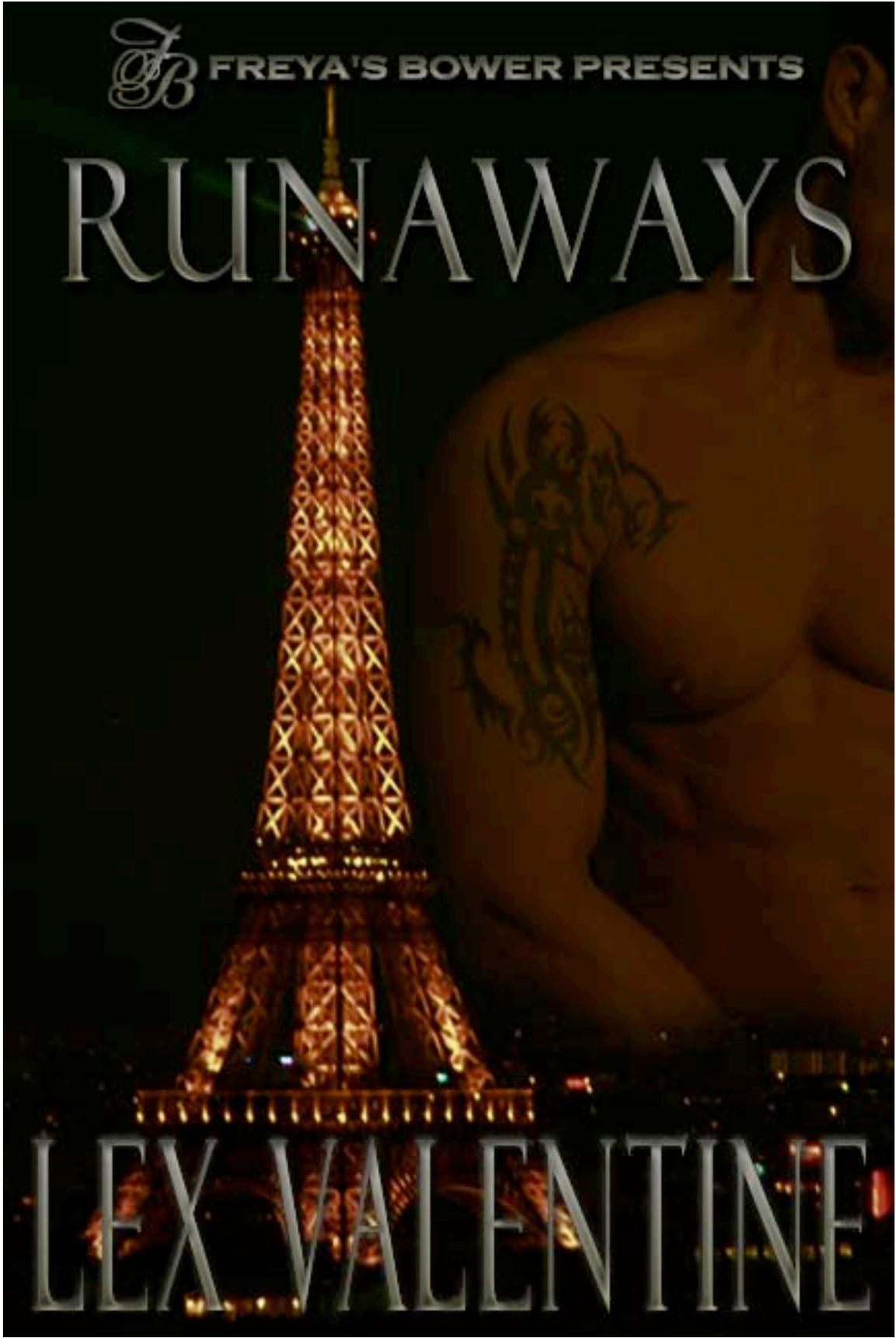


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FREYA'S BOWER PRESENTS

# RUNAWAYS

LEX VALENTINE



# Runaways

by

Lex Valentine



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Runaways  
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by Lex Valentine

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## Runaways

Standing room only would have been a generous assessment of the packed conditions in the dining car. The press of people made Dante edgy. Consequently, she picked nervously at her salad, devoured her steak, and drank too much red wine.

At the table across the aisle sat a very handsome man who also devoured his steak and drank too much wine. Dante tried to keep her eyes on her plate, but he drew her gaze like a lodestone. He fidgeted in his seat, his broad shoulders hunched in the narrow space. The way his fingers fiddled with the stem of the wine glass told Dante he didn't want to be in the crowded space any more than she did.

She wondered what bothered him. He'd been frowning since boarding the train in Prague that afternoon. Guilt nibbled at her for staring so much but she couldn't help herself. She always watched people. It was easier than actually talking to them and dealing with their neuroses, psychoses, and selfishness.

The waiter cleared the plates and Dante slipped him a few Euros. He smiled gratefully. She rose and began to inch her way out of the dining car. A few feet from the door, an elbow slammed painfully into her side. Her gaze traveled upward to find a pair of worried green eyes. The handsome man from across the aisle stood there, an apologetic expression on his face.

"I'm so sorry," he murmured. "Did I hurt you? These kids...they have no respect." He turned his head, glaring at the crowd of Goths who had pushed him.

Dante smiled, her heart beginning to race. He looked divine up close. All gorgeous eyes in a sculptured face.

She drew a deep breath and said, "I'm fine. No harm. No foul."

