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THE
ASCENSION

SAMANTHA SOMMERBY

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There's only one way to safeguard the future—fight free of the past. There's only one way to safeguard the future—fight free of the past.

Byron Renfield is a master of climbing the social ladder. He's successful, handsome, independently wealthy...and a vampire. As a member of an elite group of immortals, the Dominie, Byron's spent centuries isolating himself from humanity in order to pursue redemption. It's a good plan...until Violet Deeds comes along.

Violet is beautiful, sexy, outspoken...and human, which makes her completely off limits. His society's canon may forbid it, but Byron is rocked by a longing so intense that in one impulsive act of passion, he claims Violet as his mate.

Irrevocably bound together, Byron and Violet enter one another's worlds, threatening the balance of society and nature. He takes steps to protect them both from the Dominie's inevitable retribution, but it isn't enough. Violet is hunted down and kidnapped. If Byron wants a life—any life—with Violet, he must defy the very core of the Dominie itself. And win.

This book has been previously published and has been revised and expanded from its original release.

Warning: This book contains one fabulously feisty redheaded heroine, one hunky holy-man-turned-rebel vampire, a group of corrupt religious zealots, women in chains and plenty of scorching hot sex.

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Forbidden: The Ascension

Samantha Sommersby

Dedication

For Barb. Your unwavering support and encouragement continues to be a blessing for which I am exceedingly grateful. You're my co-conspirator, confidant, cheerleader, counselor and trusted critic. But most importantly, you are a dear and valued friend. Thank you for always listening and for always being there.

Chapter One

It started out as a perfect day, the kind of day it was worth staying up to enjoy. The sky was completely clouded over and the rain was pouring down in torrents. It was barely 8:00 a.m. when I dragged my favorite black leather chair over to the large picture window so I could enjoy my merlot and watch the storm. Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking *he drinks at eight o'clock in the morning?* The answer is yes. I drink what I want, when I want. I eat what I want, when I want. And, except for a short list of prohibited items, I do what I want, when I want. You see... I am immortal... I am a vampire.

Whether to blame the weather or the wine, I'm not sure. By early afternoon I'd pulled out the box I swore I would never again open. Just one more time, I'd promised. But that was hours ago, when I'd started this indulgence. Now as I gazed into the empty box, I felt my resolve crumbling.

It was early evening. Lightning split the darkened sky, illuminating the rocky coastline of the island. My island. I draped my hand over the armrest of the chair and let the last of Violet's letters flutter to the floor to join the others. I'd discovered them among Grace's belongings shortly after her death and I'd spent the last few weeks reading them.

Each passage seemed to reveal something else to me, some nuance, some detail. I felt like a bit of a voyeur, staring into the window of her very soul. She'd laid it all bare. Not for me, of course, but it was there nonetheless. Her hopes and dreams, her fears and doubts, her longings. In her delicate hand she'd written to Grace more than a hundred letters over the years. During the course of their correspondence, Grace had clearly become not only her friend but her confidante.

I stood and stretched, then made my way over to my new computer. I was determined to give writing to Violet one more try before turning in and getting a few hours of sleep. As soon as the monitor came to life, I opened a new document. In the past month I'd tried to write to her more than a dozen times to tell her of Grace's death. Tried and failed. I couldn't seem to find the right words.

Violet

Dear Violet

My dearest Violet

It was no use. I didn't even know how to begin. I picked up the snapshot of her that Grace had kept in her wallet, a young girl in cap and gown, sunlight bouncing off her fiery red hair. Her bright green eyes full of mirth. She had jumped into the air, diploma in hand, and someone had captured the moment. My throat

tightened and my chest constricted. I was grieving, I reminded myself for the thousandth time. Sadness was natural.

But if I were to be honest, I'd have to admit this was more than sadness, more than grief for the loss of Fred and Grace. This was discontentment. And I shouldn't be feeling it. I had everything I've ever wanted, after all. So why am I sitting here, torn apart by this sense of hunger, yearning for what I can't have and shouldn't want?

I looked once again at the picture. It was clearly her fault, Violet's. Her letters had touched me. And her face; her face had managed to etch itself deep within my subconscious, weaving itself into my dreams. Unwittingly, unknowingly, Violet had awakened something in me, making me realize a depth of loneliness and an emptiness I hadn't wanted to admit to feeling. Until recently my resolve had been steadfast, my path certain. I had been content with my life. It was a noble life, one of service and honor, one my father would have been proud of. Now? Now I was riddled with self-doubt.

I'd always been somewhat of a loner, but since my elevation to *Dominie*, I hadn't left the island and I received few guests. I didn't want the distraction, the temptation. I didn't want to take the risk of repeating the sins of my father.

I hadn't been completely alone during my self-imposed confinement. There had been visits from Fred and Grace, there had been the occasional visit from other Dominie, and there were my weeks with Rita.

Rita was my consort, presented to me by one of the elders. When I first met her she was fresh and sweet and satisfying—to a degree. She'd never really been my lover, although we fucked with some regularity, at least early on. Over the past fifty years, Rita had become more and more of a friend, perhaps the only one I'd ever had. She'd wanted more, that much was plain. But I couldn't offer it and she understood. Not to her. Not to anyone.

I pulled up instant messaging to see if Rita was on-line. She wasn't. I was desperate to talk to someone. I never felt desperate. It had turned out to be a banner day for Byron Renfield—desperation and discontentment.

I made my way to the window overlooking the coastline and peered outside. The ocean was churning. The sky was a dark grey and the temperature was dropping. I expected the rain would be turning to snow soon. "Now is the winter of my discontent," I murmured, staring into my now-empty wine glass.

A knock at the door roused me from my self-pitying stupor. I wasn't expecting anyone and no one came uninvited. That's one of the advantages of living on an island. My heart skipped a beat and the palms of my hands began to sweat. Yes, my heart beats and my hands sweat. I'm immortal, not dead.

"Mr. Renfield?" It was a woman, on the other side of the door.

I picked up my discarded black cashmere sweater, pulled it on over my head, and hastily combed my fingers through my hair. It was time for a trim. That prompted me to run my hand over my chin to check for stubble. I needed a shave, too.

The knock came again.

I padded barefoot toward the front door, trying to remain calm even though my heart rate was increasing with each step. After confirming the door was locked, I laid my hand on the surface of it and closed my eyes. On the other side I detected a human, a woman. I shivered. Her pull seemed unusually strong. Already it was affecting me. All human women were dangerous, but this one...

"Mr. Renfield?"

"Yes?"

What on earth possessed me to answer? I should have just stood there. She probably would have gone away...eventually.

"It's Violet. Violet Deeds," she shouted over the din of the storm. "Could you let me in, Mr. Renfield? It's awfully cold and wet out here. Grace invited me to stay for the weekend. She said you wouldn't mind one more. It was so nice of you to—"

The fact that she was here, at my very door was unbelievable. Was it chance? Kismet? Before I was able to talk myself out of it, I opened the door. I told myself it was only idle curiosity. That I just wanted to get a glimpse of her, maybe chat a bit, nothing more.

"Come in." I stepped back.

Violet rushed past me. "It's a mess out there!"

I quickly closed the door, then turned to greet her. My breath caught in my throat. She was simply dazzling. Despite the cold, warmth radiated from her body. Her scent surrounded me, enveloping me in an aroma so intoxicatingly delicious it was almost dizzying. It had been a long time since I'd been in the presence of a human woman. I had almost forgotten how enticing they could be.

I swallowed. Perhaps opening the door had been a mistake. "Grace invited you, here?" I asked as she collapsed her umbrella and leaned it against the corner.

"Yes." She extended her hand. "I received her letter about six weeks ago. Grace said she and Fred were going to be with you for a while and she invited me up. I wrote back to confirm. I would have called you personally as well, but..."

Her hand was small and delicate and it was waiting for me to grasp it. I reached out, slowly, and encircled it in mine. The tips of my fingers began to tingle. A hum spread throughout my body. Her skin was soft, but her handshake was firm and confident. My toes curled, digging into the lush oriental carpet of the entryway.

"I don't have a phone," I finished.

"Right."

Seconds passed before Violet looked down and I realized her hand was still in mine. I cleared my throat and loosened my grip.

"Sorry. You must be freezing. I have a fire in the living room. Can I take your coat, Miss Deeds?"

“Yes, thank you.”

I watched, like a starving man, as she unfastened the buttons and peeled the leather off one shoulder, then the other. I was absolutely riveted. The supple-looking black cowhide slid down the length of her long, slender arms, gradually revealing them to me. I noticed immediately how translucent her skin was. The pale blue cast to her flesh reminded me of the blue moon that followed the eruption of Krakatau back in 1883. That night had been surreal, too. I had stood in the streets of Singapore, ash raining upon me. That moon had been a spectacular sight, but not as spectacular as the vision before me.

Violet’s rain-soaked hair hung in loose rivulets, framing her delicate features. Drops of water clung to her face and neck, glistening like jewels, making her flesh shimmer and making my mouth water. I imagined reaching out, touching her, gliding my hand over her exquisitely sculpted collarbone—better yet—my tongue. I imagined gliding my tongue over her collarbone, dipping it into the hollow of her throat before continuing the pleasurable journey downward to her warm, firm, perfectly round—

My eyes lifted to meet hers; they were green and clearly conveyed her annoyance.

“Sorry. Did you say something? I seem to be a bit distracted today.”

“You were staring.”

“You have lovely eyes.”

“You were staring at my breasts.”

Well, what the hell was I supposed to say? The last time a human woman caught me staring must have been a century ago, and that young lady had been far more gracious—ignoring my brief indiscretion. Women today prefer the direct approach, right? That’s what Rita always says. So, I went for direct. I swallowed the lump in my throat and looked her in the eye.

“They’re lovely, too.”

Violet laughed and shook a scolding finger at me.

I shrugged, giving her my best sheepish smile. I must have been forgiven, because she walked past me and into the living room. I followed at an appropriate distance, one that allowed me to enjoy the view without looking obvious.

Violet Deeds may have been small boned, but she walked with determination. She was poised, self-assured, and she had a spectacular ass. She was wearing a plain black T-shirt, well-worn, form-fitting blue jeans and what appeared to be a pair of very expensive black leather boots. I watched as she stopped in front of the fire, then shook out her damp mass of curly red hair, sending droplets everywhere.

“I’m hoping Grace has some clothes I can borrow, at least for the night. My luggage didn’t make the flight to Bella Bella. It seems the airlines sent my bag on to Bora Bora by mistake. Bora Bora. Bella Bella. I guess it’s understandable.”

“I’m afraid my manners are rusty. Can I get you a towel, Dr. Deeds?”

“Nah.” She waved her hand dismissively. “And, please, call me Violet. May I call you Ren?”

It had been a month since I'd heard that name, since I'd even thought of it. "My sister called me Ren."

"Aunt Grace still does." She extracted an envelope from the back pocket of her jeans. "Where is she?"

I resisted the urge to snatch the letter from her. "Grace wrote to you about me?"

"She's mentioned you from time to time. You're younger than I imagined. So, you and Fred are related?"

There was the void again. Whenever I thought of Fred I felt it—the sadness, the loneliness, the anger. I felt it and I remembered.

"Please, Fred, don't leave me!" I held her frail and withered hand in mine.

"It's the way of things, Ren. We mate. We die. I wouldn't have given up the time I've shared with Grace for anything, not anything. Where she goes, I go. It won't be long now, Ren."

"Don't talk like that. You know how time moves. It could be a few days, maybe a week—"

"No. Not for me. I must go. She's waiting for me."

"Fred!"

"Shh, I need you to promise me something."

"Anything."

"When they talk of me I want you to tell them with my last breath I said I had no regrets, welcomed death, and expressed my unwavering devotion to the woman I loved. Promise me, Ren. I won't have people scaring their children with tales of my mistake. My life wasn't a mistake."

"But you're dying, Winifred!"

She reached out and wiped the tears from my face. "I'm just off to join Grace," she said. Then she closed her eyes and turned to dust before me.

"Are you feeling all right? You're looking a bit pale."

My eyes snapped open and connected with hers. Violet was standing right in front of me, gazing intently, searching. Her scent swirled around me and, God help me, I let my lungs fill with it. I smelled the rain in her hair, the soap in her clothes and the lavender and vanilla she'd used to wash her body. And beneath it all, there was an unmistakable base note. The scent that was uniquely her—Violet.

"I'm fine," I managed to choke out.

"The flu's been going around. I had a touch of it myself a couple weeks ago." She placed the palm of one hand over my forehead. The fingers of her other hand wrapped halfway around my wrist, settling over my pulse point. I stood stock-still and tried to wipe the image of Violet in a naughty nurse outfit from my mind.

"Your pulse is quite rapid and you're diaphoretic."

"I'm all right," I replied, stepping back. "It's just that I wasn't expecting you, and I'm afraid I'm not very good with words. I'm just going to come out with it."

Worry clouded her face and I loathed being the one to place it there, to have to cause this pain.

"Something's happened to Grace?"

I nodded. "Grace passed away. It happened about a month ago."

"No!" She sat down heavily on the sofa.

"I'm sorry."

Her eyes brimmed with tears. "How is Uncle Fred taking it?"

For this I was going to have to sit. "Fred isn't your uncle."

"He isn't?"

"No. Actually, Fred was a woman and... She passed away an hour after Grace."

"What?"

"Fred was a woman and she—"

"I heard you. I guess I'm stunned. Are you sure?"

Was she kidding? Of course I was sure. There was a box of tissues on the coffee table. I offered her one, but she didn't seem to notice.

Violet shook her head. "All these years I assumed they were married."

"Not legally, of course. But in every other way, they were. Winifred was a Renfield, you see. She grew up on this island, in this house. Grace had been ill for some time. The end was near. They came home to die."

"Why didn't Grace say anything? I would have come sooner."

"I'm sorry," I told her, feeling her pain deep in the pit of my stomach. "I miss them, too. I knew death was inevitable, but knowing it would someday happen hasn't made it easier to bear."

"What was it? Cancer? Her heart?"

"Her heart gave out. It was her time. And Fred, well, she couldn't go on without Grace. Nor did she want to."

"I didn't even know she was ill."

I placed my hand on her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. Violet leaned toward me. Before I knew it she'd wrapped her arms around my neck and was crying on my shoulder.

Never before had I held a human woman in my arms. It wasn't what I'd imagined. It didn't feel wicked or immoral. It was nice. It felt...right. It was almost as if I were connected to her somehow. Connected in mutual grief, I suppose. I ran my hand up and down the length of her spine, soothing her, giving comfort and taking solace.

Her damp curls pressed up against my cheeks. "I'm glad you came," I murmured. And I was. I reminded myself that in my younger days I'd lived among humans on and off, and I was weaker then.

Certainly I could maintain control for a few days. It would be good to have the company, to have someone I could share my grief with.

Violet lifted her head and looked at me, her eyes glistening. "I've gotten your shirt wet."

"I have others. Blow." I handed her a tissue and she did.

"I don't usually cry in front of strangers," she said, obviously a bit embarrassed.

"We aren't exactly strangers."

"Grace spoke of me often?"

"She loved you very much. And she was terribly proud of you. I want to show you something." I walked over to the desk to retrieve the photograph I'd been examining earlier. "Here, Grace kept this in her wallet. She loved this picture of you."

Violet smiled. "I remember that day. My mother was there. She was already quite ill and the chemo wasn't helping."

"And your father?"

Her expression darkened. "It was just Mom and me. I never knew my father and she wouldn't talk about him, ever, not even at the end."

"She passed away soon after?"

"Yes, and Grace was there for me. Not in person, of course. She and Fred were living in Venice at the time. But she called as soon as she got my letter. We talked all through the night. It was the first time I'd ever heard her voice."

"But you'd been writing for years. She must have had a hundred of your letters with her when she came."

"Our correspondence started when I was in high school. My mother encouraged it. Grace helped her once, when she was quite young. 'My Saving Grace' Mom would call her. In the beginning they were just polite letters filled with meaningless talk about things like the weather and current events."

"But that changed?"

Violet nodded. "After my mother passed away Grace began to call regularly. We'd talk for hours. We still wrote, of course."

"Old habits are hard to break."

"The letters became longer and longer." She dabbed at the corners of her eyes. "We became close."

"You became friends."

"Yes, good friends."

Violet's eyes flooded with fresh tears. "Ren, the gentleman who brought me, the one with the boat. He's not coming back until Sunday afternoon. I hate to impose on you. Is there any way to reach him?"

I took her hand in mine and lightly stroked the top of it with my thumb. "Don't worry about it. We'll figure something out."

The barest hint of the scent of arousal began to permeate the air. Without meaning to, I was starting to affect her. Or maybe I did mean to, which was even worse. It was largely beyond our control and predictably inevitable. For thousands of years, women have seduced us, causing us to falter, to give in to temptation, to take one little taste.

She swept her hair over one shoulder, leaving her neck exposed. “You have any ideas?”

Oh, I was getting lots of ideas. I needed to get some distance.

“No.”

“Me neither. I’m sorry, I’m afraid I’m not thinking very clearly.”

“You’re upset.”

Violet turned away. She was crying again.

“Can I get you anything?”

“I think I need a few minutes alone.”

Suddenly I’d gone from wanting to get away from her to not wanting to leave her side. It was ridiculous, I know.

“I have to check on dinner. Don’t worry. There’s plenty. Can I offer you something to drink?”

“A glass of wine?”

Now, I knew wine was a mistake. It lowers inhibitions, even for immortals.

“Grace was fond of wine. She was always writing to me about her latest find. Let’s toast to Grace and Fred, shall we?” she asked.

How could I refuse?

“I’ll be back with a bottle.” I stood then headed for the dining room. I didn’t look back at her, not until I was safely ensconced in the darkness. The dining room was between the kitchen and living room. It had no external windows and was pitch black. I hung back inside the threshold and waited until my heart rate returned to normal before turning around.

The living room was without a doubt my favorite room in the house. It’s where I spent most of my time. The polished wood floors, mahogany paneling and long shelves of books were as familiar to me as the back of my hand. But they looked different now. The entire room looked different now, simply because *she* was in it.

Violet leaned down to unzip her leather boots. She pulled them off. Underneath she wore black fishnet stockings. I could see her brightly polished toenails peeking out from the weave of threads. She stretched, lifting her arms high over her head. Her T-shirt rose, baring a bit of her stomach and flashing a teasing glimpse of a tattoo I vowed I’d see more of someday. There was no doubt about it. The human was tempting me. For the briefest of moments I imagined myself kneeling before her, lifting the edge of her shirt, brushing my lips across her soft, painted skin, tasting her.

My cock hardened as the fantasy took hold. I looked down. Great. Now I'd done it. I was fully aroused, and in my lightweight black woolen trousers, it was completely obvious.

"Ren?"

I stepped back reflexively, turned and fled to the kitchen, adjusting myself along the way. I tried to fill my mind with images I hoped would suppress my desire and get rid of my raging erection. I reminded myself that although she was beautiful now, she wouldn't stay beautiful forever. This was merely chemistry. I would get through this. I would put her out of my mind and go on. All I had to do was remember who I was, what I was. I wasn't some mere fledgling. I was Dominie.

I rounded the center island as she came through the swinging door.

"Ren?"

I uncovered the slowly simmering pot on top of the stove and gave it a stir.

"Yes?"

She peered into it and inhaled deeply. "Wow. Dinner smells fantastic. You cook?"

The smell of the savory sauce seemed to delight her.

"A bit."

She looked around my very well-appointed kitchen, taking in all the stainless steel appliances, polished copper pots, baskets of fruits and racks of exotic herbs.

"I think you're being modest."

She was right. I consider good food and good wine to be two of the great pleasures of my existence. I like to savor my meals. For me, preparing them can be an almost sensual experience. I gazed into the pot and realized one of the downfalls of living an isolated life is that I missed selecting the ingredients. I missed carefully choosing what was to become my dinner with my own hands.

"Wine?" she asked.

I nodded toward the counter. There were two bottles remaining from the recent batch I'd retrieved from the cellar.

Violet bent over and examined both labels before making her selection. "My friend Kate keeps trying to drag me to cooking classes. I don't know. It seems pointless, cooking just for myself."

"It's not pointless. We all have to eat and I find it relaxing, like a meditation."

"A meditation?" She opened one of the drawers.

"The cork-pull is in that one there, glasses in the cabinet above."

"I was wondering if you might have something dry I could borrow?" She glanced down at the wet legs of her pants. "Wet jeans are so...not comfortable." Violet set two glasses on the countertop.

"I'm sure I could find something for you."

Violet expertly worked in the cork-pull, then placed the bottle between her thighs and...pop. I was doomed. There was no way I was going to lose my erection now.

She poured us each some cabernet. “A shirt would do, or a robe?”

Of course I had shirts, but which one to give her? Anything I let her wear would have to be burned after. It would be covered in her scent. Suddenly, I realized this would afford me the opportunity to get rid of her for a bit and collect myself.

I positioned the cover back on the pot. “Up the stairs, first room on your right. Pick whatever suits you.”

She handed me a glass of wine. “Thanks!” She smiled brilliantly at me. Christ, she had a beautiful smile.

“Take your time,” I told her. “Dinner won’t be ready for another hour.”

“Maybe I could freshen up?”

“Of course. Make yourself at home.”

Chapter Two

So, how bad could it be? Bad. So bad, I was now in the downstairs bathroom sitting on the toilet with my dick in my hand. I couldn't remember the last time I'd reacted like this.

I closed my eyes and listened to the sound of the shower in the room above me. I rubbed the palm of my hand over the engorged head of my cock and then stroked firmly, with increasing intensity, up and down the length of the shaft. I envisioned Violet standing under the hot spray, the water cascading over her body as she rinsed the soap from her breasts. I imagined touching her, my fingertips following the trail of hot white suds, sliding down her taut stomach and slipping between her silken thighs.

I shot off like a rocket. It was horribly unsatisfying.

She turned off the water and the pipes in the old house squealed in protest. That's when I smelled it. Blood. I quickly used the towel to clean myself, then tossed it into the clothes hamper and straightened my clothes.

Like a moth drawn to a flame I made my way to her, moving with purpose up the stairs. When I reached the door to my bedroom I paused and knocked. There was no response, so I turned the knob and eased inside. The door to the bathroom stood ajar. Violet was standing in front of the vanity, a towel held loosely around her. It dipped low in the back and she was holding it closed in front of her breasts. She was leaning forward, staring at something in the mirror, too intent on whatever it was to notice me. Her hair was freshly washed, it smelled of my shampoo and it hung tangled and wet against her back. I walked closer, my eyes sweeping the length of her body, drinking her in while searching for the source of her bleeding. I saw it, a thin trail of ruby red blood running down the back of her left calf. She had obviously taken the time to shave.

I knocked on the door. "You cut yourself."

She spun around, startled by my voice.

"What?"

I leaned against the doorjamb to the bathroom, striving for a casual pose when in reality I was filled with tension. "You're cut, on the back of your leg. There's blood."

She twisted around and looked at it. "I guess I didn't notice. It'll stop soon enough." She pulled a tissue from the box by the bathroom sink and began to wipe at the trail.

"You should put pressure on it." I took the tissue from her, then bent down and placed it over the small cut, doing as I'd suggested.

"It's only a tiny nick," she said, blushing crimson.

Perhaps I had acted too boldly, or impulsively. Perhaps my touch was too familiar. I half expected Violet to pull away, but she didn't, and within a few seconds the muscles in her leg relaxed beneath my hand.

I said nothing. I was too busy being thankful that I had just jacked off and apparently was enjoying a slight refractory period. I lifted the edge of the tissue and confirmed that the blood flow had stopped. Then I stood back up, dropped the soiled tissue into the commode and flushed. I focused on scrubbing my hands clean and ignoring my desire to see what was underneath the towel.

I glanced up and saw Violet staring at me in the mirror. My eyes connected with hers and suddenly my senses were awash in the scent of her arousal. She felt it too, the attraction. I simply *had* to get out of there.

"Dinner will be ready shortly." I tossed the towel I was using to dry my hands onto the counter before heading for the door.

"Are you gay?"

Her question shocked me. "What? No."

"It's all right if you are. You can tell me."

"And I would. But I'm not. Do I seem gay?"

She shrugged. "I wasn't sure. I'm getting some conflicting signals. So, I thought I'd come out and ask. I hope I didn't embarrass you."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. Her aroma was mouth-watering, my pride unreasonably wounded, and my cock was beginning to spring to life again in hopes of having a chance to reclaim my manhood.

Despite my better judgment I stepped closer to her. "I'm trying to behave myself. And, it's not easy. I find you very attractive."

"You find me attractive?" She wet her lips in invitation.

"No." I lowered my voice. "I find you *very* attractive." She was there for my taking and I wanted her, badly. "But Grace wouldn't like me taking advantage of you. We're both grieving, vulnerable. You deserve something meaningful, something lasting."

"Sometimes casual and fleeting can be good, too," she murmured, her lips almost touching mine.

I was standing a hairsbreadth away from her now, her back against the tile wall. Her cheeks were flushed with excitement, her eyes dilated, she was practically panting from desire. With each word I spoke, her scent became stronger, more powerful, harder to resist.

"Are you going to kiss me?"

"You have no idea how much I want to," I confessed.

Her heart was pounding. The roar of her blood called to me, the sound of it rushing in my ears.

"I think I know." She lightly brushed her lips across mine.

Violet had barely touched my mouth, yet I was melting. Liquid heat spread throughout my entire being, the anticipation of how it would feel to kiss her, really kiss her, set every nerve aflame.

I moved in closer still, so that my body pressed flush against hers. I wanted her to feel my desire. To feel the effect she had on me. I wrapped my hand around her neck, my thumb tracing imaginary circles over her pulse point. I could feel every thrum of her heart.

"I want to make love to you, to worship you," I whispered into the shell of her ear. "To take you to the heights of passion, to push you to your limit and beyond."

She shivered slightly.

I moved back to that delicious mouth. "I could succumb to your charms so easily," I murmured. I was right on the edge, playing with fire.

Violet's tongue swept across my lower lip, begging entrance.

"I can't." I stepped back, breaking the connection, creating distance. "It would be wrong of me."

"Wrong?"

"I'm sorry," I told her. And I meant it, too. I was sorry, terribly sorry. "Dinner will be ready shortly."

I left her there, in the bathroom. If I didn't cool off, there was no way I was going to make it through dinner, never mind the weekend. I fled downstairs and opened the front door. The fresh air was bracing. I stepped off the porch and walked to the edge of the path that led down to the docks, then gazed out at the ocean. If I wasn't fearful of it, I might have considered diving in to escape. But the shipwreck that left me stuck for months in the Atlantic back in 1806 soured me on the water.

I sighed. The sun had set, the temperature had dropped, and the rain had turned to snow. I closed my eyes and let the large fluffy flakes fall on me. The cold didn't bother me. I could tolerate it. I'd be able to easily tolerate going without food for a few days too, for that matter. For several long minutes I seriously considered the option of fleeing to the caves by the shore.

"Ren? What on earth are you doing out here? It's freezing."

My shoulders slumped in defeat. Violet would probably track me down there, too. I should have gone with the gay thing.

"It's snowing!" she exclaimed.

I turned around in time to see her place one bare foot on the top step. Her head was tilted back toward the sky, her hands reaching out, trying to catch the snowflakes as they gently drifted down upon us. The long white sleeves of my starched shirt made her look like an angel.

"Be careful. The stone steps get awfully slip—"

The words were barely out of my mouth when her foot slid from under her. Although I rarely have the need to, I can move very quickly, and within a blink of an eye I had her in my arms.

"Are you all right?" I asked her.

Her breath hitched.

“Violet?”

“My ankle, I think I twisted it.”

I carried her back inside, kicked the door closed and stood there for a moment, feeling slightly guilty. A part of me was rejoicing in the fact she wasn't going to be traipsing around the house, sneaking up on me with her flaming hair, sensual mouth and those deep green eyes I was once again getting lost in.

“This time you're definitely staring at my eyes.”

“A man could get lost in those eyes.” The words tumbled out of my mouth before I could censor them.

Violet began to play with the hairs at the base of my skull. “I can't quite figure you out, Byron Renfield.”

Suddenly I was self-conscious, uncertain. “That makes two of us.”

As I proceeded up the stairs, Violet leaned in even closer to me, her lips brushing against the shell of my ear. The warmth of her breath beat against the side of my neck. She leaned into me and the soft outline of her breast pressed enticingly against my chest.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Bed. You rest. I cook. We eat.”

In the space of an hour this woman had come into my home and reduced me to speaking like some ridiculous parody of a cave man. This was getting to be humiliating. I walked into the guestroom, deposited her on top of the antique sleigh bed and turned to leave, secure in the fact she couldn't follow me. All I needed was a few minutes alone to regain my composure.

“Why would it be wrong?”

That stopped me. Not the question itself so much. It was more the tone of it. Insecure. She shouldn't doubt herself. She was perfection.

“Ren, why would it be wrong? You made it sound pretty enticing.”

I couldn't turn around. I couldn't look at her. But I couldn't walk out and say nothing. “It's not you. It's me.”

“Which really means it's me.”

I was weighed down by guilt. She deserved some kind of an explanation. “You make me think things, imagine things I can't have and shouldn't want. We're from two different worlds, you and I.” It was vague, but honest, truthful.

“I'm from earth, Ren. Where are you from?”

“I was speaking metaphorically.”

“Ren, there's obviously an attraction between us, a connection. Do you deny that?”

I shook my head. “No. I don’t deny it.” I turned to face her. “This isn’t a good time for me, what with Grace and Fred. I don’t need this now, this distraction, this temptation. Do you have any idea how hard this is to resist?”

She rolled onto her side and my shirt rode up, slightly exposing her thigh. I could smell her arousal again.

“You seem to be doing a regrettably good job.”

I shoved my hands in my pockets and spent a moment studying the floor. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been with a woman.”

“And?”

I looked her in the eye. “I’ve never been with a woman like you. But since you walked into this house, I’ve thought of little else.”

“A woman like me, two different worlds. What are you saying, exactly? Look, I may not live on my own island but—”

“This has nothing to do with money.”

“Are you sure?”

“Completely. I can’t get close to you, Violet.” I turned to leave. “I can’t get close with anyone,” I added before closing the door.

7:04:59 PM brenfield: Thank God you’re there. Can you come over? I need to have sex. Bad.

7:05:17 PM iamrita: Smooth, Byron, really smooth.

7:05:41 PM brenfield: Is that a “no”?

7:06:15 PM iamrita: I haven’t seen or heard from you in six months. Masturbate.

7:06:50 PM brenfield: I tried. It’s not working. I’m not above begging at the moment.

