



BLOOD ECLIPSE

BOOK 2

RAPTURE

A.J. LLEWELLYN AND D.J. MANLY

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Blood Eclipse Rapture
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RAPTURE
BLOOD ECLIPSE TWO

By

AJ LLEWELLYN AND DJ
MANLY

DEDICATION

*AJ dedicates this book to Herve and to all his
readers, with love and affection.*

*D.J would like to dedicate this to all the
vampire lovers out there.*

CHAPTER ONE

Rory's body was bathed in moonlight, completely exposed to Carden's hungry gaze. He was trembling all over, moving ever closer to where Carden lay on the bed. "What is this?" he breathed. "Is it magic? Did you lure me here with some kind of a spell?"

"No, no, Rory," Carden said softly, rising off the bed. He pulled Rory into his arms and held him for a moment, trying to reassure him, take him out of that place where he hung suspended halfway between terror and an uncontrollable, aching need.

Carden recognized clearly those emotions. He could smell them. Those emotions had radiated from so many mortals he'd encountered in his existence that it made his head spin to think of it. It especially pained him coming from Rory, wounded him deep inside to know that he had the power to cause such turmoil in his heart.

There was nothing he could do to totally quell it. Nothing he could say. Rory had a deep mistrust

of vampires to begin with, and his sudden desire for him was making Rory feel torn.

It was probably not the smartest of moves to be holding Rory in his arms like this, both of them completely naked. Rory's need was made more conspicuous now with his erection pressing enticingly against Carden's thigh. The feeling of skin on skin was distracting. He had to keep his senses honed for any sound or movement, vampire or human. They couldn't do this here. In fact, they couldn't do this at all.

"I don't care if I die here," Rory was saying, his hands reaching up to hold his face, his eyes searching, his gaze blazing into his, "If you've somehow bewitched me, so be it."

Carden froze, looked around. Something. There was something or someone, and it was mortal because he could hear the heart beating, the blood coursing through their veins. It was someone other than Rory, two hearts beating in his ears.

Rory moved his hand down Carden's chest, placed his lips there for a second and then the hand traveled further to a place Cardin couldn't let it go. "No," he said, clutching Rory's hand and pulling it to his lips. He kissed it and heard Rory's moan of protest deep in his own soul.

"Why?" Rory insisted. "What have you done to me? I can't move my body."

Carden was holding Rory's hand in such a way that it kept him frozen to the spot. He had no choice. Rory's touch was weakening him and he knew they weren't alone. To tell Rory would alert the intruder. *Show yourself.*

"What are you doing? Why can't I move? I want to touch you. You just can't do what you did to me and then leave me like this. Why did you kiss me at all if this isn't what you wanted?" Rory's voice was angry now.

He'd have to lie to him. It was the only way. "It's not real," Carden said. "I put you under my spell. I was lonely. I release you." His words rang false even to his own ears in that darkened room. "Go now." He dropped his hand and turned away.

He could hear Rory's thoughts in his head. They were jumbled and confused. *This is torment. Am I attracted to death? My cock aches. Carden... Carden...your beauty holds me here...I can't leave you. Give me what I want and I'll go. If it's a spell then, take it off, take this mad desire away. You haven't released me.*

Carden looked at him from over his shoulder. "Human life is precious. You should take more care with it. You don't want to get too close to me, I'm dangerous."

"Then do as you said you would and release me from this spell you say you have me under. Or

maybe you enjoy this kind of thing, the great and mighty vampire torturing us poor, unworthy mortal conquests?"

"You think I'm having a good laugh at your expense?"

Rory picked up his pants and held them in front of him. "What would you have me believe? I come here thinking that something in the way you kissed me told me you wanted me and you send me away like I'm some serf? Go now! Do you want money, is that it? Do I have to pay like everyone else?" *God, I'm so horny and pathetic and he's standing there without anything on, torturing me. I'm insane, what am I doing here with a vampire?*

Carden reached for his robe. He'd never been modest and sometimes he was unaware of the effect his nudity had on mortals. He put on the robe and tied it. Whoever it was who was nearby, hadn't gone anywhere. He could still sense them. If he thought it safe to let Rory go, he would have sought the mortal out, but he couldn't risk it. He wouldn't play with Rory's life.

"Are you even listening to me?"

Carden walked over and closed his bedroom door, turning the lock. He wasn't sure that would keep it out, but he knew now for sure he couldn't let Rory leave here until he knew the threat had passed.

"What are you doing?" Rory demanded anxiously.

Carden came and stood in front of him, looking down at his face. He put his hands on Rory's shoulders. "I'm sorry, Rory, but I can't let you leave here."

"What? First you tell me to leave, now you..." Rory backed away from him.

"Oh, Rory, don't, don't fear me, please."

"What's happening?" Rory asked him, looking around the room, watching as Carden walked over and closed the balcony doors. "What are you afraid of? Is it Blane?"

"No," Carden said, "It isn't Blane." He went to touch him, but Rory moved out of his reach.

"What is this, Carden? Talk to me."

"I'm not going to drink your blood, Rory," he snapped. He sat down on the edge of the bed. "You're safe with me."

"Why did you lure me here?"

"I didn't lure you anywhere." He sighed. "And it looks like if there was a spell, it's worn off now."

"Why would you cast a spell on me in the first place?" Rory glanced at the door.

"Maybe I like pretty boys who don't understand me."

"Are you trying to be cute?"

"I don't know. Am I?" He stiffened suddenly, stood. "And don't think of making a run for it, I'm ten times faster than you."

"Carden, what is going —"

He put up a hand suddenly, placing a finger to his lips. He moved closer to the door.

Rory fell quiet, his eyes narrowing.

After a few minutes, Carden seemed to relax. He walked over and opened the door again. "It's gone," he said without emotion. "You can go now." He opened the robe and let it slip to the floor.

Rory was looking at him. "Have you ever used your body to torture a man to death before, Carden, or am I your first victim?"

"Rory, I told you, I've taken off the spell." He quickly picked up the robe and put it back on. "I'm sorry."

Rory shook his head, dropped the pants he was holding, and moved in his direction. "There was never any spell. You lied to me and I don't know why. And if you'd wanted to kill me, I'd already be dead. What are you afraid of?"

"It's supposed to work the other way around, isn't it?" he asked.

Rory moved closer again.

Carden backed up with each step Rory took. Now, he was standing with his back against the wall.

"Imagine that." Rory smiled. "The vampire afraid of me."

Carden didn't say anything. He let his head lull to one side, watching Rory silently.

* * * *

Rory didn't understand anything that had transpired between him and Carden in this room so far. He'd gone through a range of intense emotions that he wasn't accustomed to experiencing. His acute desire for Carden was easier to rationalize if he was to believe Carden when he said it was some kind of a spell, but he knew now that that was a lie. And there was no way he was leaving this room tonight without what he came for.

He didn't hesitate, he reached out and unbelted Carden's robe. It fell open, revealing Carden's hard, muscular body, along with a serious erection. Rory stood there, looking at him for a minute, a heady lust steering him in a direction that was absent of all sanity. "I want you," Rory breathed. "Don't turn me away."

Carden reached out and touched his cheek, smiling at him rather tenderly.

Rory moved his head and captured his fingers with his lips.

"And the fear that I may hurt you? What have you done with it? I don't feel it anymore."

"It's been swallowed up by something else," he replied, grabbing Carden's hand and placing it on his chest. "Touch me. Carden, make me yours tonight."

Carden didn't say anything, he just reached down and effortlessly lifted him up into his arms, holding him close to his chest.

Rory's head fell back as Carden's lips touched his throat. He laid Rory on the bed and stood looking down at him for a moment. He lifted the cross that Rory wore around in neck with his finger and then let it fall back again. Rory could have sworn he saw something glowing in those dark eyes.

"God and all that's in heaven, help me, Rory," he groaned, "but tonight, I want to give you everything."

Rory reached for him. "Yes," he urged, "yes."

Carden crawled onto the bed, straddling Rory's hips with his knees. His long hair fell down over his face, his erection moved over Rory's, sending shivers up Rory's spine. Carden looked down into his eyes and kissed his forehead, his eyes and his lips, his tongue sliding into his mouth, slow dancing with his.

The kiss was erotic, purposeful, and Rory moaned, raking his nails down Carden's chest.

Carden's mouth left his, his tongue trailing down Rory's throat to his chest, moving around his nipple then continuing on down to his stomach.

Rory whimpered, reached out to touch his hair, so soft, it felt like silk.

Carden raised his head. "Easy," he said. His tongue slowly inched to the base of Rory's cock. Lips lightly touched the shaft and trailed down to the head as a hand cupped his balls at the same time, gently fondling him.

Suddenly both Carden's hands moved under him and lifted his buttocks off the bed. Rory's head went back and he gasped as he was lifted in the air and Carden's mouth captured his cock. One hand moved along his spine and held him prone in the air as his ass was separated and Carden's fingers moved up inside him. The head of his cock was deep in Carden's throat, being massaged by his muscles, and somehow his balls were being suckled at the same time.

Rory started to buck, fucking Carden's throat as Carden's fingers began fucking his ass at the same time.

"Oh...mother...of...Jesus...please...mercy...oh...ohhhh... Godddddddd!" He forgot that he was in midair, his arms flailing out at the sides. In fact, now he was floating on air and Carden's free hand was moving over his chest and rock hard nipples.

His legs were wide open, his head dropping back, and he was coming in Carden's velvet throat.

Carden swallowed it all, instantly getting him hard again after he'd come, then releasing his cock and turning him over. Rory's feet hit the bed and Carden moved his body against his from behind. Rory groaned, his cock in Carden's hand.

"Jesus," Rory moaned. Carden's arm came around between his legs and pulled his hips up in the air. He nibbled his ear.

"I'm going to fuck you, Rory. I'm going to fuck you like you've never been fucked before."

Rory whimpered something.

"There will be no discomfort. We don't need any lube, no condoms, just my cock in your ass, driving you wild."

Carden was holding him somehow prone again, his feet off the bed, his hips up in the air, perfectly placed for Carden to penetrate him, deeply, and thoroughly. There was only this exquisite pleasure from the moment Carden's cock met his anus, and it grew more intense as his cock filled the canal. Rory groaned with pleasure when Carden had infiltrated him as deep as he could.

Rory almost passed out from the pleasure as Carden stayed hard inside of him, moving sensuously from side to side.

"I won't let you come," Carden said softly against his hair, "not yet."

"I can't help it."

"No, but I can," he said, holding Rory's cock, squeezing it, pressuring it in various ways. "You'll come when I know you've reached the maximum pleasure you can take. Hold on, baby. Let me take you for a ride."

Carden began to move faster inside of him. Somehow, he knew exactly what Rory wanted him to do, and when he wanted him to do it. Carden held his cock, kissed his neck, his shoulder, his back, and fucked him in a way he'd never been fucked before, completely. Carden rode his ass there in midair, causing him to cry out his name over and over, to yell and to beg, and finally to come with an orgasm that practically made him lose consciousness. It rocked his body from head to toe for a full five minutes.

When his breathing finally returned to normal, Carden was laying beside him, stroking his hair. "It's all right now," he said softly, "rest."

Rory blinked, looking at him, his body bathed in sweat, his hair plastered to his head. "Was it a dream?"

"No," he shook his head. "It was real."

Rory swallowed, feeling as if he'd just run the marathon. "But I didn't do anything for you."

"Oh yes, you did." He smiled.

"I didn't even feel you come."

Carden took his hand and placed it on his cock, which was now spent. It was sticky. "You wouldn't have felt me come, you were too...ah..." He smiled. "Off in your own world. Are you feeling all right?"

"Is it dangerous?"

"You know that it can be if you have a heart problem. You have to stay in shape."

"You're not even wet."

"We don't sweat." He smiled, lowering his head on the pillow.

Rory didn't have words for what had happened. "Is it like that with all vampires?"

"I don't know," he said, "I haven't been with many."

"You prefer mortals."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"They're warm and they have a pulse, a heartbeat. When I'm inside a mortal. I feel...well, human," he said.

Rory leaned on his elbow and looked down at him. "Is it like that every time?"

He nodded.

"How does anyone go back to having sex with a mortal then?"

"I don't know."

"Isn't sex more exciting for you with another vampire?"

"No," he said.

"But they can do...magical things, like you," Rory said.

Carden looked down at his own cock. It was starting to revive. "So can you, if you try," he said softly.

Rory moved his hand over his chest, kissed his nipples, touched his cock as if he was touching some precious object. "Will you fuck me like that again?"

"Not tonight," he said, shaking his head. "It would be overload. But..." He smiled, placing a hand on Rory's hair and encouraging him to move his lips to his sex. "You can fuck me."

Rory's head came up. "I can? You'd want me to do that?"

"Oh yeah," he said, nodding. "I want you to do that. Suck my cock. I'll be ready in a few minutes." He smiled. "And yours, you're raring to go."

"The minute you said that, my cock jumped for joy. But, Carden, I won't be able to fuck like you."

He laughed. "You'll do fine." He lifted his cock now in offering. "Come on, Rory, take it in your mouth."

Rory was hesitant, but took Carden's cock into his mouth. It was kind of difficult not to have a bit of a complex. Carden had given him heaven with abilities that a mortal could never possess. He had the most beautiful cock though, so it wasn't hard

to find inspiration. Rory sucked and licked it with great enthusiasm. He was so Christly beautiful.

Suddenly, Carden placed a hand on his head. "Enough," he said. "I'm ready. Fuck me, Rory."

Rory swallowed, sat up, wiped his mouth.

Carden stood, his hands on the wall, his beautiful ass calling directly to Rory's aching cock. "Come on, handsome, show me what you can do."

Rory wasn't sure if this was more for Carden or himself. He ran his hands over Carden's body, massaged his ass for a second, wrapped his arms around him and held him. "You're beautiful. I've never been afraid to fuck someone before."

"Don't be scared. Do you want me, Rory?"

"Oh God, yes."

"Go on."

Rory positioned himself, then began to enter him. He was shaking so badly, he took a few tries before he got it in. The pleasure was instant, and after he got over the fact that it was Carden he was fucking, he seized his hips and began to pump his ass like a man gone mad, realizing that Carden was helping him in his efforts, intensifying the fuck somehow. Rory came with a shout, the effect pushing him backward. He landed on the bed, curling into a little ball, moaning, waiting for his cock to stop pulsing in his hand.

Carden crawled on top of him, looking down at him with those dark eyes. They took on a

mysterious glow again and his mouth opened some, sharp teeth glittering in the dark moon. "I'd love to taste you," he whispered.

Rory looked up at him. His beauty would have talked him into anything.

"I never wanted to taste someone like I want to taste you," he said, his voice deepening, changing.

"I'm not afraid."

Carden smiled. He pushed off the bed. "Give me a minute."

Rory sat up. "Carden?"

"It's all right now," he said. He came to sit beside him.

"Can I stay here tonight?"

"No," he said. "Blane won't like it."

"Carden, about Blane —"

"That will be for another time," he said.

"You wanted to...drink my blood right now, didn't you?"

"Yes," he said.

"I thought you vampires were over that kind of thing?" Rory sat up, looking at him curiously.

"I was born a vampire, Rory," he said with a faint smile. "Sex and blood drinking are two things that go together for us. We weren't designed to mate with mortals. In fact, it was discouraged."

"Then there must have been many of you at one time."

"Yes," he nodded. "Pure Bloods were a race. We reproduced only with our own kind and fed each other. But due to a lot of misunderstanding about what we were and the value of our blood, our race was practically wiped out."

"I thought vampires didn't drink each other's blood?"

"Those who are turned don't because their blood does not rejuvenate, but mine does. I am not the same as them, Rory."

The significance of what Carden said had begun to sink in. He'd always known that Carden was different from the others, but he was just beginning to know how different he really was. "Why are you here with Blane? I saw you that time, fighting. You're far stronger than he is."

"I can't discuss that now, Rory. In fact, it's better if we don't discuss that subject at all."

"There's a lot I don't know, that I don't understand. Carden, why won't you talk to me?"

"It's better this way, believe me." He got up from the bed. "Now, get dressed. I'll walk you to your car."

* * * *

Shawn watched Carden as he placed a protective arm around Rory and walked with him out into the parking lot. They talked together in hushed

voices, Rory reaching out and clutching Carden's forearm as they paused in front of the car. So, Rory was to become Carden's new little pet now that Danny was no longer among the living. That was interesting.

He hung back in the shadow of the trees, watching as Carden gave Rory a rather asexual kiss on the forehead, and opened the car door for him. Shawn chuckled softly. *How disappointing for you, Rory. With someone like Carden, fatherly kisses are not very heartening, are they?*

Shawn quieted. Carden never ceased to amaze him. He had sensed his presence earlier even though he'd taken extra care to stay his distance, keep out of his range. My God, but you had to admire him. He was a powerful beast, his pure blood making not only his sexual allure intoxicating, but his instincts deadly, for anyone, vampire or mortal, who presented a threat to him.

However, it gave him a sense of satisfaction to know that Rory had not been enough of a distraction for Carden to let his guard down. Even when he'd been fucking the mortal, he'd been on high alert. If Shawn had tried anything then, Carden would have torn him apart. Tonight, the opportunity had been lost, but it was just a test. He was prepared to wait.

No, Shawn had never been foolish enough to underestimate Carden. Even now as Carden

watched Rory drive away, he paused, listening, hearing things that no mortal could possibly hear. Shawn knew Carden was aware that he was there, even before he reached a hand through the foliage and wrapped it around his throat, but he didn't have time to run. And even if he did run, he wouldn't have gotten very far. Carden could cover distance so fast no human eye could possibly follow, let alone anticipate.

"You are correct," Carden said, looking into his eyes. He picked him up so that his feet were dangling a few inches off the ground.

Are you going to kill me then? It was a thought. He knew Carden had heard him as clearly as if he had said it aloud.

Carden released him, his eyes glowing in the darkness.

Shawn dropped to the ground. He quickly scrambled to his feet and backed up a little.

"Why were you stalking me?"

"Stalking?" he croaked, rubbing his throat. "I wasn't...doing that."

Carden's expression hardened. "It would give me great pleasure to kill you."

"But you wouldn't do that."

Carden smiled. It was not a pleasant one.

"Okay, okay," Shawn said, holding up his hand. "I came to talk to you, but you were... otherwise...occupied."

"There is nothing that I could possibly want to talk to you about. You betrayed me and you betrayed Danny by helping Blane to keep him from me. You're lucky I don't kill you right here."

"Let's put that in the past. Maybe I could make amends and we could help one another now?"

"You're trying my patience."

"We can't talk here." Shawn glanced up at the window.

"Blane is not here if that's what you're concerned about. He's using another sanctuary tonight. Go ahead and say what it is you came to say and then go away. I don't want to see your face anymore."

Shawn knew that he had to come up with something fast. Carden did not look inclined to be benevolent. "I may be able to help you with Blane."

"I don't require your help."

"Okay, but maybe I can tell you what really happened with Blane and your parents."

"What do you know about that?" He came closer, his teeth exposed.

Shawn knew that if he bit him, he wouldn't turn him, he'd just kill him. This couldn't be done in anger, it had to be done voluntarily. "Not much, but I know someone who does."

"Don't play games with me because you'll lose."

"I want what you have. I want you to turn me."

"There it is," he said, with a caustic smile. "The same question, and my answer is the same as it always was, no. If I bite you, I'll rip out your throat and all you'll be is dead."

"Carden, hear me out," he said, trying to control his fear. "I can find out —"

"I said no," he growled, his eyes tuning red.

Shawn stumbled backward, putting up his hand. "Okay, okay."

Carden was gone, just like that.

Shawn tried to get his breath, "Okay," he said, marching through the parking lot, fear and anger combining, infuriating him, "you want to play this the hard way, eh, Carden? If you won't cooperate, I promise I'll make your life hell and you'll give me what I want. You'll give it to me even if I have to take it by force."

* * * *

Rory found a surprise on his doorstep. A note on brown paper, carefully folded. He took it from under the doorknocker and held it in his hand.

His energy strangely flagged one moment, then flew higher than Mount Fuji the next. Man, this was some amazing stuff, vampire sex. If you believed that you exchanged DNA once you made love with someone, then Carden had invaded his

cellular structure without even having to sink his teeth into him.

He was still staring at the note when a soft, laughing voice said, "Can't decide if you're going to read it?"

Rory turned and was amazed to see an old man, a Panama hat rakishly tilted over one eye, staring at him. He blinked. This couldn't be.

"Ricardo Montoya?" he asked.

The old man smiled, revealing a mouth of perfect white teeth. Rory suddenly wondered how many of them were real.

"I have wine," the old man said.

"But it's six o'clock in the morning," Rory sputtered.

"You are just coming in, my day started at three o'clock. I thought maybe you would like wine, no?"

"Thanks, but no."

He was itching to sleep, but knew he wouldn't. He was in a state of sex-love fugue. He'd gone and done it, had sex with a vampire, and oh yeah, an ordinary vampire wasn't good enough for him, he had to do it with a pure blood vampire. *Carden*. God, even his name made his cock ache. He was all messed up in his head and feeling weak now. *Man, the longer I am away from him, the worse it feels.*

"You really tied one on," the old man exclaimed. "Come, I cook you the breakfast of champions."

Ricardo Montoya extracted the house key from Rory's fingers.

"You take a quick, hot shower, I make you a feast..." the old man put his fingertips to his lips and kissed them.

A shower, yeah. He could do that. The hot spray was exactly what he needed. As he showered, his thoughts moseyed right back to Carden. Now what? Now nothing, that was what. And how in the hell was he ever going to make love with a mortal again without feeling unsatisfied, and frustrated? He understood now what Dennis meant when he talked about Thiago. It was like nothing he'd ever experienced before, and it could easily become a powerful addiction, an addiction he was going to have to fight unless he wanted to be miserable.

Carden had made it clear to him in the parking lot that any repeat performance was not going to happen. He had looked at him directly in the eyes and said, "Rory, we can't do this again."

That was clear enough and easier said than done. So what was he supposed to do now? Making love with Jack wouldn't be the same anymore. Making love with any mortal would be one major let down.

He towed off, found clean clothing and walked into the kitchen.

The old man placed a plate of eggs and a steaming cup of coffee in front of him.

"Basil and tomatoes," Rory said. "Hey...I don't even remember having eggs in the fridge. Where'd all this stuff come from?"

"Don't you know I am a man of miracles?"