Taking the deep breath had been a mistake, she realized. His scent filled her nostrils and permeated her senses. He smelled like melted dark chocolate. She swallowed hard. Most of the men she met never engaged her interest. Tonight, however, her libido decided to work overtime.

"Let me," the handsome man replied in a low voice as smooth and rich as his dark chocolate scent.

He held the door for her and she stepped into the adjoining carriage car. Turning her head, she gazed at him from beneath her lashes. He stepped in behind her and shut the door. Shaking his hair back from his eyes, he smiled at her.

Her heart slammed against her breastbone. She suddenly understood her body's crazy reactions, but not what made *him* so special. To most people, he would have appeared quite ordinary, dressed in faded jeans that molded his thighs and narrow hips. Beneath his caramel colored sheepskin-lined jacket, a grey designer t-shirt stretched across his broad chest. Totally unremarkable clothing and yet, he wore them as if they were his skin. His tall, lean frame excited Dante so much he might as well have been standing before her naked with every muscle and sinew on display. She wondered what it would take to get him naked.

She blinked, pulled from her reverie by his smile and the movement of his arm as he held out his hand. "I'm Ranulf Verlaine. Are you in this car?"

Dante shook her head automatically. She had a first-class sleeper car for two, even though she traveled alone. Her hand reached for his and as their palms met,

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her skin tingled. The tingle became a raging brushfire. Her self-control stretched paper-thin as she fought not to grab him and pull his head down to hers.

“Dante Allerton,” she replied huskily, her senses going crazy as his scent and touch mesmerized her. “I’m in the first-class sleeper.”

She couldn’t look away from his eyes, but somewhere in her sex-fogged brain his name registered. Verlaine...The renowned pack outside of Paris. He was a wolf...a werewolf. For a moment, she tried to remember what she knew of Alphas, Betas, and wolf hierarchy, but the sexual lure he presented distracted her. She couldn’t make her brain concentrate when her body screamed to have him.

“Dante is an unusual name for a woman,” he remarked, his incredible eyes flickering as his gaze slid over her body, making her burn even hotter.

“In school, all the boys wanted to touch my inferno,” she joked softly, her voice tight with lust.

She tossed back her hair and a slow smile curved his lush mouth as he watched the movement. He rubbed one hand over his stubbly jaw. “Oh, I’ll bet they did,” he murmured, his tone becoming seductive.

His nostrils flared and she knew that his highly developed werewolf sense of smell had scented her arousal. Not that she wanted to hide it from him. He aroused her and the opportunity he presented would not be wasted.

“Would you like to join me in my compartment? Maybe you’d like to see if you can withstand the heat,” Dante told him boldly. Fleeting, she wondered at her audacity. Acting the seductress felt awkward, but she hadn’t ever wanted a man this much before. When she’d first seen him across the aisle at dinner, her preternatural awareness had pinged. Now, standing so close to him that she could feel the heat of his body, the same awareness pinged so hard it was off the Richter scale. Such a fierce, instantaneous reaction told her instinctively that she needed to claim him for her own even if it meant kicking her usual self-doubt in the ass.

She breathed in Ranulf’s scent again. Her body officially raged out of control. In fact, her vampire senses had completely run away with her and there was no hope to put anything back the way it had been before Ranulf had touched her.

“It would be...will be...my pleasure.” Ranulf put his hand beneath her elbow, and she led the way to her compartment.

The possessive gesture ratcheted up her desire. Every time his lean body brushed hers in the tight quarters of the train, flames of desire licked at her. They stepped aside once to let several passengers pass and Ranulf put his arm possessively around her shoulders, drawing her back against the heat of his body. She ached to shove him onto a nearby seat, straddle his thighs, and sink down onto his hard cock. She burned with sexual heat. Never had she felt such need for a man. She had no experience with instantaneous, white-hot lust. And even worse, she had an inexplicable emotional connection to him telling her he felt the same.

At her door, she slipped the keycard in and the lock slid open. The little cabin had a proper bed, albeit a small one and not much bigger than a twin bed. Dante didn’t think the size would pose much of a problem for them. Her eyes flicked to the travel clock. Six hours to Paris. Would it be enough to quench the raging thirst she had for him?

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She turned, her body brushing his. He slipped out of his jacket, tossing it onto the chair. His hands came up, sliding along her arms from her elbows to her shoulders. "You're beautiful and you're wearing far too many clothes," he whispered.

Her movements were so swift they must have been a blur. In mere seconds she stripped down to her pale pink thong and nothing else. Beneath his stormy gaze, her nipples stiffened. Dante wanted to scream. She wanted him to touch her, not stand there and stare. His golden brown hair fell over his eyes when he tilted his head down to take in her nakedness. He reached out and cupped one breast. Her lips parted on a sigh. She shifted foot to foot, feeling confined in the thong. She wanted to be naked, wearing only Ranulf...

Fuck it, she thought and reached for him, slipping her hands beneath his t-shirt. Holy hell, his skin felt wonderful! Her hands skated up his ridged abdomen to his pecs, the muscles hard as stone against her questing touch. She looked down at the front of his jeans, her heart thundering with anticipation. He was hard everywhere.

She licked her lips and tilted her head up to shoot him a provocative look. Then she slid her hands down his torso to the top button of his jeans. A soft popping sound signified the opening of all the buttons. Ranulf audibly sucked in a breath and the jeans inched down. Dante moved her hands inside the open waistband, over his hip bones, helping the denim make its way to the floor. His dark chocolate scent intensified as her fingers touched his bare skin. Her fingers stilled briefly as she discovered he wore no underwear. Good, she thought as her fingers found his thick erection. Flames licked at her body, fueled by his scent and the feel of his hard flesh in her hands.

