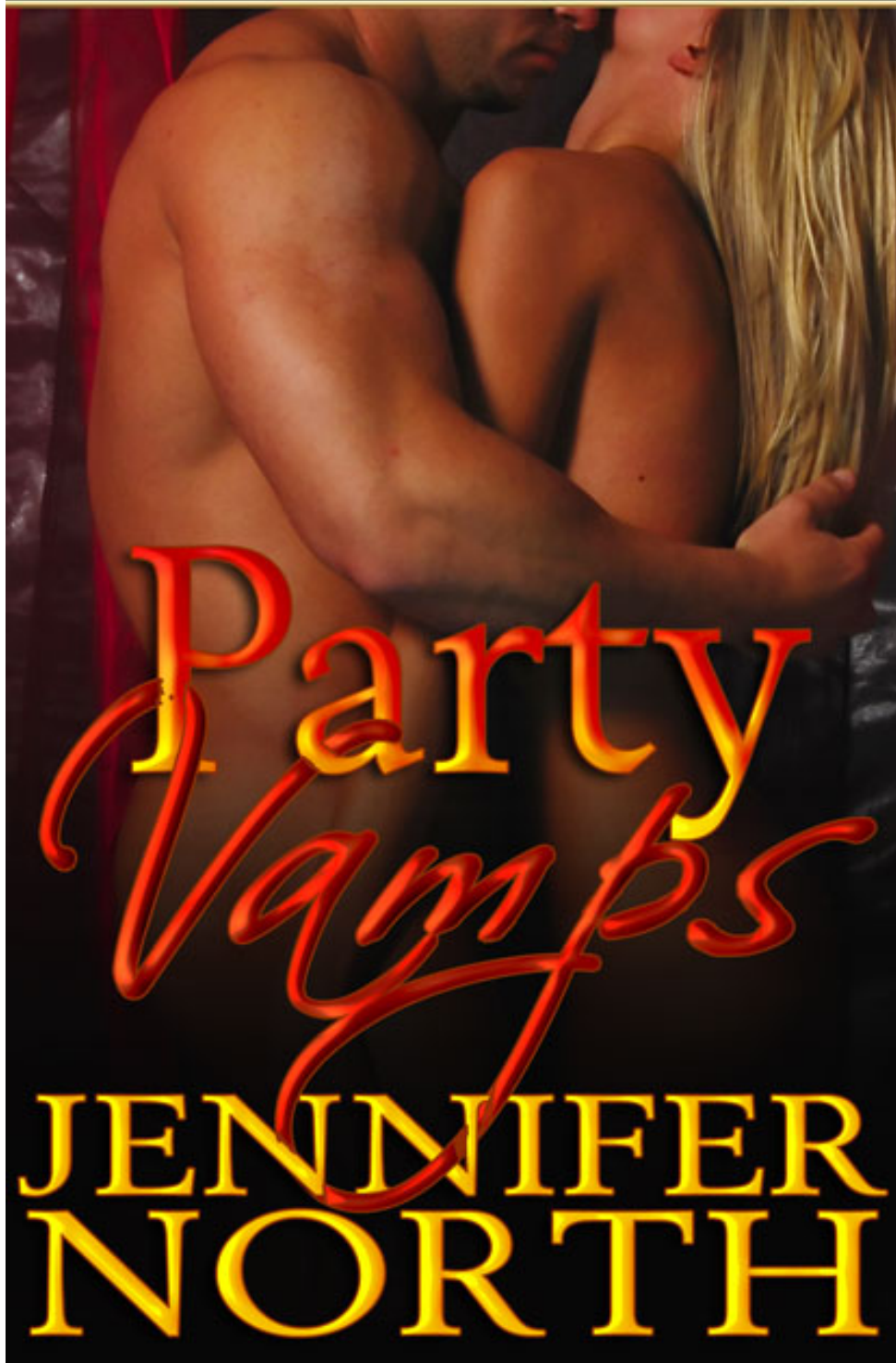


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



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Party Vamps

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PARTY VAMPS

Jennifer North

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Chapter One

Hmm. Shiny. Black.

Caro Connery smiled appreciatively and picked up her step. Stoked Corporation's male receptionist had a nice, long stride. The black-lacquered paneling of the Sears Tower suite reflected his body from a zillion different angles, all of them dramatically impressive.

The guy had the classic Stoked look—chiseled, bold and hot. His refracted image got her creative juices flowing. How would his brand of dynamite-dangerous sex appeal translate into color and concept?

She did a mental flip through her professional idea file, pausing at the titillating headings of "black patent leather" and "naughty".

Anything she could use for an upcoming party or event? Probably not. Stoked Corp was a cutting-edge company but its shareholders might not *quite* be ready for a party with an S&M theme.

The receptionist stopped at a pair of massive doors on the right side of the hallway. "If Mr. Farrell hasn't arrived yet, go ahead and make yourself comfortable." His words were smooth but his deep voice had an intriguing rumble. A few more titillating images popped into her head. Rumpled satin sheets—black, of course. Big bed awash in moonlight. Throaty groans of satisfaction...

She gave her head a quick shake and smiled up at him. "Thanks. I think this is the first time in my life I've been early for a cocktail party." She reached out to shake his hand. His fingers were firm and quite cool but when his thumb stroked downward, the fissured lines of her palm sizzled with awareness.

His dark eyes flared zephyr-bright, a weird split-second flash of silver she might have imagined. She tugged her hand away and curved her fingers around the sturdy leather strap of her briefcase.

The small tattoo on her wrist prickled and thrummed as if someone had fired up a tiny engine under her skin.

She observed him consideringly, surprised by her reaction to his sensuality. Come-ons—especially from gorgeous guys with masterful techniques—were a turn-off for her. But this particular guy was having an electrifying effect on her senses.

Is he human? As the question formed in her mind, the granite lines of his face gave way to a smile that oozed hardcore sex. His upper canines gleamed long and white.

Ah. *That* explained her reaction.

She'd once had a serious thing for vampires. And vamps from certain bloodlines still had the power to make her think foolishly sexy thoughts. But since she'd moved back to the Midwest it was rare to run into a vamp who affected her this way.

The receptionist winked and murmured a pleasant good luck and goodbye. As she watched him saunter down the hallway, she rubbed at her still happily humming tattoo, wondering how many other Stoked employees were his kind.

Caro looked down at her tattoo—the familiar image of a regal lion entwined with a viper looked the same as it had the day her vampire lover had inked it into her flesh, during a traditional vamp blood-bonding ceremony. Caro had been nineteen, naïve and deeply in love.

More than in love. Obsessed. Enthralled. Bedazzled.

Ten years had passed. The tattoo was still there, but the love wasn't. And now the mark on her wrist served as a helpful little reminder that she never wanted to be obsessed, enthralled or bedazzled again.

She put her hands on the chrome door handles and paused for a quick psych-up moment. Behind these doors, Jack Farrell, former Stoked model and current VP of marketing, would soon be announcing the name of Stoked's new event planner—and Caro had inside information that the name was going to be Party Mavens. She grinned as she felt butterflies fluttering and crashing around in her belly. Yep, it was damn exciting to have a dream on the verge of coming true. The Cleveland-based company she and her business partner Lenny had built by planning wiccan weddings, vampire company picnics and werewolf hullabaloes was about to hit the big time.

Stoked Corp's maverick management team was the first to market personal products to males of all types—human, vamp, warlock, demon, hetero, homo, trans, bi. Their sexy new product line—which included everything from makeup to specialty condoms—was going to rocket the company to a new realm in the industry. And Caro planned to go along for the ride.

She closed her eyes, silently chanting her party-planning mantra. *Sexysmart, sexysmart, sexysmartsexysmart...* When she felt good and revved she pushed open the door, ready to “make herself comfortable” with the sensational Mr. Farrell.

But when she stepped into the room and looked across the expanse of Stoked's lavishly appointed executive lounge, she quickly saw that somebody—wait, no...*two* somebodies—had beaten her to the punch.

Standing in front of a wall of windows with views clear to Indiana, Jack was engaged in a lock-and-load love clench with what looked to be a very tall male and a redheaded female.

Umm, gee. This was totally unexpected. And embarrassing. They still had their clothes on, but she suspected the layers of fabric weren't going to be separating their flesh for long.

Should she slowly back out of the room, or try to play it cool and say something clever?

Her frozen body decided she'd just stand there like an idiot, watching as the threesome shifted positions, planting lips, tongues and fingers in a new combination of spots. She heard low, husky laughter as Jack and the redhead sandwiched the tall male between them. Their new stance gave Caro a better view of the trio, particularly the guy in the middle who now stood facing the door. He brought his head up and the shoulder-length black hair shrouding his face fell away.

As her brain registered his features, it abruptly engaged in a new mantra.

Oh. Shit. Ohshit, ohshit, ohshit! Knees wobbling, stomach clenching, Caro took a feeble, stumbling step backward.

Alex. Oh man...it was really him.

Alexander King. Her ex. Half-vampire and all trouble.

If she didn't know him so well, she might not have recognized him under the bodies. Jack was on his left, his tongue doing a funky lick and twirl down Alex's neck, his hand behind Alex's back doing God knows what. Jack's other hand was reaching across Alex's crotch to stroke the svelte, silk-covered ass of the female. She wiggled against Jack's probing fingers and then ran her stilettoed heel teasingly up Alex's calf.

Caro's own heels were still stuck in the plush carpet. She watched the woman trace Alex's lips with her tongue and then... Oh yeah, the redhead was definitely a vamp. She bit down hard on Alex's lower lip and lapped at his blood before engaging him in a full-throttle, tongue-tangling kiss.

Caro squelched a spurt of hysterical laughter. No wonder her blood had been running so hot for the vamp in the hallway—her body had sensed Alex's presence before her mind had.

Oh Jesus, was he here to bring her back? *Oh God. Please. Not here, not now.*

Her briefcase made a soft thunk when it fell to the floor. "Oh shit," she squeaked out loud. She gingerly bent to retrieve the case and looked up to see Alex, Jack and companion finally taking notice of her. Jack extracted himself quickly and had the humility to look a little guilty. But the vampires moved apart leisurely, no haste or guilt in their actions.

Typical. Everything was a show with vampires. They enjoyed having humans watch them. Especially when they were doing something naughty.

Alex snared her gaze and held it steady. He smiled. Slow and easy. The same smile he wore when he was having languorous, well-sated sex, which for him happened sometime around the fourth orgasm.

She didn't smile back. Of course he'd known she was there the whole time. He'd deliberately charged the room with sexual energy. And now he knew her breasts were throbbing. He knew her sex was heavy with blood—swollen and pulsing. He knew every erogenous linked nerve in her body was singing its little heart out at the sight of him.

Alex. The mind-reading, libido-controlling bastard. Oh help, he looked good.

Before Caro could think of something to say, Jack started to walk her way, hands held out in greeting.

"Caro!"

"Hi, Jack." Her voice came out all croaky. Taking a step toward him, she realized she was holding her briefcase in front of her like a shield. As she adjusted the strap over her shoulder, the heavy case swung back around and bumped her on the ass. *Yeah, way to be sexy and smart, Caro.*

Jack's smile was the thousand-watt movie star variety, with lots of sparkly teeth. Caro found his even features and conservatively cut dark brown hair pleasantly handsome, but his tall, muscled body and the sinful gleam in his blue eyes were what sealed the deal on his appeal. "Looking fabulous as always." He gave her a hug—oh sweet Jesus, he smelled like Alex's cologne—and then stepped back to look at her. "I wasn't expecting you until later."

"You know what they say about early birds catching worms and all that." She hoped her smile looked flirty and not foolish. "But maybe I'm too late to catch anything."

She knew Alex was watching and listening from across the room. His powers made him even more hyperaware of her than she was of him. He'd probably known the moment her plane had touched down at O'Hare this afternoon.

"Well, you certainly caught us in the act." Jack laughed and took her hand. "But I'm glad you're early, because your chief competition is here early too. You guys must be trying to get the jump on each other or something." He turned and gestured toward Alex and the redhead. "Come on over and meet Alexander King, of King and Associates. You've probably heard of his father, Ivan King? Vampire royalty and entertainment magnate? Incredible business ties in the immortal community."

Jack buzzed with enthusiasm and Caro blinked rapidly, wishing Alex would turn out to be an apparition. But he didn't flicker and fade, he just stood there wearing a killer suit and his trademark sexy grin, outshining every light glowing in the cityscape sprawled behind him. Alex had obviously survived the last five years quite well. Of course, his vampire blood dramatically slowed his aging process.

Jack performed introductions and before Caro could decide whether it would be smart to play dumb, Alex interrupted in a smooth, admirably cool voice. "Caro and I are already acquainted."

Alex took Caro's hesitantly offered hand, but instead of shaking it he raised it to his mouth. She scowled up at the face she'd spent five years trying to purge from her daydreams and nightmares. All the features she knew and loved were still provokingly gorgeous, the length of his hair being the only difference in his appearance. Thick, black and satiny as polished onyx, it had once fallen dramatically to the center of his back. Now it brushed smoothly against the tops of his shoulders. Clenching her fingers against the urge to touch, she saw gray-green eyes laughing at her discomfort.

He discreetly turned her palm to his lips, lightly flicking his tongue over the nerve-rich skin before stopping at the tattoo on her inner wrist. The small, intricately patterned mark was blipping wildly, like a metal detector honing in on a brick of gold. Hot sensation zoomed down through her belly. She planted her front teeth in the pad of her lower lip, trying to stifle a moan.

Her agitation increased when he performed a tentative mind probe. He didn't barge right in—he knew he didn't have the right anymore—he simply gave the threshold of her thoughts a polite little nudge. When they had been lovers she'd often wondered what was greater—his power over her mind or his power over her body. She'd finally taken care of the latter by putting several hundred miles between them. But keeping him out of her thoughts had been a continuous struggle.

Sweet, sweet Caroline...I've missed you so. Will you let me in? Just for a moment?

No. No. No! She put up her defenses. They weren't sophisticated but they were fairly effective. All she had to do was think of the opposite of Alex. Something truly repulsive. The swill at the bottom of a restaurant Dumpster right before trash day. Riding the Greyhound bus to Omaha. The bathrooms at Wrigley Field. That thing in the woods her neighbor's dog had rolled in last summer...

Damn it. Nothing was working.

Alex had the nerve to laugh, the low, sexy sound making her want to close her eyes and moan. She pulled away from him abruptly, scowling and completely forgetting to act sexy or smart.

Oh God. When in the hell had he started his own business? If they'd known they were going to be in competition with him, she and Lenny would have used completely different tactics for their proposal. Something along the lines of guerilla warfare, maybe.

The female vampire, Sherene, was French. She looked elegant and sinful, her carmine-red hair, lips and fingernails stunning foils to her flawless, pale skin and white couture dress. Jack introduced her as Alex's assistant.

Right. There were probably a dozen so-called assistants just like Sherene back at Alex's office.

Sherene smiled knowingly as her azure gaze swept over Caro. No doubt she'd listened in on Alex's thoughts. She held out the same hand that had been groping Alex's crotch a few moments ago and said, "Great to finally meet you, Caroline."

Yep, she'd listened all right. Only Alex called her by that name. And of course, Sherene didn't seem at all jealous of Alex's interest in her. Female vampires liked to share their lovers with humans. Humans made the mix spicier.

Caro grasped Sherene's fingers as briefly as possible, murmuring a polite response before shifting a worried glance at Jack. He was starting to look confused.

The vibe in the room *was* getting a little dicey.

"When did you start working the Chicago circuit, Caroline?" Alex asked genially. "I thought you were still doing catering gigs in Cleveland."

"Two years ago Len and I struck out on our own. Our company, Party Mavens, is still based in Cleveland but now we plan major events at home and around the Midwest."

"Congratulations." Alex had the grace not to look too surprised. But why would he be? He probably already knew every detail about her business. "I always thought you'd be great at running the show."

Jack smiled. "Well, I'm glad you feel that way, Alex, and I'm glad you guys already know each other. Because you're going to be working very closely together. I was going to wait until the party was going full swing before I made a formal announcement."

Caro inhaled slowly and tried not to look tense. *Please, Jack. Please don't say what I think you're gonna say...*

"But now seems like the perfect time to tell you," Jack continued. "I want to split the account and award it to both of you."

Caro exhaled another silent litany of *ohshits*. She spared a split-second glance at Alex. He was obviously reading her thoughts. His eyes widened slightly and the corner of his mouth quirked up. Smirk or smile? She didn't know and she didn't care.

Jack prattled on, the happy business guy with a brilliant idea. "Pending final board approval, Caro's Party Mavens will be handling the human side of the product launch and King and Associates will do the immortal side. But I want the division to be seamless. Something brand-new in the world of multi-persuasion marketing. We'll give you a month to come up with something and if we like it, you won't have to split the fee. You'll each be paid as if you'd won the account exclusively. The only thing you'll have to share is the work and the glory."

Caro tried to say something innocuous like, "Oh wow" or "Hey, interesting idea." But she couldn't manage it. A feeble moan of air came out of her mouth, like she'd just taken a pratfall on her ass. "Unh."

Later, when her brain could once again perform multifunction tasks, she'd let herself weep at the situation's miserable irony. But right now all she could do was stand very, very still and try to remember the basics. Blinking. Breathing. Standing upright.

Jack was beaming, obviously waiting for an enthusiastic response to his brilliant idea. Alex still wore the same bemused smirk-smile. Sherene looked smug. Caro desperately tried to remember a piece of well-rehearsed sexysmart banter—something, *anything* to regain her footing.

The doors to the lounge opened and a team of tuxedoed waiters entered with booze and hors d'oeuvre-laden carts. "Excellent," Jack said. He waved at a group of executives who straggled in after the waiters. "I think the party's about to begin."

Chapter Two

Caro managed to schmooze with two party guests without thinking about Alex. *Woo-hoo*. That was like...what? Twelve whole minutes?

She'd also managed to slam two martinis in the same amount of time. Her head was reeling and her nerves were revving. At this rate, booze was going to beat out schmooze in a very ugly fashion. Time for a breather. She was on her way to the restroom when Jack stopped her.

"Hey there, how's it going so far?"

"Good, good. I'm just gonna make quick use of your facilities."

He flashed her his fine, flirtatious smile. "Come find me later and we'll make plans for the rest of the evening." He opened one of the gargantuan lounge doors for her. "It's right across the hall," he whispered with a knowing wink.

"Thanks," she whispered back. She knew Jack was hinting at the rendezvous they'd had in another restroom about four months ago. Caro's company had been hosting a VIP party at a personal products convention in Vegas. Impressed, Jack had invited her to hand-deliver her company's portfolio to his Caesars Palace suite. The evening had ended quite satisfactorily in the suite's kick-ass Jacuzzi, Caro facedown over the side of the tub and Jack's seriously jazzed cock stroking in and out of her until she screamed.

She'd been psyched about a replay with Jack tonight but now all she could think about was Alex.

Oh God. She was such a loser.

Ignore him, Caro. Ignore him on a personal level and just be super professional about working together. She could do that, right? She was a much stronger person than she'd been ten years ago.

Stoked's large, multi-stalled bathroom was luxuriously appointed in, what else? Shiny, black lacquer and polished chrome. Caro quickly made her way into one of the stalls, her ears buzzing in the sudden silence and her brain blipping over the events of the last hour. She was rabidly curious about how the evening was going to unfold. And what Lenny was going to say when he found out they were going to have to work with Alex and a passel of vampires.

She flushed the toilet and began putting herself back together when she realized there was somebody standing outside the stall door. Somebody wearing zillion-dollar custom-made wingtips with tiny rubies embedded in the vamps.

Alex.

She opened the door and there he stood. Looking all brooding and dangerous and delectable.

"Goddamn it, Alex. You'd better need to use the toilet because if you're following me, I'm gonna —"

She didn't get a chance to finish her sentence because he started coming at her with that look in his eyes. That lean and hungry vampire prince look he reserved only for...special occasions.

The gray-green of his irises paled and then sparkled brilliant silver. He looked borderline scary and overwhelmingly sexy. She tried to take a step back but there was nowhere to go.

"Caroline." Her name rumbled up from his chest, a deep, whispery purr. He leaned against the wall just inside the door of the stall. "I saw you leave and I had this strange compulsion," he crossed his arms and his muscles rippled alarmingly under the fine fabric of his suit, "to come tell you about these visions I'm having."

"What?" she asked warily. "Can't it wait 'til I get out of here?"

"The first vision is one you and Jack just planted." He closed his eyes and tapped his temple with his forefinger, the overhead light glinting off the huge cabochon ruby of his ring. "I see your eyes closed. Your teeth biting down on your lip. A pink flush rising across your breasts. I smell the fresh, sea-spray scent of your arousal. I hear you moan as Jack drives his long, thick cock into your body."

His disarmingly conversational tone made the words sound even more provocative. When his eyes opened, her stomach dipped.

"Yeah. Jack told me all about the hot time he'd had with a party-planner he'd met at that convention in Vegas a few months ago. I didn't realize it was you until I saw you two looking at each other tonight. I'll make you pay for those visions later."

Uncrossing his arms, he came closer. The skin under her tattoo went numb briefly and then came blaring to life, burning and stinging like she'd been seared by a flame. She put her hands behind her back.

"But this other vision just came to me a few moments ago. And it's so strong I have to let it out. Since you won't let me into your pretty mind anymore, I'll have to tell you about it the human way." His eyes went back to green, glittering like star-shot emeralds, the color they turned when he was having sex. He manipulated her so damn easily — he looked at her with those verdant green eyes and her body bloomed, dewing and ripening in preparation for his touch.

"I'm thinking about us, ten years ago," he continued. Now his voice was soft and compelling, like a good dream. "You were nineteen. So innocent...but so ripe. We had just become lovers. Bloodmates. And we couldn't get enough of each other. I couldn't bear to let you out of my bed, but we had to find something else to do just to give your poor, sweet pussy a break. So we went to the movies. We only lasted through the first half hour before we had to have each other again. I dragged you into the restroom, braced you against the wall of the nearest stall and went after you with my hands, my mouth, my cock. Like I could never get enough. Because I couldn't, you see...I was in

love with you inside and out. And you whispered my name over and over as you came..." His voice trailed off in a whisper.

Closing her eyes, Caro spread her fingers against the cool, smooth wall, barely able to stand against the forceful sensations his words inspired. She might be able to come up with a defense against Alex in the here and now, but she knew there was no defense against her memories of loving him.

He moved his shoulder forward, shifting her farther into the corner of the stall. It was a strange torment to have him stand so close and still not touch her. She wanted to feel his heat again so badly, yet she was terrified about her ability to survive the conflagration. She tried to take a fortifying breath and then regretted it. Her nostrils filled with the richly erotic scent of his skin and she abruptly wanted to tear his shirt and nuzzle his bare flesh.

What was it about him that made her senses go wild? Like he was king of the lion pride and she was one of his females. A creature who lived to be licked, bit, sucked and mounted by the dominant male in the pack...

She tried to speak but her mouth was so dry she had to work to unstick her tongue from the roof of her mouth.

"Cat got your tongue, Caroline?" He bent down to whisper in her ear. A silky swath of his long, raven-black hair brushed her cheek. She moaned. "Let me help." He dipped his head and covered her mouth with his.

Oh. God. Yes. This is what she wanted. His tongue sought hers and she thought about biting him for doing this to her, but then decided biting would best be saved for later.

Later, when she would gain access to more sensitive parts.

Right now she was lost in the feeling of kissing Alex. Remembering his flavor, his texture. It was like getting injected with a drug she'd been trying to kick for the last five years. He *was* a drug to her. The chemicals in his blood had infected her own until she was physically linked to him. Distance provided the only relief. But now he was here. Re-juicing their connection, filling her mind and her body with his vigor. And she was absorbing his essence like a sex-starved love junkie.

God, she could come just from kissing him. She'd started to get wet from the moment she saw that hot look in his eyes. She was going crazy with need...and she wanted to make him crazy too. She ran her tongue over those sexy canines and reveled in the sound of his groan.

She wanted to feel his skin, the satiny ridges of his torso, the hard planes of his pecs, but there was too damn much in the way. Jackets, buttons, ties. She groaned against his lips, frustrated, freaked-out. His fingers were tangled in her hair, holding her head still for the increasingly urgent thrusts of his tongue. She pulled away, teetering on the edge of control.

"No. Let *me* help *you*," she murmured, unzipping his pants, exhaling slowly as she parted the fabric to feel the rigid column of flesh that had once ruled her desires. She

didn't look down. She was trying not to involve all her senses, trying to contain her reaction to his power. She licked her palm, watching him as he watched her through heavy, half-closed lids.

"Mmm..." Alex expelled a long, low breath when she rubbed the sleekly contoured head of his cock with her moist palm. She smoothed her fingers down the length of the shaft, flicking her fingernails gently along its curves and ridges.

She unbuckled his belt and tugged at his pants and briefs to gain full access. When she dropped to her knees she barely noticed the cold marble floor. Grasping the base of his shaft with both hands, she pulled him closer to her mouth.

Her fingers were trembling. She closed her eyes, trying to steady herself, wanting to be matter-of-fact about this act and prove she could get him off without getting emotionally involved. But as she ran her cheek over the moist, ruby-hard head of his cock, as she licked the salty-sweet bead of pre-cum from its tip, she felt herself sink effortlessly into the old rituals of loving Alex.

Once all this heat and power had been hers — hers to pleasure as she wished, hers to pleasure herself with. She adored the intensely arousing feeling of loving him with her mouth. He was big and bold, but she knew what she was doing. She was an expert at giving head because of him. Alex — who had taught her just how to do it all those years ago.

She pressed tiny, tongue-flicking kisses against the flare of the gem-smooth head, delighting in her ability to make this — the biggest symbol of his machismo — quiver and quake. She heard his gasp and then his moan as she took him into her mouth, using her tongue and her cheeks to create gentle suction.

He spread his legs wider and shifted his weight to lean back against the stall. "Oh yeah...that's so good," he whispered. "Your mouth was made for this, princess." His fingers were in her hair, pulling her closer as she began to move up and down on all the length she could take.

Performing sweet torture on all his favorite spots, she cradled his tightening sac with one hand and moved her other hand around his ass to play with the sensitive skin along his perineum. When each breath became a gasp, she knew he was on the edge.

"Take all of me now." His command was half plea. "Hard."

She softened her lips, cheeks and tongue and let him hit the back of her throat. Then she tightened her hands on his ass and sucked. He began to piston in and out of her mouth, bucking his hips in the smooth but urgent rhythm she remembered too well. She felt her vulva throb in response, heavy with the pleasure of pleasuring him.

His fingertips pressed hotly against her scalp. "Ahh...yes. There. Now!"

His whispered exclamation dispelled her reverie, reminding her she was performing an incredibly intimate act with a vampire she couldn't afford to be intimate with. She quickly pulled his straining cock from her mouth and he deftly shifted his body to the side. His groan echoed up to the cavernous ceiling.

Caro watched his release, watched those beautiful eyes close, watched those gorgeous lips strain over his canines, watched the liquid version of his virility splash against the shiny black wall of the stall...

She reached up under her skirt and in between her legs, trembling fingers meeting hot, needy flesh aching to be stroked, filled and satiated. She rubbed her thong forward through the wet cleft, riding the nubby lace hard against her clitoris. Her climax surged immediately, her body totally hot and ready after the rush of servicing Alex.

He looked down at her, emerald eyes glowing, elongated fangs gleaming. She closed her eyes and eased her ass down to the floor. He laughed softly. "Why didn't you let me return the favor?" he asked.

Her eyes fluttered open when he took her hands and gently pulled her up. "And give you the satisfaction?" She batted his hands away. Readjusted her thong and pulled her skirt straight. "I don't think so."

In their past relationship he'd always taken it as a personal challenge to bring her to orgasm in as many ways as his very active imagination could conjure. Vampires used orgasm to achieve power—pleasurable, painful and otherwise—over their human partners. And she was definitely done with Alex having power over her.

"You've got the satisfaction part right," he said as he reached behind her to grab some toilet paper off the roll. He deftly wiped his semen off the wall. "Because making you come has always been the most satisfying experience I've ever had."

Caro grabbed the wad of paper from his hand and threw it in the toilet. "Oh come on, Alex." She tried to keep her tone light as she watched the automatic flushing sensor blink. "I bet you say that to all the girls." The bowl emptied with a swish and a gurgle. "And vampires and faeries and nymphs..." She was dismayed to feel tears welling up in her eyes. She might as well be flushing her willpower down the john too.

After being close to him for one evening, just one lousy evening, she ended up sucking him off like a ravenous fiend. In a toilet stall, for God's sake.

Where were her trusty repulsive thoughts? Ha! More like Alex equals ice cream cone on hot, sunny day.

She turned away, fumbling for the door handle.

He snaked his arm around her waist, holding her back firmly to his chest as he bent to whisper in her ear. "I've said it only to you, sweet Caroline. Only to you."

He brushed the hair off the nape of her neck, stroking the sensitive skin along her hairline before trailing his fingertips over the curve of her collarbone. He reached inside her jacket to free one of her breasts from its lace perch. Holding its weight in his palm, he ran the rough edge of his thumb over the fully erect nipple. She clenched her teeth together, trying to stifle a moan, trying not to react like the sex-frenzied freak he always turned her into.

He began kissing the side of her neck, gently scraping his canines along the tendon there. The sensation made her feel dizzy—dazed, drunk and dumbly wanting more. She trusted him not to bite her but she didn't trust him not to make her come. It

wouldn't take much. Just a few more strokes against her ultra-sensitized nipple then all he'd have to do is spread that big hand down between her legs and she'd be spiraling into heaven.

But she didn't want Alex to take her up to the clouds. She preferred to be earthbound, thank you very much. She brushed his hand away.

"You're such a liar." She'd wanted to holler the words, but her voice came out as a whisper.

"Let me take you back to my place and I'll prove it to you all night." His raspy whisper abraded her hyped-up nerve endings. He put his hands on her hips and snuggled the crease of her ass against his freshly juiced cock, obviously ready for round two. And three. And four. And five....

Yep, she knew for a fact he was capable of proving it to her all night. But what would that get her in the morning?

Caro forcefully pushed her way out of the stall, knowing that if she was going to do any thinking at all, she had to get away from Alex's hands.

Her heels echoed loudly on the marble floor as she walked up to the mirrored wall of sinks. After shifting her bra back into place, she put her hands up to her flushed cheeks and looked at Alex's reflection. She'd once thought his reflected image was a sign of his humanity. But none of the full-blooded vamps she knew had trouble with mirrors either. Alex said it was a myth.

He had a few of the other vamp myths going on though. The suave, sophisticated, wielder-of-sexual-allure thing? He had that one down pat.

"Don't you already have a date tonight, Alex? I know I do."

He walked up to the pedestal sink, smiling as he leaned his shoulder against the mirrored wall. "Well, now. That certainly brings some interesting thoughts to mind."

"What kind of thoughts?" Caro asked warily. She examined her face, looking for any telltale signs of carnal activities that might prove embarrassing later. Her knees weren't working right and she braced herself against the sink, turning the faucet on full blast.

Alex dipped a long, elegant finger into the cool water and dribbled a few drops in the crevice between her breasts.

"Thoughts about your fabulous breasts. Thoughts about Jack's tremendous cock." His voice was husky, hypnotic.

"What do you know about Jack's cock?" she whispered hoarsely.

He chuckled, raising an eyebrow in an expression of mock innocence.

She watched in the mirror as he dipped another fingertip in the water. When he traced a moist line along the deep vee of her jacket's collar, she inhaled slowly, anticipating the stroke of his cool fingers over her swollen nipples.

He dropped his hand, his smart-assed smile telling her that he knew what she wanted but he wasn't going to give it to her. Yet.

"Thoughts of beautiful things coming together. I do so love to look at beautiful things..." He leaned toward her, bringing his mouth achingly close to hers. "I think our new boss would be very pleased with our initiative in getting our partnership off to a...smooth start. What do you think, princess?" he whispered. "Cat got your tongue again?" He licked at her lower lip.

She turned her head away, hoping to reclaim reality. She knew what he was suggesting. He and Jack were two of a kind. Party boys who cleverly thought up ways to get off and do business at the same time.

Obviously, Jack and Alex had partaken in some mutual entertainment. Not a big surprise. Jack was definitely a free spirit when it came to sex and she knew he was attracted to the vampire lifestyle. Vampires loved to have sex and they loved to watch sex. It had been a very big deal in Alex's vampire community when he'd stopped participating in group sex because of her. Alex was a vampire prince, and he was much sought after as a partner.

Such a stupid girl she'd been to think her love would ever be enough.

She turned off the faucet and watched him try to straighten his necktie. Too bad she hadn't been nervy enough to get him naked. She loved his body. *Craved* his body.

But she couldn't give in to blind need. What she *needed* was to remember how devious that mind of his could be and figure out whether this was all some plot to undermine her independence.

She'd replaced her naïve dreams of a happy life with Alex with something more concrete and controllable, a successful career. She'd diverted all her love, dreams and passion into Party Mavens. She had employees she loved, clients she cared about, a business partner who was like a brother. And she made other people's dreams come true by creating parties they'd remember forever.

She'd come to Chicago to kick some business butt and she'd be damned — literally — if she let her weakness for Alex sideline those objectives. Now that she had the account — or at least part of the account — her focus should be on what Stoked wanted.

But if Jack wanted Alex... Oh God.

Business and pleasure were about to get hopelessly muddled. Vampire ethics were different from traditional human ethics, especially when it came to money and sex.

"Here, let me." She began loosening and re-straightening his tie. "Is this about business or pleasure?" she asked. "Are you going to use your...*skills* to get in better with the big boys at Stoked? Or is this just vampire fun?"

Alex smiled big, flashing his canines. "Ah, the businesswoman speaks. Cheers to your newly found acumen."

She dropped her hands from his tie. "Don't be a patronizing son of a bitch, Alex. I'd simply like to know what you're thinking. Like if you're really serious about this account with Stoked, or if it's just a way to sabotage me so I'll come running back to you."

"You want to know the truth? Read my mind."

"No thanks. I'm not rude like you."

"All right, all right. I guess an honest question deserves an honest answer." He turned to the mirror, adjusted one of his ruby cufflinks. "I truly didn't know you were in the running for this account. Jack didn't tell me your name. He only said you were a good party planner and a great fuck." His eyes flared silver for a moment. When he spoke again his voice sounded tightly controlled. "I've been a good boy and kept all my promises about your freedom. No spies, no mind links, no checking up on you at all. I thought you were still working exclusively in Cleveland."

"As for whether tonight will be about business or pleasure..." He shrugged. His serious expression suddenly gave way to a quirky smile. "Actually, Jack told me that no matter how many times he gets off tonight the deal will remain as stated. He'll be running the show, not me."

"What?" He'd managed to shock her. "You've already discussed the possibility of a...rendezvous with Jack?"

"Yep. We've been doing some hanging out. Sherene has a thing for him. He's more than a little bit vampire-struck. So. This is our first chance to make the big boss man happy. As a team. Just practicing good vampire business. Keeping the client happy and all that."

Caro snorted. "How did you ever get Jack Farrell to take on a pirate like you?" She saw his eyes widen. "Wait," she said. "Don't bother to answer that question."

His smile was incorrigible. He really was the most irresistible male. She couldn't blame Jack Farrell any more than she could blame herself.

"So what do you say, Caroline?" He smoothed his tie, rolled his shoulders to straighten his wickedly impressive suit coat. It was impossible not to look at him. His come-on-and-fuck-me charisma eventually crushed any creature who tried to resist him.

"Are you up for an evening of fucking and sucking with the vamps?" He wiggled his eyebrows. She crossed her arms and rolled her eyes. "Dicking and licking? Spooning and swooning?" he coaxed ridiculously.

She couldn't suppress a smile. "Coming and bumming?" she quipped.

He took her hand and Caro saw a victorious gleam in his eyes. He was so damn sure of himself. Too damn sure. She'd call his bluff and see how much he really wanted to work as a "team". She pushed away from the sink and said, "No thanks. I'm gonna go back to my hotel and take it easy tonight."

His brows came together. "What?"

Poor Prince Alex. He wasn't used to being told no.

"No," she repeated. "You know I've never been into the group thing...never been into watching. I haven't changed."

"Oh come on, Caro. I saw the look in your eyes. You were honestly tempted. What changed your mind?"

"You did."

"I don't get it—"

Caro interrupted him with a rueful laugh. "I know you don't. You never did, Alex." She turned away from him and he grabbed her arm, his grip firm yet gentle.

"Caro, listen..." He started to stroke her wrist and she pushed his hand away. "I don't know how well you know Jack, but the guy's a player. In business and everything else. And he's gonna expect us to play his game."

She looked at him warily, wondering who would end up playing whom in this so-called game. Alex had always been the champion game-player of any crowd he joined.

He reached for one of her long curls and wrapped it around his finger like he used to do. "Okay then. Let's forget about Sherene and Jack. Forget about work for tonight. I bought a place here in Chicago that I'd love to show you. Come home with me. You know how good it's gonna be..." His whisper evoked sumptuous memories of dark, endless kisses. "Why put off the inevitable when the inevitable is exactly what we want?"

He dipped his head, torturing her with his warm, sweet breath and the promise of his lips. "Come on, princess, why not?"

He was a master at dismissing complicated emotions, at condensing their relationship into one core need. But sex with him was never simple. Did she want to end up lost and alone again? Stuck in another quagmire of self-doubt?

"You know why not, damn you! I want more than a few hours of mindless fucking—"

Her voice broke and she closed her eyes. God...*damn*. They'd been alone for less than half an hour. She'd performed a sex act with him and now she was whining for his love.

Why, why, why does it have to be this way?

She was bound to him for life. She loved him completely. But he could never be all hers. At least not in any of the ways that were important to her.

His arms came around her and she pulled away, heading blindly for the door. Her defenses had crumbled completely so she felt rather than heard his words.

Sorry, my love. So, so sorry.

* * * * *

Alex headed straight for the bar. As he made his way through the crowd of bubbly imbibing bigwigs, he noted with relief that Sherene was happily entertaining the Stoked CEO and a couple of his cronies. She had her laptop out—apparently she was giving

them a preview of their plans for the first product launch event. Which was great, because Alex was having a hard time keeping his mind on business right now.

He drained the first martini he could get his fingers around. As he worked the pimento out of the gin-soaked olive with his tongue, he scanned the room for Caro.

Ah. She was talking to Jack. Of course.

Hmm...what to do about this most intriguing situation? He chewed the olive and swallowed.

Fall on Jack's throat and rip him apart like a ravening beast?

Nah. Too messy. Besides, he liked Jack. He couldn't hold it against him that he'd fucked Caro. Which was amazingly progressive and magnanimous for Alex, really. Showed how far he'd come at civilizing his vamp side. Because vamps were basically Neanderthals when it came to their women—and Caro was definitely his woman.

As he watched Jack introduce Caro to a group of Stoked executives, he had to acknowledge that Caro's brand of demure sexiness worked well with Jack's enthusiastic-business-guy persona. They made a disgustingly beautiful couple. When Jack put his arm around Caro's waist, Alex felt his fangs lengthen and his cock get hard. He smiled. Yeah, his vamp side still dominated certain senses in certain scenarios. And sometimes it was a pleasure to let the power loose and get reacquainted with his inner alpha.

Years ago Alex had diligently fought off dozens of Caro's admirers at the numerous parties they'd attended together. But in those days, most of her admirers had been vampires who, like him, sensed her potential as a bloodmate. Over the years the shy, gawky girl had made some changes to the way she presented herself. And humans like Jack definitely took notice of Caro, the woman.

He'd always known she would come back into his life. There had been no way to avoid it, after all. They were mated and the vamp blood bond was impossible to break. He'd been human enough—and guilty enough—to grant her a few years of freedom, but they'd both known he would force her to relinquish it some day.

There were about six hundred ways he could have dragged her back into his life over the last five years, but when she came back to him he wanted her to be happy about it. And making her happy was going to take some serious finessing. The business connection here at Stoked was an unexpected and interesting surprise.

He caught himself staring like a lecher as Caro bent over to retrieve a dropped cocktail napkin. Yes indeed, the coltish teenager who'd been all big eyes and long legs had filled out nicely. Her low-cut suit jacket provided him with a provocative eyeful of full breasts rising above some wicked-looking lace lingerie. When she stood up she smoothed down the suit's short, short skirt.

Mm. Caro's long, beautiful legs. He remembered the way they clung to his surging body as they made love, the way they tangled with his own legs as they slept. It had always been so damn difficult to break apart from each other—they'd fall asleep in the oddest positions trying to maintain the mind-blowing joy that occurred when

bloodmates connected. Joy that was better than the sex itself, better than anything else period. Power, money, art, drugs... He'd tried his damndest to rival the sensation, and he'd failed.

Shit. He wasn't going to have the strength to be patient about reconnecting, the episode in the bathroom merely a tiny little appetizer to the feast he was gearing up for.

He looked up and caught her gaze. Oh yeah. She knew exactly what he was thinking.

He grinned, letting his expression show he appreciated her efforts to remain professional even though his presence had obviously thrown a big, evil monkey wrench into her plans.

It must be hard to suddenly find out you'd have to work with your former lover. Especially when he was the vampire who had fucked up your life. The vampire who knew every little sinful secret about your body. The vampire who'd thrown your young love back in your face with every other body he'd fucked...

Yeah, he'd been a prime asshole to her in the past. A lot of it had been the brashly arrogant behavior expected of a prince of his race. Some of it had been outright inexperience—he'd never been in love before.

Vampire males weren't supposed to fall in love with human bloodmates. His vampire father had been horrified, blaming the "weakness" on Alex's human blood—and conveniently forgetting his own propensity for human females.

Regardless of reason, the experience had been...harrowing.

When Caro left him for the final time he'd nearly lost his mind, torturing both himself and her with some particularly domineering behavior. Then, after realizing he was endangering her life, he made the enlightened decision that it was time to break some old-school vampire traditions. Caro wanted freedom and he was willing to give it to her.

However...some customs were impossible to break. Blood ties, for example. Caro was his. He didn't give a fuck which instinct spurred his possessiveness. She belonged to him whether they chose to acknowledge the fact or not.

She headed for the bar on the other side of the room and, as he watched her hips sway, he realized that although he'd made a lot of changes in his life, his desire for Caro remained the same.

Aware that Alex was following her, Caro controlled a flinch when she felt him brush against her back, determined to maintain her composure this go-round.

"I didn't have a chance to ask earlier," he murmured, stroking a curl of hair away from her ear. "Did you miss me at all in the last five years?"

She turned to face him. "You know I did. But I've learned to live happily without you." It was mostly an honest answer.

Arching one of those regal eyebrows, he deliberately grazed her breasts with his arm as he snagged a martini from the bar.

"I'm glad to hear it," he said ambiguously. He sipped deeply from the frosty glass before handing it to her. "Mm." He turned and smiled charmingly at the attractive female bartender who'd come up to take his order. "Can you throw a few extra olives into one of those for me, please?"

He turned back to Caro. "And I'm also glad to hear that you're in business for yourself now."

"Thanks. As you know, owning a business has been a dream of mine for a long time."

The bartender brought back his drink – Alex always got served in record time – and he thanked her with a wink as he stirred the rippling gin with an olive-laden toothpick. The bartender gave Alex a sultry-eyed twice-over, immersing Caro in the hopeless task of trying to break down what was so goddamn alluring about Alex.

His face was two shades from handsome – his nose was a little too big and his face went all lopsided when he smiled. But that smile was devastating. And after being treated to a few of them, you realized he was maybe better than plain old handsome. His mouth added to the devastation factor – it was outrageously sensual, with a full lower lip. The kind that made you want to sample and touch. Okay, and yeah, his cheekbones were stunners too. A gift from his Eastern European heritage, no doubt. And he had a great chin – squared off and masculine with just a touch of a cleft. His "dent" as he liked to call it. Caro had always thought of it as her own personal kissing spot. Her mouth curved at the memory.

Caro's smile faded as she saw the bartender lick her upper lip in a rather unsubtle appeal for more of Alex's attention. She wondered how many bartenders and waitresses Alex had fucked at the thousands of soirées he'd attended in his long, party-filled life.

Mm, but I don't want to fuck her... The whisper wafted unbidden into her mind, like a curling trail of smoke. *I want to fuck you. Over and over and over and over...*

God, he was annoying. While she'd been standing here dreamily enumerating his assets, he'd been hovering just outside her thoughts, waiting for the weakness that would allow him to break in and wreak havoc.

He slid an olive off the toothpick with his front teeth and, reminding herself to think repulsive thoughts, Caro mentally replaced the pimento in his olive with a worm. She exhaled an involuntary giggle as he began to chew enthusiastically.

"What?" He looked down at her with a questioning smile. "You know how I love olives."

"Yeah, I know," she said with her own smile. She pushed away from the bar, trying to act casual as he put his hand at the small of her back. "Anyway, with the business thing, Len and I just decided it was time. The catering company we worked for was under new ownership..." Stopping in front of a window, she took in the sight of

Chicago's incredible night lights. "My grandma died and left me some money. We decided with those funds and a mondo start-up loan, we'd just do it. And if things continue to go well, we'll hire the rest of the crew away from the hands-off guy who bought the catering company a couple years ago."

"Caro..." He stroked her back with a solicitous touch. "I want you to know how sorry I was to hear about your grandma. It was very difficult not to come to her funeral...not to contact you. But I'd like to give you my sympathy now." His gentle words made a familiar lump form in her throat. She closed her eyes, knowing his sympathy was genuine. He'd always loved her grandmother.

"Thanks," Caro said as she opened her eyes again, grateful she'd held back the tears. "I still miss her terribly."

"I'm sure." He set his drink down and took one of her hands in both of his. He began to tenderly stroke her palm with his thumbs, his touch one of pure comfort, and she let her lids flutter shut again. Her chest ached. Like long-unused parts of her heart were finally getting some exercise.

Oh God. She didn't want to remember how sweet he could be. She had purposely spent the last few years dwelling on Alex's bad side. But part of the force of his personality was his huge capacity for warmth, for kindness. He could be exceedingly generous, particularly with his body.

"So how about you?" Caro abruptly changed the subject. "Obviously, I'm surprised to see you here at Stoked. I thought you'd given up on the business world."

"I did for a while. I took a long, soul-searching break from my dad's business and did some satisfying stuff on my own. But last year I got talked into doing some consulting work and it got my business juices flowing again. I've been wanting to move into the human side of things, and Jack is willing to get creative." Alex stopped stroking her hand long enough to grab two more martinis from a passing waiter. He handed her a glass and then picked up her hand again.

"Sounds interesting." She tried to breathe calmly as she watched his fingers entwine with her own. It felt too natural, too easy. "I'd like to hear about what you did on your break sometime."

She would be fascinated to know, in fact, but it would be best to avoid all personal conversations with Alex. She needed to keep things light. Flirty was okay. Fun was okay. Business was okay. Serious personal stuff was not.

She took a big drink of her martini and swayed a little. Whoops. Was it the skin contact or the booze? Either way, better slow down. The martinis were straight-up Tanqueray and Alex was straight-up sex.

Yeah, and the combination of Alex and gin together could potentially derail Operation Sexysmart for good. And she'd be plain old fucked. Stuck in Alex's clutches forever. And forever was a long, long time for a vampire.

His thumb moved under the sleeve of her jacket, sending silent signals that made her tattoo throb and burn. She bit her lip, knowing she wouldn't be able to control her physical reaction if he stroked the spot where he'd marked her.

And she really didn't want to climax in front of fifty or sixty Stoked executives.

"I'd love to tell you all about it," he said, his gaze warm on her face.

This was getting just too nice. "Mm, but not right now," she said quickly. "I think it's important that we mingle."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Alex agreed, but he continued to stroke the sensitive skin around her tattoo. "You're looking really beautiful, Caro," he said, his deep voice layered with emotion. After setting his drink down on a nearby cocktail table, he reached up to touch her cheek.

"Thanks." She let go of a ragged sigh as his thumb briefly dipped to stroke the vulnerable curve of her throat.

Oh God. Alex.

He was so, so good at making her feel good, making her body feel good. But he was too fond of spreading those good feelings around. Remember, Caro?

He's vamp and he's a tramp...he's noo-oo good. The tune Lenny had made up about Alex floated through her mind. Lenny would kill her if he knew she was showing signs of weakness around Alex. Hell, he would kill her if he knew she was *talking* to Alex. Oh help.

She couldn't think of a single repulsive thought, so she said the first thing that popped into her head. "How do you like fucking Sherene?"

Alex expelled a husky burst of laughter, green eyes sparkling in appreciation. Before he answered, he picked up his drink and took a long, slow swallow. "Well, I have to say that I find fucking Sherene to be delicious. But no one could ever be as delectable as you are, princess."

Princess. Once upon a time she'd loved that nickname. Because he'd made her feel like treasured royalty. Because, before he'd turned them into nightmares, he'd made all her dreams come true. For a moment she was lost in sweet memories. But then her bullshit detector finally fired up and beeped her back to reality.

Goddamn it. She wasn't nineteen years old anymore and she wasn't going to let Alex bowl her over with fairy tales. *Okay, back to fun and flirty...*

"Well, I know it's probably gauche to compare notes," she said as nonchalantly as possible, "but I just wanted to know if you enjoy her as much as I enjoyed Jack. I have to admit I wasn't sure if I could handle his size at first, but God, after that first moment of awe it was an *unbelievable* experience, you know?" She ended this little speech with a wink. She knew that she was probably asking for trouble, but she was apparently possessed by some strange demon tonight. Maybe it was just the Tanqueray.

Alex let out another snort of deep laughter. "Why, Caro! The words that come out of your mouth... Say, let's be gauche some more." As if sensing she was about to pull away, he tightened his grip on her hand.