Rory took a bite, then another, then a sip of coffee. He recognized it as Puerto Rican and his heart flip-flopped in his chest. He'd had this same coffee with Libreto Barrera. He sat at the bar stool in his kitchen and stared helplessly at the old man who watched his every move. "This is...great, thank you. Senor Montoya...I know who you are of course. You made fifteen world champions."

The old man scowled. "Sixteen." He reached into his pocket, pulled out a pack of cards, licked his thumb and ran it across the edge of the first one, sliding it over to Rory. "These are all my numbers."

Rory stared at it. "I...don't understand."

"I am now the trainer of Brandon Fire." The old man stared at him to see his reaction.

Rory had none. He was all out of emotional responses right now.

"Brandon Fire will be my seventeenth champion." He moved to pour more coffee for

Rory and his unbuttoned shirt revealed a missing left nipple.

Montoya might have been closing in on ninety, but he didn't miss a trick.

"I had breast cancer. I had the nipple removed."

"Do you miss it?" Rory asked.

"No." The old man scowled.

He did that a lot, Rory noticed.

"I am not breast feeding anyone and my wife...well, she is in a special care facility in Puerto Rico. She has Alzheimer's." For a moment, his deep pain flashed across his eyes. "Sixty-three years I am married to this girl."

"I am so sorry," Rory said, feeling the old man's anguish. *Sixty-three years! I haven't had a relationship that lasted sixty-three months!*

Ricardo Montoya accepted the sentiment with a nod. He gazed around the apartment. "You live alone?"

"Yes, why?"

"No...boyfriend?"

"I...ah...what's all this about?" Rory asked, the afterglow leaving him as suddenly as a fine tropical rain.

"Brandon Fire. He will be my seventeenth champion and I do not want you messing up my plans."

"I have no intention of messing anything up for Brandon."

"Do you love him?"

Rory balked. "No."

"Then why do you want to—" the old man made a stirring motion with his finger, as if to indicate Rory was stirring up trouble.

"Senor Montoya, I owe him." He paused. "I owe him a chance to win against an opponent who killed a very good friend of mine. A friend I watched dying in front of me. I loved Brandon once and I abandoned him. I feel very bad about that. I could do nothing to save Barrera. I don't know if you've heard, but I tried. I tried climbing over the octagon when he was bitten. It is...my worst nightmare and I dream it often. I know first-hand how these vampires work. I want to be part of your campaign strategy."

The old man's eyes gleamed. "You speak the truth," he said. "I see that." He stopped talking for a moment. "I came here to tell you to stay away. I see now I was wrong. Forgive me. You should not finish the rest of these eggs."

"Why?" asked Rory.

"I put heavy laxatives in them."

Rory gulped. "You...did?"

"Yes, sorry." He took the plate and tilted it into the sink. "Now, I make you a proper breakfast."

Rory opened and closed his mouth, glancing at his coffee. "What about this?"

"I never spike coffee. That is for amateurs only."

"Don't worry about making more eggs," Rory said, feeling his stomach muscles contracting already.

"You need water," the old man said. "Here."

"Can I trust you?" Rory asked as he started to break out in a sweat.

The old man gave him a shrewd glance. "Well, it all depends. How lucky are you feeling today?"

CHAPTER TWO

“You know, you’re cute when you’re angry.”
Dennis sat silently fuming. “I don’t feel cute.”

Thiago gazed at him over the cards in his hands. “Cheer up, baby. Your game has improved. It’s our third round of strip poker and you’re still in your underpants.”

“And one sock,” Dennis mumbled.

“Yes. Let’s not forget the sock.” Thiago shuffled a new deck with the dexterity of a Vegas dealer. “This round, suicide kings are wild.”

“Okay.” Dennis tried not to feel glum. He tried to focus on the game and not losing his pants. Literally.

Thiago leaned across the table, his hand touching Dennis for one brief moment. “Baby, you get jealous for no reason.”

Dennis swallowed hard. “I know you say that, but I also know what it is to be with you, to love

you. It...it's hard the way those guys all look at you."

Thiago dealt the cards, an odd look in his eyes. "I like being looked at, but I also like being in control."

Dennis picked up his hand and stared at the lousy cards. Shit. He'd be lucky to keep his sock at this rate.

"You say things that mean a lot to me. I don't always show it, but I think about them for hours afterward," Thiago said.

Dennis opened his mouth.

Thiago shook his head. "You know that took a lot for me to say, just accept it and be cool with it. How many cards you want?"

"All of them," Dennis said, gazing at Thiago intently.

"You just made me hard."

Dennis made a grab across the table. "You're not lying."

Thiago's troubled expression morphed into pleasure. "I have a royal flush."

Dennis got up from the table and moved to his lover. "You know, baby, I think you cheat."

"That's a wicked thing to say." Thiago's gaze was on the tent in Dennis' underpants.

"You fill those out so well," he said, his tongue running across the length of the shaft and closing in on the now soaking wet head.

"You win," Dennis said, taking Thiago by the hand. His heart hammered in his chest until his lover removed his jeans and shirt and peeled off Dennis' underpants.

"The sock is mine," Thiago murmured. "A little souvenir." He placed his body over Dennis', whose cock was so rigid and so eager for Thiago that the vampire whore couldn't fail to exhibit the pleasure he usually avoided.

Dennis watched the expression on Thiago's face, his canine teeth extending as he licked the happy head creaming for him. Thiago's passion, his desire was right there. He could wait no longer and he threw Dennis' legs wide open and entered him with swift, savage poise.

Thiago might live for Dennis' heartfelt words, but *he* lived for these moments, these small unguarded moments when he knew Thiago wanted *him*, and couldn't wait to be inside him.

Dennis and Thiago raged against each other, little nips, licks and kisses and a final wave of confession ridden together in lost, molten bliss.

"Oh," Thiago moaned as he looked into Dennis' eyes, "can you feel me coming?"

Dennis couldn't speak. He felt it all right. He felt the wave crashing down on him again as Thiago kissed him, really kissed him.

The tide washed out fast.

"Gotta go," his mercurial Brazilian vampire lover said and Dennis, who knew better than to argue, allowed Thiago to break the spell. Thiago didn't look at him, but Dennis knew. He'd seen the swell of emotion. He felt his sweat start to dry on his skin as Thiago threw on his clothes and turned, fleeing down the stairs.

* * * *

After a long day moving between the bathroom and the bedroom, a twitchy Rory cursed the old trainer for his little prank. He took another shower. He still felt crummy and walked to the store for fresh, bottled water and some warm, crusty bread. He thanked the heavens he had no food in the house the old bastard could have doctored.

He tried to sleep, but all he could see was Carden standing there with his robe undone, those eyes looking at him, and his cock woke up big time. He held it in his hand, trying to soothe the ache, but only Carden could do that.

And then his stomach cramped again.

How badly did he owe Brandon Fire?

He switched on the laptop, typed a few sentences about Brandon and the rampant corruption in boxing. Stuff kept coming back to him. Exhaustion sapped his reserves of energy

and he staggered back to his bed, finally dozing off.

A loud rapping at his window woke him. Rory sat up in the bed and rubbed his eyes. Someone was at his window.

"Damn." He got up, looked out and saw Jack standing there. He was pointing at his watch. Rory glanced at the alarm clock. "Seven thirty?" He raced around to the front door and opened it. "Damn, it can't be that late. I'm sorry, Jack. I'll get ready and go to the club right away."

"It's okay," he said, walking in, "I got a replacement when you didn't show up. What happened to you?"

"I fell asleep and didn't wake up, guess I didn't set my alarm." He walked over to the counter and began to prepare the coffee machine. He still had all his clothes on.

"You look like shit. You slept sixteen hours?"

"Ah, no, I didn't go to sleep right away when I got home. I was working on my book." That was a lie, but a good one. All day he stared at the damned computer, but his mind kept turning itself off.

"Oh, how's that going?"

"Not very well, but I'll work it out. It's the club, it takes a lot of my time of course. Don't get me wrong, the money is great, it's just I have to learn to manage my time better."

Jack came over and turned him around. He pulled him up against him and kissed him. "And you have to make time for me."

"Of course," Rory said, pulling away. It felt odd kissing Jack all of a sudden. *Carden*. Damn it, he thought, get out of my head. He started the coffee maker and walked around Jack. "I should take a shower."

"I'll help you." Jack grinned. "We have time."

"Ah, no, I'd really...I mean, I'm still asleep."

"I'll take care of that." He smirked, reaching out and pulling him near again.

"No," Rory said. It came out a little sharply.

Jack narrowed his eyes. He released him, looking a little hurt. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I'm tired, that's all."

"You want me to wait around, drive you to Eclipse? I could pick you up later and..."

"No, I'll go on my own. I'll call you later, okay?" He gave him a peck on the cheek and then walked off down the hall. A minute later, he heard the front door close.

Rory crawled into the shower again, trying not to feel guilty. He closed his eyes and let the warm water envelope him. He was so tired. He leaned against the tile and suddenly there were tears mixing with the water running down his face. *Carden*. His cock was hard again. Rory stroked it,

picturing him there, naked, stepping into the shower.

You need me, Rory. I know. I understand. I'm sorry. I should have never touched you.

Rory shuddered, his cock finally giving him release as he pumped into his hand, gulping gratefully.

* * * *

Carden sat in Blane's office, a hand under his chin, glancing distractedly out the window. Blane's words drifted in and out of his mind without effect.

"Did you hear me?" Blane asked him.

"I hear everything," he said.

"You seemed bored. Alan Spencer will be here at ten. I need to speak to you about something, Carden. I need your complete attention."

It was mortal night, which meant that mortals volunteered to participate in the live sex acts on stage. He was watching Thiago giving head to a chubby little bald guy in his forties. The mortal was so euphoric, he wasn't even aware he had an audience anymore. He thought of Rory. Rory was hurting, and that was his fault. With Danny it was different because he'd lived with Danny. Danny could have him whenever he wanted, sometimes that meant three times a day, until Carden had to

teach Danny to pace himself. The blood he gave him reinforced him, but he wasn't about to feed Rory his blood. It would tie them together forever, and he'd already gone too far.

He could fall in love with Rory, too easily. And that wasn't in his plans. His focus was on Blane now, bringing him down, liberating whoever he had under his foot, and then extracting his revenge. Blane had deprived him of those precious days with Danny. Danny had been alone without the one he wanted to be at his side the most. He'd never forgive Blane for that. He'd owed Danny that, for giving him so much, and yet, at the end, he wasn't there. He was here in this hole, amusing deranged millionaires with immortality fantasies.

And if it was true that Blane actually had something to do with eliminating his parents, he'd pay for that, too.

He couldn't encourage Rory to love him, as much as he himself might enjoy the thought of that. It was too dangerous, and after this was all over, he'd decided it would be over for him, too. He'd been on this earth long enough now. He knew how to end it. And if he touched Rory again, he'd ruin him for all mortal lovers. Rory would end up miserable and alone, yearning for something unattainable. Carden hoped that it wasn't already too late on that account.

"For the ritual they want to do, I'm willing to share the profits with you," Blane said, looking down at him.

Carden stood. "The man on the stage is going to go into cardiac arrest in about a minute," he said. "You'd better call an ambulance."

"What?" Blane demanded. "How could you know..." Suddenly, there was commotion below. "Oh shit," he said, racing out of the office.

"I told you," Carden said to himself, walking over to the window.

Thiago had lifted the man off the floor and was carrying him into the back. He wasn't going to make it.

Carden could smell death. "Rory," he said, scanning the crowd. He smiled. He was here now. How was he going to keep away from him when he felt his need? Well, he'd had bigger challenges before. He turned from the window to see Alan Spencer standing there.

"Carden," he said. "I was told I'd find you up here. I thought you'd be in your room."

"We have some excitement so it seems."

"Is he going to be all right? I heard it was a heart attack."

"No," he said. "He's not."

"It must be wonderful to know such things."

"You think?"

Alan considered it for a moment. "Maybe not. Can we go to your room, be alone?"

"As you wish."

"Carden, did Blane tell you about the ceremony?"

"He mentioned it, yes." He walked down the hallway beside him.

"We are willing to give you a substantial amount of money."

"To drink my blood," he said. He knew what they wanted. It wouldn't give them immortality.

"For immortality."

"It would be more beneficial to buy a membership to a gym," he said. *Rory. He was coming up the stairs.*

Alan laughed. "Carden."

Rory stood there in front of him now, his gaze moving to Alan Spencer, then back. *Are you going to let him touch you?*

"Alan," Carden placed a hand on his arm, "go into my room and make yourself comfortable," he said, "I have some business to take care of with our regulator."

"Of course," Alan nodded at Rory and went into Carden's room.

Sirens could now be heard outside.

"We need to talk," Rory said.

"About?" He tilted his head, hardened himself a little. He couldn't allow himself to touch him.

"What happened last night, and what in hell you've done to me?"

"You came to me, remember?"

"Carden, I'm hard all the time." He lowered his voice. "I can't bear for Jack to touch me anymore."

"Jack?"

"Yes, we're involved. I thought it was going somewhere, but today..."

"I don't care to play advice columnist to your love affairs," he said stiffly. He didn't want to think about Rory with that mortal.

Rory gave him a confused look. "Does it wear off? You said you...we..." He stopped, seeming to have trouble going on, then suddenly he became furious. He placed a hand on Carden's chest and pushed him against the wall. "Does it fucking wear off or not?"

"I don't know," he said, looking down at him. "I have no idea what you're talking about. You wanted it, I gave it to you. Shit happens. Deal with it. And kindly remove your hand."

Rory placed his forehead against his chest. "Don't do this to me. You gave me something I can never have again." He looked up at him. "Is there a cure?"

"You mean like vampire anonymous?"

"Are you that insensitive? Last night, you felt nothing, I suppose. Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"I'm not trying to tell you," he said between clenched teeth, pushing Rory away gently, "anything. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a client waiting for my attention."

"Say it then," Rory insisted, grabbing his forearm, "say it meant nothing."

"Why?" he demanded. "It won't change anything. Believe what you like, just stay away from me." He pulled his arm away and walked to his room. He closed the door, blocking out Rory's thoughts. *I'm not listening anymore. I can't hear you, Rory. I won't hear you.*

Alan Spencer lay on the bed naked. He smiled when he saw Carden. "My beautiful god," he whispered. "Come."

He swallowed. *Please, Rory, don't come to me again. Don't torment me. I made an error. I'm paying, oh God, yes, I'm paying just like you.* Carden looked at Alan and unconsciously willed the transformation. Alan Spencer suddenly looked exactly like Rory. Carden smiled. It was okay now. He'd found a way to get through this, found a way maybe to at least soothe his own ache temporarily.

CHAPTER THREE

Rory was overwhelmed. The cops and the media had swarmed the club due to Mr. Robert Jamison dropping dead from extreme pleasure on stage. This shit sure didn't happen on amateur night at the Comedy Club.

Blane had been forced to close down the club, grumbling about lost income. A few performers, including Thiago, and some of the spectators were being held for questioning.

The officer in charge was a man by the name of Sergeant Norman Bower. He was intense and made it clear to everyone that he didn't like vampires, or approve of this kind of establishment.

Rory observed two things from his office as he waited Bower's inquiry. He observed Dennis pacing frantically as Bower interviewed Thiago. He pressed a button and heard Thiago's

unhurried account of what took place on stage. Then, Rory felt him.

Bower asked, "Is there anyone else here that I should know about?"

"Just me," Carden said suddenly, walking into the room.

Even Bower was affected momentarily by his appearance. He stopped speaking, paused, and studied him. "And you are?"

"Carden."

Rory surmised that Carden's exclusive client had slipped out the back way.

"Carden who, or do you vamps even have a last name?"

A couple of police officers sniggered.

Carden smiled faintly. "Carden Adair."

This was the first time Rory had heard his family name. It was true that vampires tended not to use their family names. Maybe they'd become lost through time, or it was easier that way because until just recently, vampires hadn't needed any official identification.

"Did you see anything?" Bower demanded.

"I see everything," he said.

"Okay, none of that weird stuff, straight answers. Did you see what happened on stage?"

"I told you, Sergeant Bowers," he said, "I see everything. The man volunteered for the blow job of his life, Thiago gave it to him. His blood was

not pumping efficiently enough through his arteries due to his arteries narrowing."

Bower just stared at him. "And you saw this?"

"I felt it. None of this is the fault of the club. I believe clients sign a disclaimer to that effect. You don't approve of this activity, which is your right, but there is no foul play here, Sergeant. And your reluctance to express your affections has cost you your wife."

Sergeant Bowers' face drained of color.

Rory blanched. He couldn't believe Carden spoke like this to the cop.

Bower became furious. "Where's the night manager?"

He stormed into Rory's office, accompanied by a young, uniformed officer who was trying to act cool, but clearly was agog with the notion of a vampire sex club. "You're the night manager?"

Carden followed the young officer and stood against the wall, unnoticed apparently by Bower.

Rory stood and offered his hand, but Bower ignored him. "Please, take a seat," Rory said.

Bower sat, but barked at the uniformed cop, "You can stand, Ortiz."

Ortiz looked petrified. Rory was certain he could hear the guy's shoes squeaking.

Bower powered on. "The victim...Mr. Robert Jamison was given a health check prior to...er...before he...er..." Bower's eyes rolled

around in his head as if trying to come up with a polite way of saying, *before he fucked himself to death.*

"Yes." Rory fidgeted. Being this close to Carden made his balls ache. "Mr. Jamison had no history of heart disease, but he did have high blood pressure, which should have disqualified him right away."

"Ah-ha! Then how did he get through, since your screening process is supposed to be so thorough?"

"Well, I wasn't here —"

"So it's your fault?"

"No." Rory did sort of blame himself, but Jamison was a high-powered lawyer for the government. He'd thrown his weight around and had intimidated Suede who'd jumped in to help because Rory hadn't been here. "I can show you the DVD. I'd rather it didn't leave the premises for the privacy of our other guests."

"Other guests," Bower snorted.

"Do you want Officer Ortiz to see this?" Rory asked.

"Why not?"

"It's material of a sensitive nature."

"Ortiz can take it. Right, Ortiz?"

The young officer's ears were turning pink.

Rory waited a beat. His eyes locked with Carden's for a moment.

"Sergeant, you'll soon see Mr. Jamison was no boy scout vying for the basketball badge."

"He was a fine man, a distinguished officer of the court," Bower thundered.

Rory pressed a button. He was a little dazzled himself when his office window, looking over the dance floor turned into an opaque screen.

A tipsy, belligerent Robert Jamison could be seen pounding on Rory's desk, the sound making Bower and Ortiz jump as Jamison roughly demanded sex, demanded the right to perform.

"I want that little cutie, Number Six, to blow me like a fucking trumpet! Don't you know who I am, you goddamn worm?" Jamison screamed.

"Oh, my God," Bowers moaned.

Carden smiled over the top of his head at Rory.

"Where are you from anyway?" Jamison raged. "Want me to call Homeland Security and get you deported?"

"Sir —"

"Don't you sir me, you little prick. Let me on that stage *now*!"

Suede tried to keep his cool. That was obvious. "Sir, I need you to submit to a blood pressure test."

"Nothing wrong with my blood pressure!"

"He looks like he's gonna explode," Bower muttered.

"Gimme that paper. I'll sign it. I take full responsibility for my actions."

A few men stood behind Jamison, laughing as he scrawled his signature in a savage way.

Bower gasped.

"Oh man...that's Justice Keating and...holy shit! That's the Mayor!"

Rory tapped his pen on the desk and ended the viewing.

Ortiz swayed with fear as Rory swiveled in his chair.

"So you understand, I can't let this DVD out of here. You can see Mr. Jamison was quite... unreasonable, quite unmanageable." Rory reached behind him and took a piece of paper off the top of the printer. "He signed a waiver. His...family will most likely still want to sue us, but I can tell you I wouldn't like this to be the way the people of the city of Los Angeles remember such a... distinguished officer of the court."

Bower swallowed.

Rory handed him a business card. "You can wrap up this investigation now, Sergeant Bower, and have the press liaison from the Mayor's office call me. We'll come to an amicable agreement on how this will be handled."

Bower nodded. "Did the Mayor...did he...you know?"

"I can't discuss this, Sergeant. Client confidentiality."

The cops shuffled away and Rory spotted Thiago still being questioned by the police. Bower gestured and the cops vanished.

Carden leaned forward. "I'm impressed. Give me the DVD. I'll protect it for you."

Rory hesitated. "No. I think I'll keep it. After all, it's my neck on the line. Not yours." He saw the glimmer of dismay in Carden's eyes. "There's one more person on the DVD I didn't let Bower see," Rory whispered.

"Really? Who?"

"The Governor."

Carden laughed. "If any of them even realized they were caught on surveillance, they'd shut him down, they'd—"

The full weight of what damage this would do to Blane, even a hit being ordered, seemed to sink in with Carden.

Rory had already thought out the angles. Boxing had taught him this. "I will give it to you if you give me a chance," Rory said.

Carden looked at him.

In that moment, they exchanged a silent contract. No word was spoken aloud, but Rory heard the word *deal* very clearly in his mind as Dennis rushed into Rory's office, beside himself.

"How did you get rid of them?"

Rory shrugged. "He realized it was an accident."

Carden swung by Rory's chair and palmed the tiny DVD. His fingers moved up to brush the nape of Rory's neck. The sensation was like being jolted with a live wire that left his body shaking for more.

Oh, boy.

"They're not going to blame Thiago, are they?"

"No, Dennis," Rory said, feeling weak. "They are not going to blame Thiago."

* * * *

Bower snapped shut his notebook and motioned to the other officers. "Come on, we're finished here." He looked at Blane. "Try to screen your customers more carefully, Mr. Blane. I think we have all we need here and we can put this down as a death due to natural causes."

Blane nodded. "Good. Then I can open tomorrow?"

"I don't see why not." He walked out without looking back, the other officers followed. They glanced back once or twice at Carden.

"Thank you, Carden," Blane said.

"I didn't do it for you," he said, looking at Thiago. "I did it for him and his mortal companion who looks quite frazzled."

Thiago nodded at Carden.

Carden walked in the direction of the door.

Rory ran after him, catching him as he stepped outside. "I'm ready to collect on my deal."

Carden looked as if he intended to walk away.

"Can I walk with you?" Rory just wanted to be close to him, *needed* to be close to him.

"And do we remember what happened last time we took a walk?" He almost smiled.