Dante stroked Ranulf's straining cock as he pulled off his shirt and kicked free of his shoes and jeans. She stared up at his sculpted body and her eyes dilated. Tribal bands in black ink decorated his upper arms and shoulders. Vaguely, she recalled something about wolf clan marks and pack bonds, but couldn't remember the particulars. The swirling bands of black across his muscles were erotic and she instantly wanted to lick them, trace them with her tongue, and feel him writhe beneath her. Heat rushed through her veins, setting her on fire from the inside out. She knelt and would have licked the head of his cock, but Ranulf sucked in a harsh breath and cupped his hands around her head, stopping her.

"Who are you?" he murmured roughly, his green eyes holding hers intently. "And what the hell is this between us?"

\* \* \* \*

Ranulf delighted in Dante's creamy, desire-flushed skin so soft and hot, he could barely control his greedy hands as he touched her. She fit him perfectly: not tiny and petite, nor tall and angular. She stood about four inches shorter than his six feet with an elegant bone structure, long legs, high waist, and small rib cage. Her oval face had high cheekbones and a delicate jaw that angled to a pointed chin. She completely dazzled him. Her pale, ice blue eyes shone in the dim light

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while her auburn hair glowed like fire, a smattering of golden strands glittering in the thick mass.

Watching her eat dinner earlier, he'd focused on the movement of her lush mouth and had grown so hard he hurt. He'd wanted her from the instant he'd seen her. If the Goths hadn't shoved him into her, he would have manufactured his own introduction because something about her fired his desire as no one ever had before. Just looking at her sent flames licking along his clan marks, making his skin so hot he wondered why it didn't blister.

Her name suited her he thought because she burned hotter than Dante's Inferno as her talented fingers caused waves of pleasure to crash over him. In fact, he doubted he'd ever been with a woman quite as hot, and he'd certainly been with a few. There was always a surfeit of gorgeous, sexy females around his brother, Roul, the pack Alpha. Since they were twins, women automatically wanted to try both of them and Ran rarely said no.

Now, with Dante, his senses went into overdrive. Her distinctive cinnamon scent fired his body even though it registered in his brain as non-wolf. He knew instinctively that sex with Dante would be mind blowing. The fragrance that drove him wild with lust also told him she was his mate, while the underlying aroma of her arousal indicated her willingness to mate with him.

Good, he thought with vicious satisfaction, because he was ready too. He couldn't muster even a lick of curiosity over the fact that his mate wasn't a werewolf. He didn't care. Still, he needed to broach the subject before he just fucked her and mated her. She bent to suck his cock, but he stopped her with his hands cupped around her head.

When her eyes met his, he forced the issue of mating into the open. "Who are you? And what the hell is this between us?"

Dante's pale blue eyes darkened and Ran saw that she struggled to hide her emotions. He wasn't an Alpha like his twin, taking whatever he wanted, so he helped her rise and took her in his arms.

"My senses tell me that you're my mate. What do yours tell you?" he asked bluntly, his tone soft to help ease the shock of their discovery.

The subject made her uncomfortable, her feet moved restlessly, but other than that, she remained still and focused on him.

"You're a vampire," he said willing her to tell him what she felt.

She nodded. "You're a werewolf."

"Yes. I am also your bloodmate. I defy you to deny that." Ran might not be the Alpha, but he was strong willed and had a streak of arrogance that ran just as deep as his brother's. If Dante wouldn't willingly admit her feelings, he would force them from her. He wouldn't risk losing his mate because she didn't want to acknowledge what they both knew to be the truth.

Her silence dragged on for long moments. He sensed her struggling with herself. Finally, she drew a deep shuddering breath. "I can't deny it. My senses, my body, your scent... they all tell me that you are my bloodmate," she admitted in a tense voice. "But I don't know what to do about that."

Ran's hands shifted to cup her chin and lift her head. "You bond with me, Dante. You let me mate you. It is what Nature intended when she made us mates. You cannot change it."

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Suddenly, the urge to mate her became unbearable. The longer she stood there trying to find a way to repudiate the facts, the stronger became his desire to overcome her resistance by just pushing her down and taking the choice from her. To him, there was no choice anyway. They were mates.

As if she could read his thoughts, which he realized she might be able to do, she sighed and the tension left her body. “We don’t know each other,” she said, but Ran knew that mentally, she’d already given in.

He caressed the side of her face, reveling in the silky texture of her skin. “We’ll learn. Whatever obstacles there are, we are meant to overcome them together. Can’t you feel how strong the pull to mate is? I’m on fire for your touch, Dante. My clan marks, the tribal bands, they ache for you. If you touch me there, I won’t be able to control myself,” he confessed quietly.

Her eyes flared with heat, but he saw vestiges of resistance in their blue depths. Despite his wolf’s outrage, he put control of the situation in her hands. “This is your call, Dante. Are you willing to risk losing your bloodmate? Do you want your life to stay as it is now? Unmated and alone?”

Ran didn’t know if she had a boyfriend, but since she’d come on to him, he figured she didn’t. He knew Acerbians, or vampires as they were commonly known in the Darkworld, had an innate fear of being alone and without a bloodmate to drink from. Using her fears against her might be considered a dirty trick by some, but he couldn’t just let her walk away.

Dante’s fingers stroked him and he stifled a groan. The expression in her eyes made his heart race. The last bit of resistance in her disappeared.

“No, I don’t want to be alone. I don’t want to live this life forever. I want to know happiness, desire, and love. I want to be fulfilled.”