7:07:14 PM iamrita: I can’t. I’m with someone. You said it would be all right. I get lonely.

7:07:23 PM brenfield: By someone do you mean a person?

7:07:45 PM iamrita: What? No! Wait a minute...

7:07:58 PM brenfield: Gotta go.

7:08:36 PM iamrita: Have you fucked her?

7:08:42 PM brenfield: Who?

7:08:59 PM iamrita: The human. The one who has you all worked up.

7:09:07 PM brenfield: No

7:09:16 PM iamrita: But you want to?

7:09:18 PM brenfield: No

7:09:21 PM iamrita: Whew! You scared me for a minute.

7:09:33 PM brenfield: I want to make love to her.

7:09:38 PM iamrita: No!!!

7:09:48 PM brenfield: I know! It's horrible. What the hell am I supposed to do? She's here in the house.

7:10:03 PM iamrita: You could kill her. She's going to die eventually anyways so not a big loss, really.

7:10:25 PM iamrita: You still there?

7:10:41 PM brenfield: I'm trying to think. I'm having a major crisis here. Could you maybe try to be helpful?

7:11:04 PM iamrita: Sorry. I'm thinking. How's my portfolio doing, btw?

7:11:21 PM brenfield: Fine. But if you're not going to remain at my beck and call enticing me with meaningless sex anymore, why am I handling your investments?

7:12:24 PM iamrita: Because I'm your friend?

7:12:38 PM brenfield: You're offering friendship? Right this minute I'd rather have you blow me.

7:13:11 PM iamrita: I don't think Chad's into sharing.

7:13:48 PM brenfield: Chad? His name is Chad? You're kidding.

7:13:14 PM iamrita: No. And he's at the door. I'll e-mail if I think of anything. And Byron? We've always been friends.

Chapter Three

Violet was sleeping. Sprawled out on the guest bed, the edge of my shirt riding up just enough to torture me. There was a chill in air. I set her dinner tray on the dresser, then knelt before the fireplace and quietly removed the grate. It took me just a few minutes to get it started. I'd had lots of practice after all, centuries worth.

I sensed it the moment she woke. I didn't have to turn around. I knew. Violet was watching me.

"The fire will take the chill out of the air in a minute or two," I told her. "I brought you dinner."

"What about your dinner?"

"I've already eaten," I lied, approaching her. "Let me help you under the covers. Then I'll position the tray."

"You're good at this, taking care of someone. I'm sure Fred and Grace were in good hands."

My eyes filled unexpectedly with tears. I didn't say anything. There was nothing to say.

"You obviously were very close to them. Do you want to talk about it?" Her tone was gentle, caring.

I swallowed down the lump in my throat. "No."

"I'm sorry," she said softly.

I went back for the tray, grateful that she wasn't going to push or pry.

"I didn't mean to bring up painful memories," she continued. "I wish I'd come sooner, had a chance to say goodbye. She had a full life though."

"A full life," I repeated, pausing mid-step, tray now in hand. "What is a full life?"

Instead of answering me, she started to climb from the bed.

"Where are you going?" I set her dinner down.

"I need to use the bathroom. I think I can manage if you let me lean on you a bit."

"Wait." I easily lifted her once again into my arms. "You shouldn't bear weight. And I should have brought you ice."

She wrapped her arms around my neck and tossed her hair back over one shoulder. "It's not too late to redeem yourself."

"What?"

"The ice. It would still help."

"Of course."

I carried her back to my bedroom and into the adjoining bathroom since it was closer than the guest bath down the hall. I set her carefully next to the commode, then I turned on the light, closed the door and ran downstairs in search of redemption.

When I returned a few minutes later, she was sitting on the red velvet chaise in the corner of my room, her foot propped on a stack of Chinese silk pillows, my latest financial magazine in her hands.

"I have my answer if you want to hear it." She tossed the magazine aside.

"What was the question?"

I sat next to her and placed the bag of frozen peas I'd brought up from the kitchen on her ankle. When I did, my fingertips grazed her skin. It was a simple thing, a ghost of a touch that left me wanting more.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"You asked me for my definition of a full life."

"Oh, that."

"It's an interesting question. I used to think it had to do with how long someone was around. You know, living to a ripe old age. Until you were ready to go," she said.

"Go where?"

"Wherever. Maybe nowhere. Hell, I don't know."

"But you don't think that anymore?"

"No. When I was a medical student, I saw my share of death. Being ready for it? It's not about reaching some magical age. It's about being at peace, about accepting your mortality, about looking back at your life and being satisfied with how you've lived it."

Accepting mortality was something I'd never given much consideration to. I'd never had to. But I did then. I thought about Fred, about the choice she made and how she lived her life. I thought about my father, about how bitter and resentful he'd been. He carried his mortality like a shroud. Was it simply a matter of perspective? People link satisfaction with attainment, but what if it's really about acceptance? What if it's not about getting into Heaven? Maybe there is no Heaven for creatures like me. Maybe this life, here, now, is all I'm ever going to get. That possibility shook me to the core.

Violet reached over and brushed her fingers across my wrinkled forehead. "You're thinking awfully hard about something. Care to share?"

I reached for her hand, intending to brush it away. Instead I held onto it. "Have you ever found yourself questioning whether what you believed was true?"

"Daily," she admitted, sounding somewhat amused.

"I'm not talking about the little things, like whether it's going to rain or not. I'm talking about the big stuff."

Her expression turned serious. "Like?"

“Like, what if you didn’t have to die? What if you could live forever?”

She shook her head and laughed. Well, of course she would laugh.

“Do I get to be rich and beautiful?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“What’s the catch?”

“Catch?”

“The down side. What do I have to give up?”

Now, they don’t talk about that much, vampires don’t. They don’t talk about the things they miss, the things they will never have. Perhaps it’s because we have no control over it. Why brood about what can’t be changed?

“Being around people.” I shrugged, passing it off as if it were nothing.

“I’d have to be alone forever? No. Not worth it. I’m not that interesting.”

“Not alone, exactly. You could be around others who are like you.”

“It would be me and a bunch of me clones? Kind of creepy, don’t you think?”

God, this woman was exasperating.

“No. That’s not what I mean. Let’s say you’re American.”

“I am American. Why can’t I be Italian?”

“Okay. Let’s say you’re Italian, and you can only be around other Italians.”

“But what if I meet and fall in love with a man from France or Spain or Greece or—”

I held up my hand to stop her. “I get it. You can’t.”

“I can’t fall in love with them? So, I can’t feel love?”

“You can’t *be* with them,” I told her.

“Why?” she challenged. She clearly didn’t like the idea.

“It’s a rule.”

“It’s a stupid rule,” she declared.

“Yes,” I agreed.

She bit her lower lip. It was full and red, ripe. I wanted to sweep my tongue across it, to suck it into my mouth, to take just one tiny nibble.

“Ren?”

“Yes?”

“Let me see if I have this straight. I’m going to live forever. I’m beautiful and rich, and I’ve met a drop-dead gorgeous French guy who promises to be the love of my life?”

“That’s right.”

“Let’s say I break the rule. What happens? Instant death?”

“Death, yes. Instant? No. You live for quite some time, a hundred years, two hundred, maybe more.”

"I'm still beautiful and rich?"

"You age slowly."

"Does my Frenchman leave me?"

I couldn't help but smile. "You're a romantic. No. He adores you. He has eyes only for you. Even when you are old, and gray, and disgusting."

Her mouth fell open. "Disgusting?" She gave my shoulder a little shove. "You should take lessons from my Frenchman. He tells me I'm getting better with age, like fine wine."

"He says stuff like that so you'll sleep with him," I replied, goading her and suddenly disliking the Frenchman.

"You're clearly projecting," she countered. "I'm leaning toward saying yes, then breaking the rule and living happily ever after for a few hundred years with Pierre."

"He has a name now?"

"Yes. He's also an attentive lover, and a devoted father." I was envying Pierre more and more.

"You have children?"

"Two."

"Risky."

"Why?"

"If they aren't like you, you must send them away."

"Another rule?"

"Yes," I said, remembering my mother's pain. It all had occurred long ago. Yet it seemed in many ways to have happened yesterday. "So they can live with others like them and have a normal life."

"Ren?"

"Hmm?" For a moment I'd gotten lost in the memories.

"Nobody has a normal life. It's a myth."

"Like vampires are myths?" I said hesitantly, trying to gauge her reaction.

"I'm a vampire now?"

"Immortal," I clarified, not that she would understand the difference between those who are immortal and those who have crossed the line.

"Do I have to drink blood and sleep in a coffin?"

"You don't have to drink blood. You can eat regular food and sleep in a regular bed. Only the warped vampires traipse around biting people and draining their blood, Violet."

"Right. Sunlight?"

"It's a problem. The older you get, the more powerful, the easier you can tolerate it."

"I'm still saying I'd go for it and break the rules."

"You'd break the rules?"

“Yup. I’d marry Pierre, keep the kids and live to a ripe old age with no regrets.”

She seemed quite pleased with herself.

“You’d break the rules,” I repeated.

“Sure, why not?”

Why not, indeed? My father had broken the rules. I was here, after all. My parents died when I was still young, and Fred had essentially raised me. She certainly broke the rules. She didn’t seem to regret it, either. Not one bit. Although she never had children, never had to face the pain of giving them up.

“Have you no respect for rules in general?” I asked her.

“Are you asking vampire me? ’Cause I hear vampires are pretty morally flexible, being evil and soulless and all.”

“You’re not evil and soulless. You’re different.”

“With stupid rules that make no sense. Okay, I have one now. You’re stuck on an island for three whole days with a moderately attractive woman who finds you interesting and would like to get to know you better. Do you pretend you’ve already eaten and make her dine alone in the guest room, or do you do the polite thing and have dinner with her?”

“How big are her tits?” I asked.

I saw it coming. I probably saw it coming before she even realized she was going to do it. Immortals are like that, especially those of us who have been around for a long time. We anticipate and we defend. She grasped the throw pillow and swung it toward my head in a wide arch. Long before it connected, I had her wrist grasped firmly in my hand and her arm held over her head. My body was hovering over the length of hers and the rumble of a low growl was still emanating from my chest. She glanced down briefly before searching my eyes. And, that’s when I made the biggest mistake of my three-hundred-and-seventy-nine years. I kissed her.

I kissed her, and in that moment nothing else mattered. I wasn’t thinking about next year, or next month, or even the next minute. All I was thinking about was how incredibly good she felt beneath me. Her lips were soft and sweet and willing. No, wanting. I wasn’t tender. I wasn’t careful. And I wasn’t holding back. Not anymore, and maybe never again.

As my tongue entered her mouth, Violet arched up, her breasts coming into contact with my chest. My breath hitched at the sensation and our kiss deepened. It was slow and languid. I had never experienced anything quite so exquisite. Stroking, exploring, over and over. All that existed was *her*—this moment. I wanted it to last forever. Then I realized, with an almost blinding clarity, I didn’t want to last forever without it.

“Ouch!” she cried.

I was off her and halfway across the room in a flash.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For hurting you.”

“You didn’t hurt me. I was moving my leg and I kicked the side of the chaise with my foot.” She smiled at me coyly. “You could kiss it and make it better.”

“We kissed.”

“I noticed. I was the one on the bottom. It happened right here, as a matter of fact.”

“It shouldn’t have!”

“How do you know? Maybe it was fate? Face it, you’re powerless against me,” she teased, her fingers playing provocatively with the top button of the shirt she was wearing.

“I don’t believe in fate.”

“What do you believe in, Ren?”

“I believe I’m going to go reheat your dinner. We’ll eat and then we’ll do something else.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. What do you feel like doing? We could read aloud to one another, or play poker on-line or—”

“How about spin the bottle?”

“More kissing?”

Violet sighed. “It felt good.”

She was right. It had felt good, sinfully good. “Yes, it did.”

She crooked her finger, beckoning me closer. “Come here.”

“Let me take the tray back downstairs. I’ll set the table and re-heat everything.”

“What about me?”

“I’ll come back for you. We’ll eat in the dining room, together. How does that sound?”

“Not as good as another kiss.”

“It was a very nice kiss,” I admitted. Against my better judgment, I leaned down and brushed my lips across hers. “Best kiss I’ve ever had.”

“You’re impossible,” she whispered.

“You’re irresistible.”

All I could think about was what it would feel like to be inside her. She wrapped her hand around the back of my neck and crushed her lips to mine. Willingly, wantonly, I opened my mouth and let her slide her tongue inside. The instant I did, Violet took advantage, searching, seeking, wanting, needing.

I was right on the edge. If I didn’t end this now, I wouldn’t be able to end it at all. I pulled back, aching from regret and the obvious erection I was now sporting. “Let me get dinner ready.”

“What about me?”

I smirked. “You’re already ready, I think.”

“There go those mixed signals, Mr. Renfield.”

“I’m sorry. I told you I was out of practice. You still want to brave dinner with me?”

“Absolutely.”

I know what people think of us vampires, that we’re evil, blood-sucking fiends. Some of us are, but the blood doesn’t sustain us. It’s not food. It’s more like a drug. Blood is intoxicating for us. It lowers our inhibitions and it makes us impulsive. It’s addicting. We don’t need it, but once we’ve had it, we want more. I’ve never personally tasted blood, not one drop, not in all my years of existence. I never wanted to go down that path, to relegate myself to that kind of existence, to be that dependent.

So why couldn’t I get the image of that trickle of blood out of my mind?

Violet Deeds was dangerous. I knew beyond doubt and beyond reason she could offer me everything I shouldn’t want... Or should I?

As I poured us two glasses of cabernet, I let the question roll around in my mind. Had Fred’s life really been so bad? I took a sip from my glass. It tasted delicious, but probably not nearly as delicious as Violet would.

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed Violet might be right. The rules are stupid. They’re contrary to nature. Most species are driven to procreate. I can live forever. I don’t *need* to create another me to ensure the survival of the species. But nonetheless, I found myself *wanting* to. Suddenly, I found myself wanting it *all*.

Yes. Violet Deeds was extremely dangerous.

I carried the glasses of wine into the dining room, set mine at the head of the table and surveyed the area.

I’d always enjoyed dining by candlelight, so the edges of the room were lined with tall candelabrum filled with long tapers. When I last renovated the house, I intentionally left the dining room essentially as it had been. A long cherry wood table dominated the center. It was surrounded by matching chairs richly upholstered in the same red damask as the walls. I’d chosen to set the table with Fred’s favorite china and used the antique stemware I’d purchased ages ago in London.

My favorite feature, however, was the mural on the ceiling—a sky at sunrise. The vibrant hues of gold, orange and red were warm and inviting. As I ate every night I would gaze at it and be reminded of the new day to come, and the veritable eternity of new days that would follow, days I rarely saw. The mural usually brought me comfort, but not tonight.

Tonight, I realized unless I took a chance, unless I risked, unless I reached out, all those days and nights would be spent alone. I closed my eyes, reminded myself of my duty and sighed in resignation. My body shuddered, trying to shake off the feeling of regret.

"I brought you a glass of wine. Dinner will be ready in about fifteen minutes. The table's set."

She looked up from reading the magazine and smiled. "Thanks."

"I've been thinking about what you said, about your choice."

"My choice?"

I sat on the chaise alongside of her and took a breath to brace myself. "You remember. Vampire you and Pierre?"

"Oh, that." Violet returned to reading the magazine. "Do you actually read this? It's kind of boring."

I loved that magazine. "You think so?"

She hesitated a bit. "Kind of."

"I find it informative," I told her, feeling slightly defensive. "It's filled with practical advice."

"*Cosmo's* informative. This is boring."

Well, she had me at a disadvantage. I'd never read *Cosmo*.

"You know, *Cosmo*, the woman's magazine?"

"Of course, I subscribe to that, too. I keep it under the bed with my other non-manly magazines."

She laughed, then tossed what she'd been reading aside.

"Grace said you like to play the stock market."

Now this was a subject I felt comfortable talking about. "I manage one very large trust and a few smaller portfolios for close personal friends. I'd be happy to look over your investments and let you know if I can do better for you."

"My investments currently consist of a ten thousand dollar rainy day savings account. Every other dime went into the down payment for my cottage. I've been saving for years. It's terribly small, but it's right on the beach."

"Sounds sunny."

Violet smiled.

"You carry your wine. I'll carry you," I said, lifting her into my arms and making my way toward the stairs. "You don't look like you spend much time in the sun. You're so fair."

"Cursed with red hair and pasty skin. I'm the girl who walks the beach in the morning with the big floppy hat, the long-sleeved white shirt and loose-fitting khakis. You must work out."

I purposely slowed my pace as we reached the bottom of the staircase.

"I have a gym downstairs. You're free to use it while you're here."

"Bum ankle," she reminded me as she looked around the dining room. "It's beautiful, Ren."

"It's not often I have a woman as stunning as you grace my table."

I set her down, then pulled out the chair at the head of the table.

“Always the gentleman,” she teased, taking her seat. She placed the neatly folded cloth napkin on her lap. “The china is exquisite.” Violet surveyed the room. “Are you trying to impress me, Mr. Renfield?”

“Do I *need* to impress you, Dr. Deeds?”

“Grace thought the world of you, Ren. That’s more than enough for me. To Fred and Grace.”

Violet slowly lifted the glass to her lips and took a sip of her wine. She eyed me appraisingly over the rim of the delicately cut crystal. Her gaze was intent and unwavering. It bore into me, through me, heating me from the inside. I reached out and took the glass from her hand, making sure my eyes never left hers. Color rose to her cheeks. She glanced down briefly. When her eyes once again rose to meet mine, I lifted the wine slightly in the air.

“To Fred and Grace,” I repeated. I took a sip from her glass before setting it back down on the table.

She leaned back and smiled. She looked relaxed, content, radiant. The flames of the candles danced, casting shadows around the room, the high polish of the table reflecting their light like a mirror, giving her porcelain skin and copper hair an almost iridescent glow. I was reminded of the beautiful enchantress in Dicksee’s painting, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, and wondered briefly if like the heroic knight I was fated to be charmed into spiritual slavery. Or maybe I’d been enthralled long ago and Violet was here to rescue me.

*“I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful—a faery's child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.”*

“Keats,” she said, leaning forward. She recognized the passage. “You’ve studied poetry?”

“I may not be good with words, but I appreciate them.”

“I think you underestimate yourself.”

God, how I wanted to take her into my arms and kiss her. My arousal was building and it was laced with something more primitive, the desire to take her, possess her and mark her as mine.

“I’ll be back with our dinner.” I turned and pushed my way through the kitchen door. I went straight for the sub-zero freezer and opened it. The bracing cold hit me. I grabbed a bag of frozen corn and fleetingly thought about dropping it down the front of my pants. Instead I placed it on the back of my neck. It was starting to come together for me. I’m a little slow on the uptake, but give me time and I can usually suss things out. This wasn’t about fate stepping in, or a test of my spiritual fortitude, or even divine intervention. This was an attempt at matchmaking. This was a misguided gift from Fred and Grace. Long ago Fred and I had called a truce and agreed to accept one another’s lifestyles. I guess she figured death allowed her dispensation.

I tossed the bag of corn back into the freezer, slammed it shut, and then retrieved the plates I had served earlier from the warming drawer. The fact this little weekend was a manipulation didn’t change my

predicament one iota. I was attracted to Violet Deeds, emotionally and physically. There was something about her that called to me, something beyond the normal emanation of a human woman.

I walked back into the living room. The siren who had invaded my house was trying to balance a spoon on the end of her nose. I set my plate at one end of the table before walking over to her.

“A little moisture helps,” I said, taking the spoon from her as I put down the plate.

I opened my mouth and exhaled, letting my warm breath cloud the surface of the spoon. Then I rubbed the area vigorously with my thumb and placed it on the tip of my nose. “See?”

Violet laughed. The spoon fell and effortlessly I caught it.

“Good reflexes.”

“You should see me do the table cloth trick.” I took my seat at the other end of the table. “It only works half the time, but even when it doesn’t, I still get out of doing dishes. So, all in all it’s basically a win-win situation.”

Violet was leaning over to one side and frowning.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Why are you way over there?”

“This is where I usually sit.”

“But I can’t see you way over there.” She bobbed back and forth, trying to peer around the large silver candlesticks.

I picked up my glass, plate, napkin and cutlery and then moved down the table to the place beside her. “Better?”

“Much. It’s an interesting poem, don’t you think? I wonder what motivated Keats to write it? To give a woman such power, the power to enchant and seduce men into slavery.”

I picked up my knife and fork and started to dig in. “Are you kidding? Women all possess that power.”

“Oh, please! This is fabulous, what is it?” she asked, taking another bite.

“Veal.”

She stopped chewing. “I don’t eat veal.”

“You just said it was fabulous.”

“Do you know what they do to those poor little calves? I saw a documentary. I’ll eat the rice.”

The meat had been cooked to perfection. It was so tender it was falling right off the bone. I lifted a forkful to my mouth.

Violet was staring.

“What now?”

“Nothing.”

“Look, I promise you, Daisy Mae here had a perfectly wonderful life. All my meat comes from a ranch on the mainland. I own it. There are no crates.”

“It still seems cruel. Taking a baby from its mother. Don’t you think?”

I stood, grabbed both of our plates, walked back into the kitchen and tossed them into the sink. Then I grabbed a frozen pizza from the sub-zero, threw it unceremoniously onto the rack of my oven, set the temperature and slammed the door shut.

“Pizza will be ready in twenty minutes,” I announced, rejoining Violet at the table. I picked up the bottle of cabernet and poured myself some more.

“I’ve driven you to drink and I’ve ruined dinner.” She sounded regretful.

I set the bottle on the table.

“You haven’t ruined dinner.”

She reached for my hand. “I’m a guest and I was rude. I’m trying to apologize.”

I pulled Violet from her chair, wrapping my arm around her waist. I was aroused again, hell, maybe still. I made no attempt to hide it. To the contrary, I pressed my hardness into her while crushing my lips to hers in a smoldering kiss. I was confused and angry and sad and...oh-so-glad to have her here, in my arms, at this moment.

Violet gasped. The intensity of my assault might have surprised her, but she recovered quickly. She snaked her arms around my neck. I tasted the wine on her lips as I slid my tongue inside her mouth, eager to drink in more of her. She released a moan, making me realize my hand had found its way to her breast. It was soft and firm. The weight of it filled my palm perfectly. I swept the table clear and laid Violet upon it. She was all I wanted, all I needed to feast on. Her hair splayed out across the polished wood, creating a halo around her passion-filled face.

I hooked my hands under her knees and lifted her legs, parting them, opening her up...

“Earth to Byron.” Violet snapped her fingers in front of my face, effectively erasing the last remnants of my fantasy. “I said I’m trying to apologize.”

“Apology accepted.” I leaned over and quickly blew out the candles on the table, plunging the room into darkness. “How about we eat in front of the fireplace in the living room?”

“Sounds great, Ren. And, you don’t need to carry me. I can hobble.”

“I like carrying you. It makes me feel manly... You’re rolling your eyes, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Come on, Tarzan.”

Chapter Four

“You’ve got a little sauce...”

“Where?”

Violet leaned across the sofa and swiped the corner of my mouth with the pad of her thumb. “There.” She began to pull back, but I reached for her wrist and brought her hand back toward my mouth. I sucked her thumb inside and circled it with my tongue before releasing it.

“Exceptional sauce.”

“It’s frozen pizza, it can’t be that good.”

“That last nibble seemed to have a bit something extra.”

Violet laughed and then swallowed the last of her wine. “I’ve enjoyed visiting about Fred and Grace, sharing memories. I wish I’d known them as well as you did.”

“I’ve enjoyed it, too. It helps, talking about it.”

Violet yawned.

“It’s late. You must be tired. I should get you settled in the guestroom. I can clean up in the morning.”

“I’m not quite ready to surrender to sleep,” she said, lying down and lifting her feet onto my lap. “Tell me, what was it like growing up here? Were you home schooled?”

I wrapped my hands around her feet to warm them. “You’re freezing. You should have said something. Shall I put more wood on the fire? Violet?”

In the space of a moment she had fallen fast asleep. I lifted her into my arms and carried her up the stairs. I laid her carefully on the bed, arranging the down comforter over her. The room was pitch black, but I could still see the outline of her body under the covers and the soft features of her face.

I sat on the bed alongside her and listened to her heartbeat. It was sure and steady. A minute passed, maybe more. “I’m a vampire,” I whispered.

Violet rolled onto her side and opened her eyes. “I thought you were Pierre.”

My heart was beating so loud I feared it was going to break my chest.

She placed her hand on my thigh. “How about we throw away the metaphors. Tell me why you’re about to walk out of this room instead of sliding into this bed?”

Here it was, the moment of truth. Did I whisper my confession into the darkness knowing she would hear me? Perhaps.

“Talk to me, Byron,” she begged, her voice laced with desire.

I felt as if I had taken a punch to the stomach. My heart clenched, my gut twisted and I was suddenly nauseous.

“I just... I can’t. Good night, Violet.”

10:04:59 PM brenfield: Are you there?

1:01:03 AM iamrita: Just got in. How’s it going? Did you kill her?

1:01:43 AM brenfield: No. I need help.

1:02:17 AM iamrita: You want me to kill her?

1:02:22 AM brenfield: No!

1:02:25 AM brenfield: I kissed her. I want to kiss her again. I want to kiss her forever.

1:03:22 AM brenfield: Are you there?

1:04:04 AM iamrita: It would be insensitive of me to make fun of you now, right?

1:04:26 AM brenfield: Yes. Although I’m not sure I could feel worse.

1:05:15 AM iamrita: You’re acting like a fledgling. You knew what this would cost you. Control yourself. What’s the human doing now?

1:05:31 AM brenfield: Sleeping.

1:05:42 AM iamrita: Pretty?

1:05:58 AM brenfield: Breathtaking. What if I can’t?

1:07:19 AM iamrita: You can. You’re not going to lose control.

1:08:37 AM brenfield: I stayed up all day watching the storm. I’m tired. I’m drawn to her. The pull is very powerful. What if I go to her in my sleep?

1:08:46 AM iamrita: Do you still have the handcuffs?

1:08:59 AM brenfield: I think so. Yeah. Why?

1:09:21 AM iamrita: Use them. Get a couple hours of sleep. I’ll be there as soon as I can tomorrow to help you get rid of her.

1:08:33 AM brenfield: I’m not sure I want to get rid of her. I kind of want to keep her. That’s what I want to talk about. I’m conflicted.

1:08:47 AM iamrita: She’s not a cat, Byron.

1:09:13 AM brenfield: I know. Do you ever wonder what’s so wrong about it? Fred and Grace, they seemed happy, didn’t they?

1:09:36 AM iamrita: You mate with her you’ll die.

1:10:21 AM brenfield: I know. To Fred it was worth it.

1:10:38 AM iamrita: It’s forbidden

1:10:51 AM brenfield: I know.

1:11:17 AM iamrita: Get some sleep. We'll talk tomorrow. Night.

1:11:42 AM brenfield: Night.

I stood under the spray of the shower and let the endless supply of hot water sluice over my shoulders and down my back, rinsing off the last of the soap. I was wired, tense, and so far the shower wasn't helping. I switched the jet to the massage option, turned toward the tile wall and leaned against it, letting the water pound against the tightness in my mid-back. *Forbidden*. The word rang in my ears, taking me back in time.

"Father? Is everything all right?"

"No," replied my father, Astor, hastily wiping his eyes.

"Come, Byron," Fred interjected. "Let's leave Father alone."

I could hear my mother's heart-wrenching sobs coming from inside their bedroom.

"It was human?" I asked.

All he did was nod.

"But—"

He walked over to the liquor cabinet, poured himself a brandy, drank it in one swallow, and then disappeared back inside the master suite.

"I don't understand, Fred. What does it matter?"

"It's forbidden. They can't keep it. It wouldn't be fair to the child."

"Is it fair to send it away to live with strangers?"

"It can have a normal life this way. Don't make this harder for Father. He's doing the right thing."

"He's doing the weak thing," I spat with the confident superiority of adolescence. "And it's killing Mother."

Fred slapped me across the face. "How dare you! You have no idea what he's given up for her. Do you expect him to become a total outcast?"

The sounds of shattering glass pierced through the air, and it was followed by an outraged, devastating scream.

"No! Lillian!"

Fred and I ran into the room. The infant lay, crying, alone on the bed. My father stood at the shattered window, his hands holding onto the sides of the frame, jagged glass cutting into his palms. I walked slowly over to the window and peered down into the courtyard. My mother's broken body lay below.

"I never should have mated with her," my father whispered. His voice filled with regret.

I turned and looked up at him, perhaps really seeing him for the first time in my life. “You’re right,” I agreed. “She deserved better.” Then I watched, as my father turned to dust before my eyes.

I turned the water off, stepped out of the shower, grabbed a towel from the rack and wrapped it around my waist. As a boy I had vowed I would never be like my father, and I wasn’t. I had done everything right. Or at least I used to think I had. I’d stayed amidst my own kind, living a solitary existence, amassing a fortune, honing my powers and fulfilling my duties as the clan treasurer. I’d been entrusted with a time-honored duty, managing the trust that helped care for the known *Chosen*, the children fortunate enough to be born human and registered as such, children like my long-dead human siblings. Then, there were the others, the children like Violet.

It was the only explanation, really. If Fred and Grace were involved, chances were, Violet was one of the unregistered and they had been sponsoring her. Probably through one of those bleeding-heart fringe charity organizations Grace was always going on about and trying to get me to surreptitiously support. Most of the unregistered were fathered by rogue immortals with a taste for humans, vampires living on the edge of society, outcasts by choice or by decree of the Dominie. My guess was that was the situation with Violet. The father Violet never mentioned in her letters, the father she never knew, was immortal, a vampire. It would explain why her mother refused to speak of him, it would explain her connection with Fred and Grace, and it would explain the potency of her pull, why she was so utterly irresistible. Violet was Chosen. How could I possibly interfere with that? I couldn’t. I wouldn’t. Because I had somehow managed to fall in love with her.

Chapter Five

"I'm sure you have a reasonable explanation," she said.

My eyes flew open. A bit of light streamed in from the hallway. It was just enough to barely illuminate my room, but as luck would have it, it glinted off the steel cuffs, making them shine like a beacon in the night. Violet was standing at the edge of my bed staring at me, her hands resting on her hips.

"What?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

She rolled her eyes. "The handcuffs?"

"What handcuffs?"

"Ren, I have a sprained ankle, not a head injury. I can *see* the handcuffs."

"You shouldn't be up. What *are* you doing up?"