"What can it hurt if I come to you tonight?" He waited, scarcely daring to breathe.

"It can hurt a whole lot."

"Once more?"

"No." He began to walk away.

"You made a deal. By the way, I am the only one who recognized the Mayor and the Supreme Court Judge. Sometimes it pays to be a mere mortal."

Carden paused.

"You have something on Blane now. I think the least you could do is kiss me."

"Why? If I kiss you, I'll want to do more."

"Then do more."

"I can't. Rory...please..."

Rory reached up and pulled his head down to his. "Kiss me," he insisted.

Carden pressed his lips softly against his, then his hand went to the back of Rory's spine. Rory's mouth opened to his tongue, his head went back.

He moaned, his fingers frantically tracing the shape of Carden's erection through his jeans.

Carden's lips came off his, his eyes blazing with a fire that sent electric charges through Rory's body. His mouth went to his throat.

Rory felt the tips of his sharp teeth graze his skin, then lick it gently. His body went into spasms. "Carden, please, take me to your room. Now."

Carden's arms tightened around him.

Rory felt the blood rush to his feet as if he was suddenly on a very fast elevator. He was standing in the middle of Carden's room and Carden was taking off Rory's shirt, and clumsily tearing off his own. "How did we..." Rory gasped.

"Don't talk," Carden urged, pulling down Rory's pants and standing back to take off his own.

"Carden?"

"Quiet," he urged, groaning.

Rory went back into his arms and Carden ran his hands over his back, his ass, then picked him up in his arms, positioning Rory's legs around his waist. He tipped him back, supporting his head and plunged his cock into his ass. He took him down on the floor, and fucked him hard and furiously, sending Rory over the cliff, then bringing him back and letting him free fall, catching him before he hit the ground, and

sucking his cock into a numbing bliss right after he withdrew from Rory's ass.

It was like a circus ride, the kind that elates you but doesn't have any of those annoying side effects. He felt as if he was flying...and love, God, he felt so loved.

Rory was lying on the carpet, spent, exhausted, satiated, and happier than he ever thought was possible. Carden was looking down at him, touching him, kissing his chest, massaging his balls. Rory moaned softly. "Oh God, Carden, you're so beautiful. Thank you. Thank you for having mercy on me." Tears. God, what in hell was wrong with him? He was so emotional suddenly. He reached up and touched Carden's face.

Carden kissed each tear.

"What's wrong with me? I feel like I'm falling apart."

"Maybe you're just falling in love," he said softly.

"Yes, oh yes," he murmured, reaching up and pulling him down on top of him. He rolled Carden over on the floor, kissed his throat, licked his nipples, tasting them slowly, stroked his cock, which was already hard again. "It's like a drug, you're like a drug, like candy and chocolate and Christmas day, all wrapped up together." He kissed his cock.

Carden's hand touched his hair. "Rory," he whispered.

That shiver ran through Rory again and he took Carden's cock into his mouth.

* * * *

"Is this what you want?" Shawn asked, leaning on the bar. He glanced up at the second floor. "Carden is getting carried away with this one."

"It's a passing fancy," Blane grunted, but he glanced up there a second time.

"We can help each other."

"I told you I'd turn you, if you wanted."

"I want Carden to turn me."

"Right," he sneered, "the pure blood will make you young and beautiful. He'll never do it, so dream on. I'm going to have a hell of a time convincing him to placate those weird mortal millionaires."

"You won't. That's why you need my help, Blane. Face it. You're on thin ice. Ever ask yourself why you're still walking around when he could just wish you in the ground? You have nothing he wants, believe me. But we could have something he wants maybe."

"What are you getting at?"

"Rory. Why not let them play? In fact, I'd encourage it, if I were you. Carden has one

weakness, mortals in his bed really turn him on and he has a tendency to grow attached."

"He won't play that game again."

"But you forget I have magic." He smiled. "You'll be surprised what I could make that beauty do. It's not fair that Rory gets to have him all to himself, is it?"

"I don't care about that."

"Oh yes, you do. You've always wanted him. That's the reason you slaughtered his family."

Blane had him by the throat. "I'll snap it if you ever say that again. Where did you hear that? Where?"

* * * *

Thiago walked into the bar. He paused, watching the scene curiously. Now this was interesting.

Blane let Shawn go, slapped his back and laughed. "Just having some fun."

"Um," he said, "looks like it."

"Where's your mortal?"

"Why? Hungry?" He gave Blane a simple smile.

"Funny," Blane replied, walking out of the bar. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Thiago said, looking at Shawn. "The bar is closed."

"Really," Shawn smiled, moving in his direction. "Want to take me upstairs?"

"To do what?"

Shawn laughed. "You can use your imagination."

"Well, unless you're interested in being my bedtime snack, I suggest you run along home. I don't like you. I don't trust you, and whatever you got cooking with Blane, I don't want any part of it."

"Just what is it that Blane has on you, Thiago? What keeps you here?"

"That's none of your business."

"You and I, we could..."

"There is no you and I. So either leave or I'll put you out, and you don't want that."

"No," he said, "I don't. See you, Thiago."

"Not if I can help it," he said. He watched him go, paused and glanced up to the second floor. Carden had done him a favor tonight, the first chance he got, he'd do him one. *But right now, Thiago thought with a smile, Carden is busy, and if I have any good sense, I'll go and challenge Dennis to a game of Texas hold 'em, and just maybe I'll let him win.*"

* * * *

Carden held Rory as he slept in his arms. So much for self-control. He kissed his head, listened to the steady and assuring rhythm of his heartbeat.

Damn it, this was insanity. Maybe he was in love. Maybe it was like the way his father had loved his mother, with an intensity so passionate and strong, he would have given her anything. Whatever it was, he was sinking deeper and deeper, and Rory was in the same lifeboat.

He thought for a moment of the DVD now in his possession. It was a trump card. Rory was no dummy. He recognized he'd handed over a loaded weapon to Carden that Blane didn't even know existed. Rory had surprised him. He was so calm, so self-assured. A risk taker and a lover. Carden felt something in him stirring...his inner beast was intrigued.

He felt jealous that Jack had claimed Rory's hungry heart first. No, not his heart, just his body. Carden knew Rory was falling for him, as Carden was falling for Rory. The hatred, the tension that had filled his days and nights for so long, eased away from him. Yeah, he had a trump card.

Rory stirred. "What's the matter?" he asked, kissing Carden's face and arms.

Carden sucked in a breath. "When the dust settles, Blane will wonder about the DVD. He'll ask what happened to it."

"I already replaced it. I put in a blank. We've been having problems with that damned thing. He'll just think it screwed up again." He chuckled. "I even got around all the secret spy cameras in

the office. My whole meeting with that cop... never happened."

Carden laughed, delighted.

Rory snuggled deeper and drifted back to sleep, leaving Carden alone with his thoughts.

Blane was angry, jealous. He could feel it, although the sensation only hit him after Rory had fallen asleep and he could concentrate again, regain his sanity. He had allowed Rory to take him completely away tonight, so there was no sense of what was happening around him, only Rory, his eyes, his hands, his cock. When Carden allowed Rory to fuck him down on all fours tonight, Rory left all gentility and reservations behind. He grabbed his hair, dragged back his head, sucked the flesh of Carden's throat and fucked him without mercy. A mortal man might have had some issue with its violence, but Carden understood it, he connected with it. It was passion gone mad, and Rory knew he could express it with Carden because he couldn't hurt him.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," Rory said, stirring again.

What was going on between them?

Rory raised himself up on an elbow. "It's like I want to crawl inside you, rip you apart. I've never felt such need. It's scary."

Carden kissed him, held him close. "It's natural. It's okay. I bring out that intensity sometimes,

spend it, do what you need to do. I give you that willingly. It excites me. It's nothing like it can be with another vampire. Remember that."

"What's it like with another vampire?"

"Like two beasts sometimes. It's not satisfying to me. It horrifies me."

"What's your greatest fear?" Rory asked.

And for the first time, he dared to say it out loud. "My greatest fear is to lose my humanity, to be reduced to a monster, to my baser instincts...the thirst for blood, sex, and death." His consciousness was so interconnected with Rory's at that moment.

* * * *

Dennis ran to the door when he heard Thiago drive up into his driveway. It was after three in the morning, but he hadn't been able to sleep. He was so worried about him, afraid that he'd really taken the man's death at the club very hard. When he opened the door, Thiago didn't look happy, but of course, it was hard to tell with him. He was so inexpressive sometimes. "Hi," Dennis said.

"Hello," he said, "can I come in?"

"Are you playing vampire?"

"No. I *am* a vampire," he said. "You don't need to invite me more than once." He walked in.

Dennis closed the door. "I wasn't sure you'd come."

"I wasn't sure I'd come either. Dennis, did you know that your friend is involved with Carden?"

"When you say involved, do you mean *involved*?"

"What do you think I mean?"

"Why can't vampires ever say something straight out? And you must be mistaken, Rory would never fuck a vampire, no offense."

"None taken, but believe me, they are together."

Dennis was stunned, and his shock was even diminishing the urge he had right now to rip off Thiago's clothes and ravish him. "Is that bad? I don't know this Carden. Is he dangerous?"

"He's not like me. He's...he was born a vampire, Dennis. I can't even begin to know what powers he has. He saved my ass tonight, and I owe him."

"You're getting ahead of me. What do you mean, you owe him?"

"That creepy Shawn guy, I don't trust him. He and Blane have got something going. They're planning something. Rory could be in danger."

"Oh, no. We've got to warn them." Dennis hunted for his car keys.

"Whoa, whoa," Thiago said, reaching out and catching his arm, "now is not the time, believe me."

It's okay. The sun is coming up and I..." He smiled. "Have some other ideas."

Dennis relaxed, allowed himself to be pulled into Thiago's arms. "Oh really, and what would those be?"

"Here," he said, looking down at him, seeming as if he would kiss him, then he let him go. "Let me show you." He walked over to the table and picked up a deck of cards.

Dennis laughed, exasperated. "Cards again?"

"This time," he said, sitting at the table, "Texas Hold 'em."

"Damn, I hate Hold 'em. What are we playing for?"

Thiago winked. "You'll see."

* * * *

Alan Spencer walked out the back door of his house in his boxer shorts. He hardly even felt the cold air, or noticed the frost on the grass. His wife slept soundly up in the bedroom of their sixteen-room house.

"You want to live forever?" someone asked him.

Spencer looked around. "Who...who are you?" There was no one, only a voice.

"Hear me. I know what you want. We want the same things. Only I can help you get it. Carden

will never give you what you need. He must be made to obey. He is but a beast, not a man, an animal who craves blood. Are we not clearly the master of our universe, Mr. Spencer? Carden is a freak, an oddity, close to extinction. It's time to use what he carries in his blood to make us strong. Imagine the possibilities. You could keep him in a cage, extract his blood, use it and then experience the ultimate sexual high whenever you wanted, use his blood, use his cock. Deprive him of the nutrition he needs and you'll strip him of everything. Trust me."

"Yes, yes," he breathed. "How, tell me how."

"When the time nears, I will come to you."

The wind kicked up and suddenly Spencer realized that he was freezing, and that he was utterly alone. He fell to his knees. "Carden!" he cried out in agony, but there was no answer.

* * * *

Blane stopped Silk in the hallway. "I need you to do something for me."

He waited.

"I want you to keep an eye on Carden."

He nodded and walked off to the sanctuary he shared with Suede. Suede looked up at when he walked in and closed the door.

"What does he want this time?"

"For me to do the impossible, to watch Carden."

Suede rubbed his back when he sat down on the bed, kissing his hair. "It's okay, sweetie."

"He doesn't care if Carden destroys me. All he cares about is Carden, and how much money he can make from him. I could kill him."

Suede hugged his neck. "If Carden knew, he'd kill us all."

"We had no choice. We were all under Blane's orders. He was our maker. If I would have defied him back then..." He turned and looked at Suede. "I wasn't the one who killed the last of them off. Blane was. He did it."

"But we stood aside and let him," Suede said. "If Carden knew..." He laid down on the pillow. "Only Blane can mask that from Carden, because Blane is our maker. If he removes his protection tomorrow, Carden would hunt us all down for what we did, for our ignorance. We believed him, Suede, we believed that the Pure Bloods intended to wipe us out, that they hated us because we were less than them."

"Doesn't change the fact that we helped massacre Carden's family, and now Blane wants me to betray him again." He hung his head.

Suede drew Silk into his arms. "It will be all right, baby."

"No," he said, "It won't. We're stuck here, doing Blane's bidding. We'll never be free of him."

* * * *

Dennis watched Thiago's face intensely. "This is the perfect game for a vampire, isn't it?"

Thiago actually smiled.

"Vampires have the best poker faces. Look at me, completely naked except for one sock, and still you won't be happy until I lose that. I'm always the one left in a sock," Dennis grumbled, throwing down the last of the cards on the table. "Okay, you check, raise, or fold?"

"Does a two and six count?"

"Are they in the same suit?"

Dennis shook his head. "Can't you just take off your shirt? I'm dying here, nothing to look at while you decimate me at cards. I don't like poker."

"That's because you don't know how to play poker."

"I can't keep it all straight, Royal Flush... straight, full house...which is which, and how come you can make your hand with the same cards on the table that I can?"

"That's the game, Dennis."

"It sucks." He smiled. "And I'd rather suck you."

"Are you folding?"

"My cock is."

"Come on, Dennis."

"Yes, fold, fold," he threw down his cards.

"And do I have to give my sock now?"

Thiago laughed. "And, Dennis, you got...hey, you win."

"How?"

"You have an ace of hearts and there are two hearts on the table. You have three of a kind and high card."

"Fantastic. Will you kiss me now?"

Thiago laughed. He moved his chair out and opened his arms. "Off with that sock."

"Hey, what are you taking off since I won?"

"My shoe?"

"No way, pants, off with them."

"It was only three of a kind."

"And a high card." They were laughing as Dennis got up and started struggling with Thiago's pants. He had them half off when the doorbell rang. Dennis groaned. "You got to be kidding. Someone has it out for me."

"It's Rory," he said. "He's distraught. He needs you." Thiago pulled his pants back on. "I can go."

"No, stay. Will you be all right upstairs in the bedroom?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "I'll wait for you."

Dennis kissed him and groaned with regret when he let him go. He watched him disappear upstairs, then ran for the door. "Rory?" he gasped.

Rory looked like death warmed over.

Dennis pulled him inside and closed the door. "Are you all right? Did Carden hurt you? He didn't drink your blood, did he?"

"No," he said, "of course not. And how did you know about..."

"Thiago thinks you might be in danger."

"You know, Thiago should mind his own business," Rory snapped. "Carden would never hurt me."

"I don't think he meant from Carden. Come and sit down. You look like you're about to collapse."

Rory sat down at the kitchen table. He put a hand to his head. "It's intense. I feel completely out of control, and I think Carden does, too. We didn't expect this to happen, and fuck, what am I supposed to do about Jack?"

Dennis sighed. "I don't know. Do you love Carden?"

"Dennis, the word love doesn't even begin to express it. He looks at me, he touches me and I'd...I'd do anything for him. I'm so emotional. I say his name and tears come to my eyes. That's not like me."

"Not to mention that you're exhausted. The sex is...ah...different."

"Yes," he swallowed, "and now I understand what your obsession is with Thiago. I don't know what to do."

"What can you do?"

"Nothing, but I have to tell Jack, and I'm so...scared, scared that tomorrow Carden will deny me, turn me away. He's unpredictable. There's so much he's not telling me, so much going on that I don't know about. And then after I left him, I went home and, Dennis..." He reached out, grabbed onto him. "I heard a voice speaking to me."

"A voice? Was it Carden, because sometimes I can hear Thiago?"

"No," he shivered, "it was pure evil."

"What did it say?"

"It said...he's mine."

"He's mine?"

Rory nodded. "You had to hear it. It was evil, sinister, threatening. I don't want to tell Carden."

"You have to."

"No, he'll make me stay away from him. I know it."

Dennis glanced at the ceiling.

"Oh no, Dennis, Thiago is here? I'm so sorry. I'll go."

“No, it’s okay. He told me you needed me.” Dennis came over and hugged his neck for a minute. “It will be all right,” but even as he said it, it didn’t sound right. He glanced above him again. It wasn’t only Carden who knew things. Thiago knew a lot more than he was saying as well. It was time to ask some questions.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rory was surprised when he arrived at the club early and heard a strange, grunting sound. He followed the noise, shocked to see Kolin Karolyi, the club's bodyguard, on the dance floor.

Karolyi was on all fours, something Rory had never seen in a fight. Karolyi, the unbeaten Ultimate Fight champion was the man Brandon Fire was supposed to face in the ring. Karolyi was the vampire fighter who had killed an unsuspecting Libreto Barrera.

"I can't," Karolyi ground out.

"Yes, you can," a voice shrieked back. Rory flattened himself against the wall and watched with dismay as Pinky Stevenson, the man he'd once considered a friend, kicked Karolyi in the stomach.

Karolyi bellowed, his canine teeth elongating, his face twisted with blood and pain.

Rory hated Karolyi with a vengeance. He had murdered his friend and Pinky, who had been in

Barrera's corner the night he died, was now training his conqueror. Rory realized there was blood in his mouth. He'd bitten down on his own tongue to prevent himself from screaming at Pinky to stop torturing the Ukrainian champ.

"What's that sound?" Pinky asked.

Rory thought he would die from fright when Pinky came right to him. Frozen in place, Rory was shocked when a body pressed against him, a mouth clamping down on him.

"What the —"

Pinky looked disgusted as Thiago plunged his tongue into Rory's mouth.

"Goddamn homos," Pinky muttered and backed away.

Another kick, another scream.

"React a different way. No teeth. Not until you're ready to kill," Pinky said.

Ready to kill... now Rory felt true and total panic.

Thiago took his mouth away from Rory and led him by the hand away from the dance floor.

"Thank you," Rory said.

Thiago shrugged. "You and Carden did a lot for me last night. Took a lot of pressure off me. Thanks."

Rory smiled, but he still felt shaky. "No problem...just doing my job."

"I have to watch out for you...being Dennis' best friend and all."

Rory took a deep breath. "Thanks, I appreciate it."

"You...*are* just friends, right?"

"Just friends."

"Never...more?"

Thiago's face was so serious, Rory was shocked. Wow, Thiago was smitten. He felt great for Dennis. Everything he'd heard about Thiago had been totally discouraging. He felt he and Dennis were heading into dangerous, yet exciting waters. "Nope, never. Never will be. Dennis is crazy about you."

"Yeah?" Thiago looked thrilled. His face quickly fell again. "Please don't tell him we had this conversation...*please*."

"Okay, I won't. And listen, thanks. I mean it."

Thiago waved off Rory's words and glanced back at the club. "Listen, I know a way your fighter can really throw Karolyi off his game."

"Yeah? How?"

"He should touch his ass...Karolyi might work in a gay club, but he is a true homophobe. He will go nuts."

Rory drove away, his thoughts jumbled. He missed just hanging out with Dennis. When he thought about all that happened, it seemed bizarre that only a couple weeks had flown by. So much had happened so quickly...he found parking right

outside Dennis' apartment on Crescent Heights. He took that as a good omen. He knocked on Dennis' apartment door.

Dennis opened quickly, but looked crestfallen. "Oh, it's you," he said.

"Thanks a lot."

"Sorry, Rory. I just...I just."

"Yeah, me, too. I am a lovesick fool. Listen, how about some lunch?" Dennis was not very responsive until Rory added, "My treat."

Dennis sighed. "Geez, I'm so easily had."

"You choose. Where do you want to go?"

"Some place with no vampires."

Rory laughed. "Haven't they taken over everything?"

"There's Canters Deli. They haven't taken over that."

"Okay," Rory agreed. As they drove west across Beverly Boulevard, Rory flipped radio stations. Until recently, all the Los Angeles English-speaking radio stations had been bought out by Spanish-language stations. Now it was vamp music. "I can't decide if I like it," Rory mused.

"You know what's weird? It's like trance music, which I've always hated except now I'm hearing melodies...and actual lyrics," Dennis said. "Am I crazy?"

Rory was so busy singing along he only half-heard Dennis.

"Oh, my God. You hear the words, too!"

Rory glanced at him. "Yeah. I guess I do." The enormity of the changes they were experiencing seemed to hit them both at once.

It was Dennis who changed channels. They found vamp trance on almost every station.

Then they heard, "In other news today, former world boxing champion, Brandon Fire, is set to face Kolin Karolyi on Saturday the fourteenth, at Fantasy Springs Resort Spa and Casino. At the press conference announcing the fight today, the fighters had to be physically separated when ugly words were exchanged."

Rory reached over and changed the station.

They pulled up outside Canters Deli and the two men stared at the sign out front reading *Under New Management*. A pair of fangs extended from the ends of the letter M. No misunderstandings here.

"Dang. Think they still make gefilte fish?" Dennis asked.

"Only one way to find out."

"One thing's sure changed," Dennis whispered. "With vampires running the joint, we won't be subjected to valet parkers."

He was right. They found parking and sauntered to the restaurant's rust-colored

entrance. The sight of pastries, cookies, including the hat-shaped Hamantaschen breads and the symbolic challah, gave Rory pause. Rory gestured at the giant, spiral-shaped creation standing on a table in the entrance. "That's a nice touch."

Dennis was trying to follow his reasoning. "What is?"

"The challah. It represents life going on, in spite of change."

Dennis stared at the massive pastry creation for a moment. "If you say so. I'm kinda wanting to try the espresso truffle torte...or maybe the sour cream coffee cake. I could starve to death dating Thiago. Food doesn't interest him at all."

He paused as a gigantic, bubbling pizza came out of the kitchen, the hot young waiter carrying it over his shoulder paused, winking at them both.

Dennis took an appreciative sniff. "Cream cheese, my friend. That's an honest to God smoked salmon and cream cheese pizza. I think I also detect dill. Oh man...will you look at that?"

Rory followed his gaze. Dennis pointed to a sign next to a lavish chocolate creation reading *New Wave Chocolate Tunnel Cake*.

The two friends grinned at each other.

"Hope you aren't close to maxing out your credit limit buddy," Dennis said. "Amma hungry."

Rory shook his head. "Plenty of room on it." He realized he, too, was hungry. They slid into a booth, marveling when their favorite drinks arrived without even having to ask for them.

They stared at each other.