She leaned in for a brief but luscious kiss on his lips and, disarmed, he lost his hold.

"Gotta mingle." She shot him a flirtatious grin over her shoulder, walking with enough swish to let him know she wasn't above working it when she had to.

* * * * *

After making an inspired effort to enthusiastically introduce herself to nearly everyone at the party, Caro finally caught sight of Jack at the crowded bar. The party was winding down and folks were getting their last doses of free premium liquor before leaving. She had to smile back when he flashed her one of his mega-watt grins.

"I was just coming to find you," he said. "What are your plans for the evening?"

"I was gonna ask you the same question," she said as she took his offered hand.

"Some folks are going to Gibsons for steaks. But I talked to Alex and he wants to start getting our heads together about the proposal. If you're up for it, we can grab some carryout and head over to his place."

Her smile felt stuck.

She felt stuck.

Between two master manipulators named Alex and Jack.

She cleared her throat, stalling for time. "You know, I was really hoping to bring Lenny into all our discussions about the proposal." Her shoulders tensed as she waited for Jack's response.

Was she making a huge mistake saying no? She knew one of the reasons Party Mavens got the Stoked account was because she and Lenny were comfortable with the immortal penchant for mixing serious business with serious fun. But Alex's presence made this situation different.

"I have a feeling it's going to be more fun than work at Alex's place." Jack traced the bumps of her knuckles with his thumb, his tone turning decidedly sexy. "He has a particularly deluxe hot tub on his terrace. What better place for a meeting?"

"Hmm." Caro forced another smile, wishing she had time to think things through, wishing this account didn't mean so much to her, to her business. Six months of hard work on the proposal. Years of dreams. Was tonight going to make or break all her efforts?

"Come on," he wheedled. "You can call Lenny on the limo ride over. After you make your final pitches to the board tomorrow, the executives will meet to approve my suggestion of awarding the account to both of you. And I'd love to get you and Alex on the same page before the meeting. Unless there's something you haven't told me..." He paused, a slight frown furrowing the spot between his pretty blue eyes. "You and Alex

are going to be okay with working together, right? This isn't an anti-vamp thing, I hope, because I don't know what—"

"No, no," she interrupted. She and Lenny had busted butt to prove they could work with both mortals and immortals, to prove their events could bring disparate parties together. She wasn't ready to waste Party Mavens' rep. "We're cool." She tried to brighten her smile. "Okay. Let me grab my things."

* * * * *

A short while later they were headed south on Michigan Avenue toward Alex's loft. Jack and Sherene sat with their backs to the limo driver, doling out sushi from the giant platter they'd hijacked from the party. Alex and Caro were on the opposite seat, Alex sitting so close Caro was halfway on his lap.

Caro smiled at Jack as he leaned forward to place some maki in her mouth. Soy sauce dripped down her chin and Sherene giggled as Alex gracefully leaned over to lick it off.

Caro grabbed Alex's knee and gave his flesh a squeeze, digging her nails in. Alex responded by placing a cool, strong hand on her bare thigh. Her skirt had hiked up when she'd climbed into the limo and Alex was taking advantage of the exposed flesh, the bulbous head of his ring tracing an alarmingly erotic path toward the crux of her thighs. She put his hand back on his own lap and crossed her legs, ignoring his seductive laughter.

She snatched a napkin from the tray, wiped her mouth and cleared her throat. "Maybe we should go over some ground rules for our meeting tonight. You know, discuss what we'd like to accomplish..." She felt like she was entering this game late and she needed to make sure she knew what type of players she was getting involved with.

"Great idea. What do you guys think?" Jack was squeezing some lemon onto his fingertips and wiping them with a napkin. He set the sushi tray aside as he looked encouragingly over at Caro.

"I think we can keep things casual." Alex leaned back to look out the window. White lights glittered in the trees along the lake. "But I agree that it would be good to get some formalities out of the way. Maybe we could relax for a while in the hot tub and discuss preliminaries. Then we can go over our proposals. Discuss how they could dovetail or decide if we need to start from scratch."

"Casual is always good with me," Sherene said as she poured herself another shot of vodka. "What do you think, Caroline?"

"Sure, as long as we stay in agreement as things progress..." Caro let her teeth play nervously along her lower lip. "And, um, I'd like the vamps to promise there'll be no blood exchanges without express permission." The last came out all in a rush and was a little less subtle than what she had planned to say, but it was the one thing she absolutely needed to be sure of.

"Fine," said Alex, reaching over to take Caro's hand. She twined her fingers through his, the gesture automatic and frighteningly easy. "And one more thing about formalities. We should all agree that we'll be safe, protected and discreet about anything that we exchange."

"Agreed," said Jack.

Sherene nodded. "Of course."

Alex squeezed her fingers. Caro looked beyond his profile to the lakeshore's glittering lights. If she was going to play this game, she was going to play to win. "I agree," she said.

Chapter Three

Alex's loft suited him. It was big, hip and in a slightly dangerous neighborhood. On the ride over he explained that the old warehouse building had been used for decades by a shoe manufacturer, but had been empty since the company went out of business several years ago. Alex had purchased the building with the idea of converting it into lofts and smaller condos.

He'd reserved the top floor for himself and, because he preferred living in unstructured space, had done almost nothing to break the lines of the cavernous room. The great room was as big as a roller rink and one wall was entirely floor to ceiling windows. Odd choice for a vampire. But the night views were probably just as spectacular as the daytime ones and Alex, who enjoyed pitting his human strengths against his vamp instincts, made use of all types of modern technology to shield himself from hazards to his health. Caro guessed the windows were equipped with solar shields, timed to close the moment the sun's rays broke the horizon.

And, since he owned the building, Caro had no doubt he'd placed his luxuriously appointed crypt deep in its depths. Unless his habits had changed, he only needed the crypt a few times a month.

The only furnishings in the great room were a group of ultra-modern, low-slung chairs and couches. Caro recognized Alex's favorite black leather chaise in a place of honor by the windows. An acre-long table and chairs stained matte black were placed by the open gourmet kitchen. Everything was chic, minimalist and very expensive.

Drawn by the views of the South Loop and the lake, Caro walked over to the wall of windows. Evening had deepened into night and the sky was a velvety royal blue, the lights of the city glowing golden against its softness. She loved Chicago—the hard angles of the skyline and the smooth curves of the lakefront; the hyped-up urbanity mixing it up with low-key neighborhoods; every flavor of creature she could imagine. Another reason why this account meant so much to her. If she and Lenny pulled off the Stoked product launch events like she knew they could, they would move their business from Cleveland to Chicago permanently.

Alex began to turn on lights but Sherene stopped him. "Let's light candles instead."

"Suit yourself." Alex shrugged. "I'll scrounge up some robes and drinks."

He headed toward a corner of the loft shielded by several twelve-foot freestanding panels. The panel screens were painted with abstract images of the moon and mountains. The Carpathians, no doubt. Caro immediately recognized the artwork as that of Alex's sister, Juna. She was a fabulous painter, and she'd recently hit the big time. Vampire art was all the rage at the moment and the panels were probably worth a fortune.

She gave a little start when Jack came up behind her and took her hand. He led her through a pair of glass doors at the end of the wall of windows.

"Wow." She exhaled a soft breath of appreciation.

The terrace was almost as large as the loft. There was a deluxe grill, an inviting eating area and several chairs for lounging. A privacy awning jutted from the side of the building, enclosing a luxurious-looking spa and a small sauna.

Jack flicked a couple switches and Caro heard the water begin to churn. He lit several large candles that were placed along the spa's edge. She smiled. "You've obviously set the mood here before."

"Yeah." He smiled back. "Alex and I have been doing some hanging out." He pulled down some bamboo shades along one side of the tub, shielding it from its closest neighbors. "He's a fun guy. Seems to attract a lot of parties."

"Yes. Yes, he does." And Jack probably didn't know the half of it.

Caro walked over to run her fingers through the warm, pulsing water. "Mmm, it's already warm."

Jack came to stand behind her, the strength of his body a tangible force. "It's on a timer. Which is good because I don't want to wait. Let's surprise Alex and Sherene." His lips brushed her ear and the sensation made her brain go topsy-turvy, various scenarios that might play out in the hot tub flipping around in her head.

She and Jack. Yeah, she'd done that once and it was awesome.

Sherene and Jack. She wasn't very into watching but, yeah, they'd be a very hot couple.

She and Sherene. She'd never gone all the way with a female before but there was a first time for everything, right?

Alex with any or all of them.

Shit.

Oh God. This is why she'd always had troubles with this kind of party. She wasn't a sharing kind of gal. Which was why having Alex for a mate was like getting kicked in the head. Over and over and over. She swallowed hard and tried to think about something else.

Jack turned her around and began to unbutton her suit jacket. His fingers were cool against her skin but his lips felt hot when he bent to kiss the pulse beating above the lacy edge of her bra. Before she could react, he stepped back and shrugged out of his suit coat. He began to laugh as he quickly unbuttoned his shirt and took off his pants. He wasn't wearing underwear.

Stepping into the spa, Jack playfully splashed a plume of water over the side, making Caro gasp in surprise when the frothy warmth doused her skirt.

"You're full of surprises," she murmured. His laughter was infectious and she giggled as she quickly shed her qualms and her clothes. *In for a penny, in for a pound, right?*

She sighed as she sank down into the steamy water and settled into the molded seat beside Jack. *Ahhh*. Maybe this wouldn't be so hard after all... She could just sit here in all these lovely bubbles and not think of a thing.

Reaching over, Jack spread a warm, wet hand across her back and under the fall of her hair. "Your hair's getting all wet."

Caro gathered the golden mass into a ponytail and plopped it on top of her head. She was surprised when another giggle bubbled from her mouth, nerves obviously making her punchy. "Do you have a hairpin under there, big fella?" She leered at the bubbling water over his lap.

Jack laughed. "No, little lady, I'm afraid I've got something much bigger..."

"What's bigger?" Alex called out as he came through the terrace doors. His red silk robe was a dramatic foil to his long, dark hair and pale skin.

"I am, of course," said Jack, laughing harder.

"No denying it," said Alex with a smile. He leaned over to test the water and the robe gapped open, the starkly defined muscles of his chest rippling with his graceful movements. He wasn't buff like Jack—vamps weren't really up for hitting the gym—but his appeal was just as intense. Well, probably more so, since Caro couldn't seem to take her eyes off him even though Jack was sitting next to her completely nude.

Sherene came out and set a tray of drinks next to the candles.

"Caro needs something to tie her hair up." Jack reached over to play with a tendril of wet hair.

"Afraid I can't help her with that." Sherene smoothed her hand over her chic, short cap of red hair, staring down into the water with her bright blue eyes. "Mm. That looks divine." She untied her wraparound dress, dropped it to the floor and stepped over the edge of the tub. Of course she wasn't wearing any underwear, either. Caro caught a flash of small, perfectly formed breasts before they dipped below the water's surface. "Do you have anything, Alex?" Sherene asked. Alex's hair was long, but he never tied it back. At least not that Caro remembered.

"Here." He untied his robe's belt and handed it to her. Then he let the robe drop to the ground.

"Clever fellow," said Jack.

"Yeah, I've always been creative about tying things up." Alex stepped around to the other side of the spa and got in.

Caro murmured a brief thanks, glad she had something other than the momentary glimpse of Alex's nude body to concentrate on as she tied the red silk sash around her hair.

"Lovely." Jack stroked her nape. "I think you've created a new style."

Caro leaned back, nestling her head against the cushioned headrest. "I've always wanted to be a trendsetter in spa style... God, this feels incredible."

"Here, this will make it even better," Jack said, passing her a martini.

Alex reached over to a tray on the edge of the spa. He retrieved a small glass vial and opened it, dispensing a few drops of red liquid into first Sherene's drink and then his own.

"No objections?" Alex looked at Jack and Caro with a raised eyebrow and they both shook their heads. Vamps tended to be a little overzealous when it came to...relaxing with human partners. The condensed blood drops were dosed with a mild relaxant and both ingredients would, in theory, ease any uncomfortable edginess brought on by play with other species. But Caro knew firsthand that the drops weren't always reliable.

They sipped their martinis in companionable silence. Caro discreetly observed Alex. His eyes were closed but that didn't mean he didn't know she was checking him out. His head was tipped back over the side of the spa, one well-muscled arm spread out along the side of the tub to hold his drink. His other hand played with the hair on Sherene's elegant neck. He looked relaxed but she sensed tension of a distinctly sexual nature coming from his body.

Willing herself to enjoy the water and stay loose, she closed her eyes and concentrated on the sound of the bubbles surging around her. Jack asked Alex a question about a party they'd apparently attended together last week. She was curious about their relationship and settled back to listen, but the gurgling water soon began to drown out their voices.

Her drink slipped from her fingers. She sat up quickly and caught the stem as it hit the water. *Damn*. She must have drifted off. She had no idea how much time had passed. She blinked her eyes and noticed everyone was watching her.

"I think we're boring Caro." Jack's voice was warm with humor.

"Why don't you entertain her?" Alex suggested in a dry tone.

"My pleasure..." Jack leaned over and took the nearly empty martini glass from her. Holding her gaze, he set the glass on the spa's edge before placing his lips gently over hers, tasting.

Caro's breath caught on a sigh. She reached up to hold on to his broad shoulders and deepened the kiss. His tongue was firm and hot and his hands were warm and wet as he stroked her shoulders, her neck, the tips of her breasts. He tasted like vodka and lemon. His tongue stroked hers over and over until she moaned.

Jack drew back, his chest heaving. "I think we're both awake now."

"That's for sure," Caro agreed. Steamy heat fired her cheeks.

"Well, I think that put an end to our boring discussion, Jack." Alex stood up. Water, steam and candlelight accentuated the angles and curves of his leanly muscled body. With his gleaming cock unabashedly erect, he looked like some kind of sex god rising from the fires of the earth.

Oh man...and was she ever damned...

"Shall we go inside and begin our meeting in earnest?" Alex made no move to disguise his arousal as he stepped out of the spa and put on his robe.

Caro jumped when he put his warm hand on her shoulder. "Can I give you a hand out?"

She gave him her hand and quickly stepped over the side, shivering as cool air hit her body. "Thanks," she murmured as he draped her shoulders with a thick terry robe.

"My pleasure." He reached up to untie the sash of his robe from her hair, running his fingers through her curls as they tumbled down her back. "You're incredibly beautiful."

She held her breath and felt her heart thump wildly. She thought he was going to lean down to kiss her, but he turned away and helped Sherene dry off. Sherene whispered something to Alex in French, his responding laughter intimate and low. Caro stuffed her fingers into her robe's deep pockets and quickly made her way into the loft. The others followed close behind.

"Let's light more candles," Jack said as he walked through the great room and over to the table. A huge mirrored tray covered with candles had been placed at the table's center. Sherene got matches from the kitchen counter and began to light them. Her pale face glowed as the candles began to throw a surprising amount of light into the room.

"Caro, why don't you go get that lovely portfolio you were showing me earlier?" Jack asked.

Caro looked at his shadowed face. She couldn't tell what his mood was. Were they actually going to discuss their proposals? The room hummed with sexual tension, the throbbing tune building higher every second.

She walked over to the couch where she'd thrown her briefcase, found her portfolio and brought it back to the table. Jack and Alex stood on the opposite side, their faces flickering in the candlelight. Sherene put her arm around Alex's waist. Alex hadn't bothered to retie his robe and Caro could see the curve of his erect cock looming in the shadows of red silk.

Jack opened the folder. "Let's see, since I'm the guy overseeing this project I guess I should be the one to direct this...meeting of the minds. That is, if everyone's amenable." His manner was incongruously businesslike as he leafed through the pages of Caro's portfolio.

"Sure," said Alex.

Caro nodded her head. Her mouth felt dry. She wondered if it would be a bad idea to have another martini.

"We're going to go over the assets of Ms. Connery's proposal, point by point. I'll be the final judge of suitability, but I expect others to give their input." Jack walked over to Caro. His words seemed playful but his blue eyes gleamed intently. "People in your line of business frequently encourage sampling of their wares, do they not?"

"Yes." Caro's answer was half gasp as Jack untied her robe in a swift movement.

"Do you mind if we do a little sampling tonight?" He put his hands just under the robe's lapels and raised an eyebrow.

She bit her lip, hesitating. *Oh God*. How far did she want to take this? She felt Alex's gaze on her face, felt his unspoken dare. He was the only one here who knew her past—and he knew that in the past she would have bailed on this kind of scene.

"No." She tried to make her voice louder than a whisper. "I don't mind." Jack pushed the robe off her shoulders. She felt her stomach muscles clench and her nipples tighten in the cool air.

"Well," murmured Jack. "I would certainly say that first impressions are very, very good."

"Agreed." Alex's voice sounded hoarse.

"Very nice," Sherene purred, heavenly blue eyes now half-lidded.

"Please be seated, Ms. Connery." Jack gently pushed her down onto one of the wooden dining chairs. "Or may I call you Caroline?"

"Caro, please."

"Very pretty." Jack knelt in front of her chair and pulled the belt from the waist of his robe. Caro could feel heat rising from his body as he carefully took one of her ankles and tied it to the leg of the chair with the belt. He used the other end to tie her other ankle to the opposite leg.

Caro heard Sherene exhale a fluttery sigh when Jack stood up and dropped his robe to the floor. Caro didn't blame her for the reaction. Because really, humans didn't get any more impressive than Jack. He was ripped and raring to go.

Using the belt from her robe, Jack tied Caro's hands together behind the back of the chair. Caro stifled a gasp as his naked torso brushed her arm. She hadn't been lying when she'd told Alex how she'd been intimidated by Jack's size the first time she'd seen him. And yeah, she was still intimidated. Topped by a wide, reddish-purple head, the shaft shadowed the muscled ridges of his belly. He had the longest—and thickest—cock she'd ever seen.

Standing up, Jack circled around her, surveying his handiwork. "Can I trust everyone to follow my rules?"

Caro licked her dry lips as Sherene dropped her robe to the floor. "You can trust me," Sherene said, her voice low and sultry.

Alex merely nodded, his expression unreadable.

Caro tried to keep her eyes on Jack's face but the sight of that massive cock in the flickering candlelight was irresistible. Her thoughts danced and burned like the wick-eating flames. She remembered Alex's favorite piece of advice—don't think, just feel. She felt the cool ebony wood beneath her buttocks and thighs, her pussy so wet her labia clung together even as her legs were spread wide enough to straddle the sides of the chair.

Jack knelt down and gently spread the lips of her pussy with his fingers, careful to avoid touching her clit. Inhaling deeply, Caro tried desperately to keep from wiggling her ass over the seat of her chair.

"There are a few rules I have for this type of meeting." Jack's voice was a curious combination of authority and sensuality. "Only I say when and where you may open. Only I say when you may come. If you don't follow the rules, the meeting is over. If anybody wants to stop the action at any time, say 'uncle'. Does everyone understand and agree to the rules?"

Sherene nodded, moving to stand next to him, her eyes on his colossal cock, her elegant fingers slowly stroking his shoulder.

"Agreed," said Alex.

"Yes," said Caro.

Jack stood up, moving behind her, and Caro closed her eyes as she felt him lean closer, his rigid length brushing against her shoulder, his flesh hot but his touch making her shiver.

"Alex, you stand in front," Jack commanded. Caro's blood flamed in response to Alex's closeness, his body heat inciting a fiery reaction.

She opened her eyes to see Alex's cock was now within centimeters of her chin. She licked her lips, her reaction immediate and involuntary.

Jack chuckled softly and whispered down into her ear. "Our Alex is indeed a big boy...but that's what you wanted, right? To play with the big boys?"

Caro couldn't speak. Swallowing convulsively, she tried to ignore the heat and power radiating from Alex's cock. She could see the veins throbbing, the head getting slicker. She swayed forward. Oh God. Her tattoo throbbed against the gently knotted tie at her wrists.

"Caro." Jack was back to using his VP of marketing voice. "Please tell us what you feel is your proposal's strongest asset and describe how it would complement...our rather obvious needs."

Caro cleared her throat. She needed to concentrate if she was going to play this game.

"Umm." *Shit*. That was a bad start.

She should be assertive about her talents.

She lifted her chin as she tried again. "Commitment, of course. I put my heart and soul into my work—neither one is occupied elsewhere," she paused and closed her eyes for a brief moment, "so I can be whatever I need to be for any type of client. Anytime."

Jack laughed appreciatively. "See why she's a finalist?"

"She presents herself well," Alex agreed.

"And how about King and Associates?" Caro asked. "What do they bring to the table?"

"Mm." Sherene lifted a section of Caro's hair and slowly twined it around her fingers. "A very big appetite."

Caro felt a gentle tug on her scalp as Sherene took up another section of long, thick hair. Hot, moist, silky skin brushed against her bare shoulders and neck. Jack's cock. Sherene was wrapping it in lengths of Caro's hair.

Caro looked up at Alex, who stood silently watching. His eyes glittered verdant green as he ran a long finger up the length of his cock, twirling a fingertip around the crest of the head before pushing it down, away from his tight belly. She gasped when she felt the hot, moist ball of the head come into contact with the tender underside of her breast. He moved in closer, reaching down to take the weight of her breasts in his hands and pressing the upper half of his distended cock between the twin mounds.

She moaned and his knowing smile was strangely intimate. Like they were alone in the room and the pleasure he was about to unleash was exclusively for her. He stroked the pebbled flesh surrounding her nipples with his thumbs while his fingers rhythmically pressed the globes of her breasts against the length of his cock. Caro's breath left her mouth in a ragged sigh. The thump of her heartbeat in her ears was so loud she could barely hear Sherene's whispers of encouragement.

Her skin had always been incredibly sensitive and this particular type of erotic massage was about to send her over the edge. She could feel Sherene's supple fingers stroking her neck, feel Jack's hot cock rubbing strands of silky hair against her shoulder blades. Her vision was filled with Alex's long, elegant fingers guiding the head of his penis over her breasts to tease her nipples. The silver skull ring on his middle finger glowed in the soft light. The room was wavering and shifting beyond him. In her mind, Alex's hand became that of some exotic and powerful sorcerer. And he was holding the massive wand that held her body and mind captive.

Look at me.

His command came directly into her thoughts. She met his green gaze and tried desperately to resist its pull, its seductive allure. She wouldn't fall under his spell. She couldn't. They weren't alone. She wasn't submitting to anything. This was Jack's game...

She heard Jack suck in air. Felt Sherene's fingers stroking her hair, guiding the moist head of his cock over her back and shoulders.

"Mmm. I think we're getting close to our first goal." Jack chuckled breathlessly. "Are we still together with our plan?"

"Yes, yes. God, yes!" Sherene moaned, swaying forward, standing inches from Caro's shoulder. Jack had sunk two fingers deep inside Sherene's pussy. Glistening liquid drenched her neat triangle of pubic hair, her pouting labia shockingly white against the shiny blood-red curls.

Caro closed her eyes, feeling woozy with anticipation, like a kid on her first adult rollercoaster ride. Maybe if she shut her eyes tightly enough she could shut out the overpowering sensations.

Jack began thrusting his cock against her back and shoulders, the rapid, aggressive movements tugging at her ensnared hair, forcing her head back, exposing her throat.

Her heart beating erratically, Caro felt light, feminine fingertips exploring the pulse points along her neck. Sherene's eerie yet sensual caresses soon had Caro shivering in reaction.

She heard a familiar sound—Alex's growling hiss of ownership. It was both frightening and seductive. Caro's eyes fluttered open and she saw Sherene drop her hand, her slender body humming with a disappointed purr.

Alex loomed, his fangs fully extended, his head thrown back. Caro's breath hitched as she realized he was in the throes of bloodlust. He would either have to suck or fuck to get control. And she knew he preferred to do both at once...

Oh God, she thought. Please don't let him break his promise. Her stomach twisted as an even worse thought entered her mind. Please, please don't make me watch him take Sherene.

He expelled a strangled groan and his head dropped forward, his long hair shrouding his face. He cupped her breasts tightly, pushing them together to create a warm, tight chasm for his cock. He drove into the hollow of flesh again and again, his upper body shuddering with great, heaving breaths, his leg muscles clenched like vises.

"Now!" called out Jack, the command a guttural grunt.

Caro let her eyes close once more. She heard deep, masculine cries in rhythm with labored breaths. Felt heavy grinding thrusts against her front and back. Felt blasts of hot cum against her nipples and shoulder blades. Smelled the spicy, pungent scents of human and vampire arousal. Sherene screamed in pleasure, bending forward to rest her head against Caro's shoulder.

Gentle hands stroked her face, her neck and the tips of her breasts. Jack gave a long, shuddering sigh as he released her hair. Caro eased her head upright and opened her eyes, jolting as Alex immediately affixed her with his hot green gaze. She gasped when he leaned in to stroke the warm, thick rivulets of his cum over the flushed slopes of her breasts, carefully circling her nipples with the satiny moisture.

Mine. Mine. You're mine. His whisper circled through her thoughts, the sensation as tactile and seductive as his fingertips.

"Mm." Jack went to his knees beside the chair. "Ms. Connery deserves a reward...she's shown herself to be more than accommodating."

"I'll do the honors," said Alex. "My way. If I have your permission." His voice was low and steady. He was still looking into her eyes. She tried to look away but she couldn't.

"Of course," murmured Jack. Caro pressed her lips together, recognizing Jack's abrupt acquiescence for what it was. Fear and awe. Nobody ever resisted Alex when he used his best Lord of the Dark voice.

"I want your arms and legs free." He bent down to untie her feet and still his eyes wouldn't let hers go—he was drawing her into his mind, away from the chair and the room and the night, away from the others. He was showing her that tonight it was going to be just the two of them, no other scenario would be possible.

She shivered with anticipation as he ran his hand up the cool flesh of her calf. She flexed the muscles in her legs as he freed her other foot. Her body was so tight, her vulva so heavy, she was sure she would never be able to get out of the chair.

Alex finished untying her hands and came back to kneel in front of her. As he leaned into her body, bringing his mouth within millimeters of her lips, she held her breath, starving for his kiss. He closed his eyes, releasing her from the strange hold of his gaze. When he pulled back she couldn't stifle a moan of regret.

Later. Alex's voice lilted through her thoughts. *Later, when we're truly alone.*

He opened his eyes and began to slide his fingers up the inner slopes of her thighs. Caro looked over at Jack and Sherene, who were starting things up again. Jack sat on the floor while Sherene straddled his lap, teasing the tip of his cock with her pussy to the tune of soft groans and sighs. They curved into each other, their bodies gorgeously expressing the differences between male and female, mortal and immortal. Jack's dark hair and flushed cheeks against the perfect porcelain of Sherene's breasts...his long fingers powerful against the yielding curves of her ass. Sherene rose up and then squealed as Jack plunged a finger deep into the orifice between those slender white cheeks.

Alex's fingers were moving ever upward. "I'm on the edge right now," Caro whispered. "Touch me and I'll go..." She'd wanted those fingers inside her from the moment she'd walked into that lounge at Stoked. His fingers, his tongue, oh God, yes, his cock... Her mind hadn't wanted to acknowledge it but her body had been anticipating his achingly expert touch.

"That's good. Because you're going to go again and again and again. Hold on tight to the chair, my sweet," he coaxed as he bent low to place her knees on his shoulders. "And you are so, so sweet."

She watched as those supple fingers slid in and out of her dark pink flesh, her fluids coming down over his knuckles like warm syrup. He leaned forward to blow softly on the curls surrounding her labia, lulling her with cool whispers of breath—and then suddenly pressing the tip of his tongue against her clitoris and holding it there.

"Oh...!" She drew in an aching breath and held on for maybe three seconds. Then she let go, giving herself up to the mind-wrenching climax, letting the feelings suck her down, down, down to a place where there was only Alex and warm, dark pleasure.

Then she was drifting, drifting...

From a distance she heard Jack cry out. Sherene moaning.

Alex was concentrating only on her. Now he was using the widest part of his tongue on her pussy, parting her crease with great, lapping thrusts. His fingers came up to stroke her breasts in the same rhythm. He circled and pinched her nipples, first rough then tender. His tongue was stroking ever deeper, always coming to rest surely against the crux that housed her clitoris.

"Alex!" Caro heard her voice keen as she came once more, holding on to the chair as the climax rocked her.

One more time and then you can rest. His voice echoed in her head as he brought her legs back down to the chair. When she could open her eyes wide enough to see, she saw his incredible face. There were two ruddy spots on the pale, chiseled surface of his cheekbones, his lips swollen and wet from his efforts, straining over his canines. His hot gaze was fixed between her thighs—he looked like a starving wolf pondering a plump dove.

He carefully placed his thumbs on her mons, poising them above the hood of her engorged clitoris.

“Oh God,” she gasped. “I don’t think I can...” Her voice trailed off as his thumbs pressed down, bunching her flesh against the overly sensitized nub.

You can and you will.

Years ago, Alex had spent long, pleased hours learning what pleased her most. It seemed he remembered it all. Vampires were known for their sexual skill and intuition, but at this moment Alex’s particular knowledge of her body filled her with awe.

“Ohgod, ohgod, ohgod,” she moaned. He moved his mouth up and began to suck the sweet spot where her ear met her neck, teasing her with the sharp points of his canines. Her tattoo throbbed in time with her pounding pulse, beating small licks of flame on her skin. She wanted to scream her need for penetration.

Every fear, every doubt, every rational thought was gone, obliterated by the need to be fucked by Alex, the master of her body. She wanted to feel it all...she wanted his teeth inside her flesh, his cock inside her pussy, his cum flowing into her womb.

That’s right, that’s how it’s gonna be. Soon, princess, soon... He put searing visions in her head, encouraging her with words both sweet and dirty. She began to thrust violently against his hand, finally letting the screams out, demanding release. Suddenly she was on the edge, cresting and then zooming down into a dark chasm of pleasure as her climax whooshed through her body.

She rocked her head over the back of the chair, whimpering as her pussy shook and convulsed. *Watch me,* he commanded. She dropped her head forward and watched as he fisted the shaft of his cock and pumped with brisk, masterful strokes, his eyes roaming her body possessively. He ejaculated with a quick, violent burst, his body bowing forward, his breath exploding in a groaning hiss.

She closed her eyes. When she opened them again she saw Jack had moved to a sitting position next to her chair. His eyes were on Alex’s still-straining cock, his own erection full-blown again. Sherene licked a finger and stroked its crowning slit.

“I think Ms. Connery has grown weary of the formality of the chair. Might I suggest a reclining position?” Alex’s voice was husky yet tightly controlled as he slowly stood up.

“By all means.” Jack stood up.

“I don’t think I can move,” Caro murmured.

"Then don't." Jack laughed softly and stroked her cheek with a gentle finger before bending to kiss the pulsing spot at the bottom of her throat. He put one arm under her knees and the other behind her back and then carried her over to the large leather chaise near the windows.

Caro sighed as she lay her back against the cool, smooth leather. Her body was flushed, still vibrating with sensation.

"I'm going to get something...I'll be right back," Alex called out as he headed behind the panels on the other side of the loft. Sherene followed him.

Jack sat down, cozying up to Caro's hip on the edge of the chaise. He began to stroke her, going down from shoulder to wrist along the outside of her arm with smooth fingertips and then lightly scraping back up along the sensitive skin of her inner arm with blunt fingernails. She was completely zoned on tactile sensation.

"Are you okay with all this?" Jack asked softly.

She nodded, not sure how to answer. Because she really didn't know and really didn't want to think about it. And Jack couldn't possibly understand all the stuff swimming in the murk between her and Alex.

"These are so perfect and so blessedly real. Every guy's fantasy." He expelled a rumbling hum of appreciation as he traced the veins on her breasts. He lightly pressed a nipple with the tip of a finger. "Oh to have had my hands on you when I was sixteen. It would have saved my mom a bundle on tissue."

Caro smiled at the thought of hunky Jack jacking off at sixteen. "Jack, I'm sure you had absolutely no trouble finding willing female receptacles for your passions. And you wouldn't have given me the time of day when I was a teenager. I was a geek."

"A beautiful geek," Alex said as he approached the chaise.

The tray Sherene held had washcloths, condoms, a beautifully sculpted ebony dildo and another vial of blood drops. Such a good little assistant. Caro looked up at her face. Sherene's lids were half-closed and her lips were curved into a contented little smile.

Serene Sherene. Sated but ready for more.

Handing Jack a snowy white washcloth, Alex said, "Here Jack. I thought Caro might like a small refresher before we finish up this portion of our...meeting." He held up a small blue bottle. "Pour a little of this on the cloth."

"What's in it?" asked Caro suspiciously.

"Just some essential oils...mostly mint I think."

Caro raised an eyebrow.

"I won't say you can trust me, because I know that you won't," Alex said. "But I think you'll really like it. It's very mild. Sherene?"

She poured a drop on the tip of Jack's semi-erect penis and rubbed it around the rosy crown with graceful fingers.

Jack laughed as his cock immediately got harder. Then he gasped. "Mm...that's a most interesting sensation." He took the bottle from Alex's hand and poured a few drops onto the washcloth. "Try it, Caro."

Sherene reached to take the washcloth but Jack kept it. "No, let me."

He gently nudged Caro's legs apart and began to stroke her inner thighs with the warm cloth, sliding up to her mons and carefully massaging before moving down to stroke the folds of her labia.

Sherene held a lit demon-smoke to Alex's lips. Caro watched his clenched fists slowly unfurl.

She closed her eyes, concentrating on the warmth of the washcloth and the cool tingling of the mint. "Don't stop," she said with a sigh.

"I won't..." Jack continued to stroke gently. "But let's try this too." He moved the cloth up the length of her abdomen and over her breasts, rubbing the nubby terrycloth across first one nipple and then the other. Back and forth and around and around he stroked the pebbled flesh of her areolas.

"Now for your back."

Jack turned her on her side and slid the now-cooling cloth down her back and over her buttocks. He pressed her forward gently so that she rested on her belly. Her breasts rubbed against the cool, textured leather of the chaise. He grasped her hips, raising them so that the cheeks of her buttocks were slightly parted and facing him, and then smoothed the washcloth down her crevice, lingering finally on the folds of her swollen pussy.

"That's very good," he murmured as he rubbed back and forth. It eased the ache but left her wanting more.

As she undulated her hips against the stroking washcloth, every thought in her mind dissolved. She was a purely physical creature who wanted to be touched, stroked and filled.

"Are you ready for the culmination of our meeting?" asked Jack, his voice deep with arousal.

"Yes," gasped Caro, turning her cheek against the leather to watch him.

Sherene had two unwrapped condoms waiting. She quickly smoothed one down over Alex's cock then did the same for Jack. Alex murmured something to Sherene in rapid French and Sherene nodded.

Stroking her snow-white hands over Jack's shoulders, Sherene leaned down and gave him a long, probing kiss. When she finally released him Jack groaned. "Oh God, yes. Suck me. Take me, please."

Sherene tugged Jack to his feet, whispering a long, sibilant "Yessss..."

Caro moaned as she watched Sherene pull Jack away, knowing the woman had chosen her partner. She was going to feed on Jack and he was apparently all over the idea, tilting his head to give her access to his neck.

Caro tried to push a coherent thought through the fog of lust shrouding her brain.

If Jack was going to fuck Sherene again, that meant Alex was planning to fuck her.

As soon as the thought formed in her mind, she felt Alex's hand stroke the curve of her ass, heard the leather creak slightly as his warm body took up the space behind her. She gasped when something rigid and cool pressed against the outer folds of her cunt.

The dildo. He wasn't going to risk penetration...he wasn't going to risk being overcome by bloodlust.

He probed slightly, testing the give of her liquid center. She groaned, her body and mind at odds. They sputtered and hummed like a machine running too hot. She wanted to feel the sweet, familiar length of his cock, not the cool, almost alien stiffness of the dildo. As he pressed the dildo in a little farther, she felt his thumb probing, finding her clit. She struggled a little, wanting to tell him she really needed him inside her now. Her body was turbo-charged, zooming toward another climax, but her mind knew the road was a dead-end.

"Alex, please..." Her tattoo was on fire for his fangs. She twisted her neck so she could see his face. When their gazes connected she began to panic with need for him...oh God, she was losing herself!

Easy, princess. I'll take care of you, my love. Sweet Caro-love, Caro-love, Caro-love...

The rhythmic chant quieted her mind. He pulled back once to stroke the now-slippery dildo between the cheeks of her buttocks and then with one massive thrust, he shoved it inside her pussy.

Caro exhaled audibly as the force of it rocked her forward. He grasped her hip with one hand to hold her steady as he began to pump the ebony shaft in and out, in and out. He whispered soundless words of encouragement as she leaned back into the rhythm, clenching the walls of her core to grasp the solid length more tightly. *Let it come, that's right, my love. My sweet, sweet, angel...*

He tipped the dildo forward, catching her deepest sweet spots. Her inner muscles clenched in response. He gave a low, urgent groan and she wanted to cry out when she saw his lids begin to close. She wanted to look into his eyes when he made her come. And she wanted him to climax at the same time. When they did that, when they did it right—when they made love to each other and connected on every level—it was the most perfect experience she'd ever known.

She had to have that feeling again. Goddamn it, she might not ever have another chance...

"Alex, stop. I need...I want..."

"Stop!" Jack drowned out her whispered plea. His hands clenched Sherene's gyrating hips. Her face was buried in his neck, her fingers entwined in his hair. His words were coming out as half gasps. "I want us to go off together. That means you too, Alex."

She felt Alex release her hip, her pelvis still gyrating, the dildo a thick weight within her. She eased to her side and watched Alex stand, his cock a proud, unyielding curve against his belly, his eyes gleaming silver as he looked at Jack.

For a moment Caro thought he was going to tell Jack to fuck off. That's definitely what the old Alex would have done. But the new Alex merely slanted him a quelling look before dropping to his knees beside the chaise.

He looked at her and his eyes mellowed to green. He gently clasped his penis, stroking himself leisurely from base to tip. *Look at it, he commanded. See how much I want you.*

Caro watched his index finger curve over the breadth of the weeping head. His flesh, usually so beautifully pale, gleamed in deep shades of rose and lavender there. Her pussy clenched in response, heavy and liquid, still throbbing against the dildo. She'd been just on the edge of release and as she watched Alex stroke himself, she clenched her thighs together and smoothed her hand down between her legs. Her hand stilled when she heard him call out to her mind.

No way, princess...that's my job.

Rolling to her back, she watched him stand once more, his beautiful cock ready for ignition. He sat on the edge of the chaise, sidling his hip next to hers, smoothing her hair away from her temples, his expression a mixture of hunger, tenderness and love.

A feeling came over her that was both achingly familiar and strangely foreign. She shut her eyes against a wrenching surge of emotion, clasping her arms around her belly as the ache swept through her. Tears pricked the backs of her eyelids as he eased his hand up her thigh and then released the dildo from her body's clenching hold, replacing the stonily rigid weight with two mobile, knowing fingers.

And then it was all too much.

There was no way she could clearly define her feelings. All she knew was that it had been five long years since Alex, the love of her life, had looked at her with that expression. Five long years of getting used to the idea that she would never be his lover again, never feel him inside her again, never feel his love fill her in the deepest of all connections.

But now here they were, playing this fucking game. She didn't understand the rules anymore, didn't know what any of this meant in terms of her job or her life. She'd never understood the rules when it came to Alex and being his godforsaken bloodmate. Sweet Christ, what was she doing?

She grabbed Alex's wrist. He withdrew his seeking fingers and she immediately curled into a defensive ball. She bit back a sob, the haze of alcohol, adrenalin and sexual arousal clearing to leave only raw, exposed emotion.

"Uncle," Alex said.

Chapter Four

Caro held her breath. Did Alex say that out loud? Nothing happened for several moments. She heard only the sound of harsh breathing, the distant gurgle of the spa, the faint, dull rush of cars on the street.

She rolled onto her side toward the windows and watched the steam rise from the hot tub and drift away in the night air. She jumped when a cool hand touched her foot.

Sherene sat on the floor at the base of the chaise, her expression concerned, her fingertips soothing as she continued to stroke the arch of Caro's foot. A movement in the window drew her gaze. Alex. His chest rose and fell rapidly. His cock seemed impossibly erect, its candlelit reflection in the window surreal.

Jack was the first to speak. "Are you okay, Caro?"

"Umm...yeah, I think so," she said softly.

Alex was obviously trying to regain control over his body—his eyes were closed, his fists clenched at his sides, his mouth twisted into a slight grimace.

"How about you, Alex?" Jack asked. Alex shrugged.

Sherene rose and stretched with panther-like grace. "Things *were* getting a little intense there, weren't they?"

Caro sat up, every aspect of her mind and body tense, tentative. She knew Alex had cried "uncle" for her. He'd known the evening had become more than a game for her, just like he'd known she would have played it out unless he put a stop to it. How was he going to explain his actions to Jack and Sherene?

She watched the taut lines of Alex's face loosen into a semi-smile. "Yeah, maybe that's what happened. Things got a little intense." Slanting a quick glance her way, he took a few steps toward the darkened windows. "Sorry, Caro. I didn't mean to leave you high and dry."

He took a deep breath and rolled his shoulders, his smile twisting into something more sardonic. "After watching Jack and Sherene's amazing performance, I don't think I could have saved face if Caro had found my poor old cock lacking." He patted his cock, which had just begun to lose its rigidity.

Sherene laughed, obviously knowing complete bullshit when she heard it.

"No way, King." Jack smiled at the leaning tower of Alex's cock, a look of disbelief on his face. "You could out-cock me any day of the week."

Alex shrugged, giving a soft "hmm" of doubt. He turned and walked toward the kitchen, his muscular back and tight buttocks working smoothly as he bent down to look in one of the cabinets.

Caro felt a sense of relief as he walked away. For a few moments there, she'd been afraid he would touch her again and she'd have to deal with more unwanted feelings. The night air was beginning to dry her moist skin and she shivered violently. Ugh. She felt glued to the patch of leather she was lying on. Sherene handed her a towel and Caro gave her a smile of thanks. She was really very nice. But that made sense. Alex wouldn't partner up with someone mean or bitchy.

"Thanks, Sherene."

Sherene bent and brushed her cheek with cool lips. "I'll go find something for us to put on. It's a little chilly in here now."

Jack followed Sherene across the loft. As Caro watched Alex pour cognac into four crystal snifters, she tried to think of something to say. He picked up two snifters, swirling the amber liquid gently as he walked toward her.

"A very superior cognac for a very superior woman." His voice and expression were wry as he handed her a glass.

"Thanks." She gave him a smile but realized her attempt was half-assed at best. She held the cognac with both hands, wrapping her palms around the smooth crystal to warm the liquid inside.

"Drink it." He settled down next to her. "You look like you need it."

She breathed in the cognac's fumes, wishing they could fortify her with some instant strength.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Alex asked softly.

"No, not really." She shook her head. "I think I'm overwhelmed after a crazy day...flying in this afternoon, the reception and then maybe too much...everything."

"And of course, then you had to survive my typically relentless pursuit of your pleasure." The corner of his mouth quirked into a crooked smile. "How many times did you climax? Three? Four?"

She couldn't help smiling at the hint of pride in his voice. *This* was what it was like to have a normal conversation with Alex, or at least what counted as normal for him. "Four, if you count the time in the bathroom."

"Of course I only count the times that I'm responsible for," he said, giving her a teasing sidelong glance as he took a drink.

"Yeah, I guess you could say you really know how to wear a girl out." Caro took a sip of her cognac and wondered what had happened to Jack and Sherene. She rolled her shoulders forward, suddenly aware that her muscles were tightening painfully. "Lord, I think I need a massage."

Alex reached his hand up under the fall of hair covering her back, his fingers seeking and then finding one of the knots on her back. He slowly started to rub, saying, "I'm sure you'd find a few willing candidates for masseur or masseuse."

Caro felt her muscles twitch and tense up even further at his touch. She lowered her shoulder to shake off his fingers, trying to be casual even though she felt like fleeing.

"Mm, no thanks. I have a pretty good idea where that would lead and I think I need to throw in the towel for tonight." She started to stand up. "I wonder what happened to Jack and Sherene?"

Alex caught her arm. "Stay." The word was a request. Simple. Sincere.

She turned her head, trying to keep from looking into his eyes.

"Stay with me here tonight." His tone was just as coaxing as his words. He was using his bedroom voice. Intimate. Husky. Tender. "I won't do anything you don't want, I promise. I'll just hold you. It's been so, so long since I've held you."

"I think we both know that wouldn't work very well," she said quietly. "I really need to get back to my hotel and get my head together. Go over my proposal for tomorrow. Call Len. Stuff like that. He's probably freaking out because I've had my cell turned off all this time." Damn, she was babbling like an idiot. She had to get out of here. Now.

She was relieved when Jack and Sherene appeared. They wore bathrobes and Sherene carried a stack of towels. Jack's short hair was spiked with moisture and he looked refreshed.

"Sorry we took so long, guys. I couldn't resist the thought of hot water, so we took a quick rinse." He draped a towel around Caro's shoulders first, and then Alex's.

"Hey," he said after looking at the two of them for a moment, "how about another spa? You both look like you need to warm up and relax."

"Umm...I think I'll have to take a rain check on that, Jack," Caro wrapped the towel around herself and quickly stood up. A little too quickly. Sherene reached out to steady her.

"Thanks." She grimaced at the ache in her muscles. "Sorry to cut this most interesting meeting short but I'm tuckered out. And my partner will be desperate to hear news about the reception."

"I, for one, could benefit from some pulsing water." Alex set down his empty snifter and shifted a glance at Jack and Sherene. "It's up to you guys if you want to hang some more. Feel free to join me." He shrugged the towel off his shoulders and stood up, apparently feeling quite comfortable about remaining in his gorgeously naked state. The muscles in his abdomen rippled as he exhaled deeply. "I'll go turn on the jets."

Caro could do nothing but stand there and watch his fine-looking ass walk out the door. She felt numb. She looked over at Jack and Sherene and gave them what she hoped was a convincing smile of encouragement. "Go ahead. I'm no fun anymore, but I'm sure you guys can carry on quite admirably without me."

Jack looked doubtful. With concern in his voice, he asked, "Are you sure, Caro? Maybe you'd like me to come back to your hotel with you. We could get something to eat...you look like you could use some company."

They all looked over as Alex came into the room carrying a pile of clothes. He quirked an eyebrow at them as he silently set the pile on the nearest chair and then turned to leave again.

"How come it's never as fun getting dressed as it is getting undressed..." Jack smiled wistfully. "So what do you think, Caro? Can I take you to your hotel?"

"No really, I'm fine. I'm just gonna run through Alex's shower real quick and then grab a cab."

"Okay, if you're absolutely sure. I'll call to have a cab waiting for you. And if you need anything during the night you have my cell number, right?"

"Thanks, Jack. I'll see you tomorrow at Stoked."

"Sure thing. You get some rest." He smiled that dynamite smile.

Sherene touched her arm. "And thank *you* for a fantasy evening."

Ah, well. Just went to show, one woman's fantasy was another woman's...whatever.

"Tell Alex goodbye for me. And call me about setting up a meeting. We need to sit down and talk while fully clothed."

Jack winked at her as he picked up the phone to call for a cab.

A short time later, Caro was showered and dressed in her rumpled suit. Surrounded by all of Alex's painfully familiar personal items in his bathroom, she found she couldn't move quickly enough. She'd stuffed her thong in her briefcase—she would toss it when she got back to the hotel. She was certainly never going to wear it again and she didn't want to leave Alex any souvenirs.

Holding her shoes so she wouldn't click across the hardwood floor, her ears picked up on Alex's husky voice coming through the open terrace doors and then a low responding chuckle from Jack. Caro knew she must be seriously out of sorts if she was avoiding the sight of two gorgeous men cavorting in a hot tub.

Tears threatened to break. God, what was wrong with her? She made it out the door and into the elevator before she let them fall.

Ha. Some sexual sophisticate she turned out to be.

She was going to end up bawling on the way home from her first orgy.

* * * * *

"God that feels good," Jack said as the water in the spa gurgled and surged around their bodies.

Alex managed to mumble an agreement but he didn't bother to open his eyes. Lethargy weighed down his bones and muscles but his mind was spinning, bouncing from one thought of Caro to another.

Caro pristinely professional, smiling up at Jack at the Stoked reception. Caro kneeling before him in the restroom, her mouth mixing a heady cocktail of memories as

she ministered to his cock. Caro on his chaise, throat exposed, wrists crossed above her head, begging him to take her.

It would have been so easy to give in to that barely controllable urge...and it would have felt so fucking good. Right now his body would be ripping with energy and satisfaction, his mind at ease.

"So, Alexander." Sherene's soft voice lilted from the other side of the spa. "Tell us about Caro."

Alex lifted his eyelids long enough to squint over at her. He was uncomfortable with the deeply personal nature of the question, so he gave her a patently professional response.

"She and Len have sterling reps as caterers, for both mortal and immortal functions, and I know them both well enough to predict they'll be equally successful on the corporate level. I think we'll all work well together."

"Mm. Probably so. But you have to know I didn't mean business. There was no mistaking the currents running between the two of you. And the fact that she was quite distraught when she left here so quickly...even though she pretended not to be."

Alex expelled a weary breath and sat up straighter in his seat. He looked down at the amber liquid he was swirling in his glass. The color reminded him of Caro's eyes. "Do you want the long version or the short version? Because if you want the long one you'd better make me a smoke."

"Well, now you have *my* interest too," said Jack. "Give us the long version, of course."

Sherene retrieved the tray with the vial of blood drops. She drizzled drops onto a specially prepared cheroot, lit it up and handed it to Alex. Alex filled his lungs with the relaxant and then exhaled, watching smoke swirl and twist through the steam, wondering how much of the story he should reveal.