"My ankle feels better. I had to go to the bathroom," she said. "On my way back I noticed them. What's their purpose?"

"These?" I looked toward the head of my bed where my left hand was bound to the center iron rail.

She sighed. I could tell she was close to exasperated. "Yes, those."

"To keep me from sleep walking, from sleep walking and bothering you."

She spotted the key on my bedside table, picked it up, and leaned over me. "Ren, I was *hoping* you were going to come and bother me. Let's get these off you. Before I start getting naughty ideas."

I grinned. "What kind of naughty ideas? Wow, you smell nice, Violet." Her proximity already had my head practically swimming.

She paused and looked into my eyes. I couldn't help myself. My free hand moved as if it had a mind of its own to caress the back of her long slender neck.

"You tasted good, too. When I kissed you earlier? I've never tasted anything so sweet." I recalled how the effects of that kiss had lingered long after her lips parted from mine. I wanted so much to experience those sensations again.

"Really?" She sounded a bit breathless.

"Really." I removed my hand. "You should go. You should go back to your room."

She reached over and awkwardly tried to fit the key into the lock. "I can't quite reach it."

She was kneeling on my bed now, her torso hovering over my bare chest. The top few buttons of her shirt were undone, and I admit it, I peeked. Her full breasts were enticingly suspended before me, swaying gently back and forth as she struggled with the key.

"It won't turn all the way," she said.

At times like this, apparently I have no shame. "Keep trying. I think you almost have it," I encouraged, arching up and trying to subtly get a better look.

Violet swung one leg over my hip and persistently continued to work on it. She was so intent on her task, I'm not sure she even realized she was straddling me at first. But I realized it. Every inch of my body realized it. Now, I've never been very fond of having a woman on top. Rita tells me it's because I'm a control freak and I need to get over it. Upon reflection, I realized her chaining me to the bed with the handcuffs was likely her idea of therapy. She probably thought she'd ride me into submission and I'd somehow see the light. Maybe I had.

I moved my hand to Violet's waist to still her movements. As I did, she clearly registered for the first time that I was fully aroused and that my erection was resting comfortably beneath her. The warm heat of her body penetrated the thin cotton sheet. I imagined sinking deeply into it, into her. I shifted my hips ever so slightly, watching as her eyes widened. She lurched forward.

"Ouch!"

"What?"

I didn't have to ask. I knew. She had cut herself.

"I slipped. I grazed a knuckle on one of these stupid links."

"Violet, you need to get off."

"I think I almost have it."

"No. *Now*. You need to get off *now*. The blood. It's... I can't..."

"There, I did it!" She sat up and looked down at me curiously. "You can't what?"

My oversized shirt had shifted on her and slipped off one shoulder. I could see the evidence of her pebbled nipples through the light layer of fabric. Her spectacular mane of wavy hair framed her face. It was wild and sexy. I had never wanted anyone this much in my entire life. I could feel it, rising within me, the desire, the need. I wanted to pull her toward me and push her off. I did neither.

"Ren?" Her hot pussy was pressing against my cock.

"Please!" I managed to choke out. I turned my head away and closed my eyes. I was losing the battle for control and losing it fast. My only hope was to get some distance between us. "Go!"

But she didn't go. Instead, she reached for me. She placed the palm of her hand on my cheek and gently turned my head until I was once again facing her.

"I don't want to go. What is it? What has you so twisted up inside? I can tell that you want me."

Despite my trying to stave it off, an almost imperceptible growl began to rumble from deep within my chest and my fangs started to elongate.

"Byron?"

My eyes opened, connecting with hers. Violet sat up even straighter. Even in the low light I could see the shock and horror clouding her face. My night vision had kicked in, which meant my irises had changed to red. Whether Violet could tell, I didn't know, and that little detail didn't really matter. The change was coming. I was past the point of no return. My resolve was slipping fast. A primitive roar ripped, unbidden, from my throat and mingled with Violet's screams. She started to scramble away from me, feet and arms working furiously against the sheets.

"Violet, wait!" I grabbed hold of one ankle and pulled her back toward me, but she was fighting all the way.

"Let go of me!" she shrieked.

I deftly caught her wrists in my hands. In an instant I had her pinned underneath me, arms stretched taut over her head. I snapped the handcuffs around her wrists. Then jumped to the floor.

"Enough!" I shouted.

Violet shrank back against the headboard, her eyes widened in terror. The fear rolled off her in thick waves that smelled deliciously sweet. She was shaking almost uncontrollably. "This can't be real," she muttered. "I must be dreaming."

I started to sit on the edge of the bed. "You're not dreaming."

"Stay away from me!" she shrieked.

The sting of rejection had hit me full force and burned worse than I'd ever imagined. I backed up a few steps. "I'll stay right here. Better?"

"What the hell are you?"

"A vampire. I'm immortal. I did tell you earlier."

She shook her head. "This is crazy."

Undoubtedly, her mind was reeling, refusing to believe what was right in front of her eyes.

"There's no need to be afraid. I'm not going to hurt you. I didn't want to lose control in front of you. I'm sorry."

She looked at her hand, the one that she'd scraped on the handcuff just moments before. It was still bleeding.

"The blood," she said, quietly.

"Blood. Sex. I'm drawn to you, Violet, with an intensity I've never experienced. The desire to mate with you was becoming overwhelming. It was building up, inside of me and—"

"Mate with me?" She glanced down.

I followed her gaze. You'd think the look of horror on her face would have been better than a cold shower. But it wasn't. My cock was long and hard and forming a very obvious tent in my boxers. I turned around and faced the wall.

"Unlock the handcuffs, Byron."

"I can't."

"What are you going to do, keep me prisoner?"

I needed time to think. I walked over to my closet, pulled out a pair of jeans and a sweater, and started to get dressed.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Getting dressed."

"I can *see* that. You're like that vampire you described? You're really immortal?"

I turned back toward her, my human visage now comfortably back in place. "Yes."

Tears flowed silently down Violet's cheeks. "Did you hurt Grace?"

That felt like a punch to the gut. "Of course not! I loved Grace. I haven't lied to you."

She laughed. It was strained and held more than a hint of hysteria.

"I'm going to finish getting dressed." I grabbed a pair of boots. "I'll gather some supplies together, then go."

"Unlock these handcuffs, Byron."

I stepped into my boots. "Before I leave, I'll give you the key. You can stay here until Jean-Claude comes for you. You'll be safe here. I promise." I left, cursing Fred and Grace, cursing fate, and for the first time in my life, cursing my maker.

I made Violet a pot of coffee. I didn't have the stomach to drink any of it myself. Besides, I didn't want the caffeine to interfere with my plans to get good and drunk. I figured that was the only way I was going to be able to make it through the next forty-eight hours.

I picked up the bedroll I hadn't used in decades along with the two bundles of wood and tinder and the three bottles of twenty-five-year-old single malt I'd been saving. With supplies in hand, I quietly left my house.

The snow crunched under the soles of my boots. I trudged halfway down the stone steps before veering onto the path that led to the caves close to shore. It had been ages since I'd been to the caves. When I was a child I had spent countless hours there exploring, living in my imagination.

It was cold outside. The frigid air was bracing. Everything seemed harsh, stark and eerily quiet. The world was a landscape of white and grey. The ocean looked ominously black. I had never felt so lost or empty. They say you can't miss what you've never had. They're wrong. I knew that now. I was missing it desperately, the possibility of a normal existence. The possibility of sharing my life with someone, of living with them, of growing old with them, of having children, of knowing I was part of it—the cycle of life. I didn't want to sit on the sidelines, watching it pass without purpose, experiencing only petty and meaningless pleasure. Not anymore. I'd had my fill, I suppose.

I paused and looked out at the ocean, dark and immense, before glancing back one last time toward the house. Tears of frustration clouded my vision and for the first time in my existence I found myself regretting, no, hating, what I was.

I wiped my eyes on the sleeve of my cashmere overcoat and swallowed the lump in my throat. With profound sorrow, I forced my wretched self to continue down the path and into the largest of the caves. I dropped off the supplies then set back to do what I needed to do, to say goodbye.

She'd had some time to mull things over. As soon as I entered the room she sat up.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Away. There are caves down by the shore. I'll stay there. I'll be fine. Before I go I'd like..." I swallowed down the lump in my throat. "I'd like to make this go away for you."

Her brow furrowed. "I don't understand."

"I can put you in thrall for a few seconds, erase this memory, replace it with something more suitable, more rational."

Violet rose onto her knees. "You can do that?"

"Yes."

"Have you played with my memory before?"

"No."

"Would I know it if you had?"

I walked over to the edge of the bed. "No."

"Then why are you asking my permission? Why not just do it?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

"Because I wouldn't give up the memory of how your lips tasted, how your body felt beneath mine for anything," I confessed, my voice rough with arousal.

"What I've been feeling, did you... I don't know..." Violet licked her lips.

"I've kept my essence in check. I swear it."

"And that's what? A power?"

"A power I've been shielding you from. Anything you've felt has been real."

Violet's eyes glistened with tears. She shook her head.

"It's true," I assured her.

"No, it's not. Not if you've been holding back. I have so many questions. Don't leave, Ren."

It was going to be the hardest thing I'd ever done. And if I didn't do it soon, I wouldn't have the strength to do it at all. The fear and horror she'd initially displayed had been replaced by something else, curiosity, empathy, the desire to once again understand my plight and me.

"Your decision?"

"I want to keep my memory," she said.

I nodded. "Very well. Goodbye, Violet."

I moved toward the door. When I reached the hallway, I turned back for one last glimpse of her. She was on her knees, the shirt she was wearing seductively slipping off one of her shoulders. I tossed her the keys and fled. I was out the door before she picked them up, probably halfway to the cave before she'd unlocked the handcuffs, and likely drinking down scotch by the time she reached the front door. I was emotionally and physically exhausted. I didn't even bother to build a fire. I threw the bedroll onto the hard floor, finished the first bottle of cold comfort, then fell into a restless sleep.

Chapter Six

“There you—”

Within a fraction of a second I was completely awake and had Violet pinned to the wall of the cave, her feet dangling a good two feet above its sand floor.

Violet’s eyes were wide with fear. Her heart was racing, the thrum of its beat all but palpable under my fingertips.

“You’re hurting me.”

I closed my eyes; I was sure they were still flashing red. The remnants of my attack growl faded to a low rumble, then died all together. With a sigh of relief I gently eased her down the wall. As soon as her feet were safely on the floor, I stepped back into the darkened recesses of the cave. I was awash in shame, horrified that I could have hurt her.

“I’m sorry. You shouldn’t be here, Violet. And you should *never* sneak up on a vampire.”

“I guess my mother forgot to tell me about that one.”

“This isn’t something to joke about. I could have hurt you.”

“So many times. But you haven’t.” She walked toward me. “You won’t.”

I turned around to face the wall. I couldn’t bear to have her see me like this, ferocious fangs and raging red eyes.

She rested her hand upon my shoulder. “Look at me.”

“No. I’m not back to normal yet.”

“What’s *normal*?”

“I’m trying to do the right thing here. Don’t you think I know this is wrong? Don’t you think I know I’m an abomination? This, what’s happening between us...”

Violet stepped around to face me and placed her fingers over my mouth. Her eyes were shining with unshed tears. “What is happening between us, Byron?”

She reached for my hand, interlacing her fingers with mine. She was shivering almost uncontrollably. The temperature outside was slightly above freezing and it was once again pouring rain.

“You’re cold. You’re soaked through, and you’re limping.”

“I’ve been searching for you for hours.”

“Why?” My fangs receded. I stepped out of the shadows.

"I had to," she said. "I couldn't leave things like they were. If you were honest, you'd admit you don't want to either."

I swallowed. "It doesn't matter what I want."

"Of course it matters," she said.

I began to work on starting a fire. "You shouldn't have walked all the way down here on that ankle."

"Right now I could care less about my ankle. You're real. This is real."

I watched as the tinder caught and the fire spread, catching the well-aged wood. She was patient. I'll give her that. It occurred to me this was her job, getting people to talk about difficult issues, helping them sort out their problems, deal with conflict. The fire flared up, warming the small space quickly.

"Yes. I'm real. This is real."

"You know, I have this couple on my caseload who say they're vampires. I wonder—"

"Real vampires don't go around announcing it. For the most part we live quiet lives. Violet, if you don't get out of those wet clothes, you're going to catch your death." I stood and removed my coat.

"I'll be fine."

"No, you won't. Humans get sick. They get sick and they die. Your lips are already blue and your body temperature is dropping." I traced her mouth with the pad of my thumb. Violet's lips were trembling slightly. Whether from cold or desire, I wasn't sure. They beckoned to me, begging me to warm them, so I did. Kissing them tenderly and thoroughly. Kissing them as they were meant to be kissed.

I pulled back and gazed into her eyes. "You came to me. Of your own accord, you came. Have you any idea how much that means to me?"

I took her hand and led her over to the fire.

"I have questions."

I smiled. "I'm sure you do."

"You'll answer them?"

"You're unrelenting."

"Some men appreciate that in a woman."

"Undress. Lay your clothes on the rocks. I'll give you my coat to wear. It's warm and dry. As soon as the rain lets up, we'll get you back inside."

I sat on one of the larger boulders, my coat across my lap.

She hesitated. "Ren, are you going to watch me undress?"

"Yes. And you're calling me Ren again. Does that mean I'm out of the dog house for chaining you to the bed?"

"Maybe." She quickly shed her coat. Her fingers were trembling from the cold and she had trouble unbuttoning the shirt she was wearing, my shirt.

"Here." I set the coat aside. "Let me help you."

“You’re actually immortal?” she asked me again.

I finished unbuttoning the shirt and slid it off her shoulders. She was wearing a black bra underneath.

“We’ve gone over this.” I unzipped her boots, pulled them off, and tossed them aside.

“Right, stake through the heart?”

“Wounds heal instantly. I’m impervious, Violet.”

“How can that be?”

“You mean the science of it? I don’t know.”

I laid her damp shirt across the nearby rocks before dropping to my knees before her. “The shirt’s not too bad. It’s only gotten slightly wet in the front.”

I unsnapped the top button of her blue jeans before pulling on the zipper, revealing a pair of black cotton panties. Who knew cotton could be so sexy?

“And there are others like you?”

“Of course.”

“How long?”

I slid the jeans past her hips and down the length of her stocking-clad legs. I ran my hand over the fishnet, trailing it up her calf, behind her knee, over the top of her thigh and then up to cup the firm globe of her ass. I looked at her. “My entire life, three hundred and seventy-nine years. And in all that time... I’ve never seen anything quite so lovely as you.”

Violet caressed the side of my face. “So you were... What do they call it, sired? You were sired in 1627?”

“You’re good at math.”

“That’s nothing; you should see me do long division.”

“Step out of these. Yes, they call it sired. But *they* are idiots. The sired thing? It’s complete nonsense.”

She placed her hand on my shoulder and slowly stepped out of her jeans. I tossed them onto the rock I had been sitting on.

“I was born, like you.” I unrolled my bedding, positioning it close to the fire. “My father, Astor, was a vampire. My mother, Lillian, a human.”

“Are they...”

“Dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

I picked up the blanket I had brought. “Don’t be. It’s the natural order of things. Like with Fred and Grace. Fred was my sister. She, too, was a vampire.”

“But, I don’t understand. You said vampires are immortal.”

I sat on the pallet and patted the space next to me. “Come.”

She hesitated.

“Come, I’m not going to bite you.”

She gulped. “You’re not?”

“No. I’m not going to lie to you, Violet. The thought of tasting you is very tempting. But the blood of a human, it isn’t something to take, something to steal.”

“Right, only the warped vampires do that,” she said matter-of-factly. “You’re obviously not one of those.”

“No.” I laughed. “I’m only mildly neurotic.”

She walked over, sat beside me, and then stretched out, her body next to mine.

I wrapped my arm around her waist and then swiftly rolled, positioning Violet so that she was closest to the fire. Reflections from the orange glow of the flames danced across her face.

“Amazing,” she whispered, searching my eyes.

“What?”

“You. We’re not from two different worlds, Ren. We’re from the same world. It’s just that until yesterday we didn’t know it.” She reached up to trace the outline of my mouth. “Well, you knew about me—”

“Relationships between humans and vampires, they aren’t supposed to happen. I don’t want you doing something you’ll later regret.”

“Regret? No regrets, Ren,” she whispered, rubbing her soft cheek against mine. “Tell me this doesn’t feel right to you. Tell me you don’t want me as much as I want you. Tell me this, my coming here, wasn’t meant to be.”

“You don’t understand. You don’t appreciate what it all means, trust me. You’re not prepared to live with the consequences,” I told her. But even as I said it, my hand wandered to her breast. I cupped it in my palm, feeling the weight of it and wanting my mouth on it.

“I know one thing.” She leaned up, brushing her lips against mine. “I know I’m not prepared to walk away from this, from you.”

I reached my hand back behind her neck, pulling her toward me, crushing my lips to hers, unleashing the passion I felt, the passion I’d been holding back. She released a moan, opened her mouth, and I slid my tongue inside. I reminded myself she was wanting, willing and I slowed down, so I could savor her.

“I want you,” she gasped, breaking off the kiss and reaching for the buckle of my belt.

“Violet—”

“Shh. I’m a big girl, I know what I’m doing. I want you so much. Make love to me, Ren. Make love to me.”

She pulled down the zipper of my trousers and then her hand wrapped around my cock. It may have been cold, but her touch warmed me from the inside out. She squeezed me slightly, stroking with

confidence up and down my shaft. It made me impossibly harder. My resistance was crumbling and I no longer cared. I wanted her, this, plain and simple.

“This isn’t just sex, Violet.”

She took my hand and led it inside her panties, guiding my fingers to her moistened curls. “Feel that? Feel what you do to me? Feel how much I want you.”

I sat up and pulled my sweater off over my head, tossing it carelessly onto the dusty floor of the cave along with my fears and doubts, along with the prejudiced judgments I had lived with for centuries.

Violet reached for me and I fell back into her waiting arms. I kissed a path from behind her ear down the length of her neck, enjoying the cool feel of her skin beneath my warm mouth. I could hear the blood rushing in her veins and the promise of even a drop of it was almost overwhelming. The low rumble began to spontaneously build in my chest. I steadily moved down her body, intent on devouring her, tasting every inch of her.

She was magnificent, spread beneath me, breathing heavily. Violet’s chest was rising and falling as I lowered the cups of her bra, fully revealing her exquisite breasts to me. I palmed one, rolling its already pebbled nipple between my thumb and forefinger before bending and giving freely into my yearning need to latch onto it.

“Christ! Oh, Ren!” She threaded her fingers through my hair.

The head of my cock was rubbing up and down along the outside of her panties. I could feel her dampness through the thin barrier. “I want to be inside of you,” I admitted, releasing her breast and looking deep into her eyes.

Violet reached down and rubbed her hand across the head of my cock, spreading the moisture she discovered there.

“I want that, too.”

“I don’t have any protection. I’ve never needed it before. Vampire women, they can’t have children.”

“I’ve got that covered, Ren,” she said as she slid her panties aside and guided me.

My eyes locked on hers. The head of my cock brushed against her soft curls and she gasped, then smiled and nodded her encouragement. I tilted my hips forward, wanting only to be closer, to be in her, to feel her wet heat surround me. I slid between her lips, separating her folds, slipping past her swollen clit. She was slick with desire, desire for me, a vampire.

Her tongue darted out to wet her lips and she closed her eyes.

“No, look at me,” I begged as I entered her. “See me, who, what I am. I need to know... I need to know you realize...”

And she did. Violet opened her eyes, her gaze meeting mine.

"I see you, Byron Renfield." She pulled me deep inside, her legs wrapping around my hips. Leaning up, she licked the outside shell of my ear before pulling it into her lush mouth and sucking on it rhythmically.

"I see you," she whispered again.

I pulled back slightly in wonder. "Do you?"

"Yes."

I leaned down and rested my forehead against hers. Then I closed my eyes and inhaled, slowly. I smelled the rain outside and the burning wood. I smell my shampoo in her hair and the lingering scent of my soap on her face. The sound of the wind and rain outside, the crackling of the fire, those little sounds she was making. I intended to remember all of it. Always. Forever.

I kept the pace controlled and steady, wanting to bring her slowly to climax, wanting to make this first time last forever, wanting it to be perfect.

"So good," she moaned, arching up, her body taut.

I slipped my hand under her waist and lifted her slightly. The base of my cock dragged across her swollen clit with each thrust, heightening her pleasure.

She moved her hands to my shoulders and held on. Her head thrown back, her neck stretched before me. It was an unwitting invitation, I knew. But it moved me nonetheless.

"I wish I could spend eternity like this. Inside of you, just like this," I confessed.

"Oh, Ren!"

I continued to move, deep inside her, churning my hips over and over, her slick walls coating me with her hot juices. She began to tremble around me. The realization that her orgasm was seconds away almost made me lose control. I stopped for a moment, trying to stave it off, trying to regain my composure.

"Don't stop. Don't ever stop. I want this to last forever. Please, Ren, make it last forever!"

"I can't give you forever, I wish I could."

"Baby, let's see how close we can get," she said, then she kissed me.

In that instant Violet Deeds became my world, utterly and irrevocably. The rumble in my chest was no longer a warning to heed. It was like a sounding of trumpets, a signal to celebrate. My fangs elongated as I trailed hot open mouth kisses down the side of her face, over her jaw line, to that spot on her neck, the one just below and behind her ear, the one that was to become mine. I paused; I had to be sure.

"Violet? Are you sure?"

She reached down, her nails digging in to the cheeks of my ass. "Very sure," she said. There was no hesitation, no doubt.

I latched on, firmly, my mouth covering her flesh and then I did it. My fangs pierced her flesh, sliding inside her with one sure thrust, before instantly retracting. My mouth filled with her essence.

The taste of her was powerful, even more powerful than I had imagined it would be. As that first bit of her blood coated my tongue I was struck by how incredibly sweet it was. It warmed my throat when I swallowed. The heat built, rising inside my body, creating a slow burn.

The roar in my chest broke free, forcing me to release her neck. It sounded fierce and raw and primitive. It sounded exactly like I felt at that moment. Never had I experienced such excitement, such hunger. I wanted more of her. No, I needed all of her. I reared up and searched Violet's face, looking for signs of fear, hoping to get encouragement or at the very least permission to continue.

She was radiant with her wild mane of hair spread beneath her, her deep green eyes shimmering with unshed tears. The firelight danced across her skin, creating shadows and painting it so that it glowed. Her chest was flush with arousal and her lips were full and red from the fervor of my kisses.

Over and over, I thrust into her, picking up the pace of that ancient rhythm as my eyes were drawn to my mark, there on her neck, exactly where it was destined to be, exactly where it belonged. I leaned down and lapped up the thin rivulet of glorious nectar that leaked from it. I could feel it as Violet's pussy began to quiver around my cock, pulling me deeper still. I was on the precipice and she was right there with me.

"I'm so close, Ren."

I latched back onto my mark and took a forceful pull.

"Oh, yes!" she screamed, her voice rough with passion as a powerful orgasm began to wrack her body. I took another pull from her neck and thrust into her one more time, one last time. Spilling my seed, tasting her, taking her, I claimed her as mine, for always.

The echoes of Violet's scream bounced off the walls of the cave. The ecstasy showing in her face filled me with a strange sense of pride. Instinctually I leaned down and lapped at the twin set of punctures on her neck until the wound sealed.

"Ren?"

"Hmm?"

"That was..."

"Amazing," I finished.

"Yes." She reached up and caressed the side of my face. "Amazing." She flashed me a teasing smile. "Though you did fall a bit short of forever."

Chapter Seven

Bile rose in my throat. She hadn't understood. How stupid had I been? What had I done? I'd heard what I wanted to hear. I'd moved too rashly.

I stood quickly and hastily tossed the blanket at her before I walked over to the entrance of the cave and stepped outside. Heedless of the cold I let the rain pour down on me. I threw my head back, then with my arms outstretched, fists clenched, I let out an unbridled roar. Its sound bounded off the rocks and echoed through the nearby caves before being swallowed by the wind and the rain and the vastness of the ocean below.

"What's wrong?"

"Leave me be!" I shouted as I heard her approach.

She wrapped her hand gently around my bicep. "Come on—"

My eyes flashed red and I rounded on her, making no attempt to hide my fury. "Have you no sense, woman?" I ground out, struggling to maintain some degree of control.

She released me and stepped back. She was wearing my cashmere coat. The hem hung down to the ground, the sleeves completely covered her arms. She looked so small and fragile. "I was teasing, Ren. You were incredible. *We* were incredible. I didn't mean to insult your performance."

"It's too late, Violet! I didn't understand. I misunderstood."

"Misunderstood what?"

"When you said you wanted it to last forever, you were talking about the sex. Weren't you?"

"Yes."

"You wanted me to *fuck* you forever. That's what you meant."

"I wouldn't call it fucking. What did you think I meant? Did you think I was proposing marriage?"

"Vampires don't get married. We mate. Once. For life. I thought you were asking me to claim you."

"Claim me?"

"Take you as my mate."

"Oh."

"Yes. Oh."

I walked with purpose back into the cave and kicked sand over the fire, smothering the flames.

"So what now?"

"I'm going back to the house." I picked up two of the bottles of scotch. "I'm going to take a hot bath and have a really big drink."

"Kind of early for a drink, don't you think," she murmured.

I rounded on her, enraged. How dare she. Just who did she think she was?

I pointed the bottle at her and yelled, "You come in here with that sexy walk, those big innocent eyes, your beautiful hair and..."

"And what?"

"And you've turned my life upside-down, that's what! I told you this wasn't just sex!"

"And it wasn't, not for me, either. I think this is maybe something we could build on."

"Build on," I repeated, my voice sounding hollow.

"Yes!"

I shook my head. She was shaking like a leaf. Our union was too fresh, she was still vulnerable. I threw one of the bottles of scotch against the rocks below. The sound of shattering glass was masked by the crash of waves. As the remnants of glass were covered in its frothy foam the image of my mother's crushed body lying on the cobblestone of our courtyard swam before me. I leaned down, picked Violet up and threw her over my shoulder. I would not repeat my father's mistakes. Not all of them, anyways.

"I need to get you inside. It's my job to take care of you now."

"Put me down! I can take care of myself. I can walk. My ankle is fine. I walked here, didn't I?"

I paid no attention, moving quickly. My strength magnified by her blood.

The house was cold. Of course it would be cold. She probably had no idea how to start a fire and not enough sense to find the thermostat and turn the heat up. I flipped the switch on the thermostat by the staircase and then proceeded up them, taking two at a time. I headed straight for the bedroom.

"I don't understand why you're so upset."

After dropping her, rather carelessly, onto the bed, I set to work starting a fire. "You don't see why I'm upset?" My voice sounded much calmer and steadier than I felt at the moment. I tossed some tinder onto the grate and waited for it to catch, taking some measure of comfort in the familiar ritual.

"Can't you explain?"

"Can't I explain?"

"This is going to take longer to resolve if you're going to insist on repeating everything I say."

I stood and faced her. Boy, was that ever a mistake. Violet was sitting up, one leg tucked under her, the other trailing slightly behind. She was leaning forward and my coat had slipped off her shoulder a bit, exposing the top of one perfect breast. Her eyes were shining with tears and her hair was glistening from the morning rain. My eyes met hers and my mouth went dry. I was already once again craving the feel of her, the smell of her, the taste of her. It took every bit of strength I had not to cross those three feet and

gather her into my arms. But there were things to be said, and fucking her again wasn't going to change that.

I busied myself adding a log to the flame. "I did explain. Well, I tried to explain last night."

"Try again." She stood and walked over to me, placing her hand on my shoulder. "Please, Ren, don't shut me out."

I turned and studied her for a moment. She was frightened and uncertain. She wanted me still, yet I could sense she regretted moving so quickly. Sadder still, I was acutely aware a part of her regretted having come here at all. I could feel what she was feeling now, whether I wanted to or not.

"I can't shut you out, Violet. No more than you can shut me out. We're joined now. It's something that can't be undone. The transformation, it's already started."

"Transformation?"

"Your awakening. We need to talk."

"That's never good," she said, anxiously. "Nothing good ever follows 'we need to talk', Ren."

"Blow."

"Huh?"

"Blow." I released a warm breath into the cold of the living room. It condensed and hung in the air before dissipating.

She followed my lead. "So, it's still cold in here."

"Do you feel it?" I said, opening the front of the overcoat and unabashedly raking my eyes over her body. She wore only the black panties and stockings now.

Violet smiled. "Well, not when you look at me like that."

I slipped my coat off her shoulders and watched it pool at her feet before I interlaced my hand with hers then led her over to the mirror above the hearth. Standing behind her, I leaned her head back every so slightly and tilted her head, showing her the set of twin puncture wounds. "You're my mate, Violet. You gave your blood and your body to me. You gave it willingly. Mating transcends the bonds of marriage. There's no such thing as a vampire divorce. This is for life. As time passes, you'll begin to take on some vampire characteristics."

"You turned me into a vampire?" she asked, her voice bordering on hysteria.

"No. You're something in between. Not vampire, but no longer exactly human either. Your senses will sharpen, your aging process will slow, you'll get stronger."

She lowered herself to the floor. "Now I need a drink."

I started for the bathroom. "I'll get you some water."

"Don't bother."

I turned back in time to see Violet reach for the bottle of scotch and unscrew the cap.

"Explain," she said before tilting the bottle back and letting the amber liquid trickle into her throat.

I walked over to my chest of drawers, pulled out a cream-colored cashmere sweater and tossed it over to her. "Slip this on. You may not feel the cold, but you're still vulnerable to it."

"The magic is gone," she quipped from underneath the oversized garment. "Mated less than one hour and you can't stand the sight of me." She took another drink and hiccupped. Christ, she could be adorable.

I found a pair of black sweatpants and stepped into them. "Are you going to get drunk? It'd be perfectly understandable."

"I don't know yet." She took another swig. "Want some?"

I shook my head and joined her on the floor. "No thanks." I stared into the flames of the fire. I didn't know where to start or how to explain. "I'm not sure where to begin."

"Take your time," she said. "After all, being immortal you've got all the time in the world, right?"

That made me reach for the bottle. "Maybe that's where I should start. I'm not. Immortal that is. Not anymore. When a vampire and a human mate, something happens. The balance is upset. That's why it's forbidden. I'm tied to you now. Our life force has been joined. When you die, I die. I'll turn to dust when you leave this life and only then. Like with Grace and Fred."

"That's what happened to Grace?"

"Fred and Grace were mated for a bit over three hundred and fifty years. Grace was human, like you."