"So," said the very cute waiter who'd smiled at them a moment ago. "You want the smoked salmon pizza?"

* * * *

"Now..." Shawn received the invitation on his cell phone from an anonymous caller, who had taken great pains to disguise his voice. The number read *restricted*.

His suggestion had worked perfectly, and soon he would be a member of their exclusive little club. He didn't need Blane. He never had, especially when he discovered that one of the members of this little club was none other than the producer of the blood product that was used to feed vampires. It wouldn't take much for some chemists somewhere to refill some the bottles with something which wouldn't satisfy a vampire's thirst. Then all he had to do was replace some of the bottles at Eclipse and sit back and watch the fireworks.

Carden was an unbeatable foe, but not when he was starving. Then he'd have to be taken down

like a dog by the authorities. They'd put him somewhere to protect the public and then he'd get the millionaires to hire some Special Ops to bring Carden to them. Meanwhile he'd work on making Rory real paranoid, and when the time was right, he'd let Carden know about the army who had wiped out his race.

Soon immortality would be his, and so would Carden.

* * * *

"I swear the food got better in that joint," Dennis said as he and Rory waddled out of the deli.

"What, are you mental?" Rory asked, still in a chocolate frenzy. "That was something, wasn't it? No menus...just...reading our minds."

"Didn't read my mind so good, buddy," Dennis reported. "I was thinking how much I'd like a nooner with Thiago." His cell phone rang. "Speak of the fanged devil!" He snapped open the phone and grinned like a loon. "Would I like you to drop by?" Dennis grinned. "Rory, take me home. My baby's coming to see me."

"Can we say an hour? I gotta make a quick stop first."

Dennis heard Thiago's exasperated *fine* on the other end of the cell. Man, his hearing was getting

more and more acute. "What's the pit stop?" Dennis asked, popping the top button on his jeans.

"Gotta swing by the gym."

"You have got to be kidding me. You know I'm allergic to exercise."

Rory smiled. "Not that kind of gym. I want to drop in on Brandon."

Dennis looked startled. "Brandon...as in Fire?"

Rory nodded and took the Ten freeway toward downtown. "I gotta warn him about Karolyi."

"Warn him that the guy likes to kill on contact?"

Rory hesitated. Maybe this wasn't a good idea bringing Dennis here. Dennis might blab to Thiago and Thiago might...he remembered Thiago's kiss and decided to take Dennis into his confidence. "I'm helping Brandon out."

"Shit, Rory. Not this again."

"I owe him."

"He threw a fight. He deserved what he got."

"Did he?" Rory asked, his voice quiet. "He threw it to get money to help his little girl, who died anyway. He lost everything, D."

Dennis sighed and popped another button on his jeans. "I probably should have stuck to one slice of raspberry pie." He glanced out the window. "Brandon Fire...man, that seems like a million years ago."

"Doesn't it?" Rory asked suddenly. "D, anything that you see and hear...promise me you'll keep it to yourself."

"I promise."

They arrived at the tiny, ugly gym at the back of a garage. Built of tin, it was a sweatbox in winter. In summer, it was a death trap. The sound of feet and fists pounded as they squeezed past a rack of new tires and an old Karmann Ghia sports car on a block.

"I thought they'd been outlawed," Dennis muttered. Since the vamps had taken over, gasoline cars were relics of the past. Some people kept them as a reminder of the good-old-days. Some people turned them in for grocery and clothing coupons.

Inside the gym, which was almost consumed by the ring and a tiny walkway around its four sides, Brandon was sparring. He was giving his all, feet and hands to a tall, muscular Japanese guy wearing shorts with the word Teikken down the side.

Rory was impressed. Teikken Gym in Japan was about the most exclusive martial arts studio in the world. Brandon looked good, some real muscle tone building on his legs and upper body. He was quicker on his feet than Rory remembered.

The Teikken Warrior had Brandon on his back in an instant and threw himself on his prone body.

They grappled for a moment and it never failed to make Rory think how homo-erotic Ultimate Fighting was. Groin against groin...two bodies grinding in agitated frenzy for supremacy.

Brandon pinned Teikken's elbow near his ear and the fighter tapped out. His trainer jumped in the ring and stopped his fighter before he could dislocate his shoulder. All the spectators, including Rory and Dennis applauded and as Brandon strolled to his corner. He noticed Dennis.

Spitting out his mouthpiece, he crowed, "Big D!" He reached through the ropes to give his gloved fist to Dennis who shook it with both hands. "Give me two minutes," the fighter said and left the gym.

"Christ on a rock I am sweating," Dennis said.

He and Rory went outside and a few minutes later, Brandon joined them.

"How did you find me?"

Rory shrugged. "This is your trainer's gym. I remembered."

Brandon nodded. "I'm meeting Ricardo for lunch. Want to join me."

Rory and Dennis groaned. "We just ate."

"Fair enough. I need protein though...follow me."

They went back past the hoisted car, the tires and a stack of tools jumbled on the floor. They entered the private world of Ricardo Montoya. His

walls were grimy, covered in shelves with motor parts, a few boxing posters and a remarkable line-up of condiments and spices.

The old man had a towel over his shoulder and he sprinkled a handful of herbs on a mountainous platter of salad and grilled chicken.

"Sit," he said to Brandon who shoveled food down his jaw with his fork before he'd even finished sitting. "Nice to see you again," he said to Rory.

"Yeah, nice to see you, too," Rory said, introducing Dennis who stared fixedly at some grilled chicken on a carving board.

"You would like some?" the old trainer asked Dennis.

"Yes, thanks."

"No, he would not." Rory turned to Brandon. "He came to visit me a couple of days ago and spiked my food."

Brandon glanced at Ricardo and grinned. "I thought you looked a little too happy."

"We come bearing gifts," Rory said, changing the subject.

"No candies," the trainer barked.

"Nothing like that."

"No sex?" Brandon asked, forking some saw-toothed, feathery mizuna lettuce, swallowing it whole.

Rory was impressed that Brandon was eating such exotic fare. He shook his head. "Fraid not."

Brandon shrugged, but the expression in his eyes seemed cloudy.

"I heard something at the Eclipse Club that might come in handy for the fight."

"Karolyi's got a toothache?" Brandon asked, his tone hopeful.

"He's a homophobe. I have it on reliable authority that touching his ass will send him into the spin cycle."

Brandon forked a cherry tomato. "That's interesting." He waited a beat. "I could get close to his, rub against his wiener..."

Ricardo Montoya rubbed the bristles on his chin. "You will make him mad."

Nobody said anything for a moment.

The old man shrugged. "We have to come up with a strategy for what to do when he does get mad."

"You got any ideas?" Brandon asked.

The old man smiled like a tomahawk.

* * * *

Dennis ran to his door, found his lover waiting and was staggered to see something resembling anguish in his eyes.

Thiago went ahead of him, his manner stiff.

As soon as Dennis closed the door, Thiago flew at him, shredding his clothes with talons that appeared out of nowhere.

Dennis lay on the floor sweating, his cock hard. "I have one sock on," he croaked.

"Open your fucking legs!" Thiago barked.

Dennis obeyed, feeling his lover's long tongue flickering down his ass crack.

Thiago stood. "You don't have the scent of another on you."

"Another...what?" Dennis felt dazed. He couldn't cheat on Thiago if Thiago demanded it.

"Get on the bed and wait for me," Thiago snapped.

Dennis went into his room and lay on the bed. He wasn't nervous. He felt his man's presence and turned to look at him.

"Did I tell you to close your legs?"

Dennis opened his legs again, allowing Thiago to lick him from back to front. He was clutching fistfuls of the sheet in his hands, the chords in his neck standing out as his head dug back into the pillow. His cock was harder than seemed possible. He pushed his hips up and down and few times and swore softly. Thiago could take him to the abyss and leave him there for as long as it pleased him, then shoot him straight up in the air like a rocket launcher. "Thi...a...go...oooooo!"

He was panting, laughing, his cock shooting while Thiago calmly lay down beside him, waiting for Dennis to come down. When he did, Dennis said, "You can hold me if you want."

"Do you want me to?"

"Yes, I think I do." He smiled, going into his arms. "You're beautiful, and so um...strong. Thiago?"

"Um?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Why do you work for Blane?"

Thiago moved out of his reach so quickly that Dennis didn't even realize it until he saw him standing against the wall.

"What did I say?"

"Why did you ask me that?" His voice sounded like it was encased in stone.

"I just ah...wondered." He sat up.

"I like it there. What else am I going to do? I'm a vampire."

"Vampires do a lot of things now. They're cops and lawyers, even doctors, I heard about one vamp who —"

"Dennis," he said. "Stop. I do what vamps do best, I fuck. You have a problem with that now?"

"No, ah...yes, maybe," Dennis said suddenly.

"Well then," he said, putting on his clothes, "this is where we part ways."

Dennis blinked. "No, what...wait," he said, getting out of bed. "You don't mean that."

Thiago paused and looked at him. "I work for Blane. I do what I do, if you can't accept that without interrogating me, then we won't see each other anymore." He shrugged as if it meant nothing.

That hurt. "So, I guess it's true, vampires can't love. They don't have any goddamn feelings. What are you hiding?"

"Nothing," he said, picking up his shirt.

"The sun is up, you can't..."

Thiago put his coat over his head. "I'll be okay," he said and left the room.

Dennis ran down the stairs after him. "We need to talk about this."

"Talk is over," he said, opening the door, ducking under his jacket and running to the car.

Dennis was devastated. He closed the door and banged his head on it a few times. He wished he could believe this was just an argument and it would pass, but he had a feeling it wasn't. At least he knew one thing, there was something really strange going on at Eclipse.

* * * *

Thiago was feeling the heat as he raced from his car to the door of the club. He could tolerate a

little bit of sunlight, thanks to a vampire hunter who'd tortured him with it in the eighteenth century. The sunlight had practically fried him alive, but it had allowed him to develop somewhat of a tolerance.

Love, however, was another thing. He didn't like the word, or the feeling, but it certainly had its power. He'd seen it clearly in the face of Carden's father as he got in front of the woman he loved and took the stake deep into his heart. He remembered turning away, lowering his head in respect as the pure blood female fell to her knees and covered his body with hers, shrieking, "Kill me, kill me." They chopped off her head, right there while he watched, paralyzed but not dead. They dragged him off half mad with grief, calling out the name of his son, telling him to stay away. "Don't avenge us, Carden, don't avenge us. Save yourself, son."

Thiago's eyes filled with blood tears as he stood now in his sanctuary, thinking of how they walled the pure blood up alive and spread the body of his beloved Irena everywhere, planting her head on a stick in place of the pure blood flag.

Blane was calling for them to search the house while vampires chopped up the body of Carden's mother, and danced around it, smearing her blood all over them. For days, they had surrounded them, leaving them with nothing left to nourish

themselves except each other. By the time they found Carden's parents, they were already extremely weak, and on the border of feral. Carden was hiding.

"Find him, find the boy! Don't kill him," Blane had shouted, "bring him to me. If we have their prince, the rest will come." He was out for blood, and he wouldn't rest until he had killed every last one of them.

Thiago had seen the prince, hiding in the shadows, waiting, his beauty savage even at such a young age, his fury explosive, he could feel Carden's emotions reach out and strangle him. If Carden hadn't have been so distraught, so ravished, Thiago knew that he would have never been able to detect him.

"Where is he? Did you find him? I have to have that boy." Blane came barreling in his direction. "Where is he? Did you see him? He's weak. One of the soldiers said they wounded him, without blood, he'll be easy to subdue."

"I haven't seen him," Thiago replied. "I don't sense him anywhere. Wait," he said, pointing off in the distance, "I saw something over there. That's him." He led them all on a wild goose chase that night, away from Carden, giving him the chance to escape. There had been enough death, enough savagery, and he knew as he watched them hoist the beautiful head of Carden's mother

up on the flagpole, that they had truly destroyed their betters.

As time passed, and Blane's obsession with finding Carden intensified, he realized that Blane never intended to destroy Carden, he had always wanted him for himself, and his obsession had spanned centuries. Carden's kind had never been a threat to them. It had all been a lie.

Thiago had broken away from Blane eventually, to make his own way in the world. He had kept his secret about saving Carden, and learned to cloak his thoughts from Blane, letting him hear only what he chose.

And it wasn't until Blane had finally found a way to bring Carden to him through Danny, that he and several others who'd been a part the original army assembled to kill pure bloods, had been rounded up and forced to do his bidding in this damn place. Blane feared only one thing, Carden, and with good reason.

Sometimes Thiago thought it might be better just to go to Carden and tell him the truth, let Carden destroy them all, and end it. He'd been seriously considering that before he met Dennis. But Dennis had changed everything, and suddenly this life seemed precious to him. Except now, he was asking questions, questions Thiago could never answer.

He sank onto the bed, lulling himself into that sleep, which felt like death. At least there in that place, he didn't have to feel.

* * * *

Rory felt miserable. Dennis cried. Dennis hadn't cried since they were kids.

"He dumped me."

"Dennis...I'm sorry. I wish I knew what to say."

"Tell me it's a dream...tell me anything except it isn't true."

"I...can't do that. Dennis, can't you live with him being...you know?"

Dennis looked at him, his broken heart clear on his face. "I could live with it if I was certain he really enjoyed it." He smeared his runny nose across the back of his hand. "They have something on him...all of them."

"I think you're right." Rory's voice was quiet. "Shit...we had to go and fall in love with a couple of guys who might just be the nicest blood-suckers in the whole frickin' world."

"What do we do about it?"

Rory lifted his shoulders. "We're men, aren't we? We protect, at all costs, those we love."

Dennis stared at him a moment.

"You with me?" Rory asked.

"I'm with you."

They shook hands on the deal. Dennis' shaky fingers grew stronger by the second.

"Do you get the sense they both want us to butt out?"

Rory's smile was brief, but sincere. "Oh yes. It's clear as a radio signal."

"And so we do...what?"

"We get busy, my friend."

* * * *

When Shawn made his way down the decrepit cement stairs into the damp musty cellar, he could hardly believe that this is where a group of ultra rich immortality seekers would gather. There were not even any chairs to sit on, no refreshments, champagne. Hell, where was the spa? "You guys are millionaires," he clicked his tongue, "and you couldn't even spiffy the place up a bit?"

"Who is this buffoon?" A man's voice rose sharply within the confines of the basement. He stepped into the center of the room, wearing a long white robe.

Shit, Shawn thought, who'd this guy take himself for?

"Why is he among us?" the man demanded. He looked as old as Methuselah, his face cracked and grey, his hair was pure white.

"Dominick, this is Shawn," Alan Spencer announced a little nervously, bowing. "He is a powerful Witch."

"We don't need a bloody witch," he announced in a hostile voice, "what we need is Carden Adair."

Shawn studied him carefully and then suddenly he realized why they met in the basement. "You're not human," he said. "What in hell happened to you?"

Dominick turned his eyes to him. "I was bitten by a monster who didn't bother to complete the transformation, a beautiful fiend who took delight in giving me sexual paradise, then left me for dead. I am condemned to living like this for eternity."

"That's too bad," Shawn clicked his tongue. "You know, Blane doesn't care if Carden gives you what you want or not. And I tell you right now," he shook his head, "Carden won't do it willingly. Blane will take your money for sure, but he wants Carden for himself. He plans to rip you off. He has no respect for mortals."

The group of men began talking among themselves. "Silence!" Dominick demanded. He looked intently at Shawn. "And what is it you think you can do for us, Witch?"

"I know how to capture Carden."

"That is impossible," Dominick scoffed, putting up a hand to still the roar of disbelief. "If Carden won't come to us willingly, there is no one on the face of this earth that is powerful enough to bring him here. Do you know who you are talking about?"

"Yes, I know Carden very well actually."

"Come," Dominick said. "I've devoted my life to the worship of Carden."

The passageway was lit up with torchlight. Shawn followed the men to the end of the passageway. "Open the door," Dominick demanded.

The padlock was removed and the door, made of concrete and steel, was laid open. Shawn walked into the room behind Dominick. What he saw rendered him speechless.

The floor was covered with a red carpet, and on the wall was a beautifully done painting of Carden. The likeness was unmistakable. He was lying naked on an altar, his head turned to the side. Blood was dripping from his hands and feet, into golden chalices. "Behold, I give you Carden Adair, Prince of the Pure Bloods, the only one of his kind still in existence."

"That we know of," Shawn said.

"He is the last one," Dominick said. "I've searched the earth for another such as Carden. He is our savior, our God, destined for royalty,

denied his birthright because of ignorance and fear. We have no way of knowing the total extent of his powers, only know this, they are greater than we can even conceive. This is his shrine. And when he comes to us, he will give us his gifts. He will reverse the damage that this fiend did, and restore all of us to health, youth and beauty."

Okay, Shawn thought, this was almost a religion. "I have a plan," he said, "to bring you ah...your prince."

"Are you saying," Dominick said, "that Blane intends to trick us?"

"I'm saying that no matter how many pretty pictures you have of Carden, he's not going to ah...let you do that stuff to him."

"Carden is beauty, and kindness."

"Beauty, I give you, kindness...well..." Shawn paused, "that depends. Listen," he looked around, "we all want the same things here, right? We want eternal life and youth."

There was silence.

"And once you are young and eternal, how about sex on demand with the most beautiful immortal that walks the earth, the one who can give you paradise in bed?" He pointed to the painting.

There were some groans of agreement.

"How many of you actually pay for Carden's services?"

"Two of us have reached the higher level, and are allowed sexual rewards," Dominick replied. "I will have my reward once I am transformed by his blood. Like this, I don't see myself as worthy of his gifts."

"Okay, think of it like this, he'd be here on demand, available to all of us. You could give Carden his own little kingdom right down here."

"How would we do that?" Dominick asked curiously.

"Which one of you is Lionel Chapman, producer of and distributor of that blood substitute vamps drink?"

A skinny little man with glasses came forward. In a soft voice, he said, "I am Mr. Chapman."

"Good, good," Shawn said. "Now, if you guys want your God, here is what I need you to do—"

"Wait," Dominick asked, "and what are you asking for in return?"

"I get one night," he said. "I want youth, beauty, immortality, and one night to experience Carden. After that, do what you will with him. Agreed."

Dominick looked at him, then nodded.

* * * *

It sickened Blane to think of Carden wasting himself on Rory. Carden had promised to share

his bed, and that hadn't happened. His patience was coming to an end. He would have him, and he would have him tonight, and if that little mortal worm tried to get in his way, he'd eat him for breakfast.

The club was in full swing. His boys were doing exactly as they were supposed to do. The money was rolling. He was a happy man. Then he passed Thiago in the hallway and noticed that he looked unhappy about something, and for Thiago to have any discernable expression on his face meant there must be something wrong. "What's with you? You look like a rat's ass. Smile. Customers want a smiling hunk, not one that looks like he just fell in a bucket of shit."

Thiago pasted on a fake smile and kept walking.

Blane paused, listened to hear what he was thinking. Since when had his boys learned how to cloak their thoughts from him? There had been a time when he was able to read them like a book. Sometimes his boys weren't easy to keep track of anymore. He didn't like that. He didn't like feeling that he was out of control.

He continued down the hallway and walked into Carden's bedroom without knocking. Carden was laying there on the bed, the balcony doors open, curtains blowing in the wind, and just as he'd hoped, completely naked. "Just as I like you,"

he growled, moving closer. He went to touch him, but something told him not to.

"Don't you knock?" Carden demanded, his arms folded under his head.

"Oh how I'd love to gag and bind you, and have my way with you," he said softly.

"You can try."

Blane stiffened. "We need to talk."

"Talk then."

"You need to stop wasting your time with that mortal employee."

"You may leave now."

"Carden," he hissed. "You promised me. I gave you more than enough time to grieve. I want my turn."

"Take a number."

"How dare you lay there like that naked, laughing at me, mocking me?"

"I didn't ask for an audience. Don't look. Leave me."

"You gave your word. You're royalty, a prince."

"Yes, but the Prince of what?" he asked ironically. "That was a long time ago. I have no people, they were all wiped out. I am the prince of nothing."

"I wish you'd stop insinuating that I know something about your tragic history."

Carden sat up. "You taught that nurse fledging a lullaby my mother sang to me."

"Yes," he shrugged, "and lullabies are sung by many."

"Not that one. She invented it. No one knew that tune but members of our immediate family. Where did you hear it? Where, Blane? Tell me, or I swear I'll kill you where you stand."

Blane closed his mind. He told himself to calm down. There was nothing except that stupid tune to link him to the past. He'd already dealt with the idiot nurse. "Danny was humming it."

Carden remained silent.

"You did teach him that song, didn't you?"

"Yes. I taught it to him."

"So, this is the deal, Carden. You give yourself to me tonight and you beg off that mortal or I'll fire him, or worse." Carden was on top of him suddenly. Blane had hit the floor on his back, and he had no recollection of how he ended up there. Carden was leaning over him, his bare foot on Blane's throat.

"I will do as you ask, but if you so much as look at Rory in a way I deem inappropriate, I will kill you very slowly, and painfully. Is that clear?"

He nodded.

"I will satisfy your depravity, but after, I will have sexual relations with whomever I desire,

without seeking your approval. Is that also clear enough, or should I repeat it?"

The foot pressed down on his throat. Blane was sure he heard the bone cracking. There was pain now. "Yes," he managed between clenched teeth.

Carden released him and was suddenly back on the bed, relaxing in the same position.

Blane got to his feet. When he could articulate words again, he said, "There is no one tonight for you, a special meeting is being held. The ritual will make us exceedingly rich. You will cooperate."

"I will not turn anyone into anything," he said.

"Just go through the motions, let them drink a bit of your blood, amuse themselves, fuck a few of them, give them a thrill."

"You are extremely vile, Blane."

He laughed. "Anyway, my pet, relax. The ritual is a while off yet. Go down, watch the shows. They're hot. They'll put you in the mood for later."

"I doubt that," he said.

"You tell your little boyfriend you're busy tonight, you got it?" he pointed at Carden.

"I said yes, Blane. Now leave."

Blane smiled. "I'll expect you in my room as soon as the club closes."

* * * *

Carden didn't respond. The door closed. Blane had heard the song from Danny? That was possible of course. Danny loved that lullaby, but why in hell would he be singing when someone like Blane was taking him hostage? Blane was lying.