Most of it, probably. Otherwise Jack and Sherene would spend much of the next few months thinking he'd lost his mind. Because things were going to get downright insane if he was going to work closely with his estranged bloodmate.

"Don't keep us in suspense," said Sherene. "How long has the luscious Caroline been your bloodmate?"

"Bloodmate?" Jack quirked an eyebrow. "Isn't that a big deal in the vamp world? I thought you two were just business acquaintances."

"Actually, the bloodmate bond is the most serious connection in the immortal world," Sherene explained when Alex let the questions go unanswered. "It is a bond of the mind and body that can only be broken with death. Which is why I'm quite curious about this relationship between Alexander and Caroline. I sense it has been many years since they've enjoyed the fullness of their connection."

"Five years and three months," said Alex.

"Wow," said Jack. "No wonder things seemed so intense earlier."

"So tell all, my dear Alex. How did you meet the lovely Caroline and why have you spent so many painful years apart?" Sherene smiled a smile of true friendship.

Alex knew she could find out all the sordid details of his relationship with Caro simply by calling up a few friends and asking. But she respected him enough to ask for his side of the story. And because she was his business partner – and yes, his friend and lover – he would tell her the truth. Or at least his perception of the truth.

He sipped his cognac. "We first met about ten years ago at a party at my place in Manhattan. Lots of mortals were there wanting to get down and dirty with the immortal crowd. I had taken some summer classes at Columbia and some of my classmates showed up. An undergrad named Joe McLean brought his girlfriend – she was visiting him from Ohio. Her name was Caroline Connery. She was about to start her freshman year in college."

Jack blew out a low whistle of surprise. "So, what...she was only like eighteen or nineteen?"

"Yep." Alex took another big hit off the cheroot and glanced at Sherene. "I'm sure you can imagine what a stir a nineteen-year-old like Caro would create at a party full of degenerate young vamps."

"*Mon dieu*, yes." Sherene nodded slowly, her bright blue eyes widening.

"Hot, huh?" Jack asked.

"No, not in the traditional sense." Alex let the cognac fire his taste buds. How could he explain a truly complex attraction in simple, mortal terms? "Vamps have been trying to explain the phenomenon for years, mostly in an attempt to keep our bloodlines pure, to rid ourselves of the propensity to mate with mortals. But there is no logical explanation for the allure of a bloodmate."

"The French vampire community calls it *sang d'amour*." Sherene's voice was low, her accent melodious. "Bloodlove. Only certain mortal females possess the quality. In the olden times it was the justification for the male vampires' enslavement of young women. In the media, the use of such females is always excused by thirst for blood. But a vampire can drink blood from any mammal and be satisfied."

She took a sip of cognac and smiled at Jack. "Did you ever wonder why fictional vampires always choose to feed on pretty, young females? It is because the stories are somewhat based on truth. A vampire meets a certain human female...she has a quality that ignites the senses...something intangible yet unforgettable, like a trace of scent or a fleeting touch. It's difficult to define it for a mortal. But the male vampire senses it right away. He knows he is stricken with *sang d'amour*."

Alex smiled at the awed look on Jack's face. The guy was definitely vampire-struck. And yeah, bloodlove was a compellingly romantic notion. Especially when explained by a beautiful French vampiress like Sherene. But in reality, the bloodmate relationship sucked. In more ways than one.

"So anyway...I was in grad school at the time doing film studies. Basically wasting time trying to do stuff to annoy my folks. Fucking around was my chosen occupation –

literally and figuratively." He paused, flicking his ash onto the floor of the terrace. "And when I got scent of Caro—all legs, big eyes and untapped sexuality—what was I gonna do?" He sighed. "She was one of the most innocently alluring creatures I'd ever seen. Joe sure as fuck didn't know what to do with her. He was completely overwhelmed trying to protect Caro from the interest of all the vamps at the party."

"But he couldn't protect her from you, apparently." Jack smiled.

"It started out pretty innocently, actually. We just talked. Joe ended up having to take some too-drunk friend of his to the emergency room and when the party disbanded I kept Caro company. I was surprised by how smart she was, how charming. My experience had been that teenage girls who looked like Caro weren't really that fun to talk to. But we ended up talking all night. Hell, I didn't even put any moves on her until right before she left at dawn." Alex chuckled at the memory.

"I remember thinking I was gonna play it cool and lay my most skilled, suave and urbane vampire kiss on her. You know, bowl the little Ohio girl over. Scare her away for her own good. But when my lips touched hers...I was gone. I just wanted to be with her completely from that first moment."

"So you ended up getting together right away?" Jack asked.

"No, no," said Alex. "I knew she felt the unusual pull between us, and I also knew she was terrified. She'd only dated mortals in the past. But she told me she was pretty sure her feelings for Joe were over. And she wanted to make a clean break with him before she started a relationship with someone else."

"Admirable. I don't think I could have resisted you," Sherene said.

"Yeah, well. I was kinda happy she backed off. At first. I was terrified of the bloodmate connection. I'd seen the way it had fucked up some of my friends and family. So I was on my best behavior. She was a mortal. And so fucking young... But I soon found out she was very mature about relationships. Unlike myself and almost everyone I knew at the time. Her heart is huge and she has a strong sense of right and wrong."

"So she broke up with her boyfriend and..." Jack prompted.

"She broke up with Joe and started college in Ohio that fall. She wasn't sure another long-distance relationship would work. But she kept calling me and I kept calling her. And the more I got to know her, the more I wanted her. Which was the opposite of how my relationships usually worked."

Alex flicked the spent smoke over the edge of the terrace. "I sent her a plane ticket to fly out to New York for a weekend. And basically, from the moment I picked her up at the airport until the moment she left me for good about five years later, I couldn't keep my hands off her. God, she was the sweetest fuck..." He shifted in his seat, letting air cool his back and torso, his body getting steamed by his memories.

"Was she a virgin?" Sherene asked softly.

Alex heard Jack's sharp intake of breath and sent him a reassuring glance. Yeah, it was an intensely intrusive question in the mortal world, but Sherene understood the

issue's importance in vampire lore. A virgin bloodmate could be granted certain vampire powers—gifts that couldn't be granted to a mortal who'd first been taken by someone other than a vampire. When their relationship began, Caro reveled in those powers, happily sharing his thoughts, his emotions and his energy.

But when it came to sharing his darker side or receiving the gift of eternal life, she balked. Who could blame her, really? When confronted with certain vampire traditions, Alex stubbornly clung to his human side too.

"Yes." The word came out a whisper. Alex cleared his throat and swallowed more cognac. "And I knew what that meant but I didn't care about the consequences. Only death would have kept me from her. I had to do it all to her, with her, for her. I knew she was meant to be mine forever." He closed his eyes against the intensity of the memories. "You'd think that for something as important as deciding who you want to spend eternity with, you'd take a while to think it over. I knew it the very first time I drank from her. She was the one. I didn't hesitate. We had the ceremony that very night."

He opened his eyes and looked beyond the terrace to the deep purple horizon. The lake was invisible, buried under the weight of the night sky. Buried and blackened, like his memories. Maybe it was time to shine some light on what he'd kept covered for so long. Then maybe he could see clearly enough to survive the next few months.

* * * * *

Caro managed to stifle her tears during the short cab ride to her hotel. As she watched all the pretty downtown lights and stores go by she felt strangely disenchanted. Usually the acres of glittering merchandise displayed along the Magnificent Mile got her blood pumping. Now she just felt numb and cold. Definitely not the way she'd planned on feeling when she'd envisioned this night over the last few weeks.

She'd been dreaming about fucking Jack since their last time together. Tonight had certainly been any hot-blooded woman's fantasy. Having not only Jack but Alexander King, vampire stud extraordinaire, at her service. She closed her eyes and clenched her jaw as she thought about that final overwhelming moment before Alex had put a stop to everything. The look on his face.

Oh Lord. Could the situation be any more impossible?

When she got up to her suite she was breathing hard, her lungs overwhelmed by the task of suppressing panic and sobs. She stripped out of her crumpled suit, stepped into the tub and turned on the water full blast. Then she let the tears come. Even though she kept the water almost unbearably hot, her body shook and shivered as the sobs quaked through her system. The helpless reaction of her body was awful and familiar—she'd gone through this several times in her life. She was experiencing symptoms of withdrawal, agonizing feelings of emptiness and sorrow that overwhelmed her simply because she wasn't near her mate.

When the shaking stopped and the tears took a breather, she dragged herself out of the tub and found a robe to wrap up in. She pressed a hand to her roiling stomach.

She couldn't believe she'd done this to herself, couldn't believe she'd tried to play games with Alex. She should have come back to the hotel. She should have thought repulsive thoughts. Instead, she'd let Alex bring her to multiple orgasms. And she'd nearly begged him to take her blood.

What a loser she was.

She found her phone and dialed Len. When he didn't pick up right away she wanted to cry again. Especially when she realized she'd neglected to get any info from Jack about tomorrow's meeting with the executive board. Info that Lenny would definitely want and need to know if he was going to email her updates for their proposal in the morning.

God, what good was this whole sexysmart thing when she'd fucked up the sex and now she was fucking up the smart too? Each ring of Len's line brought her closer to a complete breakdown.

She was fumbling to think of a relatively sane voicemail message to leave him when he finally answered. "Hey you, where ya been? I tried to call a bunch of times around dinner to see how the party went."

"Lenny! Thank God. I thought maybe you'd found a date or something."

"Yes, that would be something to thank God for...but no, I was just trying to get the neighbor's cat to come inside. What's wrong with you? You sound like shit."

"Oh Len..." His name came out as a sob.

"Caro, for Christ's sake, what happened?"

She tried to speak but couldn't.

"Did Jack give you the bum heave even before the meeting tomorrow? Fuck him anyway."

"Yeah," she hiccupped, giggles battling tears. "No. No, he didn't give me the bum heave, and no, I didn't fuck him. Well, I almost did, but then things kinda got out of hand." The tears won.

"Um, Caro? Could you stop blubbering and try to explain, darling?"

"Alex is here." It was the only explanation she could think to give him.

"What did you say?"

"Alex is here."

"Alexander King? He's with you in your hotel room? What the fuck?"

"Not in my room, for cripe's sake! Jack gave him the party contract. And I think he wants to give him more than that, if you know what I mean." She let out a fresh wave of sobs.

"Okay, sweetheart, start at the beginning. I am like *totally* confused now."

Caro started at the beginning. She skipped most of the gory details about the fiasco at Alex's loft but she was pretty sure Len got the gist. And she didn't tell him about the part of the evening where she'd given Alex head in the restroom. Some things she just wasn't ever going to tell anybody. Well, she'd always told Alex everything, but he wasn't her friend anymore. The thought made her cry harder.

Len, of course, thought she was an absolute mess. Which was quite true. She felt sorry for him having to listen to her like this.

"Caro, most of what you've told me is great news. Half of the Stoked account is almost as awesome as all of it. And if we prove we can successfully work with an immortal agency, it might seal even more immortal accounts. Okay, so here's what we do..." His voice was reassuringly confident. "As soon as we hang up, I'll call a few of my vamp friends. Get any dirt on King and Associates. I'll put some stuff together to update our proposal—things that demonstrate how well we work with vamps, how flexible we are—and then I'll get in my car and drive to Chicago. I should be there in time for the meeting tomorrow afternoon."

"Lenny, it's after midnight."

"So? I'm a satyr. I'll be doing my diurnal thing right before dawn. And the vamps are just getting rolling."

Just listening to his energetic voice was making her tired. Nerves and adrenalin had been holding her up. Now, after hearing her good friend's voice for a few minutes, they were starting to fade. She yawned. "I'll just go over my notes before the meeting, improvise and everything will be fine. You can email me anything new you can come up with and I'll incorporate what I can."

"Nope, I'm coming there—"

She talked right over him. "And I don't want you to come to the meeting because Jack and Alex and Sherene know that you weren't planning on coming. They'll think I freaked out tonight and called you."

"Well you did, sweetheart. Look, we'll talk about whether I should attend the meeting tomorrow when I get there. You know how I love to drive at night and it'll be fun. We can go shopping in all those lovely stores in the morning and get you a new suit for the meeting. I never did like that blue thing you were planning to wear. And besides, doll face, I'm worried about you."

"I'm fine, Lenny. I just got a little overwhelmed tonight but you know how quickly I bounce back from things."

"Yeah, from *regular* things. But I know how long it took you to bounce back from Alexander King. Like never. And I bet you forgot every vow you made about repulsive thoughts the moment you saw his sexy face—"

"No, no. I did do the repulsive thought thing, Len! You would have been proud. And it worked. At first..."

"I'm afraid to ask but I have to know. Did you let him bite you?"

"No." She didn't admit that she'd wanted to. Very, very badly.

"Honey, you need bolstering. Let me come be your pillow."

"Okay." Caro sighed and laughed at the same time. Her brain felt like mush. She couldn't think about this anymore. "Maybe you're right. You've always been such a good little guardian angel."

"Get into bed and close your eyes. Don't think about the proposal, don't think about Alex. Just go sweetly off to sleep and when I get there, we'll take care of everything."

"Thanks, Lenny," she whispered and hung up.

She tied her robe more tightly, not wanting to give up any of its warmth, and slid between the sheets of the giant bed. She closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind but as she began to slip past the layers of consciousness, she saw Alex's green-silver eyes and heard his deep, rumbling whisper.

You'll be mine again soon, Princess. Mine in every way.

Chapter Five

After spending the wee hours of the morning speeding across the flat, largely rural landscapes of northern Ohio and Indiana, Lenny was rather overwhelmed looking out the wall of windows just outside Stoked Corporation's sixty-fifth-floor office suite. It was a veritable clusterfuck of businesses here in Chicago's West Loop, and the view reinforced his wonder at how so many thousands of people could work in such close proximity and never know what in the heck the others did all day.

Now, as he stood in the lobby of Stoked's office, he was feeling equally overwhelmed by black lacquer—and *totally* freaked out by Merrell, the vampire receptionist. The guy looked like a Stoked advertisement come to life—sculpted cheekbones, pouty mouth and square jaw highlighted by mocha skin and dark brown eyes that smoldered even from a distance.

And Lenny was trying very hard to keep his distance after Merrell sent somebody back into the depths of Black Lacquer Land to find Alex—because now Merrell was blasting Len with a mega-dose of those liquid chocolate eyes.

Merrell was definitely Len's type but there was a time and a place for this type of come-on and unfortunately, 9:30 a.m. in the Stoked lobby didn't qualify.

Len was relieved when he saw a familiar tall, dark and handsome figure heading down the hall. Because he definitely needed to get away from the multiple views of Merrell wearing those ultra-tight pants so that he could stop thinking about the multiple things he wanted to do to Merrell's ass.

Tall, dark and handsome paused. "Lenny? Is that you?"

Lenny stopped checking out Merrell and gave his eyes over fully to Alexander King. Jee-zus...the vamp had style.

Poor Caro had really never had a chance. This guy was the unliving, heavy-breathing reason why everyone lusted after vampires. Dark. Sexy. Dangerous. Sexy. Powerful. Sexy... He cut himself off as Alex strode forward to embrace him.

"Why, Alexander King! Fancy meeting you here!" Len bussed Alex on the cheek, automatically noting—and approving—his choice in cologne.

Alex grinned, still holding Len's hand. "Lenny, you sly satyr. Caro didn't tell me you were going to be here for the big meeting today."

"Umm, well, that's because we weren't sure I was going to be free to attend. But I finished up at home more quickly than I had anticipated and was able to come out early this morning."

"Excellent," Alex said. Lenny tried not to preen, it was hard not to under Alex's friendly and appreciative gaze.

"Have you seen Caro yet?" Alex's question sounded innocent, casual. "I was wondering if she'd been able to fill you in on how things progressed last night."

Len looked into Alex's eyes for signs of guilt, repentance, humor. He couldn't see a damn thing except a sexy silver gleam. Typical Alex.

"Actually, I saw Caro first thing this morning. And she did, in fact, fill me in on last evening's activities." Len didn't try to mask the fact that he was pissed off about said activities, but still, he was surprised to see concern flicker through those silver-green eyes.

"Hey, do you have time for a cup of coffee?" Alex asked. "I was just headed back to check out our new temporary digs. Why don't you join me?"

"All right. As a matter of fact there are several things I want to talk to you about. I'm here for more than just saying hello."

"Okay, then." Alex put a hand on Len's back and guided him toward the hall.

Len, noticing Merrell's quickly shuttered interest as they passed by the reception desk, indulged himself with a wink. Merrell looked away with the tiniest hint of a smile.

As Alex and Len entered the office Jack had arranged for the event planners to use, Len let out a low whistle of approval. It was a large suite with a big worktable, an accommodating seating area and plenty of tech toys.

Of course there were no windows. Stoked took good care of their vampire employees.

"Nice setup. It actually looks like some work could get done in here."

"I'm gonna work these fingers to the bone, Len." Alex smiled and flexed his ring-bedecked fingers.

"A novel event, I'm sure." As somebody who'd struggled for every penny he ever earned, Len could never resist getting his digs in on his wealthy friends.

There was a soft knock on the door and a beautiful young man holding coffee mugs came into the office.

Len watched the guy set the mugs down and leave. "What is it with the employees around here?" he asked Alex. "They all look like teenage underwear models."

Alex laughed and handed Len one of the mugs. He motioned for him to sit down.

"That's because they probably *are* teenage underwear models." Alex slouched elegantly in his chair, letting his long legs stretch out under the table. "The head of human resources has friends in all the local modeling agencies. The management likes to pick employees who are, or were, models, because they think it's good for business. Which it probably is."

Len shrugged. "Maybe so. But it's weird."

"Agreed." Alex wrapped his fingers around his coffee mug and Len couldn't help checking out the huge cabochon ruby adorning his middle finger, an heirloom gem any immortal would recognize as belonging to venerable royalty. And, a satyr through and

through, Len had always coveted bright, shiny things. Alex wore it well. Len brought his eyes back to Alex's face and saw those full, chiseled lips twist into a sexy, canine-flashing smile.

Len sighed silently. Sacred gems, profane mouth. Fuck-me body and a four-thousand-dollar business suit. Alex pulled it all off like a prince. He seemed more mature than he had been five years ago, more at ease with himself. And Lenny should know — his family had served Alex's family for centuries and he was intimate with the pleasures and the burdens of being vamp royalty.

Len had been raised in Alex's household and they'd grown up as friends and fellow rebels, both of them a trial to their conservative, traditional families. When Len had wanted to strike out on his own, Alex had slipped him the funds to start a catering business in Manhattan. Ironically, Alex had been his biggest client, the vamp prince having grown up with a fondness for lavish parties.

And it was at those parties that Len struck up a friendship with a lovely young mortal named Caroline Connery.

"So congratulations on your business." Alex raised his mug in a toast. "And on winning a totally kick-ass account. This could mean big things for you guys, right?"

"Well, yeah. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little disappointed in having to split the account. It could get messy. Particularly after the way things went last night."

"Lenny, I want to assure you that I—"

Len interrupted him, wanting to get this part of the conversation over as quickly as possible. "You know, Alex, I've had to scrape Caro's remains off the floor more than once after you've laid waste to her. When something's been broken again and again it becomes difficult to repair. She's a beautiful person. She deserves better than you." He took a sip of coffee and cleared his throat. "In other words, don't fuck with her or I will be forced to hire someone to twist your balls off."

Alex laughed, the low rumble a mixture of appreciation and acknowledgment. "You're a great friend to Caro. And I certainly approve of your, um, rather forthright defense of her. You probably won't believe me but I feel sorry if Caro was hurt by what happened last night. I should have kept everything strictly business."

Len looked at Alex in silence for a moment and then said, "What, no speech about how we're all sexual animals and Caro and Jack and your girlfriend were just as hot as you were and all's fair in games between consenting adults and whatnot?"

Alex's features creased into a grimace as he shifted in his chair. "God, Lenny. Do me a favor and don't remind of all the drivel I used to dish out."

Len lifted an eyebrow in genuine surprise. "Why, Alex! Do I sense remorse for past dirty deeds?"

Alex's lips quirked into a cocky half-grin. "Not for all of them. Just some of them."

"Okay. But I don't want to give you the wrong idea about what Caro told me last night. She hasn't really discussed her personal feelings about you. With me. If you want

that information you'll have to ask her." Len cleared his throat again. Man, he should shut up. He was always talking too much in these situations. "What I'm trying to say is, don't tell her about this conversation."

"I wouldn't dream of it," said Alex. "But I'm hoping you won't feel like you're betraying any confidences by telling me your honest opinion of how she's doing in general...like how things have been going for her emotionally. I was really sad to hear about her grandma passing away."

"Yeah, it was really rough. But she's doing a little better now. And it was good that she was living with her these last few years. I'm sure it would have been much worse if she'd been in New York when it happened."

"That's one good thing, I guess. It may sound like complete bullshit coming from me, but I really want the very best for her. I know she'll forever regret the bond between us...and someday we'll have to come to terms with it, but for now I'm doing my best to abide by her wishes."

Lenny watched Alex's eyes for any telltale flickers of vamp malarkey. There weren't any. Too bad he didn't have something to record this conversation with—he could use Alex's radical and very unprincely admission to make a princely sum in certain circles interested in preserving vamp traditions. But he'd never betray his friend like that.

Len wondered if Alex realized the extent of displeasure his relationship with Caro caused the royal community. Hmm. No time like the present to ask. "Did you know Lyra Murdoch has been rattling some chains at the Immortal Council?"

Lyra was the vampire CEO of VampedUp, Stoked's chief competition for the immortal cosmetics market. Lenny had learned that VampedUp was definitely pissed about Stoked's multi-persuasion marketing plans.

"No. But it doesn't surprise me." Alex spread his fingers on the smooth surface of the table. "Lyra's a bitch."

"She's your cousin, right? Some kind of countess?"

"Yeah, but I prefer not to think about us sharing blood. In any way."

"She's a scary one all right." Len shuddered. "And she seems particularly upset this time. The reason I bring it up is because she's upset about you and your company's willingness to do business with Stoked."

"Let her rattle her kinky chains all she wants." Alex's shoulders shifted. "I could give a devil's damn about the Immortal Council. They weren't there for me when I needed their help with Caro...why should I listen to anything they have to say about my business?"

"Um, maybe because they could put a stop to all mortal and immortal business partnerships? I know the Council might not strike fear in your big bad vamp heart, but they seem to send mortals into paroxysms of terror. And mortals are a big part of the Party Mavens client base."

"If Lyra makes trouble for you, or any of my friends or business associates, I will take care of her. With gusto." Silver streaks lit up Alex's eyes.

Lenny, familiar with the dangerous expression on Alex's face, believed him implicitly. He cleared his throat. "I should also tell you then that Lyra is here in Chicago. Some friends heard she's been throwing private parties at a new club. I was thinking about crashing one, but thought it might be good to acquire some...backup."

"Consider yourself backed up." Alex's smile was downright scary.

"Okay then." Lenny nodded and stood up, suddenly anxious to leave.

"So will you be attending the meeting with the Stoked execs, or will it be just Caro?"

"Oh, it all depends on if I can find something suitable to wear."

Alex laughed as Len sashayed out the door.

* * * * *

Alex sat at the gargantuan black conference table in one of the equally gigantic conference rooms of Stoked's offices. He stifled a yawn and stretched his fingers over the stack of documents being tediously explained by one of the financial executives. Caro and Lenny had a lunch interview with the Stoked marketing team—a process he and Sherene had gone through yesterday—and when they returned there would be a combined meeting where they would all make their presentations.

The thought of the presentation didn't make him nervous in the slightest, but the thought of seeing Caro again was making him nuts. He wondered if anyone would notice if he took a break.

Jack's seat was empty. Maybe he'd had the same idea.

Alex turned to Sherene and muttered, "I gotta get out of here for a minute." He quietly slipped out the door and, after noticing the conference room was closest to the staff lounge and its adjoining restroom, he decided to forego the long walk back to the executive suites and use the john off the lounge.

The lounge was deserted and as Alex walked past the microwaves the vague aroma of leftover chili filled his nostrils. Ugh. As a half-vamp he had a love-hate relationship with food, never knowing what was going go down smooth or what would turn his stomach. The coffee smelled beyond stale. One of the pots appeared to be scorching. He lifted it off the burner and ran some water in it at the sink.

And that's when he heard the thumping coming from the bathroom that adjoined the lounge.

Damn. Either there was a plumber in there banging the pipes or someone was having some serious issues. Normally he would have left well enough alone and gone on down the hall to another restroom, but when the next thump was accompanied by a loud grunt, he thought he'd better do his civic duty and make sure that nobody was pulling an Elvis and keeling off a commode.

He gently pushed open the swinging door and peeked into the room. There were three stalls and near the far wall, the door to the largest stall had swung open. Through the opening he saw Lenny Gibbons, his hairy satyr ass a dead giveaway. Len jerked and gave a pained groan. Alex took a step forward, thinking Lenny was ill or maybe having nasty troubles with a plugged-up toilet.

As he got closer, Alex laughed out loud at his own stupidity. He'd failed to realize that Len was not alone. And it was now quite clear that instead of plunging the commode, Len was plunging his thick, rigid cock into a shapely male ass. Whoever was on the receiving end of Len's attentions was holding on to the frame of the stall and with each thrust was banging it against the marble wall.

Len's head came up. Apparently he'd heard his laughter.

Alex winked. "Hey, you guys might want to take it a little easy. I could hear you banging out in the lounge."

"Oh fuck." Len shut the door to the stall with a thud. There were sounds of mad fumbling and hushed whispers.

"Please don't stop on account of me," Alex called out. "I was just on my way out to use the other restroom."

Alex turned to leave, still chuckling—and nearly plowed into Caro as he pushed open the door. She lost her balance and he reached out to hold her steady.

The door thunked closed behind him. He was momentarily speechless at the sight of her. She looked amazing. Her upswept hair and demure business suit were dramatic departures from the red-hot carnality of last night's sex-tousled curls and cum-streaked flesh. His cock juiced at the memory. He ran his tongue over his canines and exhaled a slow breath.

"Caro..."

"Alex."

Alex's hands were creating havoc with her body. Yes, she was fully clothed, and yes, he was quite innocently supporting her shoulders after she'd nearly fallen on her ass. But none of that mattered to her Alex-starved nerve endings.

He must have been laughing at something, because sexy little laugh lines were still visible around his mouth and eyes. She shook her head, feeling more than a little hypnotized by his proximity. She tried to keep her voice calm and professional. "Umm, excuse me. I need to use the restroom. I think I'd prefer it if you didn't join me."

Alex appeared to remember something. "Wait! Ah...don't go in there."

"Why not? Is it just for men or something?"

"Uh, no. All the restrooms here are unisex I think."

"Well, I've really got to go, so if you don't mind..."

"Why don't you let me show you the executive bathroom? I think you'll be more comfortable there."

Oh God. If he thought he was going to get her into another compromising position in the john, he could think again.

"I'm not in the mood for your games," she said in a barely civil tone. "I'd like to use the facilities. Without your help."

"I really think it would be better if you —"

"Goddamn it, Alex! I am not above kicking you. And I'll do so if you do not get out of my fucking way. Now."

"Okay, okay. No violence, please. But you may be sorry." He stepped aside to let her through.

She got one step closer to the door before almost getting bowled over again, this time when Len came busting through in a rush. Alex had to reach out to steady her again.

"Lenny! I've been looking for you," she said. "Where have you been? It's time to get our stuff ready for the final portion of the meeting."

Len didn't respond. His cheeks had a suspiciously rosy cast and his gold-brown curls were more mussed than usual. His eyes kept flickering over to Alex.

Alex looked like he was trying very hard to maintain a straight expression.

"What's going on?" If she didn't know better she'd suspect immortal monkey business of the sexual variety. But she knew these two opposites just didn't attract in that particular way. At least they never had before...

"Nothing's going on," said Len in an unnaturally loud voice. He had his hands on the door handle behind him, like he was holding it shut. "I was just taking a quick break before coming to help you out."

"But why did it look like Alex was guarding the door just now?" She flexed her shoulders, trying to keep tension from immobilizing her muscles. "Come on, come on...I've got enough on my mind without trying to figure out what you two are up to."

Alex rolled his eyes heavenward. Len began to stammer excuses just as the door swung open again. This time Caro was quick enough to take a step back. It was Merrell. The hot vamp receptionist. He rubbed a hand over his short black hair and shot them all a canine-baring grin before jauntily leaving the room.

Alex smiled at Len and Caro. "They have a very accommodating staff here, don't you think?"

Len cleared his throat. Caro glared at both of them.

"Len, can I see you in private for a moment? Thanks for your help, Alex. We'll see you at the final meeting, right?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world." He bowed slightly and left.

Caro grabbed Len's hand and dragged him into the bathroom.

She walked to the middle of the room and turned to face him. At least he had dropped the fake innocence and looked honest-to-God guilty.

"Goddamn it, Len. Couldn't you have waited until *after* the presentation to fuck Merrell?"

Len closed his eyes and pressed his lips together in a flat line.

She should have guessed this would happen. Gay vamp males seemed to have a thing for Lenny—and he sure as shit had a thing for them. For one thing, Len was a satyr, and although he usually kept the more obvious indicators of his species under wraps—like his stubby horns and docked tail—when he wanted to, he could give off some pretty extreme "do me all night really, really hard" satyr sex vibes that a lot of folks found irresistible.

And then there were the tempting features that belonged to Len exclusively—wide-set acorn-brown eyes, broad cheekbones, a nose that could only be described as cute and thick, shoulder-length curls in a gorgeous blend of light brown, umber and gold.

There was a thump from the stall behind her and Caro whirled around.

Jack came out of the stall.

What in the heck...?

He strode up to the mirror, looking a little too casual as he smoothed his lavender tie with a flick of his hand. "All set for the big show?" His smile was dimmer than usual.

Len stood there, still frozen. Caro answered stiltedly, "Um, yeah, thanks Jack."

"Yes. Well. I'm looking forward to it." He exited the room in a rather hasty fashion.

Caro slowly turned back to Len. "A three-way? With Merrell and *Jack*?"

Lenny didn't respond. He went to a sink and turned on the faucet, bending to splash water on his face.

"That *is* what you were doing, I presume?"

He caught her glance in the mirror when he stood up. He looked more sheepish than guilty, she decided. Which meant the sex must have been good.

"Yes, yes," he said. "For God's sake, yes! Things got a little carried away. Merrell lured me in here. He was totally hot for me. And then Jack walked in...turns out he likes to watch. He begged us to fuck. What could I do?"

"Lord, the restrooms in this place must have aphrodisiacs in the air freshener. It's bad enough that one of us had to go all floozy and almost screw this deal. Do we really need to go through this again today? I assume that Alex walked in on you, right?"

Len was mashing a paper towel against his eyes, not answering.

"My God, please don't tell me it was a four-way!" Caro's voice verged on a wail.

"No, no, no. Merrell is a little, umm...shall we say, loud? Alex heard us from the lounge."

"Oh Len," Caro moaned. "Well, thank God for small favors. It could have been somebody else who walked in on you. Somebody less understanding about the pathetic urge to get off at a moment's notice..."

"Sorry, sorry. A thousand times sorry." Len threw the paper towel in the trash and put his hand over his heart.

Caro shook her head at him. "I've gotta pee. Which stall is safe?"

Len's face got pink. "Oh for God's sake, they're all fine."

She stood there looking at him, eyebrows raised.

"Well, take the first one if you're going to be such a priss, then."

Caro went into the first stall

"So how did lunch go?" Len asked when she came back out. Caro and Len had been invited to a lunch meeting with some of the marketing team. At the time, she'd been baffled by Len's request that she field the meeting without him. Now she realized he must have had...other plans.

"Okay, I guess. Jack's second-in-command, Mike Powers, put subtle moves on me then asked me out to dinner."

Len snorted. "Typical. What did you say?"

Caro shrugged as she approached the mirrors behind the sinks and pulled a cosmetics case out of her handbag. "I told him I thought we should wait and see how things went this evening."

"Good thinking," said Len.

She applied some lipstick. "So how were they?"

"What?"

"You know. Merrell. Jack. How were they?"

Len's nut-brown eyes sparkled. "Merrell was better than I imagined. I didn't have a chance to...sample Jack."

"So Merrell's as hot as he looks?"

Len chuckled. "In the parts I've checked out so far."

"Well, it's always better if these things end up being worth it. If you know what I mean."

"And I do."

"Okay." She smoothed back a stray strand of hair. "I think I'm as ready as I'm ever gonna be. Shall we go see if they're ready for us?"

"Let's do it, you sexysmart thing, you."

Caro gave him a quick hug and they went to kick some ass.

Chapter Six

The tremendous surge of adrenalin that had been pulsing through her system during the presentation eased and left Caro feeling exhausted but euphoric. After doing pitches to every type of client imaginable for four years, she was fairly solid about predicting success. And yeah, this pitch had gone amazingly well.

It helped that Alex and Sherene were so obviously enthusiastic about working with Party Mavens. Rumors that vampire products company VampedUp was raising a stink about Stoked horning in on the immortal demographic had Stoked executives eager to employ immortal expertise. Alex exuded confidence and charisma, and even though his own small company claimed no ties to his father's entertainment empire, the King name reigned in the world of business.

The Stoked exec committee had gone into closed session to make a final decision and now the only thing left to do was wait. Caro and Len stood in Jack's empty office trying to decide what to do.

Len was bouncing on Jack's big leather desk chair like a little boy. "Oh man...nothing beats this feeling. We need to celebrate. Now." He jumped out of the chair and came around the desk to grab her hands. "Come on. We'll use Jack's name at the Metro Club upstairs and have a few cocktails while we wait. Jack has your cell number, right?"

"Right. But you're forgetting one small thing, Len. Your partner is a mere mortal who needs a modicum of rest." Len's enthusiasm was infectious, but nerves, little sleep and nearness to Alex were making her woozy. "Maybe I should go back to the hotel and try to grab a nap. Then we can do something to celebrate later."

"But I wanted to go somewhere—"

Caro raised her hand to stop Lenny's likely litany of clubs he wanted to check out. "And I also don't want to get carried away celebrating until we hear final word that the executive committee approved us. The jinx factor is freaking me out here."

"Oh, come on. You know we got it." Len was swinging her hands back and forth. "We got it, we got it, we got it!"

Caro giggled. An excited Len was a dizzying thing.

"Hey, I've got an idea," she said. "Why don't you see if Merrell is about to get off work? Then you can take *him* upstairs for some cocktails. And I'll go back to the hotel. As soon as I get word from Jack, I'll call you and then maybe we can get some late dinner somewhere."

Joy illuminated Len's gamine features. He kissed her hands, her knuckles, her palms. "Doll face, you are the best friend anyone ever had. In all of history."

"God, Len. You are so easy to please. And I bet Merrell will soon find out you're just plain easy. Go find him and I'll see you later."

When he practically ran out the door, Caro grinned, happy that Lenny was so happy, hoping his happiness would last this time.

Vamps were often trouble for satyrs—many vamps considered the traditionally serving-class satyrs to be second-class immortal citizens. As she packed up her briefcase and headed toward the elevator, she wished Len would pick a nice mortal for a boyfriend every now and then. Someone who wouldn't use ancient immortal cultural rules to hurt him.

* * * * *

"Alex?"

Caro sat up too quickly. Streaks of city lights peeked between the drapes of the hotel bedroom and she fell back onto the pillows, dizzily watching bands of red, yellow and orange cross the ceiling.

She'd been dreaming about Alex. An occurrence so common she didn't stop to ponder it. As she drifted back into the dream, she let the sweetest of all lovers smooth her hair from her face, let him run his hand between the folds of her robe, opening it so he could caress her naked flesh with a gaze that spoke of heat and danger and love.

Her tattoo buzzed with the beat of their mutual hunger, calling on him to feed from her, to feed her own endless yearnings and her darkest desires. She felt his strong, cool fingers on the heated flesh of her thighs. Felt his hot mouth rub against her swollen nipples. His tongue tasted, his teeth nipped. A knowing fingertip smoothed slick moisture from inside her pussy, gently lavng her labia and the quivering hood of her clit. Two long fingers entered her forcefully, deeply. Her breath rasped, short, sharp pants that echoed in the room.

"Alex!"

She pressed her wrist against her heaving belly, consciousness suddenly pulling her away from the familiar, pleasurable dream. What woke her up? She'd wanted the dream to go on forever...

She heard a faint sound from the outer room and realized someone was knocking on the door to the suite. Blinking herself awake, she rose and padded through the living area to look out the peephole.

Alex. Oh God. He was actually here. After quickly cinching the belt of her robe and smoothing her hair, she opened the door.

He'd had his hands behind his back but now he brought them forward. He held a bottle of her favorite champagne. His smile was devastating as he handed her the bottle.

"I represent the congratulatory committee from Stoked. Congratulations, princess. We got the account."

"Come in." She cradled the cold bottle against her quivering belly and stepped back to let him into the room, hoping that Jack, Len, Merrell—anybody would be hiding behind him. She didn't trust herself to be alone with Alex right now. Her body was still humming from her dream. She avoided his eyes, knowing he could probably see what she'd been thinking, knowing he could probably smell her need through her robe. She shut the door, quickly moving to set the bottle down on the coffee table.

Alex walked to the middle of the room, the dim light from the window partially illuminating his elegantly rumpled form. He'd taken off his coat and tie at some point and had rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt. A five o'clock shadow made his face look leaner, sexier. Caro blinked, trying to focus on what he'd said, trying to get her mind around the idea that she and Len were a success. But her thoughts were slogging through a muddle of drowsiness and an alarming desire to get closer to Alex.

"What happened to Jack?" She fiddled with the lapels of her robe, avoiding his eyes. "I thought he was supposed to call. I told Len I'd let him know when I got word..."

"Actually, Len already knows. I ran into him as he was leaving the office with Merrell. Jack is still tied up in meetings and I told him that I'd go find you guys to tell you the news. I didn't realize you had left already." He switched on the desk lamp and she looked up to see a circle of golden light softening the lines of his cheekbones and jaw, highlighting the full, moist curves of his mouth. The smile he gave her made her stomach dip. "I told Len to go ahead and...umm, have fun with Merrell and that I would come let you know the good news."

"Oh." She stuffed her chilled hands into her robe pockets. "You could have just called."

Alex shrugged. "I know. But I wanted to tell you in person."

He walked over to the window, his hips and buttocks moving sinuously beneath his trimly tailored trousers. She shifted her weight restlessly from foot to foot, hyperaware of the slick, needy flesh between her thighs.

"Nice view." He let the curtains fall closed again and turned around, lips quirking into another smile. "Hey, Caro...are you still asleep? Aren't you happy about the news?"

"Of course I'm happy, I'm just..." Her brain felt muzzy. Her body felt...hot.

"Sleepy." He finished the sentence for her as he took two steps closer. Her nostrils fluttered, picking up his scent. She had a sudden sensory memory of being in his bed—writhing her sated body against his fragrant sheets, fitting herself more perfectly against his big sleeping body, nuzzling her face into his neck and the thick, silky fall of his hair.

Oh please, God...

She didn't understand herself anymore, didn't know what she was pleading for.

He came to stand directly in front of her. "Maybe a congratulatory kiss would help you wake up..." His eyes glowed green as he put his hands through the tumble of hair at the back of her neck.

She closed her eyes. *Yes*. This is what she wanted. She wanted him to kiss her. She didn't want to think, she just wanted to feel.

He brought his mouth down aching close, the warmth of his breath mingling with her own. Then he moved his lips over hers so sweetly, so lightly, she couldn't tell if he was whispering an endearment or merely breathing. He stroked her hair down her back and pulled her closer. His tongue and lips were seeking, seeking...then finding as she brought her arms up around his neck and responded without inhibition. Oh God, he tasted good. When he teased the inside of her lower lip with his canines, her tattoo fired to life. She nearly cried out in disappointment when he lifted his mouth to take a breath.

He looked into her eyes and smiled. "Now that's what I call a proper response to some good news."

"Kiss me more...please."

"Happy to," he murmured before taking her lips again.

She'd wanted him to kiss her lips forever but she decided it wasn't a hardship when he moved his lips to her throat. He spread the lapels of her robe, treating each shoulder with suckling, open-mouthed kisses before pushing the robe all the way off. He ran his cool hands down her bare arms.

He stepped back and looked at her. His eyes were burning hot. "Sweet mercy," he groaned. "Don't tell me you were wearing this under your suit today." Her camisole was black, tight and totally sheer, her v-string a wisp of black lace and beadwork. Nothing too special, but Alex had always had a major thing for her lingerie. He'd loved buying it for her, seeing it on her – very briefly – and then taking it off.

"Mm." She was concentrating on tugging his shirt from his waistband. She wanted more flesh under her hands, she wanted to feel him, breathe him, taste him. Live her favorite fantasy right here, right now.

"Well, thank Christ I didn't know." His voice was a rumbling purr. "Or I would have been brutally hard all day. And I would have been forced to take matters into my own hands." He spanned his hands around her waist and then began to caress her lower back. "I'd have eased you back onto that giant black table. Moved my hands up under that demure skirt. Carefully removed this..." His fingers dipped down to push the elastic band onto the swell of her buttocks. His thumbs played with her crack as he eased the band down her cheeks.

Caro let out a breathy hum. "Just so long as you're hard right now..." She tugged his belt and pulled it loose from its buckle. Her mind was now clear about one thing. She desperately needed him naked. Taking his hand, she led him into the suite's bedroom.

Alex looked down at the bed and flashed a sinful smile. "Hey, is this that sexual rush thing business guys get when they seal big deals?" He helped her fumbling fingers with the fastener of his trousers.

"I don't know...all I know is that I want you. Now."

Cumbersome silk and wool finally came down over his hips. She licked her lips as she saw his cock peek between the flaps of his partially buttoned shirt. A swift push had him falling back on the bed.

"Easy, princess...don't you want to savor the moment?" His smile teased her as he kicked off his shoes.

"What I want to savor is your cock. Deep. Inside me. Now." She pulled off his socks in a single, violent pull. Her need for him was bringing new meaning to the term "single-minded".

He started to say something else but stopped when she leaned down and pressed her open mouth to his. As she nibbled and sucked on his tongue and lips, she quickly unbuttoned his shirt, pleased when he helped her by kicking off his pants and boxers. Never breaking contact with her mouth, he freed his arms from his shirt and brought his hands up to cup her face. He plundered more deeply and she reveled in the barely controlled frenzy of their warring lips and tongues.

The pleasure was in the taking, the marauding, it didn't matter that their treasures were freely given.

She tore her mouth away, her breasts heaving as she tried to catch her breath. His eyes flashed silver as she pulled the camisole over her head. Oh God. Alex's eyes. So deep, so complex.

It was a shatteringly erotic experience to watch those eyes flicker and change during acts of love. The pure silver was a gift from an ancient vamp gene and usually signaled danger—aggression, wrath, the need to completely dominate and possess. Green was the earthy, virile, fully aroused color of pure sex.

The muscles in his arms and chest worked gorgeously as he moved to lean up against the headboard of the bed. But her eyes kept returning to his midsection, to the way his erect penis was straining up against his belly. Its shadow seemed to loom all the way up to his chest in the dim light of the room. Oh, it was her very favorite cock...all long and thick and beautiful.

"Don't move," she murmured as she climbed onto the end of the bed. She crawled toward him on her hands and knees. When his hands rose to touch, she froze. "No hands. Not 'til I say."

She straddled his thighs, hyperaware of the nearness of his straining cock, the neediness of her clenching pussy. A wave of panic hit her as she stroked his upper arms and chest...how many times had she dreamed of touching his supple flesh like this? Was she dreaming this? Would his image flicker and fade away?

No, princess. This is real. Very, very real.

Letting his reassurances lift her to a higher level of experience, she closed her eyes, ran her fingertips over his skin and just felt...the air filling and leaving his lungs, the smooth ridges of his pecs, the feel of his nipples as the sensitive flesh pebbled with arousal. She stroked down his abdomen, feeling the looming heat of his erection. She bent down, eyes still closed and, effortlessly honing in on the pulse of his desire, licked the upper crest of his cock. She smiled when she felt him jerk in response.

"Do you have a condom?"

He nodded. "In my wallet. In my pants..." He paused. "Caro, are you sure you don't want —"

She pressed two fingers to his lips. A condom wasn't necessary for protection against disease or pregnancy — Alex's vampire blood kept him disease-free and she was on the Pill. No, a condom was a barrier between bloodmates. His semen in her womb was almost as potent a connection as her blood in his body. She'd spent long, agonizing years learning to live without that kind of love drug. She didn't want to forsake all that hard work for one night of pleasure.

"No. I want you to stay right there while I get you ready."

Alex quirked an eyebrow and then watched as she reached between her legs with one hand and slid her fingers through the lips of her pussy. When they were covered with warm, glistening liquid, she slid them over the crown of his cock.

Alex made a low humming sound in his throat and shifted his hips.

"Can you feel how ready I am for you?"

"Yes."

"Good. Stay warm while I'm gone."

Alex laughed husky and low. "Honey, for you my flame burns eternally."

Caro slid off him and found a condom. She climbed back on the bed, straddled his waist once again, opened the condom and covered him with a flourish. She grinned down at him, reveling in the lush green need in his eyes.

"You can use your hands now."

He grinned back and his hands sprang to life. They slid up the curves of her hips and up over her breasts. His fingers stopped to circle and press her nipples and then came down to the tender area where her inner thighs met her torso. She closed her eyes as he stroked the crease there gently with his thumbs, coaxing her to open even wider.

"So, so beautiful," he whispered. The strong pads of his thumbs rubbed up through the hair covering her mons and then down to press the flesh above her clitoris. She opened her eyes.

"Mmm. No. No more there. I want to come with you inside."

"As she wishes," whispered Alex. She got up on her knees, hovering over his cock. She clasped his length with one hand and then stroked herself with the wide bulb of his crown...once, twice. She held it at her entrance, reveling in the moment when his flesh first separated hers.

Blood zipped to her tattoo, the sensitive flesh begging to be licked, sucked, pierced and plundered. Oh God, she wanted it almost more than she wanted the burning cock in her hands.

She looked down into his eyes and whispered hoarsely, "No feeding."

Alex's eyes silvered for a split second then he thrust his hips up a fraction and said, "This will be enough..." His eyes closed and his lips quivered over flashing teeth. "For now."

She sank down with a moan, impaling herself to the hilt on his straining cock.

Oh, he filled her so sweetly. She reached her fingers down to grasp the root of his shaft, stroking the place where they joined together. His fingers covered hers and she knew he wanted to feel what she was feeling, absorb the essence of their connection. They stroked together before he moved her fingers up over her mons, then back down to her clit.

"Show me," he whispered. "Show me how you want me to touch you."

She took his index and middle fingers and brought them to the hood of her clit, first sliding them up and down and then pressing them hard against it. She clasped his other hand and brought it up to her breast, showing him the tugging, whorling motion she was aching for.

She closed her eyes and quickened the movement of her hips. Rotating, gyrating, sliding up and down along the length of his cock. She wanted to fill herself with hard, fast sensation. No pondering the significance of the act. No wondering about how she'd feel when it was over.

Alex groaned. His fingers increased their pressure on her clit as she rode him harder. Her breathing became raspier, shallower as her pleasure heightened. Shifting her knees to press against him more tightly, she bent forward, the tips of her hair brushing across his chest. She took his hand from her pussy and placed it on her other breast. She covered his hands with her own and gasped incoherent pleas, encouraging him to pinch, tug, take.

She cried out his name as the climax began to crest, grinding her hips against his, aching to feel more of his hard flesh. She wanted to weep when release sent her over the precipice, crashing into sweet oblivion where there were no thoughts, no regrets, just pure sensation.

She dropped her head to his shoulder as she began to drift, her pussy quaking with tiny aftershocks around his still-stiff cock, his hands stroking her hair, smoothing it down her back and then languorously stroking her buttocks. She concentrated on breathing.

Her first semi-rational thought was that something that felt this good couldn't possibly be bad. *Hmm*. Wasn't that a song or something? She drifted a moment longer and then propped herself up on his chest.

His face was a stunning picture of suppressed passion—eyes closed, lips rigid, cheeks flushed.

Smoothing the dark hair curling on his moist temples, she kissed his lips gently. "My, what a patient boy you're being."

"Mmm," he grunted.

She wiggled her hips against his, feeling the thickness of his cock surge against her cushioning flesh.

He didn't move. She wiggled again. Still nothing. "What is this?" she asked. "A new meditation technique?"

His lips twisted and then he smiled, opening one eye to look at her. "Kind of." His voice was a whispery rasp. "I'm thinking deep thoughts."

She smiled back. "About what?"

"Are you sure you want to know?"

"Well, yeah," she said impatiently. She pinched his arm.

He grabbed her ass, holding it hard against him for a moment. "If you'd let me feed from you, you wouldn't have to ask what I'm thinking."

She shook her head slowly, knowing she could never make that connection with Alex again, could never become one with his mind. He was too powerful, too unpredictable, too untrustworthy. She couldn't risk losing herself. She didn't want or need his mastery anymore.

Ah, hell. She didn't want to feel this sadness right now. She'd wanted to savor their connection for just a few more moments. "Alex, I can't—"

He pressed a fingertip to her lips, his eyes blazing with arousal and tenderness. "I'm thinking about how, now that I'm inside you, I feel like I've come home. I'm thinking about how much I've missed you. I'm thinking about how I still love you even after all this time."

A wave of emotion tore through her, leaving a lump in her throat and an achy pain in her solar plexus. She bit her lip and pressed her face into his shoulder. "Damn you, Alex. I hate it when you say stuff like that."

"You wanted to know," he reminded her unhelpfully.

"It hurts."

"Even if it's true?" He smoothed a lock of her hair back over her ear.

"Especially if it's true. That's why it hurts so much."

