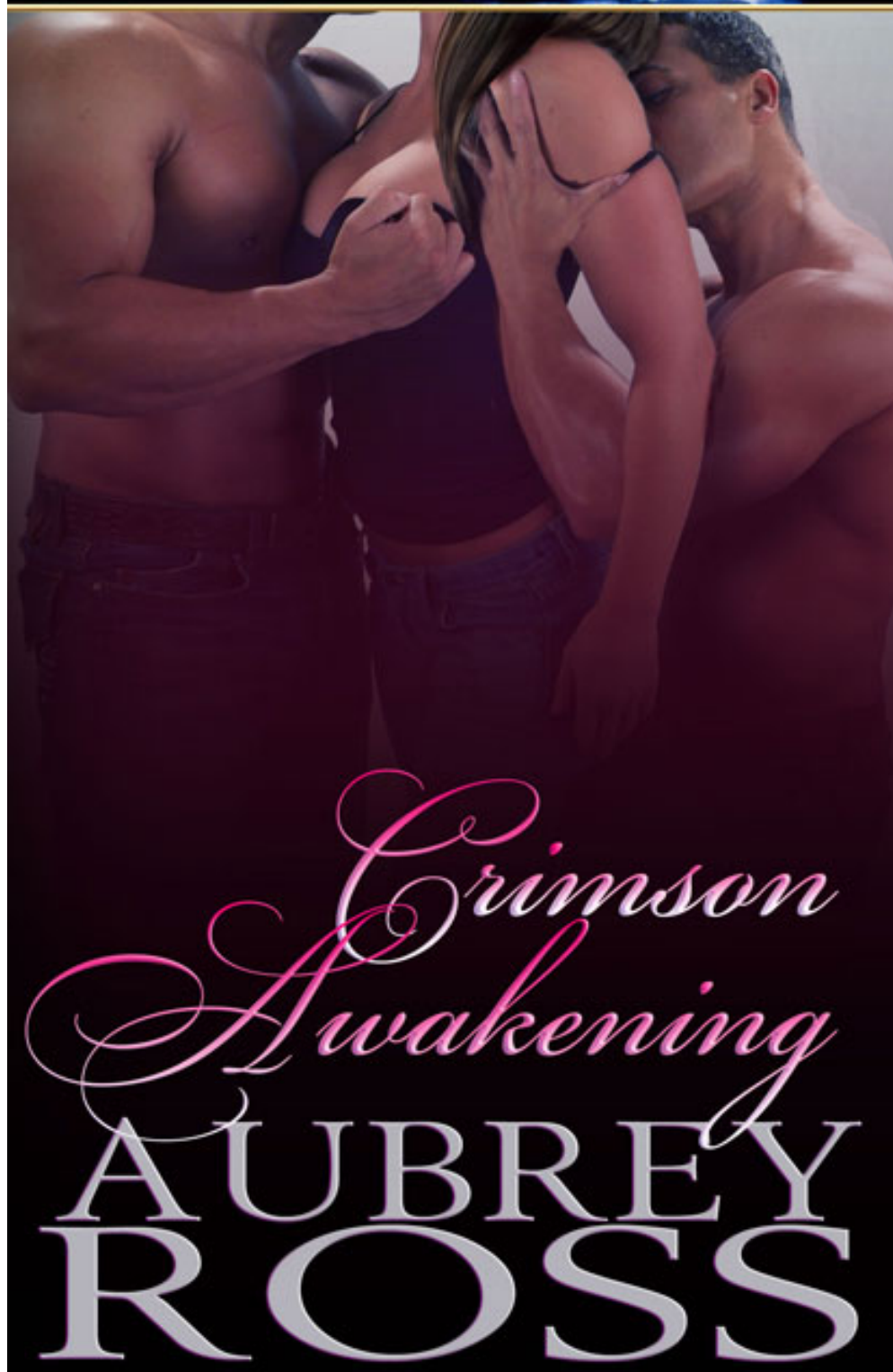


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Crimson Awakening

Aubrey Ross

While a stand-alone, this novel is best enjoyed when read with Crimson Thrall and Crimson Prey.

Chantel Demarko is about to embark on a journey of self-discovery. Driven by instinct and soul-deep hunger, Chantel will experience glamorous balls, pagan rituals and the uninhibited decadence of ancient Rome.

Two men await her surrender. Dark, demanding Thorne. And adventurous Jaron. Each appeals to her in their own way, but together they create a balance, an unshakable symmetry she has only imagined in her wildest fantasies.

As she abandons herself to the wonder, she discovers the true potential of pleasure and finds reality itself is far more expansive than she ever dreamed. Boundaries crumble and time itself is redefined. But with new awareness comes new danger. Mysteries must be unraveled and Chantel must make painful choices before she can secure a future with the men she loves.

Reader Advisory: If you're looking for the gentleman vampire, this is not the book for you. Blood is their life. It is very much a part of who and what they are.

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Crimson Awakening

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CRIMSON AWAKENING

Aubrey Ross

Chapter One

"That dress is absolutely amazing."

Chantel Demarko understood the hushed wonder in Eden Keller's voice. The same emotion washed over Chantel as she gazed at her reflection in the full-length mirror. Black lace overlay emerald silk, creating an effect both elegant and sensual. The strapless bodice hugged her torso and supported her breasts while the skirt flared gently as it flowed toward her slippered feet.

"At least the dress will look wonderful." She turned from the mirror with a nervous smile. "I'm still a little unsure of the steps."

Eden shook her head and scowled with feigned disapproval. "What kind of a tutor would I be if my best student couldn't waltz gracefully after four weeks of private lessons? You danced with Chad this morning and looked beautiful. It's doubtful any of your partners will try any fancy turns. Just feel the music and look into their eyes."

"I don't know why I'm letting this tie me in knots." An abrupt chuckle squeezed past the lump in her throat. "We both know it's not like me." An odd tension had gathered inside her over the past few nights. Not trepidation, exactly, more an undefined sense of import. Every detail needed to be perfect and she couldn't explain why. "I thought I was going to have to lock you and Chad in a room together just to get things started. I'm glad you're finally making up for lost time. Chad was miserable without you."

"I was miserable without him too." Eden's smile turned dreamy and a pang of envy twisted Chantel's heart. She didn't begrudge them their happiness, far from it. She loved her brother dearly and wanted nothing but the best for him and his mate. Still, she couldn't help wondering what fate had in store for her. Would she ever find

someone who looked at her with a need bordering on obsession? And was that really what she wanted out of love?

"Has he seen you yet?" Eden's question drew her wandering thoughts back to the present.

She shook her head and smoothed the skirt over her hips. "He's been hoping I'll change my mind and return to the city."

"After all my hard work? You better not!"

Eden's vehemence made Chantel smile. "I have no intention of chickening out, but Chad is my big brother and the Crimson Serenade has a mixed reputation."

"Really?" Interest lit Eden's expressive eyes and she pushed to her feet. "I thought it was an overblown prom."

Chantel laughed. Only a human could dismiss an ancient custom with such blithe indifference. "It's a bit more complicated than that. You must be a full-blooded organic vampire to attend. Has Chad explained what that means?"

"Organic vampires are born, not made and they guard their bloodlines judiciously. You are the source from which the others flow, the elite, vampire aristocracy."

"Now you're mocking me."

Eden tried to look contrite and failed. "I wouldn't dare." She came up behind Chantel and adjusted one of the pins securing her upswept hair. "You're the closest thing America will ever have to a princess. Of course most Americans know nothing about you."

Chad's mate was intelligent and spirited. Chantel had liked her even before Chad developed romantic feelings for her. Ignoring the momentary tangent, Chantel returned to the crux of the issue. "Thousands register, but only two hundred and fifty are chosen to attend. It's an honor just to be invited."

"Chad tried to explain it to me, but all I could think of was Cinderella and Prince Charming." Moving to her side, Eden met her gaze as she waited for her reply.

"The analogy wouldn't usually work, but this year's host makes it appropriate. Kenton Thorne is the heir of the oldest bloodline and he is currently without a mate."

Eden's brows arched dramatically. "Do you think you're Cinderella? Is that why you're driving yourself crazy?"

"Thorne has nothing to do with this. I know who he is, but I've never even spoken with the man. He's Antonio's best friend. They've known each other forever and I do mean *forever*." She gave a mock shudder, pretending to be put off. "I just turned thirty. Talk about robbing the cradle. He's closer to Father's generation than mine." The older a vampire grew the more powerful they became. Still, most humans associated age with frailty.

"Okay, so you're not in this for a husband," Eden mused. "Why do you want to go to this party so badly?"

"Damn good question, little sister," Chad said from the doorway. "I'd love to hear the answer." He smiled at his mate then looked at Chantel, his gaze gleaming with a mixture of fraternal pride and apprehension. "If Antonio hadn't agreed to chaperone you, I wouldn't let you out of my sight. You look...amazing."

"Antonio is my escort, not my chaperone, but thank you."

He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned his shoulder against the doorframe. With wavy brown hair and bright green eyes, even Chantel could see why females were attracted to him. "So answer the question, Chantel. You've mocked the brainless lemmings who march off to this 'antiquated ceremony' every year. If bagging Prince Charming isn't the goal, why are you risking Father's wrath?"

Frustrated by his persistence, she finally threw up her hands. "I don't know! I can't explain it. I just know I have to be there. Something important is going to happen and I have to be ready when it does."

"Really?" he drawled. "If you don't know what it is, how can you be ready?"

Eden crossed the room as she came to Chantel's defense. "You're going to harass her about instinct? You told me a vampire's instincts are highly sensitive and finely

tuned. You were convinced I was your mate after just one kiss. Why are her instincts less significant than yours?"

"We're instinctual beings, I'll give you that. But I would feel better if her feelings were a little more specific." He turned back to his sister as he went on. "Do you sense danger? More than one blood feud has been launched at the Crimson Serenade."

"I don't think this is a warning of danger. It feels more like..." She shrugged helplessly. "I can't explain it any better than that. Tonight is important to me. I must be there or my life will be irreversibly changed."

A warm current of air swished her skirts and teased her bare ankles. Chantel looked toward the French doors. Eden had opened them earlier to let in the fresh mountain air. Tall and elegant, clad in a black tuxedo, Antonio waited on the balcony outside the master bedroom.

"Are you ready, sweetheart?" He bent one hand behind his back and extended the other with a dashing smile. "I can see you are. There will be no rest for me tonight."

She straightened her spine and glided toward him, keeping her steps smooth and even. "As I reminded my bossy brother earlier, you are my escort, not my chaperone."

"I am your protector, *sciocca ragazza*, and no one will convince me otherwise."

"I am occasionally silly, but I am no longer a girl."

"A fact that will keep me busy for the rest of the night, I'm sure."

He was too damn charming for his own good. "How's Serafina?"

"She's having two of her granddaughters over for 'chick flicks'."

"Good for them."

"You're stalling."

Her pulse raced, yet her feet felt weighted. This was just a stupid dance! Why couldn't she calm down? "Promise you won't mess up my hair." She was frequently accused of vanity, so she used the fault to hide her apprehension. "Eden worked on it for hours."

"I did not." Eden motioned her on. "Your hair is disgustingly well-behaved, unlike the rest of you. Now get out of here. We want the house to ourselves for a few hours."

No other motivation would have worked as well. Chantel was thrilled that her brother had found his mate, but the few glimpses she'd received of their sexual antics had left her restless and uncomfortable. Sliding open the screen door, she joined Antonio on the balcony.

"I haven't done this for years," she told him, "so be gentle with me."

"Always."

Many vampires could dematerialize and travel as streams of energy. The distance they could cover was determined by their age and the control they had garnered through the years. Antonio was also able to capture another's essence and transport them along with him, but this took far more power and control than most vampires ever attained.

Antonio took her hand and led her away from the French doors, giving Chad and Eden their privacy. "Your father still has no idea you're attending?"

"I wouldn't need you if he did, now would I?" Antonio's animosity toward Lorcan was the longest-running feud on record with the Council of Ancients. Despite their best efforts to destroy each other, their bloodlines kept intersecting, so they reluctantly agreed to end the bloodshed. Even so, the bitterness remained. Neither one missed an opportunity to provoke the other. A fact Chantel was exploiting tonight.

Antonio heaved a sigh and placed his hand at the small of her back. "I can't help feeling I'm about to toss a very tasty morsel to a pack of hungry hyenas."

She laughed. "You don't think very highly of your friends."

"Few of those Kenton invited are my friends."

"What about Mr. Thorne? Don't you consider him your friend?"

His dark gaze ignited with enough intensity to make her blink. "You will dance with Thorne *once* because it's expected, and then you will stay away."

A slow, rebellious smile parted her lips. "Is he really that bad?"

"It was not always so." His tone softened and memories clouded his expression. "Tragic events changed him, made him less trusting, less forgiving."

"What happened?"

Antonio shook his head and flashed his potent smile. "It's not my story to tell. Kenton is my friend. I would sacrifice my life for him, but he is ruthless when it comes to women. This warning is not given lightly, Chantel. Stay away from Kenton Thorne."

* * * * *

Kenton Thorne looked at the ornate clock mounted above the archway leading out of the ballroom and groaned. It wasn't even midnight. Holy Mother Maker! How was he going to survive the tedium? Smile, bow, dance, pretend to listen to insipid conversation. Wash, rinse, repeat. He was going to die!

"I've seen that look before, my friend." The amusement in Antonio's voice was unmistakable. "You're plotting an escape."

Thorne was so thrilled to see his friend that he gave Antonio a spontaneous hug. Then he straightened his jacket and resumed his regal pose. "You told me you weren't coming."

"Would you rather I left?"

"Gods, no!" He smiled at a passing couple, praying they wouldn't stop. *I would rather go back in time and undo this rash decision. What the fuck was I thinking? This is the worst idea I ever had.*

Not even close. Antonio chuckled. *Remember that time in Boston when you...*

Antonio's thoughts rambled on inside Thorne's mind, but a glimmer of green drew his attention to the archway on the far side of the ballroom. A slender woman stood to one side of the wide landing, discreetly watching the crowd.

From the regal tilt of her head to the perfection of her alabaster skin, her appearance revealed the purity of her bloodline. Her black hair had been swept away from her face

and styled into a sleek twist at the back of her head. The simple style left far too much of her amazing skin bare and beckoning. He'd press kisses across her shoulders and up the side of her neck while he traced the edge of her bodice with his fingertips. Only after he'd memorized her silky texture and her scent would he venture beneath the gown.

Her breasts were full and round, the upper curve swelling into view. Were her nipples pink or darker? Rose or even brown? Imagining her naked took his mind down paths he had no intention of traveling. She must be someone's consort, or worse yet, someone's mate. If she were unattached, she would have been presented to him with all the others.

Unable to dismiss her entirely, he focused on her face, intensifying his vision so he could see her more clearly. Large, forest green eyes easily dominated her delicate features. Yet her mouth, with its distinctive shape and sensual fullness, was memorable in its own right. And those sculpted cheekbones. And that skin... She wasn't the most beautiful woman in the room—though she was lovely—her appeal was harder to define, more esoteric. It was as if her spirit called to his and he felt compelled to answer.

He shook away the ridiculous notion with a smile. He didn't even know her name.

She was joined by two other females and her features came alive with the most alluring combination of command and vulnerability. Who was she and where was her escort? She never should have been left alone in a room such as this.

"Hello." Antonio waved his hand in front of Thorne's face. "Where did you go?"

"There's a brunette standing in the archway. Do you know who she is?"

Antonio glanced across the sea of swirling dancers then scowled. "I do indeed."

"You don't care for her, I take it?"

Antonio met his gaze and stressed, "I care for her very much. That's Chantel Demarko. My niece."

Thorne's shock didn't soften the warning in Antonio's words. "That is Lorcan's daughter?" He looked at the woman again, hardly able to reconcile his mental image of a feisty little girl with the vision standing across the room.

"It would be less dangerous for both of us if you think of her as my niece rather than Lorcan's daughter."

Thorne grinned. There were many things he would do to an enemy's daughter that he would not do to his best friend's niece. "Why did you allow her to come tonight? You know how these things can be."

"Chantel is a Demarko to the marrow of her bones, far too stubborn for her own good." Antonio turned his head sharply to the side and vampiric light flashed within his eyes. "You're not the only one who's noticed her. I better get over there."

"I'm entitled to one dance before you lock her away for the night."

Their gazes clashed for a long silent moment then Antonio inclined his head, acknowledging the statement, before he hurried off across the crowded room.

* * * * *

Chantel felt as if every eye in the room had shifted to her as she descended the stairs to the main floor of the ballroom. She was being ridiculous. Most of these people had no idea who she was and many had pedigrees as impressive as hers. Every person in the room was an organic vampire. For once in her life she was nothing special, one among many. Yet she didn't feel humbled. She felt anxious and restless.

The Crimson Serenade had never appealed to her in the past. She preferred her social gatherings small and casual rather than large and ultra-formal. Yet something had compelled her here, drawn her with magnetic intensity.

She scanned the room, seeing a few familiar faces. More than anything she was struck by the cool disdain, the practiced indifference in each expression. If all these people honestly cared so little about the others, why did they continue with this meaningless ritual?

Antonio was talking with Kenton Thorne as the crowd ebbed and flowed around them. No doubt her uncle would motion her over soon and introduce her to the reigning king of tonight's festivities. She had to admit Thorne cut a dashing figure in his black tuxedo. Precise tailoring accented the breadth of his shoulders and the leanness of his hips. He'd drawn his dark hair back from his face with a red ribbon, a showy flourish against the somber black. Was there a rebel lurking beneath that icy façade?

A cool hand touched her elbow and Chantel started, snapping her head to the side. "Julia," she greeted her friend and they paused to exchange cheek kisses.

"Isn't he stunning?" Julia asked in a stage whisper. "If you ask me, he looks good enough to eat."

"Which one?" Rochelle laughed from Julia's other side. The two were frequently together, but Chantel knew Julia better than Rochelle. "I'd gladly offer my throat to either of them."

"Antonio's mate would probably object if he fed from any throat but hers." The young woman produced a melodramatic pout, so Chantel gave her hand a consolatory pat. "That still leaves Mr. Thorne."

"Not if I get to him first." Julia tossed Rochelle a challenging smile and headed off through the throng of revelers.

Would they wrestle him to the floor or wait until later and take turns? Somehow she didn't think Thorne would mind either way. He looked like a man well acquainted with female attention.

"Does your father know you're here, Ms. Demarko?"

Barely able to suppress a gasp, Chantel pressed her hand over her chest and managed an unsteady smile. If Faelon had a surname, she'd never heard it. Her father always referred to him simply as Faelon. He was tall and lethal, with gold-streaked brown hair and sharp blue eyes.

"My father is out of the country, so my uncle escorted me." She smoothed down her skirt and relaxed her shoulders. "It's kind of you to be concerned."

His hand pressed against the small of her back and he leaned in close. "I've known Lorcan for a very long time, so I wouldn't dream of taking advantage. But others might not be so cautious. You are a temptation beyond compare."

"Which is precisely why I'm here," Antonio warned as he drew Chantel away from Faelon's touch.

Faelon's eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared. "Giovanni. Now I know Lorcan knows nothing of this. He would never have allowed Chantel to attend. Was it your idea to lead her around like a lamb to the slaughter? What were you thinking?"

"I am neither a lamb nor a child." Chantel jerked her arm out of Antonio's hold and faced Faelon squarely. "And if the Serenade is so distasteful, why are you here?"

"Is there a problem?" Thorne asked as he stepped up beside Antonio.

"No, Mr. Thorne," Chantel said without shifting her hostile gaze from Faelon's angry face. "Faelon was just leaving."

Faelon gaped, obviously ready to object to her brazen dismissal.

Thorne held out his hand and smiled. "Then I'd like to request this dance. It's my responsibility as host to dance with as many of my guests as I am able."

"I see." She placed her hand in his. "We can't have you neglecting your responsibilities as host."

His warm fingers closed around hers and he led her toward the dance floor. "Faelon is not a man to trifle with. He'll find a way to make you pay for your rudeness."

"Let him try." She raised her chin and squared her shoulders, feeling oddly invigorated. "I've had my fill of bossy men."

Chapter Two

Up close and smiling, Kenton Thorne was even more attractive to Chantel than he'd been with the ballroom separating them. He was a big man, tall and broad-shouldered. Even in heels her head barely reached his chin. His hand settled against the small of her back and they merged with the swirling dancers. She stared into his eyes, feeling the heat from his body surround her as the music flowed through them.

His features were classically handsome, symmetrical and proportionate. His smile was just a bit crooked, a flaw she found endearing. With ridiculously long lashes, his black-velvet gaze made it hard to look away. Unlike her hair, which was truly black, his only appeared so until the light brought out warm highlights deep in the thick strands.

"Have we..." His gaze shifted to her lips then returned to her eyes before he completed the question. "Is this the first time we've met?"

"Antonio speaks of you often, but this is the first time we've met."

He brought her hand to his shoulder and lightly cupped her chin. "You seem so familiar." His thumb brushed her lower lip, the barest hint of a caress, then recaptured her hand and resumed a proper dance hold. "But I know it's foolish. You're so young. There's no way we could have shared..."

Candlelight flickered in the corners of her eyes, creating shimmers where faces should have been. She turned her head and the world distorted, swelling in and out of focus as the room began to spin.

A shrill cry, ruckus laughter then the smell of roasting meat.

"Are you all right?" Thorne's voice sounded far away.

She clutched at his arms, unable to control her body as images overwhelmed her mind. Darkness crowded in around her, yet she remained aware. He lifted her, cradling

her against his chest. She sensed more than felt him carry her from the room. Concerned murmurs and the rustle of clothing erupted in their wake. Where was he taking her?

Focusing on the sensations rapidly slipping beyond her grasp, she held back the darkness, stubbornly resisting the abyss. She heard Antonio's voice, but his exact words eluded her. What was happening? Why couldn't she move?

Fear leached her precious energy, compromising her fragile hold on reality. Like strands of rotting rope, the fibers snapped one after the other. She slipped deeper and deeper into the numbing void where no one could hear her scream...

* * * * *

Cool fingers brushed along her thigh and Chantel screamed. The sound was muffled and slight, but at least it was audible now. Some sort of gag was tied around her head and lodged between her teeth. She tossed her head and tried to sit, but her arms and legs felt weighted—or bound! Her eyes flew open and she stared through leafy trees at a star-speckled sky. What the hell? How long had she been unconscious?

She took a deep breath and tugged one arm and then the other. Definitely restrained, spread-eagle on some sort of table to be exact. Dreading what she would find, she looked down at herself and groaned. Her pale skin glowed in the dimness. She wasn't just bound and gagged, she was naked. Had Thorne kidnapped her or —

The touch came again, circling her kneecap, a silent reminder that she wasn't alone. She clenched her teeth against the gag then tried to speak, but the words were unintelligible.

Desperate for answers, she tried sending her thoughts instead. *Thorne? Who's there? What the hell is going on? Where am I?*

What was wrong with her eyes? She could barely penetrate the darkness and her attempts to intensify her vision failed. She blinked and blinked, but her gaze refused to adjust. Each second that ticked by escalated her fear.

"I know you are frightened, but this need not be painful." The man's voice was low yet powerful, like the rumble of distant thunder. He spoke the ancient language, a dialect known only to organic vampires.

She didn't recognize his voice. Her insides quivered and her body tensed. Tugging against her bonds, she arched and twisted, demanding to be released. Her words were garbled by the gag and the restraints minimized her struggles.

"What do you want? Who are you? How did you..." He couldn't understand her, wasn't interested in her pleas or he wouldn't have gagged her. She needed to think. Fear only made her weak, made her vulnerable.

