



Blood Daemon

By

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Dedication

To Malloreë.

Always remember how strong you are.

I also want to give a big thanks to Tracy Seybold, editor extraordinaire! To the wonderful team at Cobblestone, thank you for your hard work and support.

And to you, the reader. I hope that you have as much fun with Raven as I did. Thank you so much for continuing to visit my worlds. They wouldn't be the same without you.

Chapter One

Raven Montgomery moved between the writhing couples on the dance floor, weaving through the stench of human sweat that mingled with the sweet, metallic aroma of blood. The white strobe flashes highlighted the group of Bian's thugs in the corner, showing them in slow frames that reminded her of the old moving pictures she'd seen so long ago.

Jareth, the wall of leather, long midnight hair, and muscle that she called a daemon, sidled up to her. He pushed people out of the way and moved with her toward the group of thugs in the corner booth. "Want me to toss them out?"

"I'll take them." She motioned toward a young female biting into the neck of the human frat boy in the corner. "You handle that."

"Sure thing."

She watched him move away and smiled. In the years since Jareth agreed to be her daemon, he'd also become her best friend. His title required him to put his life on the line for hers. He was her guardian, bound by blood, but nothing else. Nothing in their laws required him to be anything other than loyal and willing to take a stake for her. So, it was a nice surprise that he wasn't as reserved as the daemons the other leaders had. He wasn't cold or distant. No, Jareth was warm and comfortable like a great old t-shirt.

Raven kept weaving until she broke free of the crowd and drew the thugs' attention. Seeing their faces clearly, she realized she knew them. The bald one was a South American illegal named Carlos. He sat in the middle with two young humans on each side of him. They were typical, unimpressive, and straight out of Southside. Carlos, on the other hand, was an experienced mercenary who deserved attention when he made a point of showing up at your home. Bian had sent his best, the bastard.

Carlos lifted his chin in her direction and rubbed a tattooed hand over his head.

Raven moved up to the table and folded her arms under her breasts. She was glad she'd worn the jeans and t-shirt. If things went badly, at least she had on the closest things to fighting clothes that she could wear in the club without drawing too much attention. "What's going on, Carlos?"

"What?" He smirked. "I can't visit my favorite Goth club without raising suspicion?"

She glanced to the monochrome patrons, then to his Latino entourage. "You don't exactly fit in."

Carlos nodded and laughed, but his eyes narrowed. "The boss wanted me to report. He's...concerned."

"Why?"

"You don't have a mate. No mate, no power."

Raven's stomach twisted in a knot. The old rule those sexist, ancient vampires used to keep their females in line was coming up again. No one, especially not her creator, was willing to let her slide by without taking what amounted to a husband who would take over her business—and her life.

She slammed her hands down on the table, and the glasses rocked. She leaned her body forward, and the humans leaned back just a little. "I don't need a fucking mate."

Carlos scratched behind his ear and smiled at her. "You need one before next month or they're going to find you one."

"Why?" Her voice cracked in anger, but she didn't try to hide it.

"You're weak without a mate. You leave us all open."

"I don't need a man to make this work. I've been in charge for four years."

"That's the point. You get five years, and time will be up in a few months."

"I don't want a mate."

"Not your choice."

She shook her head and stomped toward the staircase that led up to her office. She moved quickly up the stairs, shouldering people out of the way when they didn't move. They'd lost their damned minds if they thought they were going to push a man into her life. This was bullshit. If they thought she was going to cave just because a few members of the Good Ol' Vampire Boys' Club rattled their chains, they were crazy. She might not have harnessed her full power, but she was close. Closer than anyone else had been without a mate, and she didn't need one to finish it. She wasn't going to give up. She would be the first female territory leader to break through that ridiculous rule, even if she had to fight every one of them to do it.

Raven crossed the few feet to her diamond plate door, stepped inside and slammed it behind her. She let out a scream and moved to the desk. Reaching for the phone, she punched the number to Bian's loft in Tampa. If he didn't have the balls to confront her personally, he could at least talk to her on the phone.

The phone jerked from her hand and landed on the receiver again. Raven jerked her head around.

Carlos was there.

There wasn't time to fight. He just picked her up and hurled her body across the room. She hit the opposite wall with a loud crack, then started the short slide to the floor, but he was in front of her again. Carlos grabbed her by the throat and held her against the wall.

She opened her mouth to speak and nothing came out. It didn't matter. What

was there to say to a pissed off mercenary?

He licked a long line up her neck.

Raven felt his tongue barb scratch along her skin. She pushed at his chest and kicked, but he didn't budge. Fuck.

"Not so strong, female. Not so strong." He struck, quick like the cobra tattooed on his arm, and plunged his fangs into her neck.

Pain shot through her head and arm. He bit too hard, too deep. She heard herself scream. The tightening throat muscles only made the pain worse as he pulled the life out through the new holes in her neck. She wanted to grab the knife from her boot, but stabbing him would only get her hurt. Killing him, the boss' messenger, would bring her life to a painful, fiery end.

Raven's eyes fluttered shut. She felt the life's blood flowing out of her, taking the magic that animated her body with it. Shit. He wouldn't kill her, but he would drain her until the lights went out so he could leave safely.

"Let go of her. Slowly, motherfucker."

Jareth's voice made her eyes open. His eyes glowing with a fierce blue light. His body was tensed for battle, jaw clenching. His big hand gripped a Tazer, pressing its metal prongs into Carlos' neck. The other clamped down on the man's shoulder to keep him from rolling away.

Carlos pulled his teeth out, then let her go. He stepped back in tandem with Jareth.

She couldn't stop herself from sliding to the floor as the two moved toward the door.

"I know you're here on business, that's why I'm not killing you. Get your boys and get out of here. If you're still around in five minutes, I'll take my chances with Bian." Jareth smirked and shoved Carlos into the door.

"Fine. We'll leave, but I'll be back if she doesn't mate. You can't stop them from enforcing the law." He opened the door and shut it again quickly.