Her solemn words burned themselves on his heart. If she wanted those things, it meant she didn’t have them now, and he vowed to give them to her. His hands stroked her silky hair and she smiled at him, leaning forward to lick the head of his cock. Ran groaned as she sucked him deep into her mouth. Her mouth set his cock ablaze to the point that he had no lucid thoughts beyond that of mating her. His wolf ached to have her.

He reached up, bracing his hands against the low ceiling as Dante’s tongue twisted around his hard length. She slid her lips along his shaft, the suction making his eyes slam shut in pleasure. Damn, she had a great mouth.

She made little slurping sounds and tiny growls of pleasure as she worked him. The vibrations added a whole other set of sensations to the act and he knew he couldn’t take much more. He stroked his fingers over her jaw as he pulled away from her. Her lips were red, swollen and wet. Just looking at her sexy mouth made him want to come.

Pulling her up, he ripped the pink thong from her body. Then he realized he’d never even kissed her! While his wolf might not care about that, Ran did. He shook his head dazedly. Apparently, he’d lost all his brains with one good suck from her luscious mouth.

Ran speared his hands into her silky hair and tilted her head back. Her ice blue eyes glowed at him. He bent and nibbled at her bottom lip. She moaned and her hands slid up his rib cage, making him shudder. Her touch seared him. His

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mouth took hers and a bolt of sheer lust rocked him. Then her tongue touched his and fireworks exploded in his head.

*Mine!*

He groaned her name and her fingernails raked his back from shoulders to waist, over the tribal bands that swirled over his delts. The pleasure-pain rippled through him, as if she'd clawed his flesh from the bone. His hands were all over her, the feel of her skin against his palms making him break out in a sweat. Covered in goose flesh, his nerves came completely alive.

One hand slipped between her thighs. He found her hairless and soaking wet. Warm, sticky fluid coated his fingers as he searched for that one special place. His forefinger grazed her clit and she bit his bottom lip, stifling a scream as her body went rigid.

Shaking, Dante climbed his body, forcing him to grab her ass and hold her. She threw her arms around his neck and clung to him, her mouth grinding against his. Off balance, Ran stumbled, slamming her back against the wall. He pressed into her, his thick cock sliding easily along her wet, swollen flesh. She ripped her mouth from his and clutched his shoulders.

"Fuck me hard," she panted, her chest pressed tightly to his.

Ran didn't need any further encouragement. His cock already strained toward her opening. He flexed his hips and pressed forward until the sensitive head teased the first ring of muscles beyond her swollen lips. She twisted in his grasp, plunging herself down on him.

He sucked in a breath as she curled her body into his, clinging tightly to his shoulders. His first real thrust slammed her against the wall again, but she didn't seem to care. Her wet flesh gripped him so tightly he had no clue how long he could hold on. Two good pushes could finish him off if he didn't regain some control.

Dante nibbled his neck, licking him. Ran relaxed a little, trying to catch his breath so he could last longer. He drove into her leisurely, feeling every hot, clasping inch of her as he did. The wet glide of his cock within her felt amazing and after another half dozen thrusts, he couldn't contain himself any longer. His fingers tightened on her ass and she moaned loudly, her teeth scraping his neck. The beast within him awoke.

His wolf growled as his movements became harder and shorter. Dante's hands turned to steel on his shoulders. Her thighs squeezed his hips as her body convulsed in orgasm. His clan bands sizzled with sensation as her nails dug into them. Then he felt her fangs dance against his skin. The wolf inside him poised itself to pounce, wanting to mark her.

As Dante's fangs pierced his flesh, his wolf broke free. A low howl rose from his chest, growing in strength as she drank his blood. Intense pleasure lashed his body from the hair follicles at the top of his head to the rough skin on the soles of his feet.

She lifted her head, licking his neck, and he spun around. Pulling her off his cock, he shoved her onto all fours on the bed. With his wolf firmly in control, and uncaring that his actions might be rough, Ran lifted her hips and rammed into her. She pushed back into him with a loud moan.

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The rough tenor of his pants filled the small room. His thighs cradled hers, his arms and torso covering her. Ran wanted to mark her and make her his forever. His imminent orgasm made his senses more acute and he could tell that her body teetered on the edge as well. His wolf clawed at him, seeking escape, wanting the shift. The beast wanted to control the last part of the mating.

Ran licked Dante's ear as he lunged into her. He nuzzled her, his wolf growling possessively. He knew she was aware of his wolf and embraced it. He nipped her throat and she responded with a loud moan, her pussy clenching as she shivered in yet another orgasm.

His body tensed. Balls aching for release, cock pulsing within her, he stroked into her twice more. Then he came, his body seized with sensation. His wolf howled low, the sound ending in a growl as he bit the creamy skin of her shoulder. Blood spurted onto his tongue as he ejaculated, his cock gushing cum deep inside his mate.

Silence reigned in the aftermath of their orgasms. Possessiveness flooded Ran. He pulled his cock from her body and collapsed next to her, breathing hard and drenched in sweat. Dante was sweaty too, smelling of blood and semen with her cinnamon scent as the base note. It was intoxicating to him. His mate's scent.

The train rocked beneath them. A shaft of moonlight speared into the room as Ran began to regain his faculties. Dante got up and adjusted the curtains. She stood for a moment in a golden circle of light from the wall lamp, a beautiful sight from her tousled, sexy hair to the bite mark on her shoulder.

He sighed contentedly. The bed dipped as she pulled on the covers. He rolled out of the way as she stripped them back, pushing him down on the white sheets. Then she landed on top of him, pulling the sheet over them both.

"I want you," she said. "I've got a few more hours and I want to make the most of them."

Ran's hands slid over her skin. "Where are you going?" he asked, knowing there were several stops before the train route ended.

She shivered. "Paris. To my family."

The hell she was, he thought. He'd mated her. She wouldn't be going anywhere without him.

"Yes, I am. I don't know you, Ranulf. I have a life that doesn't include you."

Her soft words hit him like bullets. He jerked, reaching up to cup her head in his hands, holding her so that he could stare into her eyes. "You heard my thoughts."

She wriggled a little. "Yes, but it's to be expected. We've bonded."

Her ice blue eyes appeared calm, but Ran knew she had to be filled with turmoil. His thoughts reached out to her and warmth suffused him.

*How can you be so prosaic about this when we've just bonded? How can you want to leave me?*

*I don't know you. I need time to adjust. We let this happen without thought or planning.*

Ran growled a little and she kissed the tip of his chin. Oddly, his wolf calmed at her gesture of affection.

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*It happens like that sometimes. You meet your mate and it overwhelms you. Generally speaking, in my world, those who feel the urge so strongly end up the strongest couples in the pack.*

“You’re not the Alpha, are you?”

Ran didn’t know what sent the wave of jealousy through him, the fact that she suddenly switched to actual speech or the idea that she might be disappointed that he wasn’t the Alpha. “No,” he replied tersely, his fingers tightening possessively on her.

“What will your Alpha think of you mating a vampire?” She held his gaze, her own cool but curious.

He fought the urge to squirm beneath her regard. “Roul is my twin, the elder by thirteen minutes. Whatever I want, he will respect.”

Dante stroked her fingers over his clan marks and Ran felt his skin ripple in reaction. His wolf loved her touch. There was no question that she was his mate. His tribal bands burned hot when she touched him. He couldn’t see the dark lines that decorated his skin, but he bet they were glowing just a little and she felt their heat.

“My brothers will be less easy to convince.”

Startled, Ran tilted her chin up so their eyes met again. “They have no say. You are mine.”

His rough words surprised even him. Strangely, Dante didn’t fight his possessiveness. Instead, she sighed. “You don’t understand the nature of my relationship with my brothers. I don’t usually go against their wishes.”

Ran blinked at her in astonishment. The woman who’d practically raped him couldn’t stand up to her brothers? She’d been fully in control and directing at least half their encounter. He had a difficult time reconciling her words with her actions. “Bonding with me goes against their wishes? I don’t follow, Dante. Spell it out for me.”

She sighed again and he saw regret deep in her eyes. She wanted to be with him. He felt it in his bones. But something held her back.

“I work for my older brother, Christian. He’s a writer. I do his research and proof his manuscripts. I handle his schedule, coordinate his engagements, and act as his secretary. Vaughn handles the family business affairs, our money and investments, the land and properties. They need me.” She bit her lip fleetingly. “Once, I tried to take a job appraising art. I have the knowledge, the degrees. But they wouldn’t let me work elsewhere. Christian sent Vaughn to sabotage my job so I would be fired.”

Fury lashed Ran. How could her brothers humiliate her like that? He hoped he never met the two bastards because he and his wolf would tear them limb from limb. “So they won’t let you leave. They control your life. Do they let you date?” he asked gruffly, trying to get a grip on his rage.

She shrugged slightly, her fingers stroking over his clan marks. “Men they thought were right for me.”

Now, that their passion had momentarily cooled, Ran could see that despite her actions with him, she didn’t have an aggressive nature. Still, the softness of her personality had a tough edge that spoke of a dauntless, get-things-done attitude. She gave to others, and acquiesced when it came to her own needs.

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Ironically, it was a trait he recognized well. Then it dawned on him why they were mates. They would save each other from lives lived for their siblings.

\* \* \* \*

The oddest sense of calm enveloped Dante. She'd just had the best sex of her life, the most powerful orgasms, with a man she didn't know. She'd been caught in a rip tide, unable to catch her breath or make it to the surface. Being with Ranulf drowned her in sensation. She'd never found so much pleasure in sucking a man's cock. Never had she come so quickly or so hard from just a touch. She'd certainly never had a man give her so many orgasms. His scent had told her instantly that he was her bloodmate, but instead of getting to know him, she'd pounced on him and bit him during sex. That was all it took to become bonded to a bloodmate.

"Dante, you can't go home. You have to come with me. You bonded with me. You cannot drink another's blood now," he reminded her gently.

Fear sliced her. She wondered briefly if Ranulf would let her starve to death. Some vampires' bloodmates did because they could not accept the biting and drinking of blood. She swallowed nervously, her throat too dry to speak.

With a rough growl, he pulled her head down and kissed her. "I will not let you die. This is why I'm telling you that you cannot go home."

"Couldn't you just come with me?" The moment the words left her mouth she knew they were wrong. He might not be Alpha, but he was a strong Beta, and wolves like that didn't bow down to others.

He shook his head. "The point of bonding is that the new couple must make their own way, build their lives together. I, too, have a controlling brother. He doesn't mean to be, but it's the nature of the beast. Alphas control everything around them. Roul expects me to run the pack business because he doesn't have time to, but I prefer to help my friend, Griffin, build his consulting business."

Understanding dawned. "We're kindred," she said in an astonished voice. "We both need to break free of our brothers."

Ranulf nodded. "Tell me what your greatest dream is," he demanded.

Without thinking she said, "To move to New York City and work in the art world."

*New York City. Every time I go there, I don't want to go home.*

She heard his thought as if he'd spoken aloud. His expression turned fierce.

"Come with me tonight. We'll go there."