Violet closed her eyes and began to massage her temples. "I'm not feeling so well. Could you close the curtains? It's awfully bright in here. And, I hate to say it, but you need a bath. You smell like—"

"I've just had wonderfully illicit sex?"

"Ren!"

"Sorry. Everything's the same, Violet. It's just that your senses are sharpening. Reach out, feel me."

She looked at me, startled. "You're scared."

"Terrified." I climbed to my feet. "I'm going to start a bath."

She followed me into the bathroom. "I can feel your fear. Can you feel what I'm feeling?"

I nodded. "No secrets. Although I've heard over time some couples learn to mask their emotions and guard against the intrusion."

I turned on the taps, put the stopper in the enormous whirlpool tub, then poured in a generous amount of oil from the delicate amber bottle that had been given to me ages ago. A heady, exotic aroma filled the room.

"You're afraid I'm going to want to leave," Violet said.

"And you're afraid I'm going to expect you to stay."

"Oh, God!" She placed one hand over her chest. "I—I can't breathe. Is this part of the awaken thing?"

"Awakening, and no. At least I don't think so." I set the amber bottle down on the edge of the tub.

"You don't think so!" she yelled, her upper chest quickly rising and falling as she continued to take quick shallow breaths. "You're the goddamned expert here, Byron!"

Oh-oh. It was back to Byron again. I tried my best to appear steady and calm.

“You’re hyperventilating.”

“Or having a heart attack...”

“You’re not having a heart attack,” I assured her, as I quickly divested her of her clothes. “You’re anxious.” I swept her hair over her shoulder, exposing her neck and giving me access to my mark. “Let me help.”

Blinded by fear, she pushed me away. “No! What are you doing?”

“Don’t be afraid. I’m not about to hurt you. I plan to live at least another three hundred years. Remember? You go, I go.”

Her eyes connected with mine in the bathroom mirror. I wrapped my arm around her waist and pulled her flush to my body. “Feel my intentions,” I whispered in her ear. “You know what I want.”

“To give me what I need.”

“I’m going to take care of you.” I leaned down and once again pierced my mark.

As soon as the wound opened I felt her begin to calm, the connection soothing her, reassuring her. I pulled her blood into my mouth and I poured my heart out to her, letting her feel the pain and the hurt, the fear and the doubt, the hope and the longing. When her knees weakened, I was there to catch her. I lifted her into my arms and lapped up the last remnants of her essence before placing her in the bath.

She looked at me with heavy-lidded eyes. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. The next few hours will be difficult. You’re going to crave my bite, Violet, just like I’ll crave your blood.”

She was shaking almost uncontrollably despite the heat of the water. “Y-you w-won’t leave me?”

“Never.” I shed my sweatpants and climbed in behind her. “I’ll never leave you,” I murmured into her ear as I pulled her back against my chest and nuzzled her neck.

“I feel so strange, like I’m drifting, dreaming.”

I picked up a sponge, dipped it into the water, poured some of my clove bath gel onto it, then began to wash her back.

She sighed, leaning back against me, content for the moment. She wouldn’t be for long.

I reached around and began to glide the sponge across her breasts, taking care to encircle each dusky pink nipple before sliding down to wash her stomach.

“Close your eyes,” I murmured. “Relax.”

I dipped the sponge into the water and ran it over her sex. She squirmed a bit, lifting her hips, seeking more pressure. She wanted me, again. The scent of her arousal mingled with the spicy aroma of the bath gel was extraordinary. A soft rumble began to emerge from my chest, slow and steady.

Violet placed her hands on my knees and squeezed. “I can feel the vibrations.”

I smiled. “And?”

"I like it. It's... I don't know."

I released the sponge into the water. "Arousing?"

"Yes."

Reaching down with one hand, I separated her folds. She was slick and I wanted her to stay that way. I dipped my fingertips into the same oil I used for the bath.

"That smells divine. What is it?" she asked me.

I began to circle her clit with my thumb, taunting her, teasing her.

"Something very old, very special." I pulled gently on her nipple with my other hand, enjoying the hardness of it, rolling it between my thumb and forefinger. "You want to feel my mouth on you?"

"I want..." She arched up, seeking out more friction.

"What do you want?"

"You. Everywhere."

"Here?" I asked, sliding my finger deep inside her.

Violet's breath hitched.

"Or maybe here?" I suggested, tugging on her other nipple. My dick was unbelievably hard and I wanted her again desperately. I slipped another finger inside her. She rode my hand wantonly, climbing, reaching, seeking release. I felt her uncertainty for a moment and I paused. Her rocking motions ceased and I removed my hand.

Violet turned around to face me. "Look at me."

I did.

"You're right. This isn't just about sex." She lowered herself onto my cock, slowly taking me inside her. "I can feel how much you care about me, how badly you want me. It's all right. Say it."

"This is crazy. We barely know one another. I can't."

"Yes, you can." She was kissing me tenderly on the mouth, along my jaw line, nibbling at my neck. And all the while, sliding up and down.

Our tempo was building. Violet wrapped her arms around my neck and leaned back, offering me her breast. For a moment I watched us, marveling at the sensations, admiring the fit and the feel of her pussy. Then I latched on to her tit, sucking it into my mouth, flicking her hardened nipple as I thrust into her.

"Oh, baby. You're so deep," she moaned. "That feels unbelievably good."

Violet's soft velvet walls clenched around my cock, pulsating. When I reached down between us and encircled her clit, she was still slick. She was on the edge now and so was I, I couldn't stop. Instead I reached down and pinched her clit and built the rhythm.

"Ren!"

I released her breast with a pop. "You're so wet," I said, amazed. My fingers were now generously coated from the mixture of the spicy oil and Violet's own sweet scream. "Come for me, Violet. Come all

over my cock.” I kissed her passionately and snaked my hand around her waist, past the small of her back, between the cheeks of her ass. I began to circle her tight hole, gently probing, seeking entrance.

Violet gasped. Her eyes opened wide as my index finger eased inside. Her body tensed. She paused, her fingers digging into my shoulders.

“Relax. Breathe. It’s going to feel good. I promise. We’ll go slowly. Trust me.”

“I trust you,” she said, smiling at me as she eased back down the length of my cock, letting my finger penetrate her at the same time.

I moved my finger in and out, matching the rhythm of my other thrusts, waiting until she again relaxed and then I added a second. Her muscles clamped down, her body seizing up momentarily at the intrusion.

“Oh, God!”

“That’s it, sweetheart. Come for me.”

“I need...”

“I know what you need,” I told her, increasing the pace. Harder. Faster. The purr in my chest was now a steady rumble. I was breathing heavily and Violet... She was panting. Her hair was damp. Her body was slick with sweat. She was glowing, and it was all my doing. Perspiration gathered in the hollow of her throat and glistened on her chest. I lapped it up, tasting the lingering salt on her flesh. It was delicious and unmistakably her.

My fangs began to elongate. Violet grabbed the back of my hair and yanked my head back, forcefully. I growled, more from surprise than anything else. She stared into my bright red eyes and crushed her lips to mine, sweeping her tongue inside my mouth, nicking the side of it on my fang. As her blood filled my mouth I came with a roar and so did she. Tremors wracked her body while I spilled my seed inside her womb.

I ran my hand over the length of her spine, waiting until her heart rate and breathing returned to normal.

“You know, the more we practice, the better we’re going to get at this.”

Violet was draped over me, her head resting on my shoulder, her arms dangling down my back.

“I’m afraid you’re going to kill me,” she groaned.

I pulled her from me, held her face in my hands and gazed searchingly into her eyes. “Did I hurt you? I was registering a little pain, but there was also pleasure so I thought—”

“You thought right. I’m feeling a little light-headed, though.”

“You need water and rest. Up you go. Let’s pull the stopper, take a quick shower, and get some sleep.”

“Then what?”

“We’ll eat to replenish our energy so that we can make love again.”

“That is what it was, wasn’t it?”

Suddenly I felt shy. “It was for me,” I whispered, leaning my forehead against hers and closing my eyes.

“Me, too.”

Chapter Eight

When I woke I was starving for more of Violet. Although we had fallen asleep in one another's arms she was now lying on her back, arms outstretched above her head, her wrists dangerously close to the handcuffs that still dangled from my headboard. Another time, I thought as I sat up. The bed sheet pooled at my waist. I looked down upon my mate, her countenance tranquil. She looked completely sated. But I vowed to do better.

"I want to please you. I want to learn everything about you," I told her as I began to ease down her body. Her stomach was taut and quivered beneath my mouth. "Tell me about this tattoo," I said, trailing my kisses lower still, following the outline of the delicate scrolls with my tongue before moving between her thighs. "Open up for me. I want to taste you. I want to look at you."

"I'm sleeping, you sex fiend," she murmured.

Despite the protest, she allowed me to spread her legs apart.

"Right. I'll do all the work. You lie there and rest."

I separated her outer lips and breathed deeply. "Your scent is amazing." Her pussy was already moist. Slowly, I dragged my tongue up the length of her channel. I was ravenous and that first taste only whetted my appetite. Inflamed, I began to explore her inner folds with the tip of my tongue.

Violet moaned, her hips rising off the bed. She grabbed hold of the headboard's iron bars.

I greedily lapped up the cream that flowed into my waiting mouth, relishing its taste and the newfound feelings that the evidence of her arousal had awakened in me. Violet was mine and I would, in my lifetime, possess her wholly, fully, completely—in every way and as often as I liked.

She laced her fingers through my hair and when I looked up I found that she was gazing down at me, wonder in her lust-filled eyes. I pulled back slightly and smiled. Then, using the tip of my tongue, I teasingly flicked her now fully engorged clit.

"Ren!"

I paused for the briefest of moments, before pulling her closer to me still and diving back in, taking her swollen nubbin between my teeth, and tugging on it with abandon.

"Oh, God!" she cried.

I latched my mouth onto her completely, sucking hungrily, feasting until she was keening.

"Tell me what you want," I demanded, wiping her juices from my chin with the back of my hand.

"You," she said simply, reaching for my cock. "I want you. All of you."

I slid two fingers inside her pussy. “You have me.”

She was trembling beneath my touch, her release approaching.

“Yes! No! I want you inside of me. I want your cock inside of me. Please, Ren.”

I gently curled the fingers of the hand moving inside her forward, searching for the spot that would ensure her release. Violet’s breathing was becoming more and more ragged.

I removed my hand. “Whatever my baby wants,” I told her, driving my cock inside her. She pushed back, matching my urgency, impaling herself on me. I wrapped one arm around her waist and reached up to grasp the iron rail with my free hand.

“Oh, God!” she cried.

This was Eden, I decided, pulling out and then burying myself in her once again, moving closer and closer to my mark.

“Christ, I think I’ve found paradise. I could spend eternity like this...” I whispered into the shell of her ear, my fangs elongating.

“Well *that’s* certainly not going to happen. What the hell are you thinking, Byron!”

Violet shrieked.

With lightning speed I pulled out of her, tossing the coverlet over her nude body to shield her.

“Rita, fuck! You should have knocked!” I was furious.

“You know her?” Violet asked.

I stormed into the bathroom just long enough to retrieve my sweatpants. “Rita, Violet. Violet, Rita. Rita’s my...”

“Lover,” Rita filled in helpfully.

I tried to remain calm and *not* feel guilty. What I had with Rita was irrelevant now. And it was about sex, not love. Never love, not the kind I had with Violet.

“That’s an exaggeration and you know it.” I quickly stepped into my sweats. “Violet, Rita’s my consort and sometimes I think of her as a friend. I have feelings for her, yes, but they aren’t the same feelings I have for you. You’ve got to know the truth of that.”

She wrapped the coverlet around herself and climbed out of the bed. “I believe you.”

“She believes you? Just like that?” Rita gasped, horrified. “You put her in thrall!”

“That’s not true.”

“Oh, my God! Tell me you didn’t, Byron.”

Rita rushed toward Violet, but she backed away. It didn’t matter, the mark on Violet’s neck was clear and Rita had seen it.

“You claimed her? Idiot!” she shouted at me. “How long?”

“Maybe six or seven hours ago. It can’t be undone. More importantly, I don’t *want* to undo it. I love her,” I said defiantly.

Rita laughed. “Are you stoned? You’re going to throw everything away for *her*?”

“Hey!” Violet interjected.

“This isn’t love, Byron. Your chemistry’s been upset. This is nothing more than that. Her presence here has weakened you, distracted you.” She held her hands out in front of Violet and then took an unsteady step back. “She’s strong, very strong. I’ll give you that. You nasty girl! Have you any idea what you’ve done?”

I stepped between them, intent on protecting my mate. “Back off. This isn’t—”

“She’s a mistake!” Rita hissed. “There must be some way...”

“Will you two stop speaking as if I weren’t here?” Violet shouted over my shoulder.

I turned to face her. Reaching out I smoothed down her mussed hair. “Sorry, honey.” Violet was inconsolable.

“Don’t you honey me! What does she mean my presence here has weakened you? Tell me the truth!” She poked me in the chest.

I turned and flashed Rita an angry glare. “Nothing. Pay no attention to the jealous shrew, who is fired by the way.”

I couldn’t have her drive a wedge between Violet and me. Not now. Not ever. But she was starting to do just that.

“Bullshit! You’re panicking, Byron,” Violet accused.

Shit. I forgot she could read me like an open book now.

“Talk to me,” she pleaded.

“Has anyone ever told you you’re beautiful when you’re angry?”

“You’re stalling. If you don’t start talking—”

“Jealous shrew? Please!” Rita scoffed. “I’m your friend and you know it. They’ll make you step down. And that won’t be good for anyone. The trust will fall apart. Think about the future of the children. Think about the example you—”

“Children? You have children?” Violet cried, outraged.

“That’s enough!” I yelled.

My ears were ringing and my head was spinning. I grabbed a sweatshirt from the closet and fled, pulling it over my head on my way down the stairs, and slipping my arms into the sleeves. Both Violet and Rita followed me—like a pair of persistently annoying pit bulls. I ignored them. I sat in front of my computer and fired it up, intent on drowning myself in the exciting world of stock analysis.

Think about the children? What had Rita imagined I’d been thinking about, day in and day out, year after year? I’d dedicated myself to serving the Chosen and to serving the Clan. How dare she?

“Are you going to ignore us?”

I figured the best way to answer was to remain silent and hope they took the hint and went away. I needed time to think.

“Byron—” Rita began.

I held up my hand to silence her.

She was unrelenting. “It’s Saturday, the markets are closed. We *must* sort this out. You have to—”

“Stop!” I growled, standing, my eyes flashing red. “You *don’t* tell me what to do.”

“Well, someone obviously has to,” she mocked.

“I am still Dominie,” I reminded her.

“Your status won’t matter. In this case, it’s likely to work against you. You will be expelled and you know it. As soon as they find out—”

“They’re not going to find out.”

“They *always* find out, eventually.”

Anger was rising in me like I have never experienced before. Rita was speaking the truth, but I didn’t want to hear it. I had earned my status. I had worked hard to achieve it. I wasn’t about to let it go without a fight.

Violet must have sensed it building, the emotional tie that now existed between us telegraphing a portent of what was to come. She scrambled backwards, practically tripping over the coverlet that was still wrapped around her. I was, within the space of a moment, all red eyes and fangs and towering over Rita, an indignant roar echoing throughout the room.

“That’s better,” I declared once the roar faded to a low rumble. I looked down upon Rita, kneeling before me, her eyes downcast in subjugation. “You forget yourself,” I hissed.

“Yeah? Well, I still remember who I am.” Violet walked over to me. “Put the fangs away, Byron. We need to talk about this.”

Un-fucking-believable. She was going to challenge me in front of someone? This I couldn’t have. The rumble in my chest remained steady and I gave her my most menacing glare.

Violet leaned in close and whispered in my ear, “I get it. You need to save face. But I’m not going to back down here. And I’m certainly not going to kneel before you, not like that. We’re connected, Ren. I know you don’t want to hurt me.”

“That doesn’t mean I won’t,” I barked.

She looked at me and smiled. “Don’t ever play poker with me, baby.” She leaned up and nuzzled my neck. “It’s going to be all right,” she promised. “We’ll figure this out, Ren. We’re in this together.”

Together. I felt the need to connect with her again, to wrap my arms around her and reaffirm our bond. There was so much we had yet to experience of one another. I remembered the handcuffs and an image of Violet tied to the bed swam before my eyes.

I reached for her hand and began to lead her toward the stairs. “Rita, go home!”

"I can take her with me!" Rita shouted, jumping to her feet.

"What? No!"

"You plan on holding her prisoner here, Byron? Like your father held your mother prisoner? Is that what you want?"

"She's not my prisoner!" I insisted. Then I looked at Violet. "You're not my prisoner."

"When do you plan on releasing her?"

Violet's anxiety was rapidly rising. "I can't stay here forever, Ren. I have patients back home, a life."

"We don't have to stay here forever," I assured her, reaching up to caress her neck, rubbing my thumb across my mark to soothe her.

Almost instantly her heart rate and pulse began to slow down, just as I knew it would.

"He's manipulating you, Violet. He's manipulating you through the claim," Rita said.

Violet looked up at me, her eyes flooding with tears. "He doesn't mean to."

And I didn't. I wanted her to stay with me, yes. But more than anything I wanted her to *want* to stay—to *choose* to stay. I wanted to deserve her, to be worthy of what she had given me. I just wanted to love her.

I swallowed, hard, and then I said it. "I love you, Violet."

"I know." She nodded and her eyes misted over. "Please don't ask me to give up who and what I am."

Suddenly I was drowning in misery, caught in the never-ending tide of obligation.

"I'm not," I insisted.

"What does it mean to be Dominie? Tell me about the children," she asked. The tears spilled over and rolled down her cheek. "What have you risked for me?"

"It doesn't matter," I insisted, practically choking on the words.

She sat on the bottom step and looked up at me, waiting for a response. Several minutes passed before I took my place beside her. I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and pulled her close.

"I've devoted my life to serving the Clan. My conduct has been exemplary. I've followed the rules. I've obeyed the Canon. I've served as Treasurer of The Trust for the past three hundred and fifty years or so."

"The Trust?"

"I was appointed to the position of Treasurer right before Fred and Grace became mates. It has grown tremendously under my direction. It supports our Chosen children. It's large enough now the Dominie draw an annuity from it."

"What do you mean by Chosen children, Ren? What are they chosen to do?"

"Children born from a mating such as ours, a mating between a male vampire and a female mortal, can be either mortal or immortal. The mortal children are believed to be blessed, favored by the highest power."

"Favored how?"

“They will someday join Him in the afterlife.”

“And those who are immortal?”

“Are here to serve. If we serve well, we get elevated. In the end, those who are elevated, the Dominie, will get their reward.”

“What end, Byron. You’re immortal, or you were.”

“This world won’t last forever. The end will come. And when it does, the Dominie will join Him.”

“And you’re one of those? A Dominie?”

“After serving as Treasurer for two centuries, they elevated me. I’m the youngest to ever have the title bestowed upon them.”

“And you’ve taken that from him,” Rita accused.

“Oh, Ren.” Violet placed her hand over her heart. “I’ve stolen Heaven from you? Not that I believe in Heaven, but...”

“It’s all right, Violet.”

“How can you say that?”

I took her face in the palms of my hands. “Don’t cry. You didn’t take it away. Don’t you see? You’ve given it to me. We’ll be all right, baby.”

Rita crouched down in front of us. “It’s not going to be all right, Byron. Do you think they will let you walk away from this? They let you in. They trusted you. They can’t *afford* to let this go.”

“It’s not like I want to quit, I—”

Rita climbed to her feet and began to pace. “You are so naïve!” she spat. “They’re not going to let you stick around! They’ve held you up as an example! You’re their golden boy, what all the little vamps are supposed to aspire to be. You’re a dead man, Byron.”

“They can’t kill me.”

She stopped before me, her expression pained. “They can now.”

Rita didn’t have to say another word. She glanced at Violet and it hit me like a ton of bricks. And in that instant, Violet realized it, too. They’d go after her, and in doing so they’d get rid of both of us. I’d disappear. I’d be replaced. And the secret of my *failure* would remain just that, a secret.

“I’m not ready to die,” Violet said.

Fred’s dying words rang in my ears. “*When they talk of me I want you to tell them with my last breath I said I had no regrets, welcomed death and expressed my unwavering devotion to the woman I loved. Promise me, Ren. I won’t have people scaring their children with tales of my mistake. My life wasn’t a mistake.*”

“You’re not going to die,” I told her, my heart breaking. “Rita will see you home.”

Just the mere thought of separating had me breaking out in a cold sweat.

Violet started trembling. Unconsciously, she reached up to touch the mark I’d left on her neck.

I looked at Rita. “Stay with her until you’re sure she’s safe. Help her through the trauma of the separation.”

“I thought you fired me?”

I glared at her.

Rita smiled, sadly. I could tell she wanted to reach out, to touch me, but she didn’t and for that I was grateful. Violet’s emotions were too raw, our connection too new, and our remaining time together too precious. I didn’t want to waste a second of it explaining the intricacies of my relationship with Rita or defending against unwarranted jealousies.

“What about you?” Rita asked.

“I’ll be fine as long as I know Violet is all right,” I lied. “Leave us.”

I waited until Rita retreated to the kitchen, then I pulled Violet onto my lap.

“Byron—”

I silenced her with a kiss. Exploring the warm, wet cavern of her mouth as if discovering it for the first time, trying to memorize the feel of it, taking pleasure in the taste of it. There was so much I wanted to do, so much I wanted to say and so little time.

Never before in my existence had I felt the pressure of it—time. I’m not sure I even appreciated the concept before. Now, every second that ticked by was one less I would get to spend with her. The taste of the salt from our comingled tears hit my tongue and I pulled back.

“Come with me?” she said, only it was more of a question.

She was frightened and desperate and uncertain.

I rested my forehead against hers and released a ragged sigh. I so much wanted to ease her pain, pain she wouldn’t have been feeling if she hadn’t come here. But the pain was real and I couldn’t fix it, not today.

“I can’t right now. There are things I need to do first, arrangements must be made. But I will come to you, Violet. Have no doubt about that. I will come to you. That is, if you want me.”

“When?”

“As soon as I can, as soon as it’s safe. I’ll find a place where we can meet, maybe someplace in England or Ireland. Scotland is nice.”

“I live in San Diego, Byron.” She brushed away her tears.

“It’s awfully sunny there.”

“All the more reason. They’d never suspect you’d be there. Right?”

“Maybe.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes before I finally screwed up enough courage to say what had been weighing on my mind.

“It’s true what she said, you know. There is chemistry involved, physical need driving this attraction.”

Violet placed her hand over my mouth and looked me in the eye. “Do you believe in love at first sight?”

I chuckled. “Until last night I didn’t believe in love at all.”

“Look inside yourself, Byron. Look inside me. Feel what I feel. This is real. I don’t know how or why, but I do know I want to hold onto it. I want to hold onto you.”

She was right. There were feelings, strong feelings. “Until death do us part?” I murmured against her ear.

“Until death do us part, baby,” she replied.

I sunk my fangs deep into her neck and renewed our bond, then carried her upstairs and made love to her one last time. That final encounter wasn’t about passion. It was about solace. It was about a promise being made and a commitment being kept. It was about mourning the loss of one another and rejoicing in the discovery of life and love. Certainly not the life or love we had planned on, I’ll give you that. But who’s really good at planning these things? Certainly not me.

Violet left with Rita the following morning after an emotional goodbye. The sky was completely clouded over and the rain was once again pouring down in torrents. It was barely 8:00 a.m. when I watched the boat Rita had come in take them away. I dragged my favorite black leather chair over to the large picture window so I could drown my sorrows in merlot and watch as the small vessel that carried them became a distant dot on the horizon. Now, I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking *he just lets her go while he sits there and drinks?* The answer is yes. I drink what I want, when I want. I eat what I want, when I want. And except for a few things... I do what I want, when I want. And what I want, what I *will* have, is to be with her. Always and unconditionally.

I leaned back in my chair, looked around my living room, and smiled at the irony of it all. My house had never felt so empty. My life had never felt so full of meaning. I had been living the fantasy—eternal youth, immortality, rich beyond anyone’s wildest imagination, a private island, an enormous house, status in the community. I was the envy of my friends, the few I had. Until a slip of a girl came to me, tempting me to take a taste, just one, of her forbidden fruit. And I did have a taste. And it was good. The fruit was my redemption, and Violet my paradise. Now all I had to do was hold on to her.

I walked over to my computer and started to run stock screens. I was going to have to plan this carefully, so as not to garner too much attention. When the market opened in Tokyo, I wanted to be ready to execute the first wave of trades. I was going to need new accounts to start moving money into. And I was going to need a passport, credit cards and an entire background—fast.

Chapter Nine

Through the midst of acrid smoke I saw the boat approaching. I pulled the black leather sofa a bit closer to the bonfire, took a swig from the bottle of scotch I'd been nursing, and waited while I watched my mattress burn.

"The package came," Jean-Claude said. He tossed it onto the couch. It was about the size of a shoebox and it contained all the paperwork I was going to need to start my new life. "You okay?"

Laughter bubbled up inside me, unbidden, insane. In all my years of existence, I'd never been less okay.

"No," I admitted, offering him the bottle. "But I will be, eventually." My hand was shaking almost uncontrollably. The scotch helped with the tremors, but not enough. Not nearly enough.

"Don't mind if I do." Jean-Claude took the bottle and sat beside me. "That's the last of it?"

"Except for this sofa." My eyes filled with unexpected tears. "Nothing in the house smells like her anymore. Nothing. It's like she was never here."

He nodded. "The girls don't understand why I won't get rid of Millie's clothes. That's why. They smell like her."

It had been almost nine months since Jean-Claude had lost his wife. We'd barely spoken of it at the time. I hadn't understood. The truth was I still didn't. "How are you doing?"

His expression turned serious. "It's time, Byron." He finished off the bottle.

I knew what he meant. I didn't have to ask. For many centuries there had been a special relationship between the Renfields and the Rousseaus. Jean-Claude had been the tenth generation to serve our family, to guard our secret, to be our trusted lifeline to the human world. Unlike some of his predecessors, Jean-Claude had asked for little. The thing he'd wanted most, a cure for his wife, I couldn't provide. He wanted me to choose his successor, which of his daughters would take over in his stead.

"The cancer's back. I'm not gonna treat it," he said. "I started that first time for Millie. I kept at it for the sake of the girls. Now, I'm going to end it...for me."

"Do the girls know?" Jean-Claude was close to eighty. The *girls* were in their forties and fifties.

"No, and I'm not going to tell them. They wouldn't understand. I'm tired. I'm lonely. Without Millie..."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"You've done plenty over the years, for me, for my family."

“How long do you have?”

Jean-Claude shrugged. “Could be a few weeks, could be a couple months. It’s hard to know. I think you should choose Rachel. She’s—”

“No.”

“No?”

“I’m leaving, Jean-Claude.”

“But surely you’ll be back?”

I looked up at the house. I’d lived in others over the years, of course, but it was the only one I’d ever thought of as home. “I don’t know. It will be safer this way.”

His eyes widened. In all the years that we’d known one another, we’d never spoken of danger. I’d never placed him in any, until now.

“Safer?”

I opened another bottle of scotch and swallowed a few mouthfuls before passing it to Jean-Claude. “I’m not mooning over the loss of a lover,” I confessed.

“I didn’t think so. Your father tried to leave your mother many times during those early years, after the claim. He was never able to last more than a few days.” Jean-Claude pulled a mason jar from the depths of the coat he wore. “This should help.”

The jar contained a thick, black liquid. I unscrewed the cap, gave it a whiff and wrinkled my nose at the scent. It smelled of rich dark earth, hot wet stones, ash and blood. “What is it?”

“A tonic. I found the recipe for it in the diaries. It should help with the cleansing. If we don’t get your symptoms under control, they’ll take one look at you and know.”

I’d been summoned to BaMidbar. It was an unexpected invitation. I was in the habit of presenting my financial report annually; this request came four months early and from Malcolm, a Dominie that I neither liked, nor trusted. Under the best of conditions such a demand would have been cause for worry. Considering the current circumstances, it was cause for panic. Trouble was, I wouldn’t afford to panic.

I tilted the jar, held it up to the light, then attempted to swirl the thick sludge around.

“You’re stalling. It’s not a Bordeaux, Byron. Just drink up.”

“It looks awful.”

“So do you. It’s not going to kill you; only one thing can do that now.”

My stomach twisted and my gut wrenched. Whether from the thought of drinking the muck or the reminder that Violet was out there, somewhere, without me and vulnerable.

“Have you spoken to her?” he asked after a long pause.

I shook my head. “I don’t want to risk it. I don’t want to risk anything that could lead them to her, to tie us together. I’m not going to leave her, Jean-Claude. I’m going to start a life with her.”

“What’s your plan?”

“Your family will be taken care of.”

“That’s not what I’m asking. You know they won’t be content to let you just walk away. They’ll come after you.”

“I can take care of myself. But there’s a risk they might come after you.”

“I can’t tell them what I don’t know.”

I leaned my head back and looked up at the sky. It was going to be dark in a few hours. “You know about Violet. You know what she looks like.”

“Yeah. Where she’s from. What she does for a living. She was pretty chatty on the boat-ride over.”

“I’d feel better if you’d relocate.”

Jean-Claude smiled ruefully. “Soon enough I’ll be relocating for good. I want to spend my last days in my own bed.”

“I’ll stay with you, then. Until the time comes.”

It was an offer Jean-Claude hadn’t anticipated. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to.”

“You need to remember, weeks, months, those feel longer to Violet than they do to you.”

He was right, of course.

“You’re trying to absorb some of her pain through the claim, aren’t you?”

“Getting through the awakening with me at her side would have been a difficult task. This withdrawal? I can’t expect her to shoulder this alone. If it weren’t for me, she wouldn’t be in this predicament.”

“It was the same with your father. It’s written that over and over again he’d attempt to shield your mother, to absorb her pain. He’d do it until he feared going mad himself.”

“I am not my father. I will get this under control and I will get us through this.”

“What if they already know? What if BaMidbar is a trap?”

“The letter from Malcolm was written before Violet arrived, before I claimed her. It’s not a trap. I’m certain of it. Things aren’t in place yet. I need more time and I can’t get out of this without raising suspicion.”

Jean-Claude leaned forward. “What things?”

I looked down into the jar of dark sludge.

“You aren’t *just* going to walk away,” he said.

“I can’t. I need to make sure certain measures are in place so that everything runs smoothly, for a few months at least. By the time they discover my absence, I’ll be long gone. There are some instructions in my safe. They’ll find them. Recommendations they won’t trust and won’t follow.” I shook my head.