Hysterical amusement threatened to shatter what little remained of her composure. She was spread before him like a virgin sacrifice. How much more vulnerable could she be?

"Was she taught our words?" the man asked. Who was he talking to? He prowled beside the table, a darker shape against the shadowed forest.

"She was taught," a second man replied from farther back in the trees.

Holy shit, there were two of them. Yes, she could speak the ancient language, though her father frequently lamented her pronunciation. What difference did that make! Her thoughts were rambling as they often did when she was frightened. She needed to calm down.

Why hadn't they been able to hear her thoughts?

No, back the whole thing up. Why the fuck had Antonio allowed this to happen? The only way her abduction could have succeeded was if her darling uncle was in on it. Her belly clenched and she frantically searched the darkness for any visual clue. The mansion where the party had been held was nowhere in sight. She'd insisted Antonio take her to the stupid dance. Was this some sort of retaliation?

"Is your sacrifice made freely?"

Sacrifice? If this was supposed to be amusing, they were way off the mark. Holding on to her anger with both hands she used it to drive back her fear and glared in her captors' general direction.

"The sacrifice cannot be taken. It must be offered with a willing heart." The man stepped into a stream of moonlight and time slowed to a crawl. It was Thorne and yet it was not Thorne. This man's features were harsher, more vampiric, as if he were about to transform, or had not yet mastered the ability to mimic smoother, more refined human features.

A brisk breeze lifted a strand of Chantel's hair and made her shiver, releasing her from the temporal stutter. The pale blonde lock streamed across her breast, easily reaching her waist. What was this? The Thorne-ish vampire picked up the tress and wrapped it around his index finger, stroking it with his thumb. Chantel felt a gentle tug against her scalp. It wasn't a wig. The hair was real. She wasn't in her own body...

Her mind shut down, paralyzed by fear and disbelief. Encouraged by the momentary lapse, sensations rushed through her body. Her nipples gathered, the tips tingling. She clenched her hands so tight her nails dug into her palms. She felt weightless and achy and hot, lost in a surreal blending of nightmare, fantasy and vision.

This wasn't real. It couldn't be real, and yet she knew it was.

"Did you offer yourself for our pleasure?" Thorne placed his hand on her belly and she trembled beneath his fingertips.

A memory formed within her mind. Terrified people, shouts and accusations, swells of hopelessness, and then she stepped forward and volunteered to save them. Or rather the woman who ordinarily inhabited this body had volunteered for the thankless task.

He was waiting for some sort of response. If she shook her head, would he let her go?

A slow, wicked smile parted his lips, revealing long, savage fangs. He was definitely a less-evolved version of vampire, more beast than man. What year was this?

"I understand your hesitation, but know this. Your only alternative is death and that will not save your people. If you break your vow, we will gorge on their blood and burn their village to the ground before we depart these lands. Your leaders stole something precious from us and there must be a reckoning."

As it had before, her memory provided images to fill in the blanks. Fanatical humans hunting by torchlight. A terrified female vampire. Chantel's host had watched from the trees, horrified by the brutality of her own people yet knowing she could do nothing to stop them. They had literally hacked the young female to pieces with axes and shovels then stood, covered in gore, laughing and cheering, as dawn incinerated her remains.

Shaken and queasy, Chantel turned her face away. Thorne caught her chin, refusing her the comfort of retreat.

"Are you remembering Ishannah's murder or dreading what is to come?"

Why did he keep asking questions when he wouldn't let her speak?

"We were told your mate and child died last winter." The other vampire stepped forward, allowing her to see him for the first time. Like Thorne's ancestor, this man was unable, or unwilling, to suppress his vampiric nature. Distinct ridges furrowed his brow and his cheekbones jutted, yet his eyes were kind. Or at least less hostile than Thorne's. "I am Jaron, and it is not our intention to harm you."

"You will willingly submit to our every desire. You will accept us into any orifice without hesitation or complaint. You will offer your throat or your wrist or your breast whenever we hunger. You will spread your legs and surrender your essence. You will—"

"Enough," Jaron snapped. "She understands her role."

Thorne was trying to humiliate her, to intimidate her, but Chantel understood the pain driving his bitterness. Ishannah would have done all those things and more, but she'd been snatched from them, murdered by ignorant humans who feared what they didn't understand.

Was this why she was here? Had she been transported to this time to spare her ancestor the trauma of submitting to two savage vampires? She might be in a human's body, but she understood vampires in a way no human from this era ever could.

She believed in fate, in a guiding force that orchestrated events and offered opportunities. What people did with those opportunities was up to the individual and at times the opportunities seemed odd, even convoluted, but the divine energy was always there. This was certainly one of the more interesting opportunities.

She looked from Thorne to Jaron and back. It wasn't as if she really had a choice. This made more sense than anything else. Sexual healing. They were heartbroken, devastated by the brutality of humans. Could she use this body to ease their pain, if even for a little while?

"What are you thinking, *florellino*?" Jaron asked. She didn't recognize the last word. It sounded almost like little flower, but his accent was so thick she couldn't quite make it out. "Fear just left your eyes." Ignoring Thorne's attempt to stop him, Jaron loosened the gag and eased it from her mouth.

She licked her lips and flexed her jaw, thrilled with the small freedom. "Thank you."

"You will refer to us as Master," Thorne insisted. "Master Jaron asked you a question. You will answer him honestly or I will replace the gag."

"Yes, Master Th—" Shit! She didn't know his name in this era.

"What name were you about to give me? Answer honestly. Even if it displeases me, I will not punish you."

"Thorne." She offered the name without hesitation, gazing deep into his eyes. It wasn't a challenge, exactly. He just needed to understand that she wouldn't be bullied. He might insist she be respectful, but she was no man's doormat. Bound as she was, the only strategy at her disposal was her response. She would reward tenderness with trust and resist brutality.

Jaron chuckled, moonlight gleaming in his eyes. Both his hair and eyes were far lighter than Thorne's. Blond hair and blue eyes would be her guess, though in the moonlight it was impossible to know for sure.

"You find me prickly, little human?" Thorne leaned over and flashed his fangs. "Wait until I pierce your flesh with these and your sheath stretches tight around my Thorne."

"I'm not afraid of you." But her ancestor would have been terrified. She needed a reason for her boldness if she hoped to play the part convincingly. "Everyone I ever loved is gone. I pressed each one to my heart as they breathed their last." It was an educated guess. In primitive times winter meant starvation, hunger and illness. At least for humans. "Use this body as you wish. I no longer care." Why else would she have volunteered?

It was Thorne's turn to chuckle, though the sound was far from humorous. He straightened and stared down at her, eyes shimmering, blacker than the night. "You still do not understand."

"And no amount of explanation will prepare her." Jaron moved to the other side of the table, dragging his fingertips along her body as he went. "Night is waning and I long for her taste. Let's begin."

Thorne cupped her breast, lightly abrading her nipple with his thumb. "Is your sacrifice made freely?"

She had been too young to remember her mother's death, so she could only imagine the pain. Allowing compassion and acceptance to fill her gaze, she slowly wet her lips. "I know your loss can never be replaced—I'd never presume to try—but accept the comfort of my body. Find what peace you can in—" He snarled and her offer ended with a little yelp.

His hand tightened over her breast, the pressure nearly painful. "Why would you wish to comfort me?" His voice sounded harsh and choked.

"She needs comfort as well," Jaron said, brushing the hair back from her face. "She's an outcast, barely tolerated by the others. Her mate was the first to die, so the villagers believe she's to blame for the plague they suffered last winter."

Her memory didn't confirm Jaron's statement, but it made sense. Only a human who had lost everything and had no other options would offer herself to "demons".

Thorne continued his exploration of her breasts, his touch growing ever bolder. Despite his verbal impatience, Jaron made no move to taste her.

"If you are brave enough to trust us," Jaron went on, "we can show you pleasure beyond your wildest imaginings." He brushed his lips against hers, scraping her lightly with his fangs.

The vampire in her relished the sting and longed for more intense sensations. In a futile attempt to gain her father's attention, she'd embarked on a five-year rebellion that had led to some experimentation she'd rather not repeat. Still, nothing they had planned frightened her. There was likely nothing they would do that she hadn't experienced before.

As long as they didn't damage this frail human body.

Her breath hitched at the thought and Jaron interpreted the shudder as fear. "Relax, love. We'll take this one step at a time."

Closing her eyes, she allowed the cool breeze to caress her skin. She smelled pine trees and freshly turned earth, even a touch of flowers. Jaron kissed her again and his scent overshadowed the others. Woodsy and dark, his smell was just as elemental as the forest yet far more evocative.

His tongue teased her lips, coaxing a response rather than thrusting past her defenses. *Open, florellino. Accept me inside.* The unfamiliar word was even more obviously an endearment when whispered in her mind.

She slowly parted her lips and curled her tongue around his. He groaned, framing her face with his hands as his tongue moved in her mouth. *Close your eyes. Feel our hands. Let your body adjust to our touch.*

She closed her eyes. But they didn't just use their hands. Their lips pressed against her shoulders and their fangs scraped her ribs. She shivered and squirmed as tingles danced across her skin. Her lashes fluttered and she started to open her eyes.

No. Leave them closed. Thorne issued the directive, but she couldn't tell who was standing where. Hands glided over her body, squeezing and rubbing. They mixed the sensations, keeping her anxious and restless. A gentle caress would flow into a teasing pinch, only to be soothed by a warm, wet tongue.

Someone worked her nipples into pebble-hard points, twisting and suckling until she arched and moaned. Meanwhile his conspirator worked his way down her body. How should she react? She loved oral sex, but her ancestral counterpart might never have experienced foreplay, much less had anyone go down on her.

Gentle fingers parted her folds and she was licked in a long, firm swipe. "What are you..." Another loving lick and her clit received a delightful swirl. Glorious heat spiraled up through her pussy. Oh gods, did she really have to object to this? "Stop it!" She sounded breathless and almost sincere. "That's wicked, unnatural. You will..." She opened her eyes and found Thorne between her legs, not Jaron. How odd. His kiss was so tender, so unlike his prickly exterior.

Thorne found her clit with his lips and sucked. She gasped and shivered. "You must not. Please stop."

"No." Thorne held her gaze while he pushed directly into the core of her body. In and out, in and out he fucked her with his tongue.

She canted her hips and licked her lips, hungering for his cock. Stark desire burned in his expression, fueling her response. His hands slipped beneath her, lifting her so he could penetrate deeper. Pleasure built within her, rocking higher with each thrust of his tongue.

"We find no shame in anything that we enjoy," Jaron said. "And I do mean anything."

He grabbed the back of Thorne's hair and pulled him up from between her thighs. She cried out in protest at the loss, but Thorne transitioned smoothly. His lips were wet with her juices, parted and waiting for Jaron's kiss. Jaron licked Thorne's lips, savoring her essence before taking the kiss deeper. Their tongues curled, slid into each other's mouths then reemerged.

Chantel pressed her lips together, longing for the intimacy she sensed in the men. They had been enjoying her body, but this was different. There was a deep emotional connection between Thorne and Jaron.

Ending the kiss at last, Thorne ducked under her leg while Jaron bent to her pussy. "Mother Maker, she smells good."

"And tastes even better."

Jaron wasted no time finding out. His mouth pressed against her mound, tongue parting her folds and delving deep into her passage. Chantel moaned softly, enjoying the sensual slide of his lips and tongue against her intimate flesh.

Curving his hand around her jaw, Thorne turned her head toward him as he bent for a deep kiss. His tongue tasted of her cream and Jaron. The combination sent lust ricocheting through her body.

"Why are you not afraid?" he whispered against her parted lips. "You are being ravished by demons yet you respond."

"You don't kiss like a demon." Jaron caught her clit between his lips and she gasped, bucking against his mouth. "What he's doing doesn't feel evil. It feels...wonderful!"

Thorne released her chin and stepped back. He pulled up his tunic and loosened the drawstring, lowering his pants just enough to free his erection. And *oh my*, what an erection! His cock arched away from his body, so thick he could barely close his fingers around the shaft.

He widened his stance and began to pump, one hand on his balls, the other firmly stroking. Her mouth watered as she imagined the plush thickness sliding against her

tongue, bumping the back of her throat. His gaze shifted from her eyes to her mouth, his need obvious. Did he think to spare her the shock of his carnal desire? Should she say something, encourage him?

Jaron chose that moment to end his oral play. He closed his lips around her clit and sucked. All the mellow sensations smoldering in her abdomen detonated in a burst of fire and light. She came in sharp, deep spasms. She closed her eyes against the blinding pleasure, moaning in the velvet darkness. Her back arched and her limbs tugged against the restraints. He stroked her clit with the tip of his tongue, keeping the waves rolling on and on and on...

* * * * *

“Chantel?”

She groaned then whimpered, aftershocks still pulsing through her core. That was Antonio’s voice. She tried to open her eyes, but they felt weighted, as if she were drugged. “Antonio?” She was back in her own time or at least in her own body.

“I’m here, sweetheart. Are you all right?”

“I think we should call a healer,” Thorne insisted, his voice deep and firm.

Thorne. Had he abandoned his ancient name and taken on the name she’d given him? The possibility sent excitement zinging through her body. And Kenton no long suited him. He’d be simply Thorne in her mind and in her heart from this day forth.

She lay on a couch or a bed, something soft. Her lids finally cooperated and her gaze collided with Thorne’s. His eyes were still black as night, but his other features had resumed their modern appearance. He looked civilized, sophisticated—and far too human.

Her heart sank and her pussy ached. She wanted him wild and ravenous, so lost in passion he couldn’t contain his true nature. He’d spread her legs and control her with his fangs while he thrust hard and deep between her thighs.

Lust curled through her, dragging a moan from the back of her throat. She pictured him standing over her, pumping his cock while he stared with obvious longing at her willing mouth.

"Chantel?" Antonio reached over the back of the sofa and touched her shoulder, scattering the echoes of her fantasy.

Determined to regain her composure, she blew a strand of hair out of her eyes and looked around. She was surrounded by elegant artwork and polished wainscoting. They must be on one of the upper levels of the mansion in which the Serenade was taking place. She could still hear the orchestra and an occasional burst of laughter. The ballroom took up the majority of the ground floor and she'd been in all the other rooms. This salon wasn't one of them. Even so, reality had returned. All was well.

"Are you feeling better?" Antonio helped her sit then joined her on the leather sofa.

"I am so embarrassed." She looked at her uncle and shook her head. "Apparently teleporting doesn't agree with me." The explanation was as good as any. She sure as hell wasn't going to tell them she'd just had an extremely erotic hallucination about Kenton Thorne and another vampire in some freaky past life!

"We should call a healer," Antonio agreed, concern creasing his brow.

"That's not necessary." Ignoring her wobbly knees, Chantel pushed to her feet. "I've felt a little woozy ever since we arrived. I didn't want to spoil the evening after dragging you here, so I was trying to make the best of it. Obviously, my body had other ideas." She glanced at Thorne and heat washed over her again. Damn, the man was gorgeous. "I'm sorry to make a spectacle of myself."

"The crowd presumed you were overcome by my charm," he said with a playful smile. "We're just worried about you. I'd really feel more comfortable if you'd allow a healer to examine you. Prolonged unconsciousness is not a common reaction to teleportation."

Prolonged? "How long was I out?"

"I'm not sure," Antonio said. "It felt like forever."

It hadn't taken long at all once Jaron had gotten down to business. He just hadn't been in any hurry to get her off. "I'd rather see my own doctor." It hadn't been real. Regardless of how wet her panties were, it hadn't been real. "Will you release me if I promise to make an appointment first thing tomorrow?"

Thorne shot Antonio a quizzical glance. "Chantel, you're not my prisoner."

And yet it still felt as if she were. Authority emanated from him and drew her to him. She could see his savage features, feel his mouth on hers, taste their cream-coated kisses. Gods, she needed a few minutes alone with a vibrator.

Or alone with Thorne.

"I'm sorry." She rubbed her eyes, trying to focus entirely on the current situation. "I still feel sort of foggy."

"All the more reason for you to see a healer," Antonio persisted.

Maybe he was right. Something had caused the hallucination and apparently she hadn't been on a holy mission. Too bad. She wouldn't have minded riding out that particular hallucination to its conclusion.

Something deep inside her stirred, a soul-deep ache. She felt hungry, lonely, incomplete, yet she couldn't name the source of her misery. She wanted to curl up in a ball and weep. The loss was nearly overwhelming. Tears gathered behind her lashes and she furiously blinked them back.

"I'll see a healer, but I'll see one at home." Her voice was thick with emotion and her throat was dry. What was causing these irrational swings? "There's no reason to disrupt the party any more than it's already been disrupted."

The men searched for objections.

Thorne was the first to relent. "That seems reasonable."

"It's probably better if we avoid the lake house." Antonio smiled. "Chad and Eden aren't expecting us for hours."

"Take me to my apartment in the city and I'll make arrangements from there."

Thorne seemed satisfied with the decision. "I've always found it amusing that the inhabitants of Manhattan refer to their city as if it were the only city in the world."

"It's the only city that counts," Chantel countered with a wink. She paused for a deep breath then looked at her uncle. "I better splash some water on my face before we head out or you might not appreciate the landing."

He cringed, obviously understanding her concern. "Take your time. I won't leave without you."

"There's a bathroom two doors down on the right," Thorne told her.

"Thanks."

The bathroom was quite and cool. She used the facilities and kicked off her shoes. More than anything, she needed a few minutes alone to process the possibilities. What had happened to her? Her body ached with sensory echoes and emotional aftershocks. Vampires lived so long, few ever thought about the afterlife, much less considered the concept of reincarnation. Was it possible she had lived before? That she and Thorne had been lovers and —

Without warning the handle rotated and the bathroom door swung inward.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she snapped, startling the nice-looking blond man.

"Sorry! I didn't realize anyone was in here." He angled the door, creating a partial barrier without blocking his line of sight. "I just needed the window. It's the only one with the right orientation."

"Orientation for what?" She paused, feeling rather bitchy.

"For Lulina. She's supposed to burn brightest tonight." He stayed in the doorway, his baby blue eyes gleaming with unmistakable enthusiasm.

The comet. Stories about the rare phenomenon had been all over the 'net. She'd meant to take a look herself the night before but ended up clubbing with a couple of her friends. "We can see it without a telescope?"

"We can tonight." His smile melted her tension and focused glaring light on her overreaction. "She's a rare green comet with some really unusual properties. This is her first trip into our solar system."

"You sound like you know her well." She was flushed and disheveled. He probably thought she was drunk.

"I've always tried to appreciate heavenly bodies."

Despite his deadpan look, she broke out laughing. "And you'd been so smooth up until now. That line was retired before I was born."

He leaned his shoulder against the doorframe and arched one eyebrow. "Your figure is excellent, as you're obviously aware, but I was referring to Lulina."

Heat blossomed across her cheeks and she smoothed down her skirt, looking anywhere but at her uninvited visitor. Wow, she was really off her game tonight!

His warm chuckle added insult to injury. "I didn't mean to embarrass you. I'll go up on the roof."

"That's not necessary." She tried to sound casual, refusing to retreat. She was Chantel Demarko, damn it! She would not be upstaged by a comet. "I'm sorry I bit your head off. It's been an odd night."

Recognition widened his eyes and she straightened her shoulders. So, he hadn't realized who she was until now.

"That was you downstairs?"

She just nodded. She'd had no control over what happened on the dance floor. She had no reason to be embarrassed. Even so, tension returned, winding around her chest like the coils of a constrictor. "Chantel Demarko."

"Jaron Sandros." He raised her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles.

Unexpected tingles raced up her arm and heat pooled between her thighs. A beat rotated out of time, a long, drugged moment, suspending her between vision and

reality. His gaze surrounded her, caressed her with velvet expectation. He wanted something, *needed* something just beyond her grasp.

Infuriated by yet another intrusion into her reality, she ruptured the compulsion with a sudden burst of psychic energy. The debris spun around her and shot through her, stinging and burning before it disintegrated and floated away.

She jerked her hand out of his light grasp and took a step back. "No one enters my mind without permission. No one."

"I'm sorry." He lowered his arm, closing his hand into a fist. "My motivation was honorable, I assure you. I was trying to heal you."

"Oh really? Healers are required by law to seek permission before administering treatment."

The sardonic smile returned and she wanted to slap him. "Which law are you referencing? To my knowledge the Council of Ancients has never dealt with the issue of healing in any detail."

"I don't want you in my mind."

"That's all you needed to say." He held up both hands. "It won't happen again. Unless you ask for my assistance, of course. If you feel woozy or any of your other symptoms return, please let me know. Otherwise, can we please move to the window?"

"My uncle's waiting. Will this take long?" He seemed harmless, but her instincts were in overdrive tonight.

"Not at all, but if we don't get to it, we're going to miss it. Come on." She stepped aside and he opened the large bathroom window then released the screen. He leaned out a bit and turned his head to the left. "It's still partially concealed by the trees. It'll be more impressive in a few minutes."

Curious yet anxious, she crept toward the open window. Her feet resisted each step and tension gripped her belly. What was he going to do, push her out on her head? She was being ridiculous.

He flashed another boyish grin. "I don't bite, Chantel, not without permission. Come on."

Heaving a frustrated sigh, she crossed to the window and looked out, trying to locate the comet. In a smooth sequence of movements, he wrapped his arms around her torso and launched them skyward, leaving the Crimson Serenade far behind.

Chapter Three

"Who am I?"

Chantel tugged against the wide leather cuffs confining her wrists. It was useless and she knew it. The cuffs were securely attached to a belt and the belt snugly encircled her waist, crossing her arms behind her back. She jerked her head from side to side, rattling the metal leash connected to the front of her collar. "If you wanted a pet, why didn't you adopt one? Rescue shelters have lots of them."

"Who am I?" He ignored her sarcasm.

She glared, ignoring his question. He'd brought her to a sex club, members only she was sure, expensive as hell if this luxurious suite was any indication of the norm. He'd stripped her down to her black lace thong and removed the pins from her hair then he'd wrestled her into these ridiculous restraints.

He wrapped the leash around his hand, slowly drawing her toward him. "Look into my eyes and tell me who you see."

With a rebellious sigh, she met his gaze. "You're Jaron Sandros or so you claimed when you *kidnapped* me. Are you someone else now? My father is going to kill you. You know that, don't you? Our location might be shielded now, but I was shrieking like a banshee while we were flying. They know our approximate trajectory and, more importantly, they know who took me!"

"Lorcan Demarko is irrelevant." His bright blue eyes were somber yet intense. He'd taken off his jacket and unwound his bowtie.

She stilled. "You're insane." Had she actually thought this asshole was charming? Comet watching? She couldn't believe she'd fallen for such a transparent ploy. "If the Demarko clan doesn't scare you, how about the Giovanni clan? My uncle is an enforcer for the council. He will hunt you down and —"

He silenced her with his mouth. There was nothing gentle in the kiss. His lips forced hers to part and his tongue pushed his taste into her mouth, awakening her senses, stimulating her soul. For a long moment she trembled, shocked and frightened by the power of a relatively simple contact. Her ears buzzed and her body warmed. The buzzing built to a rumble and the rumble escalated to a roar.

His scent sank into her brain and teased her memory. She knew this man, knew his taste, his texture, the sound he made when he came. Overwhelmed by her reaction, she jerked her head to the side. "Stop it! I won't be your plaything."

"I don't want a pet, Chantel. That's not why I brought you here." He kicked off his shoes as he spoke then held the leash in one hand and reached for his belt buckle with the other.

"If this isn't about sex, there's no reason to undress."

He unbuckled the belt and lowered his zipper. "I didn't say it wasn't about sex."