* * * *

Rory often looked up at the second floor, but each time he attempted to go upstairs to find Carden, something came up. Jack was around somewhere, and Rory was trying to avoid him. Then Dennis showed up around nine o'clock, looking extremely depressed. This in spite of their cunning plan. Dennis was going to stay away from the club. He was going to be cool. Rory noticed Thiago walking right by Dennis without speaking to him.

He would have to say something. Thiago might have different blood coursing through his veins, but he had feelings for Dennis. Rory was certain of it. As for Dennis...Rory knew he couldn't handle being in love and being mistreated. Rory followed Thiago into the room with the ghostly piano player.

"What do you want?" Thiago spat out without even turning around.

Rory hesitated. The ghost was playing *The Long and Winding Road*, a song that always made him feel so melancholy. He and Dennis had come a long way, they'd both found love, they'd both given up all pretence, dropped their guards. He had to make Thiago understand.

Thiago stared at him.

Rory wondered if Thiago was able to read his mind. "I know Dennis is...headstrong. I know he wears his heart on his sleeve and cannot keep his emotions in check." Rory hesitated.

Thiago stood, arms folded across his chest. The stance said *I'm not listening*.

Somehow Rory knew he was. "When Dennis..." Rory glanced over his shoulder to make sure Dennis wasn't close by. "When Dennis was five years old, his mother left their father. Dennis had a six-year-old sister, Donna. Their mother was a brave woman who left an abusive marriage and started again in another town. On Christmas Eve, about five months after she left her husband, Dennis' mom took the kids to the mall. It was the first time she had money in months. She wanted to let the kids pick out a gift. Dennis...Dennis wanted a Spiderman doll."

Thiago started to speak.

"Let me finish," Rory said. "Please. He never got that doll. His mom parked outside the store. Her ex-husband approached the car with a gift

wrapped in Christmas paper. It was a gun. He said *Merry Fucking Christmas* and blew her brains out. He turned the gun on Donna and then Dennis. Somehow, Dennis survived."

"You're making this up," Thiago said.

Rory didn't think Thiago was really accusing him of lying. "I'm not, I promise you."

Thiago looked devastated. "He never...I...he... really went through this?"

Rory nodded. "He survived, Thiago. I never thought he would get over what happened. I never thought he would be able to love anyone...to stop looking over his shoulder. You see, his dad went to prison, vowing to kill him, to finish the job he started once he was released."

"Released? Who would release him? He murdered two people."

"They released his father after serving ten years. That's all he got. He came out when Dennis was fifteen. He made no secret of wanting to hunt down his son, but obviously, he never found him. Dennis went into the witness protection program...I met him the year after he moved here. He is...he is my best friend. I know all his secrets. I know everything there is to know about him. I can tell you that you will never meet a more aggravating man in your life. But you will never, ever meet anyone who has such a capacity for love and sheer pleasure in the details. He loves life. He

sees and smells things most people don't notice. So please, give him a chance."

Thiago's head tilted at an odd angle. "This is the most horrible story I ever heard. I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do with this."

Rory spread his hands out. "I'm sorry. I had to tell you the truth."

"You just dropped a bomb in my lap." Thiago's tone was sulky.

Rory sighed. "One day, I am sure he will tell you everything...or you would read it in his mind, but—"

Thiago snapped his fingers. "That's why when he's sleeping, I see him at cemeteries...crying. Because he can't go to her grave. There is no grave for her...oh..." Thiago's eyes glazed over.

Rory felt the vampire's anguish and let him wrestle with it for a moment. "He's my brother. My brother from another mother. I want him to be happy. I hope you will give him a chance, Thiago. Please just think about what I said."

Thiago's head dropped and Rory left him alone, hoping he hadn't done more harm than good.

Rory couldn't stop thinking about Carden, but sometimes he swore someone was trying to run interference, saying strange things like...*he's not yours...he can't love you...leave this place.*

When Thiago got up on stage with Suede, the crowd went wild. They did a simulated scene with Suede as a vampire hunter and Thiago as his tied and bound conquest. Dennis didn't take a table. He sat at the bar, only watching with sad eyes when Suede began to run his hands over Thiago's buff, oiled body.

Rory finally got enough of a break to go and say hello to Dennis.

Dennis gave him a ghost of a smile.

"What's going on?" Rory asked. *Death. You will die, Rory. Is it worth it? Worth it? Worth it?*

"I said hello and he ignored me."

Shit, I really fucked things up for you. Oh, man...

"What? I'm sorry, there's a lot of noise and..." Rory stopped. The voice had gone.

"I wish I'd never met him!"

"You don't mean that."

"Yes, I do." Dennis' voice rose, then fell again. "I couldn't even work today. I love him, Rory. I don't think I can go on without him. I..." Tears ran down his face. "I...what am I going to do?"

"Rory, there you are," Jack said. "I've been looking for you all over the place."

"Jack, can it wait?" Rory asked him, turning back to talk to Dennis, but suddenly he was gone.

The show on the stage ended with Thiago breaking his ropes and grabbing the vampire hunter. However, he suddenly stopped in the

middle of the scene and looked in the direction of the bar. Suddenly without warning, he lunged off the stage, practically flying in the air, and ran toward the exit.

The commotion caused Rory and Jack to pause in their conversation to see what was going on. They saw Thiago push the front door open and yell, "No. Dennis! Don't!"

* * * *

Carden picked his head up off the pillow and walked over to the balcony. He saw Thiago running down Hollywood Boulevard, completely naked, chasing a car. He easily caught up to it and planted himself in front of it, causing it to swerve to a stop in the middle of the road. Suddenly, Thiago's thoughts called to him.

Please, Carden, help me.

Carden pulled on his pants and his shoes, then jumped off the balcony, landing on his feet like a cat. Thirty seconds later, he stood beside Thiago, giving him an inquiring look.

Thiago was staring into the car.

Rory's friend Dennis was sitting there, with a pistol pointed to his temple. He was sobbing. Carden looked at Thiago again. *What did you do to this poor mortal?*

I love him.

Carden took a quick intake of breath and suddenly he could imagine Rory sitting in Dennis' place. Love could drive someone to this. With one lunge of his arm, Carden smashed through the windshield and grabbed the gun out of Dennis hand. The glass broke cleanly in one smooth, round piece, with no shattering.

Dennis was so shocked, he didn't move.

Carden quickly took the bullets out of the gun and handed it Thiago.

Thiago's eyes were rimmed with blood. "I don't deserve your help," he said.

Carden gave him a curious look. "Take care of your lover." As he slowly began to walk back up the road, the headlights of Rory's car hit Carden full in the eyes. He didn't blink.

Rory pulled over beside him, a few feet behind Dennis' vehicle, and rolled down his window. "Is Dennis all right?"

Carden glanced back at the car. Thiago had opened the door and was hunched down beside Dennis, talking to him softly. "He is now."

"What in hell happened?"

"Love. Isn't it a bitch?" He started walking again.

Rory got out of the car and ran after him. "What in hell happened? Did you have an accident?"

Carden stopped. "Dennis put a gun to his head and threatened to blow his brains out."

"Oh my God," Rory said.

Carden reached out suddenly and pulled Rory close for a moment. He kissed his head. "Don't ever do anything like that, okay?"

"No, I won't, I—"

"Even if..." he stopped. "Even when it's over."

"Is it over?"

"We can't see each other tonight." He released him.

"Why not?"

"I have other plans."

"Other plans? What other plans?"

"I have commitments," he said, waving him off. He walked away quickly before Rory could ask him any more questions.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dennis was crying. Rory could hear him as he walked back to his car. Thiago was holding him. He had known what Dennis intended to do, that's why he went running out of there. They were that connected.

That could be you.

"Shut up," he said aloud. "Go away and stop talking to me who ever you are." He got into the car. Dennis was all right now. Thiago would take care of him, protect him, but it seemed that Carden had other plans. He started the engine. He wouldn't turn into Dennis. If Carden wanted someone else tonight, so be it. He'd suck it up like a man.

As he parked his car again at Eclipse, a few people came out to find out what had happened, including Jack. Rory told them that Dennis and Thiago had a lover's spat. Blane, however, knew differently.

"Carden should have let him blow his brains out," he laughed.

Rory walked up to him and looked him in the eye. "You bastard." God, had Carden saved Dennis?

"He's a hero," Blane mocked, glancing at Carden who stood on his balcony looking down at them.

"Did you save Dennis?" Rory walked over beneath the balcony and looked up at him.

"Thiago was distraught. I gave him a hand."

"Thank you," Rory said.

"I didn't really save him. Only Thiago can do that."

"Thiago seems to know a hell of a lot more about love than you do."

Carden remained silent for a second, then said, "Maybe so." He disappeared off the balcony and closed the door.

"Rory," Jack said.

Rory didn't even know he'd been standing there. "Jack? Ah, there you are."

"What's going on between you and the pure blood?"

"Nothing," he said, shaking his head. At first, he felt embarrassed at the lie, but then realized that it wasn't a lie. There was nothing going on between him and Carden, nothing at all.

* * * *

It seemed they'd been walking for hours. Thiago held his hand. It was quiet, nothing but the crunching of their feet on the gravel.

"I feel so stupid," Dennis said. "I don't know what came over me."

Thiago squeezed his hand.

"How did you know?"

"I heard your thoughts," he said. "I'd been hearing them all night. I knew how miserable you were. It was my fault. I had no cause to turn on you like that."

"If you'd just make me understand," he said, looking at him. "I suddenly saw a life without you, and...I didn't want to be in it." The tears ran down his face. "I won't ask you anymore questions, I'll..."

Thiago pulled Dennis up against him and held him. "Vampires are not known for their communication skills."

"I think it may be men in general rather than just vampires."

Thiago released him. "You have to promise me you'll never try and take your own life again. You have to promise me I will never see you with a gun in your hands again."

"Rory told you, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did. But you know something, you told me, too. I've seen pieces of her in your dreams. Her name was Maryanne."

"Oh, God!" Dennis covered his face with his hands.

"I see her with you sometimes."

Denis looked at him, his face a mixture of anxiety and hope. "You do? Really?"

"She liked dogs. I always see a dog with her. A small brown dog."

"Mitzi." Dennis fell silent for a moment. "She disappeared just before we left him...my father. My mom was convinced he'd killed her. She was a great dog. Do you...do you see her here?" Dennis looked around and Thiago, still naked save for a ratty pair of shorts Dennis found in his trunk, grabbed him and hugged him.

"No. Right now, you're all mine."

Dennis smiled slightly as he felt the hard cock at his hipbone. He still couldn't believe he had come after him completely naked. Thiago seemed very thoughtful.

"Do you trust me?" Thiago asked.

"Trust you? Yeah. Why?"

Dennis gasped when Thiago took him by the hand and ran across the road.

"Hollywood Cemetery? Are you kidding me?"

Thiago squeezed his hands. "Come on. Indulge me."

Dennis kept quiet as they slipped into the gates left ajar, the gigantic Watchhorn Obelisk eerie at this time of night.

The reflective pool glowed, thanks to the stars and the city lights, and Thiago moved fast, so fast Dennis felt like his feet weren't touching the ground. He realized they were on some kind of vampire frequency. His feet barely touched the earth as they moved between graves and mausoleums, spectacular, gothic crypts and they turned into a section called the Park of Morning Calm.

There was something about this place.

"Your mother's here," Thiago whispered, his face twisted in grief. "I just realized she limps."

"Her hip. My father beat her badly and she broke it. It was never the same again. Where...where is she, Thiago?" His lover pointed and Dennis found himself staring at a white stone statue of an angel, head bent, staring down at a grave. "Do you see her a lot?" Dennis asked, his tears free-falling.

"No...just the last couple of days. Dennis...do you see her?"

He shook his head. "I see a kind of hazy glow."

"That's her."

"Thiago, where's my sister?"

"She's with her." Thiago's voice was quiet.

"They're smiling."

"Are they okay? Only...I miss them so much."

"They're fine. They watch over you, Dennis. Look at this."

He stepped forward and read the inscription on the grave in front of them. A mother and infant daughter buried together.

Thiago put his arm around him. "It doesn't look like anyone comes here. This can be the place you come whenever you want to visit her...bring her flowers."

Dennis moved into Thiago's strong embrace and tried not to think of his sister dying in his arms, her bloody, matted hair...she had been so proud of her hair. She brushed it one hundred times a day. "Thank you," he whispered and Thiago held him tightly.

"Let's go," Thiago said. "Next time, we'll bring the most flowers we can find."

Back out on the street, Dennis knew Thiago was troubled about something other than Dennis. "What is it? Let me help you?" He put a hand on his back. "If it's Blane, we can fight him together."

Thiago turned around and looked at him. "It's something I was a part of a long time ago, something I deeply regret now. Then, I didn't understand. I was young and under Blane's control. By the time I realized what we had done, it was already too late."

"You've known Blane a long time then."

"He was my maker."

"Oh. I didn't know."

"Um, how fortunate for us all."

"All of you who work at the club were turned by Blane?"

He nodded. "Except for Carden, of course."

"So he's like your father?"

"In a sense."

"So what was this...that you were a part of?"

"I can't tell you that. It would put you in danger. All I can tell you is it keeps me tied to Blane. It keeps us all tied to him, in fear."

"You fear Blane?"

"If only it was Blane." He sighed.

"Who then? Who do you fear?"

He looked at Dennis and said quietly, "Carden."

"Carden?" Dennis laughed. "He saved my life tonight. I can't believe how he put his hand through the glass and —"

"Dennis, there are a lot of things Carden doesn't know. And he must never know because he would kill us all...and with good reason."

"I don't believe that. If you told him then maybe —"

"Dennis, trust me, okay? He can never know, or you'll lose me. I've told you something I've never told anyone. You mustn't speak of it or even think of it."

Dennis nodded, suddenly afraid. "Okay."

"And don't tell Rory either, nothing."

"I won't," he went into his arms. "I promise. I love you, Thiago."

He held him tighter. "I love you, too."

* * * *

Jack waited to leave with Rory when the club closed. "Want to go get something to eat?"

Rory cast a look up to the second floor, then looked away. He twitched when Jack put his arm around his waist, but said, "Yeah, why not?"

"What's the matter with you?" Jack asked. "Did I take ugly pills or something?"

He dropped a light kiss on Rory's mouth, making him feel uncomfortable. Poor Jack, he deserved better than this, but Rory couldn't have a heart-to-heart right here in the entrance of Eclipse. "No, nothing like that." Rory attempted a laugh.

"Something's going on. I can't get near you, you act all weird. Was it the client's death last night, because you know, shit happens."

Shit happens. You got that right. "No. I handled that."

Jack grinned. "So I heard. Blane was impressed. For once in his life, he was glad the security cameras malfunctioned and didn't record the visit.

Somebody said something about the mayor being there. That would be a catastrophe, right?"

Rory said nothing as the valet driver brought Jack's car to them.

"Want me to drive?"

About to respond, Rory noticed Kolin Karolyi running out of the club, great excitement on his face. He was talking on a cell phone.

"He accepted the deal...one million dollars and we do the fight tonight. No holds barred. No rules. One dead fighter."

Beside him, Pinky Stevenson, his trainer and Rory's estranged friend looked stricken when he saw Rory. He held a suit bag that Rory knew would contain the fighter's ring wear.

Kolin snapped his fingers and a valet driver ran to get his car.

"Rory, are you ready?" Jack asked.

Pinky glanced at Rory as Kolin paced the cobbled courtyard, listening to whoever was on the other end of the line.

"Who's he fighting?" Rory asked.

"Brandon." Pinky looked nervous. "Rory, he can't handle this guy. Not in the shape he's in."

"Good training?"

"Fuck the training. He just had a blood transfusion. Virgin's blood. He's pumped and ready."

Rory didn't know what to say.

"Where is the fight?"

Pinky didn't respond.

Kolin was back, looking pissed. "Where the fuck is my car?"

"We'll take you wherever you need to go," Rory said. He glanced at Jack. "Right?"

Jack looked murderous, but Kolin got in the back seat and shrieked, "Let's go!"

Pinky climbed in beside him, Kolin's suit bag stretched across his lap.

Jack said nothing as he started the car. His hand hovered over his navigation system on the dashboard. He glared at Rory. "Where to?" he asked, looking at Kolin through the rearview mirror.

"Playland...in Dominguez Hills."

"Dominguez Hills?" Jack's fury was evident when his gaze fully rested on Rory.

"That's a good hour from here."

"Fine," Kolin said, putting his hand on the door.

"No, no. We'll take you," Rory said and Kolin sat back against his seat, his iPod earbuds in his ears. Rory detected the strange vamp-trance music his breed favored, only he could hear the words *kill, kill*, threading through it.

Thiago and Dennis walked up the hill leading to the castle and Rory grinned when he saw the handsome vampire wearing Dennis' gym shorts.

"Hey," he said, opening his door. "We're going to a fight. Come with."

"A fight?" Dennis stared at him. "Who's fighting?"

"I'm getting some clothes," Thiago said. "I adore fighting. Give me two seconds."

A car honked behind them. They were holding up the line of traffic into and out of Eclipse.

Jack pulled over, heaving an aggrieved sigh.

"Brandon Fire," Rory muttered. Dennis seemed to notice Kolin Karolyi and Pinky Stevenson. He looked stunned, but Rory mouthed, *please*, and Dennis quickly climbed into the backseat.

Thiago emerged in black pants and a flashy silver shirt. "Let's get ready to rumble," he shouted.

Kolin Karolyi opened an eye, aware now of the crowd in the vehicle. "I always wanted an entourage," he said.

Rory cringed inwardly. *I'm not part of your entourage, pal.*

They began their strange journey east to Dominguez Hills, to the notorious, incongruously named Playland, where cocks fought, dogs fought and men fought. To the death.

Kill, kill, he heard over the trance music. *Kill.*

* * * *

Carden was on his way to Blane's bedroom when he saw Rory and Jack leaving the club, Jack's arm around Rory. He watched them through the glass partition, standing back so that he'd be concealed from sight. They paused at the door and Jack kissed Rory on the mouth. Carden felt it like a knife slicing through him. He sighed, swallowing the pain. He was feeling demoralized, empty, the images of Dennis with that gun to his head playing in his mind. It was better this way, Rory being with a mortal, safer.

He glanced at Blane's bedroom door. It was ajar. He turned, looked through the glass partition again. *Rory. No.* He ran to the other end of the hallway and took the stairs two at a time. He got to the front door and saw Rory getting into Jack's car. He wanted to grab his man, beg him for more time, beg him for...*anything*.

Suddenly Blane was standing in front of him, barring his path as he started out the door. "Good evening, lover. Where are you going? You gave your word," Blane said. "Go after that mortal and see what happens. We had an agreement, fuck him if you must, but only when you've fulfilled your obligations to me. That's more than fair, don't you think?"

"First you use Danny, now Rory."

"You should stop falling in love with mortals. You're lethal to them."

Carden was surprised to see Kolin Karolyi and that weird trainer guy, Pinky, getting into Jack's car with Rory in the front seat. What the hell was going on?

"Hellooooo?"

He glanced back at Blane, who stood, hands on hips. Two vampires, vicious, savage, and bloody, reduced to their baser instincts, all humanity gone.

"You want me?" Carden growled, slamming the front door, ripping off his shirt, "you've got me. Come on, if you dare." He threw off the rest of his clothes and lifted up off the floor, scaling the balcony to the second floor.

Blane landed on the second floor in front of Carden, taking off his own clothes. "Fuck me," Blane hissed, his teeth exposed.

Carden reached out and lifted Blane off the floor with one hand. He barred his teeth and hissed, throwing Blane up against the wall. He howled with mad laughter as he reached out and grabbed Blane by the testicles, taking him down on the floor. His teeth sank right into Blane's quivering throat, then he threw him over the balcony. He went crashing to the table below. For a few minutes, Blane didn't move. Carden flew down the stairs and hovered in the air directly above him.

Blane's eyes fluttered opened.

"Ready to get fucked now, Blane?" He flipped him over on the pool table. After a second, he smiled, his blood lust just beginning to simmer, and picked up a pool cue.

* * * *

"Entrance fee is a hundred dollars a person," the guy at the guard gate said.

"I am the star of this event, this is my corner," Karolyi announced in his imperial manner from the backseat.

"Your corner? That's some big corner," the guard said, scratching his chin.

"I'm the trainer," Pinky Stevenson said. His hand moved to Rory's shoulder. "He's my second."

He gestured to Dennis. "He's the mitt guy."

The guard pointed to Jack, whose hands clenched the wheel.

"What about him?"

"He's the spit bucket guy."

Jack looked pissed, but didn't say anything.

"And the guy in the silver shirt?"

Pinky Stevenson looked bewildered for a moment. Rory saw Thiago's blank gaze on Pinky's face and Pinky's mental vacation moment collide.

"He's the entertainment," Rory said.

The guard stared at Thiago for a moment.

"What's he do?"

"He sings, of course," Rory said.

As they were finally granted entry and directed to a parking space somewhere near the North Pole, Jack and Thiago spoke at once.

"How did you know I sing?"

"I'm not carrying the spit bucket."

They both stopped speaking and Thiago filled the awkward moment with, "What am I supposed to sing?"

"*The Star Spangled Banner*," Rory said at once.

"Shoot. I was hoping for *These Boots Were Made for Walking*."

* * * *

Cold water fell on his head.

"What the fuck?" Blane muttered, trying to shake it off. He couldn't shake. He couldn't do anything.

Carden smiled down at him, a sick, twisted smile. "There...there...don't you worry. I've found your little...playpen. Only it's you, not me, bound for ritual sacrifice."

"But —"

"Don't speak. You're boring. You have nothing to say but lies. So shut *up*!"

"You're mad. You never did know a friend from an enemy," Blane said.

"I know it all, you fucking asshole. I know everything."

Blane's crazy eyes focused into ragged fear. "What do you mean...*everything*?"

"You killed my family. You will pay." Carden had never felt such rage, such an urge to destroy. He could be done with it all. He *would* be done with it all.

"Who told you that? They're full of shit."

Blane seemed only now aware that he couldn't move, that he was stretched out on the floor of his own room, cuffed with golden hand and foot cuffs, Christ-like, on the altar he'd prepared to sacrifice Carden.

"I saw it," Carden said, sitting beside the prone Blane, as if ready for a long, quiet chat, instead of ritual homicide. "Thiago...you used him...and others...you have held them, manipulated them...all these years." Carden was quiet for a moment, but realized Blane was testing the binds on his hands and feet.