She shook her head instantly. "I cannot."

Anger darkened his green eyes. "Dante, you must. We're meant to break free of our families. You can't go back to them. You'll die without me."

"It doesn't have to be like that. You can come with me," she said stubbornly.

"Your brothers will make trouble between us. I barely tolerate my own brother, my Alpha, telling me what to do," he said. "I'd never take it from your brothers."

Frantically, she tried to figure out the situation. She shook her head. "I can't go with you tonight. I have to go home and speak to them. Then I'll join you," she offered in desperation.

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She heard him arguing with himself about how to handle her. She listened in, but didn't speak. Finally, he convinced himself to give her a couple of days. He reached around her back and tugged at his finger. Then he held out a silver ring.

"It's platinum," he corrected her thought with a grin. "My family crest." He took her right hand and slid the ring onto her forefinger then kissed the fingertip. "Two days. Then I come for you."

She raised her eyebrows. "What if I'm not ready to go?" she asked quietly, unable to lie and say she didn't want to go with him. She couldn't lie. He'd know.

His green eyes glinted. "You will anyway. I won't let you starve to death because you're afraid to tell your brothers you're bonded."

"I didn't really know what it meant to want someone until tonight." Her lips trembled.

Ranulf pulled her head down and kissed her gently. "Don't walk out of my life. Come with me. We'll call your brothers together," he whispered. "Then we'll call mine."

Dante shook her head. "Don't push. I'm not ready."

His eyes darkened, but when he spoke, he changed the subject. "Where were we?" he asked, his gaze turning hot with desire. One long-fingered hand slipped between her thighs and she gasped, the contact lighting her nerve endings on fire. "Oh, yeah. Making the most of the hours left until Paris. Did you know that werewolves have a voracious appetite?"

He waggled his eyebrows at her and she smiled, her heart turning over. He pushed the sheet off, flipped her onto her back and spread her thighs. "Fuck, you smell good," he murmured. "How will these hours ever be enough?" And then his mouth settled on her sex, sending her spinning out of control once more.

\* \* \* \*

They shared their dreams in their last hour together. Dante clung to Ranulf as she told him about her dreams of New York. Then she comforted him as he talked about his twin. It seemed odd to her that they each dreamt of escaping the emotional burdens of their families. As strong as Ranulf seemed, when it came to his family he wasn't much better off than she was.

They dressed in silence, shielding their thoughts from each other. When the train pulled in, they stepped off and walked toward the station, holding hands. As the distant lights of the Eiffel Tower came into view, Ranulf stopped and took her in his arms, kissing her fiercely, the scent of his desperation strong in her nostrils.

"Don't go," he pleaded.

"Two days. Three at most." She pushed him away, keeping her thoughts from him.

His jaw set in stubborn lines. "If you don't call, I'm coming for you. I won't let anything come between us. Matings don't happen by chance for immortals. This is right and I won't let them convince you that it's not."

She gasped, shocked at the rage in his tone. "My brothers wouldn't do that!"

"Wouldn't they?" His lip curled. "They've controlled you for years. They won't be happy to lose you."

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Dante bristled. She knew fear made Ranulf speak so arrogantly, but she couldn't stop herself from snapping back. "You don't know anything about them!"

"I know they'd probably let you die before they let a werewolf take you from them!"

His angry words conveyed his fears and she knew it was an obvious conclusion for him to make, but it still pissed her off. "You're wrong. Maybe you'd better go now."

"Not before I say goodbye, sweetheart," he growled, jerking her against him.

His mouth took hers in the hottest, sweetest kiss she'd ever received. Her every sense tingled with awareness of him. Abruptly, he let her go, striding away from her and through the passengers who streamed off the train.

Dante stood on the platform for several minutes, her heart thudding uncomfortably, her brain numb. What the fuck was she doing? First, she'd bonded with Ranulf. Then she'd refused to go with him. Now, she stood rooted to the spot where he'd left her as he walked out of her life. She swallowed hard, her throat tight and dry. Pain radiated out from her chest. He was her bloodmate. She couldn't let him go...

Before the thought fully formed in her mind, her legs began to move. She walked quickly through the people on the platform. When she didn't see Ranulf's broad shoulders and brown hair anywhere, panic set in. She started jogging, her eyes darting in every direction, hoping for a glimpse of him. She had to find him...she had to.

She stepped on something and a voice cursed her. Glancing back, Dante nearly fell as she collided with a hard body. The scent of dark chocolate enveloped her.

"Looking for someone, beautiful?"

With a cry, Dante threw her arms around him. "You, you, you!" she cried out, holding him tightly.

Ranulf's hand slipped beneath her chin, tilting up her face so their eyes met. "I'm glad you came to your senses because I came to mine." A low growl escaped him, the possessive sound matching the expression in his eyes. "You're my mate. You're not leaving me. At least not for any appreciable amount of time."

His mouth slashed down, his lips ravaging hers, as if they hadn't already taken every part of her soul from her during the past few hours. She melted into his embrace, her body cleaving to his, hungry for him as if they'd been separated for days, weeks, instead of a handful of minutes. Her tongue flicked his and a groan that vibrated through her palms rumbled up from his chest.

Ranulf jerked up his head, breathing hard. He kept one arm wrapped around her as he steered her purposefully toward a taxi stand. She blinked, dazed by his kiss and confused by his swift, decisive movements.

"Where are we going?" she asked breathlessly.

He gestured toward the glittering lights of Paris. "Do you want to stay here? You know what awaits us. Your family. My pack." He quirked a dark brow upward as a mischievous smile curved his lips. "Wouldn't you rather start fresh? Different skyline, but still a city of lights?"

Dante sucked in a breath. His words brought back the dreams she'd spilled during the night: her yearning to go to New York and be her own woman. "A city

## Runaways

that never sleeps?” She laughed softly. “You’re playing on my dreams, aren’t you?”

Ranulf shook his head. “Nah. I’m playing on mine. I don’t want to let you out of my sight. I don’t want to deal with my family or yours. I just want to be with you and create our world, our life, together. Without their damned interference.”

“And just walking away from them to go to New York will keep them from interfering?” Dante didn’t think the Atlantic Ocean would keep her brothers from butting into her business if they thought something was wrong. She’d just have to figure out how to make them realize that everything was suddenly right.

“I don’t know about your brothers, but my brother won’t come after me.” Ranulf shrugged slightly. “He’ll respect the fact that you’re my mate. He won’t like it, but he’ll respect it. I’ll have a bigger fight on my hands with Griffin. He won’t want me to leave the business.”

Dante raised both brows. “Then he’ll have to figure out a way for you to stay a part of it,” she said practically.

Ranulf chuckled, his earlier stress dissipated, leaving his expression carefree and his face suddenly appearing much younger. He hugged her tightly. “Since you’re so sure of that, we’re outta here.”

He pulled her toward the taxis at the curb but she hung back. He stopped, looking down at her questioningly. She grinned back at him. “I have a suitcase I need to retrieve. I thought you did too.”

Astonishment flickered in his eyes. “Damn. I forgot. Look what you’ve done to me, woman.” He growled at her and leaned down to drop a kiss on the soft skin behind her ear. “We’ll get our bags and catch a cab to De Gaulle.”

As they walked toward the baggage retrieval area, Dante asked, “Won’t your brother be expecting you? Shouldn’t you call him? I mean, my brothers won’t worry until I don’t show up at dinner, so I need to call before that.”

Ranulf grunted. “We’ll be across the ocean by then. And yeah, I do need to call Roul, but not until I’m about to get on a flight. Just in case.”

Amusement bubbled up within her. “Dear gods. We sound like runaway teens.”

He shot her a sardonic look. “I feel like one. Leaving behind my family, my job, and my responsibilities...all to take a chance on love.”

“Oh, please.” Dante snorted. “We’re not human. There’s no chance about it as you yourself pointed out not more than an hour ago.”

“Well, despite that, it’s not going to be easy in the beginning. We need to learn each other, learn to live together, how to blend our lives. It will be easier if our brothers don’t interfere,” he pointed out. “This has happened so fast the only way I know how to deal with it effectively is to isolate ourselves.”

Dante nodded. She didn’t need to give it a lot of thought either. She knew how controlling her brothers could be and putting the width of the Atlantic between them was perfect. Not only did it prove to them that she meant business when it came to Ranulf, it gave them time to think too. Hothead Vaughn would be hell bent to drag her back. However, the distance between them would have logical Christian rethinking everything.

By the time Ranulf bought their tickets, she’d come to terms with her choices. For the first time in her life, she wasn’t second guessing herself. She wanted

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Ranulf, wanted a chance to have a bloodmate, and to be happy. She sat in the first class lounge, looking out the window at the plane that would take her to New York City where the rest of her life would begin.

In the past twelve hours, her life had run away with her. Now that she allowed Ranulf into her thoughts, she knew he felt the same. They'd both been burdened by the expectations of others, but they'd put themselves in that position. Making the decision to walk away empowered them.

As dawn broke over Paris, their flight turned away from the sun. The dawn chased them across the Atlantic, but by the time they landed, New York gleamed in the sunlight. They took a limo directly from JFK to the hotel Ranulf had booked. Exhausted from hours of travel, a night filled with sexual activity, emotional upheaval, and life altering decisions, they tumbled into bed and promptly fell asleep in each other's arms. Dante had never felt so peaceful in a bed that wasn't her own. Ranulf's presence beside her apparently made all the difference.

\* \* \* \*

The moon hadn't risen yet. Ran's werewolf senses always kept him informed of that event. Curled up at his side, one slender thigh thrown over his, Dante still slept. Learning to track her movements, growing his awareness of her through their metaphysical connection, would take some time, but he knew their bond would strengthen daily. He eased away from her lax body, slipping out of bed and heading to the bathroom.

When he returned, he saw that his shower hadn't disturbed her. She lay sprawled, her face in the pillows. He smiled indulgently. She'd been beyond exhausted when they'd walked into the hotel suite. He knew that the sex had wiped her out more than the traveling had. She hadn't had many partners and none recently. Plus, the emotional upheaval of finding her mate and deciding their future on the fly had been draining.

Tightening the towel around his waist, Ran opened the drapes and quietly slid open the door to the terrace. The warm spring breeze floated into the room. He drew a deep breath. The city smelled the same as it had on his last visit. He picked out the scent of freshly baked pizza. A smile curved his lips. New York pizza couldn't be beat.

Staring in the direction of home, he opened the bond he shared with his brother. Instantly, the tribal bands across his shoulders began to itch with awareness. Despite the time difference, his twin was awake. The bonds of the pack, of blood and brotherhood, reached out to Ran. His brother's worry wrapped around him and he tried to let his twin know his happiness.

In his mind's eye, he saw Roul standing at the window of his study, as he so often did when something bothered him. His tank top did nothing to hide the tribal bands that snaked across his shoulders and around his thickly muscled biceps. Their markings had been made at the same time, but they were not alike. Still, the tribal magic of the pack's clan marks connected them as surely as their twin bond did.