“You don’t want to give it up.”

“I don’t want to give *her* up.”

“And if something does go wrong at BaMidbar?”

“I’ve got insurance, leverage. If something happens to me trades and transfers will start to automatically execute. It will be a financial shit-storm the likes of which the world has never seen.”

“Sounds like you’ve got everything covered,” Jean-Claude said, raising the bottle of scotch.

“I better. The stakes are awfully high.” I lifted the mason jar into the air. “Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

I tilted the jar to my lips.

“Best drink it all down quickly,” Jean-Claude encouraged.

The goo tasted every bit as bad as it smelled. I closed my eyes, pinched my nose shut and forced it down.

“Do I even want to know what’s in that?” I handed the jar back to Jean-Claude.

“Poison. I really didn’t expect you to finish off the entire thing.”

I jumped to my feet and pulled Jean-Claude up with me. “Poison? Are you mad?” The front of his coat was fisted in my hand. His image swam before my eyes. I let go and stumbled back, toward the fire. Jean-Claude was there to catch me, to lead me back toward the couch.

“We need to get you up to the house.”

There were three Jean-Claude’s now. Each of them turned toward the path that led from the shore, where the fire burned, to my front door.

“I can’t carry you. I didn’t expect it to kick in so fast,” he said.

A spasm seized my body. I was burning, boiling, my stomach suddenly on fire. I started to pull at my clothes, claw at my belly. The world began to spin out of control. Jean-Claude wrapped one arm around my waist.

“Y-you betrayed me?” I managed to choke out, my mind reeling.

“Never.” He helped me to my feet. “Lean on me. We’ll take it slow, a few steps at a time.”

I took one step, maybe two, before falling onto my hands and knees. The sand felt cold and wet, but solid, steady. My stomach lurched and my bowels roiled. Then even the sand beneath me started to shift, break away. I was falling again, spinning. I opened my mouth to scream but only blood came out, buckets and buckets of blood.

“She’s inside you. It’s the only way.”

Tears started to flow from my eyes. I wiped my face on the arm of my shirt. Only they weren’t tears. It was more blood. My nose. My ears. My gut twisted again. Dear God.

“Come on. Up you go. As soon as the spasms stop, we’ll start your first transfusion. We’ve got to get you inside. They say each treatment gets harder, each time you’ll feel weaker.”

I pushed his hands away. “What do you mean, each time? How many times, Jean-Claude?” I began to heave once again. This time the blood was thick and black. It looked like a mixture of coffee grounds and the sludge I’d swallowed.

“Six times a day, three days. Can you stand?”

Six times a day, three days. Eighteen times. I placed one hand on the sofa, another on my knee and tried to stand. Even with Jean-Claude’s help, it was no use. I shook my head, then did the only thing I could do. I fell back down onto the sand and I began to crawl.

It was slow going. By the time we made it up to the house, night had fallen and I was completely and utterly exhausted. Jean-Claude cut off my soiled clothes, stripped them away and rolled me onto a blanket. Then he dragged me into the shower stall in the downstairs bathroom where I spent the next three days purging my body of Violet’s blood, while desperately clinging to her in my heart. When I woke after the third day, my body was weak, but my commitment was strong. I knew what I had to do and I was determined to do it because soon, very soon, I would once again hold her in my arms.

Chapter Ten

We were stuck in traffic, again. I was so close. It took all of my resolve to stay safely ensconced inside the black limo with its tinted windows. Even at the ripe age of three hundred seventy-nine, the sun would weaken me after several hours of exposure. And I wanted all of my strength tonight, because tonight I was going to be in Violet's arms, in Violet's bed.

It had only been eight weeks since I'd claimed her. I'd been en-route for four weeks. I'd hired over two dozen limousines, each from a different company, each with a different driver. I mostly traveled at night and I always paid cash. I'd switched names daily. This afternoon I'd woken up Byron Adams. And that was the name I was going to keep. I set out a bit earlier than usual today, wanting desperately for this journey to end and for my new life to begin.

"How much further?"

"We're just a couple blocks, sir."

A couple blocks and I'd be there.

I hadn't spoken with Violet since I put her on the boat with Rita. I'd asked Rita to disappear herself for a while after seeing Violet to safety and it seemed she'd done just that. Violet was safe, I *knew* it, I *felt* it. All I had to do was reach out, through the claim, to feel her emotions, to know her state of mind. Violet and I may not have spoken during the past few weeks, but we were in constant contact—our souls, our lives irrevocably intertwined.

The limousine came to a stop in front of what looked reminiscent of a doll house Fred had when we were young.

"Is this it?"

"This is the address you gave me, sir," the driver replied.

I looked out the tinted window, taking in the details of my new home. The outside of the cottage was painted a cheerful yellow, the trim was white and the front door was fittingly a bluish-purple. Boxes hung beneath the windows along the front of the house. They were filled with brightly colored pansies.

Someone passed in front of my window on a bicycle, momentarily obstructing my view. It was then I noticed a few passers-by had stopped. One of them was pointing at my limousine.

"Is there a garage?" I asked.

"It doesn't appear so. Shall I get the luggage?"

"Yes." I handed him an envelope of cash. "There's a little something extra in there for you."

“It’s been a pleasure, sir,” he said.

I closed my eyes and reached out to her. She wasn’t in the house. Of that, I was sure. My sense of her was definitely stronger than it had been in weeks, but not as strong as I would have liked, not as strong as it was when we were together. Wherever she was now, she was feeling annoyed as hell. I smiled in amusement. My Violet was a feisty one. I was dead certain she was giving some poor bastard a hard time about something.

I stepped out of the car and made my way swiftly to the door. The sun was low in the sky as I ran my hand across the top of the molding in search of a key. Upon locating it, I slipped it into the lock, turned it, and entered what was now my home.

I crossed the living room to gaze out onto the back deck. “You can just set my things inside. I’ll unpack later.” There was a grill on the patio, along with a table, some chairs and a hammock. Having been raised on an island, I’d watched many a sunset over the ocean, but this one seemed to hold an extra promise—the promise of a new beginning.

“Will there be anything else, sir?” the driver asked.

“No, that will be all.” I unlocked the French doors that led to the deck and deeply inhaled the cool air. Outside the tides were high and the sea was churning. The ocean breeze blew the curtains about in the small living space.

I heard the latch on the door click into place as the driver left, closing it behind him. I had thought my nerves would feel less frayed once I had arrived, but I was wrong. I surveyed the cozy sitting area. The overstuffed blue and white striped sofa and matching chair were arranged around a modest entertainment center. The furniture looked soft and inviting, a poignant contrast to my traditional black leather. I sat on the couch, sinking deeply into it. Then I toed off my shoes, put my feet up on the glass coffee table, closed my eyes, and let her scent wrap around me—just as it had the moment I first looked upon her.

With stark clarity I recalled how she’d rushed into my house to escape the rain, quickly closing the door. And how when she turned and smiled at me, my breath caught in my throat. My reverie was interrupted by the rumbling sound of the ice-maker as it unloaded a fresh batch of ice. I opened my eyes and turned my head toward the culprit. The white side by side was covered with magnets holding photos and slips of paper. I stood, then walked past the dining room table and into the small open kitchen.

I scanned the selection of takeout menus, dry-cleaning receipts and photos filled with people I didn’t know. A sense of self-doubt began to creep in as I gazed about the unfamiliar room. How was I going to fit in Violet’s world? I’d been so focused on my escape, on the journey. I hadn’t given any thought as to what would happen once I’d arrived. My mouth went dry. I swallowed down the lump in my throat and opened the door to the refrigerator to search for something to drink.

Sitting on the top shelf was a bottle of Tattinger’s with a post-it note that said, “Welcome Home”. The fact she was expecting me brought me comfort. Could she sense I was here, waiting for her, wanting her?

I picked up the chilled bottle, pulled off the note and stuck it into my breast pocket. We were bonded, I realized, and irrevocably so, but need and desire isn't the same as choosing to love. I knew that all too well. It was a lesson I remembered learning as a small boy from my parents.

That night the door to their bedroom was slightly ajar. Light spilled into the hallway, casting the walls in an eerie glow. I tiptoed across the gleaming hard wood, inching closer, until I could see my mother sitting at her vanity. She was brushing her hair.

"I hate it here," she said, laying her silver-backed brush down.

My father responded from somewhere deep within the recesses of the room. "You'll get used to it."

My mother stood and turned, presumably, to face him. "I don't want to get used to it. I want to go back to London."

"You want to go back to your lover. I'm enough of an embarrassment to my brother. You think he would tolerate my being made a cuckold? You think I will? It's my bed you belong in, Lillian. You're mine. Understand?"

My mother's hand flew up to cover her mouth and her cheeks flushed crimson. "Astor, I..."

My father suddenly came into view. He walked swiftly over to my mother, grabbing her about the shoulders. "I don't want to speak of this again. This is a chance for us, Lillian, a chance to start over. We've both made mistakes. I know I've been distant and resentful. I know I drink too much. I know I've neglected you."

"Are you saying things will be different?" She sounded hopeful.

My father released her and turned away. I stepped back deeper into the hallway, into the cover of darkness. The pained expression I'd witnessed on my father's face forever etched into my mind.

"I need you, Lillian," I heard him admit, quietly. "God, help me, but I do."

"Need." My mother nodded, tiredly. "Do you even love me? Have you ever loved me, Astor?"

He spun back to face her. "I've given you everything! Everything!"

"Everything but that, the one thing I truly want from you!" she yelled, tears of frustration spilling from her eyes.

My father forcefully threw his glass at the wall. It exploded, sending shards of crystal everywhere.

"Can't you just admit it? This, what we have, it's not some prison sentence, Astor. We're not together because I seduced you. We're not together because of some thrall or magics!"

"Why are we? Tell me!" he shouted.

"Because I was fool enough to choose to love you! Why can't you admit you love me?" she sobbed.

I watched as my father pulled her into his embrace and soothed her, lacing one hand into her long mane of dark hair and making sweeping circles on her back with the other.

"Shh," he whispered. "It's going to be all right. I know what you need, Lillian."

"Oh, Astor," she moaned, melting into him.

He swept her hair aside, then leaned down and began to nuzzle her neck, burying his face in the crook of her shoulder as he reached up to palm one of her breasts through her long cotton gown.

After a moment or two, my mother's knees buckled and my father lifted her, still trembling, into his arms. She reached up, languidly, and with her thumb swiped the remnants of her blood that clung to his lower lip.

"Thank you," she whispered, offering her thumb to him.

My father nodded and carried her out of view, toward their bed.

"Sleep now, Lillian. You need to rest."

The lights went out, shrouding the room within and the hall in which I was standing in complete darkness. Frozen in place, I waited for them to fall asleep. My mother, sated, drifted off first. My father followed her into slumber soon thereafter, but not before murmuring his greatest fear into the night, a fear he'd managed to somehow pass on to me.

"You don't love me," he whispered. "You love what I do to you."

I shook off the memory, popped the cork on the bottle, and searched through the cabinets until I found the proper glass. Then I served myself some champagne and proposed a toast. "To learning from the sins of our fathers."

After taking a sip, I set the glass down on the counter. I was intent on exploring my surroundings. It didn't take me long to familiarize myself with the entire cottage. There were only two other rooms, a small bathroom with a tub that was decidedly not big enough for two and a modest-sized bedroom. The bed itself was adorned with pillows galore and a floral print duvet. The windows were covered in white lace, and the walls were a pale shade of pink. I looked about and tried not to panic.

I retraced my steps to confirm that, indeed, this was it. And it was. I wondered, briefly, if Violet would notice if I made a few changes. Like maybe swapping the bedding for something a bit more masculine or adding a second story.

I moved my luggage to the bedroom, setting it on the floor next to what appeared to be Violet's reading chair. There were at least a half-a-dozen books on the nearby table about vampires. I smiled. The thought that she was trying to learn about me warmed my heart. I was about to sit and read some completely misguided vampire folklore when the sound of an approaching car drew my attention. Hastily, I made my way down the hall toward the front door. Even before I picked up the thread of their conversation, I felt her. It was Violet. She'd come home.

“Violet, look, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up. I’m worried about you. You still need to eat. Let’s order a pizza. We can watch a movie or something.”

“No!” she said, definitively. I heard the slam of the car door. “You said this was business. That’s why I agreed. We were supposed to be going to your office to go over my testimony, not going to your apartment for a cozy dinner.”

“You used to like cozy dinners in my apartment,” he said suggestively.

“I’ve moved on, Michael. You should, too.”

“That’s just it, you haven’t. I’d feel better if you had. This doesn’t make sense. You’re not dating. You come home after work, and you sit here.”

“Have you been watching me?”

A low rumble began to sound in my chest.

“Byron?” Violet whispered.

My heart pounded in anticipation as I waited for the doorknob to turn.

“Byron?” she said again, only this time it was louder.

In the next instant my arms were filled with Violet, her mouth covering mine in a searing kiss. I stepped back quickly and turned, taking her with me around the corner, into the hallway and away from prying eyes.

“You’ve come,” she gasped. I pushed her up against the wall. I was a bit rougher than I’d intended to be, but she didn’t seem to notice or mind. Perhaps she’d grown stronger. Perhaps her need for me, like mine for her, overpowered everything else, obliterating all other thought.

She threaded her fingers through my hair and pulled back from the kiss. I gazed upon her for the briefest of moments, searching her eyes. Then I hungrily began my worship of her, my mouth leaving a trail of kisses across her jaw, my tongue licking a path down her neck, searching for my mark.

I vaguely registered that Violet was grabbing at my shirt, pulling it out of my jeans and fumbling with the buttons. “Not yet, baby,” I murmured. “But, if you keep this up, I’ll be coming any minute now.”

I palmed her breast with my right hand while reaching for the edge of her skirt with my left. I felt the silk of her stockings. Her thigh quivered under my touch. I abandoned her breast long enough to tear her lace underwear to shreds.

Violet’s hands were on my belt, pulling down my zipper. It was the best unzipping of my life, ending blissfully as my fully erect cock, heavy with desire, spilled out into my mate’s waiting hands.

“I need you, Byron. Please,” she begged.

And I understood, because I needed her, too. God, how I needed her. I placed my hands under the firm globes of her ass and lifted her, sliding her up the length of the wall. Violet wound her legs around me, pulling me in closer, engulfing me, surrounding me. With one sure thrust I buried myself to the hilt inside her willing pussy.

Then it was as if time stood still. It was just Violet and me and the sounds of our breathing. All movement stopped. I gazed into her eyes and swallowed, my own misting with tears, reflecting the emotion I saw in hers. A smile spread across her beautiful face and I began to move once again. A steady pace building to a slow burn. Our breathing quieted, the desperate pants slowing. It felt so good to be inside her again at last, so right to be making love to her. Overwhelmed with emotion, I leaned in, resting my forehead against hers.

“I love you,” I whispered, as I made love to her slowly, deliberately, savoring the smell, the feel and desperately wanting just a little taste.

“I love you, too. Don’t stop, Ren. Don’t ever stop.”

“Never.” I sucked on her neck, on my mark, careful not to break the skin.

Violet’s orgasm shattered through her. She grabbed the back of my head, fisting my hair in her hand. “Oh, yes!” she shouted.

Tremors wracked her body. I spilled inside her, coating her walls with my come. It was every bit as glorious as I had been imagining it would be, perhaps even more so.

Chapter Eleven

We were being watched, and I knew it. As we climaxed, the man she had called Michael, the one who had brought her to his apartment for a cozy little supper, was peering around the corner, watching us.

He'd moved back toward the entry now, but I could still smell his arousal, hear his heart thudding. *Let him see what he's missing*, I thought, *what he would never have*. I was more amused than threatened. Violet was mine and I intended to reclaim her as soon as possible and hold onto her until I turned to dust. Until I turned to dust and joined her in death.

I lowered her to the floor and she looked at me with questioning eyes. "Why didn't you bi—"

I placed my finger across her lips to silence her. "Later. Some things are too intimate to share." I tilted my head toward the entry. "A bath awaits you. I'll bring you some champagne after I show out your guest."

Violet blushed crimson. She began to smooth down her skirt. "Do you think he heard?" she asked quietly.

"Do you want to know the truth?"

"God, no. Lie to me."

"You were as quiet as a mouse, baby." I turned her toward the bathroom and gave her a playful swat on the ass. "I'm sure he had no idea what we were up to."

I tucked myself back into my jeans, straightened my clothes, then went to face Michael. I ran my right hand through my hair as I rounded the corner, my left stuffed securely in my pocket.

"Sorry about that, Michael," I offered by way of an apology. "It's been a few months since I've seen my lady. I appreciate you bringing her home safe and sound."

Michael's hair was blond, his eyes bright blue, his nose a bit crooked and his jaw square. He was meticulously dressed in a navy suit, cobalt blue shirt and a yellow and blue striped tie. Strangely enough, I seemed to have done something to either offend or annoy him.

"Your lady? I'd like to see Violet and make sure she's all right."

"All right?" I glanced back over my shoulder. "She looked more than all right to me just now. How'd she look to you?"

Okay, maybe that was uncalled for, but he was starting to piss me off.

Michael swallowed.

I extended my hand in a gesture of peace. "Byron Adams."

He stared at me, his face impassive, refusing to accept my handshake. For Violet's sake I was determined to try.

"Look," I began, walking over to the kitchen and pouring Violet a glass of champagne. "I can imagine how you feel. Violet's exquisite. It must be devastating to lose something so precious. And I'd wager you aren't a man who's accustomed to losing, are you?"

"Who says I've lost? Just because you're here now doesn't mean you're going to last."

I smiled at him. "Time will tell. Now, if you'll excuse me."

He turned to walk out the door. After crossing the threshold he paused. "A guy like you won't hold her interest for long."

"A guy like me?"

"Where do you live, Byron? What do you do? Let me guess." He nodded toward my guitar, the one that the driver had left propped up in the corner. "Musician?"

I looked down at the rumpled T-shirt and faded blue jeans I was wearing. The jeans were my favorite. They were well worn with rips in both knees. The prick was clearly judging me.

"It's of no concern to you. Violet is of no concern to you. It would be easier for you if you'd accept that and move on."

"Or else?" he asked, puffing up. He started to remind me of a strange-looking lizard I'd seen in a National Geographic episode not long ago.

I shrugged, then took a step closer. We were just inches from one another, him on one side of the threshold, me on the other. In the big scheme of things, whether he realized it or not, he was of little consequence. "Make it hard on yourself. It really doesn't matter to me."

"Are you threatening me?" He squared his shoulders and looked me right in the eye. He was at least four inches taller and forty pounds heavier than I was. He was trying to bait me.

I had no intention of getting into a fight with Michael. Not because I would lose. I wouldn't. With my strength I could easily snap him in two without breaking a sweat. The simple truth was that I wanted him out of there so I could return to Violet.

"No." I took a step back. "But make no mistake, I intend to protect what's mine."

"Yours? Look, Byron," he began, using an especially derisive tone, one I was quite certain he reserved only for those he held in contempt. "Violet's a strong and independent woman, she doesn't need protection. In fact, she abhors that archaic caveman routine. She finds it demeaning."

His statement immediately called to mind that fateful moment back on the island. The moment I claimed her in the cave close to the shore, the moment in which Violet had become my world. I'd never felt so much passion, so much raw desire. The mere thought of it had me fully aroused again.

"Thanks for the tip," I managed to say, suppressing the need to adjust myself, and the desire to slam the door in his face.

“Let Violet know I’m looking forward to tomorrow night. I’ll see her around eight o’clock.”

Suppression is bad, I decided. It leads to crankiness. Thanks to Michael, my good mood was rapidly fading. I’d had enough of him and I had better things to do. So, with a smile, I kicked the door shut. Then I headed for the bedroom to retrieve the little blue box I’d picked up in Los Angeles.

Violet was stretched out in the tub, surrounded by bubbles, a light layer of perspiration making her almost-translucent skin glisten.

“I can’t believe you’re here.”

I knelt next to the tub and handed her the glass.

“And you showed great restraint with Michael,” she added. “Thank you for not killing him.”

“I think I deserve a reward, don’t you? A blowjob will do nicely.”

Violet blushed.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to embarrass you. I’m used to asking for what I want.” I looked pointedly at the definitive bulge in my jeans. “We missed you...a lot.”

“I’m sure Rita is always *very* accommodating.” She took a sip of her champagne. “Have you seen her lately?”

I could feel her jealousy. She had nothing to be jealous of.

“No.” I wanted to set her mind at ease. “And, if I had, it wouldn’t be to have sex with her. You’ve no need to envy Rita. It’s you I love, you I’ve come here to create a life with. You’re my mate. Not Rita.”

“It’s just that...”

“You’re worried I’ll tire of you, be disappointed, that I’ll expect more from you than you’re comfortable with or are able to give.”

She let her head fall against the pillow that was fastened to the back of the tub. “I don’t know whether to be grateful you can read me so clearly or if it’s a curse.”

“We’ll find our way. We’ll find it together.”

“I’m so glad that you’re here.”

“Me, too.”

“I’m not used to feeling...”

“Vulnerable? Dependent?”

“Yes.”

“Me neither, it’s a bit daunting. This is all new for me. I very much want to do it right.”

I held the box out and watched as her eyes opened in surprise and a smile lit up her face.

“Is that for me?”

“Yup.”

“It’s from Tiffany’s,” she said reverently, reaching for the box.

I was suddenly nervous. “If you don’t like it, we can exchange it.”

Violet opened the box. “Ren!”

“You’ve been sporting my mark, the symbol you’re my mate for two months. It occurred to me that—”

“Are you asking me to marry you?” Violet pulled two rings from the box, one a platinum set three-carat round solitaire, the other a matching band.

I felt awkward and ill-prepared. It hadn’t occurred to me she might not have considered us already married.

“You already think of us as married, don’t you?”

“I’m afraid I may have jumped the gun. I didn’t think to ask. It didn’t even occur to me you’d want the ceremony in a church, the white dress, the traditional honeymoon. I’m an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot. You knew about Tiffany’s. An idiot would have never thought to go to Tiffany’s.”

She slipped the rings onto her fingers and then held her hand out and admired them.

“Can you even go in a church?” she asked.

“You mean *without* going poof?”

Her head shot up, alarm in her eyes.

“I’m kidding,” I assured her. “Yes, I can go in a church. Impervious. Remember? I’m only vulnerable—”

“Through me.”

I nodded. “Legally we’re already married. It happened in Vegas...on paper, anyways. I realize now I should have waited. We could get divorced, do it all again. Or, we could just let it stand and—”

“How on earth did you get married without me?”

I stood up and started to remove my shoes and socks. “The Elvis impersonator was very accommodating once he saw the great big pile of cash.”

“The Elvis impersonator?”

“I had a choice between Elvis, The Captain and Tennille or Madonna. I went with Elvis. He sang *Love Me Tender*; I told him it was your favorite.”

Violet reached for a razor and lifted her right leg out of the water. “And the Captain and Tennille would have sung?”

“Something about a rat. That didn’t seem appropriate.”

Laughter bubbled out of her. “Oh, Byron! Surely you’re making that up!”

I sat on the edge of the tub, took the razor from her, and ran my hand up and down her already smooth leg. It felt like silk. “I said my vows to you in the Valley of Fire. It was sunset. The light was low in the sky and reflecting off the desert rock. Your hair, your skin, everything about you was gloriously vibrant.”

Violet leaned back, submerging her shoulders deep in the water and releasing a sigh. “It sounds lovely.”

“I’d never been so happy,” I whispered, cautiously lifting my eyes to meet hers. “We can go back there, together.”

“Tell me about the honeymoon?”

“We flew out to a little cabin on the West Rim of the Grand Canyon. It was stocked with food and wine, down comforters, a fireplace, very secluded and private. But, I’m afraid we didn’t get to see too much of the outdoors, and it was only for a couple days.”

“I’ve always wanted to see the Grand Canyon,” she said, wistfully.

“I’d remembered that from your letters, that’s why I chose it.”

“What letters?”

“The ones you’d written over the years.”

Violet looked at me, realization dawning.

“You read the letters I’d written to Grace?” she asked, sitting up straight in the bath.

The warm water cascaded over her torso, patches of suds clinging to her breasts and stomach.

“Yeah,” I admitted, wondering if I should feel guilty. “After Fred and Grace died, I found a box of them, all but the last. I never did find the one saying you’d be arriving. I read the others though, every one. And I fell in love with you.”

“Is that true?” she asked quietly. “Or is that part of the story?”

“True. I’d been thinking about you, dreaming about you, long before you showed up on my doorstep.”

“What are we going to tell people, Ren? That we met for the first time at Aunt Grace’s funeral after writing to one another for years?”

“Falling in love bit by bit. Both afraid to admit it, thinking it was crazy.”

I put the razor down and then leaned forward, winding my finger around one of the damp tendrils of hair that had escaped its clasp and now framed her face. “I’m hungry for you, Violet,” I told her unabashedly, my voice sounding rough with passion.

My craving for her was becoming overpowering. I ached inside from desire. I could sense the rumble coming, my eyes changing, my fangs elongating. I stood and quickly walked out of the room. Everything was so intense. It was as if an iron fist had a hold of my heart, squeezing it. I leaned against the wall in the hallway. I was rock-hard with want. I tried to breathe and calm myself, but I couldn’t. I slumped to the floor, shamed, in defeat.

“Ren?”

“Sorry.” I turned away. “I’ll get better at controlling it.”

“Don’t apologize, please. This is who you are.”

“But, it’s *not* who you are.”

She walked up to me in all of her naked glory. “It is now.” Violet rested one hand on top of my head and smiled down at me. “I’m not running away. I’m right here, Ren.”

I reached for her hips. “Closer,” I demanded, pulling her toward me, forcefully, so that she straddled my thighs, standing above me. She lurched forward, extending her arms and bracing herself against the wall above my head.

“Is this where you want me?”

“Not quite,” I told her, lifting one leg over my shoulder. “Hold on, baby. I have to taste you.”

“Here?” She seductively traced a small circular pattern on her inner thigh.

I wanted her blood, yes, and I wanted to encourage her to explore her power over me. But what I most wanted to do was drown myself in the sweet pleasure of her pussy. I breathed deeply, inhaling her essence.

“Fuck!” I moaned. “This is going to be so good.” I flattened my tongue and took that first slow lap.

Violet gasped. She reached down with one hand and fisted it in the back of my shirt. “Christ!”

With the tip of my tongue I teased her, exploring inside her luscious lips. They were ripe and ready and dripping with need. Her scent was building, her arousal climbing, and she was taking me right along with her. Molten heat collected deep in my stomach and then spread throughout my body. Violet was keening, begging. She was bucking against my mouth, holding my head to her pussy.

Slipping two fingers inside her, I pulled back. “I don’t want to nick you,” I hissed through my fangs, my breaths coming hard. “Patience.”

“I don’t think I can hold on much longer,” she whimpered.

I still held one leg on my shoulder. Her other leg was trembling, her breathing ragged.

“Let yourself fall, baby. I’m here to catch you. I’ll *always* be here to catch you. Let go.”

No sooner were the words out of my mouth did she do just that. The slight shift in her stance telegraphed her intent. Within the blink of an eye I had her cradled in my arms.

“Bed or floor?”

“Bed,” she sighed, her lips brushing against the side of my neck. “Make love to me, Ren. I want to feel you inside me. I want it to be like it was the first time.”

I stood, walked the short distance to what was about to become our bed and set her next to it. I made quick order of the pile of fanciful pillows, the flowered duvet cover and all of the bed linens save the bottom sheet. “You want me to bite you?”

“Yes,” she replied, stroking my erection through my jeans. She was sitting on the edge of the bed.

“What if we mess up these nice clean sheets?” I teased.

Violet unfastened my button and pulled down the zipper, exposing my cock. She wrapped her delicate hand around it and smiled before dragging her hot wet tongue along the veined underside. When she reached the head there was a drop of pre-come glistening on the tip. She looked up at me, grinned, then enthusiastically scooped it up. “Hmm,” she moaned.

I'd fantasized about this, longed for it.

"Is this what you had in mind earlier?" she asked.

I quickly pulled my shirt over my head. "I'd say you're off to a very good start," I told her, stepping out of my jeans. "How are you at the finish?"

Violet took my challenge, opening wide and taking me deep into her succulent mouth.

A feral growl ripped from my chest. I pushed her off me, pinning her body to the bed and quickly covering it with mine.

She spread her legs and my hips descended, my cock finding its way to her entrance.

"Are you ready for me?" I asked, wanting permission.

She looked into my still-red eyes, her gaze open and accepting. Then she wrapped her legs around my hips and her arms around my neck.

"Welcome home," she murmured quietly as I slid both fangs and cock inside her.

Enraptured, lost in the urgency of desire and driving onward toward the edge, closer and closer still, I thrust my cock to Violet's clenching pussy. She raked her nails down the length of my back, screaming my name, shouting it out into the darkness as she came, her body surrounding me, taking me to that place where only she could, in the way only she could. My seed spilled inside her, coating her womb.

I took one final pull of Violet's life force into my body as she milked the last of mine into hers. Together, we'd renewed our claim and our commitment. I released the hold I had on my mark and crushed my bloodstained lips to hers, swallowing the last remnants of the sounds of her passion.

The kiss turned slow and sweet and sensual. I was filled with a sense of completion, a sense of oneness like I had never experienced before. It transcended thought and expression. But I felt it. And Violet felt it, too. I pulled back from her and instinctually leaned down to lick at the twin puncture wounds of my mark. Violet shivered.

"Cold?"

"No." She caressed the side of my face. "Hold me?"

I reached for the covers and pulled them over us. "Of course." I curled my body around hers, drawing her in close, her back to my chest.

Violet sighed.

"We fit well together," I said, wrapping my arm around her and cupping her breast in the palm of my hand.

"Good thing. We're going to be sleeping in the same bed for a really long time."

I smiled at the thought. "Yeah."

She turned around to face me. "That idea appeals to you, does it?"

"Yes." I ran my hand over the curve of her side and settled it on her hip. "I know it's not supposed to, but it does. I'm not like my father. I have no intention of spending the next few centuries moaning about

what I've lost. I want to spend them celebrating what I've gained. I'm happy. I want you to be happy. I want to build a life with you. There will be complications, I know, but—"

"Can we do that? Is it safe now? Rita, she said... But somehow I knew, I'd hoped..."

"I've spent the last couple months orchestrating my disappearance. How long it will take them to notice, I don't know. I suspect when they do, they will try to find me. They won't be able to. I was careful. There's not a trace of you in the house or on the island, nothing to tie us together."