"The trick catches have been disabled. You're at my...mercy. So, Thiago...in his love for his mortal man, let slip the robe of lies. I saw it all in my mind...I saw what you did to my mother. I saw what happened to the mortal's mother. How alike he and I are. We are scarred for life, but our scars are invisible. You, on the other hand, won't be so lucky."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Blane began tugging at his binds.

Carden knew in a moment he would go crazy. He wanted to get it over before the others caught his message on the wind. "I've seen it all. All your plans. That crazy Shawn...the circle of demented, underground men."

"You're mad," Blane said again.

"I *am* mad. You're right." Carden stood and held the pool cue with his hands, twisting, turning it and finally smashing it against his knee. He knelt then, holding a jagged piece...a stake...right over Blane's heart. "I should warn you, this might hurt."

Blane whimpered. "Fuck, don't kill me. Don't do this." He started to scream. "Shawn! Suede!"

"Blane, it's no use. Nobody's here to help you. They're more afraid of me. They know they're next. And now unfortunately, I won't have time to torture you. So as you said to my beautiful mother, just before you killed her, *rest in hell*." He plunged the stake right into Blane's black heart, his screams reverberating through the Hollywood Hills.

Coyote howled and Carden was aware of countless, formless faces being woken into action. He waited as the man on the altar screamed out a call, a final cry for help even as his true hideous,

inner beast, rose to the surface and melted, into a fine pool of fiery blood.

* * * *

“What the...” Brandon Fire looked out from the folds of his flimsy dressing room walls, stunned to see Rory across the aisle with Kolin Karolyi. He’d already protested to the organizers about his lousy dressing room with its smelly curtains for walls and easy access to his opponent. Karolyi was so close he’d be able to hear his goddamn thoughts. “What’s he doing here with Karolyi?” Brandon asked Montoya.

“Never mind that. I need to get you warmed up.”

Montoya held the mitts and even he had to admit, the slightest jolt and the curtains would fall.

“They don’t usually fight humans here,” the old man said with a shrug. “Dogs don’t have much of a need for a dressing room.”

“This sucks.”

“Concentrate. You need to be strong now.”

The curtains shook and Brandon saw the head of Titian-color hair that signaled the ringside physician’s appearance.

Lucy Lang was a neurosurgeon by trade, moonlighting as the Medical Director for the

California State Athletic Commission. It should really have been called the Boxing Commission since CSAC really only policed boxing events, but Brandon knew the state was embarrassed to be pouring money into its constantly empty coffers from blood sport.

"I can't believe you're doing this," Lucy said, her buckteeth protruding from her red-painted lips. "If word of this gets out, you'll be suspended for a year."

Brandon laughed, a harsh unpleasant bark. "If I actually survive this fiasco, they can suspend me all they like." He stood, testing the feel of the gloves on his hands. "Wouldn't be the first time, babe."

She bristled, walking into his tiny cubicle. "How the mighty have fallen"

"What do you want?"

"I want my baby back."

He looked at his former wife and said, "So do I. But the two of us sniping at each other won't bring her back. What are you doing here, Lucy? I mean, really?"

Lucy's head dropped. "I miss her. I dream about her. I don't want to lose you, too. I heard about the fight and I had to come."

Ricardo Montoya stepped forward. "You're the Baby Mama?"

She nodded and he handed her one of his business cards.

"I am not in the business of losing," he said.

Lucy stared at him as if he were crazy. Her anger flashed back at Brandon.

"None of this would have happened if you hadn't gone gay."

"Lucy," Brandon sighed, exasperated. "You knew I was gay from the outset. We both wanted a kid. Who knew she was going to have the problems she did?"

"I want another one."

"What?"

"I want another baby. I'm ovulating."

"What?"

"I said —"

"Jesus, Lu. I heard what you said, I just can't fucking believe you. I'm a little bit busy right now!"

"Women," Montoya said. "She's ovulating. She can't help it."

"I don't believe this...listen," he said to his ex, "get outta here. No more babies from me." To his trainer, he said, "You stay out of this."

Montoya shrugged at Lucy. "Sorry," he said and pushed her out of the curtained room.

Brandon heard her huff.

"Well!" she stomped away.

Montoya held up the mitts. "Ready?"

Brandon stared at him a moment. "You...you instigated this."

"I had to get you hopped up. Did it work?"

"Yeah. It worked." He began to slap the red leather discs strapped to the old man's hands. If anyone could take the brunt of his fury, it was his trainer. He tried not to think about his daughter, of having sex with Lu...or having sex with Rory. He just had to focus on winning. By any means necessary.

* * * *

Inside the men's rest room, Thiago and Dennis kissed as if separated for weeks.

"Fuck me," Thiago said.

Dennis never thought he'd hear his lover asking for this. Thiago was always so dominant and Dennis...he had accepted everything, all terms and conditions just to be near the man he craved. Thiago's hands reached down to Dennis' buttoned-down jeans and felt for the hardening length of his shaft.

"It's all I think about," Thiago whispered.

Dennis felt Thiago liberating his cock, felt the possessive fingers encircling the moistened head, using it to lube the mighty erection straining toward the vampire. Thiago leaned against the wall, watching as Dennis pulled down his pants.

Thiago stepped out of them.

"Commando," Dennis grunted and bent down to lick Thiago's cock. A couple of guys walked in and caught them.

"Fags," one of them said.

Thiago waved a hand at them.

Dennis' gaze swiveled to the two men, now rolling around the floor, clutching their throats.

"Stick it in, bitch," Thiago grunted.

Dennis straightened. He adored his lover's cock. It was the biggest and smoothest cock he'd ever sucked. He never got enough of it. He was so obsessed with it, it pained him each every time he saw another man enjoying it. His fingers moved to his lover's ass hole, the bud reacting to his touch. He couldn't wait and stuck it in.

"Oh, shit, Dennis." Thiago let out a loud sigh, his open legs pressed against Dennis' chest as Dennis fucked him gently at first.

He entered Thiago, feeling no resistance, just white-hot desire. He felt the words in Thiago's head...knew that Thiago rarely let paying customers enjoy his sweet hole and he started fucking him hard and fast.

Thiago held on to a hand dryer, keeping himself hoisted high with one hand, the other slipping and sliding against the white-tiled wall. "Shit. Harder. That's it."

Dennis moved in closer, keeping his lover tight against his body, aware of the mounting ripples of pleasure shared between them. He felt his balls slap Thiago's lean thighs with each thrust that banged him against the wall. Thiago's ass was hot and gripped his cock forcefully. Dennis could hardly breathe from the pleasure he felt being inside his beautiful man. He felt the surge of bliss rising through him.

"Oh yeah," Thiago moaned. "Let me have it baby...let me have it."

Dennis fucked Thiago until they both came, Thiago spilling his seed all over Dennis and his own belly. Dennis held Thiago's twitching cock in his hand. "That's a little...appetizer," he said, flicking his tongue across Thiago's throat.

Thiago grinned and a roar sounded from out of the arena.

"Oh man, it's starting," Dennis muttered. The two men parted reluctantly, cleaning up with paper towels and straightening their clothes.

Outside the restroom door, the two men who had been lying on the floor started coughing and spluttering.

"That'll teach 'em to call us fags," Thiago said.

In the arena, he and Thiago, wearing wristbands that indicated they were with one of the fighters, took in the gigantic crowd surrounding the eighteen foot boxing ring.

Men, women, children...they might have been at the circus. Guys in striped uniforms sold beer and pretzels from handcarts. Dennis spotted ice cream carts and hot dogs. He spotted six beautiful Asian women in the middle of the ring, dancing to the tune of *Don't You Wish Your Girlfriend Was Hot Like Me?*

Some of the crowd laughed, but the girls were scantily clad, and even to Dennis' gay eye, gorgeous, but Thiago looked troubled. "What's wrong?" Dennis asked him over the noise.

"Penanggalan."

"What's a Pen...pen whatever it is?"

Thiago shook his head and Dennis glanced back into the ring. He was stunned to see all six women rip off their heads.

The crowd went crazy. The women held their heads high, bloody entrails dripping from them. A swarm of fireflies flew in through the open windows. A mother sitting near them covered her small's sons eyes, but most people were mesmerized.

"What the hell are they?" Dennis asked.

"Malay vampires. They detach their heads...as you can see."

Dennis watched the fireflies taking over the entrails from the women's heads. The heads began flying around the arena as the headless bodies kept up their striptease dance. The heads came

back, settling on their bodies. Dennis was in shock. "I've never seen one before."

Thiago licked his lips. "They...are not... common. I'm surprised they're allowed out. They're...considered hybrids...dangerous, loose cannons. I got a bad feeling about this, Dennis."

A series of dramatic drum rolls sounded.

"This is it," Dennis said. "Show's about to begin."

"Something's wrong," Thiago said. "I'm really worried. I feel great danger. I feel it coming close."

Dennis was too busy staring at the center of the ring. A man was being lowered down from the roof, hanging from a chain. Dressed in a dinner suit, he looked like a Las Vegas lounge lizard, a bad copy of Wayne Newton, complete with too much bling, black helmet hairdo and overly white teeth. Dang, it *was* Wayne Newton.

He stood in the middle of the ring, microphone in hand, as the six girls left the ring in an orderly line.

"Women always lose their heads over me," Wayne joked. He glanced around the arena. "Nice crowd, nice crowd. Are we ready to fight?"

"Yes!" the crowd screamed back.

"I can't hear you. Want me to cancel the show?"

"No!"

"So let's try it again. Are we ready to fight?"

"Yes!"

Wayne chuckled. "Now that's more like it." His arms opened wide and the octagonal cage descended from the ceiling in a haze of flashing lights, a siren and red confetti and balloons released from cages around the room.

Dennis felt a moment of panic. He'd only ever been to one fight and he'd watched the guy get attacked by Kolin Karolyi. He had a bad feeling, too, and turned to look at Thiago, but his lover was already being escorted to the ring.

He rushed to catch up with him. Thiago looked spooked. "You'd better find Rory," he said. "I think Carden's in trouble."

CHAPTER SIX

Rory slipped out of Karolyi's room on the pretext of looking for gauze. "I'll ask the ringside physician for some," he said. The feeling of utter panic intensified with the strange sounds he heard coming from the arena.

He poked his head in and saw headless women in the ring dancing...it was a peculiar sight, not to mention their heads with fiery trains soaring across the room.

Jack was right beside him. "We need to talk."

"Not now. Look, I'm sorry."

"You're sorry. I feel totally...used by you. I get you a great job and I'm hearing rumors of you and Carden—"

"Let's not do this now. Jack, my ex is about to get in the ring with Kolin Karolyi. The last guy he got in the ring with died."

Jack stared at him. "What are you doing in Kolin's corner then?"

Rory drew in a breath. He had no idea if he could trust Jack. He did the only thing he could. He drew back and punched him right in the mouth.

Jack fell to the ground in a heap.

Rory dragged him across the floor to a maintenance closet. "Sorry Jack," he whispered, and shut him in the darkened space, locking the door on him. Rory glanced around. The coast was clear. He dropped to the floor, wriggling across it to Brandon's dressing room. Throwing up a section of curtain, he saw the fighter's sweat-slick body working a jump rope.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Brandon kept skipping, but lost a step and the rope hit him right in the balls. "Ow!"

Rory got to his feet. "I just found out about the fight at the club. You need to know, Karolyi had a virgin blood transfusion."

"Why should I believe you?"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

Brandon blew out a breath. "I have no idea what it's supposed to do to improve his performance, but I hear vampires like all kinds of shit. You need to get out of here."

"I'm your second," Rory said.

"Not anymore. Not since I saw you walk in with Karolyi."

"That's on you. You should have called me and told me."

Brandon shrugged. "I knew you'd try and talk me out of it."

The curtains shook and Pinky Stevenson's head appeared between the folds.

He glared at Rory. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I came to get gauze. Fight doc didn't have any. Brandon was gracious enough to say we could have some of his."

Pinky blinked. "Okay...er...thanks."

Brandon shrugged and Rory picked up the smaller of two rolls of gauze sitting on the small table in the room. He felt the ire of his former lover and his weather-beaten trainer as he left the cubicle.

He and Pinky walked back to Kolin's cubicle together and he handed Pinky the gauze.

"Hey," Pinky said. "You surprised me, you know, coming to work with us, but thanks."

Rory nodded. This wasn't how it was meant to be at all. He walked into the room as a state inspector signed Kolin's hand wraps with a Sharpie and watched like a hawk as his gloves went on.

Ever since Panama Lewis tore out the stuffing from Luis Resto's gloves in his 1983 title fight against Billy Collins, permanently damaging

Collins' eyes and killing his boxing career, gloves were kept away from all opponents until officials watched them try gloves on for fights. Then, once the gloves were selected, they were removed until they were put on just before the fight.

Rory watched the gloves being taped and signed off, aware of Dennis at his elbow. "I need to talk to you."

A beautiful male voice began singing the national anthem and the sound traveled to the dressing rooms. Everybody stopped talking and stood, hands over their hearts.

"Thiago's singing," Dennis said, unable to keep the pride from his voice.

"Shhh," Karolyi snapped and Dennis shhhd.

* * * *

Shawn and his crew of misfits paced the dungeon room. The alarm had been sounded. He'd tried scrying, checking the blood in his cauldron, but was continually frustrated when he saw nothing but clouds. They shifted from white, to gray, to black. Black? That signified a death. Who had died?

He stirred the contents again and asked, "Please, will you show me Carden?" He found better results when he asked the scryer politely for information. He should have known better than to

use blood. Blood reflected the emotions of its donor...in this case, virgin women. He waited and was stunned when the liquid stirred and formed into a new pattern. He was shocked to see Penanggalan flying across the skies.

Then one word appeared, written in a childish scrawl...*Unforgiven*.

* * * *

Dennis was torn. It was Thiago's big moment. He broke the silent barrier, rushing back into the ring for the last two lines of *The Star Spangled Banner* and his gaze fell on Thiago. He looked so handsome and sexy, the crowd urging him in their swaying to hit the high notes. So often the difficult anthem was mangled at the end, but Thiago hit it, easily, the crowd burst into applause.

Thiago took his bow, Wayne Newton shaking his hand.

Dennis saw out the massive windows, a swarm of what looked like large, dark creatures across the skies. Thiago glanced back at him and Dennis rushed to the cage as his lover came out of the opening.

The music began and Kolin Karolyi stalked to the arena in his blood-red ring robe, hood covering his face.

Dennis grabbed Thiago's hand as soon as he was beside him.

"Did you tell Rory?"

Dennis shook his hand. As Rory came closer, Dennis tried to catch his attention. It was Thiago who stopped him as he walked behind the rest of the corner.

"Carden's in trouble."

"Shit. I can't do anything now. I'm stuck here."

A loud, shrill scream tore across the room. People screamed in the midst of the unendurable sound.

"What is it?" Rory screamed over the increasing sound of loud shrieks.

"Loogaroo," Thiago said, his face flushed with excitement.

"What the hell are they?" Rory and Dennis asked at once.

"Caribbean demons. A female cross between vampires and werewolves. They make a contract with the devil...something bad's gone down...all these demonic creatures are just popping up everywhere."

"Rory!" Pinky screamed from the ring.

He held up a finger, indicating one minute. "I have to protect Brandon. I have to stay."

"Carden...he's behind this, I'm sure of it," Thiago rasped. "I think...I think he's killed Blane."

"Blane?" Rory rocked on his heels.

"He's figured out Blane killed his parents. I'm certain of it."

"How do you know he killed Carden's parents?"

"I was there."

Rory stared at him. "My God..."

"Rory!" Pinky screamed again.

"I have to go. You wanna wait?"

Thiago shrugged. "Fight won't last long anyway, might as well."

* * * *

Shawn looked out of the windows. Nightfall was laced with dark, blood-red clouds. Ah, the rapture. He hadn't expected it so soon, and not like this. All his plans for possessing Carden might have changed, but it was not too late.

The call had come and creatures long-suffering, dormant, shut away in hiding, were out. He had an army now. Soon, Carden would be his. He threw back his head and laughed, until he heard the heartbeats, felt the breath on his neck. Shawn turned in time to see Carden grabbing him by the throat and throwing him against the wall.

"This one's for Dennis," he said. He opened the door.

Shawn screamed when he saw the headless bodies of the Penanggalan walking blindly toward him.

“Ladies, he’s all yours.” Carden climbed to the windowsill, Shawn screaming at him.

“Don’t leave me. Don’t do this!”

A long, frightening scream and Carden watched the skies.

The rapture.

* * * *

Brandon Fire entered the ring, walking into the cage. His ring wear was black and gold and the crowd gave him a mixed reaction as he paced, barefoot. The state inspector examined his taped hands again, and Karolyi’s.

He motioned the fighters to meet him in the middle of the ring. Montoya accompanied him, massaging his neck muscles. It still hurt to see his former, beloved trainer with Kolin Karolyi. He, too, worked on Karolyi’s neck. He didn’t hear a word the official said. Partly it was the strange screeching coming from outside. Partly it was adrenaline and fear. He took in the bloodied cage, wondering whether it was animal, human or vampire.

“I expect a good, clean fight,” the official said. “Now touch ‘em up.”

Both fighters ignored him, Karolyi leering at Brandon. Brandon realized Karolyi had a mouth guard with holes that accommodated his canine teeth. Not that he'd have a chance to use them.

He moved to his corner. He knew which one was his in spite of eight sides to the cage because his had a black ribbon tied on it. Directly opposite, Karolyi paced his side with the red ribbon.

Both men wore their shorts and their pride as they watched everybody get out of the cage. It was locked with a clang, the bell rang for the fight to commence and Brandon Fire ran to the middle of the ring, shocked when Kolin Karolyi flew over his head and landed behind him, getting him in a chokehold.

They dropped to their knees, Brandon unable to catch his breath or grab a hold of Karolyi. He was aware of the crowd screaming. He was aware of blood. Karolyi had bitten him on the face. He could feel it now and then Karolyi's legs moved around his waist.

Rory screamed, shaking the walls of the cage. "Stop the fight, stop the fight!"

The crowd screamed, some for death, some for life.

Brandon Fire's last thought was how painless death was. Death was a big, white room...no, a grassy meadow, his daughter waiting for him. He felt his life force leaving him, his daughter

running to him. He felt a warm breath of summer, an Indian summer in his heart. He breathed a sigh of surprise and delight.

She ran toward him.

In death, his crippled little girl had found her legs again.

* * * *

It took the Commission officials four minutes to unlock the gate. Four minutes too long. Rory screamed, pushing everyone aside, stunned to see the rapturous expression on Brandon's sightless face.

Kolin Karolyi took his money, flying from the arena, crashing through the windows and out to the sky.

The sound was weird, frightening and chaotic as people ran in all directions. The blood-crazed fans knew something was wrong. The rest of the fights were canceled, but instead of inciting a riot, people fell over each other trying to escape the swarms of strange creatures now flying and running around.

"We have to go," Thiago shouted. "We have to help Carden."

Rory touched Brandon's face. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I am so sorry."

Dennis plucked at his shirt. "We have to go."

Rory stood, his eyes streaming with tears. "I let him down."

"It wasn't your fault."

Dennis grabbed his hand, Thiago the other.

"I don't want to leave him here," he moaned.

"You have to," Pinky said. "The coroner will want to do an autopsy. I'm sorry, Rory."

"No, you're not."

Pinky sighed. "I am sorry."

"Where's his trainer?" Rory asked. "Ricardo Montoya?"

"No idea. I never saw him once the fight started."

"Come on, Rory, let's go," Dennis urged again.

With an effort, Rory walked away from Brandon's body.

"I'll look after him," Pinky said.

Rory walked out of the arena. Rory paused at the maintenance closet where he'd locked Jack. The door had been smashed into pieces. With a sigh, he walked outside and into the night. "What is this?" he asked, as he watched a kaleidoscope of activity.

"Something we need to bottle up," Thiago said.

"It's like...Armageddon."

"Close," Thiago agreed. "Hey, where's Jack?"

"No idea."

"Well, we've got a long way to go to get back to Hollywood. Any suggestions?"

"We could steal a car," Dennis said.

The three men perused the cars still in the parking lot. They heard laughter amidst the screams.

"It's the Jiang Shi...some vampires like to kill...the Chinese ones...they adore fucking."

"Hey...it's Jack's car," Rory said, looking around for its owner. "The keys are still in it. Do you remember him leaving the keys in it?"

"No, but who gives a shit. Let's get in and go, all apologies to him later," Thiago said. "We gotta go."

With great reluctance, Rory started the engine, something huge and terrifying dropping onto the hood of the car.

"AAARGGH!" all the occupants of the car screamed.

It was Jack. His throat had been torn out and the winged creature that had dropped him, peered in through the window. Blood dripped from its fangs, making murky pools on the vehicle. The enraged creature tried kicking in the glass.

Jack's body slid off the roof, hitting the ground with a thud.

Rory took off, Thiago and Dennis looking petrified in the backseat, fighting off a wingless creature that fell off the car, screeching.

"Hurry!" Thiago screamed.

Rory didn't need to be told again. He hit the entrance of the freeway, watching other cars trying to avoid the strange creatures all around it. "This freeway always was a nightmare," he said, taking the first exit and heading up Sepulveda.

Carden. Where are you? He had no sense of him at all.

* * * *

Carden walked aimlessly along the side of the road, his face, his clothing drenched in blood. The sun was about to rise in the horizon, but he didn't care. The sun couldn't hurt him, nothing could hurt him. As far as he knew, he was the only one left of his kind, alone, totally and utterly. He didn't need humans. He didn't need those lowlife hybrid vampires either. He didn't need anyone. He alone had the gift of beauty and immortality combined and he wouldn't share it with anyone.

He fell on his knees in the dirt and covered his face with his blood-stained hands. He howled out his pain. He now remembered every single detail. The flash back of images of his mother, her head being severed from her head, his father calling out to him. *The numbing grief, the fear.* They were the hunted, but he never understood why. Around him as a child, there had been only love. Yes, he'd

seen it all the moment he'd driven that piece of wood through Blane's black heart.

The sun was rising in the sky now. Oh, how he wished it would make him just fade away. He struggled to his feet and started to walk again, shuffling zombie-like near the ditch. The Penanggalan had come when he'd called, gone where he'd directed them. He'd forgotten that he could make them all bow to his wishes. He'd never had need before.

A car was driving in his direction now. It slowed and came to a stop. A woman poked out her head, her face horrified at the sight of him. "My God, are you all right?"

He looked at her, his eyes rimmed in red, his teeth extended. "Get away from me, human, or I'll rip off your head."

The car sped away, wheels spraying him with gravel.

He walked on, not knowing where he'd come from, not even remembering leaving the club. He knew Blane was gone and that he'd left after, made sure that Shawn was taken care of.

The Eclipse was in the distance. He closed his eyes and suddenly he was inside. He knew where they slept. *Kill them. Kill them all.*

* * * *

"Don't go in there," Thiago said as Rory pulled the car into Eclipse.

"Why did you make me come here and then tell me not to fucking go in?" Rory demanded. He was exhausted, terrified. He had no real idea of what was going on, and Thiago was acting all vamp on him, not really saying what he really meant.

"Calm down, Rory. None of this is Thiago's fault," Dennis told him.

"He's in there," Thiago told Rory from the backseat, placing a hand on his shoulder. He had pulled a jacket over his head as shelter from the sun.

"Who? Carden?" Rory reached for the door handle.

"Don't. You can't. He's not himself." Thiago pulled Rory back. He closed his eyes. "Oh no."

"What?" Dennis demanded anxiously.

"Thiago, where in the fuck is Carden?" Rory demanded, trying to loosen himself from the steel like grip Thiago had on his shoulder.

"He's killed them all, torn them limb from limb. And he's looking for me. He knows I'm here."

Dennis groaned. "Oh shit, Thiago, you got to get out of here. Rory, drive!"

"No," Thiago said. "It won't do any good to run from him. He'll find me. Let me out. I'll go to him."

"I'm coming with you," Rory tried to open the door again.

"No," Thiago held fast, "he'll kill you. I'm going in alone, face my fate."

"Carden would never hurt me," Rory protested.

Denis pleaded with Thiago to stay put, but he was already out of the car, and in a flash, faster than the eye could see, had disappeared inside Eclipse.

Rory tried to get out of the car, as did Dennis, but the door wouldn't budge. It was like they'd been suddenly sealed shut.

"Thiago did this," Dennis slammed his fist on the dashboard. "If Carden hurts Thiago, Rory, I'll kill him myself."

Rory stared at him. "You couldn't kill Carden, and even if you tried to, do you think I'd let you?"

"Of course not." He sighed. "I know you love him, Rory, but if he's lost his mind, then—"

"Carden hasn't lost his mind, and he would never hurt me. Thiago is wrong on that one. What in hell is going on? What did he mean Carden is not himself, not himself, how?"

"I don't know," Dennis peered around the parking lot though the window. "I don't think I want to know either."

Rory yanked at the car door again, then let out a cry of frustration. "Jack is dead, strange

creatures are coming out of the woodwork. It's like all hell has suddenly broken loose."

"Maybe it has," was Dennis' ominous reply. "Maybe it has."

* * * *

The door was open in invitation when Thiago walked in. He knew why. He sighed, and closed it. The day he'd dreaded for so long was finally here. In some way, it was a relief. He could smell the blood. And he knew that not one of them had been spared.

Hesitantly, he moved through the entrance to the bar and then beyond. The first thing he saw was Suede's unseeing eyes staring up at him. His head had been severed from his body. The body was in pieces, strewn across the floor, an arm, a leg, a torso. Suede had been ripped limb from limb. There was blood everywhere. Some vampires didn't disintegrate when they were destroyed, and the blood smelt especially rich and pungent, not like human blood.

Thiago walked through it. It stuck to his shoes and soaked the bottom of his jeans. Several other bodies lay there as well, one of them Silk. There was blood on the stage, on the walls, it was everywhere.

"Are you shocked, Thiago, at all the carnage?"

Thiago swallowed. Carden was behind him. He turned slowly to see him standing, or rather floating above the bar, his chin on his fist like the statue of the Thinker. He was as bloody as the bar was, his hair matted with it, his chin coated. He'd drunk so much blood it overflowed through his eyes. And still, Carden was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, a demonic angel obsessed suddenly with death and destruction. *Vengeance*.

"Yes," he said softly. "Vengeance. It was supposed to be God's power, wasn't it? Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord, or some such business." He lowered himself and floated down to the floor.

Thiago stood perfectly still as he approached. There was no point in running. He could never outrun Carden, or defeat him. He felt himself tremble as Carden came closer to him. He'd never felt fear like this before.

Carden studied his face. "Look at me," he insisted. "See what I am. Maybe I am God."

"You're not God, Carden. You're just in pain."

"Pain." He laughed bitterly. "This isn't pain. I can show you pain."

Thiago swallowed. "Then do it. Get it over with. I'm glad Blane is gone."

"Really?" he raised an eyebrow, pacing in front of him a few times up and down. "Funny, Silk told me the same thing before I took him from this

earth. You all wished Blane gone, but none of you bothered to do it."

"It's forbidden. He was our maker. You know what would have happened if—"

"You could have come to me. He wasn't my maker. You could have told me the truth. But you hid it from me. You hid your crimes, and protected him. And that's why he got Danny."

Thiago hung his head. He fell to his knees. "Do it then. End it."

There was only silence.

Thiago looked up and Carden was sitting on the stage. He looked fragile, yet Thiago knew he was anything but. If Carden wanted to destroy him, he'd be gone already. He got to feet. "What are you waiting for?"

No answer. He just looked away.

"Carden, stop this madness. You've had your revenge. Think of Rory. He loves you."

He stared at him now with those bloodied eyes, and in an expressionless voice, whispered, "I know no one named Rory."

Thiago's mouth opened. "Carden, you don't mean that."

"Underneath all this civility, all this attempt for vampires to mingle among the humans...is this." He jumped off the stage and exposed his dripping fangs, held out his arms. "I am a monster. And so are you, Thiago. Humans love us at their peril."

"I'm not a monster. Dennis has made me—"

"He can't make you anything. It's too late for that. You are what you are."

"You can believe that if you want," Thiago shook his head.

Carden ran his finger down the length of his chest. "Why didn't we ever fuck, Thiago? You have a certain...je ne sais quoi..."

"You don't like vampires, remember?" His knees were feeling a little weak. Carden's aura was so powerful, it was overwhelming. One word from his lips and he would have done anything he wanted. He doubted if he could even know the extent of his power.

"No, you can never know," he replied, dropping his hand. "Why did you save me?"

"What?"

"Back then, when I was a boy? You saw me and yet you led Blane and the others away from me. Why? Blane would have rewarded you plenty for capturing me."

"I...you won't believe me."

"Yes," he said, "I will, because I'll know if you lie."

A shiver went through him. "I saved you because I suddenly realized that it was wrong. There'd been enough death. I wanted it to stop. And..."

"And, what?"

"And I saw you there. You were so beautiful. I felt your power. And I knew you were meant to be honored, not destroyed." Two blood tears ran down Thiago's face. "Don't torture me anymore, Carden. You can kill me with a thought. Do it. End my misery."

He stood there waiting for the blow, the blow that would wipe out everything once and for all. No more memories of the blood he'd spilt, of the love he'd lost. He concentrated on Dennis. He saw his face. He held him in his arms, and he knew that even though it would end now, at least he'd finally been loved. *Try to remember this in your darkest moment, Carden, the monster is worth loving.*

* * * *

Dennis suddenly let out a cry. "No, oh no, no, no, please, please," he pleaded, tears coming in rivers down his face.

Rory tried to hold him, calm him down. He was inconsolable. "What is it? What is it, Dennis?" He shook him, urging him to speak, terrified of what he was going to say.

"It's Thiago," he gulped back his tears, "oh God, Rory, he's preparing himself for...for... death."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Shawn woke to the sound of water trickling down the walls. It smelt rank, musty. He wiped the perspiration from his face and slowly sat up. He caught his breath suddenly as he saw a shadow approach. Then the shadow materialized into Dominick. He was frightening to look at, so white, and old.

“Yes,” he said, moving closer. “I am frightening.”

“What am I doing here?”

“You might be more grateful, Witch.”

Shawn swung his legs over the slab.

“You don’t remember?”

Shawn shook his head. “It’s a fog. I’m sure I saw...could it be...the Penanggalan? Holy shit. They only come out when—”

“When the balance between good and evil shifts.”

“Carden is out for blood. He’s reduced himself to his baser instincts, forgotten his culture. He was

the pinnacle of balance. As soon as the mind shift began, all manner of evil dared to make an appearance. They will obey him. He sent them to kill me."

"Yes."

"How did I—"

"You must have cast a quick spell, orbbed yourself out of harm's way. You called to me. I had you brought here."

"I'm safe here."

"Not for long," Dominick said. "Carden will sense you still are among the living. And he will come for you. He won't be satisfied until all who have wronged him are wiped off the face of this earth."

"Then we're doomed. You will never be transformed and I'll never get what I want."

"On the contrary. Carden's abandonment of his humanity leaves him vulnerable. He will isolate himself from the ones who love him. And he had made himself a renegade, an enemy of the hybrid, who secretly once worshipped him. Now they will hunt him."

"We need only make sure that we are in control or the hunters." Shawn beamed.

"Exactly. And that's why I need you, Witch. Tonight, I want you to bring the leaders, and we amass an army. Soon, Carden will be ours."

Shawn gave Dominick a thoughtful look.

"And if he hasn't already, soon he will taste human blood, and nothing else will satisfy him. Once we capture him, all we need do is starve him, and I guarantee that he will do anything we ask him, too. The thirst for blood, forbidden blood, once tasted, is Carden's only weakness."

* * * *

The doors on the car suddenly fell open all by themselves. Rory stared at the driver's side, baffled. Dennis pushed off his seat and began to run toward the club. "Dennis!" Rory chased after him. "Don't. It's not safe. Stop. Stop!" He finally caught up to him just as Dennis reached the door. He pulled him back. "Wait."

Dennis looked at Rory desperately. "Thiago."

"I know but..." *Where was Carden? Had Carden killed Thiago?* But that wasn't what was utmost in his mind. It was Carden. God, please, be okay, be safe. There was no holding Dennis back. He wrenched open the door and walked in.

Rory followed. Both of them terrified at what they might find, yet compelled to move forward.

Dennis put a hand to his mouth. "Oh my God."

Rory's eyes widened. Death. Everywhere.

Dennis called out. "Thiago? Thiago, where are you?"

They walked into the bar and Rory had to turn away. Body parts, blood, pools of it.

"Thiago," Dennis cried out.

Rory placed a hand on his arm, held him back.

Thiago was sitting in the middle of the floor, on his knees, his head down. He wasn't moving. For a minute, Rory thought he might be dead, or whatever term one could use for a vampire who's been wiped out.

Dennis approached slowly.

Rory moved with him, stepping over the carnage, trying to avoid stepping in the blood. There was no way to avoid that.

Thiago looked up. "He didn't kill me," he said. His voice sounded strange, as if it didn't belong to him. "He didn't kill me."

Dennis fell on his knees and wrapped Thiago in his arms, rocking him like one would a baby.

Rory looked around the room, his stomach heaving. He suddenly felt an utter sense of loss. "Where is he?" It came out like a choke. "Thiago, where is Carden?"

Thiago stood. He brought Dennis to his feet with him. He looked at Rory. "He's gone."

"Gone? Gone where?" He felt as if he might lose his mind any moment. "Did he...do this?"

Thiago nodded.

"Why?"

Thiago looked at Dennis and Dennis nodded. "We need to call someone, get this mess..."

"No. They'll hunt him. The authorities will..."

"Rory," Thiago sighed. "He's already going to be hunted, by vampires who consider him a threat. He killed Blane. He was old and powerful."

"He killed Blane, too?" Rory cried. "Where is he?"

"Upstairs. But there isn't anything left. Don't go up there."

Rory started to shake. "I have to see him, talk to him. Help him." The tears ran down his face.

Thiago came over and placed a hand on Rory's shoulder. "You can't do anything for him now. I'm going to try and reach as many as I can, try to talk them out of the hunt. And we have even bigger problems."

Dennis stared at him. "We have bigger problems than this?"

"It's complicated. It has to do with the cosmic balance in the universe. Carden is a supreme being. Do you know what that means?"

"Not exactly," Rory replied. "Is it a good thing?"

"It is if he remembers the culture of his kind. But now, he's stripped down to his baser instincts, which means, he thirsts for blood, sex, revenge, and if he tastes human blood, he'll become addicted."

"What does that have to do with all these evil things you're talking about?"

"Carden can control this evil just by resisting it himself. Evil stays at bay because they fear him. But if he embraces it, they become his servants. Do you understand?"

"Then it was Carden who released those headless things?" Dennis narrowed his eyes.

"Inadvertently, yes. They sensed his transition to the dark and they prepared to do his bidding. That's what Blane never understood about the Pure Bloods, they were masters of all. They balanced good and evil by virtue of their very natures. Carden's gradual descent into madness could doom us all."

Rory slumped down in one of the chairs. He'd never imagined what Carden was. He would have never believed that he could hold the world in his hands. "We have to stop him, Thiago. What set this off? What are you hiding from me?"

"Let's get out of here," Thiago announced, "then I promise, I'll tell you everything."

* * * *

Exhaustion took him. And for once since he couldn't remember when, he wanted to sleep. He wandered through the cemetery, avoiding the humans who lingered there, morning over bones

and dust, and moved a heavy slab, which served as a door, away from one of the mausoleums. When he was inside, he closed himself in on the darkness.

He lay down on top of the concrete tomb. It was cold and encrusted with dirt, the soul inside, having long departed. He closed his eyes, hoping not to dream. He saw blood. He heard cries, pleas for mercy. He heard sighs and whimpers, and gasps of pleasure. He moaned and turned on his side.

We are here, master, to do your bidding. We are released. We are your slaves. We've waited so long for you.

"Shut up!" He called out, sitting up. He placed his hands over his ears.

You are not alone. We are with you always.

I am alone.

Unique but not alone. You have released my minions. The world is now mine with you at my side.

I don't believe in you.

But I am all around you. And you have finally embraced me. Carden, take what you want. Taste the blood you crave. Give yourself to rapture. There is no need to hold back now. You can take it. Take it all.

Rory? "Rory?"

There was no answer. He'd lost him forever. Then as his eyes closed and lay down again, he heard another voice, comforting, soothing. There was a song playing in his head, a lullaby, the one

his mother sung to him when he was just a wee lad.

"Carden," the male voice said, sounding much like his own, "it's all right. It will be all right. You're not alone. Come to me, son. Come to me."

* * * *

"Hold my hands," Thiago told Rory as they sat around the table at Dennis'.

Rory took his hands.

"I'm going to take you back to that time, show you what happened."

"Is it horrible?"

"Yes."

"Will it help me save Carden?"

"I don't know if anyone can save him, or us, right now." Thiago met his gaze. "Relax your mind, let it drift."

Rory did as asked, fearful of what he would see.

Suddenly, in his mind's eye, he saw a beautiful garden, and just in back of it, was a huge sprawling house, a virtual fortress made from stone and wood with a thatched roof. There was danger all around him. He could feel it. Then everything went really fast. A beautiful woman screaming, a man who looked so much like Carden Rory's heart almost stopped beating. They

chopped off her head, angry, snarling vampires. And the man was dragged off, calling for his son.

Rory's eyes snapped open. "It was Carden."

"No," Thiago said, "you saw his father, the king. King Declen Adair. We never realized what we needed to fear most would be all around us if we destroyed the last of the Pure Bloods. Blane made us fear them, said they would kill us, that they considered us their fodder. But it wasn't true. All he wanted was the boy."

"Declen's son...my Carden." His heart was breaking.

"I saw him. He was hiding. He wasn't that old, a teenager maybe. He saw everything. And if he would have been older, we'd have all been dead. But he was too paralyzed by fear and grief. I pretended I didn't see him. When I saw the others dancing around with the Queen's head, I..." He stopped, swallowed. "I knew we'd done wrong. I felt it in my soul."

"And the others, Silk and Suede and..."

"They were there, too. All of us, turned by Blane, tied to him. We all hated him so."

Dennis placed a hand on his shoulder. "You made a mistake, but you made amends."

"No, I didn't," he said. "I never made amends. Carden was right. He asked me why I didn't come to him, why I hid the truth. We all wanted Blane dead, but we were cowards. Carden could have

taken care of it for us, freed us all, and maybe Danny would have been spared. Carden will never forgive that." He put his face in his hands. "Now Carden is lost, and maybe everything we hold dear."

Dennis hugged his neck, placed his chin on his head.

Rory was finding it hard to breathe. The world could be overrun by evil because Carden wasn't there to balance it. And he could lose him completely. Never see him again.

He got up from his chair and went outside. *I don't know where you are, baby. But I love you. It doesn't matter what you've become, I will always love you. Speak to me.*

There was nothing but the wind whistling through the trees.

* * * *

Shawn looked around. He was now surrounded by angry vampires. And something had changed. He could feel it. These vampires seemed feral, out of control. They spoke of blood, and war, and feeding off mortals. One of them threw a bottle of blood substitute into the middle of the floor. "We're through with seconds. It's time for the real thing."

Dominick looked at Shawn.

There was no way to reason with these fiends. He was going to have to cast the spell to control them. He reached out his hands, said a few words, and everyone in the room froze, except for Dominick and a very frightened looking Alan Spenser, who stood at his shoulder.

Shawn moved into the middle of the room. He waved his hands around and began to say the spell. "Blood lust creatures, hear my call. Find the one you seek, powerful above us all. Bring him here to this place, touch not a hair upon his head, hunt him right away, hear these words I've said." Shawn waved his hands again and the vampires unfroze. They all turned to bow to Shawn.

"We hear your command, master, and leave without delay." The leader was a vamp named Curse. He looked like a biker, wore a gold earring and a jean jacket, and drove a Harley. He turned and began to leave, and the others filed out obediently behind him.

"Very good," Dominick said. "Now, we sit back and wait."

* * * *

There were two voices in his head. One called him, son, and told him to come to him, but the other held much more appeal. He promised him

nourishment and sex on demand, and right now, that's all he desired.

So long you've deprived yourself Carden, when the world has always been at your feet. Take it. Take it!

The first empty house he saw, he scaled the roof and ducked in through the window. He went into the bathroom and stripped off his bloody clothes, leaving them in a heap on the bathroom floor. He turned on the shower and washed his body, his hair, then dried himself off on a towel.

Next, he opened a closet, only women's clothes. He slammed the door shut, walked down the hallway, found men's jeans and shirts. The jeans were tight, but that was okay. He pulled on an equally tight T-shirt and combed through his long hair with his fingers. He stared at himself in the mirror. A stranger looked back. It smiled at him, a cool smile, of pure evil.

Suddenly, he froze. He heard noises, the door opening below. He could smell the blood, human, warm, pulsing through the veins. He licked his lips, then looked around him. He flew out the window, diving off the roof and casually landing on his feet. His sharp vision could see the tiny bugs feasting off the wildflowers beside the road.

He took to the sky, stretching out his arms, looking down on the people below, like bugs, bugs he could smash if he wanted. He spotted the

WeHo district, and touched down just off Sunset Boulevard.

A drunk staggered up the street in his direction and looked up in surprise. "Now where did you come from?" he hiccupped.

Carden ignored him, and just continued to stroll on down the street. He saw the flashing neon sign from far away, and he knew that's where he wanted to go. It was called Rapture. And it was oh so appropriate.

* * * *

Curse knew he'd be among the faggots. "That pretty boy has got a taste for cock. He'll taste mine once I get a hold of him," he told the others. "Now search every one of those sissy bars and if you spot him, don't go near him. Leave him to me."

The others spread out. Curse glanced at the neon sign, which flashed directly in front of him. "Rapture," he said, closing his eyes. "I can smell you, Adair. I'm coming."

* * * *

Rory insisted on going with Thiago, although he put up a hell of a fuss. "It's dangerous," he said. "The evil has permeated some of us. We're forgetting our pact with humans."

Dennis looked frightened. "Are you going to turn, too?"

Thiago hugged him. "I'm closing out the voices. Stay with me, sweetheart. It's you who keeps me grounded. As long as I look at you, I won't forget." They kissed.

Rory closed his eyes, his heart aching. He missed Carden so much. And right now he almost resented that Denis had Thiago at his side.

"Now, you guys stay with me. Don't say anything," he said, pulling Rory's car to a halt in front of a well-lit club on Ocean Boulevard.

"What is this place?" Rory asked as they got out of the vehicle.

"A vampire club, exclusive. I can feel the turmoil in there tonight. They're roused up. I got to talk to them, get them on Carden's side."

"That would be next to impossible," a voice said. A sleek woman who looked like a cat appeared out of nowhere. "Hello, Thiago. I wouldn't go in there if I were you. They're wondering why Carden didn't destroy you. They think you're his accomplice."

"That's ridiculous," he said. "Carden decided to spare my life because I helped him get away in the past, that's all."

"He killed Blane, and five others. He bled Blane like a pig, sacrificed him."

"Blane was no good, everyone knew that."

"Didn't matter. He was one of us. It wasn't Carden's role to play God. There's a vampire counsel for that. And what are these mortals doing here? They're in danger."

"I need to speak to them in there, Delilah," Thiago urged. "They don't understand. If they destroy Carden, all will be lost for everyone, mortal and vampire alike."

She narrowed her eyes. She had long, jet black hair that was piled on top of her head, and the creamiest skin Rory had ever seen. "I don't understand."

"I need to explain it to you. You don't understand about why the Pure Bloods existed in the first place, and Carden may well be the last of his kind."

"I'll see what I can do, but your mortals must stay here."

"I'm coming with Thiago," Dennis said.

"Me, too," Rory nodded.

She shrugged. "I can't guarantee your safety."

* * * *

All eyes were on Carden as he walked through the crowd. The men stopped, moaned, reached out a hand to touch him. He kept walking, scanning the crowd. Then he saw him, swaying on the dance floor, half-naked, his shirt tied around his waist,

his chest and back bathed in sweat. Carden moved in front of him, his partner faded into the background. The dance floor cleared and only the two of them were left. The crowd looked on, lusting, needing, wanting what they couldn't understand.

Carden placed his palms on his chest, moved them down and undid his jeans. The young man's head went back, trance like. Carden sank to his knees and pressed his lips to the flesh, felt the blood rush to the surface of the man's shaft.

No, son. Don't.

Yes, Carden. Do it. Taste him.

Son...please...don't...don't...Carden!