"I'm not going to fuck you." That left no room for interpretation. Though most vampires had no problem with seduction—in fact most were damn good at it—few would resort to rape.

Not bothering with a reply, he continued undressing.

Her family would be searching for her by now. It was only a matter of time before they were found and this madman was punished for his... He stood before her, naked, and her thoughts scattered. His entire body was sculpted with lean, highly defined muscles. Raw strength and animal sexuality emanated from his rugged features.

Awareness arced between them, speeding her pulse and hardening her nipples. Turmoil still twisted through her mind. She was confused and unsure, but her traitorous body had already surrendered.

"What happened on the dance floor?" He made no move to touch her and his gaze remained on her face. "Tell me what you saw."

“What I saw?” He stripped naked then instigated a conversation? He truly was deranged. “I saw the inside of my eyelids, asshole. I was unconscious.”

“I don’t believe you.” His tone remained calm, almost knowing. And those eyes, those beautiful blue eyes, caressed and coaxed.

He couldn’t know about her hallucination. It simply wasn’t possible. “What do you want from me? Why did you bring me here?” She tried to match his calm, to remain unaffected by his nudity and the conflict bombarding her life. Her body wasn’t cooperating. An uncomfortable pressure took hold of her core and gradually tightened. She needed to be filled, to be fucked until she screamed in release. She needed an outlet for all these emotions. She needed life to make sense again!

“Tell me what you saw. Tell me how it made you feel.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she cried. Had he sensed her arousal? Maybe he could smell the residue on her panties. Residue? What a laugh. She was still wet. Was he jealous of... Jealous of what? A past-life regression? It was ridiculous.

Tension hardened his features as he closed the distance between them. “I need you to be honest with me.” He unfastened the leash and tossed it aside. “Is that too much to ask?” Guiding her backward, he secured her restraint belt to a wide leather loop encircling one of the thick bedposts. This anchored her to the bed while allowing him to adjust her height to his liking. “Was the vision specific or did it seem to be a collage of unrelated images?”

“Why are you so certain I had a vision?” He stood close. Her nipples stirred his chest hair each time she inhaled. She wanted him to touch her, needed his hands and his lips sliding over her heated skin. Her lids drooped and she remembered the scrape of Thorne’s fangs, and the silken brush of lips... Jaron’s lips? She’d meant Thorne’s. Hadn’t she? One dark and one light. Holy Mother Maker.

Suspicion tingled down her spine. His coloring had been lighter, but she couldn’t see him clearly. It had been easier with Thorne. She knew what his modern counterpart looked like.

"What did you see," he persisted.

"A human sacrifice." She watched his face carefully, waited for him to laugh or roll his eyes.

"What sort of sacrifice?"

"What difference does it make to you?"

"Indulge me."

"Sexual. She offered her body to a vampire because her people had killed his mate." If he had some connection to the vision he would catch the inaccuracy.

"There was only one vampire?"

Holy shit! Her insides quivered and her nostrils flared, trying to detect Jaron's scent.

Jaron closed the space between them, pressing his chest against her breasts. "I'd hoped my taste would be enough. Go on." He guided her face to the bend where his throat met his shoulder, his fingers loosely fisted in her hair. "Scent me. Bite me. Fuck me. Just *remember* me."

She inhaled deeply, saturating her senses with his dark, woodsy smell. All the pleasure and sadness came rushing back. Why were they without Ishannah again? She dragged her tongue along his pulse, savoring the steady rhythm and sizzling energy. The details were muddled, but this was Jaron, her lover—her mate? She turned her face away, not ready for the final conclusion.

"You're...Jaron," she whispered, hardly able to believe she was giving voice to her delusion. "My mate?"

"I've been known by many names. Jaron is one of them." He brushed the hair back from her face and her heart fluttered in an excited little dance. He'd made the same gesture in the vision, touched her with the same unconscious tenderness. "How much do you remember?"

She leaned against the bedpost, thankful for the support yet uncomfortable with her breasts thrust forward. "If we're going to talk, would you please free me? And find me a robe or something?"

He cupped her breast and pressed a kiss over her lips. "Your memory is obviously very sketchy if you think I can resist touching you after all this time." His hands swooped down and squeezed her ass. "Tell me about the vision."

"I can't think while you're touching me."

Sliding her up along the bedpost, he greedily suckled each breast before he asked, "You can't think or you can't lie?" His lips latched on to her nipple again as he waited for her answer.

Tingles darted into her chest with each strong pull of his mouth. She needed to understand what was happening and this sure as hell wasn't helping her concentrate. "I was afraid you'd think I was crazy. I was half convinced I'd lost my mind. It felt so real. It was as if I were actually there."

Releasing her nipple with a lingering kiss, he looked into her eyes. "It was natural for you to return to the human's body because that was the purpose for the sacrifice."

"I don't understand."

He wrapped her legs around his waist, supporting her with one arm while his other hand caressed her. "Our bond is unique and powerful. Many covet the happiness it has brought us and many have tried to disrupt the contentment we have found. Only one has had any success."

"Who do you mean?" The nagging doubt scratching at her gut, whispered a name before he spoke it out loud.

"Lorcan Demarko has been attempting to destroy us for centuries."

"What does my father have to do with what I saw in the vision?"

"Demarko might have played a part in creating the physical shell you currently occupy, but you are Ishannah, my eternal mate." His chest heaved as he paused to calm

down. He moved both hands to her ass and shifted her so more of her body rested against him. "Demarko used a mind link to draw the humans to our lair as dawn crept over the horizon. Then he led us away, knowing we would risk anything to protect you. Of course we had no idea it was a trap. He used our protective instincts against us. We acted without thinking, and by the time we realized our mistake, the sun had risen and you were gone."

She rested her head on his shoulder, needing the contact as much as he did. "Go on. How does the human fit in?"

"Our first joining lasted nine centuries. It drove Lorcan crazy that three beings could —"

"Wait a minute." She raised her head and looked into his eyes. "He hasn't even been alive that long."

His smile was gentle and a touch of humor made his eyes even more brilliantly blue. "You're going to have to open your mind, my love. Reality is so much bigger than most people ever imagine. We're included in the fortunate few who are able to glimpse its true scope. Our temporal bond allows us to carry our memories from one lifecycle into the next. That's how we're able to find each other lifetime after lifetime."

"Does Lorcan have a temporal bond with someone?"

"No, his ability to remember past lives is innate. That's one of the reasons he's so resentful. He feels we're unnatural. We have created by magic something that should only occur naturally, according to him."

Closing her eyes for a moment, she let the information sink in. Her father had arranged her murder. She shuddered, instinctively knowing it was true. The images surged back through her mind, axes hacking, shovels chopping, frenzied laughter and blood, so much blood.

"Let me down." She arched and twisted. "Get me down, now!"

"Tighten your legs." As soon as she pressed against his chest, his fingers worked the buckles. Her wrists came free and he lifted her into his arms. "Don't fight it, *florellino*. You're not alone."

He carried her to a large padded chair and cradled her in his arms. "What does that word mean?" she asked, desperately needing a distraction from the horrible memory.

"Its literal translation is fire flower, but it's also a pet name for a female lover. It can also mean the portion of a female one enjoys while making love, but I assure you that's not how I used the word."

She arched her brow at him. "You just called me a pussy?"

"Not in the derogatory sense. More like, I want to bury my fingers in your soft, wet pussy and feel you come so hard you bruise my flesh."

Her *florellino* clenched in complete agreement with his throaty suggestion. Unfortunately, her curious mind was still not satisfied. "We'll explore your vocabulary more fully in a little while. Let's get back to the vision. Lorcan felt our bond was unnatural, so he compelled the villagers to murder Ishannah."

His brows drew together at her phrasing. "Do you believe you're Ishannah?"

Her dishonesty had angered him before, so she chose candor. "I'm not sure. You think I'm actually Ishannah in a new body and I think I'm Ishannah's descendent. Why does it make a difference?"

He hooked his finger through the loop in her collar as his gaze searched hers. "You really don't remember anything, do you?"

The emotions in his gaze tore at her heart. He was doing nothing to conceal his feelings. Anger, frustration and pain were all there for her to see. Vampires didn't trust easily, but Jaron trusted her with every fiber of his being. "I...want to."

He turned her to face him and moved her knees to either side of his hips. "Your being stirred when Thorne took you in his arms." His hands settled around her waist

and buried his face between her breasts. "Let's see if we can't awaken some more memories."

"Will you please explain the first one before we stir up any new ones?"

His hands slipped down to cup her ass before he obliged. "Our first lifecycle ended naturally. Thorne and I were born first as we often are. We sensed your birth and impatiently waited for you to mature."

"How does a child deal with the memories of past lives? Isn't that traumatic?"

"Mother Maker knows what she's doing. As children, our past lives seem like stories or dreams. They become clearer as we mature. Anyway, the memory of the bond follows us from lifetime to lifetime, but the actual bond must be reformed. We had just formed the link in our second lifecycle and it had not yet had time to solidify when Lorcan made his move."

"The vision was fairly detailed. I understand why the human allowed you to use her body, but what was accomplished by her sacrifice?"

"We summoned you into the human's body, which allowed you to remain with us until the bond solidified. It was risky and none of us were certain if it would work."

"But it did?"

"Yes. When we transitioned into our next lifecycle, our memories were intact."

She placed her hands on his shoulders, unsure how to respond to his fantastical claims. He made each assertion with such finality it was hard not to believe him. "Then why don't I remember you now?"

He was silent for a long time. His hands remained on her bottom, but he looked beyond her as if he was reliving the past or sorting through memories. His expression didn't change. He squeezed her cheeks gently then began in a low, rumbling tone, "Thorne came back from a clan summit and found Ishannah lying in a pool of blood. Her throat had been cut so deeply her head was barely attached."

"Oh gods," she cried, trying to wiggle off his lap.

Stubbornly holding her in place, he rushed on, "He tried to feed her until I dragged him off, kicking and screaming, but it was obviously too late. She'd been dead for hours. We found her bodyguards a couple of days later. They'd been savaged and drained of blood."

"Why was he never punished for... It's against the Charter to take the life of another vampire."

"Allegations must be proven and Lorcan controls the council. We tried a direct approach, but Lorcan is older and more powerful." He was quiet for a moment, lost in memory. When he went on his tone was hushed and pain-roughened. "The current tragedy was the worst."

It felt surreal. They were talking about her death in the past tense. "Why was it worse?"

"It drove us apart rather than bringing us together."

"I understand that, but *why*?"

"Each time it happened, the pain escalated. We knew more, had learned from the time before. We were more certain we could prevent it from happening, which made the defeat that much harder to accept. This last time was the fourth time we'd lost you, the fourth time we'd been unable to protect you, knowing the danger we'd face. We were...shattered by your death each time, but this time Thorne was inconsolable. He went to ground for several years, but nothing helped. He can't look at me without seeing her...without seeing you. He insists it's too damn painful to be around me, so he pretends I don't exist."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and held him close, tears blurring her vision. Death was never easy, but Thorne's forced isolation would have made it that much worse. She stroked Jaron's hair, offering warmth and nearness rather than superficial words.

Antonio had warned her that tragedy had shaped Thorne's past. Now she knew what he'd meant. "When did all this happen?" She was almost afraid to ask. Part of her already knew the answer.

"Late summer, 1979."

"I was born August twenty-third." Her mouth was so dry she barely formed the words.

"You were born the day she died. I thought it was odd, but you shouldn't have been reborn until both Thorne and I died as well. That's how the cycle works."

"Whoever murdered me was obviously trying to break the cycle."

"Again," he stressed.

She shook her head. "Why murder me and then father my next incarnation? That doesn't make sense."

"It does if he was attempting to disrupt the cycle, to put you on a life path incongruent with ours."

When she wiggled off his lap this time, he let her go. "Do you realize how insane this sounds?" She crossed her arms over her breasts, feeling anything but sexy.

"Yes." He didn't cover his nudity, but he was no longer aroused. "I didn't mean to overwhelm you. I'm sorry."

She studied him for a moment, searching his gaze for any sign of mockery or jest. There was none. He stared back at her, his expression open and tormented. "You honestly believe every word, don't you?"

"I started dreaming about Ishannah shortly after you were born. I resisted what I was sensing at first because I thought I was only feeling what I desperately wanted to be real. The dreams have become more erotic and more vivid as you matured. That's how an awakening works. Whoever is born first searches for the other two. And when two have joined, they search for the third. Sometimes it takes days, other times years, but the search continues until the bond is complete. The needs become more intense, the

discontent, the restlessness. Everything escalates until we are all together again as we are meant to be."

She caught her lower lip between her teeth as heat rolled down her spine. "You think Thorne has been dreaming about Ishannah too?"

A slow, sexy smile drove away some of his pain. "There's one easy way to find out."

* * * * *

Thorne glared at his best friend and clenched his teeth so hard his jaw ached. "I told you, I don't know."

"Bullshit!" Antonio charged, but Thorne countered, bringing them face-to-face in midair. "You know Jaron better than anyone. Where did he take her? *Why* did he take her?"

"Because Lorcan is a fucking reprobate who deserves to be tortured with uncertainty," he suggested. "I don't know! There was no struggle. Maybe she agreed to go with him."

"She would have told me! I'm not a fucking reprobate who deserves to be tortured with uncertainty."

"He won't hurt her."

"How can you be so sure?" Antonio floated to the floor and shot his fingers through his hair.

"I know Jaron better than anyone. Remember? I don't know what this is about, but he will not harm her." The last part was true, but the first part irritated his mind like an internal itch. He didn't believe in coincidences. Chantel Demarko lapsed into some sort of trance and Jaron took off with her. The two were connected, but how?

A firm rap on the door drew his attention across the room. "Enter." Charles, his chief of staff, pushed open the office door. The excitement with Chantel's abduction had

cut short the Crimson Serenade, so he and Antonio had flown here to Lone Tree Estate, hoping to plan her rescue.

"Lorcan Demarko is here, demanding to see you."

"That didn't take long." He glanced at Antonio. "He may enter, but show his entourage to one of the guesthouses."

"A wise precaution," Antonio agreed. "Prepare yourself for a tempest."

"His bluster doesn't frighten me, and without his minions to do his dirty work he is mostly bluster."

Antonio made no comment. He had been on the receiving end of Lorcan's tempest and nearly died as a result.

As predicted, Lorcan burst into the office with all of the subtlety of a hurricane. He flew at Thorne, slamming him against the back wall of the office before Thorne could muster the energy to reverse the direction of his charge.

"Calm yourself or leave!" Thorne shouted.

Lorcan swung at him. Thorne dodged the blow. "You fucking bastard. If he harms one hair on her head, I'll kill you both."

"I had nothing to do with her abduction."

"You expect me to believe that?" Lorcan shoved Thorne back, claws digging into his chest.

"Touch me again and this conversation is ended," Thorne ground out between gritted teeth.

"Where is she?" Lorcan lowered his hands and sheathed his claws with obvious effort.

"I am doing everything in my power to find out."

"You're soul bonded for fuck's sake, just—"

"Our link was severed with the death of our mate, as you are well aware."

Lorcan stilled. Vampiric light erupted deep in his eyes then transformation rolled across his features. His forehead rippled and his cheekbones lifted, becoming sharp, concave peaks. "You have twenty-four hours to find my daughter and then I unleash every power at my disposal upon you and yours."

Chapter Four

Knowing his next move was crucial, Jaron hesitated. Ishannah stood before him, trembling, arms crossed over her breasts. She might currently reside in Chantel Demarko's body, but he knew it was Ishannah, his lover, his wife, his female soul mate, one-third of his temporal bond.

"Would you like to have some fun?" He smiled, hoping to lighten the mood. Too much information had been dumped on her all at once and that hadn't been his intention when he'd taken her from the party. He hadn't had a clear agenda when he'd wrapped his arms around her and soared into the sky. He'd only sensed her awakening and known the Crimson Serenade was the last place in the universe she needed to be as the phenomenon unfolded.

"A little fun would be perfect right now," she agreed with a shaky smile.

He pushed to his feet and held out his hand. Hers felt so tiny and warm on his palm, it was all he could do not to pull her into his arms and kiss her until they were breathless. Instead he wrapped one arm around her waist and led her to the bed. Her steps lagged and she looked dubious.

"This is your idea of fun?" she objected.

"Frequently, but not tonight. You wanted to know if Thorne has been dreaming about you. I think we should try to find out."

"And how do we do that?"

"We construct a dream sequence on the metaphysical plane that is nearly impossible for him to resist and see if he takes the bait. If he seems surprised by the occurrence, it's unlikely he's experienced it before. If he participates eagerly..."

"He's probably visited the scene before."

"Exactly." She relaxed a bit, but he still sensed anxiety and reticence in Chantel that wasn't like Ishannah at all. "It's an educated guess, but it's better than nothing." She needed time. He had to be patient, regardless of his body's demands.

"Did you have a particular dream sequence in mind?"

"Oh yes." He swept her up in his arms and placed her on the bed. "Rome," he said dramatically as he crawled onto the bed beside her. He lay on his side, his head supported by his hand, one leg casually draped over hers. She accepted the position without resistance, so he placed his hand on her abdomen, in the ultrasoft valley just below her rib cage.

"What happened in Rome?" She stirred beneath his touch, settling his calf more fully between her knees. His leg slid forward, pressing against the heat of her sex. She let out a quiet gasp and then shivered.

Pleased by her response, he pushed no farther, allowing her body to remember his touch, remember all the pleasure they had known together. "Rome was special. Rome was unique. I found you before we found Thorne, so the dynamic was unusual."

"Are we always vampires?"

He smiled. "The question occurred to you faster than it did to either Thorne or me. We are most often vampires, but occasionally one of us will be born human or Other. During our third lifecycle we searched and scanned for years and couldn't find you. Then one of our friends bonded with an elf and we wondered if you might have been born on the other side of the veil. We convinced our friend's mate to take us through, and within days we had located you."

"Are you two always male and am I always female?"

His hand sneaked up and cupped her breast. "You and I switched genders during one lifecycle, and I was female as well as you for another."

"I bet Thorne enjoyed that."

"Thorne enjoys many things, some he will never admit openly."

She shook her head and glanced beyond him. "It's hard to imagine living more than once, much less living as another race or another gender."

"I'm not sure if it's a luck-of-the-draw sort of thing or if we're more open to new experiences than Thorne, but he's always male and always dominant..." Jaron paused, waiting until her gaze met his before he added, "except in Rome."

"All right. I'm intrigued. Tell me about Rome."

He brushed his thumb over her nipple, keeping his touch light, seemingly unconscious. "You and I had been married for several years when we finally located Thorne. He was human, which shocked us both. Never before had he been anything but vampire."

"How did we find him?"

"We were at a party, a lavish, decadent affair thrown by Faelon."

Her gaze narrowed and she slowly licked her lips. "Is Faelon like my – like Lorcan? Does he remember his past lives?"

"I don't know. They do seem to cross paths with surprising regularity." Jaron thought back over all the times he'd seen Faelon with Lorcan. They were each leaders of prominent clans, it hadn't seemed suspicious before. Even so, Chantel might be on to something.

"I didn't mean to distract you." She reached up and touched his chest. His heart thudded in response to the simple contact. He was so ready for her caresses, so anxious to rediscover all the things that pleased her most. "Tell me about the party."

"Not to be outdone by the outrageousness of humans, vampires during those days frequently held 'banquets' that were little more than an excuse for sexual excess. Before I share this memory with you, let me warn you that it was a very different time, with far different rules and expectations. Our dark natures were closer to the surface. Despite the opulent setting, we were quite barbaric."

"And such a place appeals to Thorne so much he will use it as a refuge in his dreams?"

"It will make more sense after you've seen the scene."

"All right." Her fingers splayed over his heart and a serene smile parted her lips. "Take me to Rome."

Chantel held her breath as Jaron lowered his head. There was only one way to create a shared memory. She knew what to expect and still her heart was racing. His arm slid beneath her neck and she tilted her head to the side, offering her throat.

His fangs scraped across her skin, awakening her nerve endings and locating her pulse. He held her still and bit deep with one sharp thrust. Tingles radiated out from the point where his canines penetrated, warming her, lulling her into a sensual trance.

She floated through time and space, drifting with him, now part of him. His arms wrapped around her, supporting and pressing her against his chest. Her heartbeat adjusted, matching the strong, steady rhythm of his pulse.

With the unflinching control of a Master, he eased into her mind. He went no farther than the first layer of her shields then paused. *Scan me, love. Know me as you have always known me. Feel who I am and how I feel about you.*

Feelings couldn't be misrepresented in a link this intimate. They could be concealed and suppressed, but anything she sensed would be accurate. Few vampires would have allowed her this opportunity. She searched his being, sensed the richness of his affection and the depth of his devotion. He would never hurt her. Regardless of whether or not she was Ishannah or Ishannah's descendant, Jaron would protect her and cherish her until the end of time.

She opened to him, easing the intensity of her shields, allowing him deeper into her mind. *Thank you.* He'd been trying to soothe her, she knew. But his loyalty was a bit overwhelming. He felt as if he had known her for many lifetimes while she had just met him.

You're welcome. Are you ready?

As I'll ever be.

Remember. Our behavior might seem harsh and –

Stop apologizing for being a vampire. She shook away the last of her hesitation, ready for an adventure. I still have those urges. Don't you?

Oh yes. We're just expected to suppress them far more often than we used to be.

Only in public.

A warm chuckle followed her reply and the metaphysical plane unfurled before them. Laughter echoed through the darkness, drawing them into the scene. An opulent villa, littered with colorful cushions and entwined figures. The wavering light of oil lamps cast a golden glow over naked skin, so much naked skin. Wide panels at opposite sides of the large room had been pushed back, admitting moonlight and a warm, fragrant breeze.

Bodies undulated and moaned. Hands and mouths migrated from one person to the next without hesitation. Cocks slid smoothly into any willing opening, eased by sweet-smelling oils or evocative blood.

The banquet tables had been arranged along one wall. An unexpected thrill curled through Ishannah as she viewed the arrangement. Naked humans, all young and beautiful, reclined together in an artful sprawl. Bite marks punctured their flesh in every conceivable location. Apparently Faelon's guests had been enjoying his buffet for some time.

As if summoned by the thought, Faelon appeared before her, looking rangy and feral in a dark blue toga. His gold-streaked hair was short and his piercing blue eyes missed nothing. "Are you enjoying yourselves? You have yet to join any of the activities."

"We watched the last wrestling match," Jaron disagreed. "I think the loser enjoyed being pinned even more than the winner enjoyed pinning him."

Faelon chuckled and slowly stroked his chin. "You two seem inseparable, but I have something that might interest you."

Ishannah let her gaze sweep across the room. Couples and small groups of people were engaged in all sorts of sexual antics, yet she was only minimally stimulated by any of it. "We prefer our pleasures to be private and intense. If you understand what I mean."

Faelon smiled, the expression doing little to warm his gaze. "I'm even more convinced that you will enjoy what I have in mind."

"Lead on," Jaron suggested.

They left the villa and crossed the walled courtyard. The compound was secluded and equipped with subterranean vaults where Faelon and his guests spent their days. He stationed blood-bonded slaves around the estate to protect him during his solar trance. A compulsion ensured their loyalty and kept them from leaving while he was not present to control them.

He led them to an outbuilding along the perimeter wall and unlocked the door with a metal key. "I bought this troublemaker nine nights ago. He is too beautiful to destroy, but he refuses to respond to any of my handlers. I leave tomorrow for an extended stay on one of my other estates or I would break him myself." He held his lamp high and let the light spill into the room beyond him. "If you want him, he's yours."

* * * * *

Thorne felt the vision tugging at the back of his brain and collapsed into his desk chair. Antonio had finally left and he was looking forward to a few hours of quiet so he could collect his thoughts and organize a strategy.