Raven felt the blood oozing down her neck. She wasn't strong enough to heal quickly because he'd taken so much. Left alone, he'd probably have sealed the wounds to keep her from dying, but now she was freely bleeding, with only her hand to hold back the pulsing flow.

She closed her eyes and tried to stop the room from spinning.

"Rave?"

She heard Jareth move close and kneel in front of her.

"Fuck. You're still bleeding."

He pulled her hand away and clamped his lips over the wound, then stroked his tongue over it. His mouth left her, while his hands held her upright. "It's still going. Here."

Jareth pulled her close, wrapping those heavy, warm arms around her, and

nuzzled her face into his neck. “Go on.”

Under normal circumstances, the last thing she would have done was taken from him. It just reeked of bad taste to be drinking from your personal assistant. Especially when that assistant might get the wrong idea and adopt you as part of his property, which males had a tendency to do when they’d fed a chick that they were friends with.

“Fuck. Just do it, Rave. Don’t be so damned stubborn. I’m not gonna get weird on you.”

Screw it. She clamped her hands and mouth onto him. Her teeth unsheathed quickly, which made her gums ache before she plunged them into his neck.

“God,” Jareth whispered, squeezing her tight against him so that she was sitting in his lap.

Raven drank slowly, careful not to take too much. Her legs tightened around his hips, and her fingers dug into his skin. She wanted to stop, but something inside her wouldn’t let go. Too much time had passed since she’d taken from a male of her kind, and she missed the strong flavor of their blood; the way they groaned with pleasure beneath her. Drinking from a human man was like having sex with a dildo. The end result was the same, but getting there wasn’t half as fun.

She heard Jareth groan again as he hardened between her legs. Her body reacted. First, her mind went blank, and then she started grinding her hips against his. That crimson liquid flowed into her mouth, warmed her throat, and made her want him all the more.

“If you don’t stop, Rave, I’m not going—” He shivered, and his voice cracked when she pulled her teeth from his skin and licked to seal the wound. “—to be able to.”

He was right, and she knew it, but she couldn’t make her mouth leave his skin. Her lips kissed up to his ear, and then her teeth grabbed his earlobe.

“Rave.” He pushed at her hips lightly. “We’ve got to stop.”

“Why?”

“It’s not right. You’ll regret it tomorrow.”

“Let me worry about that.” She ran her teeth down his neck in a deliberate, slow tease.

He shoved her onto her butt. She sprawled in front of him.

When she reached for his shirt, he caught her hand. Raven glanced down and couldn’t miss the hard swell behind his zipper. She smiled. Her other hand reached for toward the tempting bulge.

He caught that wrist, too. “Damn.” He laughed, but it wasn’t friendly. “They’re right. You’ve got to find someone before this goes too far. When was the last time you were with someone?”

She ignored the question and ran her boot up the inside of his thigh.

“Raven!”

She blinked up at him.

"Talk to me."

"What?"

"When was the last time you were with someone?"

"I'm not telling you that."

"When?"

She groaned. "About five."

"Months?" He seemed surprised.

"Years." Raven jerked her hands away from him and fell back onto the floor. The shock on his face was enough to ruin her pheromone high. She rolled onto her knees, then climbed to her feet and walked to her desk.

"Why?" Jareth stood and dusted the dirt off his jeans that her shoe had put there.

"I just haven't, okay?"

"I know it's not because there haven't been offers."

"I don't want a mate, which is what they all assume." She sat down in the soft leather chair and pressed the button to bring her monitor to life, then clicked the icon to open her email.

"What's wrong with a mate?"

"They..." She glanced up at him. "Why are we having this conversation?"

"We just about did it on your office floor after the boss' thug attacked you."

"They're forcing me."

"To do what?"

"Mate."

"What!" He moved over to plant his knuckles on the desk. "Why?"

She leaned back in the chair and folded her hands across her stomach, trying not to look at the bulge that remained in his pants. "They say I'm weak. According to the law, a female cannot maintain power over a given territory for a period of more than five calendar years without a male mate. The penalty is loss of territory and rank."

"Men don't have to have a mate."

"Exactly."

He started to pace and crack his knuckles. "But you've almost got all your power without a mate. All you need is to reach power maturity without one."

"I know."

Jareth pointed a finger at her. "Fight it."

"I've tried. It's a patriarchal system."

"Shit."

"Yeah."

"So Carlos was a reminder?"

"Yeah." She leaned forward and placed her face in her hands. This was so screwed up. "And he would have made the point if you hadn't walked in. I can't defend myself against the males without the power."

“We can.”

“But you guys aren’t always around.”

“How long have you got?”

“Two months. Tops.”

The computer let out a digital ring, and she glanced sideways at her screen. A new email was highlighted in bold letters, from Bian. She double clicked and skimmed the text. Her heart disappeared and left a blank hole in her chest. She stopped breathing and glanced up at Jareth.

“What is it?”

“Bian’s lined up two suitors. The first will be here on Friday.”

“Tell him you’re not interested.”

“It’s been ordered, by the emperor.”

“Shit.” He growled.

“The second will arrive on Sunday.”

“Damn. Those fuckers aren’t giving you much time.”

Raven let her head fall to the desk. “Just leave me alone for a minute. Don’t let anyone in here.”

Being the smart one that he was, Jareth didn’t speak again. She just heard the door open and shut before tears started to roll sideways down her face and onto her desk. She’d managed to be the only single territory leader in the world for four years, and now that was all coming to a bitter end. A mate would claim her and then parade her around like a prize horse in front of the others. The territory wouldn’t really be hers anymore. And if she stepped down, she’d become slave fodder for a new leader.

Chapter Two

“I’m so not ready for this.” Raven slid her feet into the pair of red high heels beside the office door. She wouldn’t have worn the damned things, but the letter demanded formal dress. Bian had even sent a personal shopper over with a long red *Pretty Woman* looking dress because it complimented her dark hair. That was just the cherry on top to make her feel like a total prostitute.

Jareth held his arm out for her to steady herself on. "Just go. Maybe you'll like him."

"He's French for Chris'sakes."

"Well." He seemed to want to say more, but nothing else came.