"There's Jean-Claude, the man with the boat. The one who brought me there."

"Jean-Claude's dead."

She quickly pulled back from me.

"You didn't..."

"I'm not a murderer. Jean-Claude was my friend, like his father before him and his father before him. It was cancer; he'd been ill for a long time. His wife passed on a few months prior, heart attack. He lost the will to fight after that. Rita, you don't have to worry about. She's loyal to me. She did as I asked, right? She helped you through?"

Violet broke off eye contact with me. "Yes," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "She helped me through."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Violet shook her head and I was content to leave it at that, for the time being.

"How was it for you?" she asked.

"Painful. I don't just mean physically. I mean emotionally, spiritually. But you know that, you must have felt it through the claim."

"I've been sensing things. I thought, maybe it was my imagination. When we were together, and now, it's so strong, so clear. But it was more of a vague impression. I wasn't certain of it. I haven't been certain of much of anything."

I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling. I felt like I was searching for the answer to a question, only I didn't quite know what the question was.

"What is it?"

I sighed. "I don't know. For the past couple months all I've focused on is this, getting here."

"Now you're not sure what comes next?" she asked, sitting up, the sheet pooling around her waist.

"I say I come next," I told her, shaking off my mood and reaching up to play with her tits. "I want to come all over these."

Violet gasped, and to my disappointment she batted away my hand.

"Byron Renfield! You're insatiable and...and naughty!"

I tried to look contrite. "Poor you."

"You're not the least bit sorry."

“No, I’m not. It’s not Renfield anymore, by the way. It’s Adams now. We’re Byron and Violet Adams.”

“Adams? You could have gone with Byron Deeds.”

“I’m not that progressive. Hey, let’s get dressed and go get something to eat. It seems I drove by a couple of restaurants within a few blocks of here.”

“You drove?”

I climbed out of bed and gathered my clothes on the way to the bathroom.

“What, me?” I shouted back as I started the shower. “No way, I hired a driver. I have a driver’s license, though.”

“Do you know *how* to drive?” She stepped into the shower before I could.

“No fair, you already bathed. I want the hot water.” I pointed toward the rear of the tub.

She smiled saucily at me and turned into the spray, the vision of the water cascading over her breasts once again fueling my arousal.

“How *hard* can it be?” I asked her as I stepped closer, pulling on the length of my cock and teasing her by rubbing it in the cleft of her ass.

Violet spun around, her eyes wide with surprise, her skin flush from the heat of the water. I reached down, taking her chin in my hand and bending to meet her lips. I kissed them softly. “Well?”

“I’ve never... I’m not sure...”

I reached around her and began to knead the firm globes of her delicious ass, the thought of someday taking it doing nothing to calm my desire. I lifted Violet into the air and turned, switching our places.

“I was talking about driving, you naughty girl.” I poured some of the clove bath gel into my hands and began rubbing it across my chest and over my biceps.

“Really?”

“Scout’s Honor.”

“Were you ever a Boy Scout?”

“No.”

“Doesn’t count then.”

Chapter Twelve

“So, Mrs. Adams, did you get enough to eat?” We stepped off the curb in front of The Golden Dragon.

“Yup!” Violet slipped her hand inside mine as we crossed the street. “Let’s stop at the store and pick up a few things.”

“Okay. And, just so you know, that was not Chinese food we ate. I’ve been to China. Granted, it was a long time ago, but—”

“Ren, China is now dotted with McDonalds and KFC restaurants.”

“Those aren’t restaurants,” I told her. “You wait, tomorrow night I’ll make you some real Chinese food.”

Violet laughed. “I’m going to have to take a rain check. I have to go to a party tomorrow night.”

A sinking feeling crept into my stomach, making my mediocre meal suddenly completely dissatisfying. She obviously sensed my disappointment.

“I should say *we* have a party to go to tomorrow night. It’s a benefit thing for the hospital where I work. You’re looking at the new Chief of Psychiatry at Mercy!”

“A party, huh?”

Violet stopped at the edge of the parking lot to the grocery store and wrapped her arms around my waist. “It’ll give me a chance to show off my husband. We can drink champagne, mingle a bit, dance a little. Do you dance?”

“I love the minuet!” I said with mock enthusiasm.

“You *are* kidding, right?”

“Yes. I loathed the minuet. I’m more at home wearing tight white polyester and dancing under a strobe light.”

Violet stepped out of my embrace and started across the parking lot. “If you don’t want to go, just say so.”

“Who said I don’t want to go?”

She glanced back over her shoulder and rolled her eyes. “Please! Don’t bullshit me.”

“Okay,” I admitted, catching up to her. “I don’t want to go.”

“That’s fine.”

“But you’re going to go.”

“Yup.”

“I’m going,” I said, emphatically.

She paused at the door of the grocery store. “Why?”

“Think I’m an idiot? Think I’m going to let some other guy get to dance with you? No way!” I opened the door for her and followed her inside. “Wow!”

“What?”

I looked around. There was an abundance of food like I’d never seen before. Aisles stretched before me, rows upon rows. For many years Jean-Claude had brought me what I’d needed, what I’d ordered. I’d been to open-air markets, farmers markets, even commercial stores. But that was forty years ago, back in the 50’s. The stores then were nothing like this.

“There’s so much of everything. What are we here for?”

“Condoms and two other things. There are certain things you can’t walk into a grocery store and buy alone. Condoms, tampons, vaginal cream...”

Suddenly my heart was racing and I was breaking into a cold sweat. I reached for Violet’s elbow and pulled her aside. “I thought you had that taken care of? Back in the cave when we first—”

“I did,” she said. “Until someone took a little nibble of me. I started getting headaches. Bad headaches. Rita said it was probably the claim messing with my hormones. I can’t tolerate routine birth control medications anymore. There’s a pill I can take tonight to cover us for earlier, but we need a good long-term alternative.”

“I don’t think I’m going to like this alternative,” I whispered.

“You have another suggestion?”

I was out of my element. I wasn’t even sure what the options were. “Why can’t you keep taking the pill you’re going to take tonight?”

“Even that pill uses hormones. The hormones seem to be making me sick, Byron.”

“Oh. Then why take the pill tonight?”

“So I don’t get pregnant? We’re not ready for that, are we?”

The harsh fluorescent lights shined down on me. I felt foolish and inadequate. I glanced around, suddenly aware there were people walking past us and this was neither the time nor the place for this discussion.

“You’re embarrassed?” she asked, sounding amused. “You don’t mind talking about sex, but talking about the possibility of me being pregnant...”

I didn’t hear the rest of what she said. I was starting to feel dizzy. My mind was racing. I was panicking, pure and simple. Violet didn’t appreciate the possible consequences, the possible risks.

She squeezed my hand. “Look, I’ll go pick up some condoms so we’ll have them. Then, we’ll go home and review the alternatives. We’ll make these decisions together. How’s that?”

I nodded. "Together sounds good."

Violet kissed me soundly on the lips. "Pick up two other things," she whispered before walking away.

I turned around and looked down the wide aisle filled with fruits and vegetables. After a moment or two of contemplation I walked over to a rather sizable bin and picked up a shiny red apple. It almost appeared plastic. I picked up a second one and began to inspect them both.

"You're like Daddy," I heard a voice say, quietly. "Only...more."

I turned to look at her, a dark-haired moppet with olive skin and chocolate brown eyes. Her clothing was modest, well-worn but clean. She was slight in stature, coming only to my mid-thigh.

"Hannah? There you are!"

The young blonde woman couldn't have been more than nineteen or twenty. She was dressed in a pair of overalls that seemed to accentuate her belly, which was swollen with child. Leaning down, the young mother whispered to the little girl, "How many times do I need to tell you that it's not safe to run off?"

"Isabelle! Get Hannah and come here!"

I looked up. At the end of the tiled aisle stood an immortal. His skin was olive, like the girl's, his eyes dark. I could smell his fear.

The woman reached for the child's hand and they slowly stepped away from me, inching closer toward the young vampire. He would be no match for me. I knew it and he knew it. He was unskilled.

"You have no need to fear me," I said simply.

He hesitated, uncertain. "I'll meet you in the car," he said to the woman.

"I'm not leaving you," she replied, glancing back and forth between the boy and myself.

"We have important obligations." He rested one hand atop Hannah's head and the other on the woman's burgeoning stomach.

I reached out through the cosmic thread that connects us all, letting him feel my compassion, commanding that he open to me. And he did. He turned toward me slowly. Although he tried to resist, his effort came too late and he was far too weak.

I walked up to him. "She is yours?" I nodded toward the child.

"Y...yes, Father," he replied, sweat beading on his brow.

"I'm no one's father," I told him, irrationally annoyed by the title that was customarily used to convey respect to elders. I nodded to the woman's protruding belly. "This one, too, I suppose?"

He stood tall and looked me right in the eye. His countenance filled with proud defiance. "Yes."

"Daddy?" Hannah tugged at the leg of her father's pants.

"It's fine," he said, offering his family assurance before reaching for the young woman's hand.

"Isabelle, what he said is true. He means us no harm."

I smiled at him and allowed the connection to disintegrate. For no good reason I seemed to find pleasure in the fact he was able to open himself to my message.

“It appears you have potential, Christian. You learn quickly. There are things I’d like to teach you.”

“No thanks, Yoda. I go by Chris, and until now I’ve made it fine on my own. We just want to be left alone. Now, if you don’t mind, I have to get to work.”

He may have been acting confidently on the outside, but he knew good and well I had the upper hand and it bothered him greatly. His pride was horribly wounded and underneath, there was something else. Terror. Terror like I’d never experienced. He was afraid of discovery, afraid for his woman and his child.

I nodded my consent and watched as he scooped up his daughter.

Isabelle kissed him on the cheek. “I’ll get the milk and be right out,” she said before walking away and disappearing around the corner.

Chris hesitated. For a second I thought he was going to say something, but the moment passed and I was left alone with my thoughts.

Then why take the pill tonight?

So I don’t get pregnant.

Pregnant. The word rumbled around in my head.

Violet and I hadn’t talked about children, about the possibilities, about the dangers.

“You said there are things you can teach him. What can you teach him?”

I looked up to find Isabelle standing in front of me again.

“Huh?”

“I don’t have much time. What can you teach him?”

I hesitated before reaching out and lifting her hair away from her neck.

“He hasn’t. He can’t.”

“Can’t?” I’d never heard of that before, a vampire who couldn’t bite.

“There are circumstances. He can’t risk taking blood again, not even mine. What does it matter anyway, Mr.—”

“Adams. He’s lacking even the most basic of skills. It’s almost as if his natural abilities were snuffed out. Your child, Hannah, detected me long before he did.”

“He’s not eating and he rarely sleeps now. He’ll go a week, sometimes more. The longer I’ve been with him, the worse it gets. I think he needs help, but I don’t know who to ask, what to do. I don’t know any other—”

“He’s afraid.”

She laughed. “Chris? No. Chris isn’t afraid of anything.”

I looked at her steadily, my gaze unwavering. “He’s afraid of losing you. He’s afraid of losing his children.”

“He works at the docks off Quivira Road. He’s there every night, cleaning the boats.”

I nodded. “I’ll find him. It’ll be a few days.”

“You won’t hurt him?”

“If hurting him was what I wanted to do I could do it now by taking you.”

Isabelle’s pulse quickened and she took a step back, afraid.

“Ren?”

I reached my hand out behind me. As Violet’s hand slipped into mine, I winked conspiringly at Isabelle.

“But I already have my own ball and chain. And this one here is all I can handle. Violet, this is Isabelle. Isabelle, this is my mate, Violet.”

Without hesitation Violet extended her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Isabelle accepted it. “I have to go. Is there a way I can get a hold of you? I have some questions.”

I glanced at Violet.

She reached into her purse and pulled out a business card. “Here’s my office number. After hours my service can always track me down.”

Isabelle quickly pocketed the card and walked away. Pausing at the end of the aisle just long enough to glance back, she mouthed the words “thank you”.

Violet was envious of Isabelle. I could feel it as clearly as I could feel her love for me. The reason for it seemed obvious. “You want children.”

“And you clearly don’t. So...” She lifted the box of condoms. “Grab some strawberries. We’ll pick up another bottle of champagne.”

“It’s not so much that I don’t want them. It’s complicated.”

“There are complicating factors, I’ll give you that. But if you take all of them away, put them aside, you’re left with what you want, what you *really* want.”

“I love you, Violet,” I told her over the large pyramid of strawberry containers.

“I know that. And you’ll come with me to the party tomorrow night?”

“It would be my pleasure.” I reached for her hand, the one that held the small box of condoms, and kissed it. Then I turned it over and looked at the box. “Sure you’ve got enough there? I don’t want to have to run back here tonight.”

“They come twelve to a box, Byron.”

“Best go get another box, then,” I said, taking the one from her hand. “I’ll meet you at the checkout. Hurry.”

Chapter Thirteen

I rinsed the last remnants of shaving cream off my face and cleared a spot on the mirror so I could examine my reflection. My hair was still a tad too long in the back for my taste, but I simply hadn't had the time to remedy that.

It had been an interesting day. Violet had work to do at the hospital. We'd slept until ten o'clock, had a light breakfast, then I kissed her goodbye and watched her drive away. It was clear and warm outside, and the waves were high on the ocean. For a while I sat, gazing out at the surfers who dotted the landscape. They bobbed up and down on the water, waiting for just the right wave while I contemplated how I was going to spend the afternoon.

It didn't take me long to decide on a course of action, and once decided, even less to effectively locate a car service in the phone book. I told them to send their best driver. Romeo arrived within thirty minutes in a hideously bright yellow four-door American monstrosity that was blaring reggae. His skin was as black as coal and he sported long dreadlocks that hung well past his shoulders.

"This your car?" I settled into the back seat and fastened my seatbelt.

"Yuh."

"You're a good driver?"

"Yuh, I'm a good driver. Where you want to go, man?"

"You want to drive for me?"

"I'm here, ain't I?"

"Mercedes dealership. First we're going to pick up something for you to drive that's not so bright."

He looked skeptical. "You're going to buy a Mercedes for me to drive?"

"They're holding one for me. I bought it over the phone. We just need to pick it up. This your car?"

"Yeah."

"You can go back for it later." I pulled out my wallet, peeled off a couple hundreds and held them up where he could plainly see them. "Surely this will get me as far as the dealership. Right?"

He nodded. "So we get your car, what then?"

"A little more shopping. I want to get a cell phone and I need a new suit."

I made my way to the bedroom, a towel still wrapped around my waist. The scotch I'd poured myself before stepping into the shower was waiting for me on the nightstand. After taking a sip I checked my watch. Violet was running late.

I slid on my new black pinstriped trousers, then pulled a starched white dress shirt from the closet and slipped it on. I paused to run my fingers over the silken fabric of the dress I'd purchased for Violet. She was on her way home; I could feel her getting closer. In anticipation I imagined for a moment what it was going to feel like to dance with her tonight. One hand holding hers, the other at the small of her back as I looked into her eyes and dipped her low, the tips of her hair sweeping the dance floor. The long column of her neck arched back, begging me to nibble on it.

A long, low whistle pulled me back to reality. Violet.

"You like?" I spread my arms wide and turned around.

"Very nice," she said, appreciatively. Violet picked the butter yellow tie up off the bed.

"Glad you approve."

"You shaved." She slipped it around my neck then deftly tucked it underneath the collar of my shirt.

"No one wants to show off a scruffy husband."

Violet suddenly looked troubled.

"What?"

"You're going to look prettier than me."

I couldn't help myself, I laughed. "Never happen, baby." I pointed to the gown on the bed. "I picked up a little something to go with the tie."

"For me?"

I nodded.

"You bought me a dress?"

"Try it on."

Suddenly I was being shooed from the room like an unwelcome rooster. "Wait in the living room. I want to take a quick shower, fix my makeup and make an entrance," she said, excitedly.

I downed the last of my scotch and quickly grabbed the rest of my clothes. "Yes, your highness."

Violet had been in the bathroom for close to an hour, and Romeo had been waiting out front in my new black sedan for at least that long. He wasn't complaining, though. I'd given him a large sum in cash today and promised him another each week for being at my beck and call. I was about to throw in the towel and go to check on her when I heard the soft click of the bathroom door.

The light scent of tuberose preceded her down the hall, giving me just the barest of hints as to the vision I was about to see. Violet was the embodiment of spring, her hair a cascade of copper curls. The

butter yellow silk of the gown clung to her every curve, accentuating her slender waist and the fullness of her breasts. The deep v-neckline more than hinted at her décolletage. I was about to rethink the choice when she spun around, erasing all rational thought from my mind. The open back was broken only by the two thin straps that crisscrossed it, drawing my eye down to the spot right above the curve of her ass that I loved so much.

“My God, Violet. You take my breath away,” I managed to choke out.

She blushed crimson. “It’s the dress.”

I shook my head and led her back down the hall to the bedroom, pausing in front of the full-length mirror that stood in the corner. “It’s the woman,” I told her, emphatically. “You’re sheer perfection. Except for one little thing.”

“What?”

“You’re missing these.” I pulled a pair of yellow diamond chandelier earrings from my pocket and threaded one through her earlobe.

“Byron, no!” She started to pull away. “They’re much too extravagant. You shouldn’t be spending so much money on me.”

“Be still.” I finished securing the clasp. “They belonged to your Aunt Grace. She would have wanted you to have them.”

A hint of sadness crept into Violet’s eyes.

“Besides,” I continued, “I have an obscene amount of money and I seem to always be making more. I can’t ever hope to spend it all.”

“Why aren’t you *doing* something with it?”

“I am doing something with it. I bought a car today and I employed a driver. He’s taking us to the party, by the way. His name is Romeo. You’ll like him.”

“You bought a car?”

“Yes. It’s fast, too. It’ll go from zero to sixty in four seconds. I have to get around, don’t I?”

“Of course. I guess I was talking about something that would, you know, *matter*. Something that would maybe help people or change lives.”

A chill moved up my spine. My mouth was quite suddenly dry and I felt sick to my stomach.

“You want me to go back,” I said.

“No!” she assured me, taking my hands in hers and squeezing them.

“You think I should resume my duty.”

“I think you should find something you love, believe in and are passionate about. I’m not talking about going backwards. I’m talking about moving forward.”

There it was again, the future. Uncertain. Unclear. Undetermined.

“I’ll have to give that some thought,” I told her.

She took the second earring from me and slipped it through her other earlobe. A frighteningly mundane thought occurred to me then.

“Am I about to have a mid-life crisis?” I asked her. “I’m probably past the half-way mark, aren’t I? It’s not uncommon. Right?”

“Is the car red and shaped like a penis?” Violet’s expression was dead serious.

“It’s a black sedan, very stodgy looking,” I replied, offering her my arm to escort her to the door.

“I think you’re safe.”

Romeo dropped us off in front of the entrance to the hotel. The streets of downtown San Diego were busy and crowded with vagrants who were panhandling, a sharp contrast to the people in finery who were spilling out of expensive cars.

“Why are there beggars?” I asked. “I thought the government helped the poor.”

“Some can’t manage to apply for assistance, some spend the money on drugs instead of housing, but for most it’s...just not enough. Oh, I forgot. I need to run around the corner and get some money from the ATM. It’s a cash bar. I’ll be right back.”

I was so entranced by my surroundings Violet’s words didn’t register for several moments. By that time she was already out of sight.

“Why, if it isn’t Mr. Adams. Did you lose your date already, Byron?” Michael asked, the prick.

I smiled politely and, like a civilized vamp, I offered my hand. “Michael, nice to see you again.”

“So where is Violet?”

“Getting some money.”

He smirked. “Making the lady pay?”

I shrugged. “I don’t intend to make Violet do anything. I’m certainly not going to get in an argument with her about who pays for the drinks. What difference does it make, really?”

“Right. I’m sure she’s thrilled just to be on your arm.”

I turned back in the direction Violet had gone. Something was wrong. Her anxiety was building. It was beyond frustration or impatience for that matter.

“As always, it’s been a pleasure,” I lied. “Excuse me.”

I took a few casual steps back into the shadows, then used my preternatural speed to hastily make my way around the corner. I opened my senses, my eyes and ears, and I found her. She wasn’t alone.

Within a fraction of a second I had my quarry cornered. Reaction without thought, relying on instinct. The first was easily taken out, knocked unconscious with a powerful roundhouse kick to the head. The second I had pinned against the wall, my hand around his throat, a primeval rumble still emanating from

my chest. I made no effort to hide my fangs or red eyes. I'm sure they both were glistening dangerously in the moonlight. The pungent smell of urine hit my sensitive nostrils. I wrinkled my nose and looked down.

"Least my girl didn't wet herself when you scared her. Big tough guy, are you?" I bared my teeth and punctuated the question with a menacing snarl.

His heart was racing madly. Any second now he'd be swooning like a sissy. I was sure of it.

"Violet? Are you all right?" a male voice, decidedly British, asked. He was coming closer.

"Run, come back for your friend later. Next time I won't be as generous," I told the boy before releasing him. I focused on calming myself, letting the remnants of my vampire visage slip away before turning to face the approaching stranger.

"Yes," Violet replied, sounding breathless. "Wesley Atherton, this is my husband, Byron Adams."

"Your husband? Well, congratulations!" Wesley reached out and grasped my hand. "Seems you have everything well in hand, mate. Nice moves, by the way. Very impressive, indeed. I'll see you two inside?"

He was maybe in his mid-to-late thirties. About the same height and build as I was. He had a peculiar air about him, an odd blend of aristocracy and everyday man. Unpretentious, yet refined. Genuine.

"Sure," I said, then watched as he walked off.

I extended my hand to Violet. "He seems nice."

For a moment she just stood there. Her cheeks and chest flushed, her lips parted, the aroma of arousal surrounding her. Interesting.

"Huh. Michael said you didn't like the caveman routine." I sauntered up to her. "Seems maybe he didn't do it right."

"I'm so completely turned on right now," she admitted.

"Yeah?" I bit down on my lower lip in an effort to impose some self-restraint.

"Yeah," she sighed, leaning back against the brick wall of the building.

My cock hardened at the thought of taking her. I released a soft, low growl. "What do you want?" My voice was rough with desire.

"You know what I want," she replied.

She was right. I knew exactly what she wanted. But I wanted to hear it. I wanted to hear her say the words, to describe it to me in excruciating detail. I'm greedy that way.

"That's not the way this game is played," I told her, standing now a hairsbreadth away from her, every part of my body just barely touching hers.

Violet lifted her eyelids slowly, the deep green of her irises pools of liquid desire. "And does the winner of this game get a prize?"

I grinned and nodded. "Oh, yeah. A nice, big prize." I tilted my hips and let her feel the thickness of my erection through the sheer fabric of her gown.

Violet gasped and licked her lips. "Tease!"

“Not teasing. In fact, you can have it right now. You’ll find I’m very accommodating that way.”

She was struggling. I could feel it.

“You want me,” I observed. “But you also want to go inside. Am I right?”

She leaned into me and nodded, almost sadly. “Promise me we’ll have wild monkey sex later?”

Well, that was a request I’d never heard before.

“That’s a metaphor, right?”

Violet’s hand flew up to cover her mouth and she burst into laughter. “Yes!” she said, emphatically shaking her head. “It’s an expression. Going at it like bunnies. Wild like monkeys...”

“Right, so we’ll have a few drinks, dance, mingle a bit, then...” I purposefully let my warm breath drift across my mark.

Violet reached for the waistband of my pants, encouraging me to move closer still. “You know you’re torturing me.”

I stepped back, instead. “No, baby. The torture will come later, but only if you’re good. I’ll tie you up to that nice big bed we have at home and treat you to something special. I promise.”

“Define good.”

A loose tendril of hair blew across her face. I caught it and twirled it around my finger, reeling her back toward me.

“Are you asking vampire me? Because I hear vampires are pretty morally flexible, being evil and soulless and all.”

“You’re not evil and soulless,” she whispered. “But I do get the distinct impression you could be very, very, naughty.”

“Only in a way that would leave you begging for more.”

“How did I get to be so lucky?” she asked, pulling back and looking searchingly into my eyes.

The intensity of her gaze and the wondrous tone of her voice left me feeling a bit self-conscious.

“Are you blushing?”

My shoes suddenly became very interesting. I can flirt shamelessly, but a sincere compliment always seems to throw me.

“Byron?”

I glanced up, shyly. “You know, the quicker we go in and make a polite appearance, the sooner I can make good on my promise.”

Violet slipped her arm through mine. “Shall we, Mr. Adams?”

I guided her around the still unconscious body on the sidewalk. “Let’s.”

Violet paused—worry marring her brow. “We should call an ambulance.”

“He’s fine,” I assured her. “His heartbeat is strong.” I prodded the fellow with my foot and he released a groan, then his eyes fluttered open. “He’s going to have a whopper of a headache though, that’s for sure.”

“Did I thank you for rescuing me?”

I grinned and winked at her. “You’re going to do that later.”

“Right.”

“Hey, I know what I could do to make a difference. I could be a superhero-type. A modern-day knight, roaming the streets after dark and protecting damsels in distress.”

“You wouldn’t like wearing the tights.”

“Who said I’d have to wear tights?”

“All the cool superheroes wear tights.”

“No, they don’t.”

“Name one that doesn’t wear tights.”

Damn! I couldn’t think of one.

“Well?”

“Give me a few minutes. There’s got to be one.” I escorted her up the stairs and into the hotel. “Besides, think about how *grateful* the damsels would all be.”

“No.” She sounded adamant.

“No?”

“Absolutely not.”

“What if—”

As we walked through the door of the ballroom, Wesley Atherton called to us. He was speaking with Michael and had his arm wrapped around the waist of a very attractive blonde.

“Have you met Byron Adams yet? Byron is Violet’s new husband. Now, he could teach you a thing or two, Michael. I’m telling you, he’s got an absolutely brilliant roundhouse kick. Some nasty bloke was bothering our little Violet out there and he just...bam!”

Wesley was practically bouncing on his toes with excitement.

The blonde at his side turned to welcome us. “Is what Wes said true?”

Violet and the blonde embraced. Violet felt affection toward her.

“Yes. Please don’t be upset. We didn’t want any fuss and, well, we couldn’t wait. Katherine, this is Byron Adams. Ren, this is Wesley’s wife and my dear friend, Katherine.”

I took Katherine’s hand in mine. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Michael looked as if he were about to become unglued. He reached for Violet’s elbow. “You *married* him?”

I slipped my arm around her waist and gently pulled her to me. “We were married a couple of months ago,” I announced, enjoying the look of shock on Michael’s face. “I have to say, Violet managed to sweep me off my feet. I took one look at her and knew. I couldn’t wait to put a ring on her finger.”

Right on cue, Katherine reached for Violet's hand. "Oh, my gosh! Violet! It's gorgeous. Come on, let's get some champagne. You have some groveling to do if you want me to forgive you for keeping this secret. How did the two of you meet? I can't believe this!"

I watched, amused as Katherine led Violet away.

"Don't be long, I'll miss you!" Wesley shouted after his wife.

Katherine paused. Then she turned, walked back to him and placed a firm kiss squarely on his mouth. Smiling at him, she wiped the remnants of her lipstick off his lower lip.

"Thank you," he said, waving her off. "You may go now."

Katherine smiled. "Are you going to forever act like a randy little boy?"

"Oh, I do hope so, love."

"Me, too," she giggled before running off to catch up with Violet.

Wesley stuffed his hands in his pockets and sighed appreciatively. "Lucky bastards are what we are." He looked over at Michael. "Oh, sorry. I forgot you were here. Are you seeing anyone new?"

Michael turned on his heel and stormed off.

"Think it was something I said?" Wes asked, as he watched Michael weave his way through the crowd.

"You don't like him."

"No, but few people do. So, how long has it been?"

"We were married a couple months ago. It took a bit of time for me to tie up some loose ends in Canada. Otherwise I would have been here sooner."

"I meant how long ago did you mark her. I was trying to remember the last time I saw Violet with her hair pulled away from her neck. I'm thinking it was before her vacation."

"I'm sorry, I'm not sure—"

Wesley leaned in close. "Come on, Byron. I've seen more than a few unbelievable things in my time." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "I know what you are, what you were."

I was doing my utmost to remain calm. I reached out through the claim, trying to signal to Violet that we'd been exposed. She was vulnerable and so was I. The pressure started to build within my chest, all of my senses sharpened, I began to nonchalantly search for an exit and plan our escape.

"You're not in any danger, mate. Not from me. I'm no threat to you. You could snap me like a bloody twig. Yeah?"

I turned my attention slowly back to him and then, facing him head on, I gave him a glimpse, letting my eyes shift to red for an instant before reverting back. "What is it you've seen in your lifetime, Wesley?"

He grinned. I hadn't frightened him in the least.

"Some things I wish I hadn't." He glanced down into his now empty glass. A pained expression crossed his features for a moment, but by the time his eyes connected with mine again, it was gone.

“Like?”

“Ghosts, angels, werewolves, vampires,” he said, matter-of-factly. “You would be the latter.”

Now, I’d never seen an angel. Moreover, I’d never met anyone who had seen an angel, except for Cain, the head of our Clan. Cain had seen everything.

“Angels?”

“Angel, actually. One. Abaddon. Believe me, that one isn’t what you’d imagine, not some chubby little cherub with swanlike wings and a quiver of arrows, that’s for damn sure.”

I was skeptical. “Yet you’re here. No one—”

“Survives the Grim Reaper?” he finished for me.

I nodded.

“He took his pound of flesh.” Wesley turned to look through the crowd, his eyes seemingly searching for Katherine. “Our first child.”

I had no connection to this man whatsoever, yet I could feel his pain. Not in the same way I experienced Violet’s emotions, of course, but it was there. The loss was so clearly reflected in his eyes when he turned back to look at me that I was almost choked by the intensity of emotion and grief.

“I’m sorry,” I told him. And I was. I understood what it was like to lose someone. The void left in me because of Fred’s death was still fresh and my sadness remained profound.

Wesley shrugged as if it was nothing, appearing to swallow the hurt, pushing it aside.

“It was five years ago, although sometimes I admit it feels like yesterday. My life’s been different since that day. Seems once you open yourself to the existence of the impossible, you start to see more and more of it. Or maybe the impossible finds you. I don’t know.”

He paused for a moment before continuing. “There are more of you in London. San Diego appears to attract a slightly different breed. Mostly young vamps with brass balls who are either stupid or exceedingly courageous, and usually hiding from someone.”

I thought of Chris, the young man I’d met the previous night. Then I glimpsed Violet. She was carrying two glasses of champagne. Having sensed my alarm she was across the room and trying to make her way through the crowd, Katherine by her side. Violet’s eyes searched out mine, looking for assurance that all was well. I nodded.