His hands felt heavy—no, restrained. Gravity intensified, dragging him to his knees. But he was sitting in a chair! How could he be kneeling?

Images rolled through his mind, blending reality and memory. He felt cold, rough manacles biting into his wrists, stretching his arms out away from his body. His toes

curled against hard-packed dirt and his knees were scraped and bleeding. How long had he been kneeling in the dirt? And what the fuck was that smell?

"Too beautiful to destroy?" a woman mocked from the doorway, her voice cultured yet oddly accented. "I certainly don't see it, darling. Do you?"

"Darling" moved into the cell, bringing an oil lamp with him. He was a tall, blond man with rugged features and a muscular build. "It's hard to tell under all the filth. What's your name?"

"Fuck you."

The man's brows drew together over his bright blue eyes. "I suspect I understand your meaning, but what an odd term."

He'd never heard the word "fuck" before? Who were these people? "What do you want?"

"No, the question is, what do *you* want?" The woman moved into the circle of light and Thorne couldn't breathe. Black hair framed a face so achingly beautiful she didn't look real, and her eyes were as green as the man's were blue. Together they were...inhuman.

"Who are you?" He twisted away from her fingertips as she tried to touch his face.

"You're chained and naked, kneeling in your own filth," she inventoried. "We want to take you away from this situation. Do you have any objections?"

"Where are you taking me and what will be expected of me when we get there?"

"You're a slave," the man snapped. "Nothing can change that. If you stay here they will whip you into submission or turn you into a mindless thrall. We are offering you a less violent alternative."

"This need not be so antagonistic," the woman said softly. "What's your name?"

"Thorne. Do I have to fuck you both or just her?"

"Why do you presume our interest is sexual?" The man took a step closer and illuminated his filthy body more completely. "Oh, I see."

"I will not mind being pricked by that Thorne," the woman murmured in an all-too-familiar tone.

As soon as anyone caught a glimpse of his dick he was objectified and degraded. It had been going on longer than he could remember. He'd barely had hair on his balls when one of his mother's friends lured him into the meadow behind their home and introduced him to the secrets of a woman's body. He'd enjoyed the lesson but resented her fixation on his oversized part!

And since his captivity, things had only gotten worse. One look at his endowments had immediately identified him as a breeder. He'd been kept by the slaver rather than sold as he'd expected to be. The disgusting wretch had locked him in a filthy pen and refused to feed him until he mounted whichever terrified female he wanted to impregnate at the time.

"Thorne," the male muttered. "A rather fitting name. So, Thorne, here is our offer. You will obey without hesitation and in return we will treat you with respect."

The definition of respect was incredibly subjective, but it was by far the best offer he'd ever received. He'd been born to poverty in a land he could barely remember. Years as a breeding slave had taught him the meaning of degradation. He'd had no control over his body and even worse, he'd forced himself on others rather than starve. Now this enigmatic couple offered him respect. It was closer to freedom than he'd ever dared dream. If he displeased them they would likely kill him, so there was really no disadvantage to going with them.

"I accept."

The man unlocked his manacles and helped him to his feet. Weakness washed over him in a humiliating wave and he helplessly clasped the stranger's arm for support.

"Oh, my love, ask Faelon if we can have him rinsed off before we depart. The stench is overwhelming."

The woman nodded and headed back toward the villa. Shame heated Thorne's face, giving him enough strength to straighten his spine. "I am not responsible for the condition of my body."

"I am well aware. It's a common strategy used on stubborn slaves. They are made to feel less than human, so they don't object when they are treated as such."

"Are you..." Did he dare ask the question? What if the stranger had no idea his friend was a monster? If he hadn't seen the transformation with his own eyes he never would have believed such a creature existed.

"Am I what?"

A shrill peal of laughter drew his attention toward the villa in time to see a naked woman run through the open archway. Close on her heels a man followed. He turned her and tossed her over his shoulder as he raised his face to absorb the moonlight.

Thorne shuddered and took a step back. The man near the villa wasn't human! His features were demonic and his eyes glowed. His hand slipped between the woman's thighs as she wiggled and shrieked in outrage. He slapped her ass and strode back into the villa, disappearing from view.

"They are lovers," Thorne's new master assured. "He was not hurting her."

"But he will... Are you a blood drinker too?" There. He'd spoken the words. Let the bones fall where they may.

"Yes." There was no apology in his tone, no shame or confrontation. "We will feed from you, but you will not be harmed when we do. In fact, you will find it pleasurable. My words were not hollow reassurance. You will be treated with respect."

"As long as I obey."

"That is the offer." The man crossed his arms over his chest and openly assessed Thorne's body. "Remaining here is still an option."

"I will obey."

"Good. Then stimulate yourself. I would like to see your Thorne fully erect."

Thorne hesitated. He could approach this with the same humiliated dread that had accompanied each act in the breeding pen or he could control the only aspect of this that remained within his sphere of influence.

"Yes, sir. Whatever pleases you." Rather than allowing the words to sound dejected and subservient, he held his head high and squared his shoulders. He was filthy, reeking of sweat and piss. Even so, he would create such a magnificent erection that his new master would ache to possess him. He grabbed his flaccid shaft and gave it a couple of firm pulls.

His master caught his wrist and chuckled. "Enough. You said you would obey. I needed to be sure you would before I had your chains removed."

Accepting the explanation with a nod, Thorne released his cock and relaxed.

The woman returned with two servants bearing buckets of warm water. They scrubbed him down with brushes, using one bucket, then rinsed him with the other. One returned to the kitchen with the empty buckets as the other worked lather through his matted hair. The first woman returned with rinse water for his hair and then he was left alone with the couple.

"A marked improvement," his master said.

"His hair is hopeless," his mistress lamented. "We will have to shave his head and let it grow in fresh."

Ishannah and Jaron flew Thorne to their villa in the neighboring valley. Thorne approached each new task with the cautious wonder of a child, or a half-tamed animal. Ishannah was fascinated by him, yet her heart ached when she thought of the abuse he had suffered, the neglect and the degradation. He devoured the food set before him as if he were terrified that he would never be fed again.

She pushed back from the table and crossed to stand beside his chair. "Thorne, you're safe now." Gathering his large hand between her much smaller hands, she gave him a reassuring squeeze before she added, "No one will harm you here."

He looked younger without his wildly matted hair, yet his handsome features appeared even more tragic. "Those are just words."

The implication sank in as he lowered his gaze and tears blurred her vision. She stepped closer, pressing his face to her breasts and holding him close to her heart. His scalp was smooth and surprisingly sensual. Still, she kept her touch light and soothing.

"We have required your obedience, but I'm willing to take it a step further." Jaron remained in his chair across the table from Thorne. His features were tense, a potent combination of emotions crowding his expression. "You have purchased your body with your blood."

Easing away from Ishannah, Thorne placed his hands on the table. "What do you mean?"

"We need your blood to survive, so we have no choice but to feed from you. As I said before, this is not harmful. But from this moment on, you will be required to do nothing sexually. When and if you join us in our bed it will be because you want to be there."

Thorne's dark gaze clouded with mistrust and doubt. His nostrils flared and his chest heaved. "What...trickery is this?" He stood so suddenly his chair toppled over. "If you do not want to fuck me, what use am I?"

"He didn't say we didn't want to enjoy your amazing body and explore the personality everyone has woefully neglected," Ishannah pointed out. "He said we wouldn't require it of you."

"You will sustain our lives," Jaron told him. "There is no greater use, no higher worth. And if you choose to offer anything more, it is entirely up to you."

Chapter Five

Thorne rode the sensual rush, a willing prisoner to the vision. His life was filled with pressure and responsibility, stress and anxiety. In bygone years there had been battles to fight and humans to hunt, countless ways to vent these frustrations. Now vampire numbers had dwindled and the actions of one irresponsible rogue could endanger the lives of many. He was exhausted and lonely, and he missed the incendiary bliss he only experienced with his mates. So he shed his clan leader mantle for a time and let the images flow, absorbing the familiar sensations with greedy delight.

Despite Lorcan's tantrum, Chantel was in no danger. Jaron would never harm an organic female. And the mystery surrounding his motivation could wait a few hours longer. There wasn't much Thorne could do until one of his spies picked up their trail.

Thorne hadn't sought out the vision, but he damn sure intended to enjoy it. He'd been so innocent in Rome. So fucking human! If Jaron and Ishannah hadn't found him that night it was likely he wouldn't have survived. Faelon was ruthless and his brethren were notorious for their insatiable appetites.

Urging the scene forward with a mental push, Thorne found himself in a lavish bedroom. A large bed dominated the room, the square mattress centered on a small platform. Swathed in rich bedding with pillows scattered across its surface, he had never seen anything so inviting. There were no windows, but one wall had been painted with a colorful landscape, preventing the room from feeling closed in.

"We are sensual beings, Thorne," Ishannah was saying. Her wavy black hair spilled across her shoulders and flowed to the small of her back. The filmy white gown she wore only accented the delightful curves and hollows of her body. "Hunger and lust often stir together within us."

Jaron casually disrobed, moving with the swift grace inherent in all vampires. Thorne tried not to look at the other man's body, but his muscles rippled and flexed. "Step behind her. Let her lean against you and offer her your wrist."

Why would she need to lean against him? Thorne knew better than to ask. These two had already indulged him further than any of his other masters. He positioned himself behind the woman and her hair swished against his chest. They'd given him a simple tunic with which to cover his nakedness, but the front left a wide swath of skin bare.

Finding the inadvertent caress disconcerting, he pressed against her back. Her scent drifted to him, swirled around him, making his head spin. She increased the pressure, leaning into him as she rested her head on his shoulder.

"Oh yes, my love." Her voice sounded breathless and needy.

Thorne dared a glance over her shoulder and his eyes flew open wide. The man was on his knees in front of her, *licking* her woman's parts!

Jaron's gaze met his as he pushed back from the woman. "Have you never tasted a woman's desire?"

Thorne shook his head. "I mounted whichever female they thrust into my pen. Tasting them would not have accomplished what they wanted from me."

Ishannah turned toward him, creating an embrace between the three of them. "I am barren, so there will never be a reason for you to 'mount' me. Pleasure, however, is something I welcome. We touch each other with our hands and our mouths because it feels good. When I take Jaron into my body, it makes me feel complete, as if a piece of myself is missing without him."

Thorne shook his head, his gaze helplessly drawn toward her nipples and the shadowy V at the juncture of her thighs. "I know nothing of these things."

"Would you like to learn?"

Heat swept through his body, pooling low in his abdomen before rushing down the length of his cock. His gut clenched and his balls tingled. He covered the telltale bulge with his hands, humiliated by his lack of control.

"Your desire is natural." Jaron guided his hands away from his crotch. The material of his tunic formed a conical tent. "You are safe with us. Ishannah, take off your gown."

She pulled the shoulder straps apart and the gossamer material whispered down, pooling around her ankles. Lust slammed into Thorne, dragging a groan from the back of his throat.

Jaron chuckled. "My thoughts exactly. Ishannah is spectacular."

Thorne drank in the perfection of her body with greedy interest. He wanted to touch her, to kiss her and lick her from head to toe before he spread her legs and...tasted her desire? Did he really want to lick her cunt? His gaze focused on her woman's mound, shocked to realize she was hairless. Trancelike, he extended his hand then suddenly snatched it back.

"Go on. Touch me. I want you to. No, I need you to."

Her permission was all the encouragement he needed. He feathered his fingers over her silky skin, mesmerized by the texture. "Do you... Why is there no hair?"

"She removes it for me," Jaron explained. "I enjoy it more when she's smooth, especially when I feast on her soft folds."

Unable to resist the temptation, Thorne slid his middle finger into her core. Her snug walls gripped him as he slid in and out. Gods, she was hot, and so incredibly soft. He gathered her slick essence and hesitantly raised his finger to his mouth. The tip of his tongue tingled, so he risked another lick. Salty, earthy, wild, her taste was unlike anything he'd ever imagined. He sucked his finger dry and then soaked two fingers in her glistening juices.

"Be brave," Jaron urged. "Go right to the source." He swept Ishannah into his arms and carried her to the bed.

Thorne shed his tunic and joined them on the bed. Jaron arranged her on his lap, draping her legs over his, which spread her thighs wide. Thorne knelt between her legs and gazed in wonder at her sex. He'd never paid much attention before. Fucking was an obligation, something he was forced to do to survive. Ishannah was beautiful, her flesh delicate and deeply flushed. He traced her crease with his fingers, fascinated by the slide.

"Here. You must always touch a woman here." Jaron parted her folds and exposed a swollen nub at the top of her opening.

"Why?"

Jaron passed his thumb across it and Ishannah shivered, letting out a little moan. "Because it makes them do that."

Pleasure. They fucked because it felt good. It even made the woman feel pleasure? He was glad when the woman didn't shriek and struggle. This was entirely new territory for him.

"Now trace her slit with your tongue. Circle her opening and tease her pearl. See if you can make her climax."

With his hands on her inner thighs, Thorne bent to her sex. Her scent was strong yet clean, evocative and stimulating. He tried to do as he was told, but his body had other ideas. He licked her once from back to front and even circled the puffy little bead. Then something took over, something fierce and elemental. He wanted this woman as he had never wanted anything or anyone before.

He pushed his tongue right up into her cunt, swirling it slowly until he was coated with her cream then he fucked her, lifted her hips to his mouth and fucked her with his cream-coated tongue. His fingers gripped her tight little ass as his tongue laid claim to her passage.

She arched into each possessive thrust, her hands stroking his skull, grinding his mouth against her folds. "Yes, take me. Fuck me!"

Hearing the word whispered in her passion-thickened voice only made him wilder. He sucked her juices into his mouth, drinking her down like honey. His upper lip rubbed over that special knot as his mouth moved against her and she cried out sharply. Desperate to share her joy, he thrust his tongue back inside her. Spasms rippled around his tongue as she trembled and moaned.

"Hurry," she urged. "I want my taste mingled with yours."

Thorne wasn't sure what she meant, but he surged up along her body. She guided his mouth to hers and her fang gently nicked his tongue. Blood mingled with cream, but he didn't retreat as she fed from his mouth.

"Fuck her," Jaron whispered from close beside him. "I want to watch that mighty Thorne disappear inside her."

He had no idea when the other man had moved, but Ishannah was on her back now and Thorne had followed her down. He knelt between her thighs, his cock bobbing between their bodies.

She released his mouth and he gasped in a deep breath. "But only if you want this," she quickly added. "You're under no obligation." The reminder sounded silly when he'd just had his tongue buried in her cunt.

"I want this," he assured her. "I want to experience everything you two do and more. I want to invent things no one has ever tried before."

Jaron laughed. "That's the spirit."

He guided his cock to Ishannah's opening and both men watched as her body accepted him inch by glorious inch.

"How's she feel?" Jaron asked.

"She's so hot and so tight. Why is she so tight?"

"We're stronger than humans and she has wonderful control over her inner muscles. Push as hard as you like. You won't hurt her."

Thorne drove inward, not stopping until his entire length was sheathed in her snug heat. He let out a ragged groan. "Gods, I could come just being inside her."

"Then we'll start over from the beginning." Ishannah grinned.

Steadying her hips, Thorne pulled back and thrust deep. She cupped her breasts, lightly pinching her nipples as her gaze bore into his. "Harder. I like it really hard."

Thorne lifted Ishannah's legs to his shoulders and pounded into her willing body. Jaron allowed them to enjoy the frantic pace for a few minutes before he touched Thorne on the shoulder. "I want to fuck you," he whispered the words into Thorne's ear, knowing it would send lust spiraling through his already-stimulated body. "I want to put my Thorne inside your ass while you're inside Ishannah. Will you allow it?"

Tension rippled up Thorne's back and he let Ishannah's legs slip to his elbows. "I...my other master—"

"I won't hurt you. I will never hurt you. You will feel only pleasure. I promise."

Ishannah eased her legs down around Thorne's lean hips as he arched over her body. Jaron took a moment to stroke Thorne's back and enjoy the defined symmetry of his legs and ass. Nicking his wrist, he dripped blood into his crack and inhaled the distinct metallic scent. The scarlet trail stood out in stark contrast against his skin. Jaron bent and licked a drop as it settled just above Thorne's scrotum. Thorne shivered and tensed.

"Spread your legs."

"Is blood the best thing to use for—"

"Blood is life to our kind. Blood binds us to each other. Our blood can heal your body and your blood sustains us. You must get used to seeing and tasting blood. It is very much a part of who and what we are." As if to prove his point, Jaron trailed blood down Thorne's spine and across his shoulder, drizzling it into Ishannah's mouth. She

sighed, accepting the offering with obvious relish. "Now kiss her. Taste me on her tongue while I join my body with yours."

He pooled blood in his palm and coated his cock then parted Thorne's ass cheeks and positioned himself against the human's anus. Drawing energy into his fingertips, he caressed around and beneath his cock head, sending tingling currents into the tightly puckered flesh. He pushed slowly, continuing the mystic massage, relaxing Thorne's muscles, easing the way.

Thorne broke away from Ishannah's mouth with a gasp. "How did you do that? It feels..."

Slowly pulling back, he accented the sensations gathering beneath his fingertips. The tingling heat seeped into his cock, augmenting the fierce grip and the scalding heat. "So good!"

"I have to move." Thorne sounded desperate.

"Then move."

They moved together. Jaron extended each of Thorne's strokes, passing the pleasure through the human's body and pouring it into Ishannah. The rolling flex of Thorne's ass beneath him drove Jaron crazy. He thrust harder, urging the other man deeper.

"Faster!"

Jaron wasn't sure who cried out the word, but it unleashed a hailstorm of passion. They shifted their legs, desperate to find the best position for the firmest leverage. Ishannah bucked into their downward strokes, tossing her head from side to side.

She reared up, suddenly sinking her fangs into Thorne's shoulder. Jaron mirrored her movement, biting him on the other side. They pinned him between them, saturating his body with pleasure as he offered his life-giving blood without reservation.

Orgasm rolled in a lazy circle, starting with Jaron. He buried his cock inside Thorne and released his seed, binding the human to him as securely as this lifecycle allowed.

Thorne cried out, shuddering between them, impaled by their fangs and Jaron's cock as he came deep inside Ishannah.

Ishannah's climax sent an echoing wave of pleasure back through the men. She wrapped her legs so tightly around Thorne that her heels rested on Jaron's hips. Dizzy and boneless, she withdrew her fangs and collapsed against the bed.

Chantel stared into Thorne's dazed eyes, face tingling. The past blended with the present. Her current features pushed to the surface as Ishannah was enveloped in memory once again.

Thorne blinked. Licked his lips then whispered, "Chantel?"

The visualization ruptured, thrusting her off the metaphysical plane with such force she found her physical body flailing. She yelped and grabbed Jaron, steadying herself against his chest. She spun and tumbled then rocked gently, safe within the cradle of Jaron's arms.

"I think we have our answer," Jaron concluded, brushing her hair back from her face. "He definitely joined in. At one point he even took control of the visualization."

"But he was shocked to see me. What does that mean? Why doesn't he recognize me? If I'm who you say I am, why didn't he recognize Ishannah in me? Or me in Ishannah?"

"If you're who I say you are?" Disentangling their limbs, Jaron rolled off the bed and landed on his feet. "You still don't believe you're Ishannah?"

Chantel licked her lips. The shared memory had been incredible, every nuance vivid—and accurate, every detail incredibly familiar. She'd lived those events before. Jaron wasn't crazy. She was Ishannah. She couldn't explain why she had been reborn while they were still alive, but she was Ishannah.

Her stunned realization progressed no further. Shouts and thuds erupted in the corridor outside their rooms. She dragged the sheet up, holding it against her breasts

with one hand as she frantically tried to unfasten the collar with the other. Jaron snatched his pants off the floor, each movement revealing his frustration. He only succeeded in pulling them on before Thorne tore a hole in the shield protecting the suite and teleported into the bedroom.

Enraged and fully transformed, Thorne looked enough like the vampire in Chantel's original vision to send a wave of recognition sweeping through her body. She pressed the sheet to her chest, unable to hide her flushed skin or hardened nipples. Mere moments before this man had been buried deep inside her and she'd been drunk on his blood.

"Were you brought here against your will?" His glistening gaze focused on her, refusing to so much as acknowledge Jaron's existence.

"You know what's going on here." Jaron moved into Thorne's peripheral vision.

Lethal tension crackled in the air, waiting for the slightest provocation. Maybe it would be wiser to retreat and fight another day. "I haven't been harmed in any way."

"That wasn't my question."

Someone pounded on the door in the outer room. "Security! Mr. Sandros, do you require our assistance?"

"I have everything under control. Thank you," Jaron called out.

Thorne glanced toward him and growled. "You have no idea how out of control things really are, do you?"

"Ishannah has been reborn." He took another step closer to Thorne.

Like an over-wound spring, Thorne snapped. He grabbed Jaron by the throat and slammed him against the nearest wall. The tips of his nails pierced Jaron's skin, a silent warning not to move. "We are still alive! She cannot be Ishannah, no matter how badly we want her to be. Do you think I don't miss her? I think of nothing else. I dream of her, long for her, hunger as I have never hungered."

Jaron couldn't speak and Thorne's mind was carefully shielded.

Chantel had no choice. If she didn't do something, Thorne might give in to instinct and harm Jaron seriously. Inching forward, not daring to breathe, she placed her hand on Thorne's tight upper arm. "They're not just dreams. You've sensed my awakening."

"It's not possible." He refused to look at her, glaring instead at Jaron.

"Whether it is or not, you need to let him go."

With an infuriated hiss, he shoved away and left Jaron slumped against the wall. "I'm here to rescue you, Ms. Demarko. If you prefer to remain with your captor, I'll inform your father of your decision and that will end my involvement in this matter."

Chapter Six

"You can't take her to Lorcan Demarko," Jaron objected, rubbing his bruised neck. "We both know he's murdered her more than once."

"Demarko murdered Ishannah!" Thorne blurred across the room, standing toe-to-toe with Jaron in an instant. "This is Chantel. Even Lorcan is not perverse enough to hurt his own child."

"Don't count on it." Jaron glared, a bit of his spirit returning.

Tension escalated within Chantel with each volley of the heated exchange. Would her father really harm her when he realized she was Ishannah? "Do you believe my...that Lorcan is responsible for Ishannah's death?" she asked Thorne.

"Which time?" he sneered.

"You believe you've lived multiple lifetimes with the same soul partners. You just don't believe I'm Ishannah?"

"You can't be." He relaxed enough to reverse transformation. His features smoothed and his eyes mellowed to an ebony shimmer rather than the cutting intensity they had possessed since he arrived. "I held Ishannah's body in my arms. I felt the bond rupture. Despite everything I had done to prevent it, her soul slipped beyond my grasp. We will be reunited. I have no doubt, but not during this lifecycle."

"What if you're wrong?" She stood several paces away, cocooned in the sheet.

"I'm not." Instantaneously he stood in front of her and hooked his finger through the loop on her collar. "If you want to stay and play with Jaron, I understand. I doubt your father will, but I know firsthand what a skilled mouth Jaron has and how well he —"

"This isn't a game," Jaron snapped.

"You're damn right it's not!" He disentangled his finger and turned on Jaron. "Lorcan is ready to move against you for this little stunt and I'm not just talking about his family. I'm talking about his clan. You couldn't have approached me privately or waited until tomorrow night to contact her? You threw down the gauntlet in the middle of the Crimson Serenade. It doesn't get any more intentional than that."

Jaron glanced away but not before Chantel saw guilt spark within his eyes. "You wanted to provoke him?"

"It wasn't my primary motivation," he insisted. "More like a happy coincidence."