She stood straight. In the shoes, she was eye level with his neck. There was a bruise there, from her feeding. She glanced away. "Yeah. I don't see me with Frenchy long term."

"Just have dinner. If anything goes wrong, I'll be a few feet away. I won't let him hurt you."

"I know." Raven patted him on the arm. "Let's get this over with."

"There's a limo outside."

She shook her head. "It just keeps getting worse."

He smirked and held out one arm to her while the other flicked the light switch, casting the office in darkness. She held on to him and managed to walk all the way around the catwalk, which hung above the dance floor, to the front of the club without tripping.

She hadn't been outside all night. The hair and makeup people that Bian sent had taken hours to finish. The moon was high in the cold, dark sky when she stepped out onto the sidewalk. Not most people's idea of paradise, but she loved it.

Jareth batted away the chauffeur and held the door open for her. "Move it."

Raven smiled and hurried into the back seat. She waited for Jareth to join her, but the door shut, then another on the passenger's side. She frowned. This is the way it would be? When she had a male, Jareth would be nothing more than the hired help. Not her best friend.

Across the aisle rested a minibar. She smiled and cracked open a tiny bottle of Southern Comfort. She had to go, but nobody said she couldn't drink.

She downed the bottle, then another before they arrived in front of *La Maison Noir*. The tall white building with its glass, brass, and intricate details reminded her of the pictures of *The Crystal Palace*. Through the panes, the white tablecloths with little rose vases and candles were visible all along the gold and crimson carpet. There wasn't a lot of seating, but then again, most people couldn't afford to eat there.

She'd been here a few times with Bian, when he made his annual visit. This was his place, and she knew exactly where his boy would be sitting. In the back corner booth, the one that was always reserved for Bian by his friend, the French vampire who owned the place.

Raven took a deep breath. She knew the rules. He had the right, as a chosen suitor for her by her leader, to bed her once. If she refused, he could demand retribution from Bian. So, she would go along until he gave her an excuse to cry foul.

The door opened and Jareth held out his arm and the umbrella. "Come on, princess."

“Smartass,” she whispered as she took his arm and stepped forward.

She straightened, but her body weaved a little.

“Minibar?” he whispered as they moved toward the door.

“Yup.”

“Good girl.”

They were at the door too quickly, and he pulled away. He held the entry open for her, and she wished he could come with her. Maybe his presence would make the tightness in her chest ease.

A small woman in a black dress and pearls came her way. Her hair was slicked into a twist. “*Mademoiselle. Bon jour.* Right this way. We are so pleased to have you and *Monsieur* Astor join us this evening. *Monsieur* Bian requested your usual table.”

Raven tried to seem friendly, but her mind focused on the simple task of walking. Her face burned. The whisky had been a little too quick to act.

“*Mademoiselle.*” Astor stood as they neared the table and motioned toward her place as a waiter slid the seat under her. “It is so nice to meet you.”

She nodded. “Same here.”

Someone shoved a menu in front of her, and she opened it.

“Oh, no, no. That is not necessary. I have taken the liberty of ordering for us.”

Someone jerked the menu away again, and she tried not to grind her teeth. If he thought, for one moment, that she was going to roll over and—

“*Monsieur* Bian said that you have a bit of a problem.”

At least he was straightforward. “Yeah.”

He lifted a tall glass of dark wine and swirled the liquid as he spoke. “I am sure that you have no need for suitors, but I had hoped that you would at least hear my proposition.”

“All right.”

“Since your power has yet to mature, and I need a new home, I had hoped.” He took a sip, then set the glass back on the table. “If we could work together to resolve both issues, then I would gladly serve in whatever capacity you would have me.”

“I don’t need a mate. I am almost at maturity now. The only reason I might be interested is to get them off my tail.”

“I thought as much.”

Two waiters brought out square white plates with gold trim, each piled with a tiny bit of food and decorations. “*Pour vous, z’ chef* ‘as prepared a magnificen’ treat. Zis appetizer consist’ of mushrooms *avec* lobster stuffing *et* wild truffle dressing. *Bon appétit.*”

Someone poured a glass of white wine in front of her, while Astor started to eat. She watched him using the knife and fork so carefully, taking only bits of food into his mouth at a time. Sure, it was dignified, but she’d always seen herself with a man’s man. Someone who would chow down on a cheeseburger and beer.

He arched a brow. "Is something unsatisfactory?"

"No." She grabbed the fork and smiled. "No, everything's fine."

* * * * *

Raven was drunk. She shouldn't have had that last glass of wine with the entrée. She'd thought she was losing her buzz, but the intoxication came back with a vengeance. Now, just staring at Astor made her want to giggle.

"Do you agree?"

"I'm sorry." She dabbed the corners of her mouth with the napkin. "I was just admiring your ring."

He held up a perfectly manicured hand. "This?"

She nodded and tried to limit the movement to her head.

"This is my family crest. All of the firstborn children have them." He smiled. "If we are mated, you will be given one, too." He crossed his legs and tossed his napkin onto the table. "Have you given it any thought?"

"A little."

"Do you find me attractive?"

She looked at him slowly. His blond hair was neatly trimmed, his skin was nice and his face had strong, handsome features. His blue eyes were no less beautiful than any other man's. In fact, his shoulders were broad and obvious even under the dark suit. "You are a handsome man."

"And you are beautiful." He seemed even more confident than before. "You are intelligent and strong. I see no reason why this will not work."

"I have no intention of becoming a trophy for an egomaniac."

There. She'd said it. The truth was out, even though it probably shouldn't have been.

He gave her a genuine smile, which spread into a chuckle. "And you are honest." Raven shrugged.

"I would have you as nothing less than what you are. To conquer you would be nothing less than capturing a butterfly in a glass jar."

Points for him. He knew the right thing to say, even if something about his words seemed less than genuine.

"Now, if you are not opposed, I believe the appropriate thing to do now is for us to retire to my suite at the hotel."

Her heart pounded in her chest before she could stop it.

"Do not worry. I will not force you to do anything. However, if we find that the muse takes us there, it will bode well in my report to Monsieur Bian."