Wesley pointed to a table on the edge of the dance floor that appeared to have space available. “We should grab a seat.”

I took his cue and signaled to Violet and we both began moving in the same direction.

“Your connection with her is strong,” Wesley observed quietly. “I’d like to learn more about that. Most of the male vampires I’ve treated are suffering from adjustment issues and have performance problems. They have trouble—”

I interrupted him. “Vampires don’t go to shrinks.”

Wesley nodded. "Right. Like they don't claim humans or have children. Mind if I ask how old you are?"

"Three hundred and eighty next week."

Wesley stopped dead in his tracks. "No shit?"

The look of shock on his face was almost comical. The man had faced Abaddon for Christ's sake, and a three-hundred-and-eighty-year-old vampire impressed him?

"No shit, Wes."

"Wow." He shook his head in wonder. "You look great for your age. Do you moisturize?"

I released an almost imperceptible growl.

Wes raised one hand, surrendering. "Just kidding, mate. I saw you kick arse out there. I can tell you're a manly man...er...vamp." Then he punched me, playfully, in the arm. "Come on."

As the final strains of the tango faded away, I released Violet from my tight embrace. Her face was flushed from the spirited dance and her eyes were sparkling with delight. The evening had been spectacular with both of us enjoying the champagne, the company and dance after glorious dance. I had treasured every moment, reveling in the sense of freedom and marveling at how natural it all felt, how easy it seemed.

"You've been holding out on me. Minuet my ass. You're an incredible dancer, Ren. You realize every woman in this room wants you right now?" she whispered breathlessly.

I flashed her an unabashed grin before leaning in to steal a kiss. "But you get to take me home, you lucky girl."

Wes tapped me on the right shoulder. "Sorry to interrupt."

"If we ignore him, maybe he'll go away," I murmured against Violet's full lips.

She smiled. "A bit rude, don't you think?"

I sighed in defeat, accepting the fact I was going to have to acknowledge him.

"Violet, I know I'm on call for you tonight. There's an emergency and the caller is insisting on speaking with you. I need some help with this one. It sounds a bit unusual."

I followed the two of them off the dance floor and into the foyer.

"Name?"

"Isabelle. She won't give me a last name. I've told her repeatedly she has the wrong Dr. Deeds and offered to call an ambulance. But she won't tell me where she is, and she's calling from a cell so we can't initiate a trace. She says she's in labor. She thinks something's wrong. I have her on hold."

My eyes connected with Violet's.

"He's probably afraid to go to the hospital, afraid the child will be discovered. They're birthing at home. It's our way," I said to her.

Violet's eyes flitted briefly toward Wes, before returning to me.

“He knows. It’s all right.”

“Isabelle is mated to a vampire?” Wes asked quietly.

“Yes,” Violet replied.

I shook my head. “They aren’t mates.”

She looked at me, confused.

“The child is his, but he’s never claimed her and... That’s completely not important at the moment.”

Violet extended her hand. Wes quickly pushed a button, then gave her the phone.

“Isabelle? It’s Dr. Deeds.”

A blood-curdling scream drowned out any response.

Violet winced. “Isabelle? I’m going to help you. Tell me where you are.”

She motioned with her hands, indicating she wanted something to write with. Wesley pulled a sleek-looking device from his pocket, hit the power switch, pulled out the stylus, then looked expectantly at Violet.

I listened intently.

“She’s bleeding,” the voice said. “The baby won’t come.”

“Where are you? I’ll send an ambulance.”

“No ambulance. You—” the woman said.

Another scream masked the remainder of the sentence.

“It sounds like she’s in danger. Isabelle needs medical attention.”

“And you’re a doctor. Promise me there will be no ambulance. You come, you do your best. That’s all we ask.”

“I...” Her eyes connected with mine. She could feel it, my intense hope that she’d agree to help the young woman. That she’d save the child, the one possibly chosen. The one that might be destined to save us all. “Give me the address.”

Chapter Fourteen

“Stop staring at me!” Chris growled.

He looked as if he were about to snap. His right knee was bouncing furiously and both of his hands were balled tightly into fists.

“I apologize. Perhaps Romeo can try calling again?” I suggested.

He viciously kicked the seat in front of him, his eyes turning red due to his unchecked anger and deep frustration. “Stupid fuck! I can’t believe I left my cell at home. Of all nights...”

“Hey!” Romeo shouted. “Watch the car, man!”

“It’s all right,” I interjected, placing my hand on Chris’ shoulder and giving it a re-assuring squeeze. “They aren’t answering because they’re busy. Violet is concentrating. She’s focused, concerned, her adrenaline is pumping. She’s relieved she seems to have made it in time. We’re close, aren’t we?”

“How do you know?”

“The claim,” I replied, finding it a bit curious he would have to ask.

The Mercedes stopped at the curb and Chris wasted no time jumping out. He ran to the staircase of the apartment with lightning speed. I was quick on his heels and within seconds we were both through the door of his tiny apartment.

Instantly we smelled it. Blood. He looked at me, for a second immobilized, unsure of what to do. Afraid of what he would see.

“Daddy!” Hannah cried, jumping out of the arms of a female vampire and wrapping herself around the leg of her father.

“Go,” I said, nodding toward the closed door of the room, the room from which the scent of blood was coming. I knelt and ran my hand over Hannah’s head. “Hannah and I will sit and wait. It’s going to be fine. Isn’t it, Hannah? Come.”

Hannah turned and fell into my comforting embrace, wrapping her arms around my neck and whispering in my ear, “Mommy’s hurting. She has a bad owie.”

I lifted the little waif, walked over to the sofa with her, and sat. The female vampire who had been tending to her was exceedingly nervous, tremulous in fact.

“Look at me,” I commanded softly.

Her eyes lifted slowly, and she gave me a shaky smile.

“Father.” She bowed slightly.

She was stronger than Chris, more refined and a bit older.

“You’re Italian,” I observed, recognizing the accent.

“Yes, Father. Although I’ve been here for some time now.”

“Call me Byron. And you are?”

She walked over to the closed door and began pacing in front of it. “Angelina.”

“And...what is it you do, Angelina?”

“I’m a mid-wife.” She glanced back at me.

I reached out to probe her mind. She felt me enter and turned boldly to face me, almost daring me to share her memory.

Angelina stood back in the corner behind the bassinet. The child inside was crying, wailing every bit as loudly as the woman standing protectively in front of it.

“I don’t care! I’m not coming back. I won’t give her up. Never again, Antonio! Don’t you understand? It’s wrong! I can’t live like this! I won’t live like this.”

“We have no choice, Maria,” the dark vampire said, his face drawn, his eyes hollow and lifeless.

“There is always choice!” she said, quietly, before raising the gun to her head and pulling the trigger.

The woman slid to the floor, dead. Angelina watched as a pool of blood formed a halo around the victim’s head, inching out further and further.

“I’ve made a horrible mistake.”

Angelina’s eyes flew up to connect with those of her father’s.

“I should never have let them take the children,” he told her, his voice filled with the regret of a lesson learned too late. Then he vanished into the air.

“You all right?” Hannah asked, cupping my cheek in her tiny hand.

I nodded and swallowed. The vision of a young Angelina witnessing the death of her parents had startled me so completely, moved me so entirely, I had dropped my guard slightly and was obviously reacting.

I looked back at Angelina and she nodded. “Good. We understand one another. I was lucky enough to see my father’s regret. I was fourteen. I did what I needed to in order to survive after that, and it wasn’t all pretty. I’ve already seen Hell and I long ago stopped believing in Heaven. I have no delusions about any of us getting back inside those pearly gates. I’m not interested in redemption, Father. So don’t waste your time on me. I simply don’t believe in it.”

“I’m not sure I do, either,” I heard myself say as the piercing cries of a baby split the air and the bedroom door swung open.

Wesley Atherton was holding the infant close to his chest, his hand protectively cradling its fragile head. “She’s hemorrhaging. I’m needed. It’s a girl.”

Angelina accepted the bundle with ease. “Go. I’ve got her.”

Hannah buried her face in my chest, afraid of the blood, yet excited by it at the same time.

“Blood is bad,” she whispered.

“It’s not bad,” I told her. “It’s life. It’s sacred. Like your sister.”

Hannah looked again upon the babe and then sniffed the air. She looked at me, her eyes flashing red. “She’s not like us.”

“No,” I agreed.

“She’s special,” she said, a hint of reverence in her young voice. Already tainted by prejudice and marked by centuries of judgment.

Tears formed in my eyes. “You’re special, too,” I told her. “We are all...special.”

I woke with a start. I had drifted off just as the sun came up. Violet was kneeling before me, her hand on my thigh. She was wearing a pair of jeans and a T-shirt I didn’t recognize. The clothes smelled like Isabelle. Her hair was tied in a knot on top of her head. She looked exhausted.

“How about I tuck the little one in her bed? We’re through here.” Wes was leaning against the doorjamb to the bathroom, his shirt covered in blood. “Angelina’s agreed to stay.”

Hannah was fast asleep in my arms, her little body draped across my chest. I nodded. Wes crossed the room and carefully lifted her, then the two of them disappeared into the second bedroom.

“Everything all right?” I asked.

Violet nodded. “She’s stabilized. She’s going to be fine. Wes will come back and check on her tomorrow. My office manager is going to squeeze her into my schedule for an office follow-up on Tuesday.”

I noticed there was a bandage covering her arm. She followed my gaze.

“She needed blood; she lost a lot. We were a match, thank God.”

“How did you know that?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“Chris.”

“You let him drink from you?”

“Not like you do. It saved her life, Byron.”

I sat up and looked out the window. The sun was bright against a cloudless sky. The apartment faced west, casting the interior in shadow.

“Don’t get weird on me about this.”

I stood. “You’re weak. You need rest. We both need to sleep.”

“I don’t understand why you’re upset.”

“He’s tasted you. He’s sure to want more. You are mine, Violet. *Mine*. How could you?”

“What did you expect me to do? Let her die?”

I felt like a bastard. But, yes. That’s what I expected, given the choice. I turned to face her. There was no use hiding it. She clearly knew how I felt.

“People, humans, die. It happens every day.”

“Not when we can save them, mate,” Wesley interjected. “It’s what we do, doctors. He was reluctant to do it, by the way. He’s in recovery. It was a necessity. He took a little taste of each of us. We were lucky to get a match and we were damn lucky Angelina was so well equipped. It doesn’t have to mean anything.”

“How would you like it, Wes, knowing another man had tasted your wife?”

“Byron!” Violet chastised me, embarrassed by my bluntness.

Wes held up his hand. “It’s okay, Violet. Katherine wasn’t a virgin when I met her. In fact, she was pregnant with another man’s child. I didn’t like it, but I loved her, and I loved that baby. I wished to hell the child were mine, that she had been only mine. But that wasn’t the case. It wasn’t reality. So, I accepted it.”

He crossed the room and pulled open the door. “I guess I could have spent a decade or two moping about, wallowing in angst. But I’m not a vampire,” he said quietly, pausing on the threshold. He turned back and looked me in the eye. “I couldn’t afford that luxury, Byron. Now the question you need to be asking yourself is if that’s how *you* want to spend the next ten or twenty years. You’ve got a beautiful mate there.” He nodded toward Violet.

“That I do,” I acknowledged. Wesley spoke from his heart; he was a man of conviction. I respected that.

“Violet’s crazy about you, man. Take her home and shag her senseless. Really, it beats brooding all to hell. I’ll meet you in the car.”

Chapter Fifteen

The ride home had been quiet and strained. We'd dropped Wes off in Mission Hills, then Romeo brought Violet and me back home. Home. Who was I kidding? This was Violet's home. It wasn't mine.

I sat in the chair next to the bed. Already I'd removed my shoes and socks, loosened my tie and unbuttoned my shirt. I looked at the beautiful gown Violet had tossed onto our bed and let the sadness wash over me. I leaned forward, picked it up and inhaled, trying to take solace in the familiar scent. I felt disconnected somehow. Disconnected from Violet, disconnected from society. Not immortal, but not human. I was riddled with ambivalence, and the worst thing? The worst thing was that Violet felt hurt and angry and it was because of me.

I carelessly let the silk slip through my hands and land on the floor. *Sins of the father*, I thought.

Violet walked into the bedroom, fresh from the shower. I'd let her shower alone. I shouldn't have, and I regretted it.

"Won't you tell me what you said to Chris before we left?"

"We had a heart to heart," I told her.

"About me?"

"About etiquette."

"I'm sorry I disappointed you tonight. I can tell it's weighing heavily on you, Ren." She pulled back the covers and sat on the edge of the bed.

It was close to noon. The sun was bright in the sky and although the drapes were closed, the room was cast in a soft glow. Violet reached under her pillow and pulled out a pale pink nightgown. Now, that was a disappointment. She had been wearing only a pair of sheer panties. It seemed a shame to cover them.

"Come here," I beckoned.

She looked at me, her gaze questioning and uncertain. I leaned forward in the chair and held out my hand.

"Please."

Violet crawled across the bed to me. Once she was within reach I took the gown from her hand, tossed it back onto the bed, then pulled her onto my lap.

I lifted her arm so I could examine the site from which the blood had been extracted.

"I'm disappointed in myself," I told her, noticing for the first time how tiny the puncture hole was. "I should have opened myself to you. If I had, I would have understood why you did it."

“Do you understand now?” she asked.

I answered her honestly. “I’m trying.”

“I’m trying, too.” She released a sigh. “Can we talk this through?”

I reached up, unfastened the clip that held her hair in place and watched as the curls cascaded down, falling gently around her shoulders.

“Let’s have sex now, we’ll talk later.”

“How much later?” she persisted.

“Next week?”

“Byron.”

“Violet.”

I tried my charming smile and wiggled my eyebrows playfully. She didn’t budge.

“Don’t shut me out and don’t deny what’s real and true. I don’t think I could stand that. It would feel like too much of a betrayal, Ren.”

It hit me then, and quite suddenly.

“What is it?”

I realized the depth and reason for my mother’s despair.

“Ren?”

Violet placed her hand over my heart. Did she sense it clench? Did she feel my pain? Of course she did.

I swallowed and gently eased her off my lap.

“I need a drink.” I stood and headed for the kitchen, more specifically for the cabinet in the kitchen where Violet kept the scotch.

“It’s barely noon.” She’d slipped on the pink nightgown and followed me.

I slammed the bottle on the table with a growl.

“I drink what I want, when I want!” I shouted.

“No, you don’t!” she shouted back, placing her hand over mine, the one that held the bottle. Tears began to slip from her eyes and run down her cheeks. “Don’t you get it? We’re a team now, Ren. What you do, what you say, who you are... It all affects me. Please, I couldn’t let her die.”

I looked at her hand. She was a gutsy broad, I’ll give her that. Not many women would be brave enough to try to come between me and my scotch.

“It’s not about the blood.” I sighed. “I understand why you did it. And, I’m a bit embarrassed about my reaction. It was an honest reaction, if not a noble one. The child is Chosen. I should have been prepared and willing to make any sacrifice. Instead I was selfish and petty. As much as I try not to be like him...” I shook my head. “I seem to be in so many ways.”

“Who?”

“My father.” I released my hold on the bottle and stared down at it.

“Rita said your father held your mother prisoner on the island. Is that true?”

“I suppose.” My voice sounded distant to my own ears.

Violet turned and reached for the teakettle, then busied herself filling it with water and setting it to boil on the stove. She turned to look at me. “Do you drink tea? I don’t even know that about you. There’s so much I don’t know.”

“You know the important stuff.” Her desire to understand me touched me profoundly, deeply. “You know what’s in my heart.”

“Empathy and understanding are different.”

“Says the shrink.”

“I’m not going to apologize for wanting to know my husband. I’m going to be stubborn about this.”

I closed the gap between us and pulled her into my arms, lacing my hands in her hair and tugging on it slightly, so her head tilted back, exposing her neck to me.

I was almost overcome with the desire to take her, to take control. My cock hardened and lengthened as my fangs descended. I moved with lightning speed, and before I even registered my actions I had her pinned to the pantry door. I could hear the roar of her blood and I wanted it. I wanted her—to be inside her. Since my arrival she’d lost too much blood. She was tired and needed rest, but that did little to dampen my desire, my arousal. I inhaled, deeply, letting her scent surround me. Then I leaned down and lapped at my mark, tasting what I could of her essence, taking comfort in it and promising to indulge myself more later, when it was safe.

Violet was still, her heart beating loud and strong in anticipation.

I stepped back and kissed her, tenderly on the lips. “I haven’t had tea in a very long time. But, I’d love to share a cup with you.”

Violet lifted her eyes up to meet mine. “You want me. You want my blood. You’re holding back and settling for tea. Why?”

“Because it’s what *you* need. You’ve lost too much blood in the past few days. You need time to recover.”

The teakettle began to shriek. I released Violet and stuffed my hands in my pockets. While she tended to the tea I wandered out to the living room. I sat on the sofa, closed my eyes and let my head fall against the back.

“Maybe I need therapy,” I said aloud, remembering Wes’s comments from the prior evening about immortals who had trouble adjusting after the claim.

I felt Violet sit next to me, and when I opened my eyes she was holding out a steaming mug of a reddish liquid. It smelled sweet and there was a hint of vanilla.

“What is this?”

“Tea.”

“It’s red.”

“They call it Madagascar. It’s rooibos with vanilla.”

“I’ve been to Madagascar. Trust me, it didn’t smell anything like this.”

Violet smiled and watched as I blew across the top of the mug before hesitantly taking a sip.

“Good?”

“Not bad,” I admitted, sweeping an errant strand of hair away from her eyes. “I love your hair.”

“I hate it.” She tucked the stubborn curl behind her ear. “I gave up trying to tame it years ago. I battled with my hair and my hair won. It pretty much does what it wants.”

“It suits you.”

Violet waited, patiently. That was one of her greatest gifts, being comfortable with the silence that sometimes fell between us. It occurred to me most of the women in my life had abhorred silence and I felt a pang of guilt over all the times I’d teased Fred and Grace about what had then seemed endless prattle. I missed the sound of their voices, I reflected, taking another sip of my tea.

“My mother had black hair, dark as coal,” I said. “It was long and sleek, although she wore it up most of the time, as was the fashion during that time. I was very young when they died.”

“How did she die? Was it like with Fred and Grace?”

I shook my head and stared into the steaming mug, hesitant to look her in the eye. “She killed herself. My mother was mad. She was driven mad.”

Violet set her mug on the table, then took mine from my hands, which were trembling.

“Tell me,” she said softly.

“Remember that day when we were talking hypothetically about what it might be like, living forever?”

“Yes.”

“You said Pierre was an attentive lover and a devoted father.”

“And you said having children would be risky. That they would be taken away.”

I swallowed. “Yes. Not all of them. But the human children.”

“That wasn’t hypothetical.”

“No. It wasn’t.”

“And that could happen to us?”

I nodded. “It’s possible. Most of the fallen comply and turn their human children over so they can be adopted out. Others go into hiding.”

“And your parents went into hiding? Is that what Rita meant when she said your mother had been held prisoner on the island?”

“My mother hated the island. She resented the move. I guess that you could say we went into hiding there, yes, but not for the reason you imagine. We moved there to spare my uncle humiliation. He was close to achieving elevation, the first ever in our family to do so.”

“You being the second?”

I set my mug down on coffee table. The tea suddenly tasted bitter. “That’s right.”

“You said the move was meant to spare your uncle humiliation. How?”

I realized I was getting a glimpse of Violet at work. She was probing, gently, trying to unravel my past, trying to understand.

“It was long ago and I was young. There’s a lot I don’t remember.”

I walked over to the sliding glass doors and stared out at the ocean.

“What do you remember?” she asked.

“My mother’s broken body,” I murmured, the image of it still emblazoned in my mind. “She jumped from the bedroom window after giving birth. The child was human. She couldn’t bear the idea of parting with it. She’d lost so many. All of them, every single one except for Fred and me, had been human.”

Violet came to me. She slipped her arms around my waist and pressed up against my back. “You witnessed your mother’s death?”

“No. Fred and I were in the hallway, with Father. We heard the glass shatter, the scream. We followed Father into the room. He turned to dust before my eyes. After that it was just Fred and me.”

“What happened to the child?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, feeling nauseous. “When I woke the next morning, it, she, was gone. Fred wouldn’t tell me. We never spoke of it again. Fred stayed with me on the island until I reached the age of maturity. We traveled together for a bit, eventually going our separate ways, living our own lives. The day you came to the island, I remembered something, something that I think is important.”

“What?”

I turned to face her. “An argument I overheard between my parents. It was shortly after we moved into the house. At least I think so. Who knows, maybe I’m not even remembering it right.”

Violet picked up the tea she’d left on the coffee table, took a sip, then sat back down on the sofa. “Maybe you are. What was the argument about?”

I rejoined her. “In retrospect I’d say it was about the same thing they were all about. It’s ironic.”

“What is?”

I rubbed my face with my hands and let my thoughts roll out. “All these years I’ve blamed him.”

“For?”

“For defiling her, for mating with her in the first place.”

“And now?”

“Now I know, that isn’t what broke her heart, what shattered her mind and soul.” I let my head drop back on the couch and screwed up the courage to turn and look my mate in the eye. “It was what he did after that.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“He couldn’t let himself love her. They were together for close to half a century, Violet. And for all of those years, my father failed to honor his feelings. He failed to even acknowledge the simple truth of them. Instead he publicly bemoaned his choice, putting on the proper show of penance, living a life of lies, and being resentful and regretful about the greatest gift God ever could have given him. That’s what did her in. Watching the man she loved miss that chance...”

“What chance?” Violet asked, leaning forward, focusing intently.

I was tired, worn out, weary from the day and from the myriad of emotions that were coursing through me. I smiled to myself. Suddenly I felt very old.

“The chance to truly live.”

Chapter Sixteen

The shrill sound of Violet's phone roused me from a deep, dreamless slumber.

"Hello? This is Dr. Deeds," Violet answered, her voice still rough with sleep.

I rolled onto my side and began to playfully slide the strap of her gown off her shoulder.

"Dr. Adams," I corrected.

She shushed me, batted my hand away, and sat up. She was obviously alarmed. I began to pay attention to the conversation.

"Shall I put the officer through, doctor?" the disembodied voice on the other end of the line asked.

"Yes, of course!"

"Dr. Deeds, this is Officer Woods."

"What's happened?"

"There's been a break-in at your office. It seems your office manager surprised the perpetrator."

"Is she all right?"

"She took a pretty hard hit to the back of the head. The paramedics are checking her now. The security guard found her out cold."

"Good Lord!"

"The door to the office was left ajar. That's what alerted him to the intrusion. Seems the perpetrator left in a hurry. We need for you to come down and let us know if anything is missing."

Violet went to her closet and selected a pair of jeans and a light-weight sweater. "I'll be right there. Has anyone called Jennifer's husband?"

"Yes. He's driving back from Los Angeles."

"I'm on my way," Violet replied before disconnecting and tossing the cell phone aside.

I climbed out of bed. "That's serious, isn't it? I'll go with you."

Violet kissed me softly on the mouth. "The sun is up. It's not necessary." She started to quickly dress.

"I'm strong, I can take a little sun," I replied, stepping into my jeans. "Why would someone break into your office?"

I started to rummage through the closet looking for a shirt. That's when it hit me. Like a wall of stifling heat. My heart constricted as I fought off the intrusion. Only once in my lifetime had I ever felt such power.

"What is it?" Violet asked, sensing my alarm.

It was over.

“Nothing.”

As quickly as it had started, it stopped. Or, maybe it hadn’t happened at all.

“Are you sure?”

“I thought I felt something, sensed something. Whatever it was, if it was anything at all... It’s gone now.”

Standing just inside the office was a pale, thin, hauntingly beautiful creature. Her hair was as dark as ink and her eyes were doe-like and knowing. She smiled at me and nodded in appropriate deference as we walked through the open door. Her recognition of what I was did nothing to deter her from reaching into me, from trying to slip in and probe my mind. Surprisingly, she smelled completely human. I deftly shut her out.

“Oh! My God, Jennifer! Are you all right?” Violet gasped.

“I’m fine,” the young woman answered, still looking at me.

“Jennifer, this is—”

“Byron Adams.” I extended my hand.

“Dr. Deeds?” the police officer interrupted.

“Yes, you must be Officer Woods.”

“If you don’t mind, could you take a look in your personal office and let us know if anything appears to be missing or disturbed?”

“Of course.”

“Mrs. Houghton’s already gone through the rest with us. It appears she scared the perpetrator off before they caused any trouble, but we want to make sure.”

Violet followed Officer Woods down the hall, leaving Jennifer and me alone.

“You’re a sly one, and brave, too, out in broad daylight. I’ve been wondering when you would come,” she whispered, softly.

I was becoming more curious about Jennifer Houghton by the second. “Have you now?”

“Oh, yes. I figured it was just a matter of time. I’ve been expecting you ever since Violet returned from holiday. The moment she walked in the office, I sensed she’d changed. I kept trying to suss it out. Once I noticed your mark... Well, it was obvious.”

I shoved my hands into my pockets and leaned against the wall. The girl was unnervingly forthright.

“Violet hasn’t seemed ready to talk about it. She was barely hanging on when she came back, truth be told. Can you smell them?” she asked.

“Smell them?”

Jennifer frowned, then turned and walked into the back room where it appeared the receptionist normally sat. I followed her.

“Pick up their scent? Let’s not waste time pretending. You have a keen sense of smell, right? They were in here. It hasn’t been long; there may be a lingering trace of their scent.”

Even as she spoke to me, she was reaching inside, trying to slide through my defenses. I shook my head. “That’s very rude. And you won’t succeed.”

“You can shut me out!” she gasped.

“Yes.”

I leaned down to the keyboard and inhaled deeply. I did it more for show and amusement than because I thought there would be anything to gain. But there was something. What, exactly, I wasn’t sure.

“How?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

She nodded, eagerly. “Yes, please. I can normally—”

I interrupted her. “There is something, on the keyboard.”

“It’s familiar?”

“Maybe. Vaguely. I can’t quite place it. Possibly someone I met last night.”

There had been so many people at the party. I desperately searched through my olfactory memory for a match.

“Take another whiff.”

I shook my head. There were too many competing odors.

Jennifer sniffed the air. “I don’t smell anything.”

“You use this keyboard?”

“Yes.”

“You use hand lotion, orange and ginger. It’s masking things somewhat. There’s also powder and latex. They wore gloves. If I were to come across them again, the chance is quite good I’d recognize them, but I can’t tell you now.”

“You’re good.”

“Honey? It doesn’t seem like anything is missing. The officer’s through,” Violet said as she walked into the room.

I nodded toward the computer.

“What?” Violet asked.

“Maybe they were after something on the computer,” I suggested.

The police officer grabbed a nearby pencil and hit the power button. The screen came to life and the login window popped up.

“Everything looks secure,” he said. “Seems you were lucky, Dr. Deeds.”

Violet breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

"If you notice anything else missing, you have the case number," he told her, then he was off.

"How the hell can he tell by looking at the login screen nothing's been tampered with?" I wondered out loud.

"He can't," Jennifer said. "Even I know that."

Violet looked concerned again. "There's confidential information in there."

Jennifer pulled a set of keys from her pocket and handed them to Violet. "Stanley's going to check the system. He's on his way back from L.A. I called him right before you arrived."

Violet unlocked one of the many cabinets in the room and started to search through it. It was filled with medications.

"Who's Stanley?" I asked.

"Jen's husband." Violet sounded tired. "I've got to find some aspirin. I have a splitting headache."

"Bottom right shelf," Jennifer said. "I'll get you some water."

I tried to remember how long it had been since we'd eaten. "You're probably hungry. And you need more rest."

Violet accepted a bottle of water from Jennifer. "I should call Wes. He was going to check on Isabelle. I want to see how she's doing."

"You'll be of no use to anyone if you're sick," I reasoned. "You can call Wes later."

"I suppose."

Jennifer leaned down and closely inspected the keyboard without touching it. "Stanley's a penetration expert. Maybe you've heard of him?"

Penetration expert? Now, that's one I hadn't heard before.

"I'm not really a connoisseur of porn."

Violet choked on her water.

"He tries to penetrate security systems, Ren," she explained. "He's the one the government hired to break into that military installation a few months back. The astonishing lack of security he uncovered was all over the news. It happened right before my visit to the island. His company installed this computer system for me."

"I have a bad feeling about this," Jennifer replied forlornly.

That in and of itself was enough to worry me. "Let's get something to eat," I suggested. "By the time we're through, maybe Stan can meet us back here and have a look at things."

"All right," Violet agreed.

I put my arm around her then turned to Jennifer and asked, "Know any place dark and gloomy with an interesting brew on tap?"

She smiled. "I know just the place."

Chapter Seventeen

“Interesting restaurant,” I observed as I looked around, taking in the décor. It was an unusual blend of seventies disco and earthy Asian influence. The mini mirrored balls, carpeting on the walls and chrome tables that were lit from underneath by blue lights made me feel as if I’d walked into some futuristic opium den.

“I met the owner at my shrink’s. He’s like you. Only much younger and single.” Jennifer led us to a cozy table in the corner.

“He’s Canadian?” Violet asked.

“He’s a vampire,” Jennifer said. “You’ve met Sirius, Violet. He’s my best friend.”

The staccato beats of Violet’s heart telegraphed her alarm. With assurance I placed my hand at the base of her spine and pulled out a chair for her.

“She’s an intuitive,” I whispered into Violet’s ear as I pushed in her chair.

Violet looked first at me, then at Jennifer. “An intuitive?”

Jennifer unfolded her napkin and set it daintily on her lap. “I kind of *know* things. Sirius keeps bagged blood around. You might consider giving it a go. If you don’t mind me saying so, Violet is looking a bit pale. I think someone may be over indulging just a tad.”

Violet self-consciously covered faint mark with her hand. Unless someone knew what they were looking for, they wouldn’t even notice it was there.

“Violet donated blood yesterday,” I explained. “And not to me.”

“Violet is sitting right here.” She was getting irritated. “I’ll have a martini, Grey Goose, rocks, extra olives,” she called out to the bartender. “What do you mean you kind of *know* things?”

“I’ll have a ginger beer and my new friend will have a glass of your O-negative,” Jennifer requested, sweetly.

I smiled at the buxom blonde bartender in the short black skirt and tight white blouse as she approached our table, menus in hand.

“I don’t want the O-negative,” I said softly.

“You don’t want the O-negative.”