Thorne shook his head, clearly disgusted. "I told Lorcan I was finished feuding and I meant every word. The innocent pay too high a price in any blood feud. No one else will die as payment for my happiness. Didn't you learn anything in Ireland?"

"I learned that a soul bond means something different to me than it does to you." Jaron stared back at Thorne, his expression inscrutable.

Dismissing the other man with an impatient growl, Thorne turned toward Chantel. "Put on Jaron's shirt and I'll take you to your apartment." He raked his hair with his fingers, his fatigue beginning to show. "We'll contact your father after you've repaired your appearance. If he sees you like this he'll explode."

"She's aware of who she is now," Jaron persisted. "It's only a matter of time before Lorcan senses the change in her."

"She's aware of who you think she is." Thorne sounded as tired as he looked. He shook his head. "It's a wonderful fantasy, but it's a fantasy nonetheless. I know she was born on the day Ishannah died. The irony is not lost on me. I miss her just as badly as you do, Jaron. But this is not the answer to our loneliness."

"Neither is shutting me out."

Thorne said nothing. He waited in stoic silence as she donned Jaron's shirt and Jaron freed her from the collar. Jaron pulled her into his arms and kissed her. His lips moved over hers, warm and firm, his tongue gently stroking.

This isn't over, love, Jaron whispered in her mind. *He will come around. He just needs time.* His hands gave her ass a possessive squeeze as he stepped back. "I can't protect her. They'll be scanning for me. Promise me you won't leave her alone."

"She doesn't need to be protected from her father." Thorne grasped her wrist and pulled her into his arms with a bit more force than necessary.

She hid her smile against his chest, enjoying the mystical familiarity of his scent. She'd never actually touched his naked body or kissed him or made love to him, yet she knew him intimately.

"Fine," Jaron snapped. "I ask one last thing."

"You're in no position to bargain with me."

"If I ever meant anything to you, in this or any of our lifetimes, do this one thing for me."

"You sound like a simpering schoolgirl."

"Mock me all you like. I don't care. Before you contact Lorcan, kiss her, really kiss her and allow yourself to honestly assess how it makes you feel."

"You're out of your fucking mind. She can't be Ishannah."

Jaron looked at Chantel and went on. "Don't let him contact your father until he kisses you." He sounded almost desperate.

Thorne ended the conversation by teleporting them to her stylish apartment on the Upper West Side. She wrapped her arms around his back and buried her face against his chest. She hadn't felt comfortable huddling this close to her uncle and the jump had been far more disorientating.

"You can let go now." There was a note of amusement in his smoky tone.

She didn't really want to move out of his embrace, but he'd already lowered his arms. "Well, that was all very confusing." She took a deep breath and stepped back.

He'd exchanged his black tuxedo for jeans and a knit shirt while she'd been with Jaron, but the casual clothes did nothing to dampen his sophisticated appeal. He

radiated confidence and authority, like a potentate or a... She suddenly pictured him in Persian robes, lounging on silk pillows as the balmy night wind caressed his face.

"You're safe now, *Chantel*."

He stopped just short of mental compulsion, but her name was infused with significance. *You're Chantel, not Ishannah. You no longer need to play that madman's game.* He didn't actually say the words, but his meaning was clear.

"That was my first experience with a shared memory." It wasn't true. Memory sharing was a common practice among organic vampires. But she needed to make a point, so her conscience chalked it up to the greater good. "I'm not sure how they work. Can one person control what the others see and feel?"

"No." His brows drew together over his expressive eyes. "Each person reacts to the images with a mixture of what they felt then and how it makes them feel now."

"I see. Then how was I able to experience something that happened to Ishannah if I wasn't around back then?"

His gaze narrowed and a muscle worked at the corner of his jaw. "I don't know."

"Neither do I." The overhead light had been triggered by their arrival. She moved to the windows on the far side of the room and opened the drapes then rotated the light-dampening blinds. The Manhattan skyline awaited her, welcoming her home, soothing her frayed nerves. "And you need to remember Jaron had nothing to do with the first incident."

"What are you talking about?"

"On the dance floor. Remember? What did you think happened? You took me in your arms and it triggered a vision, or was it a memory?"

"It isn't possible."

She remained near the window, drawing strength from the night. "You keep saying that, but what keeps it from being possible?"

"I'm still alive."

"So is Jaron," she mused.

Thorne growled. It seemed to be his favorite sound. He growled when he was frustrated and when he was intrigued. He growled to appear intimidating and when he was about to come. He could express so much without uttering a word.

"Leave Jaron out of this," he said when she didn't respond to his primal communication.

"I can't. He's part of this. Why have you avoided him all these years? Wouldn't it have been comforting to be with the one person who understood how badly you ached?"

He was beside her in an instant, his hands tangled in her unbound hair. "It was too damn painful to be near him. It made me savage, made me..."

"Why?" It would have been easy to play the traumatized debutante, but the question just slipped out. "You'd lost her before. Why not mourn her together? Why did you push him away this time?"

"I'm the eldest. I'm the warrior. It was my responsibility to protect her, to protect *them*." His gaze narrowed and his nostrils flared as his face hovered over hers. "Why is this suddenly about me?"

"It's about both of you."

"Did you fuck him?"

His flare of jealousy fanned the embers of her desire. She wrapped her fingers around his wrist and dug in her nails, needing his aggression, wanting him wild. "I took him up the ass while we accessed the memory. I've never come so hard in my entire life."

With a thrilling snarl he grasped her by the waist and slid her up the wall. Her shoulder knocked a picture off its hooks and her head grazed the ceiling. He used his elbow to part her thighs and then buried his face against her silk-covered mound. His

deep inhalation sent lust thrumming to her core. He'd know how aroused she'd been, but she and Jaron hadn't actually done more than some heavy petting.

"Little liar," Thorne muttered, and let her body slide back down. He quickly hooked her legs over his arms and cupped her bare ass cheeks. "You should know better than provoking me."

"How could I? We just met."

His fingers tightened and he leaned in, fangs just beginning to peak. "I'm a male vampire. That's all you need to know."

"I need to know a whole lot more than that. Kiss me. Let's see if there's any reaction."

He pressed her against the wall, splaying her legs in the process. His mouth covered hers, brushing back and forth, announcing his arrival. Then his tongue lightly traced her bottom lip, easing deeper and deeper until he stroked over and curled around her tongue. He pushed his taste into her mouth and pulled her taste into his.

She inhaled his scent and learned his textures as the kiss went on and on. His hair felt soft and silky between her fingers, but she could easily imagine his scalp bare as he kissed her with the same demanding fervor.

Guiding her legs to circle his waist, he freed his hands to wander. He slipped them up under her shirt, cupping one breast and then the other. His fingers worked her nipples, pinching and pulling in an evocative combination that sent spirals of sensation deep into her abdomen.

"Thorne, oh gods, how I've missed you," she whispered against his damp lips.

"You kiss like Ishannah and taste like Ishannah, but how..." He pushed back and searched her gaze. "How can this be?"

"I don't know. It's a gift or a second chance. I don't understand it any more than you do. Does it have to make sense?"

He licked his lips and uncertainty unfurled within his eyes. "If this is real, there is more to it than coincidence."

"If this is real?" Her entire body ached to be rejoined with his and he was still at "if"? She was beginning to understand why Jaron was so frustrated.

Thorne let her down and stepped back from the wall, running a quick hand through his hair. "I sense the connection. I won't pretend it's not there, but other things can simulate legitimate bonds."

She gasped, feeling the accusation like a sucker punch to the gut. "You think I'm a spy? What, I'm playing you and Jaron?" She pressed a hand to her chest and shook her head as angry tears blurred her vision. "That's ridiculous. What do I gain by concocting such a story?"

"The bonding ritual, maybe. Only a handful of people can still perform it. Many would pay a fortune for the incantations."

"I don't need money! I'm a Demarko, for gods' sakes." Rubbing her eyes to disperse the bothersome moisture, she tried to think through the emotions ravaging her composure. Anger and hurt, loss and desire combined in a dizzying rush. Just when she adjusted to one blow, fate dealt her another. She finally accepted that she was Ishannah and Thorne refused to believe. It was as if he were afraid to feel anything. "Were you always this suspicious?"

"No. Having your mate murdered *four times* can change your personality in ways you'd rather not consider."

She sighed and fought back her more volatile emotions. Thorne responded best to reason. Like any good hunter, he liked to analyze each situation before moving in for the kill. "Let's look at this coincidence thing a little closer," she suggested, "mainly because I don't believe in coincidences. Is it possible someone drew my soul into Lorcan's unborn child?"

"I've heard rumors of sorcerers with that sort of power, but I've sure as hell never met one."

"That you know of." Her tension eased in tandem to his. Their bond might not be active at the moment, but her soul remembered.

"I guess anything is possible. The only person who would know for sure is your mother and she's unable to tell us."

Her mother had died when she was still a child. "Not necessarily. My mother was old-school aristocracy. She had a lady's maid-companion. Grace knows everything my mother knew and went everywhere my mother went. I know for a fact Grace was present at my birth."

"And Grace is still alive?"

"Very much so. Father pensioned her off shortly after Mother died, but Grace and I have kept in touch. She lives right here in the city."

"Of course she does." Thorne shook his head and glanced out at the lights. "I honestly don't see the appeal."

"That's because you're part hermit. Always have been."

"How would you know?" The corner of his mouth quirked with the hint of a smile.

She didn't bother with a reply. She couldn't explain how she knew, she just knew. Just as she knew Thorne was a true Dom while Jaron's role was fluid. Rome had been the one exception, which was why it remained special in everyone's memory. Jaron tended to come with his eyes wide open, filled with wonder and brimming with love while Thorne closed his eyes and threw back his head, lost in the staggering sensations.

"Chantel."

Dragged away from the pleasant tangent by Thorne's throaty voice, she looked at him and shivered. His gaze smoldered, his fangs longer now, nostrils flared. Could he smell her gathering cream? Of course he could, she could.

"I should have left you collared. You looked amazing wearing nothing but that thong and a black leather collar."

He'd been so angry. She hadn't realized he'd paid attention to her accessories. "Jaron's idea of jewelry, I guess." Her tone downplayed the significance, but her body melted, ripened, prepared itself for his touch.

"I was the first to give you a collar. Do you remember?"

Her heart thudded in her chest. The question implied that she was Ishannah whether he realized it or not. An image slowly came into focus. A supple strip of velvet with a single diamond stud supporting a discreet leash loop.

"Paris," she said with a dreamy smile. "I don't remember the year."

He moved in front of her, his gaze searching hers. "What else do you remember?"

"Bits and pieces. Not much really, but each incident I'm able to remember seems to unlock other images as well."

"Your mother's maid, is she a vampire? Can you contact her tonight?"

She shook her head. "Grace is human. I'm sure she abandoned our schedule long ago. I'll contact her tomorrow."

"Which leaves tonight for strategy." He took both her hands and entwined their fingers. "We must defuse the situation with Lorcan. Regardless of what our investigation uncovers, we cannot allow this to escalate into another blood feud. Too many have died because of our animosity. I will not allow such a thing to happen again."

She nodded, hesitating over her next question. "What happened in Ireland?"

"That's where you were killed."

She'd suspected as much, but she needed the fact solidified in her mind. Rather than asking for painful details, however, she moved on. "How do we prevent a repeat performance?"

"It won't be easy," Thorne admitted. His speech pattern relaxed as his mind returned to the present. "He has to understand that he has no control over the situation,

yet he can't feel threatened by the outcome. It's going to be hard as hell to accomplish both. First and foremost, he has to know that you're safe."

"Uncle Antonio needs a similar call."

"Antonio knows the danger is minimal. I explained who Jaron is and that he wouldn't hurt you."

"Even so, I'd like him to hear it from me."

"Fair enough." He concluded the point with a stiff nod and moved on to the heart of the matter. "The first thing Lorcan will do is order you to the Demarko compound for your own protection of course."

"I'll refuse to go."

Thorne's brow arched. "Will you be able to prevent it if he insists?"

She thought about it honestly and shook her head. "Not without revealing more than we're ready to reveal."

"And once you're in his grasp, it will be impossible for me to protect you."

"You said I don't need protection from my father," she reminded.

"Chantel doesn't, but Ishannah does. So we have to make sure he cannot insist that you leave." He crossed his arms over his chest, looking far too serious. "We'll play the bluff for as long as we can, but Lorcan is no one's fool. He'll sense the difference in you and know we're hiding something important from him."

"So we provide a reasonable explanation for our behavior?"

"Exactly."

"But you're his sworn enemy. There is no way in hell he'll walk out of here and leave me with you."

"He'll have no choice if I've already claimed you."

"If he senses a blood bond when he walks into the room, he'll rip out your throat before you open your mouth."

"No he won't. It would violate our truce and our truce is the only thing that has kept him in power."

"I don't understand."

He took a deep breath, obviously reluctant to elaborate. "The clans were divided, but my supporters were gaining strength. We'd gathered in Ireland to organize an assault that would break Lorcan's hold on the council once and for all."

Pain tore across his features and she understood where the events were leading. She reached out to touch him, but he turned toward the window, staring out into the night. His reflection revealed his torment. Unapproachable. Desolate. She moved in close, offering affection and support without rushing him.

For a long time he said nothing. He just stood there, lost in memory. Then the story poured out, his tone emotionless and quiet. "After I found you, and realized I failed again, I went crazy. I slaughtered every Demarko who crossed my path. I was ruthless and savage in my quest to find Lorcan. I had my hands around his throat, ready to rip off his head, when your mother walked in on us." His voice broke suddenly and his lips trembled as the past clawed its way to the surface.

Unable to witness his pain without responding, Chantel wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her body against his back. She could no longer see his face, but she felt his muscles begin to relax.

"She didn't scream or beg for his life. She just shook her head and told me he wasn't worth it. Nothing could have been more unexpected. This was his mate, the mother of his child. Why was she so indifferent? Then she said two things in my mind that I will never forget. She said, 'Ishannah will return to you. Be patient a little while longer.' And she said, 'Don't let Lorcan destroy you. Let it go for now.' She waited until I regained control then she turned and left the room."

"You thought she meant I'd come back in the next lifecycle?"

"Of course. What else was I supposed to think? That's how it had always happened before."

"You mentioned a truce. How did that come about?"

"When I walked away from Lorcan, it left the feud unresolved. My burning need for vengeance was gone, but everything felt incomplete. So I reluctantly offered Lorcan my seat on the council for a permanent and final end to all hostilities between our clans. It was all I had left to offer Jaron, the only hope I had of keeping him safe. My heart died that day with Ishannah, but I was determined to protect my other mate."

It was so sad. She was sure Jaron would rather have faced danger with Thorne at his side than enjoy security without him. She kept the thought to herself however, knowing Thorne believed he'd acted honorably.

"Your seat gave Lorcan controlling interest in the council?" she asked instead.

Thorne nodded as he heaved a weary sigh. "Controlling the council means everything to Lorcan. He has kept his clan in line without fail. No one has broken the truce from that day to this. Lorcan's addicted to power. I honestly think it means more to him than anything."

"Including me?"

He cupped her chin and tipped her face up until their gazes locked. "We better pray it does, because it's the only hope we have of defusing the situation long enough to figure out what's really going on."

Part of her resisted the idea that her father might not love her enough to fight for her while her awakening soul wanted nothing to do with the man who had reared her. It was confusing and frustrating. "What do we need to do?"

"I have an idea, but it will take a bit of acting on both our parts and a sexual act."

Calming her anxiety with a deep breath, she said, "I'm listening."

"We'll claim we're lovers, that Jaron acted out at the dance because he found out we were going public with our relationship and he was furious."

"That makes sense, I suppose." Her body came alive as she anticipated the answer to her next question. "What sexual act did you have in mind?"

"If we fuck, my scent will be too strong. As you said, Lorcan would likely lose control the second he walked through the door. But if you...swallow my seed and then drink a small amount of my blood, my scent will gently permeate your body."

"Are you sure you don't just want a blowjob?" He finally smiled and affection twisted through her. He was far too serious too much of the time, which made his smiles all the more precious.

"The idea is undeniably appealing, but it's not my primary concern." Wrapping his fingers around the back of her neck, he stroked the underside of her jaw with his thumb. "This cannot be allowed to escalate into war."

"I agree." Without hesitation, she slipped out of Jaron's shirt and knelt before Thorne, naked to the waist. "My mouth is always available to you. I know who I am, and I know I love you."

She unfastened his jeans and pushed up his shirt, not surprised to find that he wore no underwear. Thorne hated clothes. When they were alone, he was seldom dressed. He never wore undergarments. She wrapped her fingers around his shaft, pumping him from tip to stem in two long strokes. Then she closed her lips around the widely flared head and sucked him inside her mouth. He was hot and hard, faintly salty, utterly male.

His hands soon framed her face as he rocked his hips, sliding his cock in and out of her mouth. "So good. So damn good." He let his head fall back on his shoulders as his hips moved faster.

She steadied him and adjusted the angle, letting him move freely. Her tongue swirled and tasted without interrupting the smooth strokes. He grew thicker and harder, straining her lips and bumping the back of her throat. She tilted her head, giving him more room, a deeper cavern in which to slide.

"Finger," he gasped. "I need your finger."

Instinctively understanding what he meant, she raised her arm and he nicked her middle finger with his fang then spread the warm liquid over her skin. Careful not to

bump the blood-coated digit on her undulating partner, she adjusted her position, moving her hands between his legs.

Thorne slowed, clearly anticipating her entry, needing the fullness of her finger in his ass. She parted his cheeks with one hand and found his anus with the other. He matched her inward slide, driving into her mouth as she pushed into his tight passage.

A long, low groan indicated his pleasure along with the rhythmic spasms of his sphincter. She drew back and he followed, hesitating with just the tip of his cock inside her mouth. Fascinated by the phenomenon, she drove in fast and he thrust to the back of her mouth hard enough to make her gag.

"My turn," he whispered, and took over the rhythm, obviously expecting her to follow. He resumed his steady fucking and she matched each thrust with a solid jab. Each time she found an elusive smooth spot deep inside him he shuddered and lurched farther into her mouth.

"Now push deep and don't move."

She obeyed and his hands took complete control of her head. He positioned her carefully, not hurting, but obviously needing her submission. She relaxed, communicating her surrender with her eyes.

Recognizing the touch of her Master, her body came to life. She tingled and moaned, wishing he could be in two places at once. His fingers splayed against the back of her head as she eased a hand between her thighs. Unable to ask permission, with one firm tug on her clit, she joined him in orgasm.

He jerked and twitched against her tongue as his seed slipped down her throat. Her core rippled, her womb clenching, echoing each pulse of his cock. Her fingers slipped between her folds and pushed into her core, sharing and prolonging her pleasure.

She swallowed and swallowed, licking and sucking until every last tremor ceased. His taste was wonderfully familiar. His touch, his taste, his deep, throaty growl, everything about him was comforting. He drew out slowly, obviously loath to leave the

warmth of her mouth. She drew out as well, caressing her way to the front of his body, unable to stop touching him.

He pulled her to her feet and kissed her, unconcerned with his own taste. Feeling restless and feral, she caught her tongue on the point of his fang. The metallic sharpness of blood mated with the salt and she spread it around with a swirl of her tongue. "Now I'll return the favor."

"I already came. I know I should have asked permission, but my mouth was rather busy at the time." She panted against his mouth. "It's really not—"

He cut off her words with his mouth as he gathered her hands behind her back, holding them there with one large fist. *When I want your pussy, you will offer me your pussy. Do you understand?*

Yes, sir. Excitement surged through her, warming her from the inside out. He wanted her, needed her, would deny her no longer. Her Master had returned!

Down. He helped her, guided her to her knees. *Now grab your ankles and lean back.*

The position was awkward at best. Her weight rested on her shoulders and she spread her legs for balance, which was exactly what he wanted. Her feet were tucked up tight against her ass and her pussy was open, waiting.

"Never deny me or argue with me." He knelt between her thighs, his gaze hot and possessive. "You are mine." Bending to her crease, he flicked his tongue across her folds, back and forth, back and forth, arousing and stimulating.

She was his and Jaron's, but now was probably not the time to point out the distinction. Thorne finally parted her sex with his thumbs, exposing her neglected clit, but he withheld the tender caress she so desperately craved. Instead, he lashed the swollen nub, sending a hot spike of sensation into her passage with each ruthless flick.

He grasped her hips, lifting her slightly. She sighed and then groaned. He'd relieved the pressure from her ankles while giving his mouth better access to her sex. His lips closed around her clit and he sucked the tiny nub into her mouth. Pleasure

stabbed into her lower body, exploding with enough force to make her jerk away from his mouth.

"Hold still," he snapped.

"Don't do that."

"I like doing that."

"Then do it softer."

He flashed his fangs with a hiss and carefully licked his lips. "I don't do softer."

His hands tightened on her hips, holding her perfectly still. Then he pierced the flesh on either side of her clit and gently drew blood with each slow pull on the sensitive nub. The vampiric connection bridged the gap between pleasure and pain. It was a test, a challenge, a warning. One her being understood.

Her pussy pulsed with heat and intensity, perfectly in tune with the masterful pull of his lips. He claimed her, demonstrated his strength and his mastery, his ability to protect and cherish her. If she were willing to surrender herself into his keeping, he would show her paradise!

Blood and pleasure, trust and submission, these were the elements of her life. She opened her mind, offering her being as freely as she offered her body. She focused entirely on the sensations he unleashed within her. Safe within his arms.

He pulled her legs out from under her and draped them over his shoulders, cupping her ass in his hands. His fangs carefully withdrew and then he pushed his tongue directly into her cunt.

"I want to fuck you so bad, it's driving me crazy," he said at last, his voice more growl than actual words.

She wiggled a bit, trying to free herself, not really wanting to be free. His hands simply tightened on her ass. He obviously had no intention of letting her go. She was more or less upside down, suspended from his shoulders. The only part of her body touching the floor was her shoulders and he positioned the rest as he pleased.

"If we're going to claim to be lovers, anyway, why aren't you inside me?"

He pounced, bending her legs and rolling her hips up off the carpet. "Hold them back or I'll tie you like this."

She wasn't sure she saw the difference between being tied in this ignoble position or holding herself in it, but she grasped the back of her knees and held herself open.

Kneeling over her again, he pushed two fingers of one hand into her pussy, beginning a slow, deep slide. "So soft and so damn hot. I want to be here."

"And I want you there. Please, fuck me."

"Not tonight."

"Then stop teasing me!"

He pulled the fingers out and slid them back, painting her other opening with the slick secretions from her cunt. "Jaron loves to fuck you here."

"And Jaron loves you to fuck him there." She closed her eyes against the agonizing ache. Only thirty years had passed since she had been with her mates, but it felt much longer. She burned for them, longed for their strength and their intensity. "Why are we still pretending?"

Ignoring her question, he narrowed his gaze and carefully entered her tight rear passage. He dragged his fingers outward slowly then thrust them in fast. She gasped, wiggling helplessly. "Does that feel good? Or does it just make you want more?"

She turned her face away, refusing to give in to his subtle provocation.

"No! Don't hide your pleasure from me. Look into my eyes."

It took her a moment to muster enough courage to meet his gaze. His expression revealed so many emotions. Possessive passion contorted his handsome features. He was tense and cold with consuming purpose. Still, she was troubled by the things she didn't see. Where was the tenderness, the warmth? She was the one struggling to remember.

With a slow, steady rhythm, he finger-fucked her ass. She stared into his lust-glazed eyes and imagined all the lifetimes they'd spent together, all the places they'd loved, all the happiness they'd shared.

Grief rolled across his gaze, loss so stark and desolate it drove the breath from her lungs.

I am here now. You'll never be alone again.

His eyes refocused on her face and he slowly licked his lips, but he didn't respond to her assurance. He wasn't ready to be comforted.

"You've always enjoyed this, but *this*..." He slid two fingers into her pussy, moving them in the opposite direction from the fingers sliding in her ass. "You love it best when we fuck you together, when we filled you so full you could hardly breathe."

She trembled beneath him, allowing him to see how powerfully she was affected by the teasing parody of the act. *I am yours. Now and forever.* "I love it when you're both inside me, when we're together as we were meant to be."

His hands gentled, each stroke caressing her inside and out. *Come for me, Ishannah. Share your pleasure with me.*

The glimmer of tenderness in the midst of his passionate aggression was all she needed to carry her over the edge. Her inner muscles contracted around his fingers, pushing the pleasure up through her body until it burst in her abdomen. Her toes curled and colors danced before her eyes. She released her legs and sprawled on the carpet, boneless and spent.

Thorne withdrew his fingers, sending pleasant aftershocks skittering up her spine. He looked tense and hungry...and aroused. He was the one who had insisted on evening the score. She'd been perfectly content after round one. She wisely kept the comment to herself.

"Pull yourself together," Thorne grumbled. "We still need to contact your father and now we're racing the dawn."

Chapter Seven

Lorcan Demarko stood toe-to-toe with Thorne, and Chantel felt the past few hours melt away. She was no longer the uninhibited woman, abandoning herself to her long-lost mates. She was confused and conflicted, the vampire princess who had never quite understood her father.

"How were you able to free her so easily, if you had no involvement in her kidnapping?" Lorcan's voice cracked with suspicion, overloud in the predawn hush.

"My involvement was inadvertent." Thorne's shoulders were squared, his head held high and he met Lorcan's gaze directly.

Chantel wasn't fooled by their apparent civility. They were two predators circling, assessing, searching for weaknesses.

Lorcan paused for a moment, deliberately turning his back on Thorne. He looked her over in greater detail. They had embraced briefly when he first arrived then his attention had been drawn to Thorne. Lorcan seemed less certain now without his anger to guide him. "You are truly unharmed?"

"Yes." Tension knotted her belly and memories stirred. He had been destroying her for centuries, why should he care about her well-being now?

He doesn't know. Thorne carefully shielded the thought as he pushed it into her mind.

How could Lorcan not know that his daughter was his enemy?

Because she had not known until contact with Thorne triggered her awakening.

"Tell him," she said with a secretive smile. "Tell him what's really going on." Lorcan was mildly empathic. He would sense that they were hiding something, so they would give him a plausible explanation then get him out of here!

Thorne smoothly insinuated himself between her and her father. "As you know, Jaron and I were involved in a ménage until we lost our mate," Thorne began.

"I don't care to hear about your sordid sex life." Lorcan puffed out his chest and glared. "Thank you for assisting with my daughter's rescue. We will be going now." He held out his hand with obvious expectation.

"You're free to leave whenever you like. I was only trying to explain what really happened at the party."

"Chantel," Lorcan tried a more direct approach, "come with me now."

"This is where I live. I was never in any real danger. There's no reason for me to go home with you."

Lorcan took a step toward Chantel then lunged for Thorne. Having expected the attack, Thorne deflected the momentum around his body, sending Lorcan crashing into the wall behind him. Lorcan recovered in an instant and sprang off the wall, hurling through the air in a flying tackle.

Chantel jumped back as the men landed on the floor at her feet. They rolled and grunted, cursing in a string of profanity that flowed from one language to another without pause. Claws slashed and fangs chomped, but the combatants hardly noticed.

"She's my daughter!" Lorcan screamed.

"I didn't know who she was when we met." Thorne momentarily pinned Lorcan to the floor, his forearm across the other man's throat. "I swear, I did not know."

Clever. Lorcan would sense truth in the statement. Thorne hadn't known who she was when he'd met her. He'd thought she was Chantel, not Ishannah.

Lorcan arched, bucking with enough force to dislodge Thorne. They toppled an end table, smashing one of Chantel's favorite lamps. She moved the coffee table out of their way before they could demolish another piece of furniture. She knew better than to try interfering. When tempers ran this high, emotions had to run their course.

The pummeling continued but gradually slowed. Lorcan's fury melted into frustration and finally a tormented cry tore from his throat. He rolled away from his nemesis and struggled to his feet. Blood streaked his face and stained his shirt. His hair stuck out in unkempt clumps.

She rushed into the kitchen and wet cloths for each of them. Thorne looked a little better than Lorcan at first glance, but Thorne had a nasty gash on his throat that seemed reluctant to close. He needed blood.

"How could you fuck her without knowing who she is?" Lorcan ground out the question, his jaw tense, nostrils flaring. "Don't bother denying it. Your scent is all over her."

"The fault is mostly mine." Chantel drew Lorcan's attention away from Thorne. The longer he stayed focused on the other man, the longer he would remain angry. "People treat me differently when they know who I am. So I tend to introduce myself as someone else until I'm sure they're interested in me as a person and not the Demarko empire."

"A wise precaution," he admitted begrudgingly.

"Unfortunately, Kenton had done the same thing the night we met. We had no idea we were tempting fate by being together. We thought we'd just found someone we actually enjoyed spending time with for a change. By the time I felt comfortable enough to tell him who I was it was too late. Daddy, I love him. I feel as if I have always loved him."

Lorcan closed his eyes, fists clenched tightly at his sides. "This is not happening."

"We were going to pretend we met at the party," Thorne interjected. "It gave us an opportunity to be seen together in public that was basically innocent."

"Except she was not supposed to be there!" He opened his eyes and glared at Thorne. "She was forbidden to attend." His head jerked toward Chantel. "How was that arranged? Who took you to that cursed party?" Lorcan held up his hand, vampiric light

flashing in his eyes. "Don't bother. Anything that displeases me this much must be laid at Antonio's feet."

"I felt...compelled to go." The excuse sounded feeble now, but the compulsion had been real. "I knew you wouldn't understand, so I talked Antonio into helping me."

"He knew I'd be furious. Anything that angers me pleases Antonio. He was pleased to oblige you. Besides, he's Thorne's best friend. Isn't he?" His hostile gaze returned to Thorne. "You got your best friend to bring her to the party, but your fuck buddy learned of your plans to go public with—"

"Jaron and I are no longer lovers, but you're on the right track. He didn't harm her, had no intention of harming her. He was only trying to get my attention."

Lorcan was quiet for a long time. He paced. He glared. He kicked at the debris. Then his fury iced over and his features relaxed, the lack of emotion even more disconcerting than the anger.

"You did this intentionally. You waited thirty long years for your revenge and then you seduced the only person who ever loved me. Her mother was a faithless whore. Chantel is my life. I will not let you have her." Each word was precise, clipped and cold.

"My love for Kenton doesn't change what I feel for you," she insisted. "You raised me, protected me, and taught me. You're my father. Nothing can change that."

"Are you sure?" Lorcan snapped. "Your mother hinted, but I refused to listen. I should have killed her while you were still in her womb. If you can love that vile creature, you are no child of mine!"

Chantel turned into Thorne's embrace as his arms closed around her. Lorcan teleported out as abruptly as he'd arrived, his hateful words echoing in the twilight.

"He was just lashing out," Thorne insisted.

"I know." And part of her did, but it didn't lessen the sting.

"It worked." His smile seemed a bit forced. "We sneaked out of this without igniting a war."

Strength bled out of her in the wake of the emotional tumult and her gaze drifted toward the open window. The first rays of dawn had just touched the horizon, making the bottom edge of the cityscape glow.

"We're out of time."

She checked the security system and waited for the timer to trigger solar lockdown. The blinds rotated and the drapes closed, casting the entire apartment into absolute darkness. Her bedroom was off an interior hallway, so there was no chance of accidental exposure while they were trapped in solar trance.

"Hell of a night," Thorne muttered as they climbed into bed.

"You can say that again." He repeated the phrase in a playful whisper as she settled against his side, but it was Lorcan's hurtful words that echoed through her mind.

If you can love that vile creature, you are no child of mine!

* * * * *

Thorne took in the tiny apartment with one assessing sweep of his gaze then focused on the human who might well hold the secrets of Chantel's birth. She was stout with a pleasant round face and large dark eyes. Despite her advanced years, her gaze was clear and bright, and filled with a wry sort of knowing.

"Grace, did my mother have a lover?" Chantel came right to the point.

"I haven't heard from you in months and now you want to dredge up long-forgotten secrets?" The old woman looked at him for a moment before turning back toward her former employer. "What inspired this trip down memory lane?"

"I have reason to believe there might have been someone else in my mother's life. Lorcan has been acting very strangely toward me and I—"

"Lorcan?" Snow-white brows drew together over her up-tilted nose. "I've never heard you refer to your father by name. What's going on, Ms. Demarko?"

"Was there anything unusual about my birth?"

Her pale lips parted and her weathered hand pressed against her chest. She shook her head. "I can't tell you."

Chantel knelt on the floor beside the old woman's easy chair and gathered her hands between hers. "Grace, I really need to know what happened."

"I can't tell you."

"Mother is dead. There is no reason—"

"I am *unable* to tell you."

Thorne smiled, liking the crafty old woman more with each passing moment. "Who made you unable to speak the words?" She simply shook her head. "Are you able to picture this person in your mind?"

She guided Chantel's hand to her brow and closed her eyes. Chantel jerked back from the human as she skimmed the image from her mind. "Are you sure?"

"Oh yes," Grace stressed. "I've been robbed of all my fascinating stories, but the answers to all of your questions lie with that one."

They left the modest brownstone before Chantel revealed what she had learned. "It was Faelon. He bound her memory so I wasn't able to determine his exact involvement. But he was definitely my mother's lover. That much was clear."

"We have crossed paths with Faelon in several lifecycles. I've always wondered if he was like Lorcan, a past-seer."

"He was the one who gave you to us in Rome."

"I remember." They walked for a moment in silence, reflecting on the past and contemplating the future. The past thirty years loomed like a specter while hope shimmered just out of reach. To grab hold of the hope, he would have to turn loose of the past and he wasn't sure he knew how.

She slipped her arm though his and pressed against his side. Without their bond, she wasn't able to sense his emotions, but she was still incredibly perceptive.

"Before the Crimson Serenade, the most exciting thing that happened to me was sneaking off to a film premiere or indulging in a shopping spree. Now I'm investigating my heritage and averting clan wars. Do you have this effect on all your lovers?"

He stopped walking and turned her to face him, resting his hands on her shoulders. "You're not my lover. You're my mate. And we need to reunite. We can't confront someone as powerful as Faelon without Jaron at our side."

"You'll get no argument from me." Her smile was a bit hesitant, but at least she smiled.

Thorne would have preferred to awaken her slowly, to allow her time to adjust to all of the changes being thrust into her life. Beneath the socialite fragility her soul was strong. He had no doubt she could endure whatever fate tossed her way. He just wished she didn't have to for a change.

He opened his arms and she stepped into his embrace. The teleportation pulse took them to Jaron's rustic house in the Lake District of upstate New York. Jaron had always claimed that he wanted to keep an eye on Lorcan, to make sure he upheld the truce. Now Thorne couldn't help wondering if Jaron had sensed Ishannah's spirit all along.

Dressed in faded jeans and a concert t-shirt, Jaron greeted them with a sexy smile. "You two are a sight for sore eyes. I didn't expect you to work out your differences so quickly." He rushed forward to embrace them both.

Thorne paused, allowing himself to savor the warmth of his mates pressed against him as their mouths mixed and mingled in a dizzying series of kisses. "Neither did we, but chemistry doesn't lie."

Chantel pushed them apart with stubborn determination. "We have to talk first."

"Why?" Jaron reached for her hand, but she snatched it back and stepped out of reach.

"She's right." Thorne raked his hair back from his face with both hands, banking his desire through sheer force of will. "We should figure a few things out before we

unleash these feelings. Once I put my hands on you, there won't be much time for conversation."

Jaron's heart thudded in his chest, making his chuckle sound breathy and sinful. "Promises, promises." They were here, in his house, in his life. Both his mates had returned and he would fight like hell to keep them together for the rest of eternity. He could hardly contain the joy surging through every molecule of his being. It had been so long since they had all been together like this!

Thorne clasped his shoulder, drawing his full attention. "Forgive me." Each word throbbed with pain and regret though Thorne's expression remained cautious.

"There's nothing to forgive." His attention was squarely focused on the future. He had no interest in reopening old wounds.

"I hurt you."

"You thought you were protecting me. I understood that. I didn't agree with it, but I always understood it."

"It was the wrong decision."

"Did you just admit to being wrong?" He clasped a hand to his chest and laughed. "This has got to be a first."

Chantel hooked her arm through his and squeezed. "Let him apologize. He obviously needs to clear the air."

"Apology accepted. You're forgiven." He leaned over and gave Thorne a quick kiss. "And for penance I order you to never shut me out of your life again. You can start by telling me what happened last night after you left me."

"I kissed her of course." Thorne finally smiled. "What do you think? I tried to remain unaffected, but even I am not that stubborn."

"Thank the gods. What did you do about Lorcan? He doesn't still think I have her, does he?"

"He thinks I seduced her to get back at him." Thorne's sharp gaze belied his casual tone. He was now fully invested in the conflict. Good. They would all need to be. "According to him, it was the only way I could take revenge without violating the truce. He thinks you kidnapped her in a jealous rage when you found out we were lovers."

Jaron mulled over the alternate explanation for a moment. "It's not that far from the truth. I can see why he bought it. I guess the question is, why did he let you live?"

"Because running the council means more to him than I do," Chantel said softly.

"Despite his embittered cheap shot about your mother."

Jaron didn't miss the subtle challenge in Thorne's tone. "What embittered cheap shot?"

"It's not worth repeating." She waved away the issue and slipped her arm around his waist. "We're here and that's all that matters."

"I thought you wanted to talk." Jaron swept her up in his arms and started for the bedroom.

"We think Faelon might be her father," Thorne announced in the same casual tone.

Jaron rocked to a stop and looked over his shoulder. "Is Faelon better or worse than Lorcan?"

"Faelon's never murdered me," Chantel said.

"No, he just watched from the sidelines, repeatedly, while Lorcan did," Thorne pointed out, anger accenting the lines of his elegant features.

"You're jumping to conclusions," Chantel insisted. "We don't know Faelon is my father. We only know he was my mother's lover."

"And that he put a compulsion in Grace's mind that won't allow her to speak about the circumstances surrounding your birth."

Jaron set Chantel down and turned toward Thorne. This was the first he'd heard about Faelon having anything to do with Chantel's birth. "Who is Grace?"

"She was my mother's personal servant," Chantel explained. "She told us Faelon has the answers to our questions."

Jaron accepted the information with a nod. "This isn't the first time we've wondered if Faelon is a past-seer. Is he more likely to be Lorcan's rival or his ally? That's what we need to find out." They continued toward the bedroom at a more leisurely pace, their passion having been cooled somewhat by their speculation.

"If he was fucking Lorcan's wife, my money is on rival. Most people don't impregnate their ally's mate." Thorne pushed open the door to the bedroom and turned on the overhead light.

Understanding his partner's motivation, Jaron smiled. Thorne needed to be able to judge every expression and nuance of their responses as he guided their next few sessions. Once the soul bond was reformed they would sense each other's emotions and share each other's pleasures. For now, they were dependent upon conventional senses.

They would introduce themselves to the shape of Ishannah's new body while they reacquainted themselves with her intoxicating soul. They would caress and tease her until she was wild and eager for their rejoining. His body stirred, hot and hard, ready for the night ahead.

Knowing Thorne now controlled when and how he came, Jaron accepted the pressure and defused the sensation throughout his abdomen. He dragged his wondering mind back to the subject at hand, Faelon. He closed the door behind them and pulled off his t-shirt. "Approaching Faelon can be tricky. Unlike most of the elders, he doesn't have a specific lair. He moves whenever the mood strikes him and keeps his inner circle extremely small."

"If the circumstances surrounding Chantel's birth were important enough for him to cover up, then I can almost guarantee he'll come looking for her as soon as he realizes she's grown suspicious."

Her jaw dropped and she slapped Thorne on the arm. "Do we want Faelon looking for me? The few times Father invited Faelon to the estate, great care was taken to make sure I was never left alone with him."

"We won't leave you alone with him either," Jaron assured.

"No, you're going to use me as bait!"

"It's not like that," Thorne insisted. "I'm going to make some calls. Let club owners know we'll pay for information regarding your birth. That will send ripples out through the paranormal underground and Faelon will contact us."

"Sweetheart, if he'd meant you harm —"

"I'd be dead?"

Jaron wasn't sure what he was going to say. She had a valid point. "Basically. If he'd meant to do you harm, why wait thirty years? It would have made more sense to silence the scandal before it had the opportunity to embarrass him."

"What if the issue isn't scandal?"

"The only one who can unravel his motives for us is Faelon," Thorne said.

"Which means we need to draw him out of hiding."

She still didn't sound pleased, but Jaron had all sorts of ideas on how they could lighten her mood. "Yes we do, but not tonight."

Chapter Eight

"But what if—" Thorne pressed two fingers against Chantel's lips, halting her objection. He stood in front of her, tall and indomitable, ageless, timeless. The quintessential vampire.

"Not tonight." Jaron stood beside Thorne, shirtless and shoeless, his blond hair a charming mess of tousled curls.

They were wonderfully different. At times almost opposites, yet in this they were unified. Faelon would find them soon enough. Tonight was for rediscovery.

Thorne sat on the foot of the bed and tugged off his boots. Jaron knelt and helped her with her sandals. Unsure what the night would bring, she'd chosen a summer dress with a long flowing skirt. Jaron set her sandals aside and ran his hands up the backs of her legs, sending tingles skittering off in all directions.

"Did you remember anything more when Thorne kissed you?" His chin pressed lightly into the valley between her breasts and desire smoldered in his baby blue eyes.

"Bits and pieces." She brushed his hair back from his face then traced the line of his jaw, enjoying the gentle rasp of his whiskers. "You need to shave."

"Sorry. Try it now."

His skin was smooth where it had been prickly moments before. "Nice trick. I need to learn how to do that with my legs."

"It takes some practice, but most organic vampires can manage simple shifts." He gave her butt a playful pinch then stood and unfastened the top of his jeans. She felt each metallic click vibrate through her body as she watched his hand descend along the fly. Would his cock spring free, or was he wearing something under the jeans?

His gaze caressed her face as he pushed the jeans low on his lean hips. "I forgot how young you were when you lost your mother."

No underwear, but he turned his back as he finished undressing. This, however, gave her a spectacular view of his sculpted ass. "I suspect there are a lot of things I never learned because I lost my mother." The front of her dress suddenly loosened and she gasped. She turned her head and found Thorne standing behind her — naked.

"We have the rest of our lives to supplement your education, but tonight is for us. No ghosts and no regrets." He lowered the zipper slowly then pulled the narrow straps down, encouraging her to lift her arms. She stepped out of the dress and Jaron draped it over the back of a chair while Thorne took off her panties. The dress had a built-in bra, so she was soon naked, just like her men. "Do you have any misgivings about reactivating our bond?"

She'd never been with two men in this lifecycle. She wasn't a stranger to anal play, but the occasional toy was as far as she'd ever allowed it to go. She knew they wouldn't hurt her. Still, the thought was intimidating. "I know who I am and I know we belong together."

"But you're frightened?"

"A little." She didn't want to admit it, even to herself, but honesty was the foundation of trust and a soul bond had no hope of surviving without trust.

"Then we'll feed each other before we take you. It will give us greater control so we can be gentle with you."

Thorne's willingness to even attempt gentleness thrilled her. She suspected she wouldn't allow him to keep his word, but the effort pleased her. "Do I get to watch?" A wicked smile parted her lips and liquid heat curled through her belly.

He returned her smile and motioned toward the bed. "Make yourself comfortable. You can touch yourself if you need to, but you're not allowed to come. And you may not hide yourself from my sight for the rest of the night."

His imperious tone hinted at a deeper meaning and understanding unfolded within her mind. She was not just to be naked, but open, available to his eyes or his fingers or his cock. She must keep her legs parted and her pussy moist—as if that were ever a problem. All she had to do was think about them and her body melted, prepared to pleasure them.

“Yes, sir.” She crawled onto the bed, tingling heat spreading across her skin. Her body hungered for him, hungered for *them*, craved the intensity that had been missing in all her sexual encounters in this lifecycle. Of course sex had felt flat and routine. How could it not? She and her mates had been practicing for millennia, learning exactly what satisfied each other best. How to drive the pleasure higher and make each sensation last the longest.

Stacking pillows against the headboard, she propped herself up and bent her knees. She brazenly parted her legs, waiting for her men to notice her posture, her pose.

Jaron saw her first. He stood in front of Thorne, one hand splayed against his chest the other quickly descending toward Thorne’s cock. Jaron’s eyes widened then narrowed and he looked at Thorne, waiting for their Master to react.

Cued by Jaron’s sudden stillness, Thorne turned his head toward Chantel. Possessive desire burst within in gaze and he let out a low growl. “Do you remember this position or were you taught by another Master?”

“I am yours and Jaron’s, now and always.” She lowered her lashes and winked at him. “Don’t make me wait too long.”

Jaron laughed. “She’s a flawless sub, but she never was a very good slave.”

“She’s our perfect mate. I wouldn’t change a thing.”

“Nor would I.” Jaron dragged his gaze away from Chantel with obvious effort. “I thought you were hungry.”

Thorne’s ravenous gaze never left Chantel as he reached for Jaron. He pulled Jaron in front of him then angled Jaron’s head, so he could still see Chantel. Thorne’s mouth settled over Jaron’s in a deep, demanding kiss. She could see their lips move and their

tongues slide as their mouths repositioned. A muffled gasp escaped Jaron and then blood swirled along with their tongues.

The unmistakable sharpness of blood reached Chantel, stirring her hunger and compounding her desire. She fidgeted against the sheets, wiggling her bottom and rubbing her thighs. She could almost taste the warm thickness coating their tongues and feel the energy surging through their bodies. Thorne held Jaron tighter, the kiss momentarily forgotten as he drank. Their bodies pressed, arched, ground against each other in a frantic attempt to draw closer.

Jaron broke away with sudden cry and Thorne snarled, tossing his head. "Easy, love." Jaron held up a hand, keeping Thorne back. "I'll gladly calm you, but I can spare no more blood."

Thorne was glorious in transformation, primal male, utterly savage. His torso rippled with corded muscles and his features jutted at primitive angles. Sharp cheekbones and elongated fangs made him appear more demon than man.

She shivered, excited yet anxious. Was this really the same person who had promised gentleness a short time ago?

Her soul provided the answer along with a pang of shame. How could she still doubt him after all she'd sensed and all she'd seen? He'd taken on Lorcan for her, knowing full well how her father would react. If Thorne so much as smelled fear, he would immediately control these urges and honor his vow. He loved her that much.

Obviously as fascinated by Thorne's true self as she, Jaron caressed his way down his mate's tense body. Jaron moved behind him, for a moment rubbing his shoulders and working his arms. "Once the bond is reactivated, I'll be able to heal you at a cellular level. Is there anything that can't wait until then?"

"Suck me," Thorne growled. "I need to come."

Jaron grinned, apparently pleased by the command. "Yes, sir." Pausing long enough to wink at her, Jaron positioned Thorne so she could see exactly what he was doing. Then he knelt on the floor at the foot of the bed and massaged Thorne's legs.

Thorne shifted his feet apart, obviously restless and ready for the pleasure he'd requested. When Jaron continued to procrastinate, Thorne took matters into his own hands. He tangled his fingers in the back of Jaron's hair and pulled his head back.

The corners of Jaron's mouth curved up suspiciously as he pretended to resist and his tongue curved around the tip of Thorne's cock. "Please, sir. I wasn't—"

Thorne thrust forward, filling Jaron's mouth with cock and ending his feigned struggle. Jaron closed his lips around Thorne's shaft and sucked in long, deep pulls. All pretence fell away and raw emotion took over.

Jaron grasped Thorne's hips, steadying himself as Thorne's rhythm slowed yet deepened. Chantel watched their faces, the tension, the struggle, the need. Yet in the midst of the hunger, Thorne's savagery calmed. His features smoothed and his fingers loosened, moving to frame Jaron's face rather than tangle in his hair.

As if sensing her thoughts, Thorne's gaze snapped to hers and vampiric light flashed for an instant before smoldering in the depths of his endless black gaze. He slowly drew out of Jaron's mouth and nodded toward her. "I don't want to come without her. We've waited too long for this night."

"Are you sure you can control—"

"I'm sure I can't," Thorne admitted, desire thrumming through every molecule of his being. "Not yet. That's why you're going to eat her sweet pussy while I fuck you. You're going to make her come and come again while I work off the edge inside you."

A slow, appreciative smile parted Chantel's lips as she scooted down along the mattress. She was so damn beautiful it made his chest ache just looking at her. "Are you sure you don't want me to finish what Jaron started before we move on to the next round?"

Lust blasted his senses, making his insides tense. He groaned and closed his eyes, the joy bittersweet. They were together—finally, but the separation was so recent, he couldn't quite set aside the pain.

"Weren't you listening?" He scowled at her with an anger he didn't feel. "I don't want to come without you."

"Then don't come. I just want to feel you slide against my tongue. In fact," she bit her bottom lip and smiled up at him through her lashes. "Can I play with both of you for a few minutes before we get down to business?"

Jaron groaned so loud Thorne chuckled. "Since you asked so nicely."

Standing at Thorne's side, Jaron wrapped his arm around his waist. Chantel slipped off the bed and knelt on the floor. Her fingers teased their way up the outside of their thighs until she reached their hips then she angled them toward each other, bringing their cocks closer to her waiting mouth.

"Oh wow," she whispered as she closed one fist around each shaft.

Thorne inhaled slowly, refusing to give in to his overwhelming need to take control. She needed to play, to explore. And he could offer her this small freedom. So much had been expected of her in such a short time. Let her learn their textures and their tastes at her own pace.

Her fingers were warm sliding against his engorged flesh. The scent of her arousal was driving him crazy. Jaron reached over and pinched his nipple, the unexpected spike of pain instantly clearing his head.

"Thank you." He shook his head, unnerved by how hard he was battling to remain in control. Her velvety lips closed around his cock head and Thorne trembled, clenching his fists until he felt his nails dig into his palms.

We already awakened her in this lifecycle. We shouldn't have had to do it twice. I think that's why it is tearing you apart. I'll do whatever I can to help. Use me. Don't frighten her.

Thorne acknowledged the offer with a shaky nod, unable to send his thought with her mouth sliding up and down on his cock.

"Now you're just being cruel." Jaron pulled her off with a throaty chuckle. "You know he won't come until you do. Taste me so we can get busy."

Watching her suck Jaron was no less evocative than having her silken mouth moving on his own shaft, but Thorne endured it in silence. Her pale body knelt before Jaron, the pose inherently graceful. Her breasts were firm and round, not large, yet soft and feminine. The description could be applied to her ass as well, firm, round, soft and feminine.

Jaron eased out of her mouth and moved her to the bed. Before Jaron could arrange himself between her thighs, Thorne tugged him out of the way. "I want her taste on my tongue while I fuck you."

"Fair enough."

Thorne pushed her over onto her back and draped her legs over his arms so he could cup her breasts while he licked her pussy. He wanted to touch all of her all at once. He wanted to fill every opening and press her down into the bed until she was imprinted with the shape of his body.

Containing the primal urges with infinite control, he traced her slit with the tip of his tongue. Slick, hot, salty, sharp *Ishannah*. Her appearance might change, but her taste remained the same.

He worked her nipples into tight little peaks as his tongue circled her clit. She sighed and wiggled, rocking her sex against his mouth. So hot. So very soft. He pushed his tongue into her passage and slowly rotated, gathering her essence at the source, savoring the tingling intensity coursing through his bloodstream.

"So good," he whispered against her damp folds as his tongue returned to her clit.

"May I come?" She arched and trembled, obviously on the brink.

"Come. Feed me, love. Feed me now." He closed his lips around the ultrasensitive nub and carefully tugged. Her back bowed and she cried out, her cunt pulsing against his lips.

Needing her cream to augment Jaron's blood, Thorne opened his mouth over her passage and sucked greedily. She cried out again and again as his swirling tongue and

persistent mouth prolonged her orgasm. He stabbed into her with his tongue, wrapping his arms around her hips. She was his! She was —

She is ours. Now finish up and let her go.

Jaron's voice penetrated the roaring in Thorne's ears. Why did he feel so...odd? He eased his hold and gentled his touch, licking his way to her folds for several slow, calming strokes.

"Are you all right?" Chantel asked. "If you need blood..."

"We need to exchange blood during the bonding." Thorne disentangled their bodies and stood. "I won't risk weakening you."

Jaron watched Thorne closely. Something was wrong. He wasn't just overly anxious to reactivate the bond. Vampiric light kept flaring within his gaze and transformation rolled beneath the surface of his features as if his appearance were not quite stable.

He hated to frighten Chantel, but they could no longer afford to be subtle. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I don't know. I feel... I need..."

He needed the soul bond and Jaron wasn't going to risk Thorne harming Chantel in the process. "Get on the floor," he told her.

"Why?"

"Don't argue. Do it now."

She did.

As she passed him, he hurried her along and positioned her the way he needed her for what was about to happen. "Don't be afraid. He won't hurt you."

Her eyes widened at the words, but Jaron couldn't think of anything else he could have said that wouldn't have been a lie. She lay on her back and he knelt between her thighs, immediately pushing into her creamy passage.

"Close your eyes, love. I don't want you to be afraid."

"I'm not afraid." He didn't smell fear, but she wisely closed her eyes.

Jaron pulled her hands above her head and entwined their fingers. Her body felt so tiny beneath him, so warm and soft.

He pulled his hips back, savoring the snug clasp of her inner walls. When only the tip of his cock remained inside her pliant body, he looked over his shoulder and froze. Transformation had claimed Thorne, but a transformation unlike anything Jaron had seen in this lifecycle. Thorne's features had reverted to their primeval sharpness. His eyes glowed like molten gold and his fangs hung down over his bottom lip. Not since their second lifecycle had he seen this Thorne, not since the first time they'd had to reclaim Ishannah.

"Thorne? Are you still with us?"

Thorne opened his mouth and snarled, flashing his fangs in an unmistakable challenge.

Jaron immediately lowered his head and spread his legs, making his body as small as possible. *Are you in there?*

Barely. I need... Must have...

Thorne ripped open his wrist and pressed it against Jaron's tailbone. Blood trailed into the seam between his cheeks. Jaron held perfectly still. Only after the link was formed would he have any hope of pulling Thorne back from this madness. Jaron had to shield Chantel from Thorne's savagery in the meantime.

Fingernails bit into his neck and Thorne slammed him down against Chantel's shoulder. "Don't open your eyes."

His ass cheeks were wrenched apart and the blunt head of Thorne's cock moved into position.

Jaron relaxed, breathing deeply, refusing to give in to whatever negative force had taken hold of Thorne. He waited for the brutal thrust, the careless claiming. Instead, a

ragged groan escaped Thorne and he rubbed his cock head against Jaron's anus, pushing slowly inward as Jaron's body opened for him.

Thorne drove deeper and deeper until he filled Jaron completely. Then he urged him forward, burying Jaron's cock inside Chantel. She raised her legs high against his sides, somehow managing to curve her feet against Thorne's ribs.

"Better?" Jaron glanced over his shoulder, but Thorne's face was pressed against his back.

"Together. We have to do this together." His voice sounded harsh, guttural. Were his features still locked in that odd transition?

Knowing how close Thorne was to losing control, Jaron balanced his weight on his knees and guided Thorne's hands to his hips. "Use me. Move me. Set the pace."

Jaron frequently took on a more submissive role, but this was different. Never before had he been completely passive. Thorne pulled in and out, sending scalding pleasure spiraling through his overstimulated body. At the apex of each stroke, he clasped Jaron's hips and pushed him into Chantel's pussy.

Floating in passive tranquility, Jaron received pleasure unlike any he had experienced before. Safe yet powerful, he opened himself, mind and body, inviting the soul bond to flow through him.

Thorne surged into his mind, all scalding heat and overwhelming intensity. Jaron greeted him without fear, accepting his aggression without judgment or rancor.

Chantel's entry was more cautious, more careful. No, this was Ishannah, rich, complex. A soul could not develop this depth in only one lifecycle. She opened herself to them freely, sharing her energy as well as her pleasure.

Jaron felt his cock sliding in her cunt, felt how her muscles tightened around him. He felt her legs shifting against their sides as Thorne moved a little faster. She grew restless and her fingers flexed, still entwined with his.

Welcome back, Ishannah. Jaron sent affection along with the thought. *We missed you more than you can possibly imagine.*

Thorne's nails bit into Jaron's hips and his cock slammed into his ass. Possessive desire blasted across their soul bond. Finally. He countered the mercurial shift in Thorne's mood with a wave of warm acceptance.

Slow down, love. We're not going anywhere. He reached back and squeezed Thorne's thigh. *You won't lose us again.*

With strong, steady thrusts, Thorne drove the pleasure higher and higher. Chantel stared into his eyes. Even an occasional glimpse of Thorne's savage features didn't seem to bother her. She shared her feelings generously, her mind open and welcoming. Each rotation of their bodies and each surge of pleasure wove the link more completely.

Jaron felt his balls tingle and lift, not sure he could hold off the climax.

"Let it come," Thorne cried, pushing his full length deep into Jaron's body.

Happy to oblige, Jaron surrendered and released his seed. His cock bucked inside Chantel as blinding pleasure rippled across their link. Chantel shuddered. Her arms and legs tightened around her men as her body built then returned the sensations. Jaron gasped as the pleasure passed through him again only to detonate inside Thorne. Jaron felt the hot splash of Thorne's release as blissful sensations echoed through his being.

Thorne carefully separated his body from Jaron's then helped Jaron to his feet. The odd transformation had reversed. Thorne now appeared as he usually did in this lifecycle, but he was shielding his thoughts, which made Jaron uneasy. Jaron scrubbed his eyes with one hand as he reached out the other toward Chantel. Thorne reached her first.

Sweeping Chantel up in his arms, Thorne took a step toward the bed then stopped. Jaron approached him slowly, hand outstretched, but Thorne bared his fangs, snarling in primitive challenge.

"Thorne, calm down. No one is going to take her from you. I know she's—"

Before Jaron could finish the reassurance, Thorne buried his fangs in Chantel's throat.

Chapter Nine

Fangs thrust into Chantel's throat, unleashing both pleasure and pain. She arched and twisted, but Thorne's embrace was unbreakable. Jaron shouted Thorne's name then clawed at his arms, frantically trying to pull his hands away from her body.

After a moment of shock and fear, she pushed into Thorne's mind, flowing beyond his ravening hunger to the tenderness still present in his soul. *What do you need from me? What do you need from us?*

Jaron...gave. You must sub-mit.

She relaxed, arching her neck to give him better access to her throat.

I am yours.

"Are you okay with this?" Jaron sounded dubious.

"Can you muster a cleansing pulse? I'm not sure where he plans to take me."

Jaron chuckled. "How very human of you."

Despite his mild teasing, she felt the warm tingle of a cleansing pulse undulate over her body.

"Now we're all squeaky clean," Jaron assured.

Thorne sat on the edge of the bed and brought her down on his cock. She straddled his hips and his fangs were still buried in her flesh. The strong suction of his mouth lessened as he clasped her hips and slid her up and down.

He refused to release her, yet he could barely move with his mouth fastened on the side of her neck.

Mine!

Yours. She tightened her inner muscles and inundated his mind with devotion. His hands moved up and down her back as she took over the rhythm as best she could. If he'd just withdraw his fangs, she'd be able to move a whole hell of a lot better.

Mine! Thorne thrust up into her as he pushed her down onto him and she cried out. It hadn't really hurt, just filled her so full she'd been startled by the sensation.

Jaron came up behind her and toppled them over onto the bed. "Enough of your selfish tantrum, Thorne. She's not *your* mate. She belongs to both of us. And we belong to her. Even in our first lifecycle you understood that much."

The challenge seemed to cut through whatever was muddling his thinking. He slowly withdrew his fangs and gazed into her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"We'll get through this," she assured, adjusting her position to center herself over him more squarely.

"We'll get through this *together*," Jaron corrected. He crawled onto the bed with them and pressed himself against her back. "You only thought you were going to get out of this. It's still our bonding night."

Excitement unfurled within her, sharpened with the faintest edge of fear.

"I won't hurt you. I would never hurt you."

"I believe you." And she did.

She leaned forward, pressing her ear against Thorne's chest. He stroked her hair and caressed her arm, the motions especially tender given his current struggle for control.

Jaron took his time. Jaron always took his time. Starting at her knees, he caressed his way up her legs and onto her hips before exploring the sleek curves of her hips. He massaged her resilient cheeks, holding them apart so the air teased her sex as well as the puckered opening that was his eventual destination.

"If you don't get busy, I'm going to kill you." Thorne's threat mirrored her thoughts. The longer Jaron took, the harder she was finding it to relax.

Something warm trailed along her crack and she accessed Jaron's mind to see what it was. Blood. He'd anointed her body with blood for the joining. They weren't human. Their blood cured diseases, it didn't carry diseases.

Creating shiny patterns in the blood, Jaron trailed his fingertips along her skin. He followed the crease between her cheeks to the tightly puckered opening. A drop of blood had caught there, awaiting his fingertip. He smoothed the crimson liquid over her rippled flesh then carefully pushed inside.

Chantel breathed with the penetration. She'd taken toys before, just never a real cock. There were a lot of things she'd done during her rebellion that would likely surprise her mates. But all that was in the past now that she was reunited with her mates.

Jaron slid his finger in and out. "Is that okay?"

"Can't you sense how it feels?" She opened her mind and showed him the pleasure building around his finger.

"All right." He pulled out slowly, nearly triggering her orgasm. "Let's try the real thing."

Thorne twitched inside her pussy, obviously agreeable with the idea.

Needing to see as well as feel, Chantel closed her eyes and flowed across the link and back into Jaron's mind. It was exhilarating to have the freedom of so many perspectives. Her body looked small and pale bowed before him.

He guided his blood-coated cock to her rear opening and his simmering desire began to boil. Holding her open with his hands, he circled her once then pushed inside. Her anus stretched, opening wide to welcome him home. The flared head sank past her tight muscular collar and he paused, smearing more blood on his shaft before pushing deeper into her passage.

Thorne pulled her face up, drawing her consciousness back into herself. Without the visual spectacle to distract her, she was left with the unbelievable fullness of having them both inside her. She groaned and shivered then focused on Thorne.

"Ours," he said with a lazy smile. His features had smoothed and all traces of feral transformation were gone.

She returned his smile then kissed his mouth, no longer concerned that he'd bite her.

Jaron moved slowly in her ass. The intoxicating slide dragging his cock along the entire length of Thorne's engorged flesh. Thorne framed her face with his hands as his tongue moved in her mouth. He didn't try to move, seemed content with the stimulation Jaron was providing, at least for the time being.

"We must exchange blood to solidify the bond," Thorne reminded them when he finally managed to drag his mouth away from hers.

Jaron grumbled but shifted to one knee, which allowed him to maneuver more freely. "Wrists. I think it's the only way to get everyone what they need."

By way of agreement, Thorne offered his wrist to Chantel. She bit down hard, enjoying the contrast of penetrating as she was so undeniably penetrated. His blood flowed across her tongue and his being surged into her mind, intoxicating and addictive.

It took all her willpower to pull her fangs free, but Jaron's wrist was waiting. Jaron took her wrist to his mouth, preparing to bite her as she bit him. Following suit, Thorne took her other arm and brought her wrist to his mouth. A moment passed as they made sure each person was ready then all three bit down at exactly the same time.

With Thorne's blood still pooled in her mouth, Chantel mixed it with Jaron's as the men drank from her wrists. Their pulses synchronized. The suction of their mouths was precise and deliberate.

Reality slowed.

The room around them blurred and then fell away, leaving them suspended in a misty sea of nothingness.

Chantel raised her head, confused and disoriented.

Jaron withdrew his fangs but remained inside her body. "Did you summon the metaphysical plane?"

Thorne released her wrist and looked around. "Not intentionally."

I brought you here. Would you please get dressed before I roll back the mist?

"Faelon," they said in union.

They disentangled their bodies and Thorne conjured bathrobes, not knowing how long their host would give them to make themselves presentable. No sooner had they donned the robes than the mist dissipated, revealing an elaborate library.

Chantel glanced at the book-lined shelves and the elaborate crown molding. Was this a memory or a glimpse of the elusive Faelon's home? The man in question sat at the only table, thumbing through a leather-bound tome. "Glad you could join me. Have a seat." He motioned to the chairs across from him.

"It wasn't as if we had a choice." Thorne tighten his belt, refusing to move.

Chantel searched her mind, trying to remember anything she could about Faelon. He was an acquaintance of her father's, whom her father didn't trust. Beyond that – and the memory he'd suppressed in Grace – she knew little about him.

"Why did you bring us here?" Jaron was the first to sit.

"I presumed Chantel would have some questions after her conversation with Grace. If I was wrong, pardon the imposition." He scooted his chair back from the table.

"You weren't wrong." Chantel sat down beside Jaron.

Rather than sitting, Thorne stood behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders. "Are you a past-seer?"

"I'm not acquainted with that term." The amusement in Faelon's gaze said otherwise. He looked at Chantel and smiled. "Is he always so rude?"

"Not always. I think he enjoys being difficult." Thorne's hands tensed on her shoulders, so she slipped affection into his mind and his hands relaxed.

"If he's so difficult, why do you love him?"

"I enjoy a challenge, and his soul speaks to mine — to ours." She indicated Jaron.

"Now that's a concept I understand all too well." He angled his body so he could cross his legs. "Did you know I'm soul bonded with a human? Try explaining that to most organic vampires. Lorcan was so enraged he had me kicked off the council." Faelon snorted. "As if I ever cared about being on the council in the first place."

"Why did you bring us here?" Thorne prompted.

"Ah yes, I suppose you'd like to finish the ritual. I did interrupt the, um, crescendo. That was strategic by the way. I wanted to make sure you three were good and distracted." He leaned back a bit and exhaled. "You have no concept of the power available to you as a bonded triad. Once you've figured out how to control it... Anyway, the short answer is this, Ishannah is my daughter. Even though she was not born with my gift, it is her blood and our family's ritual that originally allowed you to form a temporal soul bond."

"Then you are —"

"What I am takes much longer to explain," Faelon cut Thorne off. "As you know from past lifecycles, vampire is only one of a variety of organisms with which our souls are compatible. And past-seer only scratches the surface of what we are able to do."

Jaron looked at Thorne for a moment, speculation clouding his gaze. "Are you able to return to previous lifecycles?"

Faelon uncrossed his legs and scooted to the edge of his chair. "Thorne just about found out tonight and you three are far from ready for such an excursion. I've been monitoring the situation, waiting for the best time to contact Chantel. Needless to say, I sensed a sudden surge in the temporal field and stopped by to investigate."

"We were talking about your abilities. What does this have to do with my bizarre transformation?" Thorne sounded downright dangerous, so Chantel reached back and pinched his ass. Faelon was sharing information freely. This was no time for one of Thorne's moods.

"I saw you," Jaron reminded. "Your transformation wasn't just bizarre. You had reverted to an earlier you."

Chantel folded her hands on the tabletop, trying not to sound as impatient as she felt. "None of this makes sense to me. If you're my father, why would your abilities affect Thorne?"

Faelon leaned back again, drumming his fingers against his knee. His blue gaze searched hers for a moment before he replied, "The conversation will be quite lengthy if we get into all this tonight."

"Just start at the beginning," Thorne suggested. "Who the fuck are you?"

"I already told you who I am."

"If you're Ishannah's father, why doesn't she remember you?" Thorne challenged.

"Because I don't have his gift," Chantel reminded. "It was only after I formed a temporal bond with you two that I started remembering my past lifecycles." Faelon inclined his head, confirming her statements. "Why didn't you tell me who you were before now? I know that I've lived before and you've been part of other lifecycles."

"As you said, your memory is muddled right now, but Ishannah clearly remembers her parents. That is to say, she remembers the parents who created her physical host during the lifecycle in which she was first soul bonded." He paused for a sad little smile. "Your memories don't go back to the beginning of your existence."

"Even if you had told me, I wouldn't have believed you."

"Exactly. I've always been nearby, watching, doing my best to protect you. But Lorcan's obsession is nothing if not consistent."

A sad understanding spread through her as the pieces started fitting together. "Lorcan is related to us. Isn't he? He wasn't just married to my mother. What's the connection?"

"Lorcan is my brother," Faelon admitted, his voice tense and low. "His inability to produce offspring has slowly driven him mad."

"What about Chad?" Chantel objected. "Even if you're my father, Lorcan..."

Faelon just shook his head. "Antonio knows the identity of Chad's father. It was never my concern. All I know is it wasn't Lorcan. It's physically impossible."

"Chad will be so relieved." Chantel couldn't believe she'd said it out loud, but Chad had always had a love-hate relationship with Lorcan.

"So, Lorcan's obsession with us has had less to do with our soul bond and more to do with the fact you're her father?" Jaron mused.

"Yes and no. Lorcan is a power-hungry narcissist." Faelon shifted in his seat, clearly uncomfortable with the subject. "He must control everything that comes within his orbit. Ishannah was a walking reminder of his biggest failing. He couldn't stand the fact that I had produced a healthy offspring who had successfully soul bonded with not one but two mates. It didn't matter how many clans he controlled or how many empires he built. He was incapable of producing an heir. It was a fundamental flaw, according to the expectations of our kind, and it infuriated him."

Was it less disturbing that Lorcan had murdered his niece rather than his daughter? Chantel couldn't decide. She just felt empty and numb. "What happened thirty years ago? Why was I reborn before this lifecycle ended?"

Faelon came around to her side of the table as they neared more recent events. Kneeling beside her chair, he took her hand between his. She didn't resist the touch, but it was unexpected and made her wonder why he was being so cautious.

"Lorcan was determined to destroy your soul bond. He figured if he kept disrupting the cycle, sooner or later you would be reborn into a life path unreachable to them."

"He was right," Thorne said softly. "When she died this last time, I felt the bond rupture. It was the most painful thing I've ever endured."

Faelon nodded, his gaze alight with compassion. "I felt it too. Not like you felt it, nothing like that. But I knew Lorcan had finally accomplished what he'd set out to do.

So I..." He released her hand and stood, suddenly finding his fingernails utterly fascinating.

"You what?" Chantel reached out and reestablished the touch. His gaze locked with hers and she managed a tentative smile. Her heart fluttered and curiosity cut through her numbing stupor. Whatever he'd done, no matter how outrageous, he'd done out of love for her. "What did you do?"

"I flowed back through time and seduced Lorcan's mate."

"You what?" Thorne finally sat down.

"If you can manipulate time, why didn't you just prevent Lorcan from killing Ishannah in the first place?" Jaron asked.

"Or better yet, why didn't you kill Lorcan and put an end to all of this?" Thorne snapped.