She nodded and allowed him to help her up from the table. They left the restaurant without paying, which told her that he had either already paid, or Bian was

picking up the tab.

Outside, Jareth watched, but let the chauffeur open the door this time. She'd almost forgotten him, standing outside in the cold.

* * * * *

Raven stepped out of the limo behind Astor, and took his hand when he offered it. Surprisingly enough, he'd been a complete gentleman on the short ride over. Now, walking up to the hotel entrance, she felt the looming height of the building weigh down on her. The entrance was like the mouth of a giant monster that was waiting to swallow her up.

They stepped inside, and he walked directly to the elevators. Behind them, Jareth and Astor's daemon followed. Wait staff practically fell over themselves to greet and help them. If she hadn't known better, she would think he'd been using mind tricks on them.

The elevator opened and shut again, leaving Jareth to stand with Astor's daemon and wait on the next one. That was part of what she hated about the hierarchy of their race. Friends, true friends, were often found in the lower parts of the power structure—and there weren't many to be found among vampires. So, when she had them, she liked to keep them close.

"They will wait outside the room."

She smiled at him. "Sorry. He is also a friend."

"Never trust the help, dear."

The doors opened, and she hesitated with the first step.

Astor led her forward, then opened the suite's door, waved her inside. "Please, make yourself comfortable."

Nothing about the place was second-rate. The view was wonderful, just like the furnishings. Hell, the "suite" was practically a small house.

Raven kicked her shoes off under the side table, then moved to the large window. She scanned the city, watching the lights of cars and traffic from the fifteenth floor and wondering just how many women out there were trying to make the same decision. How many human women out there struggled to pay the bills and were considering a husband to ease their burden? She would have bet money that there were plenty.

His hands landed on her shoulders, and she tried not to tense. "I was quiet sincere when I promised not to push you."

"Thanks, but I know how it works."

"I must be honest; Bian encouraged me to pursue the issue."

"Figures." She turned partially to look up at Astor. "Who else does he have in mind? I don't know, but I am aware of at least one other possibility. Morimoto inquired

while I was in Bian's office just before my departure."

She knew the name. The Japanese executive had made a name for himself by testing, and breaking, mates. He'd take four mates during his lifetime, and each had committed suicide. Though no one knew for sure, rumor was that his sexual perversions and domineering behavior were the reason.

"You know the older ones. They'll seek power, through you, to add to their lands in America."

She nodded. Dammit. How did she get herself into crap like this all the time?

"I know how you feel, but if we consecrate this, tonight, Bian will send the others away."

He was right. And she knew it down into her bones. Sure, he was a total stranger, but he was hot and willing to let her go her own way. "You're right."

Astor moved to stand in front of her, his hand went to her cheek and his thumb stroked her slowly. "I promise. I will only treat you with the utmost respect. After tonight, I will leave the decision to you to come to me if you choose."

He lifted her chin slowly.

She closed her eyes and nodded. Her breath held, as if she were about to dive into a large black pool with no bottom.

When his lips pressed against hers, they were soft and tasted of the mint sticks that had been served with dinner. His hands smoothed slowly down her bodice.

Raven pulled away from the kiss. She couldn't do this. While she might have been many things, cheap wasn't one of them.

Those soft wet lips came to her neck and pushed her chin up slowly. "Stop thinking, dear."

His body was warm, his hands were firm, and the man knew how to give a great hickey. There was no reason not to just relax and let a good-looking man drive her wild. So, she breathed in the warm, sweet smell of his cologne and tried.

A tooth scratched down her neck, and he whispered something against her skin.

Her knees quaked. The one simple gesture made a fire roar to life in her belly. She wanted him between her legs. Now. And it wasn't just because she'd been celibate for a few years, he was working her over with his power, and she didn't mind. If they had to do it, she'd rather be drunk on power than miserable.

"Come to bed," he said, and swept her up into his arms.

As he carried her toward the king-sized crimson pillow of a bed, her mouth caught his again. When his tongue flicked across her lips, she opened for him. He was slow and careful, the picture of a skilled, mature lover.

Astor stopped at the edge of the bed and let her slide slowly to her knees in front of him.

Her hands caught the lapels and pushed his jacket back, off his shoulders and down toward the floor. Then, she watched her hands unbuttoning his shirt and

removing his tie. When she finished, Raven pushed the soft fabric open to reveal his smooth, muscular chest. It was perfect, just like the rest of him, and begged to be kissed.

He watched her with greedy eyes and slid the short sleeve of her dress off her shoulder.

She leaned forward and licked a slow line from his pecs to his neck.

His head fell backward and a low moan slipped from his lips. "I am yours," he whispered. "Do as you like."

Raven pushed at the shirt, but it refused to fall.

"Just a moment."

She watched Astor take out his cuff links. His belt came next, as well as the shoes and socks, but he left the pants on. He slid off the shirt slowly, while his eyes bored into her. The hunger in them was fiery, but controlled. She had a feeling that everything about him was as controlled.

He kissed her shoulder, and then turned her so that her back was to his chest. Without a word, he slid the zipper of her dress down slowly. She smiled to herself, unsure if he would appreciate the panties she'd worn. Bian had sent over black lace stockings, panties, and the whole deal. It's probably what Frenchy would have liked, but if he wanted to be her mate, even in name, he'd have to accept that she had a rough side. Tonight, that rough side was coming in the form of a latex thong with silver rings on the sides.

A small groan of appreciation came from behind her as the dress fell to the floor.

She stepped out of the circle of fabric and arched a brow at Astor, who bent to scoop the dress up, then lay it over a chair. "Now, where are those lovely red shoes?" He disappeared into the other room, and then returned with the shoes in hand. He knelt in front of her and held one shoe. His hand gripped her calf, and then pulled her foot into the heel. He repeated the process with the other leg, and then kissed his way up to her thigh along the dark thigh high stockings. "What may I do, mademoiselle?"

She arched her brow again. Something in his face—the adoration—said that he meant more. In all her time as a vampire, and as a woman, Raven had never had a man who wanted her to control things. For her to be the dominant.

Astor kissed her thigh again and waited.