"Ah, princess. I know you don't trust me—so let me just show you my love one more time."

He grasped her shoulders and gently rolled her onto her back. She felt a tear seep from the edge of one her lids. He kissed it away and then moved his lips over hers, caressing her lower lip with his tongue until she opened and let him in for a deep, achingly tender kiss.

His hands were under her buttocks, shifting and tipping as he thrust his cock into her more deeply, adjusting to the new position. He smoothed his fingers down her thighs, coaxing her knees to grasp his waist.

She held on tight everywhere. Hanging on to his shoulders, his thick waves of hair, grasping and releasing with her fingers as she drowned in his kisses.

Alex gave a low moan as he began to thrust into her more forcefully, rocking her body with a pulsing rhythm. His hands sought hers and he laced their fingers together, extending their arms against the cool sheets, plunging his cock forward and out, again and again. "Open your eyes, princess," he coaxed breathlessly against her lips. "I want you to look into my eyes when I come."

"Oh God, Alex..." A swell of fresh arousal strummed through her body. His eyes were glowing with emotion and sensuality, the lids heavy, the beautiful silver-shot green of the irises almost totally eclipsed by the black of his pupils. A shock of hair had fallen across his forehead, his expression was harsh but strangely beautiful as he grimaced and tightened his lips, his right canine drawing a drop of carmine-colored blood. His body convulsed and then surged forward.

She quivered and keened as she came, rejoicing in the feel of her tightness fisting him, her wetness easing his way. He pressed his forehead to hers and gripped her fingers still more tightly as he ground his cock wildly against her claspings pussy, milking their orgasms for every drop of pleasure.

"I love you, I love you, love, love, love..." He whispered in rhythm to the now-slowing motion of his hips. He released one of her hands and brought his own down between their bodies, quickly bringing her to another wrenching climax as he surged slowly against her.

They lay there motionless for several moments, the harsh sounds of their breathing slowly becoming quieter. Her eyes were damp. Alex gently kissed the tears away as he pulled himself out of her limp body. He eased onto his back, carefully keeping hold of her hand. As he snuggled her up against his length, she pressed her head to the spot where his neck met his shoulder.

A phone began to ring from somewhere in the room.

He laughed softly. "Well at least they waited until we were finished."

She nuzzled her face into his neck. "Don't answer it."

"It's probably Len or Jack wanting to know where we are."

Sighing, she sat up and ran her fingers through her hair, wincing as they snagged in a nest of tangles. "Like they haven't guessed."

Alex swung his feet to the side of the bed and grabbed the phone out of his pants. "Let me see who it is...ah, yes. It's Jack." He looked over at her and quirked an eyebrow.

She shrugged. "Go ahead if you want." Reality would suck no matter when it reared its ugly head. She'd already begun to mentally kick herself for her weakness, her need, her unkept promises to herself.

Alex pressed a button and put the phone to his ear. "Hey, what's up?"

Not interested in the conversation, Caro stood gingerly and made her way into the bathroom. She avoided looking in the mirror, not wanting to see her face. Adjusting the jets so they would blast the hottest water she could stand, she quickly stepped into the stall and closed her eyes as the water beat against her face.

She was still standing there when Alex came in a few minutes later. He opened the door to the stall and stepped in.

"I don't think I want any company." She turned to face him and then tipped her head back to let the upper jets pulse against her scalp.

"Don't worry." He took her shampoo from one of the shelves. "No hanky-panky. I just want to shampoo your hair."

Caro mumbled a barely intelligible word of consent as he pushed her head forward to rest on his chest. He poured the rosemary-scented shampoo into his hands and then began to rub it into her scalp, massaging gently from her forehead to her neck and then rubbing his fingers more roughly against her temples.

Caro moaned in pleasure, leaning all her weight into his body. She wondered if it were possible to keep Alex's hands without having to deal with the rest of him.

As if he heard her thoughts, he smacked her bottom and pushed her back under the showerhead. "All done," he said. "Now rinse."

He poured shower gel onto one of the spa sponges resting on the shelf and handed it to her. She quickly soaped her body and then stepped back to rinse. Her hip brushed against something long and stiff. He apparently sensed her dismay because he turned away, casually dispensed more shampoo and said, "Don't worry. It's a completely innocent reaction to your undeniable appeal."

Ha. Alex had never been innocent. He'd probably been trouble when he was in the womb, for God's sake. She stepped out of the shower and went to find her robe.

He came out of the bathroom a few minutes later, a towel wrapped around his waist. His hair was wildly tousled. He looked fabulous and clean and sexy. She wanted to lick him all over. Instead she said, "There's a comb in my bag by the sink." As he sat down next to her on the bed and picked up her bottle of moisturizer, she caught a whiff of rosemary and lavender. Smelled kind of cute on him, she thought with a little smile.

"Okay," he said, but didn't get up. "Lie back and I'll put some of this on you."

She sighed silently and then shrugged. What could it hurt? He'd just made her come three times. It was too late to avoid intimacy.

She rested her head on a pillow, watching as he poured a blob of moisturizer onto the top of each of her feet. He rubbed the cream slowly downward, using his thumbs to work the aching muscles of her arches. This time her sigh was quite audible.

"Jack wants us to meet him for a late dinner," he said, his brow furrowed in concentration. "Some new place in River North. What do you think?" He stroked the balls of her feet and looked up at her. "Do you want to go?"

"Is anyone else going to be there?"

"I think he's been trying to get Len on his cell but apparently can't get through," he paused to waggle his eyebrows, "and maybe a couple of other people."

"I suppose I ought to go. It's not every day that you win a major corporate account. I don't want to screw things up already."

He was working her toes now and she thought about how people say foot massages were as good as sex. Then she thought about the last hour. Nope. It was a hard call but she couldn't agree.

"You are so good at this stuff," she said. "I always thought you should open a spa."

"Only Caro's personal spa. Remember, princess, I am your sworn vassal for life."

She smiled a little at the joke they'd shared for so long. But the poignant memory of their first time together always made her melancholy. If only they'd been able to keep those sweet promises.

"You shouldn't wear such outrageous shoes all the time. But I'm glad you do..." He brought one foot up to his mouth and kissed the ridge of delicate bones. "Because they are so sinfully sexy," he drawled. He moved his hand up her calf and stopped just above her knee. He began to rub there but she shook him off when his thumb moved higher.

"Did you tell Jack what you've been doing for the last hour?" She kept her gaze fixed on his hands.

"No," he said evenly. "Should I have?"

"I don't know. I guess I don't really know what kind of relationship you two have."

"Do you want to know?"

"Yes. No, wait...I regretted it the last time I answered yes to that question."

"The truth is always a good thing. I learned that from you." He smiled and stroked his finger down her cheek.

She rolled her eyes and swung her legs down to the floor.

"I know. I deserve all your doubts...all your skepticism." He sighed. "I'd like to talk to you about Jack, though. And Sherene."

"Okay. If you want to." She stood up, walked over to her suitcase and started rifling through it. This seemed like the type of conversation she should be dressed for.

"Maybe I'll have a drink. Do you want some champagne?"

"Just a water, please." Champagne was the last thing she needed – Alex made her heady enough.

After retrieving a whisky for himself and a fizzy water for her, he strolled up to hand her the glass, eyeing her lingerie with the astute, highly analytical gaze of a connoisseur.

"Hmm...can I help you pick?"

She gave him a look.

"Just kidding." Smiling sheepishly, he sat down on the edge of the bed. "I know I don't have any way to prove it to you, but Sherene is actually the first creature, mortal or immortal, that I've fucked – and I mean in any way – in almost two years. And I've never fucked Jack. Not that he hasn't spent a lot of energy trying to change my mind."

Caro turned to stare at him. He stared back and then lifted a shoulder.

"Why are you looking at me like that? It's true." He expelled a self-conscious burst of laughter. "I got tired of my...how should I say it? My hedonistic lifestyle. I'd been working for my dad for a few years and we'd been having major disagreements about every other week. You were gone for good. I was pissed off and depressed all the time. My friends suddenly seemed like moochers or morons. So I took off. I traveled extensively for over a year and learned a bunch of things, tried to figure out my state of mind. Then I decided to take a permanent vacation from my usual choices in life."

Still looking at him, she stood silently holding a pair of white lace panties, clenching them tightly, not daring to believe Alex had actually done what she'd begged him to do for years.

"If you don't believe me you can ask my sister. She arranged for me to meet some of the folks at the retreats I went on. Most of my friends – both vamp and mortal – thought I had totally flaked out, and they were probably right. But I ended up realizing that I was being a flake in my old life too. Just a different kind."

She walked over to the bed and sat down. "A flake."

Alex laughed. "Yeah. Is this freaking you out or something?"

"Yeah. You could say it's kind of freaking me out."

Alex sloshed around the ice in his drink before taking a big sip. "I didn't want to go back to work with my dad, I didn't want to get caught up in the destructive routines again. I did some advertising work for a friend who was starting a new label at her winery. She got me a few more gigs and introduced me to Sherene. She had just left a very reputable PR company and was looking for financial backing for her own venture in Chicago. We hit it off. Personally and professionally. But just as friends. She knew I was bloodmated, knew I would never get serious with her about anything other than work." He stood up and dropped his towel on the floor before walking across the suite to refill his drink.

"I've been seeing her exclusively for the last year. No one else. That is, until last night when you attacked me in that bathroom."

Caro had been listening silently, her mouth slightly open. She snapped it shut. "I attacked you –!"

He held his hand up, smiling. "Just seeing if you were paying attention. You haven't said anything and I thought maybe I was boring you."

"Oh no," she said. She finally put on the panties she'd been holding for the last several minutes. "I'm fascinated. Honestly."

"Yeah, well. I've always been a fascinating guy, I'm told." His tone was light but she could see the vulnerability in his eyes. He turned to refill his drink

Caro came over and reached for his hand. "No, I'm really, really thankful you told me all of that, Alex. It makes me glad to know that you found some happiness, some peace. Because before we...before *I* broke things off, I was kind of worried about you. No, a *lot* worried about you."

"I know, princess." He gave her hand a squeeze. "Everyone who really loved me was worried. Juna, my very oldest friends...I think it finally started to sink in that I needed to do something after you left. I'm just sorry I hurt you so much."

"Yeah, well you were pretty much an ass, but I was the rube who kept coming back for more." She released his hand and walked over to the closet, shaking her head as she recognized her crazy need to believe another one of his apologies. "What was it your friend Demo called me...that stupid mortal chick?"

"You weren't a rube. Or stupid." He came up behind her and unwrapped the towel from around her head. He shook the long, damp tangle of hair down her back and she shivered when he placed a kiss on her shoulder. "You were sweet, warm, beautiful..." He accentuated each word with a kiss along her neck. "Are you sure you want to go out to dinner?" he asked, teasing the tendon under her ear with his teeth.

No, she thought, as every erogenous zone in her body fired up. She was one-hundred-percent sure she wanted to spend the rest of her life in this room with Alex. She clenched her jaw and cursed her weakness. Damn, damn, damn.

Okay, one step at a time. She could do this. She could fuck Alex and still have a life. First, get dressed. Second...

"Alex, get dressed." She turned and placed a hand on his chest, firmly pushing him out of her space.

Frowning, he looked down at his fully erect penis. "Damn. This guy seems to be in the way."

"And that, my friend, is a suitable epitaph for the story of your life."

Alex laughed and started searching for his clothes.

Chapter Seven

Alex and Caro were the first to arrive at the lively little bistro just north of downtown. They walked into the crowded lounge to wait for the others.

"I can't believe Jack managed reservations at this place," Alex said after they sidled up to the bar and order drinks.

With a professional eye, Caro looked around the busy restaurant, checking out the details of the décor. Simple furniture and flooring met with lushly abstract art and lighting. The food looked trendy but satisfying, the clientele hip but not pretentious. A good mixture of tastes and persuasions.

She felt a buzz of excitement when she realized she was going to be working and living in this eclectic environment. Just on this single street of restaurants and clubs, you could find something to suit any taste—hip and casual, upscale and swanky, old school and elegant—and mortals and immortals who were eager to try it all.

Alex took her hand as he leaned back in his stool and watched the jazz trio playing on a small stage toward the back of the bar. Caro found herself smiling as she watched him. If she squinted her eyes and squelched her brain cells she could almost pretend they were on a date. Looking around at the other couples milling around the bar and tables, she wondered if any of their histories were as twisted as hers and Alex's. He kissed her fingertips and she let herself sink into the music.

He gave her a nudge and pointed to the window. She saw Jack walking by on the sidewalk with Len and another guy she didn't recognize. Wait. Yes, she did. It was one of Stoked's marketing guys, Mike Powers. The one who had wanted to take her out to dinner tonight.

"Oh shit," she mumbled.

"What?"

"That guy with Len and Jack..."

"Mike Powers? He's one of Jack's marketing dudes. Didn't you meet him earlier?"

"Yep. He wanted to take me out to dinner tonight. I kinda blew him off."

"Oh." Alex's fingers tightened on hers briefly but the smile he flashed was casual. "Don't worry. I'll come up with a good excuse. Like you and I desperately needed to get together for an impromptu consultation about..." His eyes lingered on her throat. "Something that I'll think of in a minute."

Caro took a big gulp of her drink as Jack spotted them and corralled the other men over to the bar.

Alex stood up and shook hands. They each reached down to buss Caro on the cheek.

While Jack made space at the bar, elbowing his way through the crowd with party-boy skill and precision, Len sidled up to Caro and whispered in her ear, "And what, pray tell, have you and Alex been up to?"

Smiling sweetly, Caro whispered back, "The same thing you and Merrell were up to. Except nobody took it up the ass."

Len snorted a blast of laughter. "Like you wouldn't love Alex to send his royal cock straight up your —"

"Len!" She punched him in the arm. Hard.

"What?" Jack handed Len his drink and winked. Caro picked up on some decidedly sexual undercurrents as Jack's deep blue eyes twinkled into Len's mischievous light brown.

"Nothing, I was just offering Caro my personal congratulations on time well spent." Len's face was all innocence.

"Let me add mine too." Jack grinned. "You guys put on one of the best proposals I've ever seen in this line of work."

"I second that," Mike Powers chimed in. He put his drink down on the bar, deliberately placing his big, linebacker-esque physique between Caro and Alex.

Caro wanted to roll her eyes. Oh Lord. This was going to be an interesting dinner.

As Mike leaned an elbow back on the bar, obviously angling to get closer to her, Caro met his too-friendly hazel eyes and politely returned his smile. He was very attractive but definitely not her type. He had a ruddily handsome face, cropped blond hair and the buff build of a former athlete. Caro guessed he'd been a high school and maybe a college star — his gung-ho arrogance indicated he was used to being a leader of like-minded individuals.

"I was afraid I wasn't going to get to see you tonight." He placed a big paw of a hand on her forearm. "I tried your cell, but you didn't answer —"

Alex shoved a cocktail plate in front of Mike when the cocktail waitress came by with a steaming dish of calamari. Caro suppressed a smile. Alex was no lightweight when it came to oneupmanship.

"Caro had a few questions about where we could warehouse supplies for the product launches," Alex explained in a light tone. "I checked out quite a few facilities when I was looking for a place to live last year, so we drove by a few to see if any would be suitable." Alex washed down a piece of calamari with a swig of whiskey. His smile was smooth but not the slightest bit slimy. Lying was one of his fortes.

"So did the *facilities* meet up to your expectations, Caro?" Len asked. Caro wanted to kick him.

"Why yes, Len. They were very accommodating. Very large. Just the right size for my — I mean, *our* — needs."

Caro saw a smirk through Alex's raised whiskey glass. He'd asked for another refill. *Shit*. He was going to get drunk if he didn't watch out. Alcohol tended to bolster his vamp side and drown out his human side.

Mike leaned forward again, hazel eyes looking way too eager to please. "Well, if you'd like, Caro, I could drive you out to our suburban offices tomorrow. I think there might be some additional space out there you might like to see. Oh, and you too, Len."

"Well, thanks, Mike." The sarcasm in Len's voice was barely detectable. "But Caro's going back to Cleveland tomorrow."

Caro flicked a quick glance at Alex. She'd neglected to mention she was returning home the next day and, as predicted, he didn't look too pleased about the news.

"When you come back next week then," said Mike. "Oh, and Caro, about what we'd discussed earlier, I have some suggestions for people you can talk to about lighting..."

Mike launched into a ten-minute monologue about all the mortal contractors he thought Caro should confer with right away. He looked rather disgruntled when Jack jokingly reminded him that this was supposed to be a celebration dinner and that they could leave the detailed business discussions for later.

Luckily, the hostess called out Jack's name and they had to leave the bar to find their table. Caro felt Mike place his hand on the small of her back. *Oh boy*.

When they arrived at the table, she tried to outmaneuver him and sit between Len and Alex, but Mike had already pulled a chair out for her. Damn it. And it wouldn't do to be rude to one of her new bosses.

By the time the entrée arrived, Mike had totally moved in on her space and Alex had moved into protective boyfriend mode. Mike put a possessive arm around her chair and blathered about his new SUV. Alex, who had been stroking her arm at various intervals, began playing with her hair.

Jack and Len watched the whole thing with barely contained amusement. *Thanks a lot, guys*, she silently mouthed across the table to them. Jack grinned and Len toasted her with his empty champagne glass.

Mike began drawing little circles on her shoulder with his thumb and she bit off a groan of frustration. She knew Stoked was a liberal organization when it came to fraternization, and she was happy about it. But Mike wasn't picking up on any of her hands-off signals.

Thinking that it was definitely time for more blatant no-thanks tactics, she grabbed his offending hand and deliberately let it drop. If he tried anything else, she'd have to get verbal. Which meant Alex would get physical. And then everyone in the restaurant would have to save their asses from an angry vamp.

As if sensing her agitation, Alex placed his hand on her knee and squeezed – but his touch was anything but comforting. His hand was creeping up her thigh and now she could feel his fingertips tracing the intersection of the seams of her jeans. Yeah, the intersection right over her...

Sweet, creamy pussy...mm, God...I know exactly what I want for dessert...

Goddamn it, Alex. Stay out of my head!

I'll be happy to stay out of your head. Just as soon as you let me into your –

She gasped as he pressed harder, scraping his fingernails along the grooves of cotton. Her lips flattened. She gripped her butter knife with sweaty fingers. Oh man. Maintain. Normal. Expression.

She reached beneath the tablecloth and clamped down hard on his crotch. Easy to find because it was marked by his flagpole of a cock.

"Mmph," he grunted.

Mike started another god-awful monologue about his personal and professional attributes and Caro thought seriously about stabbing him with the butter knife. She looked across the table at Lenny and beseeched him with her eyes. *Come on, Len. Unless you wanna go home to Cleveland tonight and come back to Chicago only for my murder trial.*

"Well, guys," Len pushed his chair back from the table, "I hate to break up the celebration party, but I've been invited to go dancing at Club Nuance." He made a show of glancing at his watch. "And I hear this is about the time things really get hopping over there."

Jack perked up. "Hey, I've heard some wild things about that place. What do you say, guys?"

Alex poured the last of a magnum of champagne into his glass. "It's vaguely tempting..."

"Why don't you guys go ahead?" Mike unsubtly snagged the opportunity. "I can take Caro back to her hotel. I'm not sure if we'd really fit in to that particular club's niche or nuance." He paused, crooking his fingers into air quotes. "If you know what I mean."

Before Caro could explain she didn't want to fit into a niche, nuance or any other nighttime activity with him, Alex said abruptly, "No, Mike, we don't know what you mean." Sitting back in his chair with scarily casual deliberation, Alex drained his glass of champagne. "Tell us. I'm curious to know."

Caro, recognizing the evil gleam in Alex's eye, knew she needed to diffuse the situation. Quickly. Yes, she was irked with Mike but she didn't particularly want Alex to go all vampire on his ass.

"You know what, guys?" She pushed her chair away from the table, blocking Mike from Alex's view. "I'm feeling pretty tired. I think I'll take Mike up on his offer to go back to the hotel. I'm not really up for clubbing tonight."

Looking shocked and more than a little stoned, Alex watched Mike help her out of her chair and assist her with her jacket. Mike looked ready to crow. Jack looked relieved.

Len took Caro's cue and stood up to place a firm hand on Alex's shoulder. "Let the poor girl rest, Alexander. Your boy friends are calling you tonight." Len showily waggled his eyebrows at Jack.

"Jack. Thanks for the great dinner." Caro pressed her lips against Jack's cheek. "I'll call you before I leave tomorrow."

He smiled. "Cool. We'll set up a meeting schedule. And hey, congratulations again."

As Mike said his goodbyes, Alex stood up. Caro tensed, holding her breath, glancing around at the other diners, the china and glassware cluttering the tables, the plates of food, the beautiful glass light fixtures...the plate glass windows.

Oh God. An angry Alex could lay waste to this scene in seconds. But he didn't. He simply looked at her, his eyes now an inscrutable gray-green, his lips contorted in an expression she interpreted as either hurt or disgust.

He took a step away from the table, his movements tightly controlled. He turned away from her and looked at Len and Jack. "Okay, boys." He bared his teeth in one of the ultra-sexy come-on grins he was famous for. "Are you ready to get down your bad selves?"

Chapter Eight

Alex ordered another bourbon, knowing he was already good and soused but not particularly caring. The atmosphere was ripe for excess and the club was crowded with stylish folks of every mortal and immortal persuasion—hetero, homo, metro, ambi, bi, trans. What they all had in common was the “sexual.”

Jack and Len were dancing with Merrell and his friends, Merrell’s friends giving new meaning to the term “dirty dancing”. As the taller of the two started putting some serious moves on Jack, Alex smiled, thinking Jack might be getting more than he bargained for as Merrell’s friend feigned a particularly aggressive act of full-fanged fellatio on Jack’s gyrating crotch.

Alex sighed as a nymph dressed jarringly in complete cowgirl regalia sidled up to his table. He smiled and shook his head but she didn’t seem to want to take no for an answer. The bad part about hanging out at a table by himself in a place like this was that he got hit on too much to enjoy himself. And the bad part about being on the dance floor was that he got hit on too much to enjoy dancing.

This, he remembered, was why he’d given up clubbing.

Before he had to give the cowgirl-nymph a second brush-off, Len and Merrell joined him. They were breathless and looked ecstatically happy. Alex also noticed that they couldn’t keep their hands off each other. Ahh, young love...er, sex.

Len tried to shout something over at him about getting a drink, but Alex couldn’t really hear. Music bludgeoning every cell in his body, he waved his drink at Len and shook his head. There was no sign of Lyra Murdoch and her private party. He watched Lenny as he sauntered off, Merrill in tow. He seemed to be having too good a time to remember their original reason for coming here. Alex had made a few discreet inquiries about Lyra at the bar but he’d been waved off by the demon bartenders, the original kings of stoicism.

Alcohol, combined with the aftereffects of his pre-dinner activities with Caro, was making him feel wickedly lazy and slightly out of control. He knew he should go home and recoup for a few hours in his crypt—sex without feeding was harrowing—but he also knew if he left the club alone he’d end up at her hotel again. He wasn’t really sure he wanted that to happen and he was definitely unsure if Caro wanted it to happen.

Alex knew he’d been a jerk at the restaurant, but instinct ran too strong for him to ignore assholes like Powers. And the possessive aspect of his instincts had been juiced big time by the amount of time he’d spent inside his mate tonight. He shifted in his seat, his cock instantly jacked by the thought of Caro’s sweet love.

God, if only she'd agree to let him feed. Then he wouldn't have to worry about her. If she was protected by his gifts, he could reach her with his mind whenever he needed her...

What was she doing now? Was she still with Powers? Unpleasant memories of dinner roiled and pitched in his gut.

He didn't want to think about the possibility that Caro was actually attracted to Mike. He knew that the guy wasn't Caro's type by a long shot—but maybe her tastes had changed in the last couple years.

Oh fuck. Escape. These thoughts. Now.

Yeah, he was definitely done with this shit tonight. He'd go look for Jack and make his excuses. It might not be such a good thing to go on the offensive with Lyra when he was in this kind of mood. Meeting as two professionals and settling differences the twenty-first-century way—at the conference table and on the stock market—would be healthier for everybody.

He saw a bright-eyed and flushed-looking Jack making his way through the crowd of people by the bar. "Alex!" He had to shout to be heard over the music. "Where's Lenny?"

Alex shrugged.

Jack sidled up to him and grasped his arm. "I've been looking for you," he said into his ear. "Come with me."

Alex let Jack lead him through the towering space that encompassed the main bar and the dance floor. The rear portion of the club was set up to look like some sort of pasha's paradise, with groupings of gold, pink and purple velvet club chairs and cushions separated by pseudo walls of silk hangings and beads. By the amount of groping going on, Alex guessed that the décor was a success.

Stopping at an unobtrusive door adjacent to the restrooms, Jack looked up at a discreetly placed camera above the door and waved. A few seconds later the door opened.

"What is this place?" They walked down a dark hallway painted a deep royal purple, the only light coming from sparsely placed red-shaded sconces. Alex's ears rang at the sudden absence of sound.

"Private party area. Lyra Murdoch's rented the space for the night. Do you know her?"

"Yes." Alex bit off a negative qualification when he realized that Jack, vamp-loving party boy that he was, might actually like Lyra. She was known for her mortal groupies. Was Jack one of them?

"She saw me on the dance floor through one of the house cameras," Jack said. "I went back to talk to her and she's invited us to hang out."

Alex noticed that Jack was speaking more rapidly than usual...and that his pupils were completely dilated.

"What did she give you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

Jack looked a little sheepish. "She called it a special blend. Do you want some? I'm sure she has more."

Alex paused. "I don't think so. My head's already fucked on booze. I was actually coming to find you to tell you I was ready to split. I'm not sure I'm up for fun with Lyra tonight."

"Oh Alex, come on, you'll love this scene. Don't think about business, just have fun. I've been to one of her parties before and it's something you don't want to miss. Give it an hour and then you can leave."

He sighed an agreement. It would save him from stewing alone at home, wouldn't it?

They walked to the door at the end of the hall and Jack pushed it open. Blinking against the sudden bright light, Alex tried to make out the details of the small room. A bank of television monitors covered the far wall, each monitor showing a different view of the club. An unassuming young mortal wearing wire-rimmed glasses and a *Simpsons* T-shirt sat at a desk behind a large computer. He barely glanced up as they crossed to the door behind him.

Alex found himself trying to adjust his eyes once again as Jack led him through the second door. If the back of the club was decorated as a brightly erotic pasha's paradise, the designer must have had the pasha's torture chamber in mind for this room.

It was huge and over-the-top Goth. His eyes were immediately drawn to a massive, black-iron chandelier suspended from the ceiling by heavy chains, hundreds of wax candles dripping from its many tiers. Black pedestals topped with additional candles were placed in strategic places around the room. The flames created an eerie dance of flickering shadows and writhing gold and orange light.

Alex expelled an involuntary snort of laughter when he noticed a series of wrought-iron shackles bolted along the length of one wall—they were placed at various heights for hands and feet. The corner of the room was dominated by a large domed cage. Man, oh, man. It had been quite a while since he'd seen a setup like this. But Lyra had always loved going the old-school route for her parties. She had a penchant for playing with naïve mortals and knew exactly how to lure them into her snare.

He was relieved to see the shackles and the cage were unoccupied tonight. In fact, the several humans occupying the chamber were all gathered around what appeared to be a large, recessed area in the floor toward the back of the room. Another huge candlelit chandelier rose above them.

Lyra Murdoch surveyed the scene from a small podium. When she saw Alex and Jack, she hurried over to greet them.

"Oh Jack, hooray!" she gushed in a deep, melodious voice. "So glad you came back. And I'm so happy you brought the luscious-looking Alexander with you. You honor us with your presence, my prince."

Taking his hands, she blatantly surveyed his appearance, eyes boldly lingering on his crotch, his neck and his lips. She was tall, maybe a half-inch shorter than he was, and clothed in a hooded black sheath of a dress that covered every inch of her flesh except for her long neck, angular face, bony fingers and her bare, ring-covered toes. The shiny fabric of the skintight sheath accentuated every curve of her slender form, showcasing her small, perfectly formed breasts in a way that flesh-baring cleavage never could. She wore a long pendant—a vial made of blue glass. Her dark-gray eyes—ancient-looking eyes that were too damn probing—were devoid of makeup and highlighted strangely by short, pale eyelashes. The affect was ghostly against the backdrop of her chin-length, center-parted black hair.

Her best feature was a gorgeous set of full lips painted the obligatory blood red. When she pressed those lips to his, he smelled a sweetly cloying mixture of patchouli oil and hashish. Her hands were cold but her lips were hot.

She gave him the creeps.

He pulled back when he felt her tongue lap at his lower lip.

She gave a low laugh and brought her hands down to her sides. "Mm. You have the taste of a very sweet mortal on your lips. I'd love to meet her sometime."

"I don't think so." Alex tried to speak the words coolly but they came out decidedly hot.

Laughing again, Lyra gestured to the gathering of people in the back of the room. "Come."

Lyra was old. One of the oldest creatures he knew, in fact. She had an admirable talent for gliding ambulation. As she floated across the room, he saw the back of her gown was laced with wide black cords that left the breadth of her back bare from her shoulder blades to the center of her buttocks.

Jack squeezed his hand as the sound of low, throbbing music began to emanate from various points in the room. Alex heard gasps and groans coming from the circle of people. As they came closer, he saw why.

The circle was formed around a pit in the floor that was about four feet deep and twelve feet wide. An audience was leaning on a narrow, black wooden railing along the edge of the circle. And in the pit, a satyr and a young mortal female were in the throes of passion. The female was on her back, her pelvis raised high as the satyr enthusiastically performed cunnilingus.

Lyra came to a stop at the edge of the pit. Here the music was louder and Alex saw that part of the circle was lined with the same ivory pillar candles placed around the room. The candlelight limned the glistening flesh of the satyr and the woman as they moved sinuously on the dark cushions.

"It's amateur night," Lyra whispered, motioning for Jack and Alex to come forward. "This is our first couple of volunteers." She smiled. "I'm sure we'll have plenty more as that spectacular zing begins to flow through our veins."

She grasped the vial hanging from her neck and began to unscrew the top. "Would you care for a pleasure pill, my prince? It's my own private blend."

Alex shook his head. "No thanks."

"No? I'm sure your friend Jack can attest to its loveliness."

Alex looked over at Jack. He appeared to be utterly enthralled with the scene unfolding in the pit and didn't respond to Lyra's request for a testimonial.

"Maybe another time," Alex said politely. "I've had a little too much to drink to want to mix my poisons tonight." He might have royal blood in his veins, but Lyra was his elder. No matter how much he hated her, it went against everything his family had taught him to be rude to her face.

Lyra shrugged, the move accentuating the view of her now-hardened nipples under the shiny black fabric of her dress. "Oh well. I'm sure the sights alone will be stimulating. Do help yourself to more alcohol should you desire. The bar is over there." She tilted her head toward a corner of the room and then glided over to the other side of the pit.

Alex looked around at the other guests. There were about fifteen of them. Mostly mortals. A couple of demon males. Another satyr. A faerie female. They were all youngish and there were a few more women than men. Some were watching with lustful zeal, cheering the sexual performers on. Some were obviously a little nervous or uncomfortable. They were all extremely attractive.

Alex surmised that they were all regular club goers who, like Jack, had been viewed on the dance floor or elsewhere in the club and then invited to partake in the festivities in the back room. It had been a fairly common practice in some of the clubs Alex frequented in New York. The parties would have various kinky or drugged-out themes depending on the host's particular tastes.

Lyra's tastes seemed fairly tame, although Alex had no idea what was in the designer drug she had offered. She appeared to be into straightforward voyeurism with a touch of BDSM—and from the appearance of the woman in the pit and several of those observing, she had a penchant for willowy blondes. Well, Alex couldn't really fault her for that proclivity.

The activity in the pit appeared to be reaching a critical point. The woman cried out suddenly and arched her back, her firm, athletic thighs tensing and flexing convulsively as she cried out her pleasure. "Yes, yes, yes!"

The satyr was young. Either a blond or a redhead, Alex couldn't be sure in the candlelight. Thick, reddish-gold hair covered his tight ass and uber-buff thighs. His tail had been docked—a practice that had become common in the species—and the remaining stub was rigid, a sign of sexual arousal. The rest of his body could be

mistaken for a beefcake but diminutive mortal. His oak-brown skin gleamed over bodybuilder-esque muscles.

After flipping his partner onto her belly, he ran a hand solicitously over her shapely ass, gently manipulating her onto all fours. Her straight blonde hair fell forward onto a black pillow. From Alex's view, he could see her swollen pussy glistening between her legs and the globes of her heaving breasts dangling and then being tenderly caressed by the satyr. As Alex felt his cock respond to the undeniably erotic sight, he looked over at Jack, who was leaning against the railing that circled the pit, his mouth slightly open and his hips pressed hard up against the rail.

The satyr turned, giving the crowd a view of his squat, thick cock. The shaft was the same golden brown as his skin but the head gleamed a deep, deep red. Alex heard Jack moan. Yeah, satyrs were pretty impressive. Animalistic and very sexy...if you went for that kind of thing.

The woman looked over her shoulder. She moaned too. Licked her lips. You could tell she was wondering how that ruby-red cock head would taste...

The satyr stroked himself and laughed. "Do you want to suck it or fuck it?" he asked politely.

"Suck it." Her voice was husky but quite clear.

She rose to her knees and came forward. The satyr cheerfully accommodated her by pushing his thick, fat rod downward—a task that seemed fairly daunting as the thing looked like it had been cast from cement.

The female moaned and opened her mouth. She curled her tongue around the cueball-sized head of his cock—the dark, rich-looking flesh rosier than the wet skin of her tongue. She whimpered and began to lap rapidly.

The satyr, obviously used to this kind of appreciation, cradled her face with his hands and stood unbelievably still. A mortal male of his age would have been pistoning his hips, gasping, shouting for more. But satyrs were endlessly accommodating and playful. They weren't very submissive but Alex had never seen one display hardcore alpha or Dom behavior.

Just when he thought he might be witnessing a world-record-long act of fellatio, Alex saw a telltale twitch of the satyr's stubby tail. The satyr thrust his hips forward and the female gasped, obviously overwhelmed by his cock's thickness. Another thrust. Two more.

When the woman had to pull back, straining for air, the satyr patted her head and took over the job with his hand. Pumping with swift, twisting strokes that should have been painful but obviously weren't, the satyr let his head fall back, his boyish features crinkling into a big smile of ecstasy. He sighed. And then spurted an unbelievable amount of cum onto the blonde's breasts.

The crowd burst into spontaneous applause as the woman got to her feet and the satyr embraced her. They gave each other a brief hug and the woman raised her fist victoriously and hopped up and down. It was disarmingly like the end of a sports

match. Alex could almost hear the phone call she would make as soon as she left the party—*Ohmigod! I just sucked off a satyr...or tried to...! He was really furry! And so well hung!*

“Bravo!” Lyra called down to the performers. “A spectacular exhibit. Now...” Lyra stepped down a small set of stairs into the pit. She put her slender, black-clad arms around the two flushed performers. “I’d like to go over the rules of our little game with our newcomers and those of you who may need a refresher—we’ve changed them a little since we last met, I believe.”

Like a coach praising a good athletic performance, Lyra patted the satyr and the female on their asses and pushed them gently to the sidelines of the pit. She began to speak in low but carrying tones, her hands outspread like a preacher’s. “My friends, if you would like to continue observing our little performances you must commit to being potential performers yourselves. For as each performance concludes—and by conclusion we mean that each performer must come to at least one climax—the current performers get to choose one or more new partners from the audience.

Lyra moved to a small banquette located at the back of the pit. She opened the seat and pulled out various lengths of silk scarves, tasseled ropes and a small wooden box.

“Since tonight is amateur night,” Lyra continued, “and most of our performers will be entertaining us for the first time, I am only making our tamest toys available. Feel free to use any and all of the items in this bench. All men must, of course, use condoms during acts of penetration.” She shut the banquette and moved back toward the stairs. “Now I think I’ve talked enough...these little gatherings are all about free expression and I don’t like to go on about rules too much.”

She turned toward the satyr and the blond. “Your choice?”

The satyr and the blond put their heads together and whispered for a moment before the satyr spoke. “Heather will decide on a partner for the two of us.”

“Very well,” said Lyra, back up on her perch again. “You have one minute to choose, Heather. Feel free to speak any observances and criteria out loud.”

Heather began to walk around the perimeter of the pit, looking over the observers carefully. A few of the more timid gamers had begun to titter and push their friends forward. Heather slowed down in front of a Vin Diesel type with a short, muscular frame and a shaved head. He grinned and flexed his chest muscles beneath his skintight T-shirt.

“Hmm,” pondered Heather. “I don’t think so. But I definitely want a guy. I want to see a big, long cock buried in that hairy satyr ass.”

Alex shifted his weight, feeling more than a little uncomfortable with Heather’s enthusiasm. Was he just drunk or was this scene really fucking weird?

He’d been to plenty of sex parties in his time. Usually he joined in, but sometimes he just sat back and observed the glory of the mortal and immortal sexual spirit. Tonight the spirit seemed tainted.

Would it be against the rules if he suddenly left the observing area and went to go find himself a drink? He looked over at Jack. He was definitely titillated. Alex wondered what was in the drug Lyra had given him and how long it would last.

He looked over at Lyra. Her eyes were glowing eerily as she watched Heather. Her arms were crossed and she was clutching her elbows with those long, bony fingers. Alex decided to get that drink.

When he came back with a nice, full glass of premium booze, the blonde was moving closer to where Jack was standing. She flipped her long, pale, straight hair back over her shoulder and posed with a hand on one hip. Her breasts jutted forward impudently. Their size, shape and proportion to the rest of her body made Alex suspect they were a fine example of plastic surgery. Her pussy was shaved to a tiny bikini triangle and it was obvious she was a natural blonde. Long, toned legs and a girl-next-door pretty face added to the very attractive package.

Alex watched Heather's gaze center on each male's crotch, knowing she would love to ask them all to whip them out for her perusal. She gave the other satyr, who looked a little too young and a little too nervous, a quick once over and then moved to stand before Jack.

Alex raised an eyebrow. If she wanted a big cock she'd stopped in front of the right guy. Alex wasn't about to provide any testimonials, however.

"Your minute's almost up," Lyra called out.

It was likely that Lyra knew Jack was the best candidate for the job.

Heather smiled up at Jack. Jack returned the smile.

"I pick you!" The leer on Heather's face was jarringly juxtaposed with her sweet features.

Jack looked over at Alex, a questioning look in his fevered blue eyes. Alex shrugged. It was obvious that Jack wanted this. Hopefully he could fuck the satyr and the charming Heather's brains out and then they could get the hell out of here. He was just glad she hadn't chosen *him*. He didn't think he was up to a public performance tonight.

Hell, after another drink he didn't think he'd be up to any kind of performance at all.

"Oh, oh! An excellent choice!" Lyra gushed. Clapping, she walked over to Jack and took his hands. Seeing her canines gleaming unnaturally white against her blood-red lipstick, Alex wondered how many of these "recruits" she would feed from tonight. He drained his drink with a shudder.

The other observers clapped as Jack and Lyra walked by and made their way down the stairs. Alex heard one young woman say, "Oh my *God*. That guy is fucking gorgeous! I hope they pick me next."

Heather smiled coyly as Lyra led Jack to stand between her and the satyr.

"Okay," said Lyra. "Lead performer's choice. Would you like to undress him, would you like him to undress himself or shall I do the honors?"

Heather's pale eyes were fixed on Jack's crotch. His erect penis was outlined beneath tight denim—it looked like it was trying to make an escape down his left leg. The satyr licked his lips. "We'll do it," he confirmed.

Lyra let out a low laugh. "The pleasure is all yours, then." She waved a slender arm up in the air with a flourish. "Let the games begin!"

Alex wondered if Lyra had been a game show host in another life. Or maybe the pressures of corporate life had finally gotten to her. He quickly took the opportunity to refill his drink from the large array of crystal decanters on the bar in the corner of the room. He sloshed a good bit of the fine bourbon over his hand.

Damn. This drink's gotta be the last. Fourteenth one's the charm, after all.

Walking carefully back to his place at the railing, he saw that Heather had her hands up under Jack's shirt and the satyr had his hands on Jack's belt. Heather ran her hand over the ridges of Jack's abs. "Nice," she murmured. Her low voice carried oddly in the big room. For the first time Alex realized that the pit must be miked.

The low, throbbing music started again as Heather pushed Jack's shirt up over his pecs. She reached out and flicked her tongue against his right nipple. "Take off your shirt now," she commanded. Jack obeyed. Heather gave a lusty laugh of appreciation.

The satyr knelt before him and quickly unbuttoned his jeans. Jack smiled down at him, taking over briefly and making a show of unzipping his pants. The satyr stuck his thumbs inside the waistband, pulling down his briefs and jeans all at once.

You could hear his gasp come over the sound system as Jack's cock sprang out of its denim prison. Heather fell to her knees.

Alex took a swallow of his drink, smiling as the other observers echoed their own murmurs of awe. Jack was indeed a formidable boy. And he apparently liked to show it off now and then.

Jack stroked the length of his shaft with his hand, the rosy column of flesh coming within centimeters of Heather's open mouth. "Who wants it first?" he asked, his tone low and excited.

Heather nodded and moved to take him in her hands. "Ah-ah-ah," said Jack in a singsong voice. "You're going to get it from behind or not at all."

The satyr moved toward the bench, probably to get a condom.

"Don't move," Jack commanded in a voice that made the satyr jump. "Watch. Nothing else." He walked over to get a condom out of the box Lyra had shown them earlier.

Heather sat back on her heels waiting, apparently perfectly willing to take the submissive role. She hadn't moved her eyes from Jack's straining cock.

Jack handed her the condom. "Put it on me," he ordered.

Heather took the condom and smoothed it over Jack's shaft. She released him and his cock bobbed, so huge it reached all the way up to his navel.

"Good." Jack smoothed the latex once with his hand. "Now get down on your hands and knees. On that pile of cushions."

Heather quickly knelt on all fours in the center of the pit. Jack bent down and put an additional cushion under her knees. He smoothed his hand over one of her flanks, as if he were testing her height. "Down on your elbows," he barked out.

Heather immediately obeyed. Jack moved behind her, sharply smacking the flesh of her buttocks once, twice, three times. Heather squealed. "Get that ass up in the air. I want them all to see how your cunt drips for me."

She inched her hips up higher and spread her knees. Jack's face was strangely businesslike and completely focused on the motionless, kneeling satyr as he moved behind Heather and grasped her hips with both hands. Without any preliminaries, he rammed his cock home.

Several observers gasped. Alex winced. Man, that one had to hurt. Heather didn't seem to mind though.

Alex slowly sipped his drink, intrigued by this side of Jack. The dude who put the "sex" in metrosexual had been transformed into an all-business Dom. His hardnosed, get-the-job-done expression was an amazing foil to Heather's expression of slack-jawed, otherworldly arousal.

He felt his own reluctant tug of arousal as Jack rammed his cock again and again into Heather's welcoming pussy. Damn. With that kind of intensity, Jack could go all night. It must be the drug.

Alex flicked a glance over to Lyra. She was practically drooling, her mouth open, canines extended. Her arms were crossed, hands clenched tightly over bony elbows.

Heather began to whimper with each surging thrust. Alex saw a bead of sweat drip down Jack's back, the only indication he was affected by his carnal workout. His tight ass flexed with each stroke, his gaze steady on the satyr. Stopping, he stepped back abruptly, his cock a glistening latex rocket rising out of his dark thatch of pubic hair.

Heather's hand was between her legs, her hips still thrusting as she began to stroke herself. "More, more. Please!"

"Don't touch until I tell you to," Jack ordered in a crisp voice. He walked over to the banquette, his torpedo of a cock bouncing against his navel with each step. He grabbed a silk-corded rope from the pile of toys and walked over to the satyr.

"Tie her up," Jack ordered.

The satyr looked like he might protest. But then he nodded and smiled. "Sure."

He bent down to tie her wrists, propping her elbows up so she could continue to support her weight. He whispered something inaudible in her ear and eased away from her.

Jack strode back to his original position and placed his hands on her ass. She was now rocking back and forth, emitting pained little moans. He rammed home again and Heather cried out, "Oh God! Harder, please...!"

"This...is...the biggest...and hardest...you'll...ever...have..." Jack ground out the words with each thrust but his eyes were definitely not on the task at hand. They were on the satyr's thick, rigid column of a cock.

What the fuck? thought Alex. Why wasn't Jack giving it to the satyr? He obviously wanted to. Badly. Did he have some kind of hang-up about them? Or was it a male-female thing? Nah, couldn't be that. Alex knew Jack happily swung every which way he could.

Jack pumped into the blonde's pussy over and over, his cock like a piston on a machine gone haywire. His ass muscles clenched, a shadow of a grimace contorting his face for a quick beat. With a triumphant shout, he shoved Heather's ass back onto himself with tightly gripping hands.

He released her hips with no warning and she collapsed down onto the pillows. She was making keening sounds, her hips still gyrating wildly. Jack gave her an air-cracking, open-handed smack on the reddened skin of her ass. She rolled onto her back with an appreciative-sounding groan.

Jack looked down at the satyr, hands on his hips. "Let me see how fast you can bring her off. Spread her as wide as you can. Let everyone see." He tossed the satyr a condom.

The satyr nodded obediently and sheathed himself with latex. He spread Heather's thighs with gentle hands. Her pussy looked swollen and well used—she was wet enough that even from a distance Alex could see the glistening magenta lips and the moist, ruddy gold of her pubic hair.

The satyr dipped a few fingers just once into her sopping pussy. She convulsed. He clasped his hands on her hips, raised her and then moved his thick forearms beneath her ass. Her body arched and he looked at her with a sweetly appreciative expression. He must have decided to be mercifully quick, because he abruptly impaled her with his cock. After three short, grunting thrusts, her moans of release came over the speakers. "Ohhh God! Ohhh God!"

Jack moved behind the satyr and ran his hand up his ass, the motion almost reverent. The satyr convulsed, arched and laughed joyfully as he twitched and shook in an obviously gratifying climax.

Jack stepped back, his expression finally satisfied, his cock now semi-erect. The observers clapped enthusiastically. Alex noticed that the two demons and a woman were going at it big time over in a corner of the room. He drunkenly wondered if that was against the rules.

Jack helped Heather up to her feet. She could barely stand as the satyr gave her a quick hug.

"Brilliant, brilliant!" Lyra called down. "Jack, are you sure you aren't a professional?"

Jack flashed his mega-watt grin. "Only on weekends."

Heather's smile seemed a little fragile as Lyra walked down to put her arms around her. "Ah. But I think little Heather is all worn out." Lyra gazed at Jack with her ghostly gray eyes. "Jack, it will be your turn to choose."

Alex swayed and gripped the railing tightly, his recently refilled drink sloshing over his knuckles. Jack looked up at him, his eyes still glowing unnaturally from the drug but Alex couldn't return his gaze, his focus kept glomming onto Lyra—he was getting some decidedly fucked-up vibes from her.

His eyes went bleary. *Shit. Shouldn't have had that last drink.* He might have trouble walking out the door. Which he'd definitely decided to do. Immediately. He looked down at his hand. *Hm.* What the hell should he do with his drink?

Jack's voice broke through his drunken ponderings. "I'd like to pick two more partners."

"My, my. That's what we like to hear. And who will be the lucky recipients of your ample attentions?" As Lyra's eyes fixed on Jack's garden hose of a cock, a tall, cadaverous-looking guy appeared next to her holding a steaming towel on a small white plate.

"Thank you, Juan." Lyra gingerly lifted the towel. "Jack, let me help you clean up a little before you make your next choice." A rapturous look transforming her face, she reached down and stroked Jack's cock with the towel.

Alex shuddered involuntarily. God, she was creepy. He turned to look for the door. *Ah, jeez. Where the hell is it?* Fighting his spinning head, he surveyed the perimeter of the room. He caught sight of Jack walking the circumference of the pit. Very slowly. Considering each nervously anticipating contestant above him.

Jack pointed to a young woman with long, dark-blond hair. Alex shook his head once, blinking as the sickening aura of a nightmare settled over his senses.

Lyra was smiling broadly again, leading the blonde woman down to the pit. Petite, long-legged and curvaceous, the woman had big, thick-lashed eyes and a very pretty look of innocence about her.

Oh God. She looked like Caro. Alex tried to focus on her face but the room kept shifting.

Jack stood beneath him. "And...I choose *you*."

Alex shut his eyes against the force of that mega-watt smile.

He heard Lyra cackle. "Oh wonderful, wonderful! A simply wonderful choice. Partygoers, I think we'll be in for a real treat." Alex opened his eyes. She was coming for him. He swayed and stumbled slightly before holding on tightly to the railing.

This wasn't going to happen.

"No!" he heard himself call out. He tried to modulate his voice as he saw the contestants look at him in alarm. "Hey, Jack, sorry," he called down to where Jack had gone to stand next to the little blonde. "I'm wasted, man. Can't do this."

"But Alex, I picked her for *you*. You can do us together. Show us what Alex 'The Party' King is all about."

Alex shook his head, moving his hand away as Lyra came to grasp him. "Thanks, but I can barely stand. You do her for me. I've gotta go."

"Come on, Alex. Look at her. You know you could do it. You're a legend. Shit, just pretend she's Caro. The only difference is I think *this* one would let you fuck her pussy."

Alex felt a bolt of anger forming in the pit of his stomach. "Fuck you, Jack."

Not waiting to see Jack's reaction, Alex wrenched his arm from Lyra's clawing hand and handed her his drink.

"Thanks for the lovely..." What the hell was he thanking her for? "Gotta go."

"So sorry, my prince, but I can't allow you to disobey my rules."

"Disobey? I just wanna leave, Lyra. Not up for this tonight."

"Alexander, surely you understood the rules. Everyone who watches agrees to be a potential participant. If I let you go, all my players would feel cheated."

He felt the others looking at him with curious, nervous eyes.

Yeah, well, he could give a flying fuck what these half-frightened strangers thought of him. And shit, he was born to break rules. Lyra was obviously messing with his head.

"What the hell do you want from me, Lyra?"

She laughed. "Ah. Now we get to the point."

"If this is about business, I would really prefer to talk about this tomorrow. I'm not in any condition to —"

"I don't care what you prefer!" Lyra's dulcet tones sharpened and cracked through the room like a bullwhip. "You will show me the respect I deserve! And you will follow my rules."

The bolt of anger in his stomach was gaining force, he pulled himself up to full height and spoke loudly and clearly. "Fuck. You."

It was an outrageous insult. His father would have backhanded him and sent him underground immediately.

But Lyra merely laughed again, a cackle that scaled from low to high in a seemingly endless trill. "Oh you do have balls, my prince. And you'll soon discover I have the proper vise to squeeze them." She moved into his personal space, an audacity only a vamp of her age would dare. When she spoke, all traces of humor had vanished from her tone. "You will cease your business dealings with my mortal competition or be taken to the Immortal Council."

Now it was Alex's turn to laugh. "And why would I follow any order issued by you or your cronies at the Council?"

"Try me and find out." She tapped her ruby lips with a pale finger. "Or...make me a deal."

"What deal?" Here it came. Lyra did love to play games...

"Do as your friend Jack requests and fuck the little blonde. Let us watch you feed from her. She looks amazingly like your bloodmate, don't you think? I had the pleasure of making your sweet mate's acquaintance at one of your lovely parties many years ago. Caroline. Right?"

It wasn't a deal. It was a threat.

Power zipped and zoomed through his nerve endings. He fisted his hands. "You stay the hell away from Caro. She's under my protection. If she is harmed in any way, you'll be the one on the rack before the Immortal Council."

"Is she truly under your protection, my prince?" She gestured to Jack. "Your friend here told me you haven't fed from her in over five years."

Jack caught his eye, his expression stricken. "Alex, man, I'm sorry..." He shook his head like he knew he'd messed things up big time. "She asked about you and me..."

If he could have managed to speak he would have told Jack to forget about it. But his energy was being pulled into a vortex of violence. And oh shit—he had to let it out.

He raised his fist above his head, arm rigid, elbow straight. Electricity swirled and hovered. He heard the familiar crackle, smelled the familiar spark. The chandelier above the pit swayed. The candle flames sputtered. A woman screamed.

He tasted her terror. Felt the fear of everyone in the room converging, feeding his power.

He fell to his knees, gasping at the resulting sparks.

No. No. No. He'd promised himself he wouldn't do this. He was bigger than his fucking instincts, than his goddamn immortal gifts.

Control. Control was within his reach. He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes for a long moment, trying to conjure thoughts strong enough to dispel the violent energy.

Love. Caro. Think of Caro.

He could see her now. She was curled in the big bed of her hotel suite, shifting in her sleep, calling his name.

He stood up and carefully put one foot in front the other. He did it once more. Again. And again, until he made it across the room safely, success surging through his bloodstream.

"Oh dear. So sorry to see you go," Lyra called out gaily from behind him. "Since you won't play by the rules, I'll take this to mean we'll settle this another way, another time."

He flipped her the bird from behind his back, not bothering to turn around, laughing loudly at the appropriateness of the juvenile mortal gesture.

Then he was momentarily blinded as the door opened in front of him. The guy who'd been monitoring the house cameras pulled him into the room.

"Thanks." Alex propped himself against the wall as the guy shut the door and returned to his chair. "How can you stand to work here, man? That's some fucked-up shit in there."

The guy shrugged and pushed up his glasses. "It trips my trigger."

Alex nodded. "Oh."

"I'll call Juan to help you out."

Alex closed his eyes, trying to keep the room from spinning. "Thanks."

Juan arrived and led Alex through the crowd in the cavernous club. They were still partying their brains out, clueless about the carnal events in their midst. Hell, they'd probably join in if they could. He had a fleeting thought of Lenny and Merrell but realized he didn't have the energy to try to find them.

Cold night air hit him when Juan opened the front door. Alex stumbled out onto the sidewalk, taking deep, gulping breaths. Juan hailed him a cab. "You okay to get home, man? You remember your address?"

Alex nodded.

The cabbie called back to him as he sprawled onto the backseat, "Where to?"

Alex found he couldn't, in fact, remember his own address. Or maybe he just didn't want to. He remembered the name of Caro's hotel, though. He told the cabbie to take him there.

Chapter Nine

Caro looked at the glowing numbers of the digital clock. Three-thirty. She really didn't want to talk to whoever was obnoxious enough to call at this hour but she picked up the receiver just to stop the awful ringing.

"Yes?"

"So very sorry to bother you, Ms. Connery. But there's a gentleman down in the lobby who says he's your guest. He says he doesn't have a key or remember your room number. Do you want us to give him the information?"

"Who is he?" Caro rubbed her hand over her eyes. It had to be Alex. She'd given Len a key and she didn't think Mike Powers would have the nerve.

"He says his name is Alex."

Caro sighed. "Okay. Let him come up."

Hanging up the phone, she swung her feet to the floor and tried to activate her brain. She must have passed out on the bed while she was watching TV. She'd been totally keyed up after Mike Powers had dropped her off. Giving him the brush-off had been easy but stressful. She'd soaked in the Jacuzzi and then watched an old movie, trying super hard to relax so she could get some desperately needed sleep.

She walked over and switched off the muted TV, relieved when the blue glow dissipated. As she turned on the light by the chairs in the living area, she heard a muffled knocking sound. She looked out the peephole and saw Alex. And when she opened the door she saw that it was a very, very drunk Alex. He swayed as he gave her a lopsided smile. He reeked of booze, smoke and bad behavior.

"Can I come in?" His voice croaked mid-sentence.

"Would you go away if I told you to?"

A truly pathetic look crossed his face. "Yeah. I would. But do you remember my address? This was all I could remember when Juan put me in the cab."

"Oh for Christ's sake, Alex, get in here." Grabbing him by his floppy arms, she pulled him into the room. She turned to face him after shutting and locking the door. He just stood there swaying sadly.

"Who the hell is Juan?" she asked.

"Dunno," he said, tripping over to the couch and flopping down with a grunt. He slid onto his back and put his hand over his eyes. "Uh-oh." He sat up suddenly.

"What?"

"Gonna hurl."

He leaped up and half ran, half stumbled to the bathroom.

She prayed that he made it to the toilet in time.

She sat on the couch and sighed, wondering if she should go help him. He sounded like he was in agony. A weak stomach was the plague of a half-vamp. She'd been through this with him before.

She went to the partially opened bathroom door, peeked in and saw he was on the floor. He waved her off. "Go 'way."

Plugging her ears against another wave of horrible retching noises, she went over to the kitchenette and filled a glass with some ice. When the noises had faded to mere moaning she went over to the vanity and poured the ice into a washcloth. She let the ice melt under some water and then squeezed out the cloth. She handed it to him when he staggered out of the bathroom door.

"Oh God." He made it to the bed and then fell backward onto the mattress. He put the cloth on his face. "Better pray for my damned soul, princess." He reached out but didn't come close to touching her. "'Cause I'm gonna die now."

"Dang, Alex." Caro arranged the cloth over his eyes and forehead. "How much did you drink after I left?"

The feeble gesture of his outstretched hand was punctuated by another drawn-out groan.

Sighing, she clasped his fingers and sat down next to him, gently rubbing at the inside of his wrist with her thumbs. After a few minutes his breathing became more normal. Was he conscious? His hand still clenched hers tightly. She readjusted the washcloth, brushing his damp hair back from his forehead.

After feeling a wave of tenderness she wanted to kick herself for, she made herself remember a trick he'd played on her once. It was right after she'd moved out on him for the second time. After weeks of trying various things to get her to come back, he'd pretended to have vamp fever. He showed up at her door flushed and sweating late one night, begging her to let him feed, saying he had a rare condition only her blood would cure.

She was clueless about vamp lore and she'd believed him. He'd been hot, pale, sweaty. She allowed him to feed and, of course, he'd made very thorough, very feverish love to her. When he'd awoken the next day the fever was gone. They'd stayed in bed for a week making up. She'd found out later that he'd never been sick. He'd just worked up a sweat jogging the twenty blocks to get to her place.

She stopped rubbing his hand and stood up.

He reached out for her, his face still covered with the washcloth. "Don't stop."

She ignored him, fortified by her memory of "vamp fever".

"What happened to Jack?" she asked.

Alex snorted. "Fucking his second blonde...in the evil bitch's pit."

"Umm...do you wanna run that one by me again?"

"No," he growled. "You don't want to know."

"Probably not," she said. "What about Len and Merrell?"

"Don't know. Probably fucking like rabbits somewhere."

"Well," she said wryly. "Sounds like a lot of fucking is going around tonight."

Alex raised his head with a sudden jerk, peeking a silvered bloodshot eye out from under the washcloth. "You didn't fuck that asshole Powers, did you?"

"Fuck *you*, Alex."

He put his head back down and re-covered his eyes. "Thank God. I didn't think you would."

She strode over and whipped the washcloth off his eyes. "Get out!"

He blinked, his eyes red-rimmed and bleary in his ashen face.

"Damn it, Alex! You wake me up at four a.m., you puke in my bathroom and then you ask me about stuff that is just *way* not your fucking business!"

He tried to sit up and made it as far as propping himself up on his elbow. "Shit, Caro. I'm sorry. I'm drunk off my ass and totally freaked out." He flopped back down on the pillows. "Please don't make me leave. Jack might come back to my place and I don't want to see him right now."

She stood there and looked at him. She'd seen him pretty doggone messed up before and this was about as low as he ever got. "What the heck happened tonight, anyway?"

"Nothing. We just went to a weird party. And I drank too much."

"Did you fight or something?"

"No, not really."

"Did you hurt anyone?"

"No, definitely not. Don't want to talk about it. Would you hold my hand again?"

Thinking she was a fool for falling for his pathetic explanations, she reluctantly sat back down and held his hand again, playing with his rings and rubbing the tender flesh at the base of his thumb. After several minutes he seemed to fall into a fitful sleep.

She looked down at their joined hands. His fingers were long and gracefully shaped, the nails trimmed and buffed. They were pale—definitely not the hands of a working man—but they were strong and decidedly masculine. They made her think of sex. Just like everything else about Alex.

Oh Lord. She couldn't believe she was sitting here in Chicago holding Alexander King's hand at four in the morning.

She could almost hear the sucking sound of her life being absorbed into his. She should be in therapy. She really should.

How would a therapist characterize their relationship if they were a typical mortal couple? Dependent personalities, maybe. Alex was the egotistical sex addict and she was the enabling personality. That probably got it about right. But they were both more complicated than those labels, weren't they?

And they were different now that five years had passed. She was stronger and definitely more independent. And Alex seemed to have moved farther away from his father's sphere of influence. She wondered how far. Alex prided himself on progressing with the decades. He scoffed at his full-vamp friends and relatives who chose to obey rules and laws written thousands of years ago.

If only she could get him to ignore those rules and laws altogether. Then she could be free to...

She frowned. Tightened her hold on his hand.

He stirred, opening his eyes and giving her a wan smile. She let go of his hand and, exhaling slowly, he tried putting his feet on the floor.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Mm. I think I need to pay a visit to my crypt."

"Ah. Well, I can call you a cab."

"The doorman can find me one, I'm sure. Caro..." He reached for her hand again then hesitated. "Would you come with me?"

"Back to your place?"

"Yeah. Would you sleep with me for a while? I know it's a lot to ask. But I wouldn't ask if I didn't need you. Please?"

Her heart sped up when she heard the raw urgency in his voice. "Something *did* happen tonight. Oh God, Alex—did you fight? Is that why you're so exhausted?" No matter how much he'd put her through, the thought of him in physical danger made her crazy with worry. His powers were unpredictable and sometimes very scary.

"No. I wanted to but I stopped. And I stopped because I thought of you. Dreamed of sleeping with you. Together. The way we used to. Please, Caro."

He closed his eyes and she felt him in her mind. *Threat...can't explain it now. Need to be safe, regroup. Can't do it without you.*

He needed her. Being needed by a powerful creature like Alex was an amazingly compelling experience. Strangely erotic and impossible to ignore. She nodded her head in agreement and then qualified, "But no feeding."

He opened his mouth as if to protest but then smiled. "Thank you."

* * * * *

Caro waited on Alex's terrace while he showered and prepared to go underground.

It was cold and she wasn't dressed warmly enough, but she'd wanted to breathe the damp predawn air and watch the morning take form just beneath the horizon. The sight was full of promise, anticipation—much of the beauty in a sunrise was in the waiting.

The air shifted behind her.

A spur of excitement jolted her languid muscles. Alex.

He came up behind her, wrapping her in those strong, familiar arms, caressing the top of her head with a light kiss and his warm breath. He smelled like toothpaste and juniper. "Do you need something to eat before we go down?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm good."

He took her hand and led her through the cool, silent loft. They climbed into the rickety, iron-gated elevator. When he slammed the gate shut and pressed the button marked "B" for basement, he gave her a sudden smile, an old-style Alex smile full of sex and mayhem, canines glowing menacingly in the light of the funky old light bulb.

"It's a brave girl you are...to enter the vampire's lair." His hand came up to her throat, his thumb unerringly seeking the pulse at the base.

She swallowed hard against the touch, felt her heartbeat flutter against the subtle pressure. Fear was not a factor in her reaction. Oh no. Her response was all about sex. About need.

The elevator stopped with a whirl and a jolt. He opened the gate and when she followed him blindly into the damp, black space beyond, she felt heated moisture work itself between the blood-heavy folds of her pussy.

"Almost there," he whispered.

She heard the sound of heavy keys clanking together. The snick of a well-oiled lock.

Air moved and a breeze, warm and richly scented, brushed her cheek.

"I got the door fixed." Alex's husky chuckle touched her ear. "The creaky hinges were just too damn tacky."

He took her hand and guided her across a small, raised threshold. She stood still, utterly helpless in the unrelenting darkness. His arm brushed her shoulder and the air stopped moving. There was a small thud as the heavy stone door shut.

"How much light do you want?"

"A few candles maybe..."

An orange-gold glow, as sudden and unexpected as magic, blossomed in the corner of the crypt. A small, silver candelabra sat on a recessed marble shelf, casting fractals of shimmering light against the shiny walls and floor. She could make out the furnishings now—they were few and familiar. There was just enough space for a narrow bed luxuriously appointed with black silk coverings and velvet drapes and an ornate, antique bed stand at the bed's end, inlaid with ebony and pearl. A solid silver basin and urn rested on the stand.

"You haven't changed anything."

He smiled. "No need to. And in case you're wondering, yours are still the only eyes other than mine that have seen this."

Oh God. That meant so much...

She expelled a low breath of anticipation when he pulled her against his body. As he embraced her for a long, silent moment, she pressed her cheek against the vee of skin

between the lapels of his robe, listening to his heartbeat become slow, steady...and slower still.

"Mm, I want to make love to you." His voice rumbled softly up from his chest, his hands rested heavily on her shoulders. "More than anything in this crazy, fucked-up world. But I..." She tipped her head so she could look into his eyes. His lids were drifting closed over deep green irises, the creases around his mouth slackening.

"But you need to sleep," she whispered.

"Mm." His muscles relaxed completely for a moment and then he jerked and gripped her in a sudden panic.

"It's okay...I'll be here with you." His hold loosened. He moaned as if he were in pain.

She let him go long enough to pull the duvet from the bed. After pushing the robe from his shoulders, she eased him between the cool sheets. He was unconscious by the time she slipped off her clothes and slid in beside him. She nestled into her favorite spot, her head on his shoulder, her arm draped over his rib cage.

His skin was cooling rapidly now, his heartbeat slowing to once every few seconds. She watched the candle flames elongate and smoke, watched Alex's flesh glow deathly pale. When she could no longer keep her eyes open, she slept.

* * * * *

Time passed slowly in the crypt. Or perhaps quickly. Seconds crawled. Minutes sped. Hours evaporated into days.

The black stillness was disorienting for a human, reviving for a vampire.

Caro woke to the sound of her own panicked breathing. She sat up, her fingers groping at utter darkness.

"Princess?"

The candelabra sizzled to life at the same moment she heard Alex's voice.

He flashed a disarmingly cheerful smile before pulling her back down beside him. "Good morning, my brightest star."

She pressed her face into his neck as she tried to get her bearings. Sleeping in the crypt turned her brain to sludge. And she'd forgotten that it made Alex as chipper as a fucking bluebird.

But it was worth it. His skin was warm again. His heart was beating full bore. And he smelled delicious.

Her skin quivered as he began to stroke her hair and her back. "Good morning." Her voice sounded croaky.

His soft laughter hummed beneath her. "You know, I was just lying here thinking..."

"What?"

"About the last time we made love in your hotel room. I should have tied you to the bed right then and there—we never should have stopped. And my evening would have gone much better."

"So you're saying that fucking me would have been better than going to a weird party and then puking your guts out?"

He laughed. "Yeah, that's what I'm saying."

He tipped his head to kiss her lips and the sudden pleasure of it took her breath.

He deepened the kiss and she tasted of him deeply. He was so, so good. Rich and dark and sweet like chocolate. She rubbed the length of her body against his warm, silky skin, wishing she could absorb his essence so she'd never have to let him go.

He pulled his mouth away, breathing heavily. He rested his forehead against hers. "Is it okay to do this? I really want to make love to you..."

"Yes."

Capturing her lips with his again, he began to explore her body with an enticingly light touch. His fingertips grazed the globes of her breasts, the ruched peaks surrounding her nipples. Feathery finger strokes traced her ribs and then flickered down her quivering belly. He played with her sex, flirting with her clit and then fiddling with the swiftly melting flesh of her pussy.

She gasped as he changed tempo, treating her neck and collarbone to hot, open-mouthed kisses before shifting downward to suck hard on a swollen and needy nipple. Two long fingers slid assertively inside her crease. Her breath snagged when his thumb brushed a sweet rhythm against her clit.

A hitching cry of loss crossed her lips when he sat up and moved down on the bed. She shivered and he soothed her with his warm hands and husky voice. Her shiver turned to a shudder of anticipation when he pushed her knees up and sat between them. More candles flared to life—she couldn't see them, but she could see Alex's eyes glow emerald in the bolder light.

"You're so pretty here. Let's have a look at you." He tugged her hands until her upper body lifted and she could see the glistening flesh between her legs. "See? Like a flower. The outsides of your petals are dark and then when I open to see inside, you bloom hot pink." He stroked the folds of her labia and then spread them with his fingers, blowing a cool breath on the heated lips as he opened them wide. Her hips thrust forward involuntarily. "And up here, where the flower protects its little secret, I know just where to look."

Eyes alight with sexy mischief, he pressed his thumb against the hood of her clitoris, exposing the hidden nub before giving it a gentle stroke. He thrust a finger deep inside her pussy, maneuvering easily against the greedily clenching walls. Caro moaned and let her head fall back, her hands fisting in the soft silk sheets. "And the sweet nectar you keep locked inside...it all comes down when you're ready for visits from the birds and the bees..." He withdrew his fingers slowly, slicking her wetness up across her mons.

She looked up at him and he paused, rolling his eyes heavenward in a mocking pose of reflection. "Mmm, I think I'll write a poem to your sweet flower of love."

An unbidden giggle escaped her, making her body quaver and shake. "Oh God. Shut up and touch me some more." She reached between her knees to grab for his hands. He laced his fingers through hers, moving them together to rest on her kneecaps.

"Not before I taste your sweet nectar of love." He dipped his head down until his mouth was millimeters from her pussy, making her writhe helplessly as he teased her only with his warm, moist breath. When she began to whimper, he carefully parted the weeping crease with his tongue. When she begged, he stroked deeply. Over and over. When her hips began to thrust forward in slow rolls, he sought the nub of her clitoris with the point of his tongue.

Her hands clenched his convulsively as he broadened his strokes, taking her quickly past the screaming edge. She hovered, drifting on the first wafts of relief. Then he released her hands and thrust his long, strong fingers into her pussy, hooking up and back at the quivering entrance, still tenderly sucking her clit, prolonging the endlessly good peak.

"Alex!" She fell back and arched her head into the pillows as he nipped at the tender flesh of her thigh with his teeth, pressed the hard edge of his palm into her clit. She came again, the heavy velvet drapes absorbing her screams and his words of praise and encouragement. He slowly stroked her thighs and breasts with his other hand, soothing her as she bucked and held on to the last throes of pleasure.

He moved forward between her legs to kiss her mouth, bracing his hands on either side of her shoulders. She gripped his shoulders and back, reveling in his warmth, his hardness. She kissed him deeply, tasting the love on his lips. His cock was a tempting weight between their bodies, long and thick and ready.

He groaned against her lips and took a gulping breath. "Time for a condom. Unless you've changed your mind..."

She shook her head. *Oh God. Please, willpower...hold out.*

Rolling off her to sit on the end of the bed, he picked up his robe and pulled out a strip of foil squares from the pocket. "There were still a few synapses firing before I crashed," he said with a thankful smile.

As he fumbled with one of the packages, Caro knelt behind him, draping her arms across his shoulder. She loved to embrace him like this, loved the feel of her swollen nipples and ultra-sensitized skin against the hard muscles and boned ridges of his back. She began to kiss the back of his neck, moving her lips and tongue quickly up the tendon that led to his ear.

He shrugged his shoulder up against her tickling tongue and laughed. "Hey, I'm doing something important here."

She teased his earlobe with her teeth and laughed when he grabbed her hand.

He turned her hand and placed a kiss on her tender inner forearm. She inhaled sharply. Her tattoo, slumbering and sated from the flow of her of sex-satisfied blood, flared to life.

He looked over his shoulder, catching her with his hungry eyes. He licked his lips.

Can I?

You promised. No feeding.

His smile was crooked over his extended canines. *How about a lick? I have more control in the crypt.*

She closed her eyes. She wanted to feel the sensation again. So, so much. She nodded. A lick wouldn't do too much damage, right? As long as he didn't get carried away and suck...

His breath caressed her. Her gut clenched, as if her womb was about to cramp...but the edge of pain was like an awful, soul-deep pleasure. The anticipation made her moan. She couldn't catch her breath.

He opened his mouth, extended his tongue and licked—one wet, hot stroke over the surface of the black-inked symbol.

She came. Violently. A pelvis-thrusting, fist-clenching, teeth-grinding, mind-wrenching orgasm. Almost scary in its hotspur intensity. *Ohhh, God!* How could she have forgotten what this was like?

Her body sagged against his back, his tight clasp on her wrists keeping her from sliding limply back onto the bed. He held her there, gently kissing all the spots he could reach while she moaned and tried to calm her spastic nerve endings.

He had the audacity to laugh.

"Not funny," she whispered.

He offered her the condom and with an irresistibly sunny smile said, "Get me back."

"You're on."

She pulled his shoulders down to the bed and knelt at his side. A fresh surge of arousal hit her as she surveyed his penis. Thickly distended veins pulsed on the purplish-red shaft. A clear drop of pre-cum slid from the slitted crown. She bent down and licked it off with a slow curl of her tongue. The hot, totally sexed-up skin seemed to melt against her tongue's tip, so she dipped in more deeply, making Alex clutch at her hair and gasp.

"Damn. Don't *do* that."

"I love it when you're this ready," she murmured.

"Get that thing on there, princess, because I'm too ready. And I've been dreaming about coming inside you."

She caressed the crinkled-velvet skin of his tightened scrotum, moving one finger back to find the ticklish pink skin of his perineum.

"Lord, Caro, I mean it..." Alex sat up and grabbed for the condom.

She brushed his hand away and quickly smoothed the latex circle down over his cock, swinging one knee over his waist to straddle his lap. She watched him try to maintain control and loved him for his struggle—loved the flash of silver in his eyes, loved the wicked gleam of his teeth, loved the throbbing pulse in his arched neck.

"Have mercy," he whispered.

She smiled—powerfully, triumphantly—and guided him to her entrance with moist fingertips. Alex grabbed her hips roughly and buried himself with one swift, hard stroke.

She put her hands on his shoulders and began to ride him up and down, trying to take strokes that were smooth and easy, trying to pace herself to make this last forever. She felt him shift and brace his feet on the floor, anchoring them so he could reach up and play with her breasts. He held their weight in his palms, pinching and tugging at the hard nubs of her nipples.

She began to ride him harder, grinding down on him, desperately trying to take all of him, to fill the yawning emptiness of the years she'd spent without him. He filled her so completely...her body, her soul. She felt tears threaten and closed her eyes.

"God, you are so sexy, princess." His voice was a satin rasp against her shoulder.

He nibbled and nipped at the sensitive slope until she moaned and arched her back. She tightened her grip on his shoulders, almost losing his hot, slippery cock. "Stay with me," she whispered. "Never leave."

"Never...I'll take you to paradise...a place where lovers never have to part." He reached between their bodies to find her clitoris. He whispered sweet words of encouragement as he rubbed her in the way she liked best. She pressed her knees to the sides of his hips and rode him to completion, his whispers an erotic accompaniment. "So sweet, so tight. Take me deeper now...harder."

She squirmed as she slammed into the edge and then let go. Alex bucked beneath her with a shout. Pleasure opened up like a cloudburst and she reveled in the sublime submersion, wanting to live inside the storm forever. She cupped his gorgeous, passion-ravaged face and rained soft kisses across his cheeks.

He flopped down onto his back, taking her with him. She kissed him hotly on the mouth and then nuzzled her nose into the crook of his neck and wiggled her pelvis, still enjoying the sweet, slick connection of their bodies. He steadied her motion with his hands and when he made a move to shift out from under her, she clamped down on him with her thighs.

"I'm never letting you go," she murmured into his neck.

"Mm. That's my dream." He drew hearts on her back with his fingertips. "But at some point I've got to get rid of this soggy condom."

She rolled off him and lay on her back. "You're so romantic."

After taking care of the spent latex, he settled in next to her again. He propped himself up on an elbow and began to draw little hearts over her belly. "Shall I recite my poem to your pussy again? Now *that's* pure romance."

Caro giggled. "Don't you dare."

"I'll just have to keep practicing. I'm quite new to erotic poetry. But with you as my inspiration..."

She sighed as he ran his fingertips down the sensitive flesh of her inner arm. "I guess you'll have to find other inspiration soon. I need to go back to Cleveland. Maybe a poem to Jack's prick? Or Sherene's lips? You usually have your choice of inspirational material."

Alex stopped the motion of his hand. Closed his eyes.

"Alex?"

No answer.

"Did I say something wrong?"

"No. No, not really." He opened his eyes and she saw a very human blend of gray and green in those beautiful irises. "I think I was caught up in some alternate reality. One where you and I could go on like this forever and Jack and Sherene and everybody else... They were just...I don't know...not in the picture. You reminded me that wasn't the case."

She reached up and traced the muscled wedge of his left pec, seeking and then finding his heartbeat.

"You know, Alex," she said slowly, "when we were a couple, that was my favorite dream. I would steal you away from all the people in your life. Easily. Painlessly. Just somehow erase everyone else from the picture. But your life has so many dimensions, so many levels of involvement. Family, politics, vampires, immortals, humans, friends, lovers, businesses... You have an amazingly full and rich life. I could never keep you for myself." He closed his eyes. She traced his silky brows with her fingertips then pushed a thick swath of hair behind his ear.

He cupped her hand to his cheek and rolled over to his back. "An amazingly full and rich life full of amazingly fucked-up and empty relationships." He said it lightly but there was regret in his eyes.

Caro started to say something but stopped when he continued.

"You know, up until I saw you at that cocktail party on Thursday night, I was convinced that I'd begun to think about relationships differently. And that's the key word I guess—*think*." He rubbed her knuckles along the high ridge of his cheekbone. "I've always loved the freedom of acting on impulse, doing whatever I wanted and then worrying about the consequences later. Call it whatever you want—vamp tradition, ego, being totally spoiled, I'm an asshole. All of the above. I don't know. But I got tired of it."

Looking down at her hand as he held it in his, he began to stroke her palm with his thumb.

"And then I saw you walk into that party at Stoked and all I wanted to do was fuck you. Right then, right there." He grinned. "And all the stuff that I'd thought about for the last five years, all the lessons I thought I'd learned and everything I wanted to say to you if I ever had a chance again...just flew right out of my lust-addled brain. And basically the only thing I've thought about for the last two days when I haven't been fucking you is how I'm going to manage to fuck you again." He traced a wide circle around her tattoo. "Yeah, and don't forget *suck* you again."

"Oh Alex." Caro pulled her hand away and sat up. "I never know what the hell I'm doing with you." She inhaled slowly and she wondered what magic kept the air in the crypt so fresh and clean smelling.

"Seeing you again knocked me for a loop too." She rested her head on her knees and watched one of the candles gutter and flicker out. "I've spent the last few years diligently working you out of my system. Working hard to be smart in business, in relationships. And I've been successful at it all. I thought I'd built up a really healthy amount of self-discipline, thought I could resist anyone. Including my bloodmate. What a bunch of vampire hogwash, I thought." She turned and smiled at him. "Then, within two hours of seeing you again, I was sucking you off in a bathroom."

He laughed. "Well, you worked hard and were successful at that venture too."

"But when we did all the fun and games stuff at your place with Jack, I was well on my way to having a major identity crisis. Because making love to you was never a game for me. And I've mixed sex with business before but...it was different this time. I just got overwhelmed. I still am, I guess."

"Me too." His smile was so tender it made her breath hitch. Then his lips twitched. "The only time I feel better is when I'm fucking you." He wagged his eyebrows and bared his teeth. "Wanna do it again and commiserate?"

"Alex's cure-all. Sorry, big guy, but this mortal needs food and a bathroom."

He leaned forward and kissed her. "Let's go upstairs."

Chapter Ten

When they got up to the loft, Caro decided to pretend it was morning even though the clocks told her it was late afternoon. She quickly used the bathroom and made coffee while Alex showered. She was sitting on his bed reading the morning paper when he came out of the bathroom looking all damp and delectable.

She made a quick decision. She wasn't going to think. She was going to enjoy.

He gave her a crooked smile as he bent to give her a kiss. "Morning, princess." He tried to stand up, but Caro pulled him back.

"Again," she ordered.

Laughing his assent, he brushed her lips with his once more then sat down when she ran her tongue along his freshly brushed teeth. God, he was delicious. She got up on her knees to deepen the kiss, smoothing her hands through his damp, silky hair. She broke the kiss, catching her breath before starting in on his jaw line and chin. Tender little nibbles on the ridge above his throat and a big bite at the base of his chin. Half grunting, half laughing, he pulled her closer. He tasted like shaving gel.

"Mmm, you taste all clean."

He chuckled as she licked his collarbone. "Best of all, I'm clean all over..."

She smiled down into his eyes. "Is that a hint?"

"Maybe."

She pushed him back onto the bed, his stiff cock bouncing and bobbing against his belly. "Hmm, you might be clean on the outside, but I can see that inside you've been thinking very dirty thoughts."

He reached up a hand to tease one of her nipples. "Dirty to some, but I happen to think they're one-hundred-percent pure." He gasped when she took the entire head of his cock into her mouth with one quick suck. After treating him to a lingering lick, she popped him out of her mouth.

"Yep, you're clean there too." She scrambled off the bed and stood up. "I think I'll shower now."

Alex laughed and scrambled after her. "You naughty, naughty mortal...get back over here and finish what you started. Or face the wrath of your vampire lover." Grabbing her by the hem of the robe she'd borrowed, he pulled her back.

She giggled and turned around to face him. "Okay."

She gave him a big push and he sat down hard, his look of surprise quickly turning into anticipation when she stood between his knees. His hands came up the back of her robe and he cupped her ass with eager hands.

"No, no. Sit still." She dropped to her knees, spreading his thighs wide. The head of his cock looked clean and shiny. Rosy. Dewy with anticipation. She gave the slit a little lick, smiling when she felt his thigh muscles jerk and tighten.

"Show me how you like it," she whispered, rubbing the soft skin of his glans along her cheek.

"Jesus, Caro. You know how I like it..."

She shook her head. "I want to see." She took his hand and brought it to his cock. "Show me. Give me your royal command."

Alex was magnificently aroused—eyes flashing dark silver, nostrils quivering as he drew in deep breaths, hands gripping the edge of the mattress, his ruby ring catching the light and flashing its mysterious fire. With a shuddering exhale he thrust his hips forward to the edge of bed, his princely cock a rich, red arch against his black pubic hair and the pale ridges of his abdomen, the twin globes beneath outlined against the smooth, dark sheets. He brushed her hair away from her face and neck, resting his cool fingers on her nape.

He cupped his balls with his other hand. "Take them into your mouth," he rasped.

She leaned forward and he moved his fingers to his shaft, raising it to give her access to what lay beneath. She gave his swollen sac a gentle lick before suckling first one testicle and then the other into her mouth. He gripped her neck with his free hand, groaning, his thighs straining. Her mouth sank into deep sensory overload—the textures, the flavors, the musky fullness of him were overwhelmingly delicious. His hips thrust forward and he inhaled sharply. He cupped her jaw.

She looked up at him, panting, waiting for his next command. His thumbs came up to stroke her wet lips. She reveled in the passion of his expression—strength and ferocity battling the vulnerability of mind-numbing pleasure. His hair was a wild tangle, his brow a fierce line of concentration, his eyes shot through with silver streaks.

"Use your hands on the root, your lips on the crown," he commanded. She curled her fingers around the base of his shaft, playing with the curls she found there, exploring the source of his cock's power. His fingers trained hers, leading her up the length of his shaft, showing her the pulling, twisting motion he liked best.

With a breathy sigh, she covered the seeping crown of his cock with her tongue and lips, half kissing, half sucking. She took him a fraction of an inch deeper, suckling the hot, smooth head, tasting his salty heat, curving her tongue over satin planes and throbbing ridges.

She closed her eyes and sank into sensation. She loved this, loved knowing all his intimate secrets, loved learning exactly how to take him to bliss. When he dropped his hand, she took over the motion and kept it up until she felt his other hand leave her head. He fell back onto his elbows.

"Oh God...finish me off however you want." He clenched the sheets with fisted hands and groaned.

She quickly sucked in all of him she could take, pressing his glans with the flat of her tongue. His shaft surged, the distended veins quaked, his thighs tensed and released. He gave a strangled cry as he thrust his hips forward violently, spurting his seed into her mouth. Her vulva throbbed in response as she vicariously rode his pleasure, moaning, sucking, draining the sweet-salty fluid from his bursting cock. He stroked her cheeks and her hair as he murmured mindless words of thanks. She gave him one last, tender suck and released him, her chest heaving.

He sat up and gave her a dazed smile. "Sweet mother of God, Caro. What a way to start the day."

"Mmm, I love having you for breakfast." She closed her eyes as he leaned down to kiss her.

"God, you are so sexy, so beautiful...I think I'm going to have *you* for breakfast, lunch *and* dinner."

He pulled her up to stand between his legs, opening her robe and kissing the smooth skin of her belly until she gripped his slippery hair, her knees weakening with suppressed arousal.

The phone by his bed rang, and with a sighing moan, he moved his lips up to her rib cage. "Don't answer it."

"Len might be worried about me. I haven't checked my phone for messages yet. He might be trying you to get to me." She bit her lip as he pushed her breasts together and scraped his teeth across both nipples. Bowing her head, she hesitated and then reluctantly pulled away to look at the phone.

He put his hand between her legs, murmuring with approval as he instantly got drenched with her juices.

She read the ID on the bedside phone. "It's Jack," she said.

"Fuck." He groaned the word, flopping down on the bed and pressing his fingers against his eyes. "I don't want to talk to him."

"Maybe I should answer," she teased as she sat down next to him.

"He'll leave a voicemail. He probably wants to talk about what happened last night." The phone rang three more times and stopped.

"Have you guys partied together a lot?" She laughed softly when his lips curved downward in distaste.

He rolled over to his side, propping himself up on an elbow. "No, not really. Definitely not like anything that happened last night.

"But you're friends right? You like him more than just on a business level."

"I suppose. We have some of the same interests. We have similar business philosophies." He began to stroke her thigh. "We have the same taste in women."

"Hmm." She stood up, realizing he wasn't going to reveal any of the details of the party he and Jack had gone to—and feeling pretty okay about it because she wasn't really sure she wanted to know. "I think I will take a shower, if you don't mind."

He sat up, an expression of mock hurt on his face. "Well, as a matter of fact I do mind. What about my breakfast?"

She brushed his lips with hers. "You'll just have to go into the kitchen and make us some."

He pouted. She went into the bathroom and shut the door.

When she came into the kitchen fifteen minutes later, her nose twitched at the aroma of fresh coffee and her stomach growled when she saw he was making batter for waffles.

"You're making me waffles?"

"Of course. It's your favorite breakfast, right? Whatever princess wants, princess gets..."

As she sat on one of the stools by the counter, he poured her a cup of coffee and handed it to her. She couldn't contain her smile. "I knew there was a reason I stuck around today."

He laughed. "I'll remember the waffle trick next time you try to get away from me." He waggled his eyebrows as he turned on the mixer.

Caro heard the door buzzer over the whir of the beaters. She reached across the counter and turned off the mixer. The buzzer beeped again and a zillion different scenarios beeped into her mind. Jack strolling in, observing the evidence that she'd been sharing a very intimate day with Alex – and firing them both. Nah, he wouldn't do that, would he? Maybe it was Len and he'd be pissed off at her for the same thing – he'd tell her she was a weak-willed vamp-hag, a loser of a business partner, a silly goose...

Wait. How would he have found out where Alex lived?

Jack, of course.

"I'll get it," Alex said, looking at with her amusement, obviously understanding the source of her discomfort. "I hope it's not Jack."

He went to the door and punched the intercom button. Len's face popped up on the digital display. "Hey, Len. Come on up," he said, buzzing the door.

Alex came back to the kitchen and picked up the mixer. "You wanna pretend like we haven't been up to what we've been up to?" he asked, looking pointedly at what she was wearing.

She tugged at her damp hair and rolled her eyes at her stupidly flaring nerves. "Let's just tell him the truth. He'll figure it out and I'm no good at lying."

"Okay. Fine with me."

Len came in a few moments later, his worried expression easing the moment he saw her. "Thank God. I found all your stuff at the hotel but no you. I called Jack and he suggested trying here."

Hiding a wince, Caro hugged him close. "Sorry, Len. Alex had some...issues last night. So I came over here to keep him company."

"Oh." Len took in her wet hair and Alex's shirt. "I see."

She laughed. "Maybe. But probably not too clearly. It's kind of complicated."

Len snorted. "Since when *aren't* things complicated between you two?"

"Since never," Alex said. "Hey Len, you want some waffles?"

"Hell yes. I've already had breakfast and lunch but I'll never say no to a waffle." He slanted a glance at Caro. "You need to do me a favor, partner."

"What?"

"Call Edie McCarthy. Fast. She canceled the latest reception venue and if I'm forced to talk with her, I will kill her. I. Will. Kill. Her. No joke."

Caro sighed. Edie McCarthy was the classic fretting mother of a bridezilla client. Lenny usually handled all the Party Mavens wedding accounts, but for some reason, he couldn't seem to handle Edie McCarthy. "Oh Lord. Give me your cell. I don't want to have to come visit you in prison." She grabbed his phone. "Can I borrow some sweats or something, Alex?"

"Sure, help yourself."

"Better make it fast," Len called to her retreating back. "Or I'm gonna eat all the waffles."

Len sat at the counter watching Alex pour batter into a hot waffle iron and appreciating him in casual home attire. Tattered jeans and nothing else. Looked great on him. Even better than the insanely expensive suit he'd worn yesterday.

"Great place," Len commented after looking around the expansive, mostly empty room. "You ever try roller skating in here?"

Alex laughed. "I thought about it before I got furniture."

"But a disco ball and kneepads probably don't fit with the royal vamp lifestyle, right?"

"Mm. Probably not." As Alex leaned against the counter and sipped his coffee, Len stared at him, wondering how he could possibly be so casual after all that had happened over the last forty-eight hours.

"What?" Alex finally asked.

Len inhaled slowly, hating the thought of talking to Alex about scary stuff. Okay. Caro first. Lyra Murdoch later. "What the hell is going on between you and Caro?" Might as well get right to the point.

"Maybe you'd better ask her that question." Alex refilled his mug, his movements slow and deliberate.

"I figured that would be your answer. But you know, sometimes I like to ask you these things, just to get a different take."

"Well, I must confess I'm a little confused about the situation." Alex's smile was boyishly crooked, a charming foil to the masculine elegance of his half-naked, wickedly sexy body. He went to the fridge and got out syrup and butter.

"Maybe you could start by telling me what the situation is. And don't worry, I'm gonna be asking Caro the same questions."

Alex expertly pried the waffle loose from the iron, flopped it onto a plate and pushed it toward Len, who doused it with syrup. "The situation is normal, Lenny my friend. It's all fucked up. Here's how I see it..." Alex paused to watch him fold half the waffle onto his fork and shove it into his mouth. "I love her and she loves me. The sex is so insanely good I can't live without it. And my need to feed from her is beginning to make me physically and mentally ill. But she won't let me feed because she doesn't trust me and I don't know how to prove I'm trustworthy. Time would probably help my cause, but what do we do in the meantime? Start a serious, committed relationship? No. She wouldn't trust me. Fuck each other, but continue to see other people so I can feed and she can feel free? No, she's totally jealous—even though she'd never admit it. And I fully admit that right now I'd probably go evil vamp on anyone who comes near her. So that's the puzzle, Len, my boy. How're the waffles?"

"God, they're terrific. Your mom taught you well."

"That she did." He plopped another waffle on Len's plate. "So do you have a solution for your two old friends?"

"Nope. That's what you call a really impossible situation. You either need a ton of willpower, which neither you nor Caro seem to have. Or you need several states or, better yet, several countries separating the two of you. Or you need to get married and forget about it."

Alex laughed. "You know what the truly fucked up thing is? I'm beginning to think that the last option might be the best one for us."

Len almost choked on his waffle. He gulped coffee.

Caro came back all rolled up in Alex's NYU sweatshirt and track pants. "What's fucked up?" she asked as she sat down at the kitchen counter next to Len. "Did you eat all the waffles?" She took a big sip of coffee.

"No, there's plenty." Alex put a plate in front of her. "Len thinks we ought to get married."

She choked, spraying coffee down the front of her shirt. Len guffawed and pounded her on the back.

The door buzzer rang loudly. "I'll get it," said Alex, handing Caro a dishtowel as he walked by.

Len tried to send her a reassuring glance when Jack's voice came over the intercom, but she wouldn't look at him. *Uh-oh.*

"Jack's coming up." Alex put another waffle on Len's plate.

"I hate it when you guys talk about me," Caro grumbled, pushing her plate away. "And with Jack here I won't even be able to yell at you." Her lower lip was beginning to protrude ominously. "I'm not hungry anymore."

Alex took the plate back and poured syrup all over the waffle. He took a dripping bite and, with an expression Len would have to categorize as a leer, said, "Oh, that's right. You already had breakfast."

Caro threw the dishtowel at him. Alex laughed around his waffle.

"Mmm, it smells delicious in here," Jack called out as he came through the door.

"It's an undisputed fact that Alex makes the very best waffles." Len pushed away his plate and patted his belly.

"Well, I've been cheated then because I've never had them." As Jack came around the kitchen counter, he raised an eyebrow and glanced at his watch. "Especially not for dinner."

Caro hopped off her stool. "Sorry to run out like this guys, but I think I need to go change and make some plane reservations."

"What happened to you?" laughed Jack, his gaze on her spattered shirt.

"Coffee went down the wrong way." Caro hurried toward the bathroom.

"Is she okay?" Jack asked as he watched her walk away.

Alex shrugged. "Have a waffle."

"Okay." Jack came around the counter and got himself a plate, finding things easily enough for Len to notice how comfortable Jack was in Alex's kitchen. Hm. Was this part of why Caro seemed so upset? Was there something really going on between Jack and Alex?

Oh God. Why were things so fricking complicated when it came to vampire relations?

"So," Alex said, after Jack sat down and happily began digging into a waffle. "I hate to be a big, bloody downer at this lovely, impromptu get together, but since the major affected parties are here and relatively sober and relaxed, I think it's appropriate to ask."

"What?" Jack and Len asked at the same time.

"When are we gonna take down Lyra Murdoch?"

Jack's fork slipped from his fingers.

Len quirked an eyebrow and studied Alex's cool gray-green eyes and his casual pose. Wow. You had to admire the vamp for his balls. But then, he was never one to back down from an enemy.

"Uh, do you mean personally or professionally, Alex?" Jack looked oddly nervous.

Lenny's curiosity spiked. "Do you know Lyra personally?" He had to ask.

"Sort of," Jack said cryptically.

"He's been to some of her parties, right Jack?" Alex's tone was moderate, even friendly. But Jack looked even more nervous.

"Look, Alex. I came here to apologize for what happened last night." He cast a quick I-wish-you-weren't-here glance at Len. "I know I was totally out of line and I hope—"

"Don't worry about it," Alex interrupted. "We were both fucked up. My concern isn't about Lyra's propensity to play sex games with mortals. My concern is her covert threat to Stoked and her *overt* threats to my company and Caro."

"Jesus!" exclaimed Len. "What the hell did I miss last night?"

"You don't need to know the details—the party was typical Lyra fare. But before I took my drunken ass away from her malevolent presence, she told me she planned to bring me up before the Immortal Council."

"Why the hell would she do that?"

"Same old, same old. She's adverse to mortals and immortals working together to make money. Sex, drugs and evil mind control are all well and good apparently. Legitimate business is still a no-no."

"You know, I kind of wish you would have told me about your issues with the CEO of our chief competition." Jack had replaced his worried look with one of disgruntlement.

Lenny expelled a snort of laughter. "Alex has issues with every CEO of an immortal company. Not all of them bad issues...but issues nevertheless."

"True," Alex said. "But none of the other CEOs I know are as powerful or as evil as Lyra Murdoch. And her barely veiled threat to my bloodmate is a gauntlet I can't ignore."

"What the hell did she say?" Fear pricked at the back of Len's neck. If Alex was this worried about Lyra, then yeah, he was gonna get worried too.

"Let's just say Caro's not going to leave my presence until this issue is resolved."

"Jesus, Alex. You have to do better than that if Lyra's threat is real. You have to grant her complete protection. She's leaving for Cleveland soon. You'll have to convince her to renew all of your bonds, grant her some real powers for defense—"

Lenny clamped his mouth shut when he saw Alex look beyond his shoulder, his eyes sparkling silver. Len turned and saw Caro standing just outside the bathroom door. Her body language told him she'd heard quite a bit. Voices apparently carried well in the cavernous room. *God. Damn.*

She walked softly across the floor and stopped a few feet from his stool.

"Jeez, Lenny," she said, keeping her eyes solely on him. "I know satyrs are notoriously capricious. But you sure are whistling a different tune about Alex today than the one you were whistling about him yesterday. Marriage? Renewed blood bonds? Wow." Hurt bled through her sarcasm and Lenny wanted to cry.

"Caro, take it easy." Alex's swift move around the counter had Caro taking a step back. "I should have included you on this conversation from the beginning. But I didn't want to frighten—"

"Oh yes, we wouldn't want to frighten the poor little defenseless mortal female."

Len saw sudden understanding dawn in her expression. Something bad, from the look of it.

"My God. *This* is why you took me to your crypt last night, isn't it?"

Len bit his lip. Yep. Bad. All the bads were there in her voice. Hurt, anger, sadness.

"It wasn't because of your undying love or your eternal need for my company," she continued. "It was to protect me from your disgruntled business enemies!"

Alex was starting to look as bad as Caro sounded. "Caro, you know it's more complicated than—"

"No, I *don't* know it, damn it! That's always been the trouble between us. I never know when you're telling me the truth. Even when I can read your mind, I don't know." A tear slipped down her cheek and she swiped it away. "I don't know who Lyra Murdoch is or why she's angry with you. But I'm not your bloodmate...not really...so she won't be able to use me to get to you. Right? I won't be under your control or anyone else's!" Her voice cracked and her face crumpled for a horrible second before quickly smoothing out into a hard, cold mask. Uncurling her fisted fingers, she calmly said, "Now, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I've got a business to take care of. I'm going to Cleveland. I'll be back next week to work on the account." She turned on her heel and headed for the door.

Recognizing she was holding off a big-time meltdown, Len started to follow her but Alex stopped him with a fierce look and then sprinted after her.

Len looked over at Jack—who spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

Caro was in the elevator, trying to get the clanky doors to close and knowing she was being stupid because, yeah, she was barefoot, barely dressed and trying to flee a vampire who owned her soul. But every cell in her body was telling her to run.

She expelled a strangled moan of frustration when she saw him. "Goddamn it, Alex," she whispered heatedly as he easily pushed open the gate and stepped in beside her. "I don't want to see you right now, I don't want to talk to you, I don't want to think about—"

He grabbed her shoulders and put his mouth over hers, kissing her like he was drowning and she was the air he desperately sought. She eased into his body for a moment, empathizing with his urgent need, but after a long, soul-sucking moment she forced herself to pull back, her breasts heaving, her mind aching as she tried to sever her thoughts from his.

"I had to kiss you goodbye, princess." His tone was teasing but his eyes were sad.

"I can't do this, Alex." She turned away from him, clasping the metal bars of the elevator's cage with trembling fingers.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Lyra before, but I was so fucked up last night, and we were so happy this morning—"

"No, it's not just that. It's the whole thing—there's too much history between us. The sex was a mistake. Pretending we can be together was a mistake. If we can't maintain a purely professional relationship then I'll have to bail on this job. And I won't see you again. Ever."

He moved into her space with a sudden bold move, backing her into the corner of the small elevator, blocking out the dim light with his body and his dark eyes.

"Do you honestly believe that, princess?" His voice was soft and full of menace. "That what's between us is *pretend*? Something we can just forget?" He moved in closer and she felt a thrum of dark energy pass from his body into hers. "You're mine. Forever. Your body has my mark. Do you know what that means?"

She nodded, her mouth going dry as he lifted her hand to his mouth.

"It means my enemies are your enemies. I fight for your life, the same way I fight for my own life." He kissed her palm, the base of her thumb. He blew lightly on her wrist and her tattoo burned, his breath like a hot metal brand on her sensitive skin. "And it means I can make you beg for a good, hard fucking. Anytime. Any place. Any way I want you."

She struggled then, rage overcoming her anxiety. She kneed him, kicked him, struck out with her free hand, crying out her anger and frustration. He held her tight, immobilizing her, his strength and reflexes gravely outmatching her passionate efforts.

She stilled her body and when he kissed her, like she knew he would, she bit down hard on his lip, drawing forth his rich, dark blood.

He grunted. "Damn! That fucking hurt!"

"Good!"

A silver shadow passed through his eyes. He brought her wrist to his mouth and suckled her tattoo, smearing her marked flesh with his blood.

She arched. A sharp breath hissed between her lips. With a shout of agony, she climaxed, pleasure torpedoing through her body, sucking all her emotions into a tight ball of ecstasy that blasted through her nervous system and then left her limp and dangling against Alex's body.

She sobbed. Felt him still suckling, felt more pleasure build in her pussy, her breasts. His canines lengthened, his eyes went black. She felt a prick, a slight piercing. Her clit swelled and throbbed—

"No! Please, Alex! I'm begging you, no, no..." She was weeping in earnest now, her mind as overcome as her body. "You promised, you promised!"

He dropped her wrist, fell to his knees and covered his head, as if the blows she'd tried to land earlier were finally connecting and he was protecting himself from her attack.

She grabbed the bars of the elevator to keep from falling. Tried to control her body-racking sobs.

He rolled onto his side in a fetal position, clenching his stomach with his arms, his hair shrouding his face.

"Leave me," he gasped. When his body contorted she could feel his pain. Nauseating, excruciating, slicing deep through his gut.

"Oh God. Alex..." She bent down, her hand hovering over the black silk of his hair.

"Now!" His roar reverberated through the elevator shaft, shaking the cables, shattering the light bulb. A red emergency light flickered on in the hallway.

Caro backed out of the elevator, brushing thin shards of glass from her hair and shoulders. Her eyes seized on the door to the stairwell. She forced her body to move through the door and down the dank stairway.

The door at the base of the stairs exited into an alley. She took a step, stumbled against a Dumpster and sat on the dirty asphalt, weeping silent tears.

Lenny found her there several minutes later.

She looked up into his dear, sweet, worried face. "Take me home," she whispered as he gathered her into his arms.

Chapter Eleven

Caro was staring at her morning cup of coffee when her phone rang.

Alex. Her head was swimming with the residue of too much crying and a too-hard sleep. Should she answer? Yeah, otherwise he'd keep trying. Or worse, come here to Cleveland to see her in person.

"Hello?" Her voice rasped. She cleared her throat.

"Are you okay?" The sound of his voice made her want to weep again.

"Mm. Yeah. I think so. How about you?"

"Not so good, actually."

"I'm sorry."

He made a disgusted sound. "You're sorry? Jesus, Caro, don't be. I'm the one who's sorry. I deserve to be flayed for the way I treated you in that elevator."

"Alex—"

"I'm sorry, princess. Truly, genuinely, deeply. Can you forgive me? Can we start over?"

She rubbed her forehead with a shaky hand. "Oh Alex."

"I know. This is like déjà vu from five years ago and you don't want to have this conversation again."

"Exactly."

"Well, I figured you probably felt that way, so I just wanted to let you know that there's no pressure. I just want to do business with you. I mean...I won't be putting any pressure on you for a relationship or anything like that." He sighed. "Fuck. Why is this so hard to say? I won't expect things from you on a personal level. I'd like to keep everything strictly professional."

"Umm..." She was surprised—no, make that completely shocked—by what he'd just said.

"I'm not saying this very well, am I? Look, I just don't want to repeat any of the mistakes I made with you in the past. I'm letting you call the shots. I love you and I want to be with you but I know that's probably not possible for us right now."

"Alex, I don't know what to say..."

"That's my point. If you don't know what to say, you shouldn't have to say anything. You're not ready to come back to me yet. So. I look forward to working with you on a business level but that's all there's going to be right now. A blurring of the lines would just make us miserable.

"Yeah, I agree." Was she actually hearing him say all this?

"I talked to Sherene and Jack and Lenny and things went surprisingly well. We've got a tentative plan for how to deal with Lyra and some great ideas for how to proceed with the first product launch. And I need to let you know something up front..." He paused for a long moment. "Sherene and I—we're going to try to keep things going with our relationship. Friendship. Um, you know, stay friends and feed when we need to..." He cleared his throat.

"Oh."

"And I told her my worries about working with you—she knows you're my bloodmate, of course. And she agreed that if things get uncomfortable, she'll do the supervision of events planning. I'll just fade into the background."

"Fade into the background..." Caro didn't seem to be able to complete a sentence.

"Yeah, so you'll have to let us know if things aren't going satisfactorily." He paused, as if trying to find words. "Satisfactorily....shit, I sound like an ass, don't I? What I mean is we're going to have to work very closely together on occasion and if I really start to piss you off because of stuff from the past, or stuff in the present for that matter, let me know. You really deserve this account, and I don't want you to bow out because of me."

"Umm. Okay, Alex. Thanks, I guess. This is a lot to think about."

"I've spent the entire time since you left thinking about it. I want you to be happy and successful, princess. I don't want to get in your way."

Caro was suddenly suspicious. "Hey, did you talk to Len about this?"

"No, just about business. Not about this...us. Why?"

"Well, I thought maybe he put you up to it."

"No, it's something that I really want to do—nobody coerced me." His soft laughter had a tinge of sadness. He sounded completely human, like he'd put his bad-ass vamp side somewhere else for a while. "I'm hoping you'll give me a break some day after you realize I'm not such a bad guy, after all. And actually, Lenny did warn me that if I fucked with you again he'd twist my balls off."

Caro exhaled a breath of laughter. "Len the bad-ass satyr."

"He can be pretty scary when it comes to protecting you."

"I know. That's why I can never find a decent boyfriend."

Alex snorted in disbelief. "Now I *know* that can't be true."

"You'd be surprised."

There was a tense little pause.

"Well, I'd better go." Alex's tone was tentative. "You're coming for the marketing division's meetings next week?"

"Yes."

"Good, I'll see you then."

"Okay."

"Take care, princess."

"You too."

After the line disconnected, Caro stared at the familiar furnishings in her kitchen, feeling oddly lost. She tried to analyze her emotions but couldn't get a handle on them. Alex, for once, had acted like a complete grown-up – professional, kind, mature. He'd said all the right things. So why did she feel like he'd just broken up with her?

Oh Lord. Did she *want* to go back to him—all the way back to him? Sex mate, bloodmate, life mate, the whole damn deal?

No. She'd struggled for five years to become independent. And now she had her dream. A successful business. Friends who respected her for herself, not for her connection to Alex.

And now she had Alex's respect. As a friend. As a business equal.

She should be jumping up and down, pumping her fist in the air, shouting "Success!"

Instead, she swiped a tear off her cheek and stared morosely into her cold cup of coffee.

* * * * *

Mike pumped Len's hand and then dropped it to take Caro's hand in both of his beefy ones. "You're here for the meeting this afternoon? Great. Wish I would have known you guys were coming in this morning, we could have had lunch or something." His pale hazel eyes were fixed on Caro's cleavage and Len was pretty sure he knew what ol' Mike meant by "or something".

"Yeah," said Len distractedly as his gaze shifted once more to Merrell. Merrell with his warm mocha skin, hot espresso eyes and A-bomb sex appeal.

Human males like Mike were reputed to think about sex once a minute. Well, a satyr never *stopped* thinking about sex. And a big, beefcake vamp was Len's very favorite way to let his mind go.

It had been a long week away from Chicago.

He cleared his throat when Merrell caught him with those sultry eyes and held on to him. "Caro, I'll see if Merrell can help me get those photocopies made for the meeting..."

Caro smiled at him. "Sure Len, take your time."

Hey – did she just wink at Merrell? Nah.

Mike solicitously placed an arm on Caro's elbow. "Caro, would you like to join me in my office? I have a few questions for you and I wanted to go over some information I found for you last week."

"Okay," Caro agreed. "I have a few things I'd like to run by you as well."

"Great. Let's get started."

Len watched Mike lead Caro down the hall. Then he let Merrell lead him in the opposite direction.

When Merrell gently pushed him through a discreet door adjacent to his desk, Len thought it was a broom closet. But then he saw office supplies. Merrell shut the door and carefully turned the lock. As he walked toward him with that now very familiar Mona Lisa smile on his lips, Len felt blood rush to his groin.

"I paged Gerald to come cover the desk for my break," Merrell said. "We have fifteen minutes."

With the incredible speed full-blooded vamps were known for, Merrell abruptly had him against a shelving unit and in a lip lock—a mind-blowing, cock-popping, mouth-bruising kiss. He felt dizzy. He clutched his silk-clad shoulders and held on when those long, cool fingers dove under his shirt, down his waistband, into his briefs.

He wrenched his mouth away and gasped, "Okay, but let's go easy...I don't want to get interrupted again." He groaned as Merrell palmed the head of his cock.

Merrell's laugh was full of anticipation. "I'll be quiet if you will." He made quick work of belt buckles and waistbands. And—*ah God*—then Len's hot, thrusting cock was in those cool, white vampire hands. Merrell dropped to his knees. Len moaned when Merrell darted his tongue around the base of his shaft.

"Mm, I missed you," murmured Merrell. "I've been dreaming of how you taste for days..." He gave him another lick, wetter, more forceful. "Now I'll have you for my coffee break...so much better than my favorite latté." Merrell's tongue lingered on the tender ridge along the crown. "So much hotter." Len hummed softly as a well-manicured fingernail traced the groove of the slit. "Makes me feel so much more jazzed..." Len clutched Merrell's head, his fingers grasping his smooth, short curls convulsively. "Let's see if we can make a little of that lovely frothy cream come out on top..."

"God, just do it!" He thrust hips forward, the move involuntary, like his cock was pulling the rest of his body toward those sensitive vamp lips. Vamps had a unique way of giving head—those canines got in the way of traditional techniques like deep-throating. What they lacked in suction, they made up for in skill.

For example, Merrell had this great little thing he did with his front teeth...oh yeah, there it was right there, an enticing little tickle along his raphe, half scrape, half bite. Len thrust forward, grunted. Yes, the open-mouthed kisses were very, *very* good. Merrell's lips were so cool, his saliva so hot. He had a special way of pressing the tip of his tongue to the tender flesh of his glans—he should patent his technique, it felt so fucking good. Too good.

"Oh shit, I'm gonna go really fast," Len cried out. He tried to find something to hold on to as he felt his knees go weak. Merrell's palm was bearing down on his balls, pressing them in rhythm with his pulsing tongue. Len's climax rolled through his gut and out his cock like a bullet express.

"God, God, God...!" His hand caught the edge of a shelf full of boxes of binder clips. About twenty boxes came rattling and crashing to the floor. But he didn't care. He was too busy pulsing his cream into Merrell's waiting mouth. He closed his eyes, shuddering, whimpering like a wuss. But damn, he couldn't catch his breath. Merrell placed a last soothing lick along his shaft and then leaned back on his heels to look up at him.

Len took a hesitant step forward, still feeling a little rocky in the knees. But that look on Merrell's face was too much to resist. The floor would be hard but he didn't care. He nudged Merrell's shoulders, hinting at what he wanted next.

"Nuh-uh," Merrell whispered. "I want you on your knees. My cock has a message for your tight, hairy little satyr ass..."

Len smiled big, dropping to his knees—then freezing as he heard a key turning in the lock.

Jack walked in, briefly surveying the scene before shutting the door behind him. He fixed his hot blue gaze on Len's ass and grinned that fabulous Jack grin. "Hello, lovers. I thought I might find you in here."

* * * * *

Caro noted with a jolt of nerves that Mike's office was directly across the hall from the office she'd be sharing with Lenny, Alex and Sherene. Would Alex be in there? The door was slightly ajar but she couldn't see any movement inside. Mike escorted her into his office. He offered her a chair at a small round conference table near his desk.

"Did you have a good week?" he asked politely. He pulled a bunch of files off his pristine credenza and brought them over to the table.

"Yes, thanks. It was very productive." Caro noticed several of the pictures on Mike's bookcases showed him in a University of Illinois football uniform. Yep. Just as she thought. A jock boy.

"Good. I have to confess I did think about you more than a few times." Mike's smile was charming.

"Oh? I hope they were good thoughts." She might as well flirt back, she thought. She definitely needed to start thinking about a guy other than Alex. A nice, normal human might be just what the psychotherapist ordered.

"Hey Mike, there's something on this afternoon's agenda I wanted to talk to you about—" Alex came through the door and froze when he saw her.

Caro felt her nerves thrum as those gray-green eyes met hers.

Mike stood up. "Alex, come on in. Caro just got here and we were going to go over a few things before the meeting."

He thoroughly checked her out when she stood up to greet him. She'd chosen her outfit carefully today—a cashmere sweater dress that clung in all the right places and knee-high suede boots. She didn't know whether to feel triumphant or annoyed as he

gripped her fingers and gave her his slowest, sexiest smile—the one that said, “I wanna do you here and now”. It was way too intimate of an expression to wear in public, but wow—it was a definite ego-booster to be on the receiving end of it.

“Caro.” Alex’s voice and cordial nod were cool and all business, but his hot eyes lingered slightly too long on her cleavage.

He still had her hand and she felt her body respond to his touch in typical fashion. She wanted to jump him. Dump the stuff off Mike’s desk and do him fast, hard and furious.

Mm, he looked so divine...maybe she would take her time with him instead. Slowly explore what was under the charcoal suit that hugged his lean body...loosen his tie. Oh Lord, was he wearing a pink tie? Yeah, it was a fabulous pearly silk in the palest pink. It would have looked ridiculous on somebody like Mike, but on Alex it looked sexily elegant. She’d slide it from his collar, cinch his wrists behind his back and have her sweet way with him.

She bit her lip. Oh Christ. Even his silly-assed neckties looked sexy to her. She wanted to rest her head in her hands and weep over her weakness.

“Would you like to join us?” Mike was asking Alex. “What did you want to discuss?”

Alex finally let go of her hand. She couldn’t—wouldn’t—look at him again. “No, no. I didn’t mean to interrupt. It can wait until the meeting. There are a few things I still need to take care of before then so I’ll see you both later.” He left, softly closing the door behind him.

Mike shrugged as he looked at the closed door. “You know that guy’s got odd style but I’m beginning to see why he’s so successful.”

“Oh?” She settled back into her chair, trying not to sag in a silent sigh of relief that Alex was gone.

“Yeah, smarter than hell and always taking everybody by surprise. Keeps you on your toes.”

“Mm-hmm. He sure does.”

* * * * *

Two weeks later Caro was still having lascivious daydreams about her luscious, immortal co-worker, Alex “The Party” King.

The plans for the first product launch gala event were coming together amazingly well. Alex’s brash, bold, over-the-top vision meshed well with Lenny’s whimsical, fun-loving scheme. Caro and Sherene were both very practical and client-oriented. They kept their vampire and satyr partners from getting too pie-in-the-sky with budget and scope.

Their concept centered on an ancient Greek spa. The cleverness of the design lay in its scale. It was grand—gargantuan to the extreme. Each notch of the spa’s pillars could

display a towering, twenty-foot product banner or project super-sized video images of a Stoked product in use. In the pool at the center of the spa, large trays displaying mega-sized mockups of each Stoked item could be floated. Models—both mortal and immortal—could lounge on the spacious ledges of the pool and demonstrate products.

Everything from the smallest item on the buffet to the biggest item of the decor had to be planned out to the last detail.

Usually, Caro loved sweating the details—Lenny called her the detail diva—but working closely with Alex was making her sweat for an entirely different reason. The only thing she could concentrate on was him.

Like this afternoon. Lenny had spread out the latest version of the display manufacturers' plans on the big worktable. At first Caro had pored over them, carefully making notes for the caterers, the electricians, the florists and umpteen other vendors she was trying to keep track of.

But then Alex walked up to the table. Stood a discreet twelve inches away from her. Smiled at her politely as he leaned forward to switch around the blueprints. And her concentration immediately shifted to him.

Today it had been all about his scent. One whiff and she was completely aroused. She'd stood there like an idiot, clutching her forgotten notebook against her erect nipples and trying to break down what it was about Alex that smelled so utterly delicious. The shampoo he used on all that thick, silky hair. The crisp cotton scent of his white shirt. The citrusy, clean blend of his aftershave. The slightly musky aroma of his flesh.

Nobody else smelled like that. And she knew exactly where she'd like to breathe him in.

If they were alone in the office she'd go over to the door and lock it. She'd take off her clothes—no, she'd take off *his* clothes and have him lay down on that big, shiny table. Crawling over him, she'd run her face all over his pale, smooth muscles, press her nose into the spots where the musk would be most concentrated—his neck, under his arms, his inner thighs...

And when she got done with her olfactory exploration she'd move on to taste.

Mmm...

Then Sherene had tapped her on the shoulder and she'd guiltily realized she'd missed an entire conversation about the vendors. Details that would have to be repeated later so she could write them down.

Her weakness for Alex, her absurd several-times-a-day sensory meltdowns in his presence and, yeah, her basic inability to do her fucking job, were all good reasons why she was here alone in the Stoked offices working at four a.m. It was the only hour she'd found when she could get any work done. After the vamps had gone home for the night, and before everyone else had arrived for the day. She'd discovered that if she reviewed all the plans and completed tasks on a daily basis, she had better luck working when everyone else arrived the next day.

She was viewing one of Sherene's multi-media presentations for cologne when she heard the door open behind her.

Alex.

She turned to look at him. He stood there with his hand on the door, surprise on his face.

"What are you doing here?" they asked in unison.

Alex laughed as he walked into the room. Wearing tattered jeans, a hooded sweatshirt and running shoes, he looked tired and sexy and strangely vulnerable. More human than vamp. She realized the professional veneer he'd kept so carefully in place for the last few weeks was missing.

"I was working on the column designs at home," he said. "And I discovered a problem. I need to look at one of the new half-scale models the builders sent over today." He went to the workstation he'd been using and grabbed a set of keys. "What are you up to?"

She shrugged. Her shoulders and neck felt stiff with fatigue, tension, nerves. She knew exactly what she'd like to do to loosen up... She fiddled with the PC's mouse and felt silly when she realized her fingers were trembling. "Just trying to catch up on some stuff. Sometimes I, um, work better when there's no one around."

"Sorry to interrupt."

"No, don't be. I was just about to go back to the hotel. Try to snag a few hours of sleep."

"You look like hell." He smiled when she scowled at him. "Um, make that beautiful but tired?"

"You don't look so great yourself."

"I know. These last couple weeks have been...wearing."

"Yeah," she exhaled.

"Hey, did you get a chance to see the models of the spa they delivered today?" His eyes lit up. Caro had been consistently amazed over how much he loved this job. Working with him made her appreciate a steadfastness and enthusiasm she'd never seen in him before. The party boy had turned his lifestyle into a vocation.

She smiled at his smile. "No. I was meeting with one of the caterers."

"Wanna come with?"

Probably a bad idea, but God, she so wanted just to talk to him, see more smiles, be near him. "Sure," she said.

"We co-opted half of one of Stoked's gigantic storage rooms on the floor below," he explained as they walked down the hall toward the elevators. "Which is great because usually we'd have to store this kind of thing off site."

They got on the elevator and Caro tried not to think about the last time they'd been on an elevator together. Unconsciously covering her wrist, she sent a furtive glance in

Alex's direction. He was concentrating on the crease between the elevator doors. Concentrating very hard.

The doors opened and she breathed out a silent sigh.

She followed him down the partially finished hallway—Stoked was having all the offices redone on this floor—and when they came to a large set of double doors he pulled the keys from his pocket and unlocked them.

He flicked on the lights and a series of overhead fluorescents whitened the cavernous space. They walked through an aisle of huge crates and past billboard-sized pieces of advertising exhibits Stoked had used over the years. Lots of black. Lots of glass. Lots of mirrors. Masculine-looking glitz.

"Here we go." Stopping at the end of the aisle, Alex looked down at the centerpiece of their party scheme done in miniature. It was an open-air bathing spa—the model about waist high with a big piece of blue cellophane serving as water for the pool, and dozens of white plastic cylinders serving as Greek columns.

"Wow! It looks fabulous."

Alex walked around it, hands in pockets, brows furrowed in concentration.

"Yeah. I'm pleased. I'm not sure about the table scheme Len came up with, though." He pulled a piece of paper from his jeans pocket and knelt down. "Tell me what you think." He gestured for her to join him and she crouched down next to him. "See, if we put a row of tables here," he said as he pointed along the inside of the columns, "then it will block traffic flow over here."

When she tipped her head to get a better view of the line he was drawing with his finger, a swath of his hair fell forward and brushed against her face. Her body stiffened, her awareness of him agonizingly acute. He lifted his hand to push his hair back and his elbow bumped her, making her lose her balance. As she toppled into him, he twisted a little—to save them both from falling into the model—and ended up on his ass, Caro half on top of him.

"Sorry," he murmured after breathing half a laugh. "See how dedicated I am? I risk my own ass to save our party model."

Caro was working hard to scramble off him super fast and look casual about doing it.

"Are you okay?" he asked softly.

"Of course." She felt her cheeks get pink as she brushed herself off. "You cushioned my fall."

"No. I mean are you okay in general? You look...freaked out."

"Yeah. I'm just—" She heard her voice crack, felt tears well up—Jesus, what a head case—and she wanted to sink through the floor or maybe, she thought as she looked at the model, shrink to half-size and escape into the coliseum. She stood up and, to avoid Alex's scrutiny, started walking toward the next aisle of stored displays.

"This stuff is amazing. I remember most of these ad campaigns." She walked by a huge mirror—it was about the size of her living room wall—and a glimpse of her reflection jarred her to a stop.

Oh God. Alex was right. She *did* look like hell. Like him, she was wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. With her scrubbed face and her hair scraped into a ponytail, she looked like a twelve-year-old who hadn't slept or eaten in a month. And, mentally, that description was on target.

Alex came to stand beside her. "I think they used this mirror as a backdrop for a razor display."

"Oh."

She took a step away and in the mirror she saw his hand reach out to stop her. When she froze, he dropped his hand back to his side.

"You wanna talk about it?"

She shook her head.

"Caro, I—"

"I didn't expect this to be so hard —"

They spoke at the same time.

He caught her eye in the mirror. "Go ahead," he encouraged.

"I..." She paused. Should she pour out her heart to him, like she wanted to? Did she really want to give him that kind of ammunition?

He nodded, the side of his mouth turning down into a half-smile. "It's okay. You're just talking to my reflection, not me. And my reflection promises not to remember any of this conversation, unless you want it to."

She took a deep breath but couldn't return his smile. "Okay. I want you. Badly. More than ever. I can't concentrate on work. I can't think about anything else. And it's making me nuts. Because I can't have you."

He closed his eyes, tightened his hands into fists. She could see and feel the vampire within him become larger...somehow more awake. But when he opened his eyes he looked just as he had a few minutes ago. Approachable. More mortal than immortal.

"Maybe it's time to get creative," he said. He sat down on the floor and pulled his knees up, casually draping his forearms across his knees.

"Creative?"

"Yeah. We make each other unbearably hot but we don't want to have sex because things got too intense, right?"

"Um, right." She slowly sat down next to him.

"So there must be a way we can cool each other off without..."

"Without?"

"Having sex." His grin made her belly dip.

She tried to think of what he could possibly be talking about but every image that popped into her head made her...unbearably hot. "I don't get it."

"You're worried about our blood connection, right? The powers we give and take when we make love? Or when I feed?"

Oh God. This conversation alone was getting her hotter. "Right," she agreed again.

"What if we had sex without making a physical connection, without touching?"

"Like phone sex or something?"

His laughter was husky and low. "Exactly. Except...since we're here together we wouldn't have to use a phone."

"Oh."

In a lithe move, he stretched out his legs and leaned back on his elbows. She could feel his body heat now, and she wanted to turn her head and look at him, make eye contact without the barrier of the mirror, but she didn't. She kept her eyes on the mirror, watching the long, lean muscles of his legs tighten and relax under the faded denim, watching something decidedly more significant happen farther up under his fly.

His chest rumbled with a long humming sound. He tipped his head back slightly and a fall of raven black hair swung over his shoulder. She clasped her hands around her knees, keeping her body tightly folded, trying to keep the languorously sexy vibes at bay.

"Have you ever masturbated in front of someone?" he asked her reflection.

A thousand visions of the hundreds of sex acts she'd performed with Alex came charging into her head, his words opening a tightly shut gate of memories. She couldn't recall a specific instance of bringing herself off in front of him but she knew she must have. They'd shared their bodies relentlessly. She bit her lip, nodded.

He smiled. "Anyone other than me, I should have said."

She nodded again.

He quirked an eyebrow. "Recently?" He kept his tone even but she could see a tiny flexion of tension in his jaw.

"No. A long time ago." She cleared her throat.

"Before you knew me?"

She nodded.

"I'm intrigued. I was so sure of your purity..." He gave her a teasing smile. "Tell me more. All the details. How old were you? How did it happen?"

"My first boyfriend. Scott."

"Scott." Alex relaxed, easing onto his side, moving slightly closer to her but keeping his upper body directed toward the mirror. "The lucky son of a gun. Tell me."

"I was sixteen." Caro closed her eyes. "Grandma would play bridge on Tuesday nights and Scott would come over to do homework. Things would get a little hot. He wanted to go all the way but I was too nervous. Scott made up a game. We would

undress in front of each other and we would describe how we thought it would feel to fuck, but we couldn't touch each other or the game ended. Then we would watch each other masturbate. It was incredibly erotic—probably much better than if we had actually had intercourse.”

She opened her eyes and looked at Alex's reflection. His eyes were glowing with a mixture of humor and arousal. “Pretty innocent, huh?” she asked.

He chuckled huskily. “I don't know—seems like a pretty sophisticated response to a very frustrating situation. Scott was either a complete genius or the world's biggest fool. Why did you break up?”

“He was a couple years older than me. He was off to college—told me I'd never be able to compete with the girls at Dartmouth.”

“Hmm. Definitely a fool then.” He sat up and she noticed his eyes had gone completely green. “Do you wanna play the game again? With me?”

She held herself very still. Her body was so tight and clenched up with suppressed arousal that she was afraid if she stretched out, the movement of her flesh against the fabric of her clothes would send her over the edge. “I don't think you could follow Scott's rules. He was Mr. Self-Discipline. Captain of the soccer team. Class rep. Three-point-eight GPA. And you...”

Alex grinned. “Weren't.”

She couldn't suppress a smile. “Yeah.”

“Hey, you might be surprised. The self-control I've built up in the last five years is pretty amazing. Come on, whaddaya say?”

“Scott's rules. You touch or I touch and the game's off?”

“Scott's rules.” He crossed his heart.

“Okay,” she whispered.

“Good. So...Scott sounds like the kind of guy who'd take the lead in this game. A guy who liked to give commands. Am I right?”

She nodded.

“Did you like that?”

She nodded, watching as he gracefully climbed to his feet.

“Stand up,” he ordered.

She slowly unfurled her body and stood. Her aching muscles took a backseat to the sensation of her throbbing pussy and jutting nipples. When she looked at his face in the mirror, his eyes sent a hot, emerald glow through her body. She looked back at her reflection—her face looked strangely unfamiliar. Her eyes were a dusky brown, blood was rising in her cheeks and her lips looked swollen.

“Take off your top.” Alex's voice had gone all husky.

She lifted her shirt over her head and dropped it on the floor. She had forgotten what underwear she'd put on that morning—it was one of her more conservative bras,

a lace-trimmed cotton underwire, but her heaving breasts now made the cotton look fragilely skimpy.

"Very pretty," he whispered.

In one graceful movement he pulled his sweatshirt off and dropped it to the floor next to hers. He stroked an elegant hand down one defined pec and then stretched slightly as he stroked the rippling flesh of his abs.

Caro had to smile. "What a tease...Scott wouldn't have done that."

"What?" His expression was all innocence. "I was just stretching."

"Right."

"Now your jeans," Alex ordered, green eyes twinkling. She relaxed a little, instantly grateful that he'd injected humor into a situation she felt way too tense about.

She fumbled at her waistband for a moment, her fingers slippery with nerves, but finally managed to ease the denim down over her hips, watching in the mirror as her pant legs pooled around ankles. When she bent over to remove her shoes, Alex inhaled sharply. She kicked off her pants and shoes and stood up. Her panties matched the bra, but they were much, much naughtier—the low-rise v-string left her hips and ass bare, the garment's only function to titillate and almost cover her small patch of pubic hair.

"Mmm." Alex had his hands on his hips and his eyes glued to the v-string's reflection. "Bet your grandma didn't let you wear something like *that* when you were sixteen."

She laughed at the thought.

"I'd almost have to say why bother? But I'm certainly glad that you did."

"I suppose you're not wearing *any* underwear..." Caro glanced at the crotch of his jeans, which was now completely dominated by the outline of his hugely erect cock.

Alex shook his head. "I suppose Scott had nice little tightie-whities."

"Yeah, I think he did, actually."

"Mmm. Well I guess this means you'll have to take off your bra now so we can be even."

She reached back to unfasten the clasp but his voice stopped her. "Slowly, slowly...straps first."

She pushed the skinny straps of the bra down to her elbows and watched her nipples peek out from the fabric as the cups gaped forward.

"Now the back," he ordered.

Sucking in a shallow breath of air, she released the clasp and let the bra drop to the floor.

"God, Caro. Look at yourself."

Her flesh quivered from the inside out, she *so* wanted to be touched. She lightly caressed the tips of her breasts, watching as the nipples jutted out to their full peaks. She exhaled a ragged breath.

"Now who's the tease? I'm surprised Scott even had the stamina to bother with his own hand."

Caro smiled into the reflection of Alex's face. His cheeks were flushed and his pupils dilated.

"It never took very long," she murmured as she moved her hands to the string of her panties. "Take off your pants," she whispered to his reflection.

Holding her gaze as he unbuttoned his jeans, his eyes conveyed hot, liquid sex, endless black pupils with a tiny rim of brightest green. The heavy denim swished as it hit the floor. She licked her lips and looked down. She tried to remember what Scott had looked like all those years ago but her mind was fully entrenched in the here and now, solely registering the sight of Alex's hardened flesh, his cock jutting proudly, veins distended, the crown rosy and smooth. She rubbed her moist palms back across her buttocks to resist reaching out for him.

She hooked her thumbs through the string of her panties and pulled them down over her hips.

Alex moaned softly then shook his head, a wry smile on his face. "The games teenagers play." He exhaled. "Let's get on with it, shall we? Spread those legs."

She looked at his face, noticing how his tongue came out to moisten his lips as she slowly took a step to widen her stance. Heat, wet and viscous, slid from her pussy to her upper thighs. Her legs quivered.

"Now comes the kiss-and-tell part without the kissing, right?" Alex asked.

"Right," she breathed.

"Who goes first, you or me?"

"I always went first."

"Then tell me how you think it would feel if I fucked that sweet little pussy."

"Mmm, Scott never talked dirty. He was a nice boy."

"Well, I'm not Scott, thank God. Let's see – tell me how you think it would feel if we went all the way."

"Okay," she said, a smile playing over her lips. Closing her eyes, she ran a hand up the outside of her thigh, up her abdomen and lightly over her nipples. She started to speak and then stopped. She tried again. Why did she feel suddenly shy? Why did something that had seemed so simple as a teenager now seem so complicated as an adult? Her desire for Alex had too many layers...

She sighed, looking over at Alex's reflection with a sheepish smile on her lips. "Mmm. Maybe you should go first. I think I might be too jaded to play this game anymore."

"You're not jaded," he whispered, his expression suddenly serious. "Put your hand between your legs and tell me what you feel," he commanded.

She moved her right hand down over her belly and hesitated as her fingertips brushed against short, curly hair.

"Do it," he cajoled.

She slipped her middle and ring fingers downward, sliding them through the crisp thatch of hair and into her crease. She knew she was totally aroused but she was still surprised by the copious amount of wetness she felt there.

"Tell me what you feel," he reminded her.

"I'm wet," she breathed.

He laughed, his verdant green gaze on her fingers. "Well I figured that, but how does it feel? Give me some adjectives."

"Oh God, Alex, I don't know..." She started to ease her fingers in and out of her pussy. Her knees were quivering and her flesh was totally sensitized, aching to be touched. "Warm...smooth...slick... Empty."

She removed her fingers and slicked the wetness off onto her smooth belly. She heard his breath catch.

"And how do you think it would feel to have me inside you?" he asked huskily.

"Good."

He guffawed. "No kidding? What a brazen girl to admit it. Hmm, how to help with the adjectives... Do you think my cock would feel more like a cucumber or a banana?"

Caro giggled. "A hot rod of steel."

Alex grinned at her reflection. "An *astute* brazen girl."

"Now you tell me..." She licked her lips as she gazed down at his cock.

Alex quirked an eyebrow. "I don't think I've heard enough from you. But maybe I can inspire some action. Watch."

He looked down at his cock consideringly, then licked the palm of his right hand and gave the length of his penis a slow stroke. Fist wrapping around the shaft, forefinger resting under his glans, he slowly pressed his knuckle against that sensitive ridge over and over gain.

Caro held her breath. Neither of them could take their eyes off his arching prick.

"I'd kneel between your legs with my cock in my hand. I'd take the very tip of it," he stroked his fingertip over the drop of liquid that seeped from the eye of the crown, "and I'd tickle it with that curly, dark-blond hair that covers your mons. Then I'd aim down for those ruby lips and probe for the sweet, sticky honey I see clinging there."

He lifted his left hand to his mouth and wet the pads of his thumb and forefinger. Still holding his shaft in his right hand, he gently began to pinch down across the dark, smooth skin of the head with his moistened fingers.

"Then I'd take the bulb of the head and push it inside that crease, soaking it in the glistening wetness. And I'd stop and I'd savor how hot you are."

His voice became a raspy whisper. "Then I'd take my cock forward, inch by ever-loving inch. And sink it all the way into the tightness of your pussy."

Caro could barely breathe as she watched Alex's left hand move down to hold the root of his shaft. He used his right fist to stroke down the length of his cock, employing a firm, hard twist when he reached the base. Over and over he stroked and twisted. He closed his eyes, head tipping back, and a ruddy flush crossed his pale cheeks and his chest shone under the bright fluorescent lights. A moan escaped his parted lips.

She eased her fingers down to her pussy, stroking the hood of her clit with the edge of her thumb, holding her breath when Alex suddenly opened his eyes and looked down at her, fixing that hot gaze between her legs. "And then I'd move back and forth, in and out, again and again and I'd feel all that warm, wet tightness stroking me, easing the ache in my cock."

His hips were beginning to thrust forward and his fist picked up speed. Caro matched his rhythm, pressing her thumb harder against her clit as she rhythmically worked her pussy with her longest finger. She squeezed her nipples with her other hand, all the while wishing it was his touch on her frantic flesh.

Alex let out a ragged breath. "I'd start to ram my way home as the feelings took over...then I'd sense the edge." His voice caught. He moaned. "And I'd take that final sweet plunge." His hand gave a final grasping pull and he thrust his hips forward with a guttural groan, his cock twitching again and again as it jettisoned semen.

Caro bent forward, crying out, cupping her pussy. The climax maxed out her nerve endings and she fell to her knees, her legs too weak to hold her, her concentration blown. She gulped air and felt luscious little aftershocks, her vulva throbbing against her pressing fingers.

She slowly became aware of the outside world again. The brightness of the lights above them, the polished white of the floor beneath her. The huge, silvered mirror.

He stood there watching her, his hands at his sides, his cock still erect, a strange half-smile playing over his lips. "So what did Scott do next...what would he do after he shot his hot little load?"

"I think he went home," she murmured. "Or maybe we finished up our chemistry homework." She gave a little laugh. "I don't really remember." Inhaling, she took in the scent of his heat, his skin, his sex. She swallowed hard.

"God, the guy must have had ice water in his veins...he didn't ever have to hold you afterward? Stroke your hair or all that soft skin?" His gaze traveled over her shoulders, lingered on her breasts, the deep raspberry nipples.

"Mmm, no. That wasn't part of the game." She looked up at him. "Scott was good at games, almost clinical. He went on to medical school. I think he's a cardiologist now."

"We had very different values, Scott and I—when I was eighteen I was a complete sensualist. I could never have made it without touching you."

"My virginity would never have held out. You would have gotten exactly what you wanted the very first time we played," laughed Caro.

"Damn straight." His still-rigid cock was a suitable exclamation point.

Caro watched it in the mirror, licking her lips, not even feeling half sated. "Len always told me that was why we would never work things out," she murmured.

"What?" He pulled his gaze from her mouth and looked into her eyes.

"You know how Len always loves to analyze our relationship...he used to tell me our different values would always keep us apart."

"Different values?"

"Yeah. Len always thought I needed a guy like Scott."

"Values, shmalues. Len doesn't know what you really need."

"Probably not," she murmured. "Especially since I don't even know what I need..."

He smiled a slow, sinfully sexy smile. "What you need, princess, is a good, hard fuck from your bloodmate."

Her pussy clenched. "That need has always been so easy to define, hasn't it? It's the rest of our relationship that's too complicated."

Alex didn't move as she reached down for her panties and began putting them on. She turned toward him finally, meeting his gaze head-on. Silver flamed in his irises and then quickly flared out.

Heartbeat quick, he stepped forward, clasped the back of her head and stole a fast, hard kiss. Her breath was racing, her body screaming for her arms to move up and pull him back.

Just as fast, he turned away and pulled on his jeans. "It's only complicated because you're making it that way. If you would let me feed from you, our bond would make everything simple."

Oh God. She was too shaky and too damn hungry for him to discuss this right now. Deciding speed was more important than support, she blew off her bra and pulled on her sweatshirt. When her head came out he was already dressed and putting on his shoes.

"Thanks for the game, princess. I had fun." His smile looked heavy with regret, but his tone was light as he took a step away. "You can get back to your hotel okay?"

She nodded.

He turned and headed for the door.

Chapter Twelve

Caro's prayers to the god of colds apparently fell on plugged-up ears. She'd snagged herself a sore throat standing in a cold Cleveland rainstorm all night, working at a poorly timed but well-conceived Werewolf hootenanny. The wolves had reveled in the storm. She'd shuddered through it.

Now, as she drove to Chicago for a long weekend of final planning sessions for the Stoked gala, she had all the symptoms of a nasty head cold. She stopped at a drugstore for cold medicine on the way into the city and dosed herself. She had always been sensitive to decongestants and the medication hit her hard just as she hit downtown. After she completely botched trying to park her car, giggling hysterically as her compact refused to fit even in the widest spaces, she decided it was worth the extra fifty bucks a night to do the hotel's valet parking this weekend.

By the time she made it up to the suite she was sharing with Lenny, her head was alternating between sluggishly slow congestion and speeding dizziness. Neither condition promoted clear thinking.

She set down her bags, sat on the sofa and fell over onto the too-firm cushions. She promptly fell asleep and didn't wake up until Len came into the room two hours later.

"Wake up, sleeping beauty," he whispered, gently stroking her forehead.

She blinked. "Lenny? I think I passed out. I took cold medicine."

"Silly. You know that stuff doesn't agree with you. It makes you act drunk."

"I was afraid my head would explode if I didn't take action."

"Well I hope you didn't take that twelve-hour stuff."

"I did. I wanted to be clear for the Mutually Male shindig tonight. I want to know what our competition has been up to. I sent out a few feelers to other event planners and apparently their scheme is still top secret."

Mutually Male was a gay personal products company. A gay lifestyle fair was going on at the Chicago Convention Center this weekend and Mutually Male was using the venue to unveil a line of products specifically for gay vamps—a new concept in small niche marketing. The Stoked event planners were all eager to attend the party.

"Well, your nose might be clear, but now you'll have to worry about your brain. I'll make some coffee. You better get dressed because we only have an hour before we have to leave for the Convention Center."

"What time is it, anyway?"

"Six. Wear something warm. It's always chilly in that place."

"There's no such thing as a warm cocktail dress, Len."

"Mm. Especially not the ones you buy."

She went into her bedroom and put her garment bag on the bed. As she wrestled with the bag's zipper her head started to hammer, so she decided to lie down for a minute...

"Caro! Come on babe, wake up. We've got to go." Lenny was standing next to her. He was wearing a pinstripe suit and holding half a mug of coffee.

She sat up and ran a hand through her hair. "I wasn't sleeping. I was just resting my eyes. The dresses made me tired."

"You've been in here for almost an hour, girl. Here, let me pick something." He rifled through her stuff, pulling out a von Furstenberg dress. "I knew I made you buy this for a reason. This will be perfect." It was black wool jersey with long sleeves.

As far as Caro was concerned its only redeeming quality was the plunging vee of the neckline. She didn't have the energy to argue. "Okay, whatever. I get to pick the shoes though."

"Fine, just be quick. The cab will be here in a few minutes."

"Why are we taking a cab?" she asked as Len pulled lingerie from her suitcase.

"Because parking at the convention center is going to be a nightmare. I don't think either one of us wants to walk three miles through a cold, dark parking garage."

"Gotcha," Caro said. After taking off her clothes, she quickly put on the black satin push-up bra and sheer hose Len had laid out.

"Hey. You know in those Regency novels, Len?"

"What Regency novels might those be, Caro?"

"You know, those romances where the hero always has a personal servant? To tie his cravat. Blacken his boots. What are those guys called?"

"Love slaves?"

"No, silly. Valets. That's what they're called. You should be one of those."

"No, I should be a lady's maid. Because the only person I dress other than myself is you."

Caro pulled the dress over her head. "Does Merrell like you to dress him?"

"Mm. Sometimes. But he usually does a pretty good job on his own."

"How is he doing, by the way?"

"Good. I think."

Caro pulled a large box from one of the shopping bags stacked in the corner of the room. "Do you guys like to do each other in the ass, or does just one of you like the, umm...receiving part?"

"Caro! For Christ's sake!"

"Sorry." She plopped down on the bed and began pulling on a wicked pair of black stretch boots. "I was just curious. I was, you know, wondering how those things got

decided between guys. Like do your different sensibilities ever get in the way? You know, since you're from different species..."

Len laughed. "How do you and Alex decide who goes down on who first, or who gets on top?"

"Umm..."

"Right," said Len. "It just happens, usually. Or somebody asks. The differences just make things sexier. Right?"

"Yeah. *Vive le difference* and all that, huh?" She struggled to stand on her three-inch heels. *Uh-oh. Definitely looped out on cold medicine.* Len steadied her.

"Maybe you should go for flats tonight," he suggested.

"I don't own any flats."

"Of course not. Well, you'll have to lean on me, I guess."

She smiled and brushed his cheek with her palm. "I always do, Len. I always do."

* * * * *

It was a blessedly short taxi ride to the convention center, which was just south of downtown. The cab cue was long and Caro could see crowds of people crossing through the glass pedestrian bridge from the parking lot.

"Gee, it looks like there are a lot of people here."

"Yeah, the Mutually Male folks invited everybody and their dogs. It's one of the major national gay events of the year."

Caro's head felt like it was going to separate from her body and float as they entered the building and started walking up one of the huge, elevated concourses. Len took her hand. "It's going to be packed in there because they've got the main party in one of the smaller halls. But the food should be good – Merrell knows the guys who are doing the catering."

There were greeters at the doors handing out glittering, white-and-gold cellophane bags with samples and packets of information about Mutually Male products. Len and Caro each took one, Lenny cracking a surprised frown as he looked at his. "This looks familiar, huh?" It was amazingly similar to the ones they were ordering for the Stoked gala.

They walked through a zigzagged entryway that had been created with stark white panels. When they came into the room they both gasped.

There, on a pillared platform in the middle of the arena-sized space, was a giant replica of a Greek spa. At first glance it appeared to be identical to the display they'd almost finished designing.

Len gripped Caro's hand. "Umm, Caro? Do you see what I see?"

Caro wiped her other hand across her face, hoping to jog her vision, not trusting her eyes. She walked slowly toward the display, keeping hold of Len's hand.

"Oh. Wow."

As they traversed the perimeter of the structure, Caro felt her face flush and her palms sweat, reality beginning to shift sickeningly. Every time she looked over at Len, his jaw had dropped another centimeter.

The Mutually Male display wasn't as deluxe as the one they had designed for Stoked—it looked like it had been put together in about a week—but it was their design without any mistake.

Caro grabbed Len's arm and pointed to the side of the room. The giant buffet tables lining the space were in the shape of golden Greek scrolls—one of Alex's designs. She was absolutely sure of it.

Then, as if they were in a film that was suddenly going in fast motion, she noticed hundreds of things in the huge room that were their ideas. Nearly every item was something they had included in their design for Stoked.

"Well, I'll be fucked by a demon's monkey," murmured Len. "We've been one-hundred-percent ripped off. Sabotaged. Sold out. Fucked over."

She struggled to catch her breath, worrying that she might hyperventilate. Then, as if the strange film they'd gotten sucked into suddenly turned into a slow-mo nightmare, she saw Jack Farrell and Mike Powers walking toward them. Jack looked deeply concerned. Mike looked irate.

They stopped in front of them and Mike gestured wildly toward the spa display. "Do you two want to tell me what the fuck is going on here?"

Len turned to him, looking like he was about to blow a gasket. An unusual look for Len. "That's what we were just wondering ourselves, Powers! Somebody sold us out and I want to know who the fuck it was!"

Caro felt like her heart was going to skitter right out of her chest.

Mike's face turned the color of his scarlet necktie. "You're going to have to do some fast talking to convince me that it wasn't *you* who sold out Stoked! How do we know it wasn't you who ripped off Mutually Male and then tried to sell the ideas as your own?"

"How fucking stupid do you think we are?" Len's voice was now raised enough that people were stopping to stare. Caro clutched his arm.

Jack's eyes were frosty. He looked as hard and cold as one of the phony Greek busts looming behind him.

"Mike. Len. Come on. Let's be professionals." A chill was also evident in Jack's voice as he looked first at Len and then at Caro. "That's why we hired King and Associates and Party Mavens, right? Because we wanted professionals. And this kind of thing isn't what happens when you work with professionals."

"Where are Alex and Sherene?" Caro asked. There had to be an explanation for this...a joke or a mistake or some kind of an immortal party gag...

"Alex called a little bit ago and said they were running late," Jack said. As they watched a waiter parade by in a costume Lenny had designed and Jack had approved,

Jack shook his head. "Jesus, I can't believe this. There is no way in hell this can be coincidence. It's on a smaller scale than our scheme, and done a lot more cheaply. But the damage is done. We're going to have to scrap our entire plan now." His eyes rested on Lenny and Caro.

Oh God, he looked so accusing...

"Look, Jack," said Len, obviously trying to keep his voice under control. "I don't know what's going through your head, but the only people we've shown our plans to are the folks at Stoked. We sold the ideas to you. So professionally speaking, this is *your* problem."

Mike began to bluster but Jack interrupted. "Maybe so, but after laying out thousands of dollars to buy your ideas, I don't think the Stoked folks are that stupid either. I don't know what kind of security system you guys have there in Cleveland. I *do* know that I've witnessed you folks do some pretty bizarre things. In fact, just yesterday, Gerald, one of our receptionists, told me Caro comes into the office by herself every morning at four a.m. — and asked him not to let anyone know she was doing it."

Caro gasped as her equilibrium shifted. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Alex and Sherene walking toward them. She could practically see anger sparking from Alex's body. Oh shit. His eyes were completely silver.

He stopped a few feet away, blasting Jack with a molten-sterling gaze before giving Mike and Len the same sizzling treatment. Then his eyes rested on her. "What the hell's going on?" he asked, calm voice a creepy accompaniment to his crazed expression.

When Mike and Jack started hurling accusations, Alex held up his hand and roared "Stop!" loud enough to make a nearby buffet table shake and rattle. He put his hand down and a display banner rippled in the resulting hot wind, losing one of its moorings before coming partially down. As the crowd murmured, a bunch of toga-clad waiters ran to keep the banner from falling on anyone.

"Explain this fucking debacle now!" Alex's jaw was locked, cheek muscles jumping in his obvious effort to speak in a semi-normal tone of voice.

"You sold us out, you bloodsucker!" Mike Powers stupidly got into Alex's face.

Caro clenched Lenny's arm even harder. Electricity sparked in the air, drawing all eyes upward to where blue and white light zigged and crackled in the fixtures towering above them.

Vampire fireworks. One of Alex's unique gifts. His own particular version of a truly thunderous rage.

"Ah! Isn't this a lovely party?" A low, melodious voice seemed to quell the mayhem. Caro turned to see a stunning, raven-haired vampire female gliding toward them. She looked familiar but Caro's spinning head wouldn't stop to figure it out.

Len pulled Caro aside, his grasp becoming instantly more protective, and the vampiress stepped forward into the middle of the circle formed by their unhappy group, fixing her glittering charcoal gaze on Alex.