“No one at this table ordered O-negative,” I told her. “I’ll have water.”

“Water,” she said, nodding.

“You may go now.” With a wave of my hand I broke through the invisible thread I’d used to evoke the simple thrall.

As soon as she walked away I turned to Jennifer. “I’m trying to keep a low profile. I’d appreciate it if you would be discreet.”

“No sweat. Will you teach me how to do that?”

“No.”

“I promise I would only use it for good.” She batted her long charcoal lashes at me.

“You have enough power already.”

I noticed Violet was rubbing her temples.

“Headache getting worse?” I asked. “Maybe we should order.”

“I’m starting to feel nauseous. I think I need some air. Order me anything. I’m just going to step outside for a few minutes.”

Violet started to push away from the table. Before she could get up, Jennifer reached out.

“What is it?” I asked.

Jennifer had a viselike grip on Violet’s wrist. “I don’t think she should go anywhere alone.”

Violet’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “Christ, could my life get any crazier? To think I used to complain about being bored.”

“I’m afraid this is all my fault,” I admitted.

“Your fault? Ren, this can’t possibly have anything to do with you.”

I prayed she was right, but somehow I knew she was wrong.

“I’ve put you in danger. I think they’ve found me.”

“Who?” Jennifer asked.

The bartender approached the table. I waited until she delivered our drinks and left.

“The Dominie,” I whispered, “most likely someone high in the order.”

“Whoa! What the hell did you do to piss *them* off?”

I looked at her, and for the briefest of moments I allowed her inside, letting her see just a glimpse.

Jennifer reeled from the impact and intensity of the connection. I reached out to steady her.

“What’s wrong?” Violet asked, alarmed. “You’re shaking.”

“You understand?” I asked Jennifer.

She nodded slowly.

Violet leaned across the table. “Understand what? Feeling left out here.”

Jennifer looked at me, her expression grave. “You really think it could be Cain?”

“Cain who?” Violet asked, reaching for Jennifer’s arm.

“You know, Abel’s brother. You two are going to need some help.”

“Jennifer, I don’t feel right about this,” Violet said for what seemed like the hundredth time.

“I’m telling you, Stan said he’s cleared it with Will. Stan’s not an alarmist. If he says it’s not safe for you to go home now, I think you need to trust that. My brother should be home soon.” Jennifer unlocked the door and welcomed us inside the guesthouse. “Meanwhile, make yourself at home.”

“Come on in, Ren. What are you waiting for?”

I stepped across the threshold. The white stucco guesthouse with its heavy wooden door was about the same size as Violet’s cottage, perhaps a tad larger. Tucked behind the main house and adjacent to the swimming pool, it was surrounded by an abundance of red and orange poppies.

The floors were covered in a gleaming Spanish tile. The furniture was rustic and simple. The back of the house was lined with windows. Jennifer began to busy herself, closing the drapes.

“You’ll be safe here,” she said.

Violet reached for my hand. “I want to go home.”

I lifted the palm of her hand and pressed my lips to it in a soft kiss. “I know.”

I sensed someone approaching and turned toward the entrance, sweeping Violet behind me.

Standing in the doorway was an impressive-looking man. It wasn’t so much his stature, but the way he carried himself.

“Violet Deeds, Byron Adams, my brother William Carlton.”

Jennifer’s brother was of medium build with close-cropped salt and pepper hair and intensely penetrating blue eyes.

“Call me Will.” He walked up to me without hesitation and extended his hand in friendship.

“Byron. This is Violet.”

“Welcome,” he said. “Jen said you two needed a place to stay for a few days. Glad to have you. Kitchen’s stocked with some of the basics. Can I get you anything? Beer? Soda?”

“Valium?” Violet asked.

Will grinned. “Sorry. Fresh out.”

“A diet soda would be great.”

“Nothing for me.” I needed to keep my head clear and my senses sharp.

“It might be more than a few days.”

I spun around.

“Stan!” Jennifer sidled up to the tall, rugged-looking man who’d managed to enter without notice and wrapped her arms around his bicep. “You’ve got this all sussed out, haven’t you?”

“What are you two into?” Stan asked, his voice steady and quiet.

Violet accepted a soda from Will. “Into?”

“They’re good people, Stan,” Jennifer said.

But Stanley raised his hand and cut her off. "You're not telling the whole truth."

Jennifer crossed her arms defensively.

"Well?"

She sighed. "Fine. She's a person. He's a vampire. He made a bad call, pissed off the wrong people."

Will finished swallowing, then cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, did you say umpire?"

"She said vampire," Stan interjected.

Will opened one of the shades that Jennifer had closed earlier. Sunlight flooded the room. I didn't flinch.

"He doesn't look like a vampire," Will said.

Undoubtedly any vampires they'd come across were young, weak or undisciplined.

"Tell them!" Jennifer demanded, her hands on her hips. "Better yet, show them."

"Show them what?"

"You know." She lifted her hands to either side of her head, forming them into claws, and growling. "Grrrr!"

I wasn't used to this. Things were happening too fast and as the seconds ticked by I was feeling more and more out of my element. I wasn't sure who I could trust. And, unfortunately, Violet was aware of my lack of confidence. She was afraid. She needed for me to be strong and—

"No!" Violet shrieked.

I looked at the letter opener that now protruded from my side. The harmless-looking slip of a girl had stabbed me with ease and without so much as a hint of intent.

"Christ! Jennifer!" Stan gasped.

"I'm sorry," she said, looking calmly into my eyes. "We might not have a lot of time. You're going to have to trust us. We're going to have to trust one another. You know what's coming, what they want, even if you don't want to admit it."

I reached down, and despite Violet's protests, I pulled the blade free. Blood seeped from the wound, spreading rapidly in a widening circle.

Violet led me to a sofa. "Get some towels! Ren, you've got to lie down—"

"I'm fine," I assured her.

"You're not fine, you're bleeding."

I lifted the edge of my T-shirt. The puncture wound had already closed. "Impervious, remember? Except of course—"

"Through me," Violet finished.

"That's right. You die, we both die." I used a clean section of fabric to wipe the blood from the letter opener.

The tall, rugged penetration expert said something, but I didn't hear him. I was too busy catching my mate, as she fell to the floor in a faint.

Chapter Eighteen

And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand;

When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.

And Cain said unto the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear.

Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me.

And the Lord said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.

And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.

—Genesis 4:11-16

Stanley was pacing back and forth in front of the dining table. “So, let me get this straight. This guy—

”

“Technically, he’s not a guy,” Jennifer interrupted.

“This *vampire*,” he corrected, “is after you because you quit your job?”

“It’s not that simple. Being Dominie is more than a job, it’s—”

“What?” Violet asked, sensing my alarm.

There it was. It was so obvious. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of it before now.

“Rita.” I stood and walked over to the window that looked out onto the pool. “They have Rita.”

“How do you know?” Violet asked.

“That’s got to be how they found you. It’s the only way. And if she told them, well, to get that out of her...”

Heat raged deep in my belly. My eyes flashed red as my fangs emerged from their sheaths and began to elongate. A deep low growl emanated from my chest.

“Watch, Stan, he’s about to change,” I heard Jennifer say behind my back.

“Who’s Rita?” Will asked.

I heard the scraping of a chair, presumably as Violet pushed back from the table. "Byron's consort."

She placed her hand comfortingly on my back. "She's immortal. Can they really do anything to hurt her?"

I fought to bring my feelings back under control. My fangs receded. I turned to face them. "With physical permanence? No. But there are all kinds of torture." I traced a path across Violet's forehead with my fingertips. "You should know that."

"Can I have a consort?" Stan asked Jennifer.

I looked up in time to see her elbow him in the gut.

"Rita is my friend," I corrected. "She's the only one who could have led them here. I'm sorry, Violet."

"And it does appear to be Violet they're after," Stanley said, softly, as he peeled the label from his now empty bottle of beer.

"How do you know that?" Will asked.

"The only thing accessed was the calendar on her hard-drive. At first I figured Jen must have surprised them before they were able to do any real damage. But maybe the calendar was all they ever wanted."

"You already went to the office? How did you get in?" Jennifer asked.

"Didn't have to get in. I had Pixel install a key logger," he replied. "Forgive me, Dr. Deeds."

"Violet."

"Forgive me, Violet, but the security in your building sucks. Remember? This is that little extra I threw in, so if someone were to access your system after-hours, I'd know about it?"

"I'd completely forgotten about that."

"When my pager went off, I assumed it was Jennifer. She'd said she was going into the office." Stan reached out and smoothed Jennifer's long silky hair. "If only I'd called you to double check. It would have... Dear Lord, when I think about what they might have done to you."

"I'm fine," Jennifer assured him.

Stanley released a sigh. I found myself wrapping my arms protectively around Violet's waist and pulling her in close.

"Why do they want my calendar?" Regrettably, Violet slipped free from my embrace and rejoined the others at the table.

Will and Stanley glanced at one another, but said nothing.

"Out with it, you two," Jennifer prompted.

"If I had to venture a guess, I'd say someone's looking to plan an abduction," Will replied, leaning back in his chair. "Question is, what would capturing Violet get the vampire?"

"First of all, you have to realize Cain isn't just any vampire. He's the first. The strongest. He's our father, it is his sin the most loyal, the Dominie, have spent their entire existence atoning for."

"I don't get it," Stan mused. "Immortality doesn't sound like a punishment; it sounds more like a reward to me."

"Not if what you want is to be inside the pearly gates and, if in order to get in, you have to be human. That would actually put us, mortals, in an enviable position," Will said. "Am I right?"

I shoved my hands deep into my pockets, feeling separate from the rest, alone. "When you die, you return to the garden. I've given up my chance at that, if I ever had it to begin with." I shook my head. "I'm not sure what I believe anymore."

"It's not about what you believe," Will said. "It's about what they believe."

"Violet, I think you should get away, far away." Jennifer looked at me and a shiver crept up my spine. Her eyes seemed to penetrate to the depths of my very soul. "This won't end well."

Violet shook her head. "Maybe his power is more myth than reality. A legend meant to keep you all behaving like good little vamps."

Stanley chuckled.

"What?" Violet asked, slightly annoyed.

"Sorry, but the phrase good little vamps...never mind."

Violet continued. "If this Cain is *the* Cain—"

I wanted to dismiss any doubt. "There's no if, he's the real deal."

Violet frowned. "*If* he is, and he was the first, then he had children, right?"

"Right," I agreed.

"He'd be in the same boat as you, Ren. He would have lost his immortality. He'd be tied, linked to a human, a woman. Right? I mean, he didn't reproduce using binary fission."

"What's binary fission?" Jen asked.

"I'll explain later," Stanley whispered, obviously not wanting to interrupt Violet again.

"What's your point?" I asked.

"That he's vulnerable, and a hypocrite. How can he preach celibacy? How is it you can't get your ticket punched, but he can? Huh?" she challenged.

I sighed. There was a lot Violet still didn't understand. "A vampire can have sex with a human woman and not claim her. Cain had many women early on, before."

Violet pressed on. "Before what?"

All eyes were on me, expectant, waiting to hear the story, the one we were all raised on. And so I began, "When Cain was cast out, into the world of darkness, he wandered aimlessly, until he found what was the first of many consorts. A generation was born; after that came another and another. Some were destined to be like Cain himself, to carry his curse, to bear his mark, to atone for his sins. Others were like his brother Abel, favored. They were Chosen, mortal."

They were all listening, in rapt attention.

“Seven generations passed before Cain again heard the voice of God. The Lord told Cain of the son who was to come. A son who would redeem mankind. He also revealed to Cain his own path for redemption, for the redemption of us all. It was then that Cain took a vow of celibacy and pledged his loyalty to serve, to carry forth the message. And we heard. And we saw.”

“Saw what?” Violet asked.

“The truth. Or, what I believed was the truth.”

“Well, fill the rest of us in, mate,” Will said.

“We’re taught in each generation some of the damned fall to temptation, mating with humans or worse, one of the Chosen, ruining their chance for redemption, relegating themselves to forever be East of Eden. Then there are others, heroes, holy men—the Dominie—the ones who are destined to be there in the end and welcomed home.”

“Wow,” said Jennifer.

I turned to her, my heart feeling heavy. “How is it you know so much about us, yet not that?”

She bit her lip. She seemed to be choosing her words carefully. “You have to remember, the vampires we’ve met, they’ve left the fold. They’ve rejected that history. They don’t believe in that path.”

“What do they believe in?” I asked.

Jennifer shook her head. “That’s not the question you need to be asking yourself. You need to prepare, Byron.”

“For what?”

“For what’s coming,” Jennifer said.

“And the question?”

She smiled. “The question is what do *you* believe in?”

I turned to Violet, sensing her anxiety. She was holding her breath.

I shook my head. “It used to all seem so clear. I had such faith. I was so certain.”

“And now?” Violet looked at me expectedly.

I leaned down and kissed my mate softly on the mouth. It mattered not who saw or heard. I felt no shame, I experienced no hesitation.

“You haven’t been my corruption,” I told Violet, with certainty. “You, my love, have been my salvation. And I? I am already home.”

Chapter Nineteen

“Won’t you come to bed?” Violet asked. “Will explained that the security around this place is better than Fort Knox. No one, not even Cain could get within ten feet of the door without setting off all those alarms.”

I ran my hand through my hair, a long-time nervous habit. Then I gazed at the moon. I missed Fred. I had questions and no one to talk to.

“We’re vagabonds, meant to wander. We’re aimless, isolated, alone.”

I heard her climb from the bed. I sensed her approach, but I didn’t turn around. Somehow I didn’t feel able to face her. Or maybe I just desperately needed for her to come to me, to reach out.

“You’re not alone, Ren. You’ll never be alone again.” She kissed my shoulder. “I’m sorry I was insistent on you coming to San Diego. It was foolish of me. I understand that now. Maybe we should try to negotiate with them?”

I shook my head. “No. We’ll take Will up on his offer. We’ll leave in a few days and stay in his father’s villa in Tuscany. That’ll give us a chance to regroup, to think all of this through. Money isn’t an object and there’s a great big world out there. We’ll get lost in it. I just wish...”

“You’re worried about Rita.”

It was true, I was, and I felt a pang of guilt. I was certain I was on shaky ground. Even with my limited relationship experience, I knew it was poor form to talk to one’s wife about one’s ex-mistress.

“I understand she’s your friend and that you care for her still. You don’t need to try to hide your feelings, Ren. Besides, you can’t. What’s the use in hiding your thoughts when I know how you feel inside? Reveal yourself to me. Let me in. Let me be your partner, not just your mate,” she pleaded.

I turned to face her. Violet’s eyes searched mine. The deep pools of green reminded me of everything fresh and clean, young and innocent. And in that moment, I knew. I was dead certain that my father loved my mother every bit as deeply as I loved Violet. Our house on the island wasn’t meant to be a prison; it was meant to be a fortress. His failing wasn’t about what he had done; it was about what he hadn’t done. He hadn’t fully revealed himself to her.

“A man could get so lost in those eyes of yours,” I murmured, leaning down to kiss her.

“What about a vampire?” she asked, tilting her lips up in invitation and running the tips of her fingers across the top of my belt buckle.

“Oh, they’re especially tempting to a vampire,” I muttered before crushing my mouth to hers. I didn’t bother standing on ceremony or taking time for foreplay. And I didn’t bother trying to suppress the nature of the beast within me.

My tongue slid inside her mouth and as it tangled with hers, my fangs elongated. There was an intentional nick and then nirvana. I heard the buttons of Violet’s shirt strike the floor as I ripped it open. She fumbled with my belt buckle. I lowered the lace of her bra and teased her already pebbled nipple with my tongue before latching on to the top of one full, creamy breast. I sunk my fangs into it, taking what I wanted, what I needed, what only Violet was able to give me.

She cried out and laced her fingers through my hair, for a second trying to pry me off, but as the sensations coursed through her and her hand found my cock, she held my head fast to her breast, encouraging me to drink.

I took two more pulls, then released her with a growl. I lifted her effortlessly into the air and turned, pinning her against the wall. Violet’s eyes widened and she gasped. My gaze was drawn back to the narrow rivulet of blood that was winding down over the full mound of her succulent breast.

“Ren,” she whispered, huskily, wrapping her legs around my waist and her hand around my cock. “Wait a second. We don’t have any protection.”

“Fuck protection,” I said, quietly, my fangs receding.

The tip of my cock was poised at her entrance. I leaned my forehead against Violet’s and waited for the doubt, the guilt, the fear to come. Only it didn’t. Instead I was filled with a quiet resolve, a certainty. Perhaps I hadn’t been on the wrong path after all. Perhaps I had been on the right path, the path of redemption, only I’d sacrificed the wrong things for the wrong reasons.

“What is it?” Violet’s legs slipped from around my waist and I lowered her to the ground.

I turned away from her. “It’s nothing.”

She’d have none of that. Violet rounded upon me, placing both hands on my shoulders. She looked me steadily in the eye. “You want to be a father.”

I swallowed. “I’m going to die, and so are you. Not today, not tomorrow, but soon. You said I should do something that matters.”

“I was thinking along the lines of donating some money to one of the homeless shelters.”

The trail of blood was still evident on her breast and it beckoned to me.

“Does it hurt?” It was an unnecessary question. Through the claim I could tell that the pleasure outweighed the pain, but I needed her to voice it nonetheless.

Violet followed my gaze. She snatched a tissue from the box by the bed and moved to dab at the wound. I grabbed hold of her wrist, stopping her.

“You want more?” She used a finger on her free hand to sweep up the remnants of blood, then offered it to me. As I took it into my mouth, more spilled from the unclosed wound.

"I'm afraid I'll always want more of you." I leaned down and lapped at the puncture marks, staying the flow, erasing the evidence of the stain on the canvas of her skin. "Not your blood. You." I shook my head. "Everything I knew, everything I thought..."

I nodded. "Yes, everything I was taught."

"And now you see things differently?"

I tossed the soiled tissue onto the nightstand, then cupped Violet's face in my hands, the face of the woman I loved, the face of my salvation.

"No," I told her. "I see things as they are. The sins of my father are not mine, not mine to bear and certainly not mine to atone for. Cain is wrong, and he has to know it."

"I don't understand."

"Think. What would happen to my race should we be free to follow our hearts, to mate and have children?"

"You'd all eventually die?"

"Except for Cain. And nothing will change that." I stepped back and swept my arm through the air. "This is the Garden, Violet."

Laughter began to bubble up out of me. Violet lifted her hand to her mouth and spoke into it as if it were a microphone. "You heard it here first. Byron Renfield has gone round the bend. Mr. Renfield recently ended his illustrious career as Treasurer of—"

Violet shrieked as I lifted her into my arms and began to spin around.

"Stop! Put me down!"

I tossed her onto the bed and pounced. Violet was already naked and it took me no time to divest myself from my remaining clothes.

"This isn't the end of anything, baby," I assured her as I began to leave a trail of hot, open-mouthed kisses down the length of her neck, across her breasts, over her stomach.

"No?" She was already breathless with anticipation.

I hooked my arms under Violet's knees and pulled her to the edge of the bed, before stepping back onto the floor. She was spread wide before me, her wild red hair fanned across the bed linens and her pussy glistening with arousal. I rubbed the pad of one thumb up and down her moistened slit spreading her juices, then I slid my index finger into her velvet folds and began to rhythmically stroke her from the inside. "This is the beginning."

"I want..."

From experience, I knew her release wasn't far off. Her head was thrown back, her neck stretched before me, beckoning to me.

"I wish I could spend eternity with you," I confessed, sliding another finger inside, thrusting in and out of her hot core.

“Oh, Ren!” she cried out, whether it was from her pleasure or my pain I wasn’t sure.

My cock was aching for her and my heart was aching from the realization that I’d almost missed this...her...love.

I leaned over her, my cock brushing against the softness of her curls. I searched her eyes. I opened myself to her as never before, and she felt it. She felt everything. “I can’t give you forever, Violet, I wish I could.”

Violet’s eyes filled with tears. “I don’t need forever, baby. All I need is you.” She wrapped her hand around my cock and guided me in, kissing me all the while. The kiss was long and slow, almost languid. And when it ended, I was sheathed deep inside her.

“You sure you’re ready to start a family?”

My fangs elongated as I leaned down in search of that spot on her neck, the one just below and behind her ear, the one that was mine. I had no misgivings.

“I’m ready to start a revolution,” I whispered. Then I latched on, firmly, my lips covering my mark, my fangs piercing her flesh before retracting. Her walls clenched around me and as I emptied myself inside her, her warm essence filled my mouth and my being, until it was the only thing inside me, until I felt no longer myself, separate, alone.

Suddenly my mind was filled with an array of loose, unconnected images that skittered across my field of vision like a flurry of dried leaves blowing in the autumn wind. Dark caves. Dungeons. Women in chains. A baby, bathed in sunlight. Blood. Violet’s eyes. Violet’s eyes. She was looking at me. My heart was slamming inside my chest.

“Are you all right?” I asked, hesitantly.

For a second she looked confused, then she smiled and reached up, her hand covering her mark. “You didn’t take much. I’ll be fine. You having second thoughts?”

I closed my eyes, trying desperately to recall the details of what I had seen. “I saw something.” I pulled out of her gently.

Violet scurried from the bed and headed into the bathroom. I heard water running in the sink.

“Fireworks like on the Forth of July? I get that from guys a lot,” she called out.

I turned down the covers of the bed, then crawled between the clean, white sheets. Whatever it was, I couldn’t seem to put my finger on it and Violet certainly hadn’t experienced it or my reaction to it.

“Tuscany, huh? Guess we’ll have to learn to speak Italian,” Violet said as she slipped in next to me. She draped her arm across my waist and laid her head upon my chest.

“I speak Italian,” I told her. “*Parlo Italiano.*”

“Will you teach me?” She tried to stifle a yawn.

I reached down and slowly caressed her bottom. “How ever will you repay me?”

“I have this little Catholic school girl outfit I could wear during our lessons,” she suggested, her hand drifting up to trace an invisible pattern across my pecs.

I imagined Violet bending over a desk, tight white shirt, short plaid skirt that bared her... My cock began to stir again at the image. I rolled over so she was underneath me.

“How short is the skirt?” I asked her, sliding down her body, intent on getting one more taste of Heaven before drifting off to sleep.

Chapter Twenty

“That’s an awfully big needle.” I winced in anticipation of the pain.

“Are you kidding?” Stan asked.

“I don’t like needles.”

Stanley looked confused. “But you’re a vampire. It can’t hurt you.”

“I’ll be fine, Byron,” Violet assured me. “Although I still think this is ridiculous.”

“Better safe than sorry,” Stanley replied as he inserted the microchip between Violet’s shoulder blades.

“I can’t watch.” I had to turn around.

“Oh, it’s all over, you big baby.” Violet laughed, rounding on me and giving me a quick kiss. I handed her sweater back to her and she slipped it over her head.

“I think I should go with you.”

She sighed. “We’ve been through this. If we want to leave town tonight, we’re going to have to split up. There’s too much to do. I’ll only be gone an hour. Stanley will be with me.”

I plunged my hands deep into my pockets. “Can’t Wes do the follow-up with Isabelle?”

“Ren, I’ve already asked him to take over all of my patients until they are able to find other doctors. I can’t ask him for anything else.”

“Fine.”

“Fine,” she repeated, walking toward the door.

Just as she picked up her purse, I added, “I’m going with you.”

“Morning, Rachel!” Violet chirped. “Rachel, this is Stanley and Byron. Boys, this is Rachel. She temps for several of us here in the building. Jennifer’s been training her so she can cover next week when... Where is Jennifer?”

“Did you notice elevator number three is out again? I’m guessing she’s in it. She was late so I called her on her cell. She said she was about to step into the elevator, and a few seconds later the alarm started going off. That’s the third time in two weeks.”

“Oh, dear,” Stanley gasped. He pulled out his cell and began to dial.

"It's no use. There's no cell reception in the elevators for some reason. Your nine o'clock's already in your office, doc. Darling baby."

Violet placed her hand on Stanley's shoulder. "I'll be finished in a few minutes. Why don't you go see if you can do anything to help Jen? I'll be fine. Ren can even lock the door behind you if you like."

Stanley nodded. "I'll be right back."

No sooner was Stanley out the door, Violet began to head down the hallway to her office. "Give me a second," I called after her. She paused, then turned around to face me.

"You can't come in with me while I examine a patient, Ren," she said, hands on her hips.

"But—"

"No."

"Stubborn!"

She smiled, sweetly. "You're stuck with me, you know."

I walked over to her, placed my hands at her waist and pulled her flush to me. "I know," I whispered against the shell of her ear before placing a kiss on top of my mark. "Hurry, we've got a new life to start."

Violet pulled back. "I'll be ten minutes, fifteen tops," she said before walking away and disappearing in her office.

I sat close to the door and picked up the copy of the *San Diego Union* sitting on the end table and started to thumb through it. I scanned several of the articles, but nothing seemed to hold my interest.

"Can I get you some coffee?" Rachel asked. "I have a fresh pot back here."

"That would be fantastic." I tossed the newspaper back onto the table.

"Don't get up," she said. "I can bring it to you. Cream and sugar?"

Before I could reply my cell phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Father!" the voice on the other side of the line cried.

"Christian?"

"Oh, God!" he sobbed. "They've killed her! Isabelle is dead and baby Sophie...she's gone! There's blood everywhere...everywhere. I don't know what to do."

I suddenly realized I could no longer feel Violet. I bolted. In the blink of an eye I'd closed the gap between myself and the door to Violet's office, the door that was no longer there. I must have kicked it in. Perhaps I just ran through it.

"Holy shit!" Rachel gasped from behind me.

"Get Stanley," I heard myself say. My voice sounded disembodied to my own ears. I stepped over the door. The office was empty. They'd left the window open and the breeze from it was blowing a stack of papers that had been on Violet's desk onto the floor. There was no sign of a struggle.

A shudder passed through me. Like icy fingertips it trailed up my spine, taking hold of my heart and squeezing. Time stopped. I held my breath as I stepped up to the window, grabbing onto its frame. The irony of my position wasn't lost on me. The image of my father as he'd stood on the day of my mother's death swam before my eyes.

I tried to push it aside and instead focus on what was true. Violet was alive. I leaned out the open window, the sun hitting me in the face. I braced myself, remembering how my mother's body had looked, broken and twisted as it lied in the courtyard on that fateful day. I swallowed down the bile in my throat, then I opened my eyes and searched the ground below. Nothing.

Just as I was about to jump so that I could inspect the area more closely, Stanley ran into the office. Jennifer and Rachel were close behind.

"We're too late!" Jennifer stepped over the door and made her way over to the window. She placed her hand over mine. "Is she?"

I turned to look at her. "She's still alive and they haven't hurt her," I told her. "If they had, I would have felt it, known it. I didn't register a thing, not even surprise. They must have drugged her, used something fast acting."

"Let's move." Stanley pulled his cell phone from his pocket and dialed. "Will, they've got the package," he said simply, then hung up.

"That's it?" I asked. "We've got to find her!"

"We will," Jennifer said.

Stanley placed his hand on my shoulder. "I'll get the car. Meet me out front."

"Can somebody tell me what's going on?" Rachel asked.

I turned toward her and our eyes connected. "Nothing's going on," I assured her. "It's been a slow morning. There was only one patient. The doctor let you go home early."

"It's been a slow morning," Rachel repeated.

"Tell her she doesn't have to come back," Jennifer whispered before walking out of the room. "My vacation has been cancelled."

"Can I get you anything?" Jennifer asked.

"My mate!" I growled. I was ready to jump out of my skin, feeling the need to do something, anything. Instead I was stuck here, inside Stanley Houghton's home office. The place looked like something out of a futuristic spy film. One wall was filled with large flat screen monitors, another with racks of stainless steel shelving loaded with gadgets and equipment. There were no windows and the only piece of furniture in the room was the chair in front of the console where Stanley sat, busily typing.

"We'll get her back," Will said.

My gut twisted and my heart wrenched. Violet was awake, and she was frightened. I tried to reach her through the claim and offer her strength and assurance, to be what she needed me to be and not the failure I was. But my message seemed to have no effect on her. Perhaps she was too terrified to open herself to me. Perhaps whatever drug they'd given her was interfering with our connection. I wasn't sure.

He reached for my arm. "We'll get her back," he repeated.

The instant he touched me, the anger I'd been holding in check erupted, a primal roar emanated from deep within my chest. "You don't know that!" I shouted. I knew I'd changed fully and completely and that I'd frightened everyone in the room. I could smell it, their fear. Their hearts raced. I stared at them through reddened eyes. Will reached for his sister's hand and backed away from me slowly, pulling her with him. Then I saw the image on the central screen. It was a map and there was a red dot on it. It was moving. Violet.

"Is that her?" I asked. "Is that Violet?"

Stanley walked up to the screen. "Yes, that's her."

I joined him and watched as the image continued to move, shift, the dot getting smaller. "She's moving awfully fast."

"She's on a plane," Stanley said.

Will went over to the console and began to type. The screen in front of us changed, giving us a broader view.

"Where are they heading is the question," Will murmured.

I knew where they were headed. "BaMidbar. They're going to Cain's lair. They're taking her to BaMidbar."

The sound of glass shattering on the floor pierced the air and drew our attention from the screen. Jennifer was leaning, one hand braced against the wall for support, the other over her stomach, a puddle of water and shards from the glass she'd been drinking from at her feet.

"Darling!" Stanley raced to her aid. He caught her in his arms and eased her to the floor as her knees buckled from underneath her.

"He... Oh, my God!" Jennifer was sobbing, her hands clawing at the front of Stanley's shirt.

"What is it?"

"Stanley, you're going to need help. You can't do this alone. That place, it's like a fortress, an underground fortress filled with twists and turns and... Those poor women, you must save them!"

I dropped to my knees next to her on the floor, heedless of the shards of glass digging into them. "What women? What is it you see, Jennifer?"

She looked up at me. The instant our eyes connected I dove into them, casting out and following the invisible line that quickly wove its way into the recesses of her mind. Our gazes remained locked. My eyes

became hers. The images flowed into my consciousness. Dungeons. Women in chains. Violet's eyes filled with terror.

An alarm sounded, breaking our connection.

"What is it?" I asked.

Will returned to the console and scanned the screens. "Just a car approaching, a black Mercedes. Is this your man?"

I stood back up, crossed over to where Will was standing, and looked over his shoulder. "That's him," I replied as I saw Romeo reach for the handle of the passenger's door. Before his hand made contact the door opened and Christian emerged, his shirtfront covered in blood. He lifted Hannah into his arms. She was limp, like a little rag doll.

"Dear God," Will whispered. