

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

ASHLEY LADD

TRUTH, JUSTICE
AND THE
Vampire WAY

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Truth, Justice and the Vampire Way

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TRUTH, JUSTICE AND THE VAMPIRE WAY

Ashley Ladd

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Chapter One

“Damn those werecats!” Their last attack had nearly obliterated the family. If they didn’t find strong soldiers soon, they wouldn’t survive another. Genevieve peered down at the city shrouded in darkness except for the occasional ray of moonlight. The queen of the few Alp vampires remaining in North America spread her wings wider.

“I rather thought we were all damned,” Constantine, the clan’s fiercest warrior, mumbled under his breath as he caught a gust of wind. “Perhaps it’s time to take a king...”

Genevieve tamped down her annoyance as she landed in a deserted alley and transformed into her human form. The scent of jasmine mixing with rotting garbage molested her nostrils when she glanced at the line of rat-infested dumpsters with disgust. She hissed and bared her fangs. Flicking her hair behind her shoulders, she glared at her companion. “I’m highly capable of heading the family. Do you *dare* suggest otherwise?”

At her side, Constantine blended into the shadows and altered into a man. He averted his gaze and tilted his head. “You yourself just declared our desperation for strong warriors.”

“And who would you suggest I take as my king?” Her voice grew so quiet she could barely hear her own utterances. “Are you making application for the position—again?”

Constantine stepped into a sliver of moonlight, sidled close and whispered in her ear. His lips grazed her earlobe and he drawled, “There was a time when I flew Her Highness on soaring wings of ecstasy. How do you not recall?”

If he wasn't dead already... Unfortunately, she'd caught him more than once flying other women on soaring wings to ecstasy too. How fast men forgot. With a surge of gentler emotion she stroked his roughhewn cheek, "You are as my brother."

"Ouch! The kiss of death." It was his turn to jerk away. "Your careless words castrate me."

"You would wish us both miserable for eternity?"

Constantine folded his hands over his heart. Then he brought one hand to his forehead and tilted his face to the moon. "Where art thou wretched werewolves in my hour of need? Better they slay me than your cold heart."

Immune to her companion's theatrics, she turned her attention to more important matters. Her forehead furrowed. She inhaled the city air, but thankfully did not detect her enemy's scent.

She grew faint and was reminded that she had not supped for many an hour. "My bones grow weary. Let's get this over."

"What idiot would be out on the streets alone at this late hour?" As they walked out of the alley, he pointed to a man in tattered rags, pouring the last drops of a bottle into his mouth. "Pickings prove slim."

A stench of alcohol and tobacco drifted to Genevieve, and scowling, she turned away from the pitiful soul. "Patience. Surely we shall have our choice of many strong bodies in a place the size of Fort Lauderdale."

* * * * *

Tony Nelson yawned widely against his palm as he navigated the deserted downtown streets on his way to rescue his neighbor's sister. As usual, Carlos' Benz was out of commission and, as usual, he'd turned to his unable-to-say-no pal Tony to save the day. He'd never forgive himself if anything happened to Sophie.

As he searched for the address Carlos had given him, he passed several abandoned cars and run-down buildings. A few people drunkenly swayed and yelled obscenities so he rolled up his window and turned on the AC.

He turned from the one-way side street onto a four-lane boulevard and breathed a sigh of relief. Then out of the corner of his eye, a blur startled him and he slammed on the brakes. The car careened out of control. A sickening thud rent the air. Then a young woman clad in all black was thrown into the middle of the otherwise deserted road.

His heart stopping, his blood freezing in his veins, he couldn't budge. Then with a burst of adrenaline he leaped from the vehicle. "Lord, what have I done?"

Blood thrummed in his veins and he sprinted to the prone figure to kneel by her side. Gingerly he checked for signs of broken bones. "Can you hear me? Are you okay? Say something or give me a sign."

The woman coughed and her lashes fluttered. She pinned him with eyes as dark as midnight from beneath the thickest lashes he'd seen.

Greatly relieved, he expelled his breath and rocked back on his haunches. "Thank you, God."

Unable to catch her words as the breeze whipped them away, Tony lowered his ear to her lips. He waited several moments and when she didn't speak again, he fished around in his pocket for his phone. Moonlight glinted off the shiny casing. "Don't move, I'll stay with you until the ambulance gets here."

A gruff masculine voice broke the still of the night. "He's loyal."

Tony's heart stopped and then sprinted at full speed. The phone dropped with a clatter but he caught himself with his hand. As pebbles punished his palm he swore under his breath, and then wiped his hand down the length of his slacks. "Who's there? Where are you?"

The woman captured his hand in hers. "No need for an ambulance. I would appreciate it if you'd take me home, however."

Tony broke into a sweat, and his hands grew clammier as he turned back to her. "I don't know if you should move. Can you walk?"

Nearby a car's engine revved, and the woman struggled onto her elbows and looked about. "Please help me..."

The automobile's engine roared, but neither the owner of the man's voice nor the vehicle made an appearance and he frowned as he considered his options. As he hoped he wasn't doing the wrong thing, he hoisted her into his arms.

A smile curved the woman's lips. "You're right. He is strong."

Catching the fact that she did not address her remark to him, Tony grimaced. "Who are you talking to?"

Another blur dashed out of the shadows, and a white guy dressed in a black T-shirt and boot-cut jeans blocked his way. Half hidden by his straggly brown hair, a knowing grin split the man's face. "Me."

The woman curled her arms about Tony's neck and crooned, "He'll do quite nicely."

The man nodded slightly. "I'm not so sure he'd make a good addition."

Addition? Tony ached to flee, but froze. The woman's gaze hypnotized him, and every muscle petrified. His feet remained cemented to the pavement. His legs didn't listen to his command to run.

She shot a venomous glare at the other man. "You wouldn't like anyone I choose if it's not you."

Then the woman parted her lips and pearly white fangs burst from her gums. Before Tony could react, she ripped away his shirt and buried her face against his chest.

Unable to break free, to loose the scream choking his throat, he watched in horror as if floating above the scene. Her fangs sank into his breast, and an exquisite ache filled him as he slumped to his knees, still clutching her to his heart.

Having trouble dealing with the reality of what was happening, Tony reeled. *What an intense dream.* He couldn't wake. A titillating sensation tingled in his loins and then the moon spun out of control.

All around, familiar sounds testified to the reality of what was happening: The crash of waves against the nearby shore. The occasional whoosh of a car's engine. The caw of seagulls. Faraway police sirens.

As if he were putty, the woman pulled him into his car, shoved him down on the backseat and sank her teeth deeper.

Vaguely he was aware that the vampire had stripped him of his slacks, and that she ran a long, spiky fingernail along the length of his penis, that the sound of her breath thundered in his ear.

"Impressive. You'll do quite nicely," the woman purred in a silky, if muffled voice even as she suckled his nipple and feasted on him. Not missing a beat, she wrapped her fingers around his cock and stroked.

The heat her touch generated was so unexpected he didn't have time to block the onslaught of emotions that hit him.

"Must you partake of your carnal raptures in my presence?" the other man asked as he towered over them, his arms crossed over his chest, his head bent.

The woman lifted her face and stared at her companion. "Don't watch if it bothers you."

"Someone must protect the queen when she feeds in the open." But a scowl marred his features before everything misted in fog and Tony's thoughts were consumed by the woman.

When she lifted her head, his blood dripped from her fangs. She ran the tip of her tongue along her lips. "Then convey us to the manor."

As the man glanced east then west, moonlight dappled the planes of his face. "As you command, my queen."

My queen?

Tony opened his mouth to yell, but his voice had gone AWOL and his limbs felt like lead.

As the woman's bewitchment over him waned, Tony shook his head and tried with little success to raise himself on his arms.

The driver twisted around and gave him a wink. "Fear not. You'll be blessed with eternal life."

Eternal life? Fangs... Vampires! Tony's head reeled. He wanted to get up and leave, but he couldn't move. "You can't be real."

A sly smile curved the man's cheeks. "Count Constantine and Queen Genevieve at your service."

Genevieve swirled her tongue around Tony's chest as she closed his wounds with her saliva. Her fingertip ran over the tip of his penis and captured a drop of his juice. With slow, sensual strokes she fondled his cock.

Ready to jump out of his skin, he watched as she lifted her heavy skirt and straddled him. He seemed to float above himself, and watched the ghoulish hologram.

The woman slid down his hard length, sheathing his cock in her pussy. She moaned and her eyes closed as if in ecstasy. As she slid up and down and gyrated around on his cock, her hands splayed across his chest. Squeezing his cock, she greedily milked him of his seed.

When she rubbed her generous breasts against him, and her fangs sank into his chest, his body sat up and howled despite the fact that he was as furious as he was aroused. His pulse shot off the charts. As her mouth swooped down to cover his lips with hers, his seed gushed into her and the last of his energy waned.

She lifted her head and her breath hissed out. With her fingernail the vampire made a tiny incision in her breast. Her neck was long and graceful as she held his head so that

her blood trickled down his throat. Her voice was no more than a husky whisper. "'Tis time you drink of my blood."

Her lifeblood filled Tony with incredible sensations as he weakly shoved at the woman. Chills skated down his spine but more powerful feelings overrode his fear for his immortal soul. More ravenous than frightened, he drank.

"Um." She arched her back and pushed her breast further into his mouth. "Don't fight me. 'Tis your destiny. I—we—need you."

A thick band of clouds blocked what light the moon might have offered, and his soul felt darker still. Although he feared his prayers would no longer be heard because he had joined the eternally damned, he lifted one anyway. Was her partner planning to take a go at him? Was this going to get kinkier? "*We?*"

Revived and feeling an irresistible pull to the vampire queen, Tony gathered her into his arms and drank deeply of her lips as he thrust the full length of his cock to the hilt.

Quivering, he gathered the woman to him. Against her lips he murmured, "What in the hell have you done to me? Why me, for God's sake?"

As she met him thrust for excruciating thrust, Genevieve burned him with a look. "God has nothing to do with this. You're one of us now. We need you."

Overwhelming sexual desires warred with his conscience. "I had a life. People who depend on me." He prayed for Sophie's safety but he dare not lead these nuts to her.

The vampire queen smoothed his braids away from his face and nuzzled his neck. "We need you more. You have a new *eternal life*."

He glared at her. What kind of cosmic joke was this? Just what kind of "life" would it be?

She put her fingers to his lips and whispered, "Shush. Let me prove how much pleasure you'll receive." With that, she flipped him over so that he was on top and she thrashed about beneath him as she ran her hands up and down his back.

Tony's gums tingled with an odd sensation, and fangs burst through and grew longer. The unquenchable desire to sink them into the woman in his arms overtook him, and he gave in to the uncontrollable need. He suckled her nipple until she quivered and arched against him.

Panting and breathless, she cried out. Writhing about, she cried out a second time.

Tony moaned and with one final thrust, he carried her to heaven with him. Kissing her without a trace of tenderness, he gazed into her black eyes.

How he did it, he had no idea, but he retracted his fangs. Then he savored her blood before licking the remnants off his lips.

Sucking his lower lip into her mouth, she nibbled it playfully. "Tell me, what are you called?"

"Tony." He could barely get out the word before weariness overtook him, and he drifted into another world.

* * * * *

Constantine growled and revved the engine. "Are you quite finished, my queen? I have yet to feed, and I grow famished. I haven't the benefit of sex to keep me going."

Genevieve pushed Tony off and pulled down her skirts before buttoning her bodice. She dressed the new vampire and cushioned his head on her lap. Then she lifted her gaze and squarely met Constantine's. "Fear not. Once we have removed our new vampire to safety, you shall be freed to feast."

Constantine rubbed his hands together in glee and stomped on the gas pedal. "I've longed to drive such a beauty."

She eyed Constantine warily. Since he was a product of eighteenth-century Eastern Europe, she doubted it. "You know how to drive? Perhaps we should call Luke for help."

At mention of Luke's name, Constantine scowled. "How difficult can it be? Mortals do it." As if punctuating his words, the car moved like the road was being hit by small earthquakes and then stalled.

When her head banged against the back of Constantine's seat she swore. Casting a violent glare at the driver, she clamped her hand on his shoulder. "Cease this lunacy before we come to harm."

"We're already dead, my queen."

"Undead. We can still be beheaded." Like Anika, her former second-in-command. The thought made her shiver. It was unthinkable that Anika was gone and she missed her.

Constantine scrunched his nose and cranked the ignition. "Highly unlikely."

"You'll kill innocents." She stroked Tony's head and studied him in the circle of light from the overhead street lamps. Multiracial with cinnamon-colored flesh, waist-length braids and a well-manicured beard, he was mouth-wateringly handsome. Almost prettier than Constantine. He sported sooty lashes that veiled his soulful eyes. His frame was muscled, and she congratulated herself on her choice. Mesmerized, she stared unabashedly.

"More recruits."

Genevieve sighed and sank back against the plush upholstery. She drummed her long nails against the armrest. "They need to be strong, not mangled." Another thought struck her. "Don't act rashly. It wouldn't do to draw the werecats' notice until Tony has come into his new powers."

"That would not be the order of the day." Constantine's knuckles paled on the wheel but he focused on the road.

* * * * *

Tony awoke more powerful, more ravenous than he'd ever felt.

Soft fingers caressed his scalp and played with his braids. It felt so good. Then memory flooded back, and his lids jerked wide.

The woman he'd hit smiled down at him, blood still dripping from her fangs. Now that he wasn't worried about her dying, or caught in her spell, he had a chance to study her. Surprise filled him. Hair darker than the night accentuated her paleness. Her long lashes fluttered and she widened the most stunning jade eyes he'd ever gazed into, eyes that could easily cast a bewitching spell over a man without a whit of mystical power.

Then he remembered the woman over whom he was fantasizing was a vampire. Or at least she thought so. His heart hammered against his ribs so hard he was afraid they would break and he jerked away to the far side of the car. "You can't be real. This is a bad dream. You people are crazy. Let me out."

Something pulsed loudly in his ears, like a drumbeat. Focusing on it, he finally figured out the source.

Blood!

Not his own, but from the two other people in the car.

People?

Not people. Vampires.

Holy...

Or rather, how extremely unholy...

Hell no! He couldn't be. It was impossible...

Constantine sighed and half turned in his seat, stretching his arm along the length. "Your doubts grow wearisome. Like it or not, we're real, and you, my dear fellow, are now one of us."

The car bounced over the curb, and the rear end slammed against the ground. The whine of metal screeched into the night.

The woman glared at the driver and flicked her wrist. "'Tis intolerable. Pull over and summon Luke."

Scowling, Constantine stomped on the brakes. "I grow weary of having the great, all-powerful Luke thrown in my face. Perhaps you should elevate him to your second-in-command."

Genevieve snarled and leaned forward. "Perhaps I should."

Constantine's fangs burst out, and his eyes glowed red. After several intense moments he dropped his hands from the wheel and said tightly, "Your wish is my command, my queen."

Insatiable curiosity prompted Tony to ask, "What happens next? Will I turn into a monster?"

Genevieve hissed and scooted closer. "*Monsters*, like us?"

Constantine hooted and lifted his chin. "In my former life, I was a famous singer. I entertained royalty and heads of states. Crowds came to cheer me from far and wide. Queen Genevieve was a grand lady, her family highly placed in well-bred society." He cast a sarcastic smile on Tony. "Pray, tell us how you are higher and mightier than we *monsters*."

Tony's lips twitched and he wondered in which century the man had been spawned. "I run a home for runaway street kids. In my spare time, I like to knit. And I'm a vegetarian."

"Perfect." Genevieve's eyes widened with alarm and she stared at him as if he'd grown fins. "We've converted a vegetarian saint who knits. He'll be of great help in combat against the werecats."

Tony's heart flipped over in his chest and he blinked. "Werecats?" *What are they?*

Constantine drew an imaginary figure in the air with his hands. "Vicious demonic creatures, like werewolves, only far more contemptible."

"What could be worse than a werewolf or a vampire?" Tony said before he could bite back the comment.

“Our immortal enemies,” Genevieve said, snarling. She arched a finely shaped brow. “They’re responsible for murdering several members of our family. Perhaps you can vanquish them with your knitting needles.” Hanging her head, she moaned. “We’re doomed.”

Chapter Two

“Déjà vu. This looks just like Munster Castle.” Tony craned his head this way and that and his braids cascaded over his shoulder.

He eyed both of them warily.

Genevieve bustled around. Her heartbeat kicked up a notch and she allowed herself to smile but only enough for her to know. Then she quelled it. “Cease trailing me like a pup.”

Tony’s grin was slow and tantalizing, taunting. “What am I supposed to do now? Are you just going to give me a book to learn all this stuff? Where am I supposed to sleep? Will I turn to dust if I venture into sunlight?”

Although his deep voice sizzled across her nerve endings, she couldn’t abide his attitude. Muttering under her breath, Genevieve swore and her nails dug into her palms. “Our only hope is to resurrect Anika.”

Her gaze roamed over her new liege and she sighed. *Gentlemen. Vegetarians!* She shuddered. *Forsooth!* Gentlemen like him spelled death to the family. What had ever possessed her to think a nice man could be integrated into a vampire clan?

The in and out of her breath echoed in her head before her fangs pierced her gums. “Don’t take heed of everything you read.” Since Constantine was lounging against the wall, she caught him in her sights and snapped her fingers under his nose. “Take him under your wing.”

Constantine bowed. “As you command, my queen.”

“I’m retreating to my chambers. Disturb me only in case of dire emergency.” A bubble bath called. She stomped away, her skirt swishing about and tickling her ankle.

* * * * *

Two nights later, Constantine paced before Tony, his hands linked behind his back, his countenance black. "You must drink."

Tony's lips twisted and he stared at the guy as if he had grown another head. "Why?"

Constantine stopped in front of him and sighed. "Because you'll expire without sustenance."

Tony digested this with interest. "Will anything else kill me? Sunlight? Silver bullets? Wooden stakes?"

Constantine paused before him, his thumbs hooked in the belt loops of his black pants. "All of those things. And losing your head." He sliced his finger across his throat.

Starving to death beat losing his head. A silver bullet to the heart would be a lot quicker. So where did he find a silver bullet and someone willing to use it on him?

Constantine tapped him on the shoulder, leaned close and murmured in his ear. "Don't waste one thought about ending your existence. Genevieve won't allow it."

"Did you just read my mind?" Tony jumped back and tried to blank his mind. Unfortunately, his thoughts continued to race.

Constantine lowered his length onto a Queen Anne chair. Behind a cloud of dust motes that rose into the air, he hitched up his pant leg and crossed his ankle over his knee. He shook his head. "I well remember when I was but a fledgling vampire. You and I are not so different."

Tony's pulse fluttered and his brow furrowed. "No? But you're a..." The word stuck in his throat.

Constantine scowled and curled his fingers in a gross caricature of a Halloween Dracula and his fangs burst through his gums. "A monster? A fiend? A vampire?"

Tony lifted a brow and grinned.

Constantine's fangs retracted. On a loud sigh, he said wistfully, "Like you, I had a life...loved ones...dreams." On a softer, more wistful note, faraway visions in his eyes, he said, "The dreams don't die."

Tony's heart went out to the vampire as if he were one of the runaway kids to whom he'd devoted his life. "What kind of dreams?"

The vampire shook his head and tapped his fingers on his knee. Shadows flickered across his eyes before he averted his gaze. "You'd find it ludicrous."

"Try me." Tony leaned closer, willing the man to confide.

"I was an entertainer. A singer on the stage. I would have been great had I been given a chance." Constantine caressed his throat, and then punched his hand and swore softly. "I could still be great."

"You could?"

The vampire paused, looked around him, and then crossed the room and closed the doors. Then he returned and whispered, "You wouldn't be patronizing me, would you?"

A smile curved Tony's lips. Who was he to put down someone's dreams? He'd had dreams...amazingly he *still* clung to his dreams. He wanted to make the world a better place for his runaway kids. Weren't vampires supposed to be demonic, full of hate and loathing for humans? How long would it take for him to turn into a monster?

Pushing away his troubling thoughts, Tony clamped his hand on Constantine's shoulder. "No. This sucks, dude."

"It's not so bad. Eternity is ours to mold our hearts' desires—if the werecats don't get us."

Constantine's words vibrated in Tony's ears and excitement thrummed through his veins. Was this a blessing or a curse? He could no longer tell. Could he still take care of his street kids?

Constantine stuck out his hand and narrowed his eyes. "We never had this conversation."

As ideas gelled in Tony's mind, he shook the vampire's hand. "I hear nothing. I see nothing."

"We well understand one another." With a sly grin, Constantine nodded.

Tony meandered about the parlor taking inventory of the brocade furnishings and horsehair sofas. Cobwebs fluttered from the ceiling and beneath the furniture. "So this is the bat cave?"

Constantine peered at Tony. "The bloodlust should be a terrible ache in your belly by now."

Tony grimaced at the gnawing in his stomach and the weakness punishing his bones. He stiffened and gathered his determination to keep the hunger at bay. "Famished. But I'm not going to drink blood, animal or human."

"You're one of us now. 'Tis our sustenance. Human food will weaken you. And as Alp vampires, we have the added bonus of sucking from breasts." Constantine licked his lips and drew the figure of a voluptuous woman with his hands. "'Tis a most happy revelation, is it not?"

"Alp vampires?" Tony searched his limited library of vampire lore and came up with nil. His fingers flexed, itching to surf the net to find more info. "What are Alp vampires?"

"We originated in Germany, but our part of the family migrated to North America."

"Why haven't I ever heard of you then?" Tony drew his brows together.

"*We*, my dear fellow. The werecats have weakened our family and brought us to the brink of extinction. At least we have repaid the favor." Constantine walked to the window and stared up at the moon with a wisp of a smile clinging to his lips.

The vision of Genevieve's gorgeous breasts popped into Tony's mind and his mouth watered. He yanked his thoughts away from the vision of her dusky nipples, but

not before he was overcome by a heat wave. "Is that all you do? Eternity's got to be boring as hell."

Constantine stared at him as if he were daft, as if he'd lost every ounce of testosterone he'd ever had. "I'm a stage entertainer. We can leap tall buildings in a single bound. Run faster than the wind. Soar on the wings of night."

"So you're a family of superheroes. And now, so am I." Tony stared into space. Not too shabby. Not too shabby at all. This had a lot more possibilities than he had at first thought. He could do this. Maybe all superheroes were vampires.

Constantine pursed his lips and stared at him. After a long pause, he said in a very serious tone, "If you don't drink blood you can forget your dreams."

Tony's gut clenched at the vile thought. Drink blood he couldn't do. As much as he cherished his dreams, as much good as he'd planned to do in his life, he could forego them if it meant turning to the dark side. "Then we're at an impasse."

Constantine stuck out his lower lip. "I cannot force you, however, I must inform the queen if you continue down this dangerous path. She is most unhappy and regrets turning you."

Genevieve floated into the room in all her feminine beauty. Her hair bounced seductively about her hips. Unfortunately, her eyes were black chips of ice and her ferocious gaze pinned him. "You *will* partake of blood and you shall obey my every command without question. Your life and the lives of our family are at stake."

Refusing to be cowed, Tony took another step forward and then balled his fists on his hips. "I cannot and will not drink the blood or eat the flesh of a living being."

The queen growled and bared her fangs. "*Without question.*" She threw up her hands and her cleavage became more delineated. "Why am I being tried thus?"

Tony dragged his gaze back to the lightning in her eyes. Pretending this was an ordinary showdown and that he wasn't about to combust into flames, he shrugged and held out his hands. He treated the beauty to his most charming smile.

Too bad she was so high and mighty. As a psychologist with a lot of experience handling people and stress, he was sure he could loosen her up—if she had any humanity left.

“’Tis settled. We’ll have to feed him intravenously until he feeds on his own.” Genevieve flicked her wrist as if her will would be done so easily. “Summon Chloe. She can administer the procedure.”

“Chloe?” Another family member he’d not met.

“Our resident physician. Another do-gooder.” A half-snarl twisted her lips.

He made a note on his mental PDA. Do-gooders were bad. Monsters equaled good. Night reigned over day. Everything was topsy-turvy in this alternate world.

The queen needed help big-time. Unable to suppress his inner nice guy, he massaged her shoulders. “So tense. Some deep oil therapy might do the trick,” he murmured beside her ear, inhaling her flowery scent. *Gardenias?*

She jerked away and put distance between them. Then she treated him to another of her haughty glares. “What are you doing? ’Tis not the order of the day for you to presume such intimacy.”

After their erotic session on their first meeting? “Relaxing you. You’re terribly tense,” he murmured huskily in her ear. Memories of their hot sex exploded in his mind, her sweet taste lingered on his lips. No one else had ever made his body sing like that. Genevieve shrugged away and spun around on the ball of her foot. “Dare to presume such liberties in future and you shall die an excruciating death.”

“She’s eight hundred years old,” Constantine said with an unrepentant grin. “She’s a mite set in her manners.”

Genevieve thrust out her jaw. “I stopped aging at nine and twenty.”

Tony liked older women, loved their maturity, but eight-hundred-plus years? He gave her the once-over. What the hell. She was more than fine. Add to that the sultry

lashes, high, chiseled cheekbones and a mouthwatering figure, and she was the most gorgeous beauty he'd ever seen.

With a saucy flip of her head she flung her hair behind her shoulders, slapping him in the face. "Take heed. You'd have to measure up to the likes of Shakespeare and Elvis if you want me to fall for you."

His lips twitched. He'd never been able to resist a challenge.

A willowy blonde joined their group. With a graceful sweep of her arm, she curtsied before the vampire maven. "My queen?"

"I have a mission for you, good doctor," Genevieve drawled.

The doctor's brows pinched as she rose and faced the taller woman. "A medical task?"

Genevieve nodded. "Our newest member of the family refuses to nourish himself. Please provide assistance with or without his cooperation."

The blonde eyed Tony, her hazel eyes not unkind. Then she turned to her mistress and inclined her head. "Yes, my queen."

Then Chloe turned and crooked her finger at him. "Come on. Let's go somewhere more comfortable."

He studied the doctor and relaxed. She seemed so normal, so nice, he couldn't picture her as a vampire. "Why won't you drink blood?" Chloe asked as they settled onto a comfortable wrap-around sofa in a surprisingly modern den that didn't match the rest of the manor. She clicked off the TV. Then she perched on the arm of the couch and rested her chin on her raised knee.

He'd heard of a good bedside manner, but damn the woman was calm. "I'm a vegetarian. I'm not going to hurt anybody. I don't care what you say."

The doc stared at him for several moments, and then slapped her thigh and let out a loud hoot. "No wonder Genevieve's brimming with joy."

He rubbed his chin and couldn't hide his grin. He covered the doctor's hand with his and stared into her eyes. "Oh yeah, I'm her favorite person, all right. I want to help people, not hurt them. My entire life's been about doing good."

"I bet. If that's your only problem, no sweat. I won't hurt people or animals either. She referred you to the right woman."

He folded his arms over his chest. "How do you manage that?"

The doctor laughed lightly. "We have our very own grocery store. It's called a blood bank. We should visit tonight, before you grow too weak."

Tony squeezed her hand in his. "Help me."

She pulled her hand away and eyed him warily. "I am."

"Did you know Fort Lauderdale-Miami has one of the largest runaway populations in the nation? A highly skilled physician like you would be a great asset to my cause."

Emotions warred across the doctor's face before a shutter drew down. "Your cause?"

Unwilling to let a qualified physician wiggle off the hook, he pressed his agenda. "Eternity's a long time to waste. With our superpowers, we can really help people."

Chloe cleared her throat. "Mortals?" She stood and linked her hands behind her back and then paced the perimeter of the room, her head lowered. "We are more danger to mortals than help. You're not one of them anymore."

"I don't have to be to care what happens to them. There are hundreds of kids out there who need us. Help me help them."

Chloe frowned, and wrinkles crinkled about her eyes. "Don't let Genevieve hear you talk about any of this or you'll wish the werecats had reached you first."

He shrugged. He was sick of the warnings. "So she'll kill me...again." He welcomed real death. He wanted to yell, "Bring it on!"

Chloe glanced around furtively, her lips thinning. She lowered her voice to a hushed whisper. "It's no joking matter. Don't cross her. She didn't become queen being Miss Nice Guy."

He swallowed a hoot of laughter. "You mean she isn't Sandra Dee?"

She gasped. "Don't go there. She'll eat a nice guy like you for dinner."

"I'm not exactly helpless when it comes to the ladies. I've had my fair share of experience." *More* than his fair share.

"She's had over *eight hundred years* of experience. Even Constantine couldn't handle her and he fancies himself a ladies' man."

"Of course that crazy white boy couldn't handle a woman like that."

She shook her head and silky strands of her hair flopped in front of her eyes. With a grimace, she tucked them behind her ears. "There's no point in my helping you. You're not going to live long."

Chills skated down his spine. He couldn't do what they wanted and his breath hissed out. "But people *need* that blood. That won't work. There has to be another way."

She gaped at him and sucked in her breath. "You're impossible. Those are your only choices."

He eyed her warily, trying not to scowl. Deep in thought, he scrunched his nose. "How about if I only drink the unusable blood? Then I won't be depriving anyone. Would infected blood, like with HIV, hurt me?"

She pursed her lips and tapped her chin with her forefinger. "No one's tried, to my knowledge. I wouldn't advise it. They don't exactly keep it around anyway."

Hoping to uncover the secrets behind her eyes, he leaned closer. "If we're undead, we can't die again."

The doctor leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees. "But we can either enjoy vitality or suffer debilitating weakness. I for one don't want to become a vegetable."

Not ready to give up yet, he crossed his arms over his chest. "We won't know 'til someone tries."

With a snort, she drummed her fingers on the arm of her seat. "You're worse than Constantine. No one's going to keep tainted blood."

Her voice swirled like the wind inside his head, muffled and hard to hear. The weakness returned tenfold. His hands spread over his aching belly as he slumped over.

Chapter Three

"Luke! Genevieve! Anyone? Help!" A female voice echoed through the manor.

Vampires stampeded past Genevieve to the exits. "Dreadful werecats!" Her fangs burst through her gums. Her blood raced through her veins. "Cease and desist!"

Constantine marched into the room and pounded his fist against the wall. "The werecats are attacking! How'd they find us?"

Genevieve fought to keep her wits. "Quiet! The vampire who cried for help is the only one who is to speak."

Panting hard, his blond curls in disarray, Luke loped in. "It was Chloe. That new minion of yours collapsed. It's not a werecat attack."

A mixture of relief and anxiety swirling together, Genevieve swore under her breath as she whirled around. She pinned her gaze on Luke. "Where is he?"

"This way." Luke didn't wait for an answer, just pivoted on his boot heel and strode away.

Furious, muttering under her breath, she followed.

Tony moaned as Chloe held him and stroked his braids away from his face.

Genevieve groaned, worried about how ashen he'd grown. "The fool has not yet drunk blood."

Chloe frowned and shook her head. "Not yet, but we've come up with a solution."

Annoyance pulsed in her ears. "Hallelujah. Let's hope it's in time. I pray you, hand him over to me."

She slipped one breast out of her dress and rubbed her nipple against Tony's lips. She moved the bud against him. "Drink. That's an order."

Tony's lids fluttered open and his eyes glazed over. The tip of his tongue grazed her heated flesh. "Are you sure this isn't heaven?"

Luke chuckled and then stifled his mirth with his hand.

Genevieve glared at the former cop. "We all know how much you like those." She inclined her head at Chloe's more than ample chest.

Chloe blushed and her nipples beaded against her silky blouse before she crossed her arms over her chest.

Tony's hands caressed Genevieve's breast. His fingers played with the tightening nub of her other nipple.

Becoming aroused despite herself, Genevieve bit back moans of pleasure. Moisture soaked her panties and she longed to feel those fingers caress the crease of her pussy, to stroke the inside of her folds, but she maintained a stoic countenance. "Please allow us some privacy."

Luke took Chloe's hand and, with a schooled expression, pulled his lifemate from the room, and Bo followed, their gazes averted. Constantine scowled at her and Tony but then squared his shoulders, spun around and followed the others out.

Worry for Constantine's reaction was shoved away when Tony moaned anew. She pushed her breast more securely into his mouth and ensured he drank.

The old cravings returned as if she were a fledgling vampire, and she squirmed.

Holding on tight to her emotions, she reprimanded herself. This wasn't about her needs, her cravings. The time had come to revive her new liege and make him compliant. Off balance from the series of emotional quakes, she pushed up her skirts and guided Tony's fingers to her pussy.

She ached for his touch. She yearned for his caresses. Pressing closer, she invited him deeper.

Tony rubbed her clit in a hypnotizing rhythm. He slid a finger along her folds and then delved into her sex. "Mmm. You're so wet."

She was wetter than she'd been for any man in more years than she cared to count. She who was always in control of her emotions was losing her head when it came to this man, and she was frightened. Unable to dam the flow of sensation, she murmured against his searing flesh, "For you and your magical fingers."

"You're so warm—for a vampire." Tony's lips, warm and erotic, floated across her flesh, setting her aflame.

The hair on his cheeks grazed the hollow of her neck, making her shiver, and she got lost in the emotion.

He lifted her dress over her head and let it puddle to the floor. Then he removed her lacy undergarments and let them slither onto the pile. He turned her over and spread her legs wide. Instead of plunging immediately inside, his fingertips skimmed across her thighs, circling higher until he stroked her pussy lips. Then he stabbed his finger deep.

Surprised, she let out a small scream and wound her fingers around his braids.

He placed his hands on her knees and eased them apart. He kissed his way up her thighs, moving from one side to the other. With another moan, he buried his face in her pussy and feasted on her lips.

Quivering with lust, she spiraled dizzily out of control. He was better than Shakespeare. He was incredible.

He lifted his head and grinned, his lips glistening with her moisture. "Incredible, huh? Better than Shakespeare?"

Had he read her mind? Or had she said that aloud?

Whimpering at the loss of his tongue, she pushed his head back against her pussy. Arching against him, she demanded his full attention. "Ay, my liege. Your skill in the art of romance surpasses that of even Master Shakespeare."

Tony stilled and then gazed deeply into her eyes. "*The* Shakespeare?" When she nodded, he said, "I'm honored."

This man's complete, undivided attention made her feel things she'd not felt in more seasons than memory served. She'd give up a hundred Shakespeares for one genuine soul like the prize holding her in his arms.

He pushed his tongue into the heat of her sex and then zeroed in on her clit.

As wonderful as she felt, as much as she loved having his head between her legs, she grew greedier by the second. Yearning for all of him, to feel his possession, she wrapped her fingers about his girth and tugged it to her aching center. When she had him where she wanted him, she let her hands roam the rest of his sculpted body. "I want you now. All of you."

A growl rumbled from deep inside Tony's chest. "You're not a vampire. You're a temptress."

"I'm a woman who wants you too. Desperately." Unlike Luke and Chloe she'd never found her lifemate, had given up hope hundreds of years ago of ever finding her perfect man. Here in Tony's arms, hope flared. She felt something, new and frail to be sure, but precious. It was something to be cherished and nurtured and protected at all costs.

"I've never deprived a beautiful woman of her heart's desire." Tony traced her lips with the tip of his tongue and then brought their lips together in a soft, almost featherlight caress. Then he grew more demanding, taking control. His hands smoothed over her back and then moved lower to caress her buttocks and then mold her against him.

She let the taste of his mouth, his heady scent and the feel of his body surround her. Eager to be one with this man, she arched her hips in invitation.

When he plunged into her, the flames inside flared sky high and screams of pleasure were ripped from her throat. It took every ounce of her control to keep from sliding over the edge into oblivion, to savor him. Gulping in ragged breaths, she slowed her frantic writhing and eased her grip on his cock.

Tony paused and shifted his weight so he wouldn't crush her. "Aren't you happy?"

Bereft and chilly, eager to mold herself against him, she wound her fingers through Tony's braids and drew him back. "*Au contraire*. I just want to take pleasure in you. No need to rush."

Tony's sunny smile reappeared, bathing her in its glory. "No need at all. As you tell me, eternity is ours."

Eternity wouldn't be long enough to spend in this god's arms. Could she have found her lifemate? Doubts warred with her euphoria, and coming down to earth, she bit her lip. Yes, the sex was out of this world, but she wasn't an ordinary vampire. She was the queen. Her lifemate would become king. Could she base eternity, the family's future, on animal lust?

With his cock sliding in and out so deliciously, she moaned. Why should the family's needs always take precedence over hers? She'd given them eight hundred years of devoted servitude. She deserved more than a bereft eternity.

His life force seeped into her, giving her a burst of exhilarating strength. Ravenous, she sank her fangs deeper and, grinding her hips against his, she met him thrust for thrust.

Her breath came in short, punctuated bursts and her heart hammered against his ribs.

Her fangs retracted and she gazed deeply into his eyes, seeing the reflection of her own passion-glazed gaze in their depths. Yearning to give him the first taste of his own blood, she lifted her lips to his. A breath away, she murmured seductively, "See what you'd be missing if you let yourself expire? Stay with me...us."

He closed the distance and captured her lips. His tongue swept into the cavern of her mouth, and tangled with hers in a soul-searing exploration.

Striving for closer union, their hips moved together. His cock filled her, and then he pulled out to the tip, teasing her.

Her senses screamed and she pounded her hips against his, gloving his cock and milking it with every greedy fiber of her being.

Quivering, longing to share this miraculous feeling, she clung to her lover. Still writhing in pleasure, she squeezed her inner walls tightly about his cock.

Rasping in ragged breaths, Tony drove into her one last time and crushed her to him as he drank deeply of her lips.

Spellbound by their coupling, she clung to him throughout the strong orgasm that continued to rock her.

Still coupled, their bodies molded together perfectly as she drifted down from her cloud. Intrigued by his long braids, she wrapped herself in them.

"Do I pass muster, my queen?" Tony's gaze sparkled down into hers and he kissed the tip of her nose.

The way his resonant voice caressed the phrase "my queen" transformed it into a heart-melting endearment instead of the sometimes cold, often sarcastic title to which she'd grown accustomed.

Still hazy with desire, she licked her lips slowly and provocatively. "If only Shakespeare had made love so poetically."

When Tony pulled out of her, the cold air made her shiver and her nipples pucker. Catching him by his tantalizing braids, she held him captive. "Not so fast. You promised to fulfill my heart's desire."

Tony rolled over with her in his arms and then released her. As he lay on his back by her side, a sheen of perspiration made him glimmer as if he were covered by stardust. His fingertips caressed her breasts and made a slow, provocative trail down her stomach until they tangled in her wiry nest of curls. "A finer compliment has never been paid to me. And you, beautiful lady, are poetry in motion."

Heat curled in Genevieve's stomach and crawled up into her cheeks as she gazed into Tony's eyes. Bewitched, she wanted to snuggle into his arms and bury herself there for time and eternity. He seemed to be the perfect mate.

He pulled her up against him, onto her knees. "So what is your heart's desire?"

She thrilled at his transformation. Soon she'd have him soaring out of bed as well as in it. She licked her swollen lips before she answered him. *A worthy lifemate. An end to my loneliness.* "A night full of wild, uninhibited lovemaking."

His smile engulfed his entire face and his teeth gleamed white against his dark skin. "I can already see we think alike."

She slid down his length until her lips were level with his pulsing shaft. Mesmerized by its silken glory, she traced it reverently with her fingertip. "So hard yet so very soft." She delighted in the paradox that was so like men themselves—in particular this one.

After eight hundred years, men still puzzled her. She took delight in the fact that they would surely continue to do so for the next eight hundred years.

Eager to bring this special man to his ultimate satisfaction again, she flicked the glistening drop of pre-cum with her tongue. Sampling it, she smiled coyly up at him as she trailed teasing kisses up and down his hard cock.

Tony ran his fingers through her curls and arched against her. "If everyone knew the truth about vampires, they'd be breaking down your doors to enlist."

Caught up in her passionate fog, she mumbled against his heated flesh, "You only see this one side of us. Beware the werecats."

She shook off the shudders that terrible utterance always wreaked. The heinous creatures had no business ruining such a perfect love tango.

Banishing the unwelcome thought, she took him in her mouth, sliding up and down his cock. Lost in passion again, she massaged his testicles, so full of glorious seed.

He tensed against her and rammed his cock to the back of her throat.

Excited, she sucked him and caressed the base of his shaft. "Allow me to savor you," she murmured around him.

"Perfect," Tony murmured breathlessly as he spasmed and his come poured into her mouth.

She drank greedily and still it came until it spilled from her mouth. Her tongue darted out to savor the last of his salty come.

Tony burned her with a look and dragged her against his body. "My turn." Without giving her time to catch her breath, he plundered her lips.

She thrilled to his take-charge attitude.

Gently he pushed her back against the sofa and spread her legs. "So exquisite," he murmured as he delved a finger inside her pussy. "And so incredibly wet."

His voice sizzled across her nerve endings as he teased and explored. Ripe and musky, the scent of his blood tantalized her.

He leaned in and suckled her clit as his finger stroked in and out. Tender yet commanding, he nibbled, licked and sucked. Then he stood and towered above her, his long cock hanging hard and heavy, a pulsating vein running from the base to the head. It bounced provocatively, making its mission clear.

Unable to mistake the lust simmering in his eyes, she pulled him down until the tips of her breasts grazed his chest. She curled her arms around him and held him tight as she feathered a kiss across his lips.

His gaze collided with hers and then he anchored her for a full upward thrust.

His skin felt like liquid metal against hers and she tingled as if a million tiny fireflies flitted around under her skin as she ground her hips against his. Her heart accelerated, making it hard to catch her breath. Her legs quivered. As violent tremors racked her body, she pressed her lips to the base of his throat and murmured his name with a huskiness she'd not heard roll off her lips in several hundred years.

He held her tenderly and fluttered kisses over her eyelids, down her cheeks to the hollow of her throat.

He was so perfect.

Perfect?

As reality burned away the fog of jubilation, she winced. What did she know about him? That he was an exquisite lover? A vegetarian? A do-gooder? What if he was also a pacifist?

As if her thoughts mocked her, all hell loosed in the manor.

Her heart plunged to her feet and she would have drowned in her disappointment if not for the superior need to lead her family to safety. "Not now." She tore herself from Tony's arms and grabbed her clothes. She cursed their enemies and vowed she'd stop them once and for all.

Alarm on her face, Chloe barged into the room and yelled, "What are you waiting for? Get the hell out of here now! The werocats found us again."

Chapter Four

Constantine zoomed into the room. With a crazed look in his eyes, he caught Genevieve in his sights. "Battle stations! The werecats are attacking!"

Not more than a fraction of a second later, before Genevieve could pull on her dress, werecats and vampires spilled into the parlor and erupted into hand-to-hand combat. A hairy beast wrapped its paws around Bo's neck and they crashed into furniture, breaking settees, splintering chairs and knocking paintings from the wall.

With a ferocious growl, Constantine lowered his head, clenched his fists and threw himself onto Bo's assailant. He sunk his fangs into the cat's neck and ripped at its furry shoulders with his talons.

With a rush of adrenaline, Genevieve roared. In all her naked glory she rose. Her fangs burst through her gums and bloodlust poured through her. "Transform!"

She shifted into a wolf, as did most of her clansmen. Bo and Constantine, however, took to the air in their bat form. Instead of fleeing like so many others, they attacked the enemy from above, chasing away a goodly number.

To her horror, salivating werecats surrounded Tony. Their red, feral eyes gleamed in the dim lighting. Their fur bristled and their deadly claws sliced at the man. Although the newest vampire parried their assaults, they sliced and mangled him. Damn but he didn't know how to transform yet.

The fresh blood made Genevieve manic for several moments before she gathered her senses.

"Don't guard me, guard the new man." Blood pounding furiously in her ears, she leapt in front of the helpless man. Growling, she stared down the enemy.

Insanity and challenge gleaming in their eyes, her foes advanced stealthily. Only Donovan, the werecat leader and also her former lover, stood on two human legs, cocking his chin in her direction, his gaze challenging her.

“Ah, the queen risks herself for this little one. The fledgling must hold a very special place indeed—to be admitted to her royal highness’ bed.” Donovan let out a bloodcurdling growl and transformed into his hated werecat form.

Her enemy’s raw, guttural voice pushed past the pounding in her ears and for the hundredth time she cursed the man. Lover or foe, he proved lethal. Seething, she lied, “Not that one. He means nothing to me.”

Tony’s eyes glowed with an understanding unusual for one so young, distracting her for a split second, which allowed Donovan to move within striking range. Cursing herself for her weakness, she vowed to do whatever necessary to save her family.

With murderous rage gleaming in his eyes, Donovan lunged at her.

Strength gained from her fear, she lunged off her haunches and aimed her razor-like claws at the werecat’s eyes.

However, she collided midair with the werecat king. Writhing together, their fangs at each other’s necks, their limbs tangled, their claws ripping one another as fur and flesh flew, they fell to the floor.

Constantine abandoned Tony and came to her aid. He swooped down on Donovan, giving her a chance to fall back and catch her breath. The bat attacked the werecat’s eyes until blood oozed down Donovan’s face.

Every one of her muscles screamed and her joints caught fire but she bit down on her agony and whirled around to find Tony. To her relief, Luke and Chloe had jumped between the man and their enemies.

She trotted to Tony’s side and lay on her stomach so he could climb on her back, and then motioned for him to climb aboard. She couldn’t regenerate her strength in this form and feared her strength waned. When he hesitated, her annoyance multiplied.

"You're hurt. You can't take my weight." Concern tinged Tony's voice and he didn't move as ordered.

He was going to learn or die, if not by the werecats' attack, then by her. She growled again and could see the red glow of her eyes reflected in his.

With a flaring of his nostrils and a thinning of his lips, Tony leapt onto her back, pressed his knees into her flanks and wrapped his arms around her neck. He lay flat against her back, his lips a whisper's breath from her ear. "You're crazy."

Her strength failing, her focus faltering, it was a struggle to keep her head clear and watch for movement out of her peripheral vision. If they lived she'd deal with his impertinence once they reached safety.

The vampires executed a beautiful play, unfortunately oft rehearsed. They blocked the opposing guard to the cacophony of the enemies' yowls.

Cursing the enemy with her every breath, she sprinted away as if the wind whipped under her feet. It took her last vestiges of strength to ignore the stabs of pain punishing her soles.

With Constantine in front and Bo in back, her elite guard flew interference as they disappeared into their secret tunnels and escaped to their safe house.

What felt like an eternity but could only be fifteen minutes later, Tony dismounted and she heaved a heavy sigh as she shifted back to her normal shape. Once again herself, her cuts and bruises faded. Only dried blood left any proof that her body had suffered injuries.

Worried about the remainder of her troops, she paced. With an imperious flick of her wrist, she ordered several of the warriors to scout their whereabouts. Last time Donovan's crazed murderers had attacked, they'd lost three of their precious rank. Their family was diminishing at an alarming rate and she feared they'd soon become extinct if they couldn't turn this around.

Then the family convened, Genevieve lowered herself to her throne, smoothed her long skirts beneath her and primly folded her hands in her lap. Letting her gaze linger

on each family member in turn, she addressed the assembly with a heavy heart. "How did the werecats find the manor?" She tapped her long nails on her throne. "And how did they bypass our guard?"

She hated to suspect a traitor amongst them, but what else was she to think?

Tony cleared his throat. "Would there be an extra set of clothes so I can cover myself?"

Genevieve and Constantine turned in unison. The shadows didn't do a thing to hide Tony from her view and she very much appreciated the view if not his anxiety. She wouldn't mind if he stayed naked or if she could join him. Again she cursed the enemy for interfering. Unfortunately, now wasn't the time to resume their activity. "I'm sure we can find something."

Constantine motioned him forward. "You can borrow a set of mine. Follow me."

Covering his nakedness with his hands, Tony stayed in the shadows. "Just point me in the right direction."

Constantine's lips curved in a commiserative smile. "It's a maze. I'll take you."

Genevieve pressed the heel of her hand to the spot between her eyes that pounded. "Upon your return, I wish that you would grant me a private audience, Constantine."

Constantine put his palms together and bowed. His unruly hair fell across his face and hid his expression. "Why, of course, my queen."

* * * * *

Nothing had been "of course" in this shadowy alternate universe where emotions ran at full tilt, undiluted and unchecked.

Constantine led Tony to a chamber where racks of clothes wore a hundred years worth of dust. The room was so musty, his eyes watered.

"*Voilà*. Take your pick. This used to be an old theater and this was the costume room."

Tony thumbed through the racks of fancy eveningwear, each choice more pretentious than the last. He finally found something in his size and shrugged into it, grimacing at the shirt's flouncy sleeves and lacy front. Was everything in this world so bizarre?

As he slid the buttons into their holes, Tony said wryly, "How old are these things? Did they belong to Shakespeare?"

Constantine shrugged as if he didn't give a care. "I'll have you know this was the height of fashion in my day."

However irritation flashed in his companion's eyes so quickly, Tony wondered if he'd imagined it. This stuff had to be at least two hundred years old. He was amazed it hadn't disintegrated. "How many centuries ago was that?"

Constantine stared into space. "Three...four centuries gone. I was sired in 1643."

Tony did a double take and filed this tidbit of info away for future reference. He still had trouble wrapping his mind around all this. Did that mean he'd see hundreds, maybe thousands of years? He nodded, pursed his lips and arched his brows. "Let's not keep the lady waiting."

An orange-striped tabby cat trotted into the room and meowed plaintively up at Constantine.

Tony eyed the creature, growing warier of everything by the minute. "One of us?"

The tabby stood on its hind legs and in a blur became Luke. The cop quirked his brow and crossed his arms over his chest. "Playing dress-up?"

Tony scrunched his nose and held out the tail of his borrowed clothes. "Not my first choice, but it will have to do."

Luke's hearty laugh echoed in the chamber as he clapped Tony's back. "You gotta watch this guy, Constantine. He's a real joker. I have some jeans and a t-shirt stashed in my room you can borrow."

Tony breathed a sigh of relief and nodded.

Constantine rubbed his chin as if seriously considering what Luke said. "Is Her Highness summoning me?"

Luke nodded somberly. "She's not a happy camper and wants you both."

Constantine bowed slightly. "Whatever the queen commands..." He spun on his heel and headed down the hall.

Luke fell into step beside him.

Tony thoughtfully rubbed the stubble on his cheeks as he let Luke lead the way. "Can we transform into anything we want? Like a dragon?" He inventoried the forms he'd seen — wolves, bats, cats...

Constantine turned and walked backward. "We're limited to bats, cats and wolves. My shapeshifting power is that of a bat although a few of us can turn into any of the three. The lawman there transforms into a sweet little pussy."

Luke scowled. "I warned you to stop saying that."

Constantine gave a hoot. "'Tis nothing but the truth."

Chloe rounded the corner and struck a pose. "The family's waiting and Genevieve's growing impatient."

"You can get the jeans later." Luke gave him an apologetic grin.

Tony's head spun. "Do you always kowtow to Genevieve like this?"

The others stiffened and then shot looks at one another. Finally, Luke cleared his throat and answered, "She's the queen. She's head of this family and we do as she says."

Chloe shuddered and then curled her arm through the crook of Luke's when they reached her. "Be glad Anika didn't live to become queen."

He'd heard the name several times now and had pieced together she was someone of importance, someone who was no longer here, but he didn't have any of the details. "Anika?"

Hatred purpled Chloe's face and Luke winced. Finally, Constantine said, "She was Genevieve's second-in-command. She was fierce and heartless. One of the best warriors we had. Should Genevieve have died, she would have become our queen."

Tony digested this. "Who's second-in-command now?"

Constantine and Luke exchanged narrowed looks but neither replied. After several moments, Chloe said, "Nobody...yet."

Sensing this was a ripe area for strife, Tony dropped his questions.

Constantine entered alone while they waited in the hallway. How long they waited while he had an audience with the queen, Tony wasn't sure as he'd lost all track of time. Surely it must be morning soon.

Several moments or perhaps an hour later they reentered the queen's chambers. Genevieve stood and with her hands linked behind her back, paced before her throne. With an edge of disgust and sadness to her voice she said, "The traitor or traitors have yet to be unmasked. Our family's life is at stake. We must find them."

She peered at each one of them in turn. When her gaze fell on Tony, it lingered and became unfathomable. "You are the only ones I trust, and I hope my faith is not misplaced." She paused for several moments. "Keep your eyes and ears open for anything out of the ordinary. Alert me immediately should you find anything troubling."

"Yes, my queen," several voices said in unison.

Genevieve turned back to Tony and pinned him with her intent gaze. "I've decided you'll have to *earn* your keep. Cooperate and you'll be rewarded."

Tony swallowed hard. He adopted what he hoped was a congenial expression as he poured on all the charm he could manage. "I'm all yours, my queen."

The queen stepped close to him and said in a low, seductive voice, "Once we deem the safe house truly secure, we shall reconvene in my bed chamber."

Tingles raced down his spine and it was all he could do to stand tall and keep a neutral expression. "I shall follow your commands, my queen." *Some of them, at any rate.*

Relief flooded Chloe's eyes and she mouthed, "Bravo. Obey the queen and you might survive yet."

Tony bowed slightly to the doctor, as seemed to be expected. So far, she was his only real confidante and he didn't wish to alienate her.

Genevieve shot them a quelling glare. "'Tis something I should know?"

Chloe lowered her eyes and her frame stiffened. In unison, Tony and Chloe chimed, "No, Your Majesty."

"Good. Now, can we get back to business?" She looked directly at Tony and Constantine.

They nodded.

When Genevieve turned her back to Chloe, the doctor shrugged.

Genevieve bustled about, and her skirts swished about her ankles. "Miraculously, we didn't lose anyone this time. But I can't help wondering, what happened to our alarms? Our guards? How was our enemy able to get so far inside?"

Tony couldn't stand the silence and asked, "Maybe the manor was bugged. Or they might read minds."

Genevieve shot him a thankful glance. "Until we have more information, we shouldn't cast blame. We need a plan. Gather around."

Luke stepped forward. "First we have to regain control of the manor. I'll check around for surveillance devices and overhaul the alarm system."

Constantine said, "You mean what's left of it after the fiends have ripped it to shreds. They're not the most civilized of creatures."

"I've never accused Donovan—the cats—of being tidy or civilized." Genevieve's lips twisted, and she avoided eye contact with anyone.

The way she tripped over the name “Donovan” made him wonder if there was a story to uncover.

As his imagination ran rampant with different scenarios between the vampire queen and the werecat king, his fangs broke through his gums just enough to feel funny and thick. Fascinated by their strange, sharp feel, he licked his pointy teeth.

The razor-sharp edges sliced his tongue, and when he tasted his own blood, tingles ran down Tony’s spine.

Luke frowned at Tony. “For the family’s sake as well as his own, we need to bring our newest member up to speed. I’ll volunteer my services.”

Genevieve’s brows pinched together. “He’s my progeny so I’ll oversee his training.”

Constantine scowled. “If I may interject a voice of reason, the queen is already overburdened with responsibility, and did Her Highness forget that I was formerly charged with his training?”

Genevieve narrowed her eyes at him. “I have not forgotten, but I am amending my former decision. You question my word?”

A dark cloud settled over Constantine’s face, but he bowed deferentially, if a bit sharply. “I defer to your wishes. My services are still proffered should they be required.”

“Thank you, Constantine. I shall take that under advisement. Recall the rest of the family. ’Tis time to formulate our next plan of attack.

“We’ll mount our offensive tomorrow night after we’ve revitalized.

“Bo and Constantine will create a diversion to get their attention. The rest of us will enter through the catacombs. In case there are any stragglers, we’ll set off smoke bombs.”

“So I’m to be the sacrificial lamb.” Constantine shook his head and clucked his tongue.

Genevieve ignored him and pinned her gaze on Chloe. "You'll take Tony to feed. Keep him away from the fighting. Meet us back here. I'll send someone as soon as it's safe."

The queen turned to the group and with a grand sweep of her arm, she said, "We shall reconvene an hour after next sundown. Get some rest."

Tony flinched. He stared at Genevieve. Now he was nothing but a child to be babysat?

"Stop looking at me like that. You won't be any good to me dead," Genevieve murmured as she flounced off, her head held high.

* * * * *

"Rise and shine. Grocery-shopping time." Chloe sounded too chipper, as if she were embarking on an outing to the local mall.

Tony yawned and stretched his sore muscles. He'd never worked so hard, not even on his beloved basketball courts. "You make it sound so blasé."

"We're merely partaking of a meal. Simple nutrition." Chloe flicked on the lights and stood in the doorway as she looked around.

"Yeah, just like anyone else who *drinks* all their meals." Would this become same-old same-old? Maybe if he reached the queen's impressive longevity.

Chloe merely smiled as he changed. "We really have to teach you how to fly. We could be there and back in a jiff."

"That reminds me," he said meeting her amused gaze. "Why don't we wear Dracula capes? Like superheroes."

A snort of laughter burst from her lips and then she tsk-tsk'd. "Imagine that. Vampires as superheroes."

"You don't think so?" And here was his opportunity to plant more seeds. "Superheroes don't have to wear capes or lift locomotives."

"That's *outrun* speeding locomotives," she drawled, and crossed her arms over her chest. She lounged against the doorframe. "Don't you know your Superman lore?"

"Lift them, outrun them. Both are superhuman feats. But the most awesome superhuman feat is to help those in need. Are you down with me, doc? We could make a dynamite team."

Chloe stepped back and sneaked a peek down the hall in all directions before stepping into the room and closing the door. She locked it and then perched on the mattress beside him. "We're *vampires*. We're not mortal anymore. What if our bloodlust gets the better of us and we attack one of those kids you're so hot to help?"

Tony sized up the woman beside him. "You seem pretty rational and in control to me. You're a doctor. I'm a psychologist. We're not mindless animals."

"Even if we can keep total control over ourselves, what if the werecats track us there and attack? Do you want to be responsible for that massacre?"

He thought hard and didn't recall any reports of large-scale animal attacks in the city. "Have they ever attacked regular people?"

She swallowed hard and seemed to think for several moments. "To my knowledge, no. But they go for the jugular. Those kids would be our vulnerability, so the cats might attack them to get to us. I can't be responsible."

Tony's heart fell. "Surely the cats can't follow us everywhere, especially if we fly. They can't fly, can they?"

"Neither can you," she said wryly.

"I'll learn if it means helping runaways." He'd just deal with his airsickness, for the sake of the teens. Hopefully, his new physiology would prevent him from feeling the ill effects. He'd already witnessed the miraculous regenerative powers of his clansmen.

Chloe worried her bottom lip with her teeth and whispered, "Genevieve won't like it."

Although he respected and admired Genevieve, he wasn't about to kowtow to her every whim. His balls were still intact and he needed more purpose for his undeath than getting down with the vampire queen and fighting the werecats. He felt sure that, as a doctor, Chloe had to feel the sense of a higher calling. "How can you turn your back on humanity? On those kids? This is our chance to make a difference. Imagine all the good we can do, all the studies we can conduct. Our case studies could last hundreds of years. What other researchers could do that?"

Interest warred with indecision in her eyes. "Our duty is to the family now."

He jumped up and paced, rubbing the back of his head, sifting through his limited vampire knowledge. "Just how much doctoring do you get to perform on the family? We're regenerative, except for when our heads get chopped off. Tell me, can you sew a head back on?"

That won a smile and she shook her head. "You're the first vampire I've been able to help medically. My skills are obsolete here."

"But you don't have to be! Let's do this together. Let's give our undeath a purpose."

Chloe eyed him strangely. "You sure you weren't a politician?"

"Psychologists pretty much are." He knelt before her and took her hand in his to deliver his closing statement. "Say you'll join with me. We'll be the best medical team the world's ever known."

Chloe tried to hide a giggle behind her hand. "We'd be the *strangest* medical team the world's ever known."

"Don't leave me hanging too long." Persistent soul that he was, Tony wouldn't let her.

A key jiggled in the door and then Luke burst into the room. With a storm brewing in his eyes, he stopped dead. His gaze pinpointed their joined hands. "What's going on in here?"

Guilt slammed across Chloe's face and she snatched back her hand as if she'd been caught doing something nefarious. "Uh, nothing. Just talking."

"*Right*. On bended knee." Luke pinned his gaze on Chloe and then on Tony. He rubbed his chin and swore softly. "What are you two up to? What the devil are you doing down here?"

More guilt assaulted Tony than if he'd been caught in bed with her. He noted the shiny diamond Luke must have put on her finger and inclined his head at it. "Nice rock. Are congratulations in order?" What he really wanted to know was if vampires married, although he didn't want to examine his curiosity too closely.

Luke swallowed the distance in two long strides and gathered Chloe into his arms. He kissed her soundly and, still keeping an arm around her shoulders, he said, "Yep. Only vampires aren't just married for life, we're lifemates for all eternity."

Lifemates... He liked the sound of that. Visions of the very well-preserved eight-hundred-year-old queen floated before his eyes. Did he really have the nerve to think he had anything remotely in common with such an older woman?

When they finally convinced Luke nothing fishy was going on, Tony and the doctor went in search of their nightly sustenance. Clouds hid the moon and most of the stars but with his new vision, he could see as well as if the sun were shining.

Cloudy skies blocked the moonlight as they made their way off the grounds. Tony could smell the rain in the air as never before. A storm was on the way. The way the wind whipped around the trees, it was going to be a big one.

Muffled, whimpering cries coming from nearby made him stop in his tracks, making him forget about the weather.

"Hold up," he whispered, clamping his fingers around Chloe's wrist.

"Why?" Chloe looked askance at him, squaring her shoulders.

"Silence." He needed to listen, to gauge the direction the cries were coming from. He cocked his head and stared off into the distance, focusing on the sliver of pale

moonlight shimmering through a palm frond. The cries grew louder, more choked. He picked up the twin scents of terror and aggression. They were coming from the southeast, toward Sunrise Boulevard and the beach. "Something bad is going down."

Chloe's brows pinched and she yanked away her arm. "Don't even think about it. You have to feed and get back before the storm hits."

The cries grew higher in pitch, more fervent. "Somebody, please help me!"

Anger rising in his throat from the doctor's reaction, he seethed. Unable to turn his back on a person in need, he said, "Just watch me. Stay here or return to the manor without me, I don't care."

Without waiting for his companion's response, Tony focused all his thoughts inward and after several long, frustrating moments of nothing, he finally shifted into a cat and sped toward the commotion. The stench of beer, rotting garbage and urine emanated from the mouth of the alleyway where the attack was taking place. There was a chill to the wind that hadn't been present a few minutes ago. There might be a bad storm heading their way. It was all he could do to ignore the overpowering odors, and hoped he'd get a better handle on his heightened senses soon.

A vagrant accosted what looked to be a teenage girl in ratty blue jeans. He shook the child without mercy.

Slurred words tumbled from the man's lips as he loomed over his prey. "How dare you people steal my food. Trespass in my home. Spy on me!"

All blood draining from her already ashen cheeks, the girl winced. "I d-didn't know this was your home. I was only looking in the dumpster for some dinner. B-but if you let me leave, I s-swear I'll leave right now and never ever come back. P-please let me g-go." She tugged at her arm but couldn't pull free.

"If I let you go, you'll tell the others. They'll come to get me."

The teen froze. Bruises purpled her upper arms where the man had grabbed her.

Insanity flared in the man's eyes and he roared, "No enemy soldiers invade my home and live!"

"No. P-please, just let me go." The girl crumpled, starting to become dead weight on the man's outstretched arms.

Tony shifted to his vampire form and moved to rescue her, but not quickly enough.

The bum hauled her up with surprising strength and shoved her violently against a brick wall. "You lie! You steal my food and expect me to believe you? Have mercy on you? Where was your mercy for me?"

Her head cracked against the building, and she slumped to the ground.

"You! Get away from her. Get out of here," Tony growled at the man, flashing his glowing eyes. His fangs erupted.

The man's eyes widened with terror. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph, save me!" He peed himself as he sprinted out of the alley.

Tony followed just far enough to make sure the scum wasn't going to double back. He grunted in satisfaction when the bum crossed the street, and several blocks down was swallowed by the inkiness of the night.

Tony pulled in several deep, calming breaths and willed his fangs to retract and his face to readjust itself so he wouldn't scare the girl. Retracing his steps, he was heartened to see the girl slinking away.

When she passed a shaft of light, her suspicious gaze stared back at him. Thankfully, her pupils dilated equally, not showing any sign of concussion.

He breathed a sigh of relief. Except for drops of blood trickling from her temple and a few scrapes and bruises, she seemed to be okay. If only Chloe was here.

As if he'd conjured her up, the doctor appeared at his elbow. "I can't leave you alone for a second."

Too grateful for her much-needed presence to complain about the insult, he inclined his head at the girl. "I ran off a crazy drunk who thought the child was the enemy."

"And people think we're dangerous. This is no place for a kid." Chloe looked around the alley with revulsion swimming in her eyes. "We need to get her out of here, but first, I need to make sure she's all right."

Tony nodded. Afraid the wind would whip away his words he spoke a little louder than he would have liked and hope the girl wouldn't hear. "We must win her trust."

Chloe nodded. "Let me handle this."

The doctor stepped forward and held out her hand to the girl.

Tony could hear the teen's blood pumping furiously through her veins. He could see her shallow respiration and smell her perspiration. He could sense her desperation. She wanted to trust them, yet she didn't trust anyone.

"We won't hurt you. We only want to help," Tony said softly, even as he fought troubling thoughts. How easy it would be for an evil vampire to hurt these kids. Their minds were still so malleable. The beast in him clamored to feed and he didn't know how long he could resist.

Would the beast become harder to control as time marched on? As wild and unpredictable as the approaching storm?

Focus!

The girl shuffled her feet as if she'd turn and run at the slightest provocation.

Damn, she's skittish!

Chloe flashed a disarming smile at her patient but otherwise didn't move so much as a muscle, as if she too was afraid of scaring away the frightened child. "I'm Chloe. I'm a doctor. Your knight in shining armor over there is Tony." The girl's whitish lips twitched as she shifted her terrified gaze to him.

"Tony?" She bounced on the balls of her feet as if poised for flight.

His smile spread across his face. "My friends call me Tony."

The girl nodded, her frown smoothing. "I'm Liza."

Wonderful! They were making progress. "Nice to meet you, Liza. Want a lift to the shelter?"

Liza looked at her shuffling feet and dug her hands deeper into her tattered, faded jeans. "My mom said never to talk to strangers."

Tony nodded and pretended to give thought to the argument. "Would she want you to be out on these streets? *Alone?*"

Liza's brown eyes grew glassy and a tear streaked down her cheek. She gulped several times and swiped at another runaway tear, "N-no."

Chloe smiled warmly and held out her hand. "Come on. Let's get you inside where I can examine you. Besides, you don't want to be stuck outside in a storm like this."

Liza blinked and craned her neck back to gaze up at the lightning that bounced from cloud to cloud. A particularly gusty wind knocked several coconuts off a nearby tree and whipped her hair about her face. She squeaked out, "There's a big storm? A hurricane?"

Having lived in South Florida his entire life, Tony well knew Caribbean weather to be some of the most unpredictable on the planet. Storms changed strength and direction without warning. Sometimes they even jumped across the Florida peninsula, hitting the Atlantic coast instead of the Gulf, mocking all the sophisticated weather equipment predictions. "Hopefully not, but better safe than sorry. It's dangerous out here."

As if coming to his aid, a bolt of lightning blinded them and its twin, thunder, boomed loudly a few seconds behind. Cold rain spit at them, plopping in the many puddles already lining the alley.

"*You're* out here." Liza glanced up nervously and her hands chafed at her bare arms.

Chloe huddled into her jacket. With a slight tilt of her head, she grimaced at the starless sky. "We were running an important errand and were on our way home when we saw that guy attack you. We couldn't very well leave you out here alone. We only want to help. And we're all about to get soaked."

Palm fronds whipped about wildly. If they didn't talk this child inside very soon, they'd be swimming home.

"Okay. I guess you're safe enough if you've not attacked me yet. At least I'll take my chances with you over a hurricane."

Tony did his best to suppress a relieved smile. "Yeah. Tangling with hurricanes is a no-win situation. Let's get you to a safe haven, kiddo. They have a really awesome cook who makes to-die-for omelets." He removed his jacket and draped it around the girl's bony shoulders.

The idea of real food made his mouth water. Not that he'd been overly fond of eating, but food had been one of life's pleasures.

He sucked in a deep breath and counseled himself. He had a mission now. He couldn't let insignificant human cravings matter.

* * * * *

Hours later, Genevieve frowned at the news bulletin flashing across the bottom of the television screen. *Blood bank robbed. Contaminated samples stolen. Search on for thieves.* It was the addendum that put panic in her heart.

She'd known Tony was trouble the first time he'd gazed up at her with those big sloe-dark eyes of his. She shouldn't have let herself forget it. Nice guy or not, she'd have to keep him close.

A bat careened into the room and crashed against the far wall. Spread-eagled, it slid down the wall and went splat in an unceremonious heap on the floor. It changed into her other problem child, Constantine.

He blinked and shook his head. A large crimson bump was emerging from his forehead. "My sonar went out."

She eyed him warily and massaged her aching forehead. His sonar wasn't the only thing that was out.

Constantine rubbed his head until the lump faded. "You're so nice to me, I can't stand it. Whatever happened to our love?"

His question struck a melancholy note in her. Once, an eternity ago, she'd thought they had something special. Maybe they had. Maybe she'd been too hard on him. Or on herself. She cursed her need to demand perfection.

If only hearts healed as quickly as flesh...

"It *was* special." He sat up and hugged his knees. Rocking back and forth, he gazed sadly at her. "We shared something good, Genevieve. Stop being so hard on yourself. My most heartfelt wish is for your happiness."

She wanted that for him as well.

She sat next to him and leaned her head on his shoulder. "You think I'm not?"

"I *know* you're not. Remember, I know you better than anyone."

Although usually buried deep, her affection for Constantine welled up. But instead of love, it had changed to a profound, abiding friendship. "We'll both find happiness one day."

She hoped...

Constantine stood and dusted himself off, then held out a hand to help her up. Straightening his shirt, he rolled his head and shoulders as if to get out the kinks. Then he glanced up at the television and froze. He nudged her and pointed at it. "Don't look now, but I think you've already found it."

She stared straight at Tony's face framed by the TV and hissed. There was no doubt it was him. Tony was far from the ideal vampire. A terrifying, vicious night stalker he was not. "Do you think they're talking about our newest fledgling?" she asked.

Constantine nodded.

The newscaster on the TV returned to the stolen blood story and expounded on several theories. When he joked about the possibility of bloodthirsty vampires, she moaned. Pointing at the screen, she spat out, "My bet would have been on you to be the first to be on TV."

"Your high estimation of me makes me most happy," he said wryly.

She spread her skirt wide and curtsied. "My most sincere apologies."

"He's baaaack," Constantine said sotto voce.

She froze, barely breathing. The air had changed.

Constantine's warning was unnecessary. His scent permeated it.

Tony ambled into the room whistling, completely unaware he was the topic of conversation.

Constantine crooked a lopsided grin at the newcomer. "You've been caught, my dear fellow."

Tony stopped dead, his eyes widening too innocently to be believable. "Huh? Me? What'd I do?"

Genevieve's fury simmered just beneath the surface and she tried to quell it, but it was just too hot. Furious, she whirled on him, clenching her fists to keep them at her side. "'Tis what you *didn't* do."

He gave her a blank stare.

When Tony remained silent, Genevieve filled in the blanks. "That was you in the blood bank."

Tony's Adam's apple bobbed and he shifted his gaze away from her. "Oops."

"Oops? Such an eloquent response." She massaged her forehead but the dull ache only thudded stronger.

"I didn't see any video cameras. They must've been hidden." Tony rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"You dare say?" Constantine rested his foot on a wooden chair and leaned on his elbow, obviously amused by the show.

She feared keeping him out of trouble was going to be a chore. "Please practice more discretion in the future."

Tony stretched out on the couch near her, his body lax. His long legs crossed at the ankles and he rested his head on the back of the couch, his braids tumbling about him. He eyed her quizzically. "When do I start my vampire training?"

"We prefer to call ourselves 'night stalkers' or 'children of the night'," Constantine said with a twinkle in his eyes. "They're the politically correct terms."

Genevieve switched off the hateful television that she only allowed inside the manor for its news value. Constantine was becoming entirely too melodramatic, and she feared that it provided bad influence.

Tony quirked a brow and his gaze seesawed between her and Constantine, who was back to his annoying self.

Inhaling, she took a calming breath. She was being too hard on Tony. As he'd reminded her, he'd had no schooling yet. Trying to hide her annoyance, she adjusted the gold barrette in her hair to keep it out of her eyes.

Tony stood and bowed. "My time is yours. I'm at your disposal, my queen."

"He's learning," Constantine said, clapping. To Tony, he said, "Hurrah."

"Do you not have somewhere else to be? Werecat reconnaissance?" She shooed him away. "I'm most capable of schooling my own fledgling." Feeling better now that she was alone with Tony, she fixed her gaze on him. "Don't mind him, he's an idiot."

Tony's body hemmed her against the door and intent gleamed in his eyes. "Maybe some sparks remain between you two."

Thinking of her miserable romantic history, she unexpectedly choked back tears, cursing the one that slid down her cheek. Embarrassed, she tried to turn away her head.

“Hey. I didn’t mean to strike a nerve. I wouldn’t have said that if I thought there was truly something still there.” Tony kissed away the escaping tear.

She trembled. His were the gentlest lips her cheek had ever known.

Tony is a nice man, remember?

He wasn’t at all like her bygone paramours, that scoundrel Shakespeare for instance. Or the evil incarnate beast, Donovan. Nor was he insane like Constantine—at least she prayed not.

Maybe she was the crazy one. Until now, she’d been attracted to scalawags, the untrustworthy, lying, good-for-nothings.

Hadn’t she longed to find a good man like Luke? To know a timeless love like his and Chloe’s?

Maybe fate had sent Tony...

Or had it? Why would fate smile on the undead?

She was being fanciful, completely out of character. He wasn’t the first to join their family this century. Not even this year.

He wasn’t the only handsome man to smile upon her, to favor her with his tender touch.

He wasn’t the only accomplished lover to make her moan and writhe in ecstasy. But no one had touched her soul for more centuries than she cared to count.

So why did this man consume her thoughts? Drive her insane with worry whenever he wasn’t in her sight?

The last person to elicit that reaction from her had been Shakespeare.

Could she be falling for Tony?

As much to assure him she was okay as to convince herself, she shook her head. “No. No. I’m not in love with Constantine. That was dead and buried a long time ago. I’m not sure I was ever in love with him.”

Tony gazed at her with compassion. “Then what’s wrong? Can I help?”

His *help* was the problem. She couldn't keep her thoughts straight and pure if she remained within the circle of his arms. She couldn't trust herself if she stayed within kissing distance of his lips. Ducking, she escaped under his arm and stationed herself at a distance, several paces away. "It's Shakespeare. You'd think after half a millennia, his memory wouldn't affect me so."

She wanted to bury Will's memory, not resurrect it!

Tony tied his braids back into a ponytail and seemed to gaze inwardly even as he stared at her. "Soooo, he was your man?"

She laughed derisively. "We had quite the relationship. Shakespeare and I and every pretty face under two and twenty that inhabited a skirt. That one was a charmer, the rogue."

Tony frowned. "But I didn't think jealousy affected vampires?"

She stared into the past, surprised but pleased the heartache had dulled to a twinge. "He was a fellow like no other. His poetic tongue held me spellbound." He'd wooed her with a sonnet penned just for her—or so he'd claimed. When he'd read it in his ultra-sultry voice, she'd fallen deep and hard.

"So now we mere men don't stand a chance? How can we measure up to Shakespeare?" A wry smile twisted his lips.

Hadn't she learned over the centuries not to go on about Will, good or bad? Mere mention of his name threatened his rivals.

Or was it the moony, dreamy look in her eyes?

Eager to repair the damage, angry with herself, she closed the distance between them and gazed deeply into Tony's eyes. She stroked his soft beard and traced his lips with her fingertip. "Believe me, you're anything but a *mere man*. And Shakespeare is not someone you'd want to be like. Sometimes the memories of what was catch me off-guard."

Would his name ever have that affect on her? His presence?

At least Constantine posed no threat.

Ghosts haunted all of them. In his case, it was Micheala, an exchange student from his college days. The trick was not to give in to the haunting, to find a stronger love to dispel the ghosts.

He and Genevieve shared something powerful, something special. If only they'd be given the time for it to blossom.

With all these crazy werecats and night creatures running around, he suspected eternity could be a lot shorter than it at first appeared. If he didn't unlock his new potential, his undeath could end very soon.

As starved as he was for her lips, he returned to the matter at hand. "Vampire lessons? Can we start tonight? Now?"

"Yes. You must be prepared for the next attack. At the very least you need to know how to spread yourself on the wind and fly to safety."

He nodded, quelling the airsickness that assailed him whenever he heard the word "fly". Flying with his own wings had to be a world away from being at a mechanical bird's mercy. The realization only slightly appeased him.

Genevieve backed away a few steps and stood in the center of the room away from furniture. "I'll demonstrate. You have to concentrate, like you did to transform into a cat. Also spread your arms wide and bend your head." She held out her arms, dipped her head and transformed into a bat.

She hovered in the air for several moments before soaring over to him and landing on his shoulder. "Your turn."

The lovely woman's voice coming out of the little bat gave him chills. But he positioned himself in an open area where he spread his arms wide. He dipped his head and nothing happened. He waited several moments and still nothing happened.

Tony frowned, wishing he had a magic charm. "Is there a magic word? Or an incantation to chant?"

"Will it with every fiber of your being. Feel yourself changing, becoming one with the wind." Genevieve returned to her normal form and stood before him.

He tried again and still nothing happened. He screwed up his face. "It's not working."

The queen smiled at him. "Meld with me. We'll do this together."

He nodded, and concentrated on her melodious tones.

When Genevieve put her hand in his, warmth and joy spread through him. Suddenly he was flapping his wings.

Wings?

He'd done it. Rather, they'd worked this magic together.

"Flying is magical. There's nothing better in the universe."

Nothing better? He could think of two things. Sex...love...

"If you keep doing so well, I'll have to reward you."

His blood turned feverish and all he could think about was a completely different kind of flying.

"You've not lived 'til you've soared beneath the moon. 'Tis a gorgeous eve for flying. Follow me."

The full moon shimmered like a beacon, luring him. He'd gazed upon many brilliant moons, but this gorgeous orb was extraordinary. Because it was his first moonlit flight. Because he was with Genevieve.

"There's nothing more enchanting." A smile glowed in Genevieve's voice.

He found *her* enchanting. When their wings touched, thrills shot through him. They soared wing to wing, their hearts beating in sync.

Genevieve asked softly, "Are you all right?"

Surprisingly no hint of air sickness bothered him. With her by his side, with the moonlight bathing them in its brilliance, he forgot his aversion to flight.

From up in the heavens, he enjoyed a clear view of Fort Lauderdale and farther south into the dazzling lights of Miami Beach. Rooftops gleamed in the twinkling light. Starlight dusted the sparkling clouds. Whitecaps rolled on the ocean and lapped the golden shores.

"Life takes on an entirely different perspective from up here, doesn't it?" Genevieve sighed. "It's the one place I feel carefree, where I don't have to keep watch over my shoulder for werecats. If only we could stay in flight forever."

"So what is our typical night?" The confusion of the past several days settled heavily on his heart. "Moonlit flights? Or werecat attacks?"

She seemed to let her thoughts settle. After several long moments, she said in measured tones, "Both. Sometimes we engage in battle. More often than not, we indulge in making love..." Her voice trailed off in a husky, seductive whisper.

How could he forget such delicious moments? His blood simmered as he caught an updraft and climbed high into the heavens.

If it weren't for the werecats, undeath would be ideal. Unfortunately, he needed more purpose to his existence.

A bloodcurdling, terror-filled scream sounded far below, yanking him out of his reverie. Immediately, he honed in on it, the sound bouncing off him in waves. He turned and flew toward it. "Did you hear that?"

Genevieve dipped her wing and followed. "Of course. This'll be a good drill. Track it to the source. Try to ascertain the human's location."

Deeply troubled, he stared at his sire. To her, this was a hunt. The human represented mere prey. To him, the victim was an innocent to protect.

He and the queen remained worlds apart. Their ideologies lay on opposing sides.

With great effort, he blocked out the irritating city noises and followed the distressed voice.

Moments later he spotted a couple of punks accosting a middle-aged woman. The shorter, scrappier of the two ripped her shoulder bag to the ground, spilling its contents about his feet, and then shoved her to the ground. When she dove to the littered ground for her wallet, his accomplice stomped on her hand. "What's in there that's worth your life, Grandma?"

Livid, Tony had enough. Fury roiling through him, he dive-bombed the duo.

The man screamed and dove to the pavement.

Genevieve nipped his wing.

A primitive growl surged in Tony's gut as he rushed past her. He was damned if he'd become a mindless minion. He couldn't ignore someone in dire need.

The vampire queen whirled on him and blocked his path. The expression she turned on him was blacker than the night.

Bitterness crept into his heart as he realized just how different he and Genevieve were. Dipping his wing, he ducked under Genevieve and attacked the man lifting his fist to strike the woman. He clawed at his face, pulled out clumps of his hair and then sank his fangs into the fiend's chest.

The woman scampered away, her head tucked low. Uneven sobs tore from her throat as she rounded the corner and left his vision.

A distance away, Genevieve landed, and in the shadows, turned back into vampire form. She stepped into a crescent of moonlight and folded her arms over her chest. "Hear me. You are *not* Superman. I dare say, I already suffered through this unhappy circumstance with Luke. You have not his excuse—you weren't a constable."

The blood began to make him woozy and too late he felt himself spiraling into a feeding frenzy.

“Good,” Genevieve drawled as she strolled across the road and stood over him. “Drink deeply, my pet. Free yourself.”

Disgusted with himself, he released the man and spat out his vile blood. *My pet?* Just how low had he sunk? “Get lost and don’t ever let me catch you here again or you won’t get away next time,” he said aloud.

The spiky-haired punk scrambled away on all fours. “That bitch is talking to the bloodsucking bat! Let’s get the hell out of here!”

The second man opened his eyes and spat on the ground. “You drank too much of the happy juice, you pathetic moron. Grow some balls and get back here.”

The young man rose to his feet jerkily and vaulted away, abandoning his friend. “Fuck you.”

The scrappy bastard flipped off his buddy and then stomped over to the woman. “Didn’t your mama ever tell you it was dangerous to go out alone at night? Predators like me lurk in dark shadows.”

And like me, Tony thought as he flew full force at the man’s leering face.

Genevieve whispered, “Feed on him, Tony. You’d be doing the world a favor.”

Vaguely, Tony wondered why Genevieve had switched sides so fast. First she hadn’t wanted him to get involved, to reveal himself, and now she not only applauded it but coaxed him to do more.

Revelation struck and he didn’t like it. She’d sensed his bloodlust and wanted to nurture it. Genevieve’s concern didn’t lie with the woman in jeopardy but with her own selfish goals. He didn’t know who to be more disgusted with—her or him.

He barely suppressed the growl rumbling in his chest and pulled away from his victim, letting him loose.

“I fear your manner leaves much to be desired. Your lack of discipline is not to be borne,” she said, spluttering the words.

He glared at the most enchanting, exquisite, *annoying* woman in the universe and let himself slide back into his vampire form, strange sensations settling over him as if his bones were bending in the middle. He needed space to come to terms with all of this. "I didn't join your ranks of my own free will. I'm not ready to do your bidding, not when it comes to this. I don't know that I ever will be."

Without awaiting a reply, he willed himself back into bat form and slipped away. He flew south toward the beckoning lights of Miami. Unfortunately, the gently lapping ocean failed to lull him as it had earlier. To his chagrin, Genevieve dogged him.

"Return to the manor immediately. You have not been granted permission to take your leave."

He refused to look at her, but replied, "With all due respect, I'll have to decline." He tuned her out and cocked his ears for cries of distress. Two women in two days had needed rescuing. How many more would he find should he seek them out?

He increased his speed and left Genevieve behind. He headed to the heart of the city.

He flew close to the ground but grew irritated with the need to dodge the myriad buildings. And even though he was still pissed at Genevieve's highhandedness, he didn't want to fuel rumors about bats and night stalkers.

Adopting the same technique he'd used to change into a bat, he transformed into a cat. Although paws were a slower mode of transportation than wings, he could mingle amongst the humans with absolute anonymity. An army of alley cats roamed the streets, and no one would give him a second thought.

He trotted through the dimly lit, palm tree-lined streets, evading cars, stray mutts and the army of birds scavenging for garbage.

The sound of a scuffle made his ears perk and he froze in place, listening intently.

"Give me your valuables, moron. Your watch too," a harsh voice demanded.

The sound of a gun being cocked made Tony's fur bristle. He tiptoed closer on the silent pads of his paws.

"I'm not giving you my grandfather's watch," a man's deep baritone said. "Here, take my money and my credit cards. Just leave me the watch."

"You're stupid. Willing to die for a piece of jewelry."

A gunshot rang out, reverberating in the night, and a window shattered.

Fear catapulted Tony into action. Before a second shot could be fired, he turned into a man and ran in front of the victim, shielding him with his body. He fisted his hands on his hips and watched in amazement as the bullets ricocheted off his chest.

The thug gawked, too, as the color drained from his face. "Who—what...are you? Where'd you come from?"

Invincibility was his!

With a surge of power, he snatched the gun from the mugger and bent it as easily as if it were a pipe cleaner. "Return the man's things. If I catch you doing anything like this again, it'll be your body next time."

The brute's eyes widened in his ghostly face as he tossed his booty on the ground. When Tony looked at him, he bolted.

The victim turned and held out his hand to shake Tony's. "I can't thank you enough, mister. I never saw anything like it. How'd you do that? You're like Superman."

Tony's brain spun for a plausible answer as he shook the man's hand, making sure he kept his face out of the circle of the street lights. "I work out."

Without turning he said, "It's not safe to be outside alone at night."

"Yeah, yeah. Believe me, I'm getting out of here and never coming back."

When the man rounded the corner, Tony turned back into a cat. He padded along behind the victim to his car to ensure his safety.

Chapter Five

Genevieve seethed. "What cheek!" How dare he defy her!

Wretched, was she? How she longed to shake sense into his thick skull. Mostly she wanted to redirect all his passionate intensity to worthwhile endeavors. *Vampire endeavors.*

She waited in Tony's room all night, her frustration and anger mounting to explosive levels.

Tony slipped quietly into his bedroom and a sigh of relief whooshed from his lungs.

"I don't take well to mutiny."

Tony jumped and frowned at her as he began undressing. "As long as I'm back in time..."

The hair on the nape of her neck bristled and her nostrils flared. Her gaze narrowed on him. "Family members show respect for one another. Newly sired progeny aren't permitted freedoms until you've proven you are worthy of such liberties."

Tony snorted. "I haven't had a curfew since I was sixteen. I'll be damned if I'll have one now."

How had she thought this intolerable man sweet and adorable? "Like it or not, you're in your vampire infancy."

"If I'm a baby, lady, you have a very funny way of showing it." His bare chest heaved a mere two inches from her breasts. He stood before her regally, haughtily, in just his boxers.

His deliberately obtuse male logic grated on her last frayed nerve.

"Stop treating me like an ignorant child and we'll get along much better," Tony added.

They stared at each other for several minutes, their respiration heavy, their gazes intent.

Finally, Genevieve broke the silence. "Enough! You will do as I say, as your sire and your queen." Bristling, she bustled from the room.

Constantine pointed the remote at the TV and clicked it off as she marched toward him in a huff. He folded his hands over his knees, sat up at attention and beamed at her, duplicity etched on his face.

Boiling with rage, she asked in clipped tones, "Pray, what ails you?"

"Nary a thing. I am most content."

She sensed a falseness and impertinence behind his words, but the amiable quality of his voice lent doubt. She'd have to keep a close eye on him—when she wasn't consumed with her get.

Her appetite grew insatiable and the gnawing need spurred her to seek sustenance. She would deal with Constantine later. "I shall return before daybreak."

Ravenous, she quit his presence and went off to hunt. A bright and starry night, plenty of humans should be out and about. Beginning to feel lightheaded, she needed to find a donor before she became prey for one of Donovan's family.

* * * * *

Once he heard Genevieve depart, Tony ambled out to the den where Constantine was enthralled by the news.

"What's up?" He clapped his comrade on the shoulder.

Constantine craned his head and squinted. "Rumors are spreading about you. Tell me, how does it feel to save people?"

"Exhilarating. Better than flying. It's a real rush. I'm surprised that with all these superhuman powers, I'm the first."

"You're not. Luke had trouble assimilating at first, and still thought he was a cop. But you are special and that's why I selected you for Genevieve."

Tony could tell the guy was still in love with the queen, so he wondered why he would be so cool with this. "Why? It's no secret you share a history."

Constantine pierced him with a steady, intent gaze. "I want her to be happy."

Now Tony felt like a heel. "Careful. Your humanity's showing."

"This is between you and me, no one else." Constantine turned and left the room. At the entrance he pivoted around. "Be careful. Don't let your guard down."

Constantine's expression lightened. "If you like music, take a night off and come watch me perform. I'll be at the Purple Flamingo on Brickell. I go on stage at ten and midnight."

If he flew fast, he might make it to the Naples blood bank and back in time to catch the midnight show. Tony nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

Clear skies and a brisk breeze were in Tony's favor so he made it to Naples in less than half an hour. With a surge of adrenaline, he broke the lock and then located his coveted sustenance. The scent of so much blood almost overpowered him and it was all he could do to quell the bloodlust until he escaped to safety. This time he pulled his jacket hood over his braids and kept his head down. He donned gloves that he pulled from his pocket.

A cat ambled out of a back room and plaintively meowed. Its amber eyes glowed like the sun.

Recognizing Genevieve, he froze.

The cat's fluffy tail crooked and then she pranced toward the back room. When she reached the door, she placed a paw on it and turned her head, meowing again.

Cautiously, he opened the door and was pleased to see a storage room full of blood.

Tony drank deeply from his bag of blood, shuddering with pleasure when energy flowed through him. He turned to her, the luscious blood clinging to his lips, his fangs still protruding. "So how did you track me down?"

When Genevieve turned into her vampire self, moonbeams filtered through the window and skipped across her. She cast a smile that was both provocative and lethal.

Despite his annoyance, he was mesmerized. Those breasts ready to spill out of her gown called to him, making him long for dessert. If her dress dipped just a smidgen more, he'd see the areolas of her nipples. The blood he'd just drunk surged into his cock and it ached for release.

"You're not yet artful in your precautions and thus I was able to trail you with ease. In future, more cognizance of who may be following you would be the order of the day."

Tony nodded, consumed by safety concerns but more so by his hunger for the beauty. "Yes, my queen."

"'Tis time for another lesson. You removed yourself before I could teach you more. I was not able to catch you before your departure." Her eyes flashed.

She ignited his ardor and an all-consuming need overcame him. He captured her hand in his and caressed her fingers.

The beach called to him, and after drinking his fill, he escorted his companion to the alley behind the building. Taking her hand in his, he spread himself thin on the wind. Side by side, they flew toward the horizon, until the moonlight reflected off the sandy shores below.

Salt air tickled his nostrils and he basked in the moonlight. When they landed behind an outcrop of rocks, they turned into their vampire forms. Their feet sank into the shifting sands and they laughed as they stumbled across the shifting ground.

A passing patrolman flashed a light in their eyes and barked out, "The beach is closed after dark. Move along. It's not safe for folks like you."

Folks like them?

Tony almost burst out laughing. Did they really look so harmless?

He had no desire to leave. He fully intended to enjoy the balmy night on the beach with this beauty.

"We'll take our chances." When the man started to advance, he added more kindly, "Don't worry, we'll be safe."

The man scowled and crossed his arms over his burly chest. "Rules are rules. Please remove yourselves or I'll be forced to take you into the station."

Genevieve whispered in his ear, "Time for another lesson. Gaze deeply into the subject's eyes and concentrate on him. Don't break eye contact. Speak to him slowly, hypnotically. Focus all your thoughts on him and reach into his mind. You can persuade humans to do almost anything without physical force."

He felt at one with her and wondered that her powers didn't affect him as well as the mortals. Following her instructions, he gazed intently into the man's eyes until the pupils dilated.

The man stood transfixed, a blank expression on his face. His shoulders slumped, his respiration slowed and his muscles relaxed.

Genevieve sidled closer and whispered, "Try it. Tell him to remove the bullets. Suggest that he stopped at the firing range and ran out of ammunition. Then tell him to leave. To forget he saw us. Erase all memory of this event."

Enlightenment dawned. "So this is why mortals have no proof of our existence? How you feed and the donors don't remember?"

She nodded with a sly smile. "Waste not, want not. We don't bestow the gift to all the mortals from whom we feed. Only a select few are chosen to become family. And not all mortals are affected so easily as others by our persuasive powers. Some nary at all."

Awe flooded Tony. "Wow. I'm flattered." *I think.*

An adorable blush crept into Genevieve's cheeks and her lashes lowered over her eyes. "'Tis a very visible place we find ourselves, and a very bright night to boot. Let us make haste."

He blinked, dragged back to reality. "Of course."

He turned his attention on the man. "Here goes nothing," he muttered under his breath.

Then projecting more confidence than he felt, he fixed the cop with his steady gaze and pushed his thoughts at the guy. He chanted aloud, "Take the bullets out of the gun and reholster it. Forget you saw us. Forget who we are. You were at the firing range and emptied your gun of ammunition. Go about your business and trouble us no more."

As if in a trance, the man opened the chamber and dumped the bullets at his feet.

Tony focused his full attention on the man. "Very good. Now place the weapon back in its holster."

The wind whipped Genevieve's hair in her face and she tucked it behind her ears. She whispered, "Keep going. You're doing well."

"Remember this. We are no threat. We're welcome on the beach anytime. You will not bother us. You will forget this entire episode. Now turn and retrace your steps."

When the man turned away, Genevieve grinned proudly. "Your first effort bore fruit. Most progenies don't master this skill until they've made several attempts."

Most didn't have his motivation. A desperate desire to please his queen compelled him to excel. Moreover, her promises of sweet rewards tantalized him. He turned his attention on the woman. "How could I not succeed under such excellent tutelage?"

Genevieve burst into laughter. Her mirth melted into a soft smile as she slid her arm through his. "My, but you are a charmer."

His heart soared and he covered her hand with his. He turned her to face him and slid a finger beneath her chin. Lifting her face so that the moonlight kissed it, he gazed

into her eyes. "I say what I mean. Tell me, why can't we use that technique on our friends, the werecats?"

She turned her gaze out to sea and shuffled her feet in the sand. "Our psychic influences are unable to penetrate the shield of their minds. 'Tis a mystery."

"Do they have psychic powers as well? Can they manipulate mortals?"

She kicked off her satin slippers and scooped them up. They dangled off her finger as she dug her toes in the sand. "No. They are primarily beasts. Primitive creatures driven by instinct and occasional passion. Perhaps they have not the intellect necessary for us to reach their minds."

He digested this as the waves lapped his feet and wet the hems of his jeans. "Why haven't they attacked more often?"

"Like us, their numbers dwindle after each battle. They fall back and regroup. And we keep the location of our manor secret."

"Obviously not so secret."

Genevieve scowled and kicked sand into the water, ruining its tranquility. "I fear there's a traitor in our midst. Mayhap more than one."

Tony nodded as he catalogued every family member, but his knowledge was so scant he couldn't lend much observation. Another thought had been troubling him, and now that he had her undivided attention, he asked, "Why are we at war with them?"

Guilt flickered across Genevieve's face so quickly, Tony wondered if he imagined it. When she remained silent through several sets of waves crashing against shore, he asked again, "What is the reason we're at war? I'd like to know what I'm fighting for."

A long sigh shuddered from Genevieve. Still giving him her back, she said with a mixture of guilt and anger, "More than two centuries gone, Donovan, the werecat king, and myself bespoke of an alliance. 'Twas my mishap to uncover his duplicity."

"Was this a personal alliance?" Tony couldn't hold back his curiosity.

After several more long moments in which the silence fell heavily, she finally answered, "Both. He fears our power and he had a particular obsession where I was concerned."

"Is he still obsessed with you?" Tony could easily understand a man being in love with such beauty and feared he was falling too heavily under her spell as well.

"Yes. If he can't have me, he'd rather see me dead than see me with another man. If he can't control us, he'd rather bring about our extinction."

He drew her into his embrace and tucked her against his heart. Against her lips, he murmured, "I will fight to the death for you...for the family."

In danger of spontaneous combustion, he pulled her into the surf until it was up to his knees. Although the water cooled his flesh, it had no effect on his raging libido.

"You deserve a reward for passing your lesson." She pressed herself against him and rubbed against the hard ridge straining inside his jeans.

Somehow, he didn't see himself as the only one receiving a reward. Her nipples pushed against her bodice and her half-closed eyes were filled with desire.

Starved for his dessert, he dipped his head to the arched column of her throat and sucked on it until she squirmed in his arms. Greedy to treat himself to her treasures, he licked and kissed his way down her neck to her breasts.

Just beneath the surface of breasts, her blood sang out. Her flesh radiated intense heat and quivered to his touch.

Thrills shot through him at her reaction. Needing to quench his thirst, he ripped the material from her chest, exposing her to his starved gaze. So pert, so full and firm, her breasts rose and fell a mere hairsbreadth from his chest.

Perfect. More than perfect...*succulent*.

Unable to restrain himself, he pulled a nipple into his mouth. Suckling it, he moaned and ground his hips against hers.

"We're out in the open," she said breathlessly, holding his head against her, moving her pelvis in rhythm to his.

He glanced up at the moon, glad to note it was a mere crescent. "The werecats won't attack out here, will they? We're too far from the main drag for anyone to see us. It's just you, me and the man in the moon."

She squinted up at the moon and wrinkled her nose. "He must be a dirty old man. Just the type I love."

That made him pause. "Do you want me as much as I want you? Or is this merely giving something back to your donor?" His heart skipped several beats as he waited for her answer.

She cupped his face in her hands. "One, you're now a vampire, not a mere donor. Two, we're not having sex. We're making love."

Love?

Did she mean...

Devilish chuckles rang from her lips. "Now, do I have to rip off your clothes and mount you?" She trailed her fingernail down his chest to the snap of his jeans and undid it. Then she unzipped his fly and pushed the jeans down to his knees.

"I could hypnotize you with my psychic abilities. I have it on excellent authority that I've mastered the technique."

"Or you could mesmerize me with your intoxicating lips." Genevieve lifted her face to his and closed her eyes. Her smoky lashes were a smudge against her cheeks, accentuating her extreme fairness.

Who was he to thwart her heart's desires? She obviously burned for him as he burned for her. Since her dress was sodden with water, he pushed it off her shoulders and helped her shimmy free.

With a carefree giggle she stepped out of it and let the waves carry it out to sea, leaving her clad in lacy red panties that barely covered her ass.

She circled her fingers around his cock and tugged it gently but firmly to her pussy. When he started to push the scrap of lace off her hips, she shook her head and spread open a hidden slit in the crotch of her panties. "I travel prepared."

He hauled her against his chest. "Ooh baby. You're burning hot."

"For you who stirs such poetic fancy within me." She swiveled against the ultrasensitive tip of his penis.

The lace felt so erotic against his burning flesh, he almost came. He longed to recite beautiful poetry to her like Shakespeare, or croon a romantic ballad like Constantine, but he couldn't offer such eloquent flights of fancy. He could only lavish upon her all the affection swelling in his heart. Ravish her with kisses.

"I don't need pretty but empty verse. I don't want meaningless serenades." She brushed her lips against his.

Her tangy flavor burst into his mouth, and reassured, he lost himself in her exquisiteness. His testicles swelled with need, and he plunged into her hot cunt until she clung to him and screamed with pleasure.

Their pelvises ground against one another. His breath came in short, ragged bursts as raw need drove him into a frenzy.

Her breasts were crushed against his chest and their hearts raced.

Ocean spray drenched them, but its wildness was no match for their all-consuming passion.

A sudden irony struck him full in the face. He'd had to die to truly live.

"Have your wildest dreams ever taken such a turn?" she murmured huskily as she gazed into his eyes. She licked her lips as she kept up with his thrusts.

A smile tugged at his lips. "Um. Making love to the most gorgeous, exciting woman in the world? I'd hoped. Making love to a vampire queen? Not exactly."

Her laughter tinkled. When she squeezed his cock wildfire licked his veins.

How could one creature be so very adorable and annoying all in one package? Bliss unlike any he'd ever known in his mortal existence washed over him as surely, as completely, as the warm Gulf waves.

Heart to heart, soul to soul, he harbored no doubt this was meant to be. He'd never cherished anyone so much and he wanted to nurture this still-fragile love.

She was everything he'd dreamed of—and so much more. She completed him. If only they could come to a melding of the minds, his new world would be ideal.

Curling her arms and her legs around him, she clung tightly. He fucked her strong and hard and long as the cool surf crashed into them.

Ecstasy pounded her with more force than the waves. He added his hand and played with her clit, caressing it between his fingers. A climax built and quivers overtook her. Screams gurgled in her throat as he pounded into her pussy.

His moans echoed hers and he bent his head and plundered her lips.

Bucking against him, and delving her tongue deeply into his mouth, she came with more force than a tidal wave and drowned in rapture.

Tony carried her to shore and they fell to the ground. Rising above her, he rammed his cock into her until they came together again.

Genevieve laid her cheek against Tony's heart and absorbed his energy. His warmth melted into her and she trembled.

Ravenous, in need of energy, she sank her fangs into his muscular chest and drank deeply. Moaning, she writhed against his slick body. No one had tastier, sweeter blood. She could easily become addicted.

His chuckle rasped against her throat and she never wanted this night to end. Several hours of darkness still lay ahead of them. Even a queen shouldering such a wealth of responsibility deserved a few hours of carefree joy. She'd not had a luxurious

beach vacation in more centuries than this country had been in existence. "You're good for me."

He nibbled her breast and murmured, "I'm *very* good for you."

After they'd lain in one another's arms for several moments, he scooped her into his arms and strode with her to a secluded stretch of shoreline, shielded from the rest of the beach by huge rocks.

Fascinated by the play of light and shadow across his face, she drew her fingertip down his jaw. "I imagine you were popular with the ladies."

"A few. But it's not gentlemanly to kiss and tell."

An adorable stain crept onto his cheeks. She hoped he didn't have a lot to tell about. But then again, she found experienced lovers sexy. "You're a throwback—a true gentleman."

The white of his teeth gleamed in the darkness. "Well, you'd know."

Wondering if she should be offended, she pulled back and gazed into his laughing eyes. "Are you being indelicate about my age?"

He pulled her to him, hip to hip, groin to groin, and rubbed against her. He shook his head. "Not at all. I love older women."

Older? She tented her brow. Technically, she supposed she had been born and reborn eight centuries gone, but she'd stopped aging at a mere nine and twenty. Tony had reached a higher age of maturity before his rebirth, and thus in effect, was *her* elder. "'Tis not gentlemanly of you to remind me of the advanced number of centuries I've seen come and go."

Tony rocked against her and began to sway. They danced nude to the music of the crashing surf.

She marveled how perfectly she fit against his heart, how well her pelvis spooned his. The water evaporated off her flesh, and she grew warm. When his cock flexed against the juncture of her legs, her fever spiked.

Quivering with lust, she lay on the blanket of sand and pulled him down to her. Wantonly, she spread her legs wide, inviting him to complete her. She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue and then murmured, "I think I'm becoming addicted to you." Her sexual lust burned hotter than her bloodlust. That hadn't happened since Shakespeare. Finally, *finally*, she was getting over her unrequited love. Who would have thought a nice guy was just the balm she needed?

Every last lover had stomped on her heart and left it in tatters. Would Tony? His soulful eyes bewitched her.

"You're timeless. Classic. Exciting and erotic, and I'm the luckiest man in the universe." Without missing a beat, he playfully nipped her nipple.

When he abandoned it to nibble on its twin, the breeze made her shiver.

He gathered her closer into his arms and murmured against the column of her throat. He teased her lips with a kiss. "I know just how to warm you up."

Thrilling to the note of teasing in his smooth tones, she laughed. "'Tis sure I am you are."

She craved his possession yet again. Lifting her hips off the ground, she pressed against his swollen cock. Spreading her palms wide across his back, she pulled him down and into her.

He moaned and his tongue explored her mouth. His braids swished around her in a heavy curtain.

"Looky, looky. Homeboy's banging a white chick. What's the world coming to?" A tattooed, pierced punk shook his head ruefully and kicked wet sand in their faces as he and his two buddies surrounded them.

Genevieve's bloodlust returned and her fangs burst through her gums.

Enraged to the point of murder, Tony pulled out of Genevieve. Muscles bunching, he leapt to his feet, shielding Genevieve from the jerks. His fangs cut through his gums

and he longed to teach them a lesson in manners. He was fully aware of the hissing banshee behind him, amazed she hadn't already attacked. It took every last shred of his humanity not to beat the hell out of them, but he didn't know how long he could hold himself together. The bloodlust was taking hold. "Get lost. *Now.*"

The leather-clad leader unsheathed a sharp knife and advanced another step. He turned the blade so that it glimmered in the moonlight. He stared at it with insanity blazing in his eyes. "Who are *you* to tell *me* what to do?"

Tony glanced disdainfully at the useless knife, and a growl rumbled in his chest. His patience wore thin. "You'd be smart to leave now."

The kid thrust the blade at Tony's chest with a mean laugh. "How dare *you* give *me* orders, *boy.*"

The steel tip broke off on Tony's chest. "Still want to stick around?" He bared his fangs.

"Holy Mother of God," one of the two gang members muttered as he tore off down the beach, kicking sand behind him before falling flat on his face. He struggled to his feet and ran away.

"It's past time you followed your friend," Tony said, barely controlling his bloodlust.

A blur flew past him and pounced on the assailant. Snarling, Genevieve hurled the punk to the ground and ripped open his T-shirt. "Your timing is impeccable. How did you know I was famished?" Genevieve dipped her head toward the guy's rapidly rising and falling chest.

The young man suddenly stilled and his gaze grew glassy as he was hypnotized by Genevieve's powers.

As Tony watched the scene in silence, his two halves warred. Disgust filled the humanity that struggled for survival while bloodlust threatened to overcome the vampire in him. Humanity won over and he turned his back. "I don't think I'll ever be ready for this."

“How disappointing,” she drawled. “I cherished such hopes for you.” She flicked her wrist at him as she went about her business.

And here he’d thought she might have grown a heart. How could he have ever deluded himself into thinking the queen of night walkers had learned compassion?

He picked up the broken blade as a souvenir of tonight’s lesson. He tucked it into his pocket and glanced around to make sure there were no witnesses. Why he should care if the queen fed out in the open, he had no clue. She could wipe clean the slates of their minds and wreak her havoc with anonymity. With a surge of renewed anger, he changed into a bat and launched himself on the Gulf breeze.

No leisurely soar home for him tonight. He didn’t want to dwell on the night’s confusing events. And here he’d always heard life after death would be unfettered and wonderful.

But that was on the *other* side.

He’d lived a good life. How had this happened?

Chapter Six

Tony stopped by the teen center to check on Liza. He peeked into several windows until he spied her then he stole in and crept through the dim corridors to her room. He rapped his knuckles on her door and stuck his head into her room.

"How's my girl? You still hanging in there?"

She clutched a pillow to her and rocked back and forth on her bed. A haunted expression clouded her eyes.

The dorm room felt cold and sterile, devoid of the personal belongings that should clutter an adolescent girl's room, with not so much as a stuffed animal to make the bed more homey. He made a mental note to bring one to her if she was still in residence in another week.

"Home sweet home," she said wistfully, motioning toward the concrete block walls and scuffed linoleum floor. She nodded at the tattered chair in the corner. "Take a load off."

He hunkered down in it and leaned forward. "Nice place. I can see why you wouldn't want to check out."

She half snorted, half chuckled and twisted her hair into a makeshift ponytail. "Well, it's safe and dry. And it's the right price."

He pierced her with his steady gaze. "Have you talked to your parents? Tried to work your stuff out?"

The girl's eyes grew misty and she looked quickly away. "My old man left when I was real little. Ever since, my mom's drowned herself in beer and stuff. She probably hasn't even noticed I'm gone."

Anger ripped through him. These kids weren't disposable. However, it didn't sound like her mom had an easy time of things either.

"Are you married?"

Huh? He blinked. What was she getting at? "Uh, no."

"Can I stay with you anyway? We could hang out. You'd make a great dad." Hope flashed through her eyes the color of faded blue jeans and she squeezed the pillow harder.

One time, not long ago, he'd dreamed of being someone's dad. Now that dream had died along with him. "I wish I could, but my circumstances won't permit it."

The hope dulled in her eyes before a defiant mask shuttered it. "That's cool. Why should you want a troublemaking kid hanging around your neck, dragging you down?"

He winced as her pain seared him. Perhaps this had been a mistake. What did he have to offer her beyond his initial rescue? He should take Superman's cue and do the initial save and then back off. He wasn't the agency director anymore.

"Hey. Please don't take it the wrong way. I'm just not in a place that can take kids."

"I won't. I-I'm really tired. So if you don't mind?" Liza nodded at the way he'd come in and snuggled under her covers.

"Well, sweet dreams." What else could he say? He switched off her light and closed the door.

Maybe there was something more he could do. He scouted out the file room and studied her records. She'd given her mom's name and address.

He jotted them down and decided to take a little trip. He flew up the east coast to Jacksonville. Lots of alcoholics stayed up late so he hoped to get lucky and find her still awake.

He located Liza's mother's house in a poor section of town and landed in the shadows. Transforming into a cat, he prowled around and peeked through the windows until he found the woman.

She looked weary and old before her time, a fifty-year-old version of her daughter. She took an occasional sip of coffee as she picked up things around the living room. Although he spied cigarette butts in an ashtray, he saw no trace of liquor, which heartened him.

So now what? As a director he would have either called her for a meeting or had one of his social workers speak to her. As a self-appointed social worker, he decided to have an impromptu meeting. The element of surprise would be on his side and he could get a true glimpse of the situation.

He transformed into himself, shook off his apprehension as best he could and tried not to be overly hopeful. Too many times he'd met with less-than-happily-ever-afters. Too many of his kids had ended up in foster care.

He rapped his knuckles on the door, hoping she would answer so late at night.

"Mrs. Falk? I'm Tony Ne-Norbert. I'm a friend of your daughter, Liza. Can we talk?" He extended his hand and a friendly smile. He hoped he wouldn't frighten her, a tall black man at the door at midnight. Before his rebirth, he'd never have dreamed of making such a late house call. Now he had no choice.

"Liza? You know where she is? Is she all right?" The woman almost slumped into his arms. "You're not a cop with bad news, are you? Is my baby all right?"

Him, a cop? Not precisely. He had to bite back a grin.

"No. I'm not a policeman and it's not bad news. I'm a social worker." He didn't blame her for not inviting him inside. Despite his friendly demeanor, he was, after all, a night stalker, as Genevieve kept drilling into him.

"She's not dead? Glory be!" The woman wrung her hands together and opened the door wider to reveal a shabby, but tidy house. "Please come in. You must think me terribly rude."

"I hope you'll forgive me the lateness of the hour, but it took longer to get here than I anticipated." He took a seat opposite her on a torn leather couch.

Elizabeth frowned and lit a cigarette then took a long drag. Peering at him through a puff of smoke, she asked, "So she's not here in Jacksonville? Where is she?"

"At a runaway shelter down in Ft. Lauderdale. I won't lie to you, she's not eager to come home."

Elizabeth crushed out the half-smoked cigarette, and chuckled without a trace of mirth. "So she's still mad at me? We had a big blowout. You see, her dad was an alcoholic and now if I take even one drink, she goes ballistic. The last one was the mother of all fights."

Tony breathed a sigh of relief. Things didn't sound irreparable. Still, some kind of intervention seemed called for. "Was that all?"

"I work two, sometimes three jobs to support us. Waitressing doesn't pay much, so I can't buy all the fancy stuff her friends have and I can't be here as much as I'd like. I'm lucky to keep the lights on."

He nodded. In his former profession he'd run up against life's unfairness day in, day out.

The woman peered closely at him. "So can I see her? Talk to her?"

He took the shelter's card from his pocket and held it out to her. Tapping his finger on the phone number, he suggested, "Call them tomorrow after nine a.m. and set up an appointment to go see her. If you need help getting there, let them know. Be up front with Liza. Be open-minded. I hope you two can work it out."

Eager to get out, he stood and shook her hand. When he touched her, he gave her a mental push to forget him. He didn't need his former coworkers recognizing his description and sending out search parties. "Good luck."

His emotions in turmoil as he winged his way home, he tried to unwind. He'd not seen the lights of Jacksonville and St. Augustine for a couple of years and never from

this vantage. He was certainly getting out and about and seeing more of the world than he had in years.

How long would it take to travel to faraway places like Europe? Where would he spend the daylight hours and how?

While he was here, he looked up the local blood bank. As he emptied the last of his liquid meal, he heard screams. He perked his ears, launched himself back into the sky and followed the sound.

A baldheaded man held a scrawny one at gunpoint. His pistol shook as he spat out, "Fork over the money I paid you for the lousy drugs. Don't dick with me. You're lucky I don't just blow off your worthless head."

The man being held at gunpoint shivered and stumbled over his words. "I don't have it. But I'll get it for you."

"Like you gave me that inferior stuff? I'm not a patient man and I've been more than patient with your sorry ass. Now you can kiss it goodbye." The moon glistened off the gun's barrel.

Tony thought about not interfering, but no one deserved to die like that. The law should mete out their punishment. He swooped down and knocked the gun from the assailant's hand.

The gun exploded with violent fury and the bullet ricocheted through the alley.

"What the fuck?" the large guy swore. "What just happened?"

Tony landed and shifted into his human form. Crossing his arms over his chest, he grinned and said, "I did. You two are going down."

"Like hell," the bald man yelled as he scrambled for his gun.

Almost enjoying this game, Tony dashed around him and reached the weapon first. He picked it up and crushed the metal in his hand as if it was a wad of paper. "Think again."

"Freak!" The man pivoted and ran as his intended victim scurried out of the alley.

Tony knew exactly what he was, and for the first time, appreciated it. Barely trying, he caught up easily to his quarry. He marched them to the closest cop.

"These dudes have a very interesting story to tell. I think you'll want to listen very carefully." His eyes glowed red back at him in the police cruiser's window.

He hypnotized them to forget him and his part in their capture and arrest and he ducked into the shadows. He was quite pleased with his night's work.

When he returned to the manor, Constantine was waiting for him. "Genevieve's been on the warpath and she's been looking all over for you. What'd you do now?"

Tony grimaced. "Nothing right, according to her." Outside of the bedroom, they were oil and water.

Genevieve flounced into the room and faced off against him. "About time you decided to show your face."

Tony steeled his heart against her charms and intimidation. "I hear you've been looking for me."

Genevieve anchored her hand on her outthrust hip. "You're the amazing disappearing man. You know, we're a family. That means we actually spend time together."

Tony did his best to block his thoughts from her. "I had to feed."

Lightning flashed across her eyes and her magnificent chest heaved. "I've been more than tolerant. It's time you feed like a real vampire."

"I *am* a real vampire." His gums itched and his fangs started to push out.

She threw up her hands and sighed. "Then start acting like one."

"Holy cheesecake, Batman," Constantine said chuckling. "Methinks you have reached an impasse."

Genevieve whirled on him. "I beg your pardon?"

Constantine stood and took his time stretching before answering. "Guess that's my cue."

Once Constantine had left, Tony kicked back on a lounge. "So now you've got my undivided attention."

"'Tis your undivided loyalty and *respect* I need. How dare you behave like an ass."

"I'm not a six-year-old. Treat me like a man." Tony checked himself for a uniform to see if he was back in school. "Are we punching a clock? Or have I been drafted into the army?"

"Bingo!" She snapped her fingers in his face. "You've been enlisted."

Great. The new, *unimproved* Air Force? The one plus was that she didn't look a thing like his old training instructor. She had much prettier cleavage. Despite his annoyance, he couldn't help but crack a smile.

Genevieve narrowed her eyes. "Do I amuse you?"

Her quiet tones put him on alert. "Not at all," he said as smoothly as he could. Even a less volatile woman would turn into a banshee if she thought a man was laughing at her. He wasn't aiming to start a war.

She leaned closer to him. "I'm beginning to think you're ducking out on your lessons. You wouldn't do that, would you?"

Learn all about sucking blood and battle lore? Never! "Whatever would give you that idea?"

She lifted her hair off her shoulders and let it sift back slowly, provocatively, through her fingers. "Oh, I don't know. Mayhap the way you turned green and left the beach when I was drinking blood."

He rose and leaned over her, letting his breath rasp along her neck. "I wouldn't have left you had I one inkling you were in any danger. You've been feeding since long before I was born, sweetheart."

Genevieve thrilled to Tony's nearness, to his defiance, even though it should irk her.

The one good thing about Donovan had been his wild masculinity. His supreme dominance. Her status hadn't made him swoon or caused him to treat her like a porcelain doll.

For all his nice guy ideals, Tony was also strong. As much as his stubbornness annoyed her, it also excited her. He treated her as an equal.

She straightened her shoulders and looked down at him. "There are more lessons."

Tony looked up at her. "More? What else?"

"There is still much you don't know."

Tony straightened to his full height and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Such as?"

"Using glamour. Getting to know other magical folk."

"You're going to teach me about makeup and style?"

Was he adorable, or what?

Silly man.

"No. *Glamour*. A projection of a false image. The seelies are especially adept at this. They'll be the best ones to teach you."

Tony scrunched his nose. "Seelies? Aren't those some sort of Tupperware?"

She swallowed an indulgent smile. "Tupperware? Let's go meet the fairies. There's a village nearby."

"Fairies really exist?"

Oh ye of little faith. "We do. The werecats do. Is it really such a stretch of the imagination?"

Tony tapped his chin. "And I had to die to discover the wonders of the world. So where are all these magical beings?"

She couldn't help but smile at his naïveté. "Everywhere."

"I haven't seen any fairies flitting around Florida." After a pause, he said, "So take me to them so they can teach me about this *glamour*."

"I would've before had I been able to find you." She held out her hand to him with a come-hither look. "Ready?"

When he folded her hand in his, she gave a sly smile. "Careful, fairies bite."

"Get outta here! Those cute little creatures?"

A sly smile hovered around the edges of her lips. "My kind of people."

"Of course," Tony drawled.

That seductive smile of hers made his groin tighten. He stroked her hand with his thumb. He couldn't care less about learning glamours or meeting fairies. His body had a much better idea, and much more insistent needs.

He tightened his fingers around hers and cradled her to him. He lowered his head, hovering mere kissing distance from her lips. "The seelies can wait. I can't."

Genevieve stared at his lips and then lowered her gaze to his obvious erection. "I thought you were disgusted with me?"

He grunted, not liking to admit the truth. His body and heart ached for her. She completed him in a very primal way no one else ever had.

Crazy. Of all the beings on earth, his heart was captivated by a vampire queen.

Or maybe it wasn't so crazy. Maybe she'd bewitched him. Curiosity eating at him, he asked, "Will you teach me more magic?"

Bemusement tugged at her lips. "Beyond glamour and mind control? No. We don't do that. Unless you were a witch before becoming one of us."

He was relieved to hear she didn't have bewitching powers, that she hadn't put a spell on him to make him fall in love with her. "So what lessons are left?" Maybe this was like earning a black belt. He had to learn his lessons one at a time as if he were earning a higher ranking belt.

"Glamour and combat."

Feeling mischievous, he couldn't resist. "How about dancing? Driving? Knitting?"

She burst out laughing. “You can educate us in those arts.”

“Love to.” Only not right now.

Genevieve’s fangs peeked out from her lips and she pushed his shirt aside. Tracing his breast with her fingertip, she murmured, “I’m famished.”

He quivered as his nipple puckered beneath her touch. Intoxicated by the passion blazing in her eyes, he moved closer. This love-hate relationship was going to be the second death of him. *What am I going to do with you?*

The corners of her lips twitched. “Fit me into your life. Love me.”

He jerked at the sound of her voice. Had he voiced his thoughts? When and if he professed love for the siren, he wanted to be prepared,

Whoa! Love?

Was she confessing her love for him? Was he truly contemplating confessing love for this woman? A vampire?

She playfully unbuttoned his shirt and dropped teasing kisses across his chest. “Our family’s been without a king for a very long time. Far too long.”

“We have a most capable queen.” Shudders tingled down his spine. The minx wasn’t proposing, was she? Then another thought struck him and he couldn’t still his tongue. Trying to quell the jealousy surging through him, he gazed into her eyes. “So, you had another king?”

The beauty returned his stare. Then she gazed off into space and after several long moments muttered, “Centuries ago. Almost too many to recall. His name was Alexander and he was the leader of the family prior to my reign.”

“What happened to him?”

A snarl twisted the loveliness from her lips. “Civil war amongst the family. Alexander’s minions mutinied and beheaded him.”

“I thought the family was close-knit?” He promised himself he’d never become so callous and unfeeling.

"I strive to make it so. 'Tis best when a queen has a king." She dipped her head and swirled her tongue around his nipple. Then she insinuated her hand into his pants and stroked his swelling cock.

There wasn't enough room for her hand and his growing erection inside the material. More shudders coursed through him, and he couldn't wait to relieve himself of the annoying clothes. Faster than he could turn into a bat, he shucked his trousers.

He lifted her gown high above her head and flung it across the room. He divested her of her undergarments and held his breath as she spilled out under his heated gaze. Then he flipped her onto her stomach. "Get on your knees."

Wicked laughter danced off her lips. "You dare command your queen?"

"I dare. Someone told me that the queen likes take-charge lovers."

She squirmed and a sensual smile curved her lips.

He delved first one, then two fingers in her pussy and moved them slowly, coating them with her pussy juice. Lowering his face to her cunt, he inhaled her erotic fragrance and pushed his nose closer to catch more of her scent.

His fingers sticky with her juices, he pulled them out as she trembled and squirmed against him. With featherlight caresses, he stroked her G-spot from left to right as she molded her body to his. "Baby, you're so wet."

He lowered his lips to her clit and lavished kisses along its crease. "Uhm. Baby, you taste so good." Plagued by an unquenchable thirst, he treated her to long, luxurious licks with the flat of his tongue. Losing himself in her, he buried his face in her pussy, so ravenous he pushed his nose against her sex.

His tongue probed into her canal as far as it would reach. He inserted first one finger and then curled the second inside, spreading her wide. Getting into a good groove, he stroked in and out.

Slowly, he removed his fingers and put his lips over her clit. Varying between gentle suction and teasing nips, he coaxed her to orgasm.

She shoved her pussy against his face and clamped her legs around his shoulders, holding him prisoner. When her cream flowed into his mouth, he sucked and lapped to the chorus of her moans.

When her come slowed to a trickle he murmured, "Get up on your knees."

She bent over in doggy position and wiggled her gorgeous butt, and then inched back against his cock. "Works for me. Command away, my king."

He ran the tip of his cock across her exquisite ass. Fascinated by the beautiful curve of her back, he ran his fingertip from the base of her neck and down her spine to the last vertebrae as shudders shook her anew.

Testosterone erupted through him and, unable to hold back his own pleasure a moment longer, he thrust inside with a colossal roar. Holding her steady, his heart hammering against his ribs, he drilled into her.

Purring, she ground against him. Her purrs turned to moans, and the moans to groans. Finally, the groans turned to screams. "You're soooo good."

"And you're soooo *bad*."

She froze and cast a fiery glance over her shoulder. With a growl, she bared her fangs. "You dare insult your queen?"

Charmed, he chuckled. She was too adorable. He'd forgotten she was operating from an eight-hundred-year-old perspective. "Nowadays, 'bad' means good."

She quirked a finely arched brow at him and tossed a saucy smile his way. "Methinks, I'm *good*."

She was so good, better than good, that he pounded into her. "You're definitely fine, babe. The best of the best."

Her breaths came faster, shallower, and she quivered wantonly.

A fireball consumed him, and he erupted.

Chapter Seven

The next night, Tony couldn't believe his eyes. "Did you see that van go into the canal?" Tony didn't wait for his question to be answered before racing forward. That wasn't an ordinary canal, but the Intracoastal, deeper and deadlier than run-of-the-mill waterways where a vehicle might only sink twelve feet. The Intracoastal went down at least forty-five feet.

"I only saw one person in the vehicle." Chloe pointed at the taillights of a car disappearing in the distance. "That jerk ran her off the road and sped off."

Where was the former cop when they needed him? "Help me get the driver out."

Two seconds ahead of him, Chloe nodded and dove deep into the murky water.

He followed a second later, diving into her wake.

Working together they ripped off the woman's seat belt, and then he peered into the back of the vehicle to double check for anyone else. When his gaze fell on a child's car seat facing the rear, his heart flipped over.

Baby? God no!

Time was running out so he thrust the female into Chloe's arms, mouthed his concerns and pointed to the surface. "Take the woman. I'll check the baby seat."

An infant no more than five months old lolled unconscious in the car seat, its eyes closed, its flesh already becoming a sickly gray. Not wasting time, he propelled himself into the backseat and yanked the child carrier out as the last inch of the car was overwhelmed with water.

Tony called upon every vestige of his superhuman strength and kicked out the door. Bubbles whirled frantically about the walls of water crashing unmercifully against them, trying to trap them inside the vehicle.

He cursed and clutched the infant against him. Every second counted and he kicked off against the van. What seemed eons later, they broke through the surface of the water.

Chloe leaned over the edge of the embankment. Holding her arms out for the now almost purple infant, she sucked in a ragged breath. "Come here, precious."

Tony handed over the child, limp as a rag doll. "How's the mother?"

"Breathing, but unconscious. We need paramedics. Find a phone and call for help. I'll revive the little one." Chloe laid the baby on the ground and tilted its head back, and swept its mouth clear with her finger. Then she began pumping its tiny chest and blowing teensy puffs of air into its mouth.

Mesmerized, Tony couldn't move, his feet seeming to be glued to the ground. He fished around in his pocket but he couldn't find his phone. It must have dropped out, was probably at the bottom of the canal.

Chloe glanced up with annoyance shining in her eyes. "Move already."

Awaking from his stupor, he looked around for a phone, damning the day public phones had been replaced by cell phones.

Then he spied a cell phone lying on a nearby car's seat. Glancing around to ensure no one saw him, he smashed the car's window with his fist and borrowed the phone. He dialed 9-1-1 and the seconds until anyone answered seemed intolerable. Finally he was able to impart his urgent message and he flew back to Chloe just as she was lowering her bared fangs to the infant's chest.

Horried, he hauled Chloe off her prey and in a rage, flung her several feet away. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Gasping for breath, he glared from the baby struggling for life, to the woman whose fangs glinted in the moonlight. He knelt by the child, looking for telltale puncture wounds. He found none. Also to his relief, it seemed to be breathing.

More beast than human, Chloe hissed and then flew at him. They struggled in hand-to-hand combat, the woman exhibiting raw strength rather than skill. Finally, with the last vestiges of his strength, he pinned Chloe to the ground and restrained her hands above her head. He sat on her chest and glared down into her eyes. "I can't believe you. That's just a baby."

Breathing hard, Chloe struggled into a sitting position and hugged her legs to her. "I lost my head. Do you believe me now when I tell you we're more threat than help to humans?"

He didn't want to, but he was seriously shaken. She was the vampire he had believed had the most humanity beside himself and she was capable of such violence.

An ambulance siren split the night. Hauling her up, he jerked her around. "Help's here, so we're going. We can't let them find us."

Panting hard, her eyes still a blazing red but her fangs retreating into her gums, Chloe nodded. "There's no guarantees they'll live. There's still time to grant them eternal life."

"No!" The word exploded off his lips. He cast one last look at the mother and child, hoping they'd pull through. He'd done all he could, even though he wished it could be more.

"To the manor. Now!" The ambulance almost on top of them, he spread himself on the wind.

Back in their stronghold, trying to make sense of everything that had just happened, Tony faced off against Chloe. What was left of his heart sank to his feet. The fury that had eaten at him throughout the flight home started to wane. He dug his hands into his pockets. "Maybe you shouldn't interact with humans. It's too dangerous. Your humanity has ebbed."

A sad smile teased Chloe's lips. "I tried to warn you. I've changed. *You're* changing."

No! She might have lost her humanity, but he hadn't. His conviction, his mission, his love for his fellow man still blazed strongly in his heart. He was different.

Chloe grabbed his shirt and jerked him toward her. "Listen to me. You're not different. You're only younger. You've not experienced the full transition, but you will. When you do, you'll be every bit as dangerous to those you wish to help as I am. As we all are."

Luke and Constantine ambled into the room in the midst of a boisterous discussion. But with one look at Chloe's furious expression, Constantine stopped dead in his tracks and held out his open palms. "Is there a problem?"

Chloe shoved Tony hard, hurtling him against the couch so roughly the antique settee shattered and he crashed against the wall. "He's a fool! He thinks he's some sort of superhero running around saving the little mortals."

Luke gathered his trembling wife into his arms and stroked her silky hair. "Back up, sweetheart. We missed the story."

Chloe pointed at Tony with a trembling finger. "We pulled a mother and her baby out of their van when it went into the Intracoastal. But then he left them to die rather than let me turn them. We could've given that child a wonderful life."

Tony picked himself up and stepped away from the debris. He kept his distance. "We don't know that either died. Paramedics came to help."

Chloe's eyes glowed a blistery red. "Were you a physician? I think I'm a better judge."

"They were breathing when we left. They had a chance."

Luke embraced the hiccupping, sobbing woman. Gently, he stroked her hair and murmured in her ear, "Shush, darlin'. I know how much you wanted a baby, but it's not meant to be. Not yet, anyway."

Chloe yanked away from her husband. Fury flashed in her eyes. "I can't believe you're siding with *him*."

Chloe ran out of the room, almost knocking over Genevieve.

Genevieve's countenance turned dark. She stood tall and straight and crossed her arms over her chest as her gaze moved from the retreating Chloe's back, to Luke, Tony and finally to the mess of the broken couch. "What scheming goes on under my nose?"

Still seething, Tony squared his shoulders and stayed mum.

Luke hooked his thumbs through his belt loops. Finally, he spoke up. "Chloe and Tony had an altercation. I walked in on the middle of it."

Constantine did a flip and hooked his legs around his favorite ceiling beams. He crossed his arms over his chest. "I came in with Luke."

"Now you stop spreading tales." Genevieve massaged her furrowed brow, lightning bolts fairly flying from her narrowed eyes.

The queen turned her curious gaze on Tony. "Pray, why is my settee strewn in a million pieces?"

"Chloe has quite the temper and she threw me across the room. The couch got in the way. I'll clean it up and replace it."

Genevieve pursed her lips. When she moved, a tattoo peeked out between the gap of her peasant blouse and flaring gypsy skirt. She turned her gaze to Constantine. "Do tell. What was the subject of their disagreement?"

Constantine's lips thinned into a firm line and he shook his head as his hair swished beneath his head.

Genevieve threw up her hands. "What happened to family loyalty?"

Tony began to stack the larger pieces of debris against the wall.

Genevieve wrinkled her nose and crooked her finger at him. "Leave it. I wish a private audience."

That imperious tone boded no good, but Tony couldn't ignore the royal summons and they headed down the hall to the queen's bedchamber.

Genevieve locked the door behind them and then turned to him. "'Tis clear you and Chloe were up to something devious. Do you care to tell me what's going on? Would it have anything to do with the werecats?"

Tony's heart stopped beating. Did she suspect him of being the traitor? And Chloe? Would she behead suspected traitors like King Alexander had been beheaded?

He wondered if she could read his mind and if so, he wondered why her mind-reading powers didn't tell her who the traitor or traitors were. He had a lot to learn but he wondered if he'd get the chance.

She sank into a chair and motioned for him to sit across from her. She folded her arms across her chest and with an iciness to her tone, asked, "What are you hiding? What do the others know that I don't?"

He couldn't tell her. He might as well behead himself.

Trying to think about anything but the truth, he sang a song in his head. It was a song he'd liked as a teenager, one he had spent much of his time humming. He hoped it would block her mind-probing abilities. "Nothing to worry about. We were just trying to figure out who the traitor might be and how the werecats keep finding us."

She drummed her fingers on her chair. She didn't look convinced that he was being honest, but she asked, "Well? Did you figure it out? Do you know who's betraying us?"

"No, my queen. We'd have come to you if we'd figured it out."

She didn't say anything for a long time but she seemed to dissect him.

He sang louder in his head, and when he couldn't remember a word, he made one up. He wouldn't let himself think about anything else except the song.

Finally, Genevieve pushed herself up from her chair and towered over him. "That will be all for now. If there's anything you ever need to tell me, I can be assured you will?"

He looked up at her and nodded. "Yes, my queen. I promise."

"Very good." However, she didn't look convinced. "You may leave."

He would have liked to take her in his arms and kiss away her doubts, but he didn't dare. He couldn't close his mind forever and his head ached from keeping her out. Before she could change her mind, he rose and hurried out. When he reached the parlor, he cleaned up their mess and then retreated into his chamber to rest.

* * * * *

Several nights later Genevieve chafed for a few moments, allowing Tony a head start. She'd give him just enough leeway so that he'd feel safe. She hugged the wall, mingling with the shadows as the scent of his duplicity threatened to overpower her.

He stopped by the living room where Constantine ogled the television. Just then his cell phone shrilled and he dug the instrument from his pocket. He checked out the glowing display, hurriedly flipped it open and put it to his ear. "Liza?"

Liza?

And said so breathily! What cheek that jezebel had trying to tryst with Tony! Severely vexed that her premonition had not gone unrewarded, Genevieve strained her ears to catch the other woman's voice.

Her mouth agape, a more beleaguered thought trounced the first. Could Tony be the leak? Was this Liza a werecat connection and Tony the spy?

Tony swore and froze to the spot, all blood draining from his face so that his lips paled. "Slow down and say that again."

Deep creases lining Constantine's jaw, he looked up at Tony. "What bedevils you?"

Tony said, as if in disbelief, "The teen center's on fire and she's trapped inside...with several other kids. I have to go get them out."

Eyeing him with a mixture of trepidation and anxiety, Constantine whistled long and low. "Nay, you can't go. The queen's forbidden interference with the mortals."

A furious red infused Tony's cheeks and a growl rose from his bowels. He looked as if he could rip Constantine's head from his shoulders but instead, he turned and put his fist through the wall.

Mortar and dust spewed from the wall, falling about the men's feet. Portraits teetered and crashed to the floor, but the men were too intent upon one another to show concern to the paintings.

Startled by the force of Tony's violence, Genevieve was taken aback. Since when did the man have a foul temper?

"Screw you! Damn the queen! I'm not turning my back on them." Tony swore again and sped through the door without another word.

Constantine swore loudly and profusely as he massaged his forehead. "Capital!" he yelled after Tony's retreating back. "What a grandiose fool you are."

With a swish of her gown, Genevieve made her presence known. "What was all that about? Why did he speed out of here like a lunatic?"

Huffing and puffing, Constantine faced off against her. With a great show of dignity, he slipped his hand inside his shirt, and placed it over his heart. "The fool thinks he's Super Vampire. He wants to fight for truth, justice and the vampire way."

A guttural harrumph almost choked Genevieve and she found herself caught between insane laughter and total disbelief. "Art thou insane? The *vampire* way? 'Tis anything but the vampire way. He's putting the entire family at jeopardy." Hating her thoughts, and detesting the sound of her voice more so, she asked, "Is he the spy we seek? Is he in cahoots with our enemies?"

A rueful expression crossed over Constantine's face and he thrust out his chin. "What dreadful curses you level at his head."

That made her sigh. "'Tis no small consequence if he has indeed defected. I fear your loyalty lies on *his* side."

Constantine stared at her unblinkingly and issued a deferential dip of his head. "You are sorely mistaken, my queen, for I am now and forever in your service—even when you're wrong."

She prayed she was wrong but his queer actions gave serious pause. She had a lot to think about, but not now when Tony was putting the entire clan in grave danger.

* * * * *

Hidden by thick roiling clouds of smoke, Tony landed on the roof of the burning building. He changed forms and rushed into the structure, jumping down the stairs two and three at a time.

He tried to call Liza, but there was no answer. "Damn!" With renewed vigor, his heart trembling with great fear, he went in search of her and any dorm mates who might remain trapped.

As smoky as the upper floors were, he feared no human could survive much longer. Like the rest of his body, his sight was supercharged, enabling him to peer through the haze with amazing clarity. His lungs barely felt the tickle of smoke even though the air was deadly hot.

"Liza! Where are you? Is anyone still up here?" he called loudly, pricking his ears to listen for even the smallest sound of life.

No human voices answered. He hoped it was a blessing and not a curse.

He made his way down to the next floor. It burned hotter than the previous level and it was as if he stepped into a furnace. A wall of black smoke filled the hallway.

"Can anyone hear me?" He stopped in the middle of the corridor and pivoted. The fire crackled louder and the rescue workers outside made quite a ruckus.

Weak coughing broke through the distant noises, and then a whimper. "I'm here. I c-can hardly b-breathe. H-help."

"Where's here?" As keen as his hearing was, Tony had trouble homing in on the whimper above the din. "Keep speaking so I can find you."

The weak voice called out. "I'm in the game room. Do you know where that is?"

Having spent the last ten years of his life here, he knew every room in this house even with his eyes closed, and he headed in its direction. "Sure do. I'm on the way."

The room looked as if an avalanche had hit it, but his enhanced vision sliced through the fog. He spied a hunched over form huddled close to the floor. "How'd you get stuck up here, man?"

A head lifted and turned in his direction. "I must've f-fallen asleep on the c-couch. I just woke when you called out."

Tony strode to the young man and lifted him into his arms. Although the boy looked to be no more than sixteen and had a hefty build, Tony had no problem supporting his weight.

Superman, move out of my way.

He carried the youth down the stairs and shielded the young man with his body. He was amazed that he could feel the heat of the flames but not their char. "We're almost out. You're going to be fine."

He hoped.

Gently, he deposited the teen into the arms of a willing rescue worker. "He's having trouble breathing. Have his lungs checked."

Grim-faced, the soot-covered fireman nodded. "Roger that. Bring a stretcher. Have this fellow checked out ASAP."

Eager to avoid attention, Tony stole away when the man turned his head.

Grimy-faced teenagers leaned out the third and fourth floor windows, flailing their arms. "Tony, help us!" cried a girl with long, dark hair much like Liza's.

Tony did a double take. It was Liza!

"We can't get down. The flames are getting worse!" Liza clambered onto the window's ledge, and with her palms out to feel the way, pressed her back against the building. Her slight form swayed as her eyes widened into huge saucers.

"Don't jump! Repeat, do *not* jump." A police officer's voice boomed through a megaphone as a crowd of bystanders gathered beneath the window, all holding their breath, their heads tilted upward.

"For crying out loud! Get a ladder over there, quick," the fire chief ordered, as he massaged his perspiring forehead.

Fidgeting, the young woman seemed mesmerized by the great height. Her footing slipped and she leaned forward.

"Don't move another muscle. I'll be right there." Fear pulsed through Tony and before he realized what he had done, he was beginning to soar upward.

"Tony! Not here."

Genevieve's hissing voice startled him so that he plummeted to the ground and landed at her feet in an unceremonious heap.

Tony glared at the queen. "The child's going to jump and I can prevent it. We can erase their memories."

"Not so many. What if film is rolling?"

Tony swore. Without awaiting a reply, he rolled and clambered to his feet and then ran inside the burning building.

Gusts of flame burst out, trying to devour Tony, destroying everything in its path. Chunks of the ceiling fell on his head. Furniture combusted without warning. They were losing the building.

Tony counted three other teenagers hanging out the windows, pleading for help. He lifted his voice, hoping the kids knew if any of their friends were also caught inside. "How many people are in here?"

One of the young voices screamed, "Thank God! Can you get us out?"

Even with his superhuman strength and speed he couldn't carry three or more full-grown bodies to safety and stop the jumper who was poised to leap any second. But he couldn't let them lose hope. "I promise."

A boyish voice wailed, "I don't want to die like this. I won't ever see my mom again."

Tony grimaced. He felt guilty he could no longer feel what they did, that he was losing touch with his human side.

A girl coughed spastically. "I can hardly breathe."

Feeling horrible for passing by the frantic kids, he fought his way to Liza, leaping over a section of floor that crumbled under his feet. Swearing under his breath, he leaned out the window, looking for the frightened girl, while looking for other strays in need of help.

A cherry picker tried to reach him but couldn't get close enough to be of service. Flames licking at the windows kept the ladders at bay.

Tony leaned out the window and thrust out his hand to Liza. He instilled command into his voice. "Give me your hand, Liza. I'm here, just like I promised. I won't let anything happen to you."

The crowd gasped and screamed as she jerked forward. The trapped kids sobbed, desperately pleading for help.

Constantine looked at Tony, and then sprinted into the building. A moment later, he appeared behind Tony. "Are you in need of assistance, my good friend? I followed you. I wanted to make sure Genevieve didn't rip you to shreds."

Tony breathed a sigh of relief. Thank God Constantine wasn't scared of the queen. "Yeah, start getting those other kids to safety. I'm not sure how many are still trapped. I have to get Liza to safety."

Constantine saluted sharply and tapped his heels. "At your service."

Although deeply grateful for the help, Tony's fear exploded into a single syllable, "Go!"

Frantic when he realized Liza may have misunderstood, he clambered out onto the windowsill. He wished the crowd of mortals away for he might have to perform a superhuman feat they shouldn't see. Instead he chafed as he inched his way along the

crumbling ledge and held out his hand to the quaking child. "You called me, remember? We'll get out of this together."

"I-I can't move! We'll fall to our deaths." The young woman squeezed her eyes tightly, and began to sob.

Tony scowled at the ant-like rescue workers running amuck below. "For God's sake, somebody put out a net so they can jump."

As if the rescue workers heard him, a net was stretched out along the perimeter of the building. Several fire fighters and policemen coaxed the teens to jump, one by one.

Tony grunted his approval and turned his attention back on the frightened Liza who still refused to move. He willed her to do his bidding. "They're ready for you. Go ahead. Jump."

Liza eyed Tony with a teary-eyed glance. "I-I c-can't. It's so far down. What if I miss, crash to the concrete?"

He had no choice. He worked his mind control on the girl, and convinced her to jump with him. "Here, we'll jump together." Tony made a frantic grab and caught the girl around the middle. The force of the momentum propelled them down. Clinging to the teenager, he flipped their bodies so that he landed first onto the net and held the child's out of harm's way.

Still clutching Liza, he jumped out of the net as behind them the building gave a final groan and began to crash to the ground. Dust clouds billowed into the air and debris smashed against the pavement.

Rescue workers took Liza from Tony's arms and turned their attention to the shaken child. They loaded her onto a stretcher and rolled her to the side of an emergency vehicle.

Tony strolled by Liza's side and held her hand between his until they prepared to lift her into an ambulance. Concern threatened to choke him, but he tried to instill bravery into his voice lest he scare her. "You'll be okay, kiddo. Promise to give me a call, let me know how you're doing, okay?"

Liza gazed up at him with adoration and trust. "Will I see you again?"

Tony crossed his heart and smiled down at her. Then he dropped a kiss on her smooth cheek. He didn't know how much longer he could trust himself to be around humans. "Go home to your mom. She's a good lady."

Tears welled in Liza's bright eyes. "You met her?"

"Yep. Time to go. Chin up." He relinquished her hand and tousled her hair. To one of the paramedics, he asked in a whispered aside, "Will she be okay?"

"She only seems to be shaken, but this is a precautionary measure. They'll run some tests and then probably let her go tomorrow or next day."

Tony delved into his pocket and handed the head EMT a slip of paper with Liza's mother's contact information. "This is how you can get in touch with her mother. Give her a call. She'll want to be here."

"Thanks, man. We'll have someone get in touch with her. Don't worry. The young lady's in good hands."

Tony let his glance slide over the prone figure draped with a light sheet. "Where are you taking her?"

"Broward General. They'll probably only keep her overnight, especially if her mother comes for her."

Genevieve slipped around the men and eyed Tony severely. "Away with you!" When they were out of earshot of the humans, she added, "By rights, you deserve to lose your head for that stunt."

She wasn't the only furious one. Exhausted and disheartened, he didn't care what her reprisals would be. He stopped and faced off against her. "Are you completely heartless?"

"For shame! Are you such a willful simpleton? That exploit was witnessed by countless mortals!" she whispered into his ear, her breath warm and raspy on his flesh, as she pulled him away from the scene.

When they had distanced themselves several streets away from the site of the disaster, Tony yanked away. He didn't give a damn if he was *persona non grata*.

Covered in soot, Constantine joined up with them. His clothes were tattered and torn, and his hair was disheveled but otherwise he looked none the worse for wear.

Tony asked, "Did all the people get out okay?"

A lopsided and relieved grin curved Constantine's lips. "Yes. I made sure."

"I don't know how to thank you for all your help. I owe you big time."

Without warning, roaring werecats leapt out of the shadows, their eyes glowing crimson and their ragged fangs bared. The biggest, meanest cat stood head and shoulders above the others, glaring with disdain at Genevieve.

A look of horror flashed across the queen's face before she hissed and her fangs protruded. She spat out, "Donovan! By heaven and hell, I should have known *you* were the author of this *accident*!"

Donovan turned into a man and squared off against Genevieve, and a guttural voice rumbled from his mouth. "Hand over this refuse of mankind to me and I'll grant you and the rest of your vassals safe leave."

Tony wondered if Donovan would be so brave if he didn't have his army poised for attack at his flank.

"Tony?" Genevieve glanced over her shoulder at Tony and frowned. "Why would you want him? What is he to you?"

Donovan's face reddened and he roared, "Is he not your newest conquest? I hear he's poised to be your next king."

Genevieve didn't look convinced, but she asked, "Where are you getting your information? 'Tis no concern of yours."

"You're *mine*. I demand you put him out of your life."

She squared her shoulders and thrust out her chest. Notching her chin several inches higher, she glared haughtily down her nose at her adversary. "Confound you, Donovan! You can no more have him than possess me."

Tony stepped between Genevieve and the brute. "Why would she want anything to do with a cold-blooded murderer like you?"

Donovan flung back his head and howled. Then he circled them. "I'm not leaving her to the likes of you. I'll see her dead first."

Genevieve tried to push in front of Tony, but he kept her resolutely behind him.

"Let me deal with the imp of Satan," she ordered.

"Not this time. Fly home and bring reinforcements." He couldn't let her risk herself. Without her, the family would fall apart. For his own entirely selfish reasons, he realized he didn't want her anywhere near this madman.

Genevieve gasped in his ear. "The Dickens, I will! You're no match for him. He'll rip you apart limb by limb!"

Tony strangled on a mirthless laugh and drawled, "Your faith in me is so very flattering."

A horrible suspicion burrowed deep in his gut. Turning to the werecat king, Tony stated, "You started the fire, didn't you? You lured us here."

Tony shifted his attention to the werecat that appeared to be second-in-command and directed his comments to him. "How do *you* feel about your leader consorting with the vampire queen? About having her for *your* queen? She, who has spilled so much werecat blood?"

Constantine whispered in Tony's ear. "Your reminder of spilt blood will not be a help."

With an answering snarl the werecat stepped forward boldly, his claws scraping loudly on the pavement. "It's a disgrace. If the allegations are true, he's a hypocrite. His behavior breaks every one of our laws."

Donovan whirled around and gritted his teeth. "Stay out of this, Vladimir. This is none of your concern."

Constantine stepped up, surprising Tony. "You're wrong. It's very much their business."

Donovan glared at the newcomer with a feral gleam in his eyes. "Who are you to interfere, Count Constantine? Or have the vampires lost their collective minds and made you king?"

Constantine chuckled mirthlessly and tossed his head, flinging his hair wildly about his face. His fangs descended. "Your worst nightmare."

A slow, evil grin spread across Constantine's face as he snapped his fingers high over his head and shifted into a monster, "Tear their heads off!"

Tony's head snapped around. Bats dive-bombed the werecats, scattering them in all directions.

To Genevieve, Tony pleaded, "Fly away."

Her brows drew together. "But my people—"

"Know what to do." Tony spread his hand over Genevieve's heart reverently. "You are my first and foremost priority. Our family needs you to rally them. I need you."

"Why?" Her breath rasped out and she stood before him as if awaiting something important.

Touched by the beauty's uncharacteristic vulnerability, Tony cupped her cheek in his palm. "Can't you guess?"

When she shook her head, her soul shining forth from her wide eyes, he whispered, "We need you. You're the glue that keeps our family together. Now please go and be safe."

Genevieve's knees had gone weak when she thought her hopes and dreams had been answered. But now she removed Tony's bittersweet touch from her and let his

hand drop to his side. "The *family*...needs...me?" Not *he* needed her. Or more desirable yet, that he *loved* her.

Donovan laughed unkindly. "Will Shakespeare he is not. If I may be so bold as to venture that I am the only one man enough to satisfy your carnal cravings. This insufferable buffoon can't hold a candle to me."

Suddenly a snarling Vladimir swiped at his king with his claws fully extended. "So it's true what the vampires say! You disgrace us, traitor."

Donovan whirled around and roared at his second-in-command. "How dare you question me! Make him gone!" he commanded his pack.

The other cats crept stealthily forward but passed Vladimir and surrounded Donovan. Low growls rumbled from their bellies and rolled off their lips with their drool.

Genevieve blinked in astonishment but then took control of herself. "Get you gone!"

Gnashing their razor-sharp fangs, the cats stood high on their hind legs and leaped on Donovan. Fur and flesh flew. Blood pooled on the pavement.

The scent of the hot, sweet blood almost made her swoon. Bloodlust threatened to overwhelm her and she feared she wouldn't be able to control it much longer. How she longed to join the battle!

But her survival instinct was strong and Tony was right. She was queen and needed to survive to lead the family. Finding balance, she spread herself on the benign South Florida breeze and transformed into a bat.

Tony's words vibrating in her mind, she wrinkled her nose. *For the family's sake...*

His heart hammering fiercely against his ribs, Tony watched the battle from a safe distance above as the werecats divided into two factions. One led by Vladimir, who

fearlessly attacked the leader. The second faction, Donovan's faithful followers, who put up a fierce battle to protect their king.

Before long, sirens screamed into the night and the bloodied, limping werescats scampered for cover. They dragged their dead and wounded into the deep shadows of the back alleyways, but had no time to conceal the pools of blood staining the pavement, or air out the stench of the heady substance.

His emotions split in several directions, Tony gauged the night to be young enough to allow him time to check on Liza, and so he removed himself from the group and made his way to her hospital bed.

As he flew, his mind replayed the events of the night—were the werescats so vile that they deliberately set a fire that almost incinerated several runaway kids?

Damn it but Chloe was right. He was a danger to mortals. This would be the last time he could see Liza, for he became more of a vampire hourly.

Chapter Eight

Back home several hours later, mere minutes before the sun was due to rise, Genevieve wrung her hands together as she paced. With a worry unlike any she'd ever known, she couldn't help but envision a dying and lifeless Tony. He'd not returned with the group and no one had the slightest clue where he could be. Some members of the family said he was the spy and thus exposed, joined the werecats, or that the werecats had taken off his head. She knew in her heart he wasn't the spy. He couldn't be. Furthermore, he hadn't been part of the family when most of the attacks had occurred.

"Fate, you thieving bastard! Thou can't take him away after I've finally found him." But cruel, uncaring fortune laughed hysterically at her while she pounded her fist in the air. "You can't have him!"

"Have who?"

Tony's beloved, gruff voice almost made her faint. Shock coursed through her and her knees buckled. Sudden, unwelcome tears stung the back of her eyes.

Tears? Mortified at her weakness, she sniffed as she swiped at the unbecoming moisture.

Tony dropped his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. He frowned and caught a tear with his fingertip. "Hey. Why the waterworks? Those wouldn't be for me, would they?"

A shuddering sigh coursed through her and she shook her head. Mustering her courage, she said in a wavery tone, "O-of course not." Mimicking his earlier words to her, she said, "It's just that we need you."

"We, huh?" He stood a few feet from her, detached but proud. "The traitor?"

She took a step forward and put out a hand. When he raised a brow at it, she didn't venture farther but stood her ground. Shaking her head, she said slowly and succinctly, "I know you would never betray us."

Tony stood stoic, his arms hanging limply at his sides, his fingertips pointing straight at the floor. Then his lips twitched so slightly she wondered if she imagined it. "That's not what I heard."

Genevieve scolded him. "Don't listen to rumors. Have no worry. I shall tell the family you are to be trusted, that you are not the traitor."

Tony took a step closer as his expression softened. "Do you have any idea who it is?"

Although she had to find out, she didn't want to know. She didn't want it to be anyone in their family. "No."

Shudders raced down her body and she hugged herself and turned away. "Where did you go? You were missing for so long. We feared you lost to us forever."

"I stopped by the hospital to check on Liza..."

"Liza?" Sympathy crept into Genevieve's voice and her head dipped a bit farther. "She is very important to you, your Liza. I understand. Perhaps you shall wish to turn her and make her your lifemate."

"Yes, she is important to me. But no, she is not *my* Liza and I do *not* wish to make her my lifemate.

"Liza is a teenager. She's a runaway kid I've been helping. She was scared to death by the fire tonight. She looks on me as a surrogate father." Tony closed the gap between them and drew her to him, slowly, inexorably. "So tell me truthfully now. Were you merely worried about me for the *family's* sake?"

Her heart danced a little jig when his finger slid under her chin and forced her to look up into his eyes. Her resolve to stay strong melted, and she melded against him, wrapping her arms around his middle. "For shame, I'm a lousy liar. Of *course* I was

worried sick about you. Donovan had every intention of running you through and spilling your entrails for the birds to devour."

The sexy dolt just nodded and smiled.

"How can you smile about it? Donovan's personally responsible for murdering half our family." How could she have cavorted with such a vulgar piece of work as Donovan? Brain fever must have beset her.

"But he didn't hurt me. I'm here and I'm fine and I have no intention of leaving." Tony gathered her against his heart and rocked with her.

"But he could have." *Should have.* What chance did a fledgling have against a seasoned warrior? She choked back more tears. She was a regular waterfall tonight! *Utterly pathetic.*

Tony feathered kisses across her brow. "Hush. Stop torturing yourself. Donovan's family knows his true colors now."

Her heart melting, she burrowed against his warmth. "Thank goodness. But we still possibly have a spy in our midst. We must ferret him out."

Tony shook his head. "I'm sure it was only a matter of time until his pack would have turned on him without our help. As for a spy in the family, perhaps we can set a trap."

Her heart skipped a beat but she did her best to hide her anguish. She had to do her duty even if it broke her heart. "A trap would be good indeed. We must spring it soon."

"We shall do so soon enough, but tonight we need to rest."

Love filled her heart and she couldn't hold it back anymore. "I love you. Stay with me tonight."

Tony rested his forehead against hers and placed his hands across the small of her back. He ground his hips to hers. "I love you too."

Leaning forward, he pressed a heartfelt kiss across her lips. "You're my soul mate. How soon can we be married?"

Married? As in life-mated? Her heart leaped with joy.

He tightened his grip on her and pulled her back against him. "I meant it with all my heart and soul. I love you. *I. Love. You.* Now and forever. For all eternity."

Her heart sang. Giddy as she'd never been, she curled her arms around his neck and pressed her lips to his, eager to know his loving possession again.

He parted her lips and drank of her. Squeezing her tighter, he lifted her off the floor.

Her legs curled up and her jeweled slippers dropped one at a time, making tiny thuds on the carpet. Growing feverish with need, she clung to him and bared his chest to her hungry eyes. He was so gorgeous she could hardly believe he was hers for all time. Her gums prickled and her fangs poked through.

She licked his nipples, delighting when he shivered beneath her caress. How she wanted to wrap herself in his braids—and nothing else. She couldn't stand her restrictive clothing another torturous moment.

His devilish grin returned full force. "Who will marry us? I assume we don't have to wait three days for blood tests?"

She ripped his shirt open, flinging the buttons across the room. "You still have so much to learn. We have a sacred ceremony where the family will bestow their blessings upon us and witness our eternal joining."

She undid his belt and unsnapped his pants. Hardly able to contain her ardor, she pushed his slacks down his legs, releasing his beautiful cock to her greedy gaze.

Shimmying out of her gown, she murmured huskily, "We'll do it tomorrow night. But I need to warn you about part of the ceremony."

He lifted a brow. "Warn me? I'm already dead and now I'm getting married? What else is there to worry about?"

His mortal humor made her giggle. She was a giggling maniac. She *never* giggled.

"It's traditional that the family witness our first intimate moments as man and wife. You won't mind, will you, my love?"

Unbridled passion burned in his eyes and his cock flexed. He unsnapped her bustier and let it puddle at her feet. "I think I can make the sacrifice. Anything for my darling lifemate."

"Anything?" Wheels whirled in her busy brain. Finally, the opportune moment. "Are you ready to accept the kingship and everything it entails?"

He stiffened. "Define *everything*."

Worry dampening her newfound joy, she frowned. "To protect the family and guide them in the vampire ways."

Solemnly, he nodded. "Anything – except drink the blood of live creatures."

Oh! In all her mindless euphoria, the horrid detail that he still had vegetarian sensibilities had slipped her mind. Many would still consider him the most unsuitable choice for king in their entire clan. She hoped it would not cause a division in the family.

Her sparkle evaporating, she stepped out of the warm circle of his embrace and rubbed her arms. "We have a problem."

Squinting at her, he sucked in a deep breath. Bitter understanding darkened his eyes. "That's not good enough, is it? I have to toe the line and suck the life out of innocents to prove my worth. Is that the deal?"

She choked back a sob and nodded. She wished this was only a nightmare and she'd awaken to find that he enjoyed drinking blood from mortals, that he was the most perfect, ferocious vampire that had ever walked the face of the Earth. However, she wasn't into deluding herself and dreaming of fairy godmothers and Cinderella endings or any of those sugary sweet things. At least, she *hadn't* been into those things until Tony had turned her upside down. "And you won't do it, will you? Not even for me." She already knew the answer and cursed it with the depth of her being.

Surprise flickered across his ebony eyes and he blinked. His muscles stiffened for a fraction of a second and he stroked his chin.

"No," she went on, "I'm afraid 'tis far from good enough. The family may have accepted you so far...but not as their king. The king needs to hold the utmost respect of his family. He needs to extol the virtues of being a vampire. *Every single one.*"

Tony swore under his breath and slammed his fist into his other hand. "Only a perfect vampire can command their allegiance? You call killing innocent people a *virtue?*"

His words fell angrily on her ears and a growl rumbled deep in the pit of her being. Much as she desired it, the family would never accept a king who didn't lead by example, who didn't instill fear in their veins, who didn't comply with the rules. Constantine would never fall into line if he perceived his king or queen to be less than perfect.

With a growl, he pulled her against him and rubbed his chest against her naked breasts. "Tell me you feel nothing. That this doesn't matter."

She couldn't. She didn't even try. He'd see through the lies.

When he ground his pelvis against her groin, wildfire swept through her and she became lost in a mindless frenzy. Moaning loudly, she rubbed against him, trapping his delicious cock between her legs, massaging her G-spot against it. Perhaps enough lovemaking would brainwash him into becoming the vampire of her dreams. In utter ecstasy, she moaned, even as she felt like a traitor to her own emotions.

Quivering uncontrollably, she slid along the length of his luscious, velvety cock. Even if she couldn't make him her lifemate, she could enjoy his body and the pleasure he offered. No one would fault her for that. "I can't tell you that."

He murmured against her lips, his breath mingling with hers. "I didn't think so. I fail to see the problem."

She tried to focus, to stay rooted in reality, but she was losing the battle. "You're still too mortal, thus you wouldn't." Unfortunately, the combative words came out breathy and whispery.

Other things stacked against his viability as king and dull anger thumped in her chest, followed closely by resignation. "What about all your super vampire missions, such as tonight? You put the family in danger."

An unapologetic smile curved Tony's lips.

Damn him!

She rolled her eyes skyward and poked her finger at his chest. "This is not humorous. 'Tis very serious. What am I going to do with you?"

"Love me."

Disgusted, she threw up her hands. "You're incorrigible. So my hormones rage for you—"

"Your heart sings for me." He punctuated each word with a kiss on her lips as he gyrated his hips against her.

So she'd love him even after the stars fell from the sky. But that didn't change the facts. "Pray tell, so I love you to distraction but I fail to see what difference that makes. A queen has sacred duties. She's not free to follow her own heart. She must serve the good of her people."

"To hell with your precious family. With vampire tradition. With your outmoded, screwy sense of loyalty. *You're* queen. *You* make the rules."

Hopelessness pooling in the pit of her stomach, she glared at him. "Have you learned so little? For an otherwise intelligent man, you're extremely ignorant."

"You mean I'm not one of your mindless minions. Isn't that the kind of strong, independent-thinking king your precious family needs? Otherwise, why don't you just keep the throne solely in your possession? Why do you need a king if he's going to be

your puppet? Constantine serves very well as your court jester. You should marry him if that's what you want."

The force of his fury and convictions surprised her and she took a step back mentally as well as physically. There was some logic to his words. Still, he didn't understand the vampire way. He'd gone out of his way time after time to mock it.

"This isn't a democracy. We're no longer human. Forget your prior existence—if you want to *survive* here."

He chortled mirthlessly. "And what if I deem this type of survival less than inviting? What if I place more value on my immortal soul?"

She wanted to spit but she hissed instead. "'Tis too late for your immortal soul, my darling. Much too late."

He massaged his neck as irritation welled in his eyes. "Maybe it's too late for me, but I'll have no part in making it too late for anyone else. Perhaps you shouldn't listen to Constantine when choosing your next minion. You wanted a nice guy, you got a nice guy. If you wanted a monstrous vampire, you should have started with a monster."

God, but she didn't know what she wanted anymore! She barely knew who she was. She'd given her life and soul to the family for so long, so completely, she'd lost sight of her own desires and dreams.

As if he'd read her mind, he asked, "What do *you* want, Genevieve? What does *your* heart crave? Why does the family always have to come first?"

She peered closely at him nonetheless. Maybe he was changing more than he wanted to admit. Maybe he didn't even realize how much the change was taking place. There might be hope after all.

Given time...

But she wouldn't hold her breath.

She gathered her gown and shrugged into it. Turning back to him, she said in the most measured tones she could muster, "I don't fancy a minion. However, I don't

appreciate your disrespect for our ways. I don't find it the least endearing. Hopefully in time, you'll soon come around." Seething, she turned her back and retreated to her private boudoir.

Tony wanted to throttle the hardheaded woman almost as much as he wanted to kiss her. He was living a new life, a different life. But not a life of his choosing.

Once, he had thought this a nightmare, the worst possible thing that could happen to a soul. And then he'd thought it a godsend in a bizarre sort of way, not for himself, but for all the lost kids he was compelled to help.

God, but that sounded ludicrous! Who did he think he was? Clark Kent? Bruce Wayne? Peter Parker?

Angry at the stubborn woman, at the family, at the world, he marched into the parlor and ripped the chattering television off the wall and hurled it across the room.

The screen shattered and sparks flew.

Constantine swooped down and cradled the set against his heart. He glared up at Tony. "Have you taken leave of your wits? Are you utterly mad?"

His chest heaving, his anger still raging, Tony bit out, "You can have your queen. I don't want her. I don't want any of this."

Constantine rose to his feet. "You're not such an agreeable fellow as we presumed."

Sick of hearing those adjectives about himself, Tony snarled. "I never professed to be. *You* decided that."

"Did she catch you trying to save the world again?"

Tony rubbed his forehead. "She wants me to be her king but I'm not worthy of the position."

Constantine gaped and said as if speaking to a small child, "What is deemed unworthy?"

Tony whirled and punched the wall but unfortunately his anger didn't abate. "Because I'm not a mindless minion. Because I won't hurt living beings. Because the family won't accept an imperfect king."

"Good gracious. Who said that?"

"*The queen* said they won't." Tony turned back to the count. "She thinks I have to be the perfect vampire to hold your respect and make you toe the line."

Constantine pointed to himself as surprise entered his eyes. "*Me?*"

"Yes, in particular you."

He chuckled. "If by *toe the line* you mean to give up my career, no one could convince me. You have my respect and loyalty as much as any other night stalker."

"Mine too." Luke walked into the room and nodded. He crossed the room and shook Tony's hand. "You did good tonight. You would've made a good cop."

"And mine." Chloe gave the thumbs-up sign as she entered the room. "You would've made an even better physician."

Constantine gave him a hug and patted his back. "I've heard you sing and I beg of you, spare our tender sensibilities and do not break into song."

Tony's bad mood grew direr. "So it's the queen's feelings after all."

Another set of soft footsteps entered the room. A feminine clearing of the throat quieted the room. "Would you swear your allegiance to a king who won't partake of blood directly from a human? Who wishes to save humans?"

The few family members present, save for Tony, went down on bended knee and bowed. In chorus, they said, "We would, our queen. The rest of the family is in agreement."

Constantine added, "He has proven himself. He has done a great service to the family."

Genevieve paused, seeming to digest their assertions. Finally, her expression softened. "Indeed he has."

Luke stood. "Tony showed great courage and leadership. I would be honored to have him for my king."

Chloe joined Luke and slipped her hand into his. "I stand with my lifemate. I will swear allegiance to Tony as our king."

Genevieve regarded each family member in turn and then finally bestowed a smile on Tony. "It seems you've earned their loyalty. Can you forgive me?"

She closed the gap separating them and took Tony's hands in hers. "Can we rewind to the part where you proposed?"

Tony turned his hand and caught hers in his and squeezed. He dropped a kiss on her ruby lips. "I don't know that I am truly worthy, but I swear to love you with all my heart, to honor the family."

"Let's do this now." To those present, she commanded, "Gather the rest of the family. The ceremony will commence in an hour."

Chapter Nine

"Follow my lead," Genevieve murmured huskily to her lifemate, her almost-husband.

She allowed her adoring gaze to drink in the beautiful vision of Tony at the sacred altar, resplendent in a black tux and cummerbund. His bowtie sat slightly askew but that merely magnified his charm, amplifying his radiant smile as he beamed upon her as if no one else existed.

His gaze cherished her, stripping her down to her very soul. Her wedding dress, almost as ancient as she, swished about her ankles. The bodice plunged deeply, revealing a generous portion of cleavage.

The family crowded the room and spilled out into the corridors, eager to witness the happy union.

"'Tis the appointed time. Let us share a few moments of quiet reflection upon the meaning of our existence, of our family, and most specifically on love eternal."

The family bowed reverentially as they bestowed their collective blessings upon them.

Genevieve turned to Tony and curled her fingers about his. "Tony Nelson, you are my eternal love, the man to whom I pledge my undeath, my heart, my soul. Forever after, you will be my beloved lifemate as I shall be yours."

She nodded at him to take his turn and squeezed his hands reassuringly. Her heart felt light and carefree, overflowing with delight and joy as she had never known.

Tony squeezed her hands and his radiance filled her. "And I take you, Genevieve..." He paused, looking askance at her, his brow furrowed in consternation.

"Charbonneau," she supplied, trying to bite back a smile. Her surname tripped awkwardly off her lips as eons had passed since she'd had reason to speak it. "Charbonneau." Tony pronounced it beautifully, rolling it off his tongue with all the grace of a French aristocrat.

"I take you as my queen and my wife, my lover and my best friend, for all time and eternity." Tony caressed her knuckles with the pads of his fingers as his eyes adored hers.

His words and his touch melted her, and it was all she could do to stand tall and not sink into him. The eight hundred years she'd spent without a lifemate faded away, for the gift of this man was worth every lonely year. Eight hundred years was nothing compared to eternity, to waking in his loving arms at each new rise of the moon.

She wet her parched lips, eager for the moment she could drink him in and truly claim him as hers. "And I take you as my king and my husband, my lover and my best friend for all time and eternity. I shall cherish you each and every night of our lives, and I shall revere you as my king."

Constantine stepped up and bowed before her. He cupped her face tenderly between his hands and murmured, "Be happy. If you ever need anything, I will be, as always, at your service." Then he placed her jewel-encrusted crown upon her head. Then he handed the king's crown to her with a wink.

Touched, she tried to blink back sudden tears. She'd never wanted to hurt Constantine. She cupped his beloved face in her hands and kissed his cheek. She whispered huskily, "Someone's waiting out there who's perfect for you. She'll be a very lucky woman." She hoped he wouldn't have to wait eight hundred years to find happiness.

He rose and backed away and took his place with the family. For once he looked like royalty with his hair slicked back from his face, splendid in a tux that almost matched the grandeur of Tony's.

Getting control of her wayward emotions, she sniffed back her tears and placed the crown on her king's head. It fit as if designed for him.

A crimson stain rose along Tony's neck and settled in his cheeks, and he smiled humbly. "I hope I will do this crown justice, that I honor the family."

A rumble of support lifted from the family, echoing through the chamber. It grew louder as the joining and crowning part of the ceremony concluded.

Her heart rose in her throat and she tingled all over. Gazing deeply into her husband's soulful eyes, she murmured, "It's time for our first dance as lifemates."

She stepped out of her sumptuous slippers and then slid out of her heavy gown, letting it puddle at her feet, leaving her naked. In preparation for this event, she'd dusted herself with gold shimmer, so that tiny glimmers of light reflected off her flesh.

Her mouth went dry waiting for Tony to free himself of his clothing so that she could feast her eyes on him.

He shrugged out of his jacket and handed it to Luke. Then he handed off his cummerbund to the former cop as well. Soon he'd stepped out of his shoes and slacks. When he stood before her, his cock was throbbing. He drew her into his embrace, bent her back over his arm and drank deeply from her lips.

Constantine stepped up to the altar and crooned her favorite love song, a romantic ballad popular in the sixteenth century that never failed to send shivers down her spine. Meanwhile, the rest of the family divested themselves of their clothing and paired off into couples.

The temperature in the room grew to feverish levels as Genevieve's passion wildly escalated. She molded herself to her new husband, rubbing her breasts over his chest as she devoured his lips. As she'd longed to do, she wrapped herself in his sensuous braids and swayed gently with him until her knees refused to hold her up another moment.

Pulling him down on top of her, she luxuriated in this timeless love. "Is this a dream?"

Tony nibbled on her lips and his fingertips feathered across her body. "If it is, we share the same one. Just as we'll share our love. Our lives." He punctuated each reflection with a drugging kiss.

Tony kissed her with a mindless passion, his body hard and exciting against hers. His cock nuzzled between her legs. His hand played with her pussy and he massaged her G-spot with his thumb in a mind-numbing frenzy.

Moaning loudly, she spread her legs to provide better access, to invite his ravishing even as she worshipped his body. Bloodlust gripped her and her fangs cut through her gums, fully extending. Her blood thrumming through her veins, she sank her fangs into his chest and drank as if she could consume his very soul.

He flung back his head and howled.

Finally satiated, she retracted her fangs and licked his blood from her lips, savoring every luscious drop. Then she licked his wound, gently closing it with her saliva.

She arched her back and offered him her breasts. Yearning to feel his fangs sink into her, to draw on her essence, she writhed beneath him. "Your turn, my love."

"Share and share alike." He dipped his head and suckled her. Energy surged between them, and he plunged into her.

His every touch electrified her. Screams of ecstasy tore from her throat as her hips undulated against his. Her nails clawed his back, shredding his flesh, releasing the sweetest scent in creation and bloodlust captivated her yet again. In a passionate frenzy, she tore her breast from his mouth and then sank her fangs into his chest.

She ground her hips against him and tightly squeezed her vaginal walls around his cock, milking him of his seed.

Waves of glorious rapture washed over her. She clung to him lest she drown in the violent surge of pleasure. Breathless, she curled against her husband and laid her ear against his swiftly beating heart as she floated down from her orgasm.

Only now did she become aware how the others had also coupled in twos and threes. Not having waited for her and Tony to finish their wedding dance, her family feasted eagerly upon one another. The air was saturated with the scent of their musky arousal. Loud and bawdy, they were in the midst of an orgy.

Tony turned her around and rubbed the tip of his penis down the small of her back, teasing the crack of her behind. A few beats passed and his tongue swirled around the nape of her neck. His hands crept around her waist and up to her breasts. His tweaked her nipples between his fingers. Then he turned her around to face him.

She squirmed wantonly. Sliding up and down, she licked Tony's chest, savoring his flavor as she watched raw need flicker across his passion-glazed face. Running her fingertips over the tip of his penis, she lubricated his mouthwatering shaft with his juices.

Meanwhile, Tony eased his fingertip into her pussy and stroked gently at first and then with more fervor. He nudged her legs wider apart.

Wild sensation surged, climbing higher until she was a quivering mass of desperate need. "Fill me."

"Who am I to deny my queen her every desire?" her lifemate murmured against her lips as he drove his cock into her. "Anything you desire, my lady, is yours," Tony said in her ear as he drew it into his mouth and nibbled.

She swayed to the exotic rhythm of Tony's thrusts. Closing her eyes, she cherished every breathtaking touch. At the point of no return, she screamed with intense pleasure.

Still Tony pumped into her, until he filled her to overflowing and his juices flowed down her thighs.

Gasping for breath, she leaned against her husband and caressed his sexy ass.

Tony dropped featherlight kisses on the tip of her head and pulled out. Mischief flashing across his gaze. "Is my queen happy?"

Full of joy, she pressed her lips to her husband's. She murmured against them, "Deliriously, wonderfully happy. I hope I fill my king with as much joy as he fills me."

Against her lips, Tony murmured, "You already make my heart sing with joy. You *are* my heart."

"As you are mine, now and forever."

About the Author

Ashley Ladd lives in South Florida with her husband, five children and beloved pets. She loves the water, animals (especially cats) and playing on the computer.

She's been told she has a wicked sense of humor and often incorporates humor and adventure into her books. She also adores very spicy romance, which she weaves into her stories.

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