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Roul's emotions flowed into him as easily as ever, something he hadn't been sure would happen. Mates were out of his realm of knowledge. He hadn't known if Dante's presence in his head would push his twin out. Apparently, it didn't.

*If she's active in your thoughts, if you're talking to each other, I'm not allowed in.* Roul began.

*Roul, how do you know you're not allowed into my head if I'm sharing thoughts with Dante?*

*I tried when you were on the train. I got a sense of her, but then it was like a static-filled phone line.*

Ran realized that his brother had known he was mating Dante.

*She is my life now, Roul.*

*You will always belong to the pack, brother.*

*I need to do this without the pack, without you.*

*I understand, Ranulf. You're my twin, my other half. How could I not know? This will always be your home whether you choose to live here or not. You are Verlaine.*

Ran realized his Alpha, his twin brother with whom he had always shared everything, had just let him go. *I love you, Roul.*

In his mind's eye, he saw his brother's big shoulders move as he sighed. *I love you too, Ranulf. Be happy.*

And just like that, the connection between himself and his twin cut off. Ran drew a shaky breath. He'd taken a big step leaving his brother behind. Dealing with his best friend and business partner Griffin would be a piece of cake now.

Warm arms wrapped around his waist from behind. Dante kissed a path along his tribal bands making his cock stiffen.

"My brothers left a message in response to the message I left them," she said softly.

Ran didn't turn around. "And?"

"I'm an Allerton. I can come home whenever I want. They aren't happy that I bonded with you so quickly, but they understand how difficult it is to resist the pull of your bloodmate."

Now, Ran did turn in her arms. His eyes met her pale blue ones. "No regrets?"

She shook her head, her auburn hair spilling brightly over the white terry of the hotel robe. "None. This is the future I've always dreamed of. Running away with you is the best thing I ever did."

"Don't you mean bonding with me?" he chuckled, his hands slipping down to caress the firm curves of her ass.

"Oh, that's part of it, but I was just thinking about us being runaways." Her gaze held his steadily and he could see the growing love in the depths of her eyes. "We were running away from life before we met. Neither of us faced the truth of our relationships with our brothers. Sure, our emotions ran away with us when we came together, but our bonding forced us to face the future and deal with our siblings. We're not running away anymore, Ranulf. We're running to something."

He considered her words for a moment and knew them to be the truth. He bent and kissed her, feeling her instant response. "So what is it we're running to?" he murmured against her lips.

## Runaways

Dante's fingers caressed his back, tracing the tribal lines. "Life. Love. And everything in between." She smiled at him, her lips curving seductively. "Come back to bed?"

Happiness poured into him and through the bond they shared, Ran could feel Dante's happiness too. Bending, he lifted her into his arms. "Now, that is something I will never run away from."

"Sex?" she said on a laugh as he strode back into the bedroom.

He laid her on the bed, his hands parting the lapels of the hotel robe so he could touch her skin. "The chance to make you happy."

Dante tugged on his towel, letting it fall from his waist. Her fingers curved around his cock. "Make love to me then. We'll run away to paradise together, if only for these long minutes."

"Minutes? Didn't I tell you about werewolf stamina?" he teased as he knelt between her thighs.

"Why don't you show me instead?"

With a growl, he took her mouth as their passion ran away from everything but their need for each other.

Excerpt from

*Mating*

by

Lex Valentine

A Freya's Bower Shapeshifter/Vampire Mini

## Mating

“The danger of staring too long at a sigil is that it can leech away your control.”

The woman’s voice tore Roul’s gaze from the magical diamond-shaped mark that famous wizard artist Nick Diamond used to sign his paintings. A woman with long, blonde hair stood in the doorway. Her eyes met his easily, and he realized she must be at least six feet tall. Then her scent slammed into him like a Mac truck: rosemary . . . and lemon. Sweet, spicy, tangy . . . his mind and his cock reacted in the same millisecond to her scent.

*Mine!*

The woman’s elegant brows flicked up, and with a fierce growl, his wolf roused. Possessiveness filled every atom of his body, and he wondered briefly if the magic of the painting had gotten to him. Gods, he wanted her! All rational thought fled his brain, leaving behind only primal urges. Driven by his base needs, he promised himself that before dawn lit the sky, he would have her beneath him, moaning in supplication.

A sardonic expression settled on her elegant features, almost as if she’d heard his arrogant thoughts. “I can see I’m way too late with my warning about control,” she murmured, her lips curling in amusement.

Roul knew his hard cock blatantly strained the front of his jeans, but he didn’t care. His wolf wanted her to see how she aroused him. “I’m Roul Verlaine,” he said in a voice husky with lust.

The woman stepped toward him. “I know. I’m Morgan Kale. Welcome to New York.” She held out one elegant hand.

Shock rippled through him. He’d thought the head of the Watcher Agency was a man. Her eyebrows arched up, and she gazed at him. Again, her expression gave him the sense that she’d heard his thoughts. “Are you an empath? A telepath?” he asked abruptly, setting his suitcase down, and extending his hand toward hers.

Her polite smile became a wide grin. “I wish. It would make my work much easier.” Her palm met his and she shook his hand firmly, but briefly. Her fingers dropped away, and she gestured toward the office door. “Please come in.”

Her touch unnerved him even more than the persistent notion that she could read his thoughts. Despite her assertion that she was neither empath nor telepath, Roul’s instincts told him to shield his thoughts like he often did with his twin brother. A woman like this one—professional, capable—wouldn’t give him the time of day if she had heard his arrogant thoughts about having her beneath him before dawn.

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