"I've wanted nothing more!" He pressed his hand to his chest as conviction burned in his eyes. "We are immortal beings. Even if I ended my brother's lifecycle he would simply be reborn. As for Ishannah, I've spent countless lifecycles trying to save her, trying to rearrange events so she is spared. It doesn't work. If something is meant to happen, it happens. Subtle alterations sometimes merge with the temporal flow. Blatant changes are simply not possible."

"I'm still confused." Thorne rubbed the bridge of his nose. "If blatant changes are impossible, how did Ishannah end up in Chantel's body?"

Faelon leaned his hip against the table, reluctantly releasing Chantel's hand. "I timed my seduction carefully so Chantel would be born on the day Ishannah died. Then I guided Ishannah's soul into her sister's body."

"How the hell did you do that?" Thorne raked a hand through his hair, agitated and suspicious.

"The ritual I used wasn't all that different from the one you two used with the human sacrifice. You used a newly formed soul bond to summon Ishannah into a

human host long enough for the bond to solidify. I created a bond between Ishannah and her sister and used it to guide her into the body she currently occupies."

"I...have...two souls?"

"Just until the end of this lifecycle." Faelon waved away her shock as if the revelation were nothing out of the ordinary.

She looked at Jaron and then Thorne, but they appeared as dumbfounded as she was. Turning her attention inward, she scanned her mind, searching for a duality, fracture or... "I don't sense two separate personalities."

"That was intentional. Your beings are tightly woven together. Think of them as personality traits within the same psyche."

"Do you realize how insane this sounds?" Thorne shook his head as he reached over and squeezed her knee.

"Does it really matter how I did it?" Faelon shrugged off his disbelief. "Ishannah is with you again, as she was meant to be. That's all that matters."

"So, what was happening with Thorne?" Jaron prompted. "Are we related to you too?"

"No, but you three have been soul bonded for a very long time. You've been ingesting her blood for thousands of years. It's only natural that you two are beginning to absorb some of her abilities. Apparently, Thorne here has an aptitude for temporal flowing."

"But why that particular transformation?" Thorne thought back over his muddled thoughts and sensations during the bonding. "It wasn't coincidental. I'm sure of that."

"What were you thinking about right before you transformed?" Faelon asked.

"I was thinking about Chantel, wanting her, needing to protect her from Lorcan."

"You were being extremely possessive," Chantel reminded.

"That's to be expected from a vampire of that era," Faelon commented. "But what made Thorne access that particular lifecycle?" Faelon's eyes suddenly widened and his mouth gaped. "I can't believe I didn't think of this before."

"Think of what?" Chantel, Thorne and Jaron chorused.

"The summoning ritual. That has to be what Thorne's instincts were trying to tell him. The ritual is the same only reversed."

"What ritual."

"The only way to permanently end the existence for someone like us is to cast their soul into the abyss. Very few have the power it takes to facilitate the ritual. Even I am not capable of such a feat. But you three are a bonded triad, one of the most magical forces in all the known universes. You could..."

"Cast my father's soul into the abyss for all eternity?" Chantel's mouth went dry and her throat tightened, but she forced the question out all the same.

"He's not your father," Thorne reminded, but compassion warmed his gaze.

Faelon averted his eyes. "You could talk to Antonio. Maybe he has a less violent solution."

"Even if a miracle happened and Antonio convinced the council to move against Lorcan," Chantel's tone was sad and resigned. "It would only be a temporary solution. What about the next lifecycle and the next? I would eventually like to have children with my mates and I can't even consider the possibility as long as Lorcan is still on this plane of existence."

Chapter Ten

Chantel stood on her small balcony overlooking Central Park. The last three weeks had been the happiest she could remember, but she couldn't help feeling as if her life were on hold. She hadn't seen Lorcan, hadn't even tried to speak with him. And he hadn't made any attempt to contact her.

"What are you thinking about?" Jaron joined her on the balcony, lightly covering her hand with his.

He could flow into her mind and find out for himself, but she appreciated the fact that he didn't. Shielding her thoughts grew tiresome. It was more comfortable for everyone if no one entered until they were invited.

"Lorcan." She rewarded his patience with honesty. "Has someone warned him away from me?"

"Do you want to talk to him?" He sounded cautious, as if he were trying hard not to sway her answer despite a strong opinion on the subject.

"I don't know." She sighed and looked out into the night, letting the city lights soothe her. "I feel like I need to, but I have no idea what I'd say. He's the only father I've ever known. I'm looking forward to getting to know Faelon, but Lorcan is the only parent I remember."

"He didn't know you were Ishannah until your awakening. Whatever Lorcan felt for you was real. He thought you were the daughter he —"

"He knew he was incapable of producing children. He had to know I wasn't his."

"And he loved you anyway."

"This is so hard. I don't know what to feel."

Jaron stepped in front of her and grasped the railing on either side of her hips. "Those are two different functions. You *know* facts. Knowing is logical, practical. Feelings, on the other hand," he smiled. "Emotions are seldom logical. Sometimes they're not even welcome, but that doesn't keep us from feeling them. Lorcan was good to you in this lifecycle. He loved and nurtured you."

"After he killed Ishannah," Thorne reminded from the doorway.

"Well, there is that," Jaron relented with a sigh. He turned to face Thorne, moving his hand from the railing to the small of her back.

"Sorry, sweetheart, Lorcan's not going anywhere near you," Thorne said. "Now that Ishannah is awake, it's too dangerous."

"What did Antonio have to say?" She knew they'd spent the evening at Club Carousel, a nightclub rapidly growing in popularity with the paranormal elite.

"The council won't officially sanction action against Lorcan, but they've assured us there will be no repercussions against either of us if Lorcan makes the first move."

"If Lorcan makes the first move, why would there be repercussions?" Jaron moved his hand to her waist and pulled her closer to his side.

"Because we're going to goad him into it."

"How?" Chantel wasn't sure she wanted to know. Regardless of what they had planned, the end result was Lorcan's death and she was still struggling with that outcome. He had to be stopped. She understood that. If they didn't stop him, he was sure to try again and again. Still, her mind was filled with childhood memories in which he'd played a pivotal role.

"You and Chad are going to challenge his paternity. Demand a DNA profile or whatever it takes to prove he couldn't possibly be your father."

Shred his dignity in front of the people who mean the most to him. She felt sick inside. "That's cruel."

Jaron turned her to face him, his hands warm and gentle upon her shoulders. "You can't think like Chantel right now. We need Ishannah."

She could mourn Lorcan at her leisure once the danger was past. The battle was drawing near. "I know what must be done."

"If the DNA thing isn't enough to set him off, Antonio will challenge his right to lead the council. We'll keep chipping away at him until he snaps."

"As angry as he is already, it shouldn't take much." Jaron wrapped his arm around her shoulders, refusing to leave her alone with her pain. He pushed to the edge of her mind, offering comfort without imposing. She met him there, overlapping enough to feel his strength. "Better?"

"For now."

"Antonio is going to start shadowing him tomorrow," Thorne explained. "We need to be ready when he goes off."

They decided Jaron's house in the Lake District was a better location for the showdown than Chantel's apartment, so the small party relocated late in the afternoon. Chad stopped by and they worked up a petition for the council, requesting confirmation of Lorcan Demarko's paternity.

Chantel reread the simple document one last time. All council communications went straight to Lorcan's PDA. This shouldn't take long. She took a deep breath and hit send on Jaron's computer. Her stomach tensed and her mouth went dry. For better or worse, they'd just thrown down the gauntlet. There was no turning back now.

She turned off the computer and pushed back from the desk in the corner of the living room. Jaron and Thorne had moved to the sofa near the entertainment center and Chad had chosen the adjacent chair. She joined her mates on the sofa, feeling restless and guilty.

The initial awkwardness was beginning to wear off. Chad loved her dearly and knowing she was mated with not one but two organic vampires was still sinking in.

Focusing on the external challenge seemed to help him adjust to the drastic, though pleasant, changes in their personal lives.

"Did Antonio tell you who my father is?" Chad asked Thorne.

Chad had taken the news that he was a bastard with casual aplomb, seeming far more concerned about Chantel's obvious anxiety than whether or not Lorcan was his father. Chad had been emancipated from Lorcan, both physically and emotionally, for the better part of his adult life. He was financially secure in his own right and he had recently found his mate, so the issue really wouldn't have a serious impact on his life.

"The name didn't mean anything to me," Thorne said. "You'll have to ask him."

"I will."

"What do we do now? I can't just sit here." She rubbed her temples, willing back the pressure building behind her eyes. "I hate this uncertainty. I just want it to be over."

Jaron took her hand and led her into the kitchen. Without explanation, he took out a glass from the cupboard and set it on the counter. "I couldn't even find one of these in your kitchen, love. You really should work a little harder at keeping up appearances." He smiled.

"I appear to be a busy socialite who can't be bothered to cook. What's suspicious about that?"

"Point taken." After pausing to fill the glass half full of filtered water from the refrigerator door, he opened a foil envelope and plopped a small tablet into the water and swirled it around. The liquid turned cloudy and began to bubble.

"My stomach isn't upset. I have a headache."

"I know." He wiggled his eyebrows and held out the glass. "Drink up."

"Why?"

"Because I told you to and I would never hurt you."

The effervescence tickled her nose, but the flavor was mild and minty. No sooner had she swallowed the cool liquid than the pounding in her temples lessened. “No way.” A few seconds later the discomfort was completely gone. “What was in that?”

He smiled, clearly pleased by the praise. “It’s a combination of plants I can’t pronounce. It doesn’t work that fast for humans, but preliminary tests have been really encouraging.”

She set the glass in the sink as a warm blush crawled across her cheeks. “We’ve been so focused on our pasts together. I didn’t think to ask anything about this lifecycle. I know Thorne is clan leader, but I don’t even know how you make your living.”

“Herbal remedies.” He gestured toward the glass. “We had a slow start, but the company has been gaining momentum in recent years. We make natural alternatives to chemical-based pharmaceuticals.”

“Well, I’m impressed.”

“Thank you.” He kissed her hand, his gaze warm and caressing.

They meandered back to the living room, but Chantel was too anxious to sit. “I wish we could just get this over with.”

The room vibrated as something, or someone, slammed into the newly erected shields. “Sounds like he heard you.” Thorne smiled, clearly anticipating the opportunity to end the conflict once and for all, and maybe work out some of his frustration in the process.

The barrier only slowed Lorcan temporarily, but it had served as a warning. He flashed into view in front of Chantel, a copy of the petition clasped in his fist. “What is the meaning of this?”

The pain in his gaze tore at her heart, but she refused to give in. She was Ishannah. This man had murdered her repeatedly, tearing her from the arms of her mates without hesitation or regret. “You know what it is and why we submitted it. You didn’t father either Chad or me. It’s physically impossible.”

Chad took a step toward them and Lorcan sent him crashing into the wall without moving a muscle. "Stay down, boy. I don't want to hurt you, but I will." His anguished gaze never left Chantel's face. "What did you need that I didn't provide you? How could you betray me like this? I loved you as if you were my own."

She took a step toward him and then another, tears gathering behind her lashes. "You loved Chantel, I'll grant you that. But I am also Ishannah."

"No." The word was mournful and slow. He raised his hand toward her face then closed his fist before his fingers made contact with her skin. "You died. I felt the bond break. I know you died."

Thorne had heard enough. He insinuated himself between Chantel and Lorcan. "I felt it too, you worthless bastard. I felt as if my heart had been ripped from my chest while it was still beating. I died and died and kept right on dying. For thirty years, I died!" He stalked toward Lorcan, but Lorcan held his ground and they were soon nose to nose. "Then a miracle happened. I took your daughter in my arms and found Ishannah smiling back at me."

"No!" Lorcan snarled, slashing out at Thorne.

Thorne caught his wrist and twisted viciously as he brought his fist up against Lorcan's jaw. Lorcan's head snapped back with the force of the blow and blood spurted from his lip, splattering Thorne's face. Lorcan threw a punch, but Thorne easily deflected the blow.

Jaron lunged from one side as Thorne attacked from the other. Snarls filled the air. Thorne went for his throat while Jaron knocked him senseless with rapid-fire punches. Lorcan's arms flailed and his legs staggered. They didn't hesitate, didn't slow.

Thorne ripped at his throat with savage focus. Jaron held him in place, locking his arms behind his back as Thorne devastated his flesh.

Lorcan's hold on Chad slipped and he scrambled up from the floor.

Get her out of here until we're ready for the ritual, Thorne commanded. *She doesn't need to see this*. Chantel thought of Lorcan as her father and he would not have this memory imprinted on her mind. Thorne bit down hard and locked his jaw, immobilizing his prey until Chad closed the bedroom door behind them.

With a fury escalated over thirty years, Thorne thrust his hand up under Lorcan's ribs and grasped his beating heart. He crushed the muscle, slowing the steady rhythm to a pathetic, jittery crawl.

Blood seeped from Lorcan's throat and deep gashes all over his body. "Faelon said if he dies, the ritual won't work. He'll simply be reborn."

Jaron released his hold on Lorcan and he crumpled to the carpeting at his feet. "I don't want her to see him like this."

They placed his barely conscious body on his back and arranged his arms and legs at natural angles. "We can cover up his wounds, but there's no hiding all this blood."

"Your concern is sweet, but a little unnecessary. I'm a vampire. I won't faint at the sight of blood."

Thorne looked up and found Chantel standing in the doorway to the bedroom. Jaron quickly covered Lorcan with a throw blanket off the couch as she crossed the room.

"I'd rather just get this over with."

"Fair enough." Thorne held out his blood-smeared hand.

They stood over him, arms outstretched, fingers interlaced and repeated the ancient words Faelon had taught them. "*Cusa ry falondu, etor b'ran estaan!*"

They spoke the command in unison then each person recited the words alone. Finally they said it together, repeating the phrases again and again until the air around them vibrated with the sound.

Their fingers tightened, drawing strength from each other, allowing their link to sizzle and glow. They focused only on each other, allowing the ancient incantation to

direct the wayward soul, to force it out of the dying body and through the portal they'd created.

They could feel the abyss at their backs, drawing, sucking, endless. Fear and dread spiked through the link and Thorne flowed toward Chantel, surrounding her with affection, shielding her with his love. Jaron was there beside him, just as bright, just as devoted. Never again would she be endangered by this corrupted soul. They had to see this through.

Lorcan's soul struggled against the compulsion. It clung to its shredded body with tragic determination, knowing the fate waiting beyond their link.

Surround her as completely as you can, he told Jaron as he flowed toward Lorcan. This had gone on long enough. Using pulses of energy like a sword, Thorne hacked away every fiber connecting Lorcan to his corporeal body.

Shrieking and twisting, Lorcan's soul flew through the conduit created by their joining and plummeted into the abyss. *Now quickly close the link.*

They pinched off the opening and released each other's hands.

Chantel shuddered, so Jaron pulled her into his arms.

"The body needs to be incinerated," Thorne reminded. "I'm not taking any chances."

Blood saturated the carpeting and soaked their clothes, but none of it mattered. Chantel was safe now. No, Ishannah was safe. They were free to live and love as they were meant to live.

May I enter? Faelon asked from somewhere beyond the house.

Are you sure you want to? It's not a pretty sight.

He materialized near the sliding glass door leading to the deck. He glanced toward the covered body and stiffly nodded his head. "This has needed to be done for a long time. Even so, I hope you understand if I don't thank you."

"Of course." Thorne crossed his arms over his chest, ignoring his blood-soaked jeans.

"What a mess." Faeron sighed. "Take her someplace nice. I'll summon a cleaner. Then your lives can begin again."

* * * * *

"What do you want to do when we return to the city?" Chantel asked with a lazy smile. She lay on her stomach, chin propped on her folded arms. One of her mates lay on either side of her and they were ensconced in Thorne's massive bed.

"Who said we're retuning to the city?" Thorne raised his brows in challenge, but the mischief in his gaze ruined the effect. "Maybe I want to keep you locked away here at Lone Tree Estate. I like it here."

"We'll spend lots of time here, of course. I know you'll go crazy without peace and quiet, but I'll go crazy without some entertainment and excitement in my life."

Jaron snorted. "Haven't you had enough excitement for a while? It's not like transportation is a problem. We can see a show in New York and still be back here before the sun rises. You two just like to argue."

"Maybe just a little," Chantel admitted.

Thorne swept her beneath him and nibbled his way down to her collarbone, tickling her mercilessly in the process. She giggled and squirmed and wiggled, loving the strong band of his hands around her wrists and his chest pressing against her breasts. It was almost like being... Her gaze drifted to the panel in the ceiling at the foot of the bed. Damn the thing. It was so distracting!

Jaron noticed the direction of her gaze and kissed her lightly on lips. "What are you looking at?"

"I don't know. That's what's driving me crazy." She pointed to the mysterious panel. "Is that what I think it is?"

"What do you think it is?"

“Are restraints concealed inside the panel?”

The men exchanged excited looks and desire rolled across their link.

Thorne crawled off the side of the bed and retrieved a remote from the drawer in the nightstand. He activated the panel and triggered the pulley housed inside the compartment. Wide leather cuffs connected to cables descended with a barely discernable whir.

“Wow,” she whispered, feeling downright wicked, “fancy.”

Jaron rolled off the bed and helped her to the floor. Swaying gently, the cuffs promised security and a peacefulness few understood. Jaron watched her closely, his gaze bright with passion and something more, something wild. He needed this, needed her to want this. He took her hand and raised it to his mouth, kissing her palm.

“Do you want to be restrained, or do you want to restrain one of us?”

Thorne laughed. “Don’t sound so hopeful.”

“The first time I saw a woman with two men, she was in restraints.” She motioned toward the cuffs. “Hanging like that. I’ve never been able to get the image out of my mind.”

“That answers your question.” Thorne took one hand and Jaron took the other. They raised her arms and closed the cuffs around her wrists. Despite the high-tech rig, the cuffs were simple, lacing rather than buckling. The faint scent of leather, the metallic creak, it was all wonderfully familiar.

She was free from distractions, from insecurities, from any instinctive resistance. Her body belonged to them. They would take her, guide her, master her, pleasure her as she had never been pleased before. At least in this lifetime. She smiled, more than ready for this final step.

Jaron took her face between his hands and kissed her. His mouth was warm and gentle, his tongue teasing the seam of her lips.

Thorne pressed against her, cupping her breasts with both hands as he rubbed his erection against the small of her back.

She returned Jaron's kiss, touching her tongue to his, encouraging him to venture deeper. *You are amazing, florellino. So passionate, so brave. Relax and let us pleasure you.*

With her hands bound, there wasn't a whole lot more she could do. She opened her mind, sharing her pleasure, revealing the wonder unfurling within her. Every touch, every kiss showed her how special they were and how lucky she was to have found them.

We are lucky to have found each other, Thorne corrected. *We are just as grateful as you are.*

Their hands glided over her skin, stroking and caressing, soothing then stimulating. She arched and swayed, frustrated. Pressing closer to one took her away from the other.

Jaron kissed his way down her neck and Thorne held her breasts for him as Jaron suckled. The combination was heady and the firm pull of his mouth launched sensations deep into her abdomen. Liquid heat spread through her, washing her core in creamy welcome. She needed to press against a hard thigh, needed to grind until she came.

Leaving Jaron alone to suckle her breasts, Thorne moved his hands lower. Yes! She needed his fingers moving inside her, needed the skilful brush of his thumb. He squeezed her ass cheeks then ran his hands down the back of her legs.

"No," she gasped out the word, and moved her legs farther apart. "Touch me, please. Touch me."

Thorne eased his hand between her thighs, lightly skimming over her folds. "Like this?"

"More. In me." She didn't care if she begged. Her mates knew how strongly she craved them.

He parted her folds and circled her gate then withdrew his hand. "I don't think she's ready."

"I'm ready," she cried. "I am so ready."

"Well, I'm not." He moved in front of her and dragged Jaron away from her breasts. "Help make me ready."

Jaron knelt and took Thorne in his mouth, eager to obey. Thorne pumped into Jaron's mouth while his gaze bore into Chantel's. She watched the graphic slide of his thick cock in and out of Jaron's mouth. So hard, so damn big, and all for her—if Jaron ever decided to share.

"Does it excite you, watching him suck me?"

"You know it does."

"Why?"

"He loves you as much as I do. It's only right that he crave your cock."

Thorne pulled out of Jaron's mouth and helped him to his feet. "You crave my cock?"

"I crave everything about you. I crave your smiles and your growls. I crave your kisses and your tenderness."

Thorne's movements blurred as he knelt and lifted her legs, draping them over his shoulders. He buried his face between her legs and breathed in her scent. Jaron moved behind her, steadying and supporting her. She canted her hips, pressing her pussy against Thorne's hungry mouth.

He licked and sucked on her folds, thrusting his tongue into her passage over and over. She rode his face with brazen pleasure, desperate for release. Pressure built within her, driven higher by Thorne's persistent tongue and clever lips.

With a careful nip, he triggered a hard, fast climax. The spasms buffeted her body but faded far too soon. It didn't matter, Thorne wasn't finished with her. The frantic

demand of his mouth slowed, becoming drugged caresses. She arched into each stroke, savoring the heat and the sensual slide of his mouth against her pussy.

“Your turn.” Thorne held her up while Jaron took his place.

Jaron anchored her against his mouth with his hands on her ass, allowing him to tongue-fuck her deeply. She moaned, clutching the cables above her restraints. They showered sensations on her then dragged them from her with greedy insistency.

Thorne turned her head and sealed his mouth over her, coating her tongue with her own essence. Jaron sensed the surge in her excitement and shifted her so he could see what was going on. His tongue slid along her slit and into her core. Thorne mirrored the rhythm with his tongue. On and on their tongues warred as if they were trying to meet in the middle.

Pleasure gathered again, the coiling urgency that preceded climax.

Don't let her come. Not this time. She needs to wait for us.

Jaron immediately stopped and Chantel cried out into Thorne's mouth. “Greedy.” He nipped her bottom lip.

“Ruthless jerk,” she returned, and he laughed.

“Well, I'm your ruthless jerk, so deal with it.”

Jaron passed her legs to Thorne as he licked her cream off his lips. “Gods, you taste good.”

“I taste better when I come,” she grumbled.

“Which is why I let you come the first time.” Thorne wrapped her legs loosely around his waist then reached between her thighs. “Now stop being difficult.” He guided his cock to her entrance and pushed inside.

She closed her eyes against the pleasure, amazed that her body could take his entire length. And Jaron's too. She tightened her inner muscles, pleased by Thorne's soft groan. Jaron moved into position and carefully worked his cock into her snug back passage.

Suspended yet impaled. Thorne moved her legs away from his body so she would feel the fullness more acutely.

“Oh,” she gasped then shuddered.

“Go on, come.”

Her body happily obeyed, climaxing in strong, steady waves. She let her head drop back, resting on Jaron’s shoulder as they began to move. Thorne kept her legs apart, which amplified each thrust and the blissful slide.

Thorne’s hands cradled her ass and Jaron held her waist. She was supported by them, surrounded and full, so wonderfully full. She tightened her inner muscles and they increased their pace, catapulting her higher than she’d ever gone before.

Lost in the wonder of utter surrender, Chantel was momentarily startled by Thorne’s scalding presence touching her mind. She gasped then opened for him, accepting him into her mind as freely as he moved within her body.

Jaron flowed into her and through her, caressing her with his pleasure as he showered affection on both his mates.

They made love with their bodies, their minds and their souls, reinforcing their temporal bond with each tingle and thrust.

Pleasure burst within them, radiating out from Chantel and sweeping through her men. They pressed her between them, clutching each other as they spilled deep inside her. Never again would they be parted. The bond was unbreakable.

Ishannah was home.

About the Author

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

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

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

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