"Lyra, do you know anything about this?" Jack asked the female vamp, his expression half-frightened, half-pissed.

"Who the hell are you?" Mike asked at the same time, shifting from foot to foot, his personal space definitely invaded.

"What the fuck did you do?" Alex's low, menacing voice made the other men's mortal tones sound like kindergartners squealing at recess.

Lyra's laugh was a warbling trill as she made a show of looking around the room. "Don't you just love this design? What a concept! What a theme! So well conceived."

A bolt of lightning struck the half-football-field-sized platform next to them. The spa tilted. Water went splashing. People screamed.

"Alex, stop it!" Caro's cry could barely be heard.

"Tell me what you did!" His voice split the air like a thunderbolt. Sherene had her hand on his arm, whispering placating words in French that Alex was totally ignoring.

"Now, now, my handsome prince of mayhem," Lyra chortled. "It was your idea to keep things down and dirty and amongst us vampires. Remember? I was the one who suggested taking the matter to the Immortal Council."

"How did you get the plans?"

A security crew was corralling people from the room, trying to keep them from crushing each other. "Who is she?" shouted Mike over the fray.

"She's the CEO of VampedUp," Jack said. "And a good friend of Mitchell Corson."

"The marketing guy for Mutually Male?" Lenny asked.

Lyra flashed her canines at him. "The very one."

"How did you get the plans? Last time I ask," Alex repeated. This time his voice sounded dangerously suppressed. He faced Lyra the way a primed bull faces a matador. Caro could almost see the air blasting from his nostrils, his feet stomping and scraping the ground.

And then Lyra, dressed appropriately in red, taunted him with a verbal flag. "Why, from your sweet little mortal bloodmate, of course."

Caro froze as six pairs of eyes fixed on her. Her muddled head wouldn't work. What did Lyra mean? Oh God. Did they all think she had something to do with this?

She remembered what Jack had said about Gerald. About how she'd told him not to tell anyone she'd been working late. Alone. She looked at Lyra, then Alex.

Did they think she was a spy? That she'd been working for this horrible, scary vampire woman? She swallowed hard, tried to squeak out a denial from her closing throat. "I don't know...I didn't..."

Lyra trilled more laughter.

Caro grabbed Lyra's arm—it felt cold, bony and skinny like a skeleton's. "What do you mean? Tell me, please!" Lyra preened under her touch, treating Caro's clutch like a caress. Caro stepped back in revulsion.

"Alex?" Caro turned to him. His face was fierce, hard and utterly still. A warrior statue.

Finally his lips moved. "You wouldn't let me protect you." Violence seeped through his whisper, wending its way into her body, down her gut...tightening against her wrist.

"But I didn't *do* anything! Nothing happened!" The scene was too surreal—the chaos surrounding them, the accusing eyes. A party gone horribly, dreadfully amok.

"I read your mind, my sweet." Lyra's friendly smile added to the horror. "All those late nights you've been spending at the office. Diligently reviewing the plans. Poring over every detail, every specification. You have a lovely, clear thought process. Smart, precise. So easy to read."

"I thought vamps couldn't read mortal minds!" Mike looked outraged.

"Mm. Vampire blood runs in her pretty little veins." Lyra's eyes fixed on Caro's neck. Her teeth extended with an exhale and a hiss.

"But she's his bloodmate!" Sherene clutched Alex's arm but he wrenched it easily from her grasp. "Under *his* protection!"

"Not if he hasn't fed from her in five years," chortled Lyra gleefully. "Her mind is fair game for all of us."

"She. Is. *Mine*." Alex stepped before Lyra, a black thunderhead ready to set its fury free. "And you will pay for violating what is mine!"

Caro screamed when she saw him unleash the energy. "Alex, no! You're playing into her hands—"

He raised his hands, silver eyes blazing and glittering, sharp white teeth flashing. Lightning ricocheted off the walls and ceiling.

Caro tried to hang on to Len's arm but her blood rushed too quickly, became a humming blast that cloaked her vision. She lost her grip. She was falling, falling...

* * * * *

Len was carrying her out of the convention room. Lights were flashing. People were running, screaming.

"Where's Alex? We've got to stop him..." She mumbled a panicked plea into Lenny's neck.

"Shh-shh. I've got you," he whispered in her ear.

He set her down on a low bench a few hundred feet from the entrance. Hundreds of people swarmed by, shouting, pushing. Police were using bullhorns, trying to direct the crowds away from the building. Len held her hand, stroking it gently.

"Is she coming around?" she heard Jack say, his voice laced with concern.

"Yeah," said Len. "Here she is now." Caro tried to sit up and Len put his arm around her, bolstering her up against his side. "She took cold medicine earlier. It never agrees with her. That, combined with the shock..."

Caro looked up at Jack. Mike was standing behind him. She shut her eyes again, wanting to go to sleep and dream another dream because this one sucked.

"Where's Alex?" She couldn't make her voice louder than a mumble. Mike spoke right over her.

"I think I see the paramedics coming. Let's try to keep mum about the cause of this." Mike's tone was laced with typical authority.

After fifteen minutes of poking and prodding her as she sat amongst a crowd of gaping onlookers, the paramedics determined that her vital signs were okay and that she had a large bump on the back of her head.

One of them patted her shoulder as he stood up. "Okay, ma'am. We strongly suggest you consider checking in to a hospital for observation tonight. Otherwise you need to have somebody stay with you to make sure there's no concussion. And no operating heavy machinery. Can somebody drive her home?"

"Yes," said Jack.

"We'll take a cab," said Len.

The EMT looked like Noah Wyle from *E.R.* She tried to focus on what he was saying but her thoughts bumped and disconnected like the jagged scenes of a nightmare.

Okay, ma'am, we strongly suggest you pack it in and get your ass back to Cleveland. Your career is over. And so is your best friend's career. Oh, and your boyfriend blames everything on you because you wouldn't let him suck your blood. And your clients are going to sue your ass. Just don't drive home, okay?

"Where's Alex?" she croaked. Why wouldn't they answer?

Len got Caro down the concourse and into a cab—he'd only found one because he'd flashed his satyr horns at some freaked-out mortal and taken his spot in line.

They were stuck in traffic for over an hour. She felt miserable. Lost. Mute. Every now and then Lenny would mutter, "I just can't believe it."

When they got to the hotel he ran her a bath and, like a child, she let him help her get undressed. She sank into the bubbles and he sat on the edge of the tub, hovering like he was afraid to leave her alone, worried she'd drown or something.

"Len, tell me." She rasped the words out of her swollen throat. "You have to tell me now."

Len kept his eyes fixed on the ceiling. "The cops took Alex into custody. Jack said half the upper floor of the center was destroyed by the time he got out."

"Oh my God." Her body went numb.

"Yeah." Len expelled a breath of disbelief. "I've seen Alex go all evil with those vamp powers of his—Lord of Lightning and all that shit—but I've never seen him lose control like that."

"Was anybody hurt?" she whispered.

"I don't know...but it kinda happened in stages so people had plenty of time to run."

She gulped as more tears threatened. "Oh man, Lenny. I know this account means millions for Stoked, for other companies. And I know how hard we all worked. But if anyone was hurt or killed because of some stupid plans for a party..." Her voice broke.

"Not to make light of things, sweetie," Lenny said as he gently stroked her hair, "but this isn't the first time a party has gone off the deep end in the immortal scene. Vamps are fucking crazy. Demons are crazier. Turf wars, sex, parties...it's all the same to them if they feel threatened. As you know, immortal business folks have only recently been on good enough behavior to play with mortals." He expelled a snort of laughter. "And now that half the Chicago Convention Center is destroyed, they might be having second thoughts."

She rested her tired, dizzy head against the cool tile and said, "No more, Lenny. This is all my fault. Property was destroyed. People might be injured or dead. Because of me. And my pathetically twisted affair with my vampire lover. I'm going home in the morning. I'll find someplace else to live...Cleveland probably isn't far enough away from him. Maybe Australia."

Lenny laughed.

"Len!"

"Sorry. But you're being absurd. Ever heard the expression you can run, but you can't hide? He's your mate, Caro. You sealed your destiny when you were nineteen and you let him take you, mind, body and soul. You've fought for ten long years against the dark-age truth of it, and I've tried to help you. But I'm not gonna help you run anymore. I've started to see the error of my ways recently and tonight shined a big, fat light on it. Truth is, you love each other. The only way you're gonna tame Alex, stop him from going all vamp and destroying shit when he thinks you're threatened, is by being his mate. Totally and completely."

Bubbles sloshed onto Len's hip when she sat up abruptly. "Don't you think I'd do that if I could, Len? Jesus, how I'd love to be free to love him. But I'd never be able to trust him. I'd rather be dead than go through that hell again."

He took her hand, kissed her wet knuckles. "No. I wouldn't let him do it. I'd kill him first. But I won't need to. You have to trust my famous satyr intuition, Caro. He's different now. I can feel it. I can see it when he looks at you. I think you should try again. If trust is the barrier that's keeping you apart, then find a way to make him prove he loves you."

* * * * *

In a holding cell in the bowels of Chicago's Immortal Council building, Alex sat very still, very quiet.

His father's lawyers were upstairs, deep in negotiations—maybe legitimate but probably corrupt—to get him free. For once in his life, Alex was happy to use his father's power and leverage in the community. Happy to pad the palms of the people he'd pissed off.

Because if the Lyra problem went away, then he wouldn't have to kill her. And if he didn't have to kill her, then he wouldn't have to go to prison. And if he didn't have to go to prison, then he would be free to find Caro and fuck her and suck her into oblivion.

His father was right. It had been smart to be progressive with business. Smart to enter the twenty-first century in terms of civility and manners. But a bloodmate had nothing to do with civilized behavior. And it had been stupid of him to think otherwise. When it came to love, it was smart to be a throwback.

And when he got out of here, he was going to find Caro and get back to basics.

Chapter Thirteen

Caro was tidying her kitchen, taking care of pre-bedtime chores, when someone knocked on the front door. Probably her neighbor, Mrs. Clark. She'd promised to have her over for after-dinner tea but she'd been so busy with new client proposals she'd forgotten about it. Immersing herself in work and getting over her cold had been her goals for the last three days.

She was exhausted and her mind was always half-occupied with thoughts of Alex and the mayhem in Chicago. She hadn't been able to look at the news, even though she knew now that nobody had been seriously injured. Lenny was handling the fall-out with Stoked with his typical steadfast charm and skill, already working on a new concept for their products launch. Now she just had to come up with a plan to insure something like this never happened again. And that should be easy, right?

Oh Jesus, how had life gone so wrong?

She opened the door, expecting to see a worried-looking Mrs. Clark.

Alex.

Alex was standing on her front porch. Why hadn't she sensed his presence?

He was wearing black leather and he looked...wow.

Her heart thumped a too-fast beat and she clutched the doorknob to keep from falling on her ass.

"Can I come in?" The question was roughly put, definitely more command than request. She thought briefly about saying no, shutting the door in his face. But the big-bad-wolf expression that crossed his stark features quickly nixed that idea. She valued her house. Didn't want to have it come down on her head.

She let the door swing wide and gestured for him to come in.

He looked huge in her grandmother's living room. Brutally out of place among the dainty antiques, overstuffed furniture and whimsical knickknacks.

She shut the door behind her and he turned to face her. The scent of leather, night air and sex hit her hard. Her body reacted like she'd received a deeply sensual touch. Her spine curved, her nipples hardened. The sweet slickness of arousal came down to pool in her pussy.

"What are you doing here?" Dumb question, she thought, as in a boldly graceful move he stepped forward, snaked one arm around her waist and slammed her against his body.

The connection was thorough, visceral and enflaming. Nothing existed but need. Worry, hesitation and rationalization went up in smoke.

He cupped her buttocks, easily bringing her off the floor. Her pubic bone connected roughly with the hard ridge of his cock. He brought his other hand up to the back of her head, fisting his hand in the fall of hair at her nape, curling the strands into his fingers so her head fell back and her throat was exposed. She was braless under her thin T-shirt and the cool stiffness of his leather jacket was sweet pain against the points of her nipples. She wanted to rip the shirt off and rub against him.

He laughed, the rumbling sound a passionate mixture of anger, arousal and frustration. "I've come to claim what's mine." He pressed cool, firm lips to the pulse at the base of her throat. His tongue licked a hot stroke up the side of her neck. Once. "My sweet..." Twice. "Fuckable..." Three times. "Caroline."

She hung on to his shoulders, clinging helplessly to him, knowing he was both the source and the solace for her hunger. He thrust his hips against her—hard, smooth and slow—as if they were naked and he was thrusting his cock into her cunt. She groaned. Aching and ready to beg for the real thing.

Oh God...Alex, please.

You don't have to beg, princess. I'm going to give you everything you need.

He seized upon her mouth and she moaned at the goodness of the familiar feel and flavor of his lips, his tongue. As he clenched her hips harder and moved forward, she could feel how juiced he was, how the power and strength flowed through his veins with singular purpose. He swallowed her gasp when she hit the wall, the plaster at her back a sudden cold, jarring reality in the face of the hot, dreamy vampire at her front.

She was on her feet long enough to lose her jeans and panties then twined her legs around him, pulling him closer even as he suddenly pulled back slightly. When she realized he was trying to get at bare skin she helped him, tugging at his jacket, his shirt, the waistband of his pants, while he smoothed a hand under her shirt, over her hardened nipples—*dear God, yes!*—and then dipped down over her belly, seeking and easily finding her sweetest, neediest spots. He didn't linger, he was moving quickly, efficiently, responding to the frenzy she was trying to convey with her kisses, her questing hands. Letting her support herself for just a moment, he freed his fingers long enough to conquer his zipper.

Victory. With the rigid length of his cock at last free, she pushed black leather down over his clenched buttocks and with a grunt and a thrust, he was deep, deep inside her.

His head dropped back, black hair spilling, and he groaned long and hard. He was so beautiful...

He began to thrust up inside her, working the angle with his hips, widening the stance of his feet, impaling her with each motion. Over and over he surged against her and she began to gasp as he pushed her harder against the wall. She came in a rush, her pussy spasming, grabbing and holding the thick, pistoning length of his cock.

"So fucking good...you're gonna get it all this time." Alex ground his teeth as he clenched her buttocks tightly with his hands. With a wrenching shout he jackhammered his hips, blasting his cum high up into her womb, no condom, no layers of civilization

between them. She gripped his ass with wet fingers as he continued to thrust, obviously desperate to prolong the sensation. His movements slowing, she slid her hands up to his neck, pulling him forward for a long, love-thirsty kiss. This was a sip, a taste...and now she wanted to take deep, quenching gulps.

The hunger was unified and unifying, the promise of mutual satiation imminent.

He pulled back, breath rasping, leather creaking over his heaving chest. He rested his forehead on hers. She unclasped her legs from his waist and he slowly withdrew his cock from her body. She tried to stand. It worked. Sort of.

She didn't have to worry about holding herself up for long because he tugged his pants up over his ass and swung her up into his arms. He carried her upstairs and she was surprised when he walked unerringly to her bedroom door and opened it.

You remembered...

He quirked an eyebrow at her as he turned on the bedside lamp and set her on the bed. But when he started stripping, she knew that now was not the time for a trip down memory lane. That long black hair, those hungry green eyes. All those heaving muscles.

Forget memory lane. He looked ready for the highway to hell.

He grabbed her feet, tugging her down to the end of the bed. He pulled her to a sitting position, abruptly removing her remaining scrap of clothing. His hands went to her breasts, cupping, kneading, roughing up the nipples with the edges of his thumbs. She sucked in a harsh breath. Oh yeah. She definitely wanted to go down this road...

His cock was a glossy, towering beacon, inches from her mouth. She licked her lips, wanting to taste.

"Suck it," he breathed, curving his fingers around the shaft, pushing it down closer to her open mouth.

She kissed the salty-sweet crest of the head. Then she opened wide and sucked in, breathing hard, moaning a little as she tried to accommodate the thick bulb of the head and part of his shaft. Her fingers covered his and she felt his skin quiver.

He cupped the back of her head and began to thrust, slow and easy, gliding his cock head against her tongue, her cheeks, the back of her throat. She looked up at his face. His eyes were on her mouth, watching the rigid column slide in and out, in and out. His lips parted, his lids drooped. The eroticism of his expression was as arousing as the feel of the slow stroke of his cock. She cupped his balls and he groaned, "Ah God, princess."

He withdrew abruptly but she clung to his glistening shaft, rubbing her cheek over the seeping head.

"I want to taste what's mine," he whispered before bending down to kiss her wet lips. He dropped to his knees, slid her hips to the very edge of the bed, draped her legs over his shoulders and went after her aching pussy.

She leaned back on her elbows, closed her eyes and let the sensation rip her apart.

That's my sweet girl...so wet, so delicious. These curls, these pretty petal lips and that luscious nectar all for me...

He moaned and thrust his tongue deep inside her crease, curving, delving—scooping out her juices like a spoon glides through melted ice cream. She screamed when he stabbed his tongue tip against her clit and held it there. The orgasm unfurled, an oddly violent blooming—it had her arching and bucking against him, moaning his name with each gasping breath. She fell back against the bed, panting, fingers fisting into the bedspread.

He ran cool hands up her thighs, eased her legs off his shoulders and then held onto her knees, adjusting her lower body for the coming invasion, all the while speaking to her with his mind.

Caroline, my sang d'amour, I'm going to fuck you now. Take you the way you should be taken. You'll feel me in your body...my soul enter your soul...my pleasure become your pleasure...my blood infuse your blood.

She watched him through heavy lids. The quintessential vampire—darkly dangerous, sinfully sensual, irresistibly seductive. A night raider who'd come to claim her soul—nostrils flaring, pale muscles rippling, eyes silvering and then flickering back to green.

He adjusted his grip, grasping her buttock in one hand, his cock in the other. His entry was slow, masterful. Her head dropped back against the mattress, the anticipation unbearable, the sensation beyond belief. He began to thrust, pulling her against him as he stroked and she went limp, letting him dominate her body, willingly allowing him to conquer her completely. She was his vessel.

He seemed to swell inside her, get bigger, stronger. She squirmed, writhing under his controlling hands as he impaled her more forcefully. Hot streaks of pleasure ripped through her belly, sending their sweet messages to every nerve in her body. He surged, shifting their bodies farther onto the bed. His knees were on the mattress and he cupped her buttocks, lifting her, angling her for deeper penetration. He pistoned into her until there was no thought but him, no feeling but him. She was so primed, so ready...

Come into me now, my love.

He rocked back on his heels, still holding on to her, still pulsing pleasure into her with every thrust. Their gazes locked together and held. She straddled him, placed her hands on his shoulders. His eyes dilated to midnight as he turned his face, nuzzled her marked wrist. His mouth opened.

And then he bit down and sucked.

She climaxed.

Oh God! The sting was sharp, the pleasure-pain a scarlet peak to climb and get over. Her belly and her pussy clenched at the same time and she curved into his body. He held her wrist with both hands. His lids fluttered and shut over his beautiful eyes. He

drank and the pain peaked and sent her rushing headlong into pleasure, into the mystical place where their thoughts became one.

I could drink you forever.

I love you forever.

I have to stop.

Don't stop...

More pleasure waits. So much more. Move on me...God, yes. Slow and easy now. That's how we like it. Now fly us to the edge.

He released her wrist and his head dropped back, the strong muscles of his throat working as he swallowed. She held on to his shoulders with both hands again. She could see her blood on his lips, the points of his teeth.

She gyrated her hips, easing up, down and around, working his cock with her pussy, working her fluids into his skin. Oh, the sweet goodness of it. She felt his pleasure, her pleasure.

One now. They were one in every way. Tendrils of sensation became thick vines, twining them together, erupting in verdant, voluptuous blooms. Her vision blurred. Alex bucked and cried out. They went careening full speed to the edge of pleasure. When they hit the edge, they dove, knowing they were there to catch each other. Knowing the ride of love was infinite.

* * * * *

Alex woke up in his favorite way. He felt his cock hardening against the sweet flesh of his lover. He was lying on his side with Caro nestled in front of him, his penis cradled between the satin cheeks of her buttocks. He licked the smooth skin of her shoulder, caressed her sleep-warmed breasts.

She moaned softly and he smiled, knowing that he hadn't let her sleep much in the last twenty-four hours.

He stretched and felt a variety of interesting aches. They'd been earned in such a pleasurable fashion that he didn't mind the pain. When he felt her nipples harden against his palm, he moved his hand downward, tickling the flesh of her labia. The muscles of her thighs clenched and he heard her sigh as she turned her body to face his. Without opening her eyes she reached up to put her arms around his neck and he kissed her deeply, languorously.

"Good morning, princess." He spoke into the side of her neck, reveling in her sleepy warmth and her sexily ripe scent. Her hands clenched his shoulders as he moved his mouth down to suckle a nipple, his hand down to stroke her pussy. More warm sweetness. Tantalizingly moist.

He moved over her, parting her thighs with his knees. Her eyes were half open now, their golden warmth glowing with sleepy arousal. She reached down for his cock and guided it between her legs, sighing as he pressed into her.

"Good morning..." Her husky words ended on a moan as he began to slowly stroke. Shifting angles, he worked the hard globe of his cock head against the upper walls of her sex, so in tune with her response he knew exactly which places to hit and when. His hands sought hers, twining their fingers so they rested on either side of her head. When he bent down to kiss her mouth, stroking his tongue against hers to match each languid stroke of his cock, she clenched his legs more tightly with her own and he quickened his pace. As he moved his lips to her throat, she arched her neck and he couldn't resist a small bite.

She groaned and shook as he lapped up her sweetness and then sealed it with a kiss.

Shit...they were coming again.

Mm...let's do this forever.

He'd lost staying power without a condom but the added sensation made up for it. He felt the walls of her pussy contract and watched her face as she scrunched her eyes shut and bit her lip. Laughing softly, he reveled in her expression of sheer pleasure.

"Does that feel good, sweetheart?"

"God, yes. Yes, yes, yes..."

She convulsively clenched her fingers against his and he shuddered as he emptied into her, coming hard and long in a soul-deep, shared orgasm that was only possible with her, his beautiful, mortal bloodmate.

As he placed tiny, gratified kisses along the ridge of her nose, she tickled his bottom. Laughing, he eased himself off her before collapsing onto his back and nestling her into his side. He sighed, feeling the very essence of replete.

"Now that's the way to wake up in the morning."

"Is it morning?" she asked. The shades and drapes had been pulled tightly closed for hours.

"Mm. Does it matter?" He stroked her back, twining his fingers into her tangled curls.

She sighed. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to break the spell by finding out what time it is. If it's Thursday – and I have a feeling it is – I have clients to meet, errands to run." She sat up and ran her hand through her tangles. He winced when he saw her fingers snag on a bird's-nest-sized snarl.

"Sorry," he said.

She smiled. "Don't be. It was worth it." She leaned down to stroke a strand of his hair over his ear. "And you're probably just as bad."

He smiled. "Shall we shower again?" They'd shared a shower about eight hours ago – it had been particularly memorable.

"Sure."

He followed her into the bathroom.

Chapter Fourteen

Despite the fact that she and Alex had done their very best to wear each other out, Caro felt surprisingly perky. After their pre-dawn shower, they'd fallen back into bed for some much-needed sleep. She woke again at seven, extracted herself from the warm cocoon of his arms and got up to peek out the window. It was drizzling. The trees lining the street looked soft and sleepy.

Alex rolled over onto his stomach with a groan. He was definitely settling in for some more sleep. Caro stepped quietly from the room and slipped into workout clothes. If she was fast she could jog to the yoga center by her office for a seven-thirty class. Down in the kitchen she made coffee and set the timer to brew in two hours. She pulled all the shades, wrote Alex a quick note and slid a warm-up jacket over her yoga gear before heading out the door.

Two hours later, feeling relaxed but definitely sore in places, she rounded the corner to an old Victorian that had been converted to offices and headed up to the Party Mavens' second-floor suite. A plan was unfurling in her mind and she did her best thinking at her desk.

Things were quiet in the tidy exterior office. Their part-time secretary worked afternoons. She was a total gem, a gregarious neat freak who took pride in being as highly organized as her bosses. Her desk was perked up by a large gerbera daisy plant in full bloom.

Caro walked back into the large office that she and Len shared and sat down at her desk. Len's desk was a techie's dream from IKEA, hers was a battered but highly polished old, stainless-steel job. Both were tidy but liberally covered with various sample books and file folders. She checked her message box and snorted when she noted that there were three new ones from Mrs. McCarthy.

Well, she'd give her a call but first she was going to call Len. She looked at her desk clock. Ten a.m. — if he wasn't awake by now, he should be. She propped her feet on the radiator adjacent to her desk and dialed his cell.

He answered on the third ring. There was laughter in his voice. "I'm surprised it took you this long to call."

"Mm. I've been...busy."

He guffawed. "That's one way to describe it, I'm sure. So the bloodmates are back together?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"If he passes my test."

"Ah. The test. Come up with something good?"

"Yeah. It's a little off the wall. And it involves work, so I wanted to get your permission first."

"I'm intrigued."

"I know he loves me, Lenny. I know he wants to commit. I know he'll try hard to make it work this time. But his high-and-mighty-vampire pride always got in the way in the past. So I'm gonna to test that vamp pride. See how willing he is to work on my terms every now and then. Forego a few of the old, nasty-vamp customs."

"Well, I hope you're gonna keep the nasty customs that have to do with gnarly sex."

"Of course," she laughed.

"Okay, doll face. Run it by me."

She leaned back in her chair and outlined her plan.

Lenny laughed his ass off and agreed it was brilliant.

Caro hung up with him, got out her wedding files and then set up an appointment with Lenny's least-favorite client, the biggest nightmare mother of bridezilla they'd ever worked with, Edie McCarthy.

* * * * *

"Yeah, well, you can tell them to get fucked. We paid for the *incident*, as the lawyers like to call it, and I'm not going to the Council with my tail between my legs to apologize. There are some things I just won't stoop to."

Alex heard the door open and smiled when Caro came in. "Fine. Whatever. They can make all the rules they want for faeries, satyrs and other woodland creatures. I didn't vote to join the Council. You did." He shut his phone with a disgusted snort.

Caro hung her jacket in the closet and kicked off her wet running shoes. She looked fresh, happy and sexy in body-skimming workout clothes and her damp hair pulled back in a ponytail.

He shut off ESPN and patted the couch next to him. "I missed you. Come give me a kiss."

When she smiled and came to sit down he pulled her onto his lap and gave her a thorough welcome-home kiss. They were both breathing hard by the time he was through.

"Mm. You taste delicious. Coffee. Fresh air. Sex." He slipped his fingers under the strap of her tank top.

"Uh-uh." She shook her head and grabbed his hand. "I wanna do that too, but first we need to talk."

"Damn. And here I thought we'd truly entered paradise and we were never gonna have to rehash the past or worry about the future." He started kissing her neck. She

smelled so damn good...he'd been about to make something to eat but she was way more appetizing than anything he'd found in her fridge.

She scrunched her shoulder up to her ear, trying to keep his lips from all the best spots. "Will you come to dinner with me tonight? And also..." He could feel her sudden case of nerves, see them as she bit down on her full lower lip. He nudged her thoughts with his and she shook her head. Smiled. "No. I'm okay. I just have something important I want to ask you."

"Ask me now."

"Nope. Later. I need time to perfect my proposal."

His heart misfired. "Proposal?"

She wrapped her arms around his neck and laughed his favorite laugh. A husky half-giggle reminiscent of happy, fulfilling sex. "Whatsamatter big guy? Does a little tiny word strike fear in your cold vamp heart?"

He laughed back. "My heart ain't cold, princess. You've got it all fired up. And it's an eternal flame. It won't go out no matter how many scary words you throw at me."

Her smile was mysterious. "We'll see. In the meantime, you're gonna make me some lunch, right?"

"Right. Right after I have a teenie little appetizer..." He licked her collarbone and she let her head fall back, her sigh the sweet sound of satisfied acquiescence.

* * * * *

Lunch got put off. Way, way off. When they finally sat down to sandwiches in the kitchen, Caro's phone rang. It was the call she'd been waiting for. She waved at Alex to keep eating and conferred with Mrs. McCarthy on the back porch.

When she came back inside, Alex was on his second sandwich. "Sorry," she said. "Important wedding client."

He smiled around a big bite of sandwich. "Weddings. Ugh. Do you still hate them as much as you used to?"

She nodded.

"Bet you're glad you have Lenny around to handle that stuff, huh?"

Caro tilted her head and looked Alex up and down. He was lounging in one of the dinette chairs, his bare feet propped up on the table. He wore an ancient Aerosmith concert T-shirt and jeans so faded they were nearly see-through at the crotch. He licked a blob of mayonnaise from the corner of his mouth. "What?" he asked. "I was planning on changing for our date tonight."

"I'm canceling our date. Work takes precedence."

A vampire pouting was a sorry sight, indeed. "C'mon, Caro. What about the proposal you teased me with? I was kinda warming up to that idea."

"Good. Because you're about to hear it."

He put his feet on the floor, wiped his mouth with his napkin and thumped his heart with his fist, smiling a big, semi-smug grin. "Lay it on me."

She took a deep breath and blurted, "Would you come work for me at Party Mavens? I want you to be my new wedding planner."

His face went blank and she had to laugh.

"Um... What?"

"Since Lenny's tied up in Chicago dealing with the Stoked fiasco, I'm in serious need of some help. I'm not so good at handling needy women. So..."

He was raising those arrogant eyebrows now, giving her a "you've got to be kidding me" look.

"Because you went on a rampage that probably means you'll never work in the city of Chicago again, and because Stoked is reexamining your contract with them because of said rampage, I know you're looking for a job. I'm offering you one that's right up your alley. Planning big, expensive parties for people who will fall at your feet. Edie McCarthy, a very important suburban socialite who wants to put on the wedding of the decade, will be your first client. I just spoke with her. She wants to meet you tonight."

Alex gave a hoot of laughter and applauded. "Bravo. You really had me going there."

"I'm not joking, Alex." She stepped over to the table, took his hand and looked into his eyes, trying to show him with her touch and her expression how serious she was. "Here's my proposal. If you take this job and give it your best shot for six months, work hard to please me and my clients—then I'll come back to you completely. As your bloodmate, life mate, soul mate...however you want me. If not, I'm moving to Australia...or somewhere else far away. With lots of sunshine."

He held on to her hand, absently rubbing her knuckles with his thumb. "Jesus, Caro. You're serious aren't you?"

She nodded. "I love you but I need to know you can be steady for me, Alex. I need to know you're willing to sacrifice some of your pride. The volatile vamp who destroys anyone who messes with me, the half-cocked cocksman who has to live up to his royal legend—I can't live with those guys."

He dropped her hand and sat back in his chair. As he pushed his fingers into his hair and expelled a low whistle of disbelief, the overhead light glinted off the huge ruby on his finger and shadowed the planes of his cheekbones, emphasizing his stark physical beauty.

A sick feeling scrunched up Caro's stomach. Oh God. She'd just asked a vampire prince—the son of the most powerful immortal business magnate in the world, the holder of nine advanced degrees, the owner of priceless works of art and a Carpathian chateau—to plan weddings for Cleveland suburbanites.

What if he said no? What if he didn't love her enough to sacrifice part of his ego? Or maybe she was asking too much, maybe she'd insulted him and now he would be the one to do the leaving...

She was completely mortified to feel tears fill her eyes.

He stood up, drew himself up to his full height, inhaled a breath that made muscles ripple beneath his shirt and said, "Okay."

"Real-ly?" Her voice clogged in her throat.

"Yeah, really." He drew her into his arms and squeezed her tight, kissing the top of her head. "But I can't do it for six months, princess. No way. I love my business too. And I've made commitments to my employees and friends in Manhattan. I want you to share my life. And sharing means spending some time in my world too."

She pulled back. "Three months?"

She thought she saw his eyes twinkle but then his professional mask came down. "Ten days."

"Hey! What kind of negotiating is that?"

"Princely."

She snorted, raising an eyebrow. "We'll see how negotiating progresses later tonight."

"What happens then?" He folded his arms.

"We'll be in bed...you'll be all hot and bothered...and I'll have certain skills to barter with."

He laughed. "Cool."

She squeezed the tight muscles of his ass. "Go get dressed. Wear something good. We're meeting the McCarthy's at their country club."

"Oh Jesus God. What have I done?"

* * * * *

As they toiled down the highway in Alex's Porsche, easily navigating the early evening traffic, Caro couldn't keep her eyes off him. The tight jeans remained but he'd traded the T-shirt for an open-throat emerald silk shirt. His sports coat was cut fashionably tight, the fabric a rich, black velvet. His bare feet were encased in butter-soft black leather Prada's.

He reached out for her hand, kissed her palm and brought it down to his thigh. "You're sure they'll let me into the country club like this? I could go back and change into a more conservative suit..."

"No, no. It's perfect. Mrs. McCarthy will *love* you." She looked down at herself and felt rather brown in her staid tweed pantsuit. "Except now I know what the female peacock must feel like when she looks at her mate. I'll look like a boring old stump next to you."

Alex laughed, the green of his shirt making his eyes gleam sexily, his leanly muscled body the perfect form for the elegantly foppish clothes.

"Caro, you could never, ever look like a boring old stump."

"Yeah, well. Don't tell Len that you saw me in this suit. I promised him I'd throw it away. But then, he was the one who taught me that one of the first rules of working with finicky female clients is to never out-dress them."

"Hmm, you look kinda horse-womanish. Do you have a riding crop stashed in those pockets?"

"No, but one might come in handy for Mrs. M."

"If she needs a hot stud, I'm already taken for the week but I *am* a very good tease..."

"I know you are. And you'll make her drool just because you're part vamp."

"She's into the immortal thing, huh?"

"Yeah, she thinks an immortal planner will give her the edge on all her friends' daughters' weddings. She was overjoyed with Lenny because he was satyr *and* gay." She imitated Mrs. McCarthy's breathy voice. "Because gay males have an affinity for this type of thing, don't you know. And we only want the *very* latest, the *very* best for our darling daughter."

"Her words?"

"Yep."

"Hmm. So you want me to act like your new assistant, who just happens to be a femme vampire?" He waggled his eyebrows.

Caro giggled. "No." She stifled her laughter and sighed. "What I'd like to do is teach Mrs. McCarthy a much-needed lesson, but that's really not my place. Obviously, sexuality should have no bearing on her precious daughter's wedding."

"Her daughter and her fiancé might disagree. Don't worry. You just leave it up to me."

"Okay, but you can't be too naughty. Len and I have been tempted to go that route. But then we remember that our reputations are just as dependent upon this event as the weddings we've done for truly nice people."

"Now, Caro, you know I am *never* too naughty." He winked and moved her hand farther up his thigh.

Caro felt a jolt of nerves as they zoomed into the brightly lit parking lot of the exclusive suburban country club and careened into a parking place by the door. She noted the wicked little smile that was playing around the corners of his mouth.

"This is going to be fun." He grinned over at her. "I haven't been in a place that looked like this since my cousin's wedding when I was fourteen. As I recall, it was a very memorable affair."

He started to take her hand as they walked up the winding path that led to the huge Tudor structure that was the clubhouse and she quickly brushed it away. "Sorry. Habit," he said as he put his hand in his coat pocket.

"What did you do?"

"What?"

"What mischief did you get into at your cousin's wedding?"

He laughed. "First, Juna and I made liberal use of the champagne fountain and then we went on a frog-catching expedition on the golf course. The frogs came in very handy for a variety of uses."

"Poor things." Caro waited as he opened the imposing walnut door at the club's entrance.

"Yeah, I got grounded for the first and only time in my life and wasn't allowed to go on a really killer camping trip. And Juna puked champagne for two solid days."

"I meant the frogs!"

Caro's smile remained on her face as she went up to the reception desk and gave her name. Alex went over to look at the window display for the club's store.

"Come on. They're waiting for us in the tearoom. We're actually going to be blessed with the presence of the prospective bride and groom at this meeting."

"Great," Alex said. "Maybe I should get one of those totally stylish green Wimbledon sports coats." With mock wistfulness, he gazed at the window one last time.

"Mmm. I think I like the one you have on better."

They walked down a plush, carpeted hallway. The walnut-paneled walls displayed large oil paintings of various white men posing in tennis whites or on golf greens. Alex aped a couple of their expressions and Caro tried hard not to giggle again. He wasn't very far removed from the fourteen-year-old frog thief.

They turned at the first set of large French doors. Even though the tearoom was closed to the public at this hour, a tuxedoed maitre d' greeted them formally. He proceeded to guide them through the lovely mullion-windowed room back to a corner table where a large, elegantly coiffed woman argued heatedly with a smaller woman garbed completely in gray. A young man looked on petulantly. They all looked up as Caro and Alex approached.

"Caro, thank God you're here. We've been waiting for how long?" Mrs. McCarthy glanced down at her gray-faced, gray-suited daughter but didn't wait for a reply. She stood up to buss Caro on the cheeks, but she kept her striking blue eyes fixed on Alex. "And who is this? Oh my God. Please tell me this is your new assistant!"

"So sorry if we kept you waiting, Mrs. McCarthy. I'd like you to meet Len's friend, Alex. And yes, he's the one I told you about. He'll be assisting me while Len works in Chicago."

Mrs. McCarthy put a cocktail-ringed hand on one of her shapely hips. Her pink knit St. John suit clung to her tall, statuesque figure and she proudly stuck out her chest as she surveyed Alex up and down with her beautiful, heavily made-up eyes.

Alex took her hand and as he brought it to his lips, he flashed his slowest, vampiest sex smile, the one that just hinted at a glimpse of those canines. *Yeah*, thought Caro, *that oughta do the job*. Mrs. McCarthy blinked.

"Mrs. McCarthy," he said in a low, elegantly modulated voice. "Caro told me all about you. I am so grateful she's allowed me to sit in on this meeting. And whom do we have here? Your beautiful daughter, I presume?"

"Do forgive me. Yes, yes. This is Campbell and her fiancé, Andrew Moran."

"I'm charmed," said Alex, gazing warmly down at them both.

Campbell didn't say anything. She took a sip of her tea and clattered her cup back down onto the saucer.

Andrew looked up with interest but quickly veiled it before sinking farther into his chair. "Good to meet you," he said with affected boredom.

"Well," said Caro. "Shall we sit down? I'm anxious to hear where you've decided to have the reception."

Campbell snorted. "We haven't decided on anything, have we Andrew?"

Andrew shrugged.

"Oh Campbell, please," said Mrs. McCarthy. "Don't be so tiresome. Alex. Tell me more about yourself. What exactly is your relationship with Len? What's your background, dear?" She poured him a cup of tea and pushed a plate of cookies toward him. She coyly licked a crumb off a long, coral-tipped finger.

Alex inclined his head with a small smile. "Well, let's see. I've known Len for most of my life. We've had an amazing relationship. Lots of ups...lots of downs." He winked at Caro.

He wasn't injecting any swish to his tone, he was just doing his best to ooze sexy charm. And he was doing a righteous job of it. Everyone appeared to be riveted.

"As for my professional background, I've always been a stylist of a sort. Entirely in Manhattan until a few months ago. My latest stint in New York was for the Vamp Network. Are you familiar with that channel?"

"God, yes," gushed Mrs. McCarthy. "Tell me, did you have anything at all to do with the wonderful series, *Hot Vamps in Love*?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. Do you enjoy that show?"

"Oh it's just the cleverest little show...a favorite guilty pleasure." Mrs. McCarthy shifted in her seat to move closer to Alex.

"Mother, nobody cares about what TV shows you like," Campbell interjected. "Can we get on with this, please? Andrew and I have an appointment with our acupuncturist."

Alex winked at Campbell. "Great idea, Campbell. I'm sure your mother and I could discuss my boring past later. So where are you going to have your reception?"

Caro held her breath as Campbell rolled her eyes. "Well, mother wants to have it here. But Andrew and I refuse to have it at this bourgeois monument to mortal white elitism. We've been thinking about a historic mansion out by Mentor —"

Mrs. McCarthy let out a shout of laughter. "God, Campbell. Talk about elite monuments...our *house* is more suitable than that hovel." Alex shifted in his seat and Caro saw his mouth twitch. "And besides, for the final time...we can't do that place because they won't allow more than one hundred guests."

"Well, then. Andrew and I have talked it over and we're going to elope." Campbell's tone demonstrated the expertise of a professional whiner. Andrew slumped farther into his chair. His short, pale blond hair and blue eyes should have been striking, but his posture and his slack-jawed boredom made him look like a teenager stuck in detention.

"Idle threats, idle threats," said Mrs. McCarthy, leaning back in her chair before popping a tiny petit four between her coral lips. "You know you won't get a red cent from your father and I," her voice rose alarmingly, "if you insist on leaving your friends and family out of this affair."

"I'd like you to consider Len's latest suggestion again," Caro said soothingly. It had actually been her idea, but she thought that it might go over better if they attributed it to Len. "The Cleveland Botanical Garden would be lovely. I just spoke with one of their planners and they have a lovely new Asian garden planned for opening right before spring. We would just need to keep the guest list under two hundred if we wanted to do dinner there too."

"Dinner at the Botanical Garden! Come on! It would be one thing if it were in the summer, but since the children insist on having a wedding on the first day of spring —"

"The vernal equinox, Mother!"

"The equinox...whatever! Well, maybe I could go for the ceremony but I have so many problems with having the reception at the Botanical Garden —"

Caro interrupted gently. "You could have your choice of caterers rather than having to stick to the club or a restaurant's limited options. You'd have an opportunity to do something very original and very creative —"

Mrs. McCarthy laughed as she interrupted, "Pardon my French, Caro, but everybody and their fucking dog is doing a wedding at the Botanical Garden."

"God, Mother, you are so rude. Give people a chance to finish their sentences."

Caro looked at Campbell and was pleased to see there was some interest for her idea. Caro had been waiting for the right moment to mention the Asian gardens and this might just be enough to push Campbell in a practical direction.

"Mmm. Tea always makes me a little warm." Alex's voice was a sexy rasp.

Everyone looked at him as he pushed his chair back and removed his coat. He subtly scooted a little closer to Andrew as he reached back to put his coat across a chair at the table behind him. Caro hadn't seen him do it, but she noticed that his shirt was now open nearly halfway down his chest. The tight fabric pulled across the lean, well-formed muscles of his upper body as he draped an arm across the back of Andrew's chair.

And what did he have around his neck? Some kind of a necklace. One of Juna's creations, no doubt. A thin string of tiny sterling and jet beads with an unusual and eye-attracting pendant that hung right between his pecs. When he crossed an ankle over one knee, Caro's breath snagged. Thin, faded denim stretched across his thighs, the worn fabric going totally white over the bulge of his crotch. Damn. He was definitely coming on a little strong.

Caro looked over at Mrs. McCarthy. Her large blue eyes now had a slightly buggy quality. For one laughable moment Caro realized that all eyes at the table were glued to Alex's crotch except for his own. Campbell took another gulp of tea and Andrew straightened his shoulders.

"Sorry," Alex said. His half-smile made his lip curve over his right canine. It was a smile Caro loved and a smile that knocked people out with its freakish combo of cuteness, scariness and sexiness. "Hope nobody minds if I take off my jacket. You know, I'd like to put in a plug for the Botanical Garden idea. Last year I went to a royal vamp wedding that took place at some incredible gardens in San Francisco. The stylist was a friend of mine. I'd be happy to work some of her ideas up for you in a small intermedia presentation. I think they'd work brilliantly at the Cleveland Garden." He slowly ran a hand down his thigh to rest it on his bare ankle.

Mrs. McCarthy licked her lips. "Oh. Well. That would be fine. I think we'd like to see something like that, wouldn't we Campbell? Andrew?"

Campbell shrugged but her eyes had lost their vacant look. "Umm, okay," said Andrew. His eyes rested on Alex's hand and then quickly shifted away.

"A great suggestion," Caro breathed. "Thanks so much, Alex."

Alex uncrossed his legs as he leaned forward. He brushed a hand through his long, satin-black hair and smiled into Mrs. McCarthy's eyes. "You know, I really admire old buildings like this one—ones that have a great history of entertaining. I'd love it if you could show me around. It might give me some ideas for some holiday party plans I've been working up with some colleagues in New York."

Mrs. McCarthy stood up gracefully, offering Alex her jeweled fingers. "I'd like nothing better, darling. Do come. I know all the secret places here. I've been coming here since I was a girl, you know..."

Alex slanted a bemused glance at Caro as Mrs. McCarthy led him away from the table.

Mrs. McCarthy gave a final command over her shoulder. "Campbell, you talk flowers with Caro and then you and Andrew are free to go."

When Campbell rolled her eyes at the dramatic swish of her mother's departing hips, Caro gave her an understanding smile. After fifteen minutes of discussion without any of Mrs. McCarthy's super-charged opinions, Caro was pleasantly surprised. Campbell had actually made some productive and cooperative comments. Andrew, however, was still looking bored and began to drum his fingers annoyingly on the table. "I've got to use the john," he said abruptly. "I'll meet you out in the lobby, Campbell."

Campbell rolled her eyes at him too. Caro asked her a few more questions about ideas for favors and gave her suggestions for additional places to try for gowns, since apparently her search for formalwear continued to be fruitless. When Caro gently suggested that Campbell try going shopping for a gown without her mother, Campbell's eyes lit up, making her face look fifty times more attractive. "Hey, Caro, maybe we could go shopping and get your friend Alex to come with us. I bet we would find something with him right away..."

"Hmm," murmured Caro. "Yes. Maybe so. He has to do a lot of traveling in the next few months but I'll run it by him." She stood up. "Speaking of Alex, maybe we should go figure out where he and your mother went."

Campbell snorted. "She's probably showing him the ladies' locker room. So is he gay or not?"

Caro was putting folders back into her briefcase. She paused.

Campbell held up her hand when she saw Caro's face. "Sorry. I start to ask rude questions if I hang out with my mom for too long."

Caro smiled, thankful to let the subject drop. She grabbed Alex's jacket from the chair and headed out of the dining room.

They came to the lobby and found Mrs. McCarthy chatting with a velour-suited friend. "Ah, here you are Campbell. I was just making arrangements with Joan to play tennis next week." She glanced at Caro. "Caro, thank you. You were surprisingly helpful today. You really need to hang on to that Alex. He makes you look good." She smiled as she took Campbell's arm. "You'll call next week when the presentation is ready? I think Mr. McCarthy might like to be in on that. Let's hope it's great. Bye-bye!"

Caro stood there, trying not to shake her head. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Andrew quickly moving through the lobby. He gave her a furtive glance before darting out the door after his future wife and mother-in-law. *He must be desperate for money to tie himself to that ball and chain combo*, Caro thought ruthlessly.

She turned to go look for Alex and then smiled as she saw him sauntering down the hall toward her. He approached and stood directly in front of her. Her hands itched to touch him but she knew the reception desk clerk was watching them with interest.

Alex grinned, moving his mouth to within inches of hers. "Well, princess, am I hired?"

She shoved his jacket at him. "Yes. You passed that test with flying colors. Now, let's get out of here."

"Good thinking."

They both broke into laughter as they walked down the pathway to his car.

Chapter Fifteen

They were in bed—in the middle of contract negotiations—when Alex remembered the weird scene in the country club bathroom.

He smoothed his hand over the curve of Caro's ass. Her flesh was hot and pink from where he'd spanked her. He smiled. Ten delicious smacks on that perfectly curved, rosy flesh had cost him three days on his employment contract. So Caro was a double winner on that one—his good girl had climaxed instantly at the sheer naughtiness of it *and* she'd gained the days.

Damn it. He was going to have to be more clearheaded about these negotiations or he'd be planning weddings in Cleveland until the next millennium.

When he smoothed his hand up her back, her moan was rich with satisfaction.

"Hey..."

"Mm."

"I don't know exactly what we want to do with this information, but that guy Andrew?"

She looked back over her shoulder at him. "Mr. Morose? Andrew Moran?"

"Yeah," he said, pushing a silky curl of her hair away from her face.

"What about him?"

"He put the moves on me in the john at the country club tonight."

"No!" She propped herself up on her elbow, caramel eyes wide.

"Yep. No question about it either. He backed me into a corner with lust in his eyes. He showed me his pretty little ass, and when that didn't work he offered me a vein."

"Shit. What did you do?"

He laughed. "I said no thanks, of course. Then he flew out of there like the hounds of hell were chewing his heels."

Caro sat up all the way and put her hand over her mouth. "My God. Poor Campbell."

He shrugged. "Maybe she knows."

"I doubt it. Oh God, do you think you came on a little too strong during tea?"

"Hey, don't blame the victim! I wasn't the one who was groping folks in the john."

"I know, I know. But you were so blatant with your, umm..."

"My what?" He reached over to the bedside table for the champagne they'd opened earlier. He took a swig and quirked an eyebrow, offering her the bottle.

She shook her head. "Forget it."

"No. This is interesting. I want to hear more. Because this is something that we never really got through all those years ago. You seem to blame me when I get hit on. I never blame you when guys hit on you. Which happens all the fucking time, I might add." He took a long pull on the bottle.

"I don't blame you..." she started to deny and then stopped. "Oh hell. Maybe I do. You just have this way of acting *too* sexy sometimes. Part of it's a vamp thing and part of it is you. Like I bet you probably could have fucked every single person in that tearoom today."

He snorted. "I think you're giving me a little too much credit."

"Oh come, Alex. You were putting on quite a show there. I mean, I know I'm hypersensitive to your particular attractions—God knows I've tried not to be."

He leaned back against the pillows. "You know, it's interesting how even the most sexually liberated humans get nervous when they're around immortals who act blatantly sexual."

She furrowed her brow and he smiled, knowing she had to think that one over for a minute.