Carden let his teeth sink into his shaft, blocking out the voices, the blood making him euphoric. His head span. The blood gushed into his mouth, between his teeth, and flowed down his throat. He reared back, roared, and licked his lips. The music had stopped. There was absolute silence. Everyone seemed frozen in time except for the young man who wantonly ran his own hands over his body.

"Take them off, all of them," Carden told him, watching as he stripped naked. He motioned to him, undid the pants he had on and pulled them down to his knees. He stroked his own cock. "Come on, baby, sit on my cock and I'll take you for a ride."

The young man straddled Carden's hips.

Carden positioned his cock and planted it up inside of his ass, pulling him down on his cock at the same time. The man let out a cry of pleasure as Carden lifted off the floor and spread his legs, fucking him hard, bouncing him up and down on his cock while he twisted and pulled at his nipples. "Give me your throat," he growled.

The young man laid his head back, his throat exposed.

Carden sunk his teeth into the tender flesh, gorging on the warm blood while his cock continued to pleasure the mortal's ass.

The man was swooning, moaning while others lined up to take his place. Carden picked him up suddenly and threw him aside, wiping the blood off his mouth. "There, literally fucked to death. Next," he called out.

* * * *

Curse watched the display from a shadowed corner of the room. "Monstrous," he whispered, but his eyes were filled with lust. Suddenly as Carden was about to take the next one, Curse walked out into the middle of the room, clapping his hands together slowly. "Bravo, Carden."

Carden stood, did up his pants. "You better have a fucking good reason for interrupting my feeding."

"I'm here to take you."

"Take me?" He laughed. "And where do you think you're going to take me?"

"That's my business."

Carden noticed that there was several others who had come up behind him. "Ah, you want to punish me?" he cooed. "Have I been a bad boy? Bad, bad Carden."

Curse looked at the others. "Get him."

* * * *

Thiago had a hell of a time calming the others down. They were out for blood, Carden's blood. The room was tense and Rory felt as if he was being looked at like he was a juicy steak. At one point, he wasn't sure if they were going to ever leave alive.

He had been more than happy to lay back with Dennis, huddled behind Thiago as he tried to be heard over the shouts and the grumbles. Even Rory wasn't sure of what Thiago was saying anymore. He said nothing until he heard the Amerindian vampire in the front say something about *Curse*.

This made Thiago pause. And Rory heard him swear under his breath. "How did he get involved?"

"We don't know, but he's leading a gang of vampires. They're hunting for Carden. We've been called to join. We're trying to decide—"

"Listen," Thiago shouted. "Have any of you even had any trouble with Carden? Has he ever threatened you?"

There were some head shaking, whispering in the crowd.

"Then hold off on joining Curse. You know he's a troublemaker. Give me a chance to find Carden. If he's guilty, we'll let the counsel deal with him, not a mob."

Delilah looked at the others. "Let's give them a little more time before we jump on the band wagon."

"And remember who you are," Thiago warned. "We don't want to go back to the way things were before. We co-exist with humans now. Don't listen to the voices."

Rory and Dennis breathed a sigh of relief when they were back in the car. Rory got behind the wheel and he drove off like hell on wheels, prompting Dennis to slow down. They were all silent in the car then Rory asked, "What voices?" He glanced at Thiago in the mirror.

Thiago seemed distracted. He was looking up out of the window at the sky. "What?"

"What voices? You told them not to listen to the voices. Is that what you were talking to Dennis about before?" Rory gripped the wheel.

"The voices tell me I should drink your blood," he said, "give in to my natural instincts."

"And all the vampires are hearing those now?" Rory demanded.

"Most likely."

"Is Carden telling you to..."

"No, not Carden, specifically, but it's connected to him."

"I want to scream," Rory said, banging the wheel with his fist. "This is a nightmare."

Dennis placed a hand on his shoulder.

When they pulled up in front of Dennis' place, Thiago pulled Dennis up against him. "I have to go," he said.

"No."

"Yes. I have to see if I can find Carden."

"He could kill you."

"He had his chance. Look, you guys need to call someone now about—"

"I'll do it first thing tomorrow." Rory said. He was exhausted. "I think I'd like to try and get some sleep."

Thiago kissed Dennis on the forehead and left without another word.

Dennis stood there shaking.

"Let's go inside," Rory suggested. "Somehow, I don't feel safe out here anymore."

* * * *

Curse stood there with his mouth ajar. Seven vampires lay on the dance floor. Carden had immobilized them so quickly, he never saw it coming. Now, he stood in the centre and motioned to Curse with his hands.

"Come," he said. "If you think you can take me, bring it on."

Curse took a few steps back, turned and hightailed it out of there.

* * * *

Carden stepped over the bodies and walked through the club. He stood in the fresh air for a few minutes and looked up at the sky. He felt free, free of rules and free of convention. No one could hurt him. No one could touch him. He cared for nothing.

The night breeze stirred around him. Crying. He heard someone crying suddenly. It sounded as if their heart was broken. He closed his eyes. *No, baby, don't. It's okay. It's okay.*

* * * *

Dennis was shaking Rory awake. "Rory, are you all right?"

Rory opened his eyes. His face was wet with tears. "I could feel him. I could feel him, Dennis," Rory clutched his hand, "just for a minute. He's so sad. I have to go to him."

"No Rory, you can't," Dennis said. "Come out to the living room."

"Why?" Rory stumbled half-asleep after Dennis down the hallway.

"Look," Dennis pointed to the television.

On the screen was a picture of a club in Santa Monica. There were sheets covering a variety of bodies on the dance floor. Dennis turned up the volume.

"LA is a city in crisis. For some reason, there seems to be chaos everywhere. Just last night in this downtown gay club, an unidentified vampire went on a rampage. Seven vampires were destroyed, along with two humans. Police won't say how the mortals died, but there is some suspicion that the mortals may have been drained of blood."

"Oh God no," Rory moaned, sinking down onto the sofa.

"There's nothing to link it to Carden," Dennis said. "It could have been any vampire."

"To have killed so many vampires at the same time?" Rory sounded doubtful. "Who could have done that except for Carden?"

The news reporter was now reviewing the laws that were giving rights to vampires when they had come out years before. Those who had never accepted them were speaking. "We knew this would happen." Some minister from an anti-vampire church was speaking, "Give them an inch, and they take over. They'll kill us all before the end."

"Turn it off," Rory said, putting his face in his hands. "Have you heard anything from Thiago?"

Dennis shook his head. "I have to go to work today, but I don't want to."

"I have to get to the club, let the authorities know what's happened. More ammunition for the vampire haters."

"You want me to go with you?"

"No. I don't want you to lose your job. And Jack, oh my God, I have to tell the police about Jack. He must have family."

Dennis hugged him. "I'll come down to the club directly after work."

CHAPTER EIGHT

“He killed seven of them,” Curse told Shawn, his head down. “He would have killed me, too, if I hadn’t gotten away. He moves so fast I—”

Dominick reached out and struck him hard in the face. “Fool! You don’t go after someone like Carden without having a plan. Where are the others?”

“Safe. They were looking for him somewhere else.”

Gather them together. And recruit more. Bring them here and we’ll devise a plan.”

“They’re afraid.”

Dominick came close to Curse’s face. He sneered, “They’ll be more afraid if they don’t obey me, now go!”

Shawn watched Curse leave. “That might have been the only opportunity,” he told Dominick.

“Nonsense,” Dominick snapped. “I have an idea. We have to be patient.”

Patience was just the thing Shawn was running out of. He had to come up with a spell, one which could subdue Carden, reduce his power, but even after all these years, he'd yet to find one that would work. But he wasn't giving up.

"The spell you put on these vamps works like a charm, I notice," Dominick was laughing at him. "I'm sure the one you come up with for Carden will be equally as effective."

"They're afraid, that's all."

"They're supposed to be immune from fear, wanting only to serve you. We need a plan, a solid plan, enough of your witchcraft."

Shawn held his temper. "Well, if you have one, let's hear it. I fear he may now be far away from here."

Dominick was thoughtful. "Well, think about what may bring him back. How did Blane control him? It was by threatening his precious human."

"I know what you're thinking. But Carden has changed. He's embraced his baser instincts, tasted human blood. He won't care about Rory anymore."

"You wish that was true," Dominick pointed a long nailed finger at him.

His white face still gave Shawn the creeps.

"You wish it was you he desired, you he'd kill for. We all do. We all want Carden. But something inside of him makes him give his heart to mortals.

He may have embraced his baser instincts, but he can't forget his heart. Get Rory, you get Carden."

Shawn considered what he said. "If you think it would work."

"Now don't go doing anything hasty. That mortal is being protected by Thiago, the only one Carden spared. Rory must come to us, and on his own."

"And why would he do that?"

"To meet his lover of course," he lifted an eyebrow. "Now, do you think you could make Rory believe that Carden is calling him? Lead him here?"

"Simple enough."

"Then do it," Dominick said. He stood and floated out of the chambers.

* * * *

The man's hand touched his cheek. "Tell me what game you want to play, Carden?"

"The one where I hide and you have to find me. "

"Okay, go," the man smiled indulgently at him. "I'll count, give you a head start. Hide well, Carden."

"I will, Father."

He turned on his side in the crypt. "I'm hiding, Father," he said. "Come find me."

"I'm waiting for you," the voice replied. "Son, come to me. Listen only to me. I love you, Carden."

Carden sat up in the darkness. His body ached. *Rory?* He reached out to touch nothing. “*Rory, save me,*” he moaned, lying back down.

No one can save you, vampire. You’ve tasted human blood. You want more. Take it. Take what you want, and let the demons walk.

He lifted straight up in the air, pushed the door of the crypt open with a roar. He flew over the city, looking straight ahead. He needed to leave this place. He needed to go home. I want to go home.

There is no home for you. You are alone.

Yes. Alone.

Come to me, Carden. Come home to me.

The voices died down eventually, giving him rest for a little while. He closed his eyes, felt the variation in the winds, night turned to day turned to night. *Rory. Danny.* He saw their faces so clearly and for a while it comforted him, seeing them before him in the clouds, soothed his hunger, a hunger which gnawed at him. He needed blood.

When he finally touched down on the ground, it was night again. He was in the woods. He spotted a rabbit. His hand darted out and he picked it up, snapped its neck, and drank. He threw it aside unsatisfied, and feasted finally on a sheep in a farmer’s field. But the blood wasn’t human. He wasn’t holding that human in his arms, listening to the slowing heart beat, waiting

for the stillness. He knew he was near to where he wanted to be. And when he saw the place, he stopped, his entire body shaking.

It's all right, Carden. Come to me.

He kept moving through the high grass. He knew where he was. The county was called Wicklow now. It had been dubbed the garden of Ireland with its glassy lakes, tranquil rivers and sparkling streams. It was green and lush and the air smelled so fresh. It soothed his savagery being here, made him feel almost sentimental.

Most of the house was gone of course, in its place was a modern building, but he was happy to see that some of the same structure was intact. "Where are you?" Carden said aloud. "Why do you call to me?"

We are your servants. You have released us. We serve you.

Get out of my head. Leave me alone!

A young man came out of the house now. He looked curiously at Carden, then smiled. "Hello," he said with an attractive Irish lilt. "May I help you?"

He knew that accent. "I used to live here," he replied. "I..."

"Would you like to see inside?"

Carden knew the mortal was drawn to him. He could read his jumble of thoughts. He was a married man, hopelessly straight, and his instant

attraction to Carden was intensely sexual. He was perplexed by it, yet he had no control. He wanted Carden to make love to him.

"That would be nice," Carden smiled. He could smell his blood.

The young man opened the door and motioned to him to follow.

Carden. I'm close. Don't hurt the mortal. You know how to subdue him, make him sleep.

Drink, Prince. Prince of evil darkness. Take what you want. Kill him.

Carden paused. He could hear a heartbeat, another aside from the mortals, thump, thump, thump, a heart that beat exactly like his.

* * * *

Rory had told the police the same story at least five times, and it made even less sense each time he told it. How could he explain about Carden? People had all they could do accepting the idea of ordinary vampires, let alone someone that had Carden's power. Sure, he was going to say, *look, there was this vampire who killed this super beings family a long time ago, a lot of vamps were involved, and now Carden has lost it and the balance between good and evil is...* No, he didn't think so. The police were looking for Jack's body now and the officer told Rory they'd call him in when he was found.

"Don't leave town."

"What? I'm a suspect?"

"I didn't say that," he said. "I just advised you not to leave town."

"So the club will be closed now right?" Rory asked. "What will happen to it?" It wasn't as if Blane had family.

The officer glanced at him. "Since it belonged to the vamp, one of the victims, unless he had a will, it will go to the city, and probably be up for sale. But for now it's a crime scene. It's officially closed, and good riddance, as far as I'm concerned. There were always suspicious things going on there."

"Guess I'll be looking for another job," Rory muttered.

"Look, just some friendly advice, if I were you," he snapped his file closed, "I'd stop hanging out with vampires."

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind."

"If we need you, we'll call you. That's it for now," the cop stood.

Rory left the precinct, relieved to finally be out of there.

Dennis waited outside. "You okay?"

"I'm exhausted. I need to go home."

"Want to stay with me?"

Rory put an arm around him and nodded.

"So did you tell them about Jack?"

"Best I could. It's kind of hard to explain, you know?"

"Yeah. I get that."

"They think I'm a suspect. They don't say it, but they think it."

"How? That's stupid," Dennis protested. "How could you have ripped those vampires apart?"

"They don't want to face facts."

"Well, people better. There's some horrible things going on in this city. I heard it on the radio."

Rory clutched Dennis' arm. "Carden again?"

"I don't think so. Just carnage, murder, break-ins."

"Then it's true," Rory leaned on his car, his face in his hands. "Carden was what was keeping the balance."

"I think so," Dennis sighed. "I'm scared, Rory."

Rory looked at him. "Me, too."

Thiago was sitting on the stoop when they arrived. Denis ran to him and hugged him tight.

Rory trudged up the pathway. His energy had gone and so had his spirit. Thiago opened up one arm and pulled Rory close. He gave him a hug as well. "God, can I borrow him tonight?" Rory moaned, smiling.

"No," Dennis muttered with a grin, "you cannot borrow him."

Thiago looked up at the sky. "Let's go inside," he said suddenly.

"What?" Dennis asked. "Did you see something, Thiago?"

"No, it's okay. Just safer."

They all went inside.

"No luck finding Carden, I suppose?" Rory asked Thiago. He already knew the answer.

"He's no longer in LA. I can't sense him anywhere, not that he'd let me sense him."

"Not in LA?" Rory stared at him. "Where in the hell is he?"

"He's on the run. And I think he's gone home."

"Home?"

"To Ireland, County of Wicklow more precisely."

"Then that's where we're going," Rory said with determination.

"No," Thiago shook his head. "You forget, Carden is dangerous."

"He won't hurt me."

"You don't know that," Dennis tried to sound compassionate.

"I do know that," Rory insisted, tears in his eyes. "No matter what kind of blood thirsty fiend he's become, he would never hurt me. I know that. I'd stake my life on it."

"You might have to if you ran into him in the middle of the night," Thiago mused.

"I'm going. You can stay or come with me," Rory said.

Thiago looked at Dennis.

"Looks like we're going to Ireland," Dennis sighed.

* * * *

Later that night after Rory had gone to bed, Dennis pulled Thiago into the bedroom. He was tense. They all were, but Dennis knew just the way to relax them both. He kissed him hard and Thiago kissed him back, taking him down on the bed. "I wish I could do something for Rory," Dennis murmured, kissing Thiago's chest.

Thiago raised an eyebrow.

Dennis hit him. "Don't even think about it."

He chuckled. "I wasn't suggesting a threesome, but I could plant an image of him and Carden together."

"You could do that?"

"Sure," he shrugged.

"You're full of surprises."

"You just wait," he winked and got off the bed.

"Hey," Dennis protested.

"I'm coming back. Wait."

Thiago placed his hand on the wall that separated Dennis' room from where Rory slept. He closed his eyes for a few minutes, then walked back over to the bed.

"What did you do?"

"I told you. I planted something in his head. He'll dream of Carden, and it will seem real. Maybe it will pick up his spirits."

"You're a sweetie." Dennis kissed him hotly.

"No, I'm a vampire." He showed him his teeth for effect.

"Oh, baby, bite me," Dennis giggled.

"That can be arranged," Thiago tickled him.

They snuggled down together for a minute. Dennis rubbed Thiago's cock.

"Um, that feels good," he said. "Keep it up."

"Thiago?"

"Um?"

"Would you ever?"

"Would I ever what?"

"Bite me?"

"No."

"Even if I wanted you to?"

Thiago looked at him. "You want me to bite you?"

"I...I don't know."

Thiago kissed him tenderly on the mouth. He stroked his hair. "Dennis? I'd never bite you. First, I don't want to acquire a taste for human blood, and secondly because I'd be afraid to hurt you. I'd never hurt you, Dennis. If I thought that, I'd go far away."

"What about those voices?"

"I told you, I don't hear them when you're next to me. I won't let evil take me away from you."

"Fuck me," Dennis groaned. He rolled over on his stomach and flashed Thiago a smile.

"I will," he said softly, kissing the back of his neck, then trailing his lips down to the small of his back, "but I have some things I want to do first. Any objection?"

"Um," Dennis replied as Thiago's tongue moved down his crack, "none what so ever."

* * * *

"Carden?" Rory turned over in bed and there he was, those beautiful dark eyes looked down at him. "Oh, Carden," Rory gulped, tears tumbling down his face. "Carden."

"Shush," he said, his fingers on his chin, "don't talk. Just kiss me. You want to kiss me, don't you, baby?"

Rory wrapped his arms around him. He held him tight against him, afraid to let him go. "Stay with me."

"I will."

Rory closed his eyes. He sobbed. Carden was inside of him, and he was again held spellbound by that feeling of free falling, only to be caught in his strong arms, held, protected, and loved. "You're not real," he whispered, but yet all the

feelings were there, and he could see his face, feel his cock inside of him. Carden even trembled with orgasm, his hard body pressed up close to him. Muscular arms held him, rocked him, lips kissed his hair.

"It's okay, baby," a voice said, sounding amazingly like Carden. "I'm here. Sleep now. Just sleep."

Rory's eyes closed. He breathed in his scent. "Carden," he whispered, tears drying on his face, "come back to me."

I'm close, Rory.

"Carden?" He sat upright in bed. That voice sounded different. "Carden? Are you trying to communicate with me, baby? I'm listening."

I need to see you. I'm afraid. I'm all alone. I need you. Come to me.

Where are you?

Soon. I'll tell you soon.

* * * *

Carden reached out and placed a hand over the man's eyes. "Sleep," he said, and the man fell into his arms, limp, unconscious. Carden ran his fingers over his cheekbone, his lips. The mortal's body was so warm, so alive. His head fell to the side and the blood moved under his skin through the large jugular vein in his throat. Carden dipped

his head, licked the skin there. His teeth elongated.

Carden. Put him down. Stay your hunger. You're not a killer. Carden! You're not a killer.

Carden buried his face in the man's neck, breathed in his scent, struggled with his desire to taste that flesh, and drink that thick rich blood.

Carden. No!

He pulled away, laid the man's body gently down on the floor. Then he heard a baby crying. Carden blinked, walked toward the sound. There in the room ahead was a small baby in a crib. He stood, gripping the railing of his confines with his chubby hands. His arms were outreached, and he was bawling his eyes out.

Carden stood there for a minute, frozen in time, staring at the infant. He reached down, picked up the baby, held it to him for a moment, breathing in the sweet smell of his baby hair. His eyes filled. "It's okay, baby, it's okay," and he started to sing the lullaby, the one his mother sang to him so many years ago. Had he thought about it for a minute, innocent blood, the taste of it?

Try to remember this in your darkest moment Carden, the monster is worth loving.

The baby had quieted now. Carden put it back in the crib. "It's all right, baby. Where are you?" he called out.

You know. Remember our game.

He walked through the house, a house that didn't at all resemble the house he once knew, and yet it felt so familiar to him. He could see the place where they all sat together in front of the fire on cold winter nights. He could hear his mother singing to him, dancing around with him in her arms, laughing. They were both laughing. The song played in his head, the one he sang to the baby just a few seconds ago.

Fhuair mi lorg na h-eal' air...

Then, death, his mother dying and then the vampires that danced around with her head, his beautiful, gentle mother who loved him so, who wouldn't have hurt anyone.

He knew now where the voice was coming from. *The priest hole*. It was a hideaway people had built into their houses under the Protestant reformation to hide Catholic priests. There were many built in the mid 1500s under Elizabeth the First. That was the place he liked to hide from his father when they played that game. He placed his hands against the wall, listened acutely.

Thump, thump, thump.

Carden drew back his fist and smashed a hole into the wall. The plaster crumbled, the bricks tumbling down in the back as well. He took both hands now and grabbed hold of the wall, ripping a hole big enough for him to put his head through.

He blinked, his eyes adjusted to the darkness and then he saw it. Bones, and something else, a heart. There was a heart and it was beating. He stood there, stunned. His hands trembled as he stooped down, touched what remained, placed his hand over the pumping organ. They hadn't killed his father. Instead the fiends had walled him up here alive.

"My God." He lowered his head, blood tears falling in the dirt as he fell to his knees.

Feed me, Carden. Blood. Your blood.

Carden picked up his head. Nothing had moved. Nothing had changed. How could this be? Suddenly without thinking, he lifted his wrist and bit into it. He lowered his dripping arm to the mouth of the skull and watched the blood run into nothing, wetting the dirt beneath.

Then he gasped, fell backward, his back hitting the cold brick wall as his eyes widened. He was staring at something he could hardly believe. The organs began to form slowly, muscle, tissue, arteries, all of them coming together to cover bones, bones which belonged to Declen Adair.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

A. J. Llewellyn lives in California, but dreams of living in Hawaii. Frequent trips to all the islands, bags of Kona coffee in his fridge and a healthy collection of Hawaiian records keep this writer refueled. A. J. loves male/male erotica, has a passion for all animals (especially the dog, the cat and the turtle). A. J. believes that love is a song best sung out loud.

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I write not only for my own pleasure, but for the pleasure of my readers. I can't remember a time in my life when I haven't written and told stories. When I'm not writing, I'm dreaming about writing, doing something wild and adventurous, or trying to make the world a better and more open minded place to live in. I adore beautiful men, and I know I'm not alone in this! Eroticism between consenting adults, in all its many forms is the icing on the cake of life!

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