She could do this, couldn't she? She was bossy every day. Why not in bed? Besides, he was kind of cute this way. "Surprise me."

His hand reached up to the front of her panties.

Whoa. The point of being dominated was to make them work for it. Right? She slapped his hand away. "You have to earn that."

"I apologize, mistress." He tucked his head down and put his hands on his lap.

Dammit. She had to think fast. He was supposed to be pleasing her. Right? What did she really want? It had been so long, anything could make her go off like a Roman candle.

She smiled and moved to sit on the edge of the bed. She spread her legs, which felt sleek and sexy in the stockings and heels. "Come here."

He crawled slowly, and then stopped in front of her, kneeling between her spread knees. His hands roamed over her skin.

"Kiss me."

The space between them disappeared again. There was another soft kiss, begging for her tongue more than offering his. His hands stayed on her thighs.

It wasn't working. The moisture that had been between her legs was gone.

Raven arched her neck to him, which he took eagerly. "Suck my nipples."

"Yes." He drew out the word and cupped her breasts reverently.

It was nice, but not quite what she needed.

Something inside her screamed for him to bite her, torque the flesh...or at least suck hard, but he did none of those. Instead, his tongue slipped slowly over one nipple, then another.

She grabbed his head and pulled him into a hungry kiss.

Astor melted against her. His erection pressed hard against her crotch, but his hands stayed on her legs. He didn't move and didn't do anything that she didn't demand.

Raven broke the kiss. "I can't do it."

He blinked at her slowly, as if her confession didn't quite register. "You, the American leader in a man's world, cannot be the top in our arrangement?"

"No. Not right now."

He let a few words fly in French, but she didn't understand them.

"What is it?"

His face betrayed his disappointment with the situation. "Nothing."

Before she could question him, his lips were on hers again. He pressed against her, grinding against her as his tongue explored her mouth. He was forceful and warm, but lacked conviction.

Astor broke the kiss. "I cannot do this either."

Raven half laughed and half groaned. "I don't think this is going to work."

"*Non*. I doubt we could force it enough to grow your power and convince Bian."

"If I have to do this, I'd rather not suffer more than I have to."

He nodded.

"Thank you, for being so sweet, but I think I need time to think about all this."

"Very well." He smiled slyly. "But if you decide to proceed, you must know that I find you very attractive. I would consider any alternative you have. Your legs alone." His hands ran up and down her thighs. "Are enough to inspire me."

Raven laughed and gave him a quick kiss. He was cute, but something deep inside her didn't click. She just couldn't get into it. No matter how good it felt, her mind stayed in her brain, not her crotch. "I think I'm going home now."

“I will remain, in the city, until you have reached a decision.”

She nodded and slipped away from him. The heels of her shoes snagged the carpet a little as she walked over to the red dress. Without turning toward him, she stepped inside it and pulled it into place.

Astor’s hands tugged at the back and the zipper went up into place. When she turned to thank him, he planted another soft, slow kiss on her lips. It held all the magic of kissing a close relative, along with all the creepiness.

“I have to go.” She turned toward the door and walked fast, but he managed to catch up to her.

He grabbed the handle and opened it for her. “I will await your call.”

“Okay.”

He pulled the door wide and gave her another kiss at the same time.

Her gaze darted toward Jareth, who stood cold as ever, watching them from across the hall with his hands folded in front of him. She pulled away quickly.

Astor licked the corner of his mouth. “Goodnight.”

Raven quickly moved into the hallway and past Jareth. “Later.”

Chapter Three

“Get in here.” Raven rolled her eyes as Jareth trudged into the elevator with her. She knew he was trying to keep up appearances, assuming that she and Astor were together, but his new formality was annoying.

“Your new boy isn’t gonna like it.”

“He’s not my new boy.”

“Mate. Whatever.”

“He’s not my mate either.”

“That’s not what it sounded like to me.”

She whirled on him. “What?”

“I heard you moaning in the hallway.”

Raven curled her fist. God, she wanted to hit him. “If you heard half of what you thought you did when you were fucking eavesdropping, then you’d know the whole goddamn story, Wo—”

Jareth stepped into her space and stared down at her. "I left before you got to the coming part."

Her fist jerked up toward his face.

He caught her wrist in a fierce grip. "Watch who you're hitting, Raven. I won't put up with your bullshit."

She yanked down, but he didn't let go.

"If you're so hard up that you'd fuck that jerk in there, that's your business. But don't get pissed at me for pointing out the truth."

"I didn't fuck him."

"I don't want to know."

"Well, you need to know." She pulled again, and he released her arm. "It didn't go anywhere."

"Why?"

"He wanted me to be a dominatrix or some shit."

Jareth let out a roar of laughter. "You?" He laughed again.

The elevator doors open and she stepped out into the lobby. She walked to the entry, then out to the limo on the curb. She opened the door herself, hopped in, and slammed it behind her.

The door opened again, and Jareth crawled in.

"I didn't say you could ride back here."

"I didn't ask," he said as he took the seat across from her.

"Where to?" the driver called from the front.

"Home." Raven motioned toward the front seat.

Jareth reached forward and grabbed a tiny bottle of Absolute from the bar. "You didn't need him, Rave."

"Yes, I did."

"No, you don't." He downed the bottle.

"I could have made the arrangement work."

"No. You couldn't."

Raven folded her arms over her chest and glared out the window. The night was a disaster. A total fucking disaster.

She closed her eyes. Somehow, even though she figured as much, the statement wounded her. He was right, wasn't he? All of her life, men had tried to control her and even when she tried to obey, she ended up failing. She just wasn't meant to live that way.

* * * * *

Raven moved to the front door of the two story brick house, grabbed the key from the large cement flowerpot filled with the purple petunias, then opened the glass

entry door.

"You should really hide that somewhere else," Jareth said behind her.

She didn't respond. All she wanted was to be left alone. He would stay, as he always did, but she didn't have to talk.

Raven moved inside, kicking her shoes onto the tiled foyer, and then paced toward the sunken living room in the back. She heard the door close in the front, then lock. Jareth always worried about security.

Sitting in the dark room, lined with tall windows and a huge fireplace, she felt small. She'd only had the house a month, but the realization of how lonely it felt to be just one person in such a large expanse hadn't taken long.

Her eyes started to burn. She dabbed her eyes to keep the tears from escaping, then blinked her eyes open. Tears started to flow, and she snuggled into the thick pillows of the couch. She wasn't taking Morimoto, or any of the people Bian sent because that bastard always thought she needed to be controlled. Everyone he sent would be that way. She needed to find a mate of her own.

* * * * *

Raven stepped out of the steamy shower and wrapped herself in a soft cream towel. She felt clean again, even if it had taken her extra long to get the scent of Astor's cologne off her skin. She glanced at the little crystal clock on the counter. Four o'clock. It had been an hour since she'd sent Jareth away. He hadn't liked it, of course, but she needed to be alone.

She opened the door, moved past the rush of cool air and walked into her bedroom. She toweled off and slipped on the purple silk robe that lay over the bedspread, and then finished toweling her hair. When she finished, she glanced at the towel in her hand. If she put the clothes in the laundry room, Rosita would send them off tomorrow. Otherwise, she'd have to smell Astor for another week.

It was a quick trip down to the laundry room. On the way back, she heard something. A rustling sound in the living room. Raven inched down the hall, around the edge of the entry. Someone was on the couch. Jareth.

"What are you doing here?"

He jerked his head toward her. "I thought it was best if I stayed. "Since they're gunning for you right now."

"You scared the bejezus out of me." Jareth's eyes followed her as she walked across the room. She stood in front of him, listening to the sound of the steel forms sliding into place on the windows behind her. He'd had them installed for her protection during the day.

When the sound stopped, he smiled. "Same here." His eyes moved lower, to the V of her robe. "You really didn't need him, Rave."

She didn't glance down. "He seemed nice enough."

"Yeah." Jareth smirked and stood to his full height in front of her and his eyes moved to her face. "He also seemed a little prissy for you." His rough hand smoothed over her cheek. "That doesn't mean that you're too strong. You just need a guy strong enough to take you."

The feel of his hand against her skin sent chills through her body. He moved away, but she still felt him there. On her.

When she opened her eyes, she saw him moving toward the stairway. "Where are you going?"

"To bed."

She moved quickly to catch up. "Wait."

Jareth stopped at the top of the stairs. "What?"

"Be my mate."

He moved toward the end of the hall. "I'm not one of them. It won't work."

"Why not?"

"Bian hates me."

"He doesn't matter. As long as I have a mate and increase my power, I can choose who I want."

"But you don't really want me." He disappeared into his room, closing the door in her face.

Raven stood there, staring at the white panel door. She did want him. He was the standard against which she judged all men. He was her protector, and her best friend. He was perfect. At least, perfect for her.

She flung the door open and saw him standing there, sliding the shirt off over his head. In the years they'd been together, she'd only seen him topless one time, and his powerful chest was every bit as wonderful as she remembered.

She opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out. Jareth didn't say anything. Instead, he flung the shirt on the bed and looked at her.

"I do want you," she said as she moved to him. She leaned up on her toes and went for his mouth, praying that he didn't stop her.

Jareth caught her face in his hands and met her lips with his. It was a kiss that made her mind go numb and her body crave the closeness of his.

Suddenly they were moving. She tried to step backwards, but couldn't keep up. Jareth threw her off balance. When she stumbled, he wrapped his arm around her waist to hold her steady.

His tongue slipped over hers and teased her mouth until they tumbled onto the bed. The robe slid open and fell off one breast.

Jareth's gaze went to her nipple. , "Are you sure about this?"

"Yes." She tried to catch his mouth again.

Jareth pushed her back with one hand to her collarbone. His hands yanked the

robe open. He looked at her the way he'd looked at her in the office that night after she'd bit him.

Then his mouth latched on to her nipple. His tongue snaked over the flesh. His body held hers against the bed, trapping her while he took the taut skin between his teeth. A quick, soft bite and she arched against his hands.

He moaned and the throbbing between her legs responded. Fluid pooled there, making her ready for him.

"Please, Jareth."

"Not yet." He moved to the other nipple. He sucked it, too, and then bit softly.

Her body jerked. She rolled her hips up to him. There, she found the erection she craved. He was full and rock hard behind the fabric. Her hands scrambled for the edge, then pushed his pants down toward his knees.

Jareth grabbed her hands and pulled them above her head. "I said not yet."

Raven squirmed beneath him. She needed him. Now. Not in five minutes. Not in two. Now.

His mouth came back to hers. The fat plum of his cock pressed at her clit, which made her writhe. He bit her lower lip. A long, deep purr rolled from her mouth, one that she'd never have known was there without him.

Jareth's lips went to her ear. He nibbled on the earlobe. "I'll be right back."

He moved backward, and she watched. When he stopped, his face hovering inches above her shaved lips, he smiled.

Jareth's tongue slipped against her clit. She arched and let loose another moan. Her mind fogged so that nothing around them existed. There was only his tongue sliding up and down her most sensitive part, bringing crest after crest of tension. Then his finger joined in. They slid inside and found that most sensitive spot, while his mouth sucked slowly on her clit.

"Jareth. Oh, god." Suddenly her back was arched, her hands wrapped in the dark comforter on his bed.

His body slid up to hers in a slow move. When Jareth's mouth pressed to hers, Raven could taste her body on his lips. He centered himself, then pressed forward. A wave of pleasure roared through her on the slight entry, then another as he pushed again. His mouth went to her neck and he pushed farther, filling and spreading her with his own flesh.

His teeth scratched her skin. She wanted him to bite her, to drink. "Do it."

Jareth's teeth pressed into her skin with a pop. The familiar pain came, but quickly faded to a hot, bright pleasure that overshadowed the orgasm it brought. Their bodies surged together, in feeding and pleasure that banished all other thoughts. She felt the warmth of him inside her and at her neck, and didn't want him to stop.

They came back down, in a slow descent of his mouth closing her wound and then panting along with her. Raven smiled and let him snuggle her into the bed beside

him. When he fell asleep, she tucked her head into his shoulder and closed her eyes. For the first time, peace settled around her. Jareth was the one and she'd have him, no matter what.

Chapter Four

Raven was up and in her office before Jareth woke. She settled into her chair stared at the far wall. She was going to tell Bian about her mating Jareth. He wasn't from one of the top families and had no territory of his own, which would be Bian's argument, but he was strong and well respected. Bian would say he wanted her with someone who could represent her in the hierarchy, but she didn't need it. They all knew who she was. Besides, Bian had been born to a regular, too. He'd earned his own way, just as Jareth had.

The door flew open and Jareth walked in, dressed in a pair of dilapidated jeans and a navy t-shirt. "Why'd you leave?"

"I wanted to do this alone."

"If there's gonna be trouble, I'm in."

"It's not your fight."

"The hell it's not."

"Okay." She stood and moved toward him. "Just let me talk first. I think I can make this work."

Someone cleared his throat from the doorway. Both of them turned to see Astor standing there in a gray suit, looking just as pristine as the night before. "Excuse me."

Jareth tensed in her arms, but Raven motioned toward the leather chair in the corner. "Please, come in."

He closed the door, nodded to Jareth, then moved to the chair.

"So, what's up, Astor?"

"Do you want to discuss this in front of him?"

Jareth arched a brow, so she patted him on the chest. "Yes."

"All right." He rearranged his jacket and crossed his leg. "I've been considering our predicament and—"

Raven threw up her hands. "I've already fixed my problem. I'm taking Jareth as

my mate.”

The man watched them, considering his words. “Perhaps you do not fully understand Bian’s intentions for you. He has every right to choose your mate, and will not allow you to mate him.”

“Why?” Jareth blurted out.

“You have no power to offer her.”

Jareth’s jaw clenched, and she rubbed his arm to try to ease him. “I am about to call him. I’ll wait to hear what he says.”

“There’s no reason to call. He will be here in about ten minutes.”

She looked up at Jareth, who shook his head. “You’re all trying to run over her and I won’t stand for it.”

“You have no voice in this matter.”

“Fuck you.”

Someone knocked at the door. They glanced toward it just as the thing opened. A short man with gray hair and a cane hobbled inside. “Evening, Astor.”

Astor stood and offered a low bow to the man. “*Bon nuit, Monsieur* Bian.”

He smiled at Raven, but his grey eyes didn’t sparkle. “Hello, little one.”

She nodded a bow in his direction and held onto Jareth’s hand. “I’m surprised you’re here.”

“Since things went so well between you and Astor, I thought that we could finish the mating rights tonight.”

“I’ve chosen Jareth.”

“He’s not an option.”

“Well, that’s who I’ve chosen. We consecrated our bond last evening.”

The old man hobbled over to her. He looked weak, but even she knew that he held enough power to take out the entire room if he wanted. “You have no power, and you cannot mate someone who does not have his own backing.”

“She’s almost reached maturity on her own, Bian. If you gave her longer, she wouldn’t need a mate.”

“That is as the law requires.”

“Then give me a week. I can use him to bring the change.”

“I leave tomorrow. You have until then.” The old vampire hobbled back to the door and Astor hurried to open it for him. The two moved out and shut the door behind them.

“How the hell are you going to do that in twenty-four hours?”

“I don’t know, Jareth.” Raven started to pace. “Help the others open the club. I need to think.”

* * * * *

Raven walked from the couch along the wall to her desk, then back again. She'd worn the path for who knew how long and still didn't have any answers. Usually the mating ceremony brought the power, but with no ceremony, she didn't know how to use Jareth to call her own. Shit.

Pop. Pop.

Pop.

It took a second for her to realize the pops were gunshots. She darted to the door and flung it open. Humans were running and screaming, but in the far corner, under the catwalk, there was a fight. Jareth was there. With Carlos.

She ran down the stairs and toward the fight. The police would be there soon, and the building had to be cleared. The cover-up had to be fast and dirty.

"Rave, run," Jareth yelled and pointed at something behind her.

There was another pop, and he went down.

Someone grabbed her from behind. She jerked and kicked, but another arm grabbed her. "Get off me."

Carlos appeared in front of her. "Thought you'd run me off, bitch?"

She slung her foot upward and booted him in the balls. Carlos crumpled onto the floor, while she struggled with the other two.

"Leave her the fuck alone." Jareth staggered toward them. He only had a bullet hole in the gut. He should have healed by now, but he was pale and breathing hard. Bleeding all over the place.

Carlos turned on him. "If I shoot you again, it'll kill you, motherfucker."

Jareth stopped moving and fell to his knees. Something wasn't right. The bullets were different. Maybe they'd loaded them with the blood from one of the shifters. Shifter weapons were illegal, but Carlos didn't seem the type to worry about a detail like legality.

The man turned to her again, careful of her legs, and stepped right up in her face. He ran the tip of the gun over her breast and scorched her skin, but she didn't flinch.

"They told me to kill him, but I'll let him live if you suck my dick."

"I don't think Bian would let you live if you didn't do your job."

"True enough." He shrugged. "I lied. But you're gonna do it anyway."

The two men beside her tried to force her to her knees. Raven struggled and closed her eyes. She dug deep, down to that bit of her that held the spark of magic she'd found. She swirled the power, stirred it until it rolled through her body. She thought of how hard they'd fought, and how Jareth would die. Then her mind flicked to the power he'd pulled in her, the part of her that wanted to rip free of her skin when he drank, and the power exploded.

Someone gasped.

She opened her eyes and Carlos took a step back. "Shit."

Jareth looked up at her. "Use it. On them."

She focused on the hands holding her. The smell of burnt flesh tingled her nose. Men screamed, released her and ran for the door.

Kill him, a voice in her head cried. *Kill him*. She moved toward Carlos, who aimed the pistol at her.

She imaged the gun flying away, and it did.

Then, she imagined him lifting off the ground, and he did. He dangled there, held by invisible hands that she controlled.

Jareth moved to his feet again. "Do it."

She wanted to smash the little man into the floor, but something in her resisted. Raven closed her eyes and imagined him hurtling through the air and crashing through the front entry. Then she heard breaking glass and twisting metal as he did.

Sirens roared outside, and the sound echoed through the room. When she opened her eyes, Jareth stood in front of her. His face smiled, but his eyes looked a little wary. "We've got to go."

She helped him hobble across the dance floor to the bar. She glanced at Mark, a guard, who skidded into the room from outside, "You all right?"

"Fine." Jareth pushed the panel on the wall behind the bar. "Handle the cops. This was just a gang fight."

When the hidden door sprang open, she helped him inside her safe room, complete with security monitors, a bed, a fridge, and a bathroom. Jareth had insisted on building the tiny fortress inside the club.

"You're stronger than any newly changed I've ever seen. They won't mess with you now."

"Good." She pulled the door shut and entered the code to lock it. She helped him to the meager bed in the corner, then helped him slip off his shirt. The wound had healed some, but the area was still tender and badly bruised. "Do you want me to heal this?"

Jareth cut his eyes to her. "I think I'll wait until you get that new power under control."

She stuck her tongue out at him, then started toward the metal cabinets in the corner. "At least let me clean the wound up."

"Hey." He caught her arm and pulled her into his lap. She knew the weight and sudden movement had to hurt, even if he didn't wince. "What were you thinking about when you matured?"

Raven smiled. "You."

Jareth pulled her mouth down to his. The kiss was soft at first, but it became hungrier. His hands started tugging her shirt upward. He pulled away just long enough to make the fabric clear her head, then his fingers pulled the cups of her lace bra down so that her breasts spilled over the top.

"You know," she said, leaning back a bit. "We can't do this while you're injured

and the cops are in the next room.”

“Why not?” Jareth’s mouth caught her nipple and tugged at it gently. His hand smoothed over the other. The rough touch of his fingers pulled the skin taught, hardening her nipple.

Raven watched his pink tongue slip quickly, then slowly around the little nub.

He glanced up. “Take off your pants.”

She stood, surprised that his pants were halfway off before she’d started unbuttoning hers. By the time she kicked them off, he was already nude. His erection stood in stark contrast to his horizontal body, its bulging veins begging to be touched.

Raven crawled onto the bed slowly as he tucked his arms behind his head. She knelt between his legs and gripped him around the base, watching the fire grow in his eyes. She licked a long line up the shaft and heard Jareth groaned. She licked a little drop off the head and then flicked her tongue along the ridge underneath.

His hand went to her hair, but didn’t push her downward.

She opened her mouth and let her lips glide slowly down onto him, massaging the underside ridge with her tongue as she went. When she went as far as she could, she pulled back slowly, sucking hard.

Then, she let him slide with a loud smack that was met with a groan.

Raven repeated the plunging and sucking until his eyes closed and his fingers gripped her hair. Her tongue rolled over the head one last time.

Jareth caught her arm and pulled her up to straddle him. She centered herself, then let the head dip slowly inside. He groaned and tried to push his hips upward, but she managed to control the contact and keep him from penetrating her fully.

He sat up and his hands pulled her face to him for another hungry kiss.

Raven let her body slide onto him, carried by gravity, until he filled her completely. The sensation of her skin spreading, his body rubbing against the front of her, and his hands on her back drove her mind to that place again where her control slipped.

Jareth took over and pulled her up and down on his shaft. When she thought she’d reached her breaking point, one of his hands moved to the front and flicked over her clit. Rhythmic thrusts grew into one long, pleasurable wave of releasing tension.

Then, his teeth sank into the flesh of her breast.

She exploded into a full, rolling orgasm. Her power reacted, too. With the orgasm came a surge of energy that shot through her body. The lights in the safe room flickered. A bulb in the ceiling to their right exploded and fell to the floor in a shower of glass.

Jareth gasped and shook against her. His mouth released her and the power flowed slowly.

Raven whispered, “Did you feel that?”

“Yeah.”

He kissed her softly and then pulled her onto the bed beside him. "We're staying here tonight. Tomorrow, we'll deal with Bian."

She nodded and didn't want to argue.

* * * * *

"They're here." Someone called from the foyer, grabbing Raven's attention. She moved into the light from the booth in the corner. The club was closed, which gave them room to fight, if they had to.

"*Bon Nuit*, Raven." Astor held the door as Bian hobbled inside.

She nodded and felt Jareth move up behind her.

"Are you ready to take your mate now?" Bian moved up close, eyeing Jareth.

"I already have, and it worked." She stepped closer to Bian. "But you already know that. You had Carlos try to kill me." Raven let the information rest for a moment. "Doesn't that mean you went against our laws, sire?"

"Nonsense."

"He told us you sent him."

Bian growled slowly. "You're angering me, child. If you have no powers, then you have no argument. You will take Astor."

Anger boiled up until Raven slapped the feeling toward the old man. The move was as quick as it was simple. Before she'd have simply wanted to knock him on his ass. Now, with the new power, it actually happened.

He staggered backward and fell into Astor, who kept the old man from hitting the floor. A bright red mark appeared on his face. "How dare you!"

Jareth folded his arms across his chest. "I'd say you have your proof."

Bian let out a flurry of curses as he hobbled toward the door with Astor's help. "Don't call on me when he isn't enough. "

"I won't." Raven turned to Jareth, who smiled down at her.

"It's about time you told that old prick to buzz off." He pulled her into his arms and gave her a long kiss. When they separated, he smiled again. "I think we need to go back in the safe room, just in case they come back."

Raven laughed. "I bet you do."

She'd never imagined herself with a mate, despite the number of times she'd thought about having sex with Jareth. Now, seeing how comfortable he was with her strengths—and her weaknesses—she couldn't understand how she hadn't seen him all along.

The End

Author Bio

Angela Cameron is the author of several published works that range from erotica to paranormal romance to suspense. She lives with her husband and daughter near Smith Lake, just outside Birmingham, Alabama. After spending many years as a commercial artist, she is currently completing a bachelor's degree in English and Literature from Southern New Hampshire University and will graduate later this year.

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