"Well," she finally said, "maybe if everybody exhibited blatantly sexual behavior twenty-four seven it would be a different story. But when one person is acting overtly sexual at a table where four other people who aren't, and in a setting where that type of thing isn't expected, it's a little bit in your face. It doesn't mean anyone is being judgmental or anti-sex, it just means they might start to wonder about your motives."

"And they would assume those to be what?" He ran his champagne-cold finger over her perky nipple, noting with interest that it got even perkier.

"To get fucked, of course."

"Why? Why can't it just be another public persona...like people who always act like a clown, or people who put on a grumpy act like Campbell, or an overbearing act like her mother...?"

"Oh Alex. You know that sex always complicates things for people, even for you. It's on a totally different level from *grumpiness* for Christ's sake." She grabbed the champagne and drank deeply.

"Probably so. But I wish it weren't." He took the bottle from her and set it on the table, suddenly recalling that Caro and too much champagne didn't mix well.

"Maybe it's a vamp thing, a male thing." She twined a strand of hair around her fingers, something she did when she was thinking hard about something. "Some kind of predatory behavior that comes naturally."

"Huh. There are just as many female sexual predators out there—at least on the adult level—as male ones. Believe me. I know it for a fact. What about Mrs. McCarthy? Wasn't she just as overt as I was today? She would have had my cock out of my pants so fucking fast..."

"Yeah. And it was annoying."

"Ah. So you admit you're pissed off at me for the way I acted at tea."

"Damn it, Alex! Why do you always do that to me? I'm not pissed off at you. I was just a little anxious about your behavior." She turned away from him, smooshing at the pillows before flopping her head down.

"You know, Caro. I think you make this stuff a lot more complicated than it needs to be." Taking her by the arm, he pulled her back and kissed her slightly swollen, well-used lips.

He sat back against the pillows and pulled her hand into his lap, teasing the tender skin around her tattoo, proudly inspecting the mark that made her his. She arched her back, sighing.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, you're always trying to analyze this stuff to death. Most of sex is about pure animal behavior. Immortals are more comfortable with the beastliness of it all. We revel in it. But most mortals tend to fight their uncivilized emotions. Like you. You don't like to admit it, but you like the idea of owning me. You get jealous when you think other people are moving in on your territory. Or if you think I'm going to stray into territory other than yours."

She pulled her hand away and mockingly thumped her palm on her forehead. "Oh, that's it. Thank you so much for finally making it clear after all these years. I'm just a silly jealous mortal who's not in touch with her inner beast."

He took her hand and turned it palm up, half-teasingly drawing a circle around her tattoo. "That's what my mark is for—to keep you in touch with that wild inner beast of yours."

She sat up, pushing her hair back in an angry swipe. "Okay, Alex. You're right. You know what my beast tells me when I deign to listen to it? That you're mine. Exclusively. I've always been jealous of the other people in your life. But I know what you are. And because I accepted it, I've never felt I had the *right* to be jealous. Ignoring my beast was the only way I could live with you. But under certain circumstances it refused to be ignored. And it almost destroyed me. If I've made a mistake by coming back to you I don't know what I..." Her voice broke.

"Caroline, no." He took her hands again. Pain swelling in his chest, he tried to take a deep breath, but the old feeling of sick regret constricted his lungs. Regret for marking her. Regret for marking her when she was so fucking young. Taking those years away from her, years she could have spent with some nice, normal mortal guy.

"You aren't making a mistake, Caro. I'll prove it to you. Every day. But you have to give me those days. Give me time to prove myself. Okay?"

She nodded, looking embarrassed by her emotional outburst, eager to end the conversation. Thinking she might need a few minutes alone, he stood up and looked for his jacket. He pulled out a pack of cheroots—Sherene's special blend of blood drops, tobacco and a vamp relaxant. "I'm gonna go out for a quick smoke, do you mind?"

She shook her head. "Promise you'll come back fast?"

"I promise."

"Seal it with a kiss?" she asked with a teary smile. Her voice quavered.

"You bet." He leaned forward and kissed her with all the tenderness in his heart. She tasted like grapes and tears and love. Sighing, she moved her hand back into his hair, pressing her lips gently against his. When he opened his mouth under hers, she slowly explored his mouth with her tongue. God, he loved her.

She pulled away, breathing heavily. "I can't breathe and kiss and cry all at the same time. Maybe if I just stop breathing..."

He expelled a sigh of laughter before standing up. "Don't do that. Really, please don't cry, princess. I won't be an asshole and talk about inner beasts or any of that shit anymore."

He pulled on some sweats and stepped toward the door.

"You weren't being an asshole," she said. "I was the one who basically accused you of being a slut. After asking you to help, asking you to put on an act for my clients. I should be more careful about what I ask for."

He put his hand on the doorknob. "It's all that little creep Andrew's fault for putting the moves on me. Let's just blame it on him and forget about it."

"No." She shook her head. "I don't want to forget about it. You were trying to get at the truth. And that's a good thing. I've never been completely honest with you about my jealousy."

"I'm sure there were better ways to discuss it."

"I don't know. I just get emotional because a lot of this stuff brings back some of the old pain."

"I know."

"But maybe we could talk about it more later."

"Okay. Later." He went outside.

But when he came back and joined her in bed minutes later, she wanted to discuss something different.

"Alex..." Her voice sounded tentative.

"What?" He kissed the top of her head.

"Do you like ass-fucking?"

He pulled back to look at her face. Laughed. "What? Is this a trick question?" He looked over at the nightstand and noticed the champagne bottle was empty. Hmm...

She fiddled with the sheet and gave him a half-smile. "No. I mean, I was just wondering about inner beasts and all that. Letting mine run free. There were things I used to balk at doing when I was younger—"

"Um, not too many as I remember," he interrupted. "As long as they were with me," he qualified. She'd never been into the group thing.

"Well, there might have been a few. And I thought maybe we could try them...or something."

"You wanna make a list and do 'em all tonight?"

She punched his arm. "No. I just wondered if there was something that you liked—a sex act or a role—that you feel uncomfortable performing with me. That you might worry would offend my mortal sensibilities or something."

"Caro." He looked into her eyes so she'd know he was telling the truth. "When I fucked around on you—when I had sex with immortals—it wasn't because you were lacking in any way. Or because you didn't fulfill some dark inner need of mine. It was because I was selfish and scared. The party boy prince who'd been conquered by one little mortal when he was so young...impossible! I heard that so many times I believed it. So I made it impossible."

"Mm." She didn't sound convinced.

"Roll over," he said. "I'm gonna give you one of my famous back rubs."

She let him push her onto her belly. He brushed her hair away from her back and neck and started kneading her shoulder muscles.

"You know, I'm not as jaded as everybody seems to think I am. I tried some crazy things in my teens and early twenties—had fun being a bad-assed rebel. Pissed off my human family because I acted too vamp, pissed off my vamp family because I acted too human. But by the time I met you, my mind was ready for something different. It just took a while for my body—for my instincts—to catch up." He moved his hands down to her lower back, played with the cute little dimples above her ass.

He gave a low whistle as he gazed down at the bare curves and smoothed his palms over the plump rise. "Such pink skin...have you been spanked recently?"

She turned her head on the pillow and nodded.

"Are you a naughty girl?" He smiled down at her, knowing she found this kind of game silly but secretly titillating.

She laughed. "My lover punished me. I've been trying to make him bend to my will, to follow my commands. He doesn't like it."

Chuckling at her explanation, he ran a finger down the crease between her sweetly rounded cheeks.

"Alex?"

"What?" He was nibbling along the small of her back, wanting to taste as well as touch.

She turned to her side, coyly crossing her arms over her breasts. He placed tender kisses along her hip.

"Would you?"

"Would I what?"

"Fuck me in the ass."

He looked at those big topaz eyes and tried to gauge the seriousness of her request. "When we've tried it before, you've never seemed very enthusiastic. I could take your sweet little pussy from behind, of course." He brushed a finger lightly through her crease and was quite gratified to feel a flood of dewy wetness there.

"No," Caro said. "I want you to do it the other way. The real way."

"The real way..."

"Yeah, like you would do it to Jack. Or Sherene. Female vamps really like that position, right?" Alex sat back on his heels, wondering where she was going with all this. "And what was the name of that guy you did at that orgy you made me go to in L.A.?"

"Caro..."

"Victor. That was his name. He was Hungarian, right?" She frowned at him when he didn't respond. "What? Don't you want to? Because I do. I have some lube in the bathroom I think..."

"I'm not sure it's a good idea."

"What? Why not? My ass isn't as good as Victor's?" Her tone was petulant.

Alex laughed wryly. "Now isn't that exactly like comparing apples and oranges." He stroked a silky curl away from her flushed face. "Princess, let's not do this, okay? You've had too much champagne. You seem upset and I don't particularly want to do any ass comparing tonight. Let's just make love."

"Did you love Sherene when you fucked her?"

Alex shifted on the bed, putting his feet on the floor and his hands in his hair. "No, I didn't love her. I love *you*. Come on, Caro. What's this really about?"

"If you won't take me in the ass then I don't want to fuck you at all." Her pout made her look like a silly little girl. He wanted to laugh but the situation was beginning to piss him off.

"Okay, fine." He stood, needing another smoke, another drink, wanting to get the hell out of the room before he did something he'd regret. "Maybe you could ask Jack to accommodate you when you go back to Chicago. He was a good fuck, right? His cock would definitely be a tight fit but that's the way it feels best." He walked through the door and headed down the hall.

Caro called after him, "So is that a recommendation or testimonial? I think I have a dildo around here somewhere if that would get you off!"

Turning around, he stalked back into the room and stood in front of her.

"Go get the lube," he said, struggling to keep his voice level.

Caro got up and went into the bathroom. She flicked on the lights and looked in the mirror. Her cheeks and eyes seemed too bright, her lips too dry. She licked them as she opened the medicine cabinet. She fumbled around and found a tube of lubricant, her fingers shaking a little, her thoughts hot and twisted, rumbling around in her head like

wet laundry in a dryer. She felt a little angry, a little mean, a little excited. Probably a little drunk. The overriding feeling was a compulsion to do something not like herself, to challenge the former girl who'd once happily done whatever her vamp lover demanded to make a few demands of her own.

She went back to the bedroom and handed the tube to Alex.

"On the bed. On your hands and knees." The words were a command, but he said them quietly, gently almost. Caro shivered.

"Do it," he said.

Obediently, she climbed onto the bed and assumed the position, her heart beating unsteadily, her movements unsure. "Put pillows under your hips," he ordered. "Lean forward on your elbows, ass in the air."

She arranged the pillows and looked over her shoulder, hoping to see a reassuring expression on his face, but her gaze caught on his hands. His rings gleamed in the soft light as he uncapped the lube and squirted a dollop onto his fingertips. The muscles in her ass clenched and, trying to relax, she turned her face toward the headboard and spread her fingers over the smooth surface of the sheets.

Alex climbed onto the bed, the mattress giving slightly under his weight, and she could feel the heat of his body as he came up behind her. She felt his warm palm on her ass and then gasped when he smeared the cold, slick lube between her cheeks with his fingertips. The heat of her flesh began to warm the lubricant's coolness and her muscles relaxed slightly as Alex continued to work her crack. Her breath began to rasp unsteadily, her hips rotating against the increasingly sensual feel of his fingers.

When he suddenly stilled, she inhaled sharply. Then he stuck his finger into her slick hole, going two knuckles deep. She groaned as he teased the sensitive inner flesh, pushing his finger farther, delving and rotating before pulling all the way out and outlining the rim of the tiny opening. He repeated the motion, moving in and out, over and over, sometimes deep, sometimes shallow, all the while slicking the way with the lube.

Caro began to squirm. "Alex..."

She felt his cock, long and heavy, against the small of her back. He didn't say a word but she could hear his breathing become heavier. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him pick up the lube and then heard him apply it to his cock. She could see it in her mind, his long fingers smoothing the glistening liquid over his straining flesh...

He grabbed her hips with both hands, angling her higher on the pillows before spreading the slick cheeks of her ass with his cool hands. She felt the head of his prick probe and slowly thrust forward, a maddeningly slow filling that made her feel strangely empty in other places. Her breasts felt lonely, her pussy bereft. She moaned softly, wanting him to cram it in, wanting to feel the odd pleasure-pain streaking through her guts until it hit all those needy places.

More!

Can't hurt you...

Yes, damn it. Do it!

But he just pushed it in slowly, slowly. She bunched the sheets with her fingers. Panted. The sensation was all-consuming, intense, the stretch of her flesh a searingly intimate combination of pleasure and pain. She wanted to grind her hips into the pillows. But Alex held them firm and then finally rammed home.

Hard. All the way in.

She cried out. He inhaled sharply. In and out he pushed, first with slow concentration and then with quick, grinding thrusts. She could feel the rough hair on his thighs brushing against the backs of her legs and her buttocks, the friction making her want to scream, his cock touching pleasure points she hadn't even known existed.

"God, Alex, please..." She felt his hands clench down harder on her hips. He shoved forward with a last violent thrust and gave a strangled groan. He pulled out abruptly and she felt a hot spurt of cum hit her lower back. The bed shook as he shuddered through his orgasm, covering her buttocks and thighs with more jets of semen.

She waited for his touch, called out to him in her mind – but there was only silence.

Her mind struggled to understand but she was too overwhelmed with sensation. She relaxed her hips and rubbed her mound against the pillows, the friction against her clit bringing her to climax within seconds. She pressed her face into the quilt, trying to breathe, trying to process sensation and emotion.

Wanting Alex to say something, wanting him to touch her again and hold her, she reached out for him but felt only the shift of the bed as he climbed off, heard only the sound of his harsh breathing. She held very still, waiting.

"So that's how it feels to get fucked by my cock," he finally said. "You let me know when you wanna get fucked by *me*. When you want all my love."

She couldn't think, couldn't reply.

"I'm going out for another smoke." She heard him pull on his pants and, turning her head, she saw him stalk from the room. She tried to call his name but she couldn't move her lips, couldn't make a sound.

Alex...

* * * * *

Alex was standing in the kitchen draining his third glass of water and preparing to go back to bed when he heard a thump, a thud and a cry come from the room above him. Caro's room.

He set down his glass and ran for the stairs, cursing himself for being an ass and leaving her alone for the last hour. Attempting emotionless sex when both partners were feeling way too emotional was a mistake all around. And yes, he was finally smart enough to recognize that when it came to his bloodmate, he was always going to be emotional.

When he saw her lying motionless on the floor next to the bed, he freaked for a moment, thinking she'd rolled off the bed and knocked herself unconscious. But as he hurried toward her she pushed herself from her side to her back, spread her arms wide and expelled a long, whimpering moan.

"Jesus, Caro, what the hell happened?" Kneeling beside her, he brushed the hair away from her face.

She licked her lips and gave him a faint smile as she pulled her arm from under the bed. He shook his head when he saw she was holding the empty champagne bottle.

"I knocked the bottle off the nightstand and when I tried to catch it, it got away."

"You and champagne do not mix well, princess."

As he took the bottle from her hand and set it out of reach on the floor, she gave a small hiccup-laugh. When he gathered her in his arms, her laughter turned into sobs. "I feel terrible," she moaned.

"I know," he said, pressing his lips to her temple.

"I treated you terribly."

"Mm." He trailed his lips down her cheek to the tender curve of her ear. "S'okay. I wasn't exactly being a prince myself." When she clutched his shoulders and began to cry in earnest, he put his arms beneath her and lifted her onto the bed.

"Come on, my poor princess," Alex whispered. "Let me hold you for a while." He slid in next to her, taking her in his arms and pulling the covers up over them.

"Sorry, sorry, so sorry. Want your love so bad..."

"Shhh, shhh," he whispered to her over and over. She gripped his chest with clammy hands. "There's nothing to be sorry about, sweetie. Sleep now, baby. I love you. Everything's all right." He murmured an endless stream of endearments as he slowly stroked her hair off her face. Soon they were both asleep.

He felt her wake up just before dawn, sensing her disjointed thoughts, feeling her body shiver. He kissed her until she was warm again and settling her close against his side, he sent her soothing thoughts, encouraging her to nestle her thoughts against his.

I'm never, ever drinking champagne again. Even on New Year's. Promise you'll remind me. I promise.

But I might try the ass-fucking thing again...that wasn't so bad.

Mm. He chuckled. But now you should sleep...

'Kay.

He waited until she was asleep again then showered and went downstairs to make coffee. He was checking his phone messages when the doorbell rang. Who the hell would be up so early? Caro had mentioned a Mrs. Clark, a slightly eccentric neighbor who frequently checked in on her. He opened the door, preparing to charm the woman's knee-highs off.

Ah shii-iiit, I can't believe this...

Three burly demons stood there, looking absurd under the antique porch light, their black, official-looking suits and big-ass weapons surreal against the backdrop of Caro's white wicker and chintz porch furniture.

"Alexander King?" The biggest one was almost two feet taller than Alex.

"What?"

"By order of the International Immortal Authority, you're under arrest."

He snorted. "Sorry boys, I don't respect your authority." He started to shut the door in their faces, his hand already on his cell to dial his lawyer—when he suddenly went limp, hitting the floor as if he'd been coldcocked. It took him only a second to realize they must have zapped him with one of the newfangled energy-sucking weapons, because even though he was prone and immobile, he registered just a minimal amount of pain and his mind was working fine.

Next thing he knew he was being carried across Caro's front yard. They opened the back doors to an unmarked van—he saw a board, he saw straps, he saw a few things he was glad he didn't recognize. Yeah, this was gonna hurt. He turned his face toward the demon who wasn't holding him. "My bloodmate...she's in the house. She'll need protection." He could barely speak because of the mouth guard they'd shoved over his teeth.

"She'll be taken care of, Mr. King."

They threw him in the back, started in with the straps.

Oh shit, shit, shit...

He called out to her in his mind. *Caro-love! Call Lenny. Call my father. Call my attorney... Wake up, princess. I need your help!*

* * * * *

"A party-off? What the hell is that?" Jack put his hands on his hips. The movement stretched his white shirt across his drool-worthy pecs. If Len squinted, he could see the quarter-sized nipples that topped those muscular monuments to too much time spent at the gym.

Lenny sighed. He was growing weary of Jack's coy posing. If the guy wanted it, why didn't he come out and ask? He'd seen the looks he'd given him while watching him have sex. And yeah, the watching had made the episodes with Merrell even more erotic.

But now Merrell had moved on, and frankly, Lenny didn't want to dwell on another failed, hit-and-run-style affair. And Jack's hot eyes and beefcake muscles were an unwelcome reminder of the weird threesomes they'd had on more than one occasion. Threesomes during which the mortal stood there and watched the vamp dominate the satyr while the mortal stroked his own amazingly long, beautiful schlong until it exploded on the satyr's hairy ass.

Lenny shifted his briefcase from his side to his front. "The Immortal Council is famous for their oddball sentences and medieval mediation techniques." Really, he was glad the Council was laying down the law once and for all on what could have become a drawn-out, convoluted volley of lawsuits and investigations.

The convention center wanted to sue Alex for damages, not particularly caring if he was mortal or immortal or what company he worked for. Alex wanted to sue Lyra for violating the sacred bond of vamp bloodmates, not particularly caring that the bond wasn't fully functional at the time of violation. And Lyra wanted to sue Alex and Stoked, not particularly caring if Alex still represented the company or not.

Lyra was trying to heap as much bad publicity on Stoked as possible. Which is why the Stoked board thought it would be good publicity—and excellent for future immortal product sales—to take the bold step of letting an ancient, immortal legal body decide who would pay damages to whom. And to stand by Alex King, who happened to be the son of one of the most influential and powerful vamps in the country.

"It's the most fucked-up way of settling a lawsuit I've ever heard of," Jack said.

"Welcome to the immortal business world, Farrell. In a situation like this, immortals want salvaged pride, not bank accounts."

"So we have two weeks to prepare a party that's bigger and better than the one VampedUp is preparing—one that's big enough and impressive enough to wow the most important immortal big shots in the world?"

"Yep. So we better get working, right? Alex emailed me some great ideas. I need to check the storage area to make sure the stuff he's thinking of using is still there. Can you take me down there, or do you trust a shifty little satyr with the keys?"

Jack settled a hip against his desk and frowned. Lenny moaned silently. Even frowning, this guy looked delectable. Those movie idol features. That body. He was like Montgomery Clift on steroids.

"Why do you say things like that, Len? Have I ever demonstrated the slightest bit of prejudice toward you?"

Len sighed. "No. No, you haven't." He wanted to say, "But I see the way you look at my horns...and I've felt the way you've rubbed your cream into the fur on my ass and thighs..."

Yeah, he'd always be just a freak to pretty-boy humans like Jack Farrell.

Jack moved around his desk and removed a set of keys from his top drawer. He walked to the door, keeping the keys in his hand. "I'm going with you. Not because I don't trust you. But because I want to look at the stuff down there too.

"Fine." Len strode down the hall toward the elevator. As they stood there and waited for a car, he prayed that the doors would open and reveal a crowd. He really didn't want to be alone with Jack right now.

The doors opened. The car was empty. *Ah, jeez.*

Jack gestured for Len to get in first. He complied, choosing to stand in the far corner. Jack got in and stuck a set of keys into the slot beneath the numbered buttons. The doors snicked shut but the elevator didn't move.

"What are you doing?" Lenny asked.

Jack glanced at his watch. Len didn't know which he admired more, the chunky gold cufflinks, the Tiffany watch or the strong-looking wrist sprinkled with silky dark hair. Jack leaned back against the shiny black wall. The dim gold light of the elevator bronzed his skin and darkened his eyes.

"I'm giving myself five minutes to convince you that my hang-ups about you aren't about race." He licked his upper lip.

Blood and sensation settled into Len's groin, hardening his cock, rippling his gut with anticipation. "Don't tease me," he whispered.

Jack slowly shook his head, a hint of a smile on his moist lips. He stepped toward him, brushed his knuckles against the back of Len's hand. One of the hands that was clutching a briefcase in front of a fly-popping erection. Jack gently pried Len's right hand loose and slowly guided it down to his crotch.

Len let out a low whistle as he felt the hard ridge of Jack's one-in-a-million cock. "So it's like that, is it?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it is." Jack took Len's face into his smooth, cool hands. Bent to brush his mouth with his warm, full lips. He smelled like mint, male and expensive cologne.

Len held his breath and kept his eyes on Jack's mouth. Jack stood still. Len's heartbeat roared in the silence. With slow, deliberate moves, Jack put his hands on the elevator wall, caging Lenny's shoulders. He thrust his hips forward until his crotch connected with Len's briefcase, the case he was still hanging on to like a shield, the case he was now wishing would disappear so he could feel the full impact of Jack's cock.

Jack tipped his head and parted his lips, coming closer so intently, so slowly. He paused for a breath—and then went after Len's mouth like a starving fiend.

Mashing, biting, sucking with his teeth and lips and then pushing his tongue into the far reaches of Len's mouth until Len thought he would drown in a sea of passion.

Jack ripped his mouth away and stared into his eyes, heaving great breaths of air.

Len smiled. Jack, the genial party-boy business guy, was getting down to some seriously profound behavior. Len took in his flushed face, his swollen lips and his heavy-lidded eyes.

Jack pushed off the wall and took a step back. Heaved another breath. He went to the elevator controls, turned the key and the elevator started moving. Jack looked back at him. No smile. Eyes a little wild.

"Do you still want to check out the party items in the storage area?"

The question was a definite invitation.

"Yeah," Len said.

Jack nodded and turned back to the elevator doors, his shoulders rippling under his thin cotton shirt, his trousers drawn tight over his perfect ass. Len felt his cock jerk as he thought about what was lurking in those trousers. Oh God. He was going to fuck Jack Farrell. Pleasure and anticipation were making him giddy. He tried to take deep, fortifying breaths.

The elevator door opened and they stepped out into the deserted hall that had been gutted for construction. In the next second Jack had him up against the nearest piece of drywall, throwing his briefcase to the floor, grinding their hips together, going at him with that crazy kissing again.

"Easy, easy," whispered Len. "I've got to breathe."

"I'm so hot for you." Jack's blue eyes were burning little licks of flames into Len's skin. Jesus, they were going to explode right here in the hall. "I don't know why I've held back. Scared I guess. There's something about you that sends me straight to the edge, but I can never...I just never..."

"Let's take some of the edge off, shall we?" He quickly unzipped Jack's trousers. "How great is the danger that we may be interrupted?"

Jack didn't respond. He had his eyes closed. Len reached down his pants and put his hands on the most beautiful piece of flesh he'd ever laid eyes on—Jack Farrell's cock. Holy Spirit of the Underworld.

Jack didn't have the patience for admiration. He put his hand over Len's, urging him on with a stroking motion. Taking that to mean that interruptions probably weren't imminent, Len licked his lips at the thought of discovering Jack's flavor but decided, to be on the safe side, he'd stick with a hand job. He wasn't going to get caught on his knees today if he could help it.

He leaned into him for another kiss, gentling him with a few strokes of his tongue when things started to get wild again. His sensitive fingers were in sensory heaven exploring the proud length of the prick in his hands. There was an intriguing little pulse at the base of the glans, fabulous veins and ridges to tease and caress. Jack moaned. "I know what you want," Len whispered against his mouth. "But you've tortured me by making me watch you stroke this beast," he paused to trace the ridge along the crest, "and now it's my turn."

He used his other hand to find the luscious twin globes that were still hiding in Jack's silky briefs. He gently pulled them out, all the while watching Jack's tortured expression of suppressed arousal. The skin of his sac was already taut and swelling and Len guessed that he wouldn't last long. He added some heavy tongue on his next kiss, thrusting into Jack's mouth in the same rhythm as the strokes of his hand. Mm, it was ecstasy to finally get what you wanted...to explore the one you'd been lusting after.

Jack put his arms around his shoulders, holding on as he began to thrust his hips to Len's rhythm. Len went for more intensity, giving a fast jerk with a little twist as his fist came to the head, loving the little gasps and moans that were coming from Jack's chest. Smooth, jerk, twist. Smooth, jerk, twist. Ah, gods...this cock was like electricity in his

hands...lighting him up with energy and sensation. He stopped to caress the crown in his warm, moist palm, savoring the feel of the seeping, baby-soft skin. Then again back to smooth, jerk and twist. Jack was bucking, gyrating against him, about to come. Len's own cock was throbbing crazily.

Jack gave a mighty thrust against Len's hand and then came with a high-pitched yelp. His body shuddered and shook as his cock spewed globs of semen. Lenny so wanted to lean down to lick...but God, they were in a hallway in broad daylight, so he smoothed and soothed the still-jerking prize in his hand. Some of that good stuff would have to wait 'til later.

Jack's hands were holding on tight, clenching and unclenching on his waist as he tried to catch his breath. Len hurriedly packed Jack's slippery cock back into his trousers and stuffed his own cum-soaked hand into his coat pocket. With his free hand, he pushed the still quivery Jack down the hall.

"I've got to fuck you before I explode. But I refuse to do it in a hallway. Let's hope the storeroom has a lock."

Jack nodded and looked back at him over his shoulder. "There's a bed they used for an old advertising display." His voice had a breathy rasp Len had never heard. "I'm gonna lay you down on it and give you what you've been wanting ever since you set those hot satyr eyes on me."

Lenny smiled and Jack walked faster.

* * * * *

"Explain to me again. What the hell is a party-off?" Caro asked.

"It's an old immortal way of settling differences between opposing factions. Immortals can kill each other off so easily, war got boring," Alex laughed. "So they had to come up with new ways to compete. The concept is actually based on ancient Greek and Roman tradition. When national pride was based on how big of a party you could throw for an individual god. Luckily there were a lot of gods, so there were a lot of opportunities to play oneupmanship with your neighbors. I was reading about a Greek bacchanal in honor of Dionysis—the Athenian leaders had a two-hundred-forty-foot erect penis made from gold to lead the party's kick-off parade."

Caro leaned back on the skimpy hotel suite couch, cradling the phone against her ear. She'd been sharing Alex's thoughts since they'd been apart, usually several times an hour. But the phone was awesome because she could hear his voice, detect the nuances of his health and vitality that were constantly on her mind.

"So what you're saying is that this party contest between Stoked and VampedUp is really just a way to see which company has bigger balls."

Alex chuckled. "Yeah. There are all kinds of dumb jokes you can make about it. Lenny's made several today alone. By the way, he told me he could still hook us up

with a lot of the stuff we ordered for the coliseum idea. It will work for the new concept."

Caro sighed, worrying when she didn't want to be worrying. Because she and Alex had opened up all their lines of communication, he could read all her emotions if he wanted to. And he wanted to constantly, for some reason. Heck, she'd turn herself off if she could. Worry was the thing that made him the most nuts. Well, maybe worry was second to extreme sorrow. But she'd gotten over that when they'd released him from that nasty prison and put him in a cushy protective-custody facility.

"Don't worry, princess. This is gonna work. I've been wanting to throw a good old-fashioned bacchanal for years. It will knock the old Immortal Council geezers on their asses. They love that ancient shit. Gives them the opportunity to relive their glory days."

"Lenny's spies say that VampedUp is planning something ultra-modern. An outer-space theme."

Alex snorted. "Sounds lame."

"Oh God, Alex. This whole thing is immortal madness. A party to decide your fate? It's a fucking outrage, if you ask me."

"And I do ask you, my sweet. But the party doesn't really decide my fate. It decides Stoked's fate as an immortal business leader. And I've gotta tell you, even though most of the Stoked folks are great, the company's bottom line isn't what interests me about this competition."

"You just wanna get Lyra Murdoch."

"Yep. Get her fair and square in a way that's fully sanctioned by her beloved Council. Then I'm gonna serve my time and get the hell out of the quagmire of big-time business and politics. Maybe have a sweet life with a sweet wife in...oh, I don't know. Cleveland maybe?"

"Oh Alex. Wouldn't it be nice?"

"Better than nice. You keep dreamin' your little dreams, princess. Because I'm working hard to make them all come true. And yeah, I know you're scared shitless about me going away for a while. But the place isn't so bad."

"It's just not knowing how long it will be that gets to me."

"I know. We'll find out as soon as the party's over and the Council hands down their final decision."

"Right." They'd been over all this a dozen times. But she couldn't stop thinking, worrying, wondering about their future.

"So...what are you wearing?"

Caro could hear his grin. "A black merry widow and stockings with garters. Five-inch heels."

He laughed. "Liar."

"Oh-ho. Read my mind, big guy. See if I'm lying..."

There was a weighty pause.

"Jesus, Caro. You *aren't* lying."

She smoothed a blood-red rosette decoration on one of the garters and smiled.
"Nope."

"Oh man. You are gonna pay."

"Mm."

"Describe it to me. Stand in front of the mirror. I want every last detail. Then when you're done you're gonna picture me on your bed naked, and you're gonna think about all the things you're gonna do to me. And I'll read your mind. And then we'll switch."

She stood up and went to the mirror.

"Okay, the merry widow is a little on the tacky side. It has one of those little ties that come up under my breasts. I'm about to pull the right string..."

Chapter Sixteen

The Stoked Bacchanal, as it had come to be known, was a colossal, orgiastic success. In fact, as Caro walked through the jet hangar they'd rented as a venue, she wondered if it was too big of a success.

Several Immortal Council members were participating in the free-for-all orgy that had erupted in the grape-smashing pit. Bits of grape clung to the ornate columns surrounding the pit. And bits of grape clung to the bodies of several Councilmen and women, all revered, elder statesfolk of immortal politics.

She turned her head away from a pair of old guys comparing the purple tinge of their balls. One had leaned down for a taste to see if the stain would come off with saliva. Eww.

It was just one bizarre scene among hundreds. But hey, that's what a million dollars worth of the King family's wine would do for a party of five hundred. Throw in food catered by the most elite caterer in Greece – who'd been given an unlimited budget – a personal appearance by Dionysis' granddaughter, a couple dozen nude dancing boys, sixty well-trained slave girls, a set like something out of the movie *Spartacus* – and you had yourself a party.

But Caro got her biggest surprise of the night when she let herself into the trailer they'd rented for the planners and organizers. She'd thought everyone had gone home – tired didn't even begin to describe the condition of most of her friends and colleagues. They'd all been up for forty-eight straight hours or more putting together the final awe-inspiring product.

She stepped up into the trailer, turned on the lights and found Jack and Lenny. Naked. Together. Well, Jack was wearing a toga, but it had mostly fallen off. Lenny, in full, hairy, half-tailed-and-horned glory, was leaning over the desk being serviced by Jack's sensationally huge cock.

"Ohmigod! Sorry!" She turned off the lights and stepped back outside.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but that was a good sign that the party had been successfully put to bed by its chief planners.

A Stoked exec wearing a wine-stained toga walked her through the parking lot to her rental car. Her only regret about the evening, she thought as she drove back to the hotel, was that Alex had already been sent Underground, the cushy equivalent of a mortal prison. That was the punishment they'd handed down at midnight when they'd declared Stoked the winning party. Six months Underground.

No communication. No visitors. Two conjugal visits per month to allow for feeding. Caro had a feeling she'd only be half-functional between those visits and his release.

She got into bed at her hotel and let the tears she'd been holding back all night begin to fall. She hadn't wanted to cry at the party. And she'd wanted to be strong during her final phone call with Alex.

Now that she was alone for the first time in days — *weeks* really — her mind felt half-formed. Alex wasn't there. In mind or body. She felt utterly lost.

But it was ridiculous to panic, to feel so fractured. Alex would be pissed.

As he liked to say, their essences weren't less without each other, they were simply more *with* each other.

He'd promised her a private party when he got released. Something really special, just for the two of them. Because love was the ultimate party, after all. And yeah, Alex truly loved her. Just yesterday, he'd emailed her more plans for the McCarthy wedding reception. He was determined to make it the best wedding Party Mavens had ever done.

Letting those happy thoughts squelch her tears, she rolled over, went to sleep and dreamed sweet dreams of her half-vamp, all lovable lover.

Epilogue

"Folding chairs!" Mrs. M. was screaming at a beleaguered-looking Lenny. "We can't possibly sit on folding chairs for the entire ceremony and then be expected to sit on them for dinner as well. Our asses aren't made of cement! Good God. Do you know who's attending this wedding?"

"Good afternoon, Mrs. McCarthy." Caro kept her tone even and calm as she approached the volatile scene. She placed a steadying hand on Lenny's twitching forearm. "Len, how's it going?"

"Caro!" Mrs. McCarthy didn't wait for Lenny's response. "Thank God you're here. We didn't agree to this! We did *not* agree to this, I say..." Mrs. M.'s eyes were bulging dangerously.

Winking discreetly at Lenny, Caro gently led Mrs. M. away from where workers were unloading chairs from a wheeled cart. "We're using the linen chair covers for the ceremony, remember? And for the reception, the wedding party's table will have the padded seats."

"Well, I hope they look suitable. I hope they aren't those stackable things you find in taverns—" Mrs. M. paused suddenly and looked Caro up and down. "My God, Caro, what are you wearing!"

Caro smiled. In celebration of the wedding, she'd decided to forego the usual country-clubby fare and was wearing a pale pink suit that had a short, flouncy skirt. The last time she'd worn it had been for the fateful cocktail reception at Stoked—the party where she'd walked in on Alex and Sherene and Jack.

When she'd unpacked all her stuff from Chicago, she'd pushed it to the back of her closet. Then, while looking for spring clothes last week, she'd immediately deemed it perfect for the McCarthy wedding. Now Mrs. M. was taking it all in—from the plunging neckline of the suit jacket to the tips of the matching pink pumps.

"You look absolutely fabulous! I knew you were an attractive girl but I didn't realize you were so...so...striking."

Caro let a giggle escape at the look of shock on Mrs. M.'s face. "I know I was all business during the planning phases of this event but for the actual occasion, especially for such a beautiful wedding, I thought I would pull out all the stops."

"And those earrings! My God, they look real. Where did you...how did you...?"

Caro ignored her rudeness, feeling magnanimous on the day of Party Mavens' very last wedding. "Actually, they were a birthday present from my boyfriend."

"Boyfriend? You've been holding out on me! Those earrings look downright serious. Is he a local boy?"

Caro shook her head.

"Dear God, I hope you aren't relocating! Because it's looking like my niece is about to become engaged. My sister-in-law is counting on you and Len doing her wedding too."

"Actually, Lenny and I will probably be moving the business to New York. We did a few successful events in Manhattan over the holidays and we're thinking about relocating the business there permanently. But I can recommend some friends who would do a lovely job for your niece..." Caro's smile was brilliant as she led Mrs. McCarthy toward the parking lot.

After patiently listening to a hundred and one new and old complaints, Caro convinced Mrs. M. to go to her salon appointment and with great relief, went to help Len. The set-up went like clockwork and when the wedding guests began to arrive, all Caro and Len had to do was sit back and admire their work. They agreed that it was some of the best stuff they'd ever done. And they also agreed that it was for the least-deserving clients they'd ever served. Even the bride looked good. They disagreed on the looks of the groom—Caro thought that he looked slightly ill and Len thought he looked like the cat who swallowed the canary.

Dinner was nerve-wracking but ultimately uneventful and as the wedding reception kicked into full swing, Len began to celebrate their freedom from the McCarthy's a few hours early. Jack was his guest and they spent a considerable amount of time at the champagne bar and on the dance floor. As twilight fell, Caro sat at one of the gorgeously turned-out guest tables and talked to Mr. McCarthy, who was the most incorrigible flirt she'd ever met, at least of the older variety. She liked him immensely.

When Mrs. M. came over to rather tipsily cajole him into dancing with her, Caro smiled and sat back in her seat. It really was a beautiful wedding. The McCarthys should give Alex a big bonus for making them choose the Botanical Garden. It was pretty, peaceful and perfect. The evening was full of summer's promise and hope for a happy life together for the new couple—maybe.

A few of the guests were beginning to leave. She stood up, thinking she'd better consult with the staff about clean-up details. As she wended her way around the dance floor, she felt a hand on her shoulder and heard a very familiar voice whisper in her ear, "Got room on your dance card for me, princess?"

"Alex!" She turned around, laughing with delight. He laughed too as she flung her arms around his neck and began to press kisses all over his face. He pulled her body close and took her for a quick spin on the dance floor.

"I can't believe you're here." She couldn't stop laughing. He was making her dizzy in a dozen different ways. "I thought you had another month to go."

"I got to come up early. For good behavior, if you can fucking believe it." He flashed his fangs in a very misbehaving smile. "I couldn't miss the wedding of the century, after all. Especially since I was so instrumental in pulling it off..."

Caro giggled. "I'm happy to say it's gone fabulously well. And you've just upgraded my happiness to outright effusion."

"No problems with the bridegroom?"

"Not so far. But he hasn't seen *you* yet."

Alex laughed. "I'll be sure to steer clear of the john if I see him headed that way."

"For sure. Especially since you're wearing that particular tie. You're the only guy I know who can make a tie look sexy."

"You only say that because you're the one who gets to take it off."

She stroked her hand down his lean cheek. His emerald eyes were glowing suggestively.

"Mm. I'd like to take it off sooner rather than later but I might be tied up here for a while. Oh God. I don't know if I can wait." Her body was humming, jumping, popping with need for him. Oh man, oh man. He was here!

He discreetly danced them around so that Caro's back faced an empty corner of the tent. He smoothed a hand down over the curve of her hip, pressing her hard against his lower body.

"Even the wedding planner can take a little break, can't she?"

She sighed as he brushed his lips over her hair and then down to nibble on her diamond-studded earlobe.

"Nice earrings," he whispered.

"Thanks," she whispered back with a smile. "My boyfriend sent them to me for my birthday."

Alex pulled her wrist up to his mouth and gave the skin around her tattoo a teasing lick. "Well, my gorgeous girlfriend, how about that break? I swear I saw an empty conservatory around here somewhere..."

"Follow me." She led him out of the reception area. Guests were mingling among the flowers adorning the hallway that led to one of the main conservatories. They discreetly slipped by them and hurried through a set of glass doors.

"Don't they lock these areas off for an event like this?" Alex asked as they walked down a dimly lit frond-covered path. The moist, warm air caressed them as they found a secluded bench behind a drooping palm.

"I guess not," Caro murmured as they sat down on the bench. Lights sparkled in the trees outside the windows.

Smiling up into his eyes, she loosened his tie and smoothed her fingers back into his hair. She gave him a long, slow, passionate kiss. They were both breathing hard when she came up for air and began to nibble along his chin.

"You know, after last week's visit I thought I might be sated for a while. But I discovered a few days ago that that particular fix has definitely worn off..."

He brushed a finger down her neckline and quickly undid the buttons of her suit jacket. When he carefully released her breasts from her lacy camisole, his hum of appreciation reverberated through her body. Her hands ran up under his suit jacket as he bent down to tease a nipple with his tongue. He parted her thighs, seeking other sensitive spots. Thank God she was wearing stockings and not pantyhose.

"So what are our chances of being interrupted?"

Caro gasped as he found wet flesh with his fingers. "Oh God! Minimal, I hope."

Alex laughed huskily. "I'd take you behind the tree but palm bark looks a little unforgiving." Caro bit her lip as he sunk a long finger inside her.

"Let's try it this way." She quickly unzipped his fly and released his cock. After giving it an affectionate stroke, she swung her leg up and over to straddle his lap. She pushed her thong aside and quickly guided him between the folds of her pussy. His groan drowned out her sigh as she slowly sank down on his length.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," he murmured when she began to roll her hips in the slow, sinuous rhythm he liked best.

"Anytime," she whispered. She held on tight to his shoulders as he stroked the sleek spot of their connection, laving her juices over the base of his cock and around the throbbing hood of her clit. Within moments she was gasping out his name in a feverish climax. She felt Alex convulse in quick succession, his words of sweet satisfaction a luscious hum against her breasts.

He was stroking the hair away from her neck, making her shiver and sigh, teasing her with the sharp points of his canines when he paused suddenly. "There's somebody coming," he whispered.

"Yeah, I know. It was me."

He laughed softly. "Shut up, you goofball. I mean there's somebody here in the conservatory."

Caro slid off his lap and onto the hard concrete bench in time to see Mr. and Mrs. McCarthy walking down the path toward them.

In a moment they would discover Alex and Caro under the shielding frond. Alex quickly zipped his fly and smoothed down Caro's skirt while she tried to repress uncontrollable giggles.

"Went off pretty well, considering our daughter decided to marry a mental lightweight," Mr. McCarthy was saying. They stopped to look at a group of plants not ten feet in front of Alex and Caro.

"God, I'm just so happy it's over. The incredible relief that they didn't elope. Or do some other flaky thing. I'm overwhelmed with joy. And I'm a little bit drunk. Ben...do you remember our wedding night?"

"How could I forget? The night I discovered my wife was a firecracker beyond compare." They grasped each other in a clench that rivaled the best heroes of the WWF.

A noise that was half snort, half gulp escaped Caro's mouth and Alex belatedly pressed his fingers against her lips.

The McCarthys turned their heads, their faces stricken with incredibly similar expressions of dismay.

"Caro! And—my God, Alexander! What are you doing here?" Mrs. McCarthy's voice had gone from sexy to shrill in point-two seconds.

Caro and Alex stood up, Caro quickly buttoning her suit jacket and Alex straightening his tie.

"Umm, we were just taking in the sights while I took a quick break." Caro was still on the verge of laughter. As Alex grabbed her ass, she had to bite her lip to keep from busting into fresh gales. She dipped her head, furtively trying to straighten her skirt, knowing that what they had really been doing was written all over her face.

"Ah," said Mr. McCarthy knowingly. "Weddings bring it out in all of us...that need for those particular kinds of breaks." He winked broadly at Alex.

"Mr. McCarthy, I don't think you've ever met my boyfriend, Alex."

Mr. McCarthy reached out to shake Alex's hand and then jumped as his wife shrieked, "Alex is your boyfriend? But I thought...well I..."

She blustered for a moment as her husband looked at her in annoyance. "You thought what, my dear?"

"Well, I thought he was a gay vampire. I thought he was Len's...you know...boyfriend. Oh my God, does Len know about this?"

This time Caro couldn't help herself. She laughed out loud.

Alex reached over and patted Mrs. McCarthy comfortingly on the arm. "Yes, Len knows. In fact, he's going to be the best man at our wedding."

Now it was Caro's turn to gasp. "What?"

Alex pulled a small, black velvet box from his pocket. "You have to take the ring. It matches the earrings." His voice was a priceless combination of imploring plea and regal command.

Caro took the box and touched his face. She couldn't really see his expression, couldn't look at the ring, her eyes were too filled with happy tears.

"Say yes this time." His whisper caressed her ear.

She wiped the tears away and nodded. "Yes."

His lips brushed hers with an impossibly tender touch. "Thank you."

"But, but..." Mrs. McCarthy was still sputtering. "Caro! Why ever would you want to marry a vampire? And one who so obviously swings both ways? I'm a dutiful watcher of vampire reality series and I can tell you right now that you'll never, *ever* be able to trust him!"

Caro laughed incredulously. Unbelievable, but Alex had actually made her forget Mrs. McCarthy's presence.

"Darling, what in the hell are you talking about?" Mr. McCarthy was beginning to look more than a little irritated.

Alex looked down at Caro and grinned. "It's okay, Mrs. McCarthy. It was Caro who changed my wicked ways. She changed my whole life, in fact." Alex took the open ring box from Caro and slipped the righteously royal-looking rock on her finger. "I walk the straight-and-narrow line now. Because she's mine."

"Oh." Mrs. McCarthy opened her mouth and then shut it again.

"Good for you, my boy." Mr. McCarthy winked at Caro and slapped Alex on the shoulder. "In my estimation, Ms. Connery is as much a firecracker as my wife. You'll never regret marrying her. That is, if you can manage to keep up with her."

Alex took Caro's hand and brought it to his lips for a kiss. "It's going to be my second challenge. Right after convincing her to plan one last wedding party." He gave them a little bow. "Great meeting you."

As Mr. McCarthy turned away and led his baffled wife down the conservatory's leafy path, Caro drew Alex back beneath the palm tree's sheltering fronds. Twining her fingers into the black satin hair at his temples, she pulled him down for a kiss—a kiss to welcome him home, a kiss to show him how much she loved him, a kiss to celebrate their future.

He pulled back, breathless and smiling, and said, "Damn. Let's do that some more." Grinning, she tugged him closer, moving one hand down to reopen his zipper. "Mm..." he moaned against her lips, finding the bare skin beneath her skirt with his clever fingers. "But let's do it somewhere more comfortable. Like at home. In bed. Where I can love you properly for the next week and a half."

"No." She licked at his lower lip, sliding her hand into the opening of his silk boxers to find the even silkier treasure inside.

"No?" One black brow shot up.

He dipped and delved with his fingers and, wiggling against the feel of ripe, luscious sensation, she laughed and said, "No."

"The bench again?" he asked, slowly backing her toward the spot where they'd made love a few minutes ago. He gasped when she palmed his cock's seeping head.

"No." She curved her fingers around his shaft, tickling as she made her way down to the taut skin of his balls. He felt delicious.

"Oh God. The ground?"

She laughed at the hoarse timber of his voice. "Nope."

He dropped his forehead down to hers, sighing. "Okay. What gives?"

"No climaxing until you agree to negotiate."

"Negotiate?" He bit off the word as she rolled him gently between her fingers.

"Yep."

"What are we negotiating here—or am I not allowed to know?"

"Who plans our wedding. Me, a mundane mortal event planner, or you, master immortal wedding planner to the matrons of suburbia."

"Um, Caro?" He eased two fingers into her pussy, finding the hood of her clit with the pad of his thumb. She moaned, tipping her head back helplessly as he placed light, fluttering kisses over her cheek and down her neck. She tightened her clasp on his balls and he inhaled sharply. "I think you're forgetting something."

"What?" She tried to remember her train of thought as pleasure hijacked her brain but, damn, that thing he was doing with his thumb was incredible...

"I am..." Pausing on an exhaled breath, he withdrew his fingers and abruptly snagged her hand. She dazedly widened her eyes.

"What?"

"I am...your master." With a blink-fast move, he brought her wrist to his mouth and covered her tattoo with his lips and tongue.

"Ah God!" She bucked, the climax that had been hovering at the brink of her pleasure center crashing the gates with gusto. "Cheater!" She heaved out the word.

His chuckle was sexily evil as he dropped her wrist, pulled her to his body and held her close, soothing her with sweeping caresses over her hair and back. "Just a friendly little reminder," he murmured against her ear. "However..."

"Mm." she wrapped her arms around his waist and nuzzled her face into his chest. He smelled so good, felt so good. She'd missed him so, so much. "However?"

Stepping back, he rearranged his clothes and smoothed his hair. After making a few adjustments to Caro's clothes, he took her hand and led her away from the sheltering tree. "However, since I'm a newfangled kind of vamp, I am, in fact, willing to negotiate."

She laughed as he flashed her favorite grin. Holding hands, they began to walk down the conservatory's path. "Hmm. Most climaxes tonight wins?"

"Okay. But wait...is the climax giver or the climax receiver the winner?"

"Good question. We'll negotiate that point first."

"Cool. Let's go home and get started."

* * * * *

Negotiations continued well into the next week and Caro was quite happy with the outcome.

They decided Lenny should plan the wedding.

About the Author

Jennifer North was bored at work one day and stated writing a romance. “Truckstop Cutie” never made it past the first chapter, but it did provide loads of laughs for the IT guy who uploaded it onto his computer. Several years have passed and Jennifer now spends her days writing entire books that she hopes will provide laughs, chills, and thrills to a larger, more appreciative audience than her first one.

Jennifer lives in New England in a household bursting at the seams with males. No, wait-she’s not entirely sure of the gender of her sons’ three fish. But even before she lived with so many guys, she had an abiding love for football, muscle cars, beer and hard-driving rock-and-roll.

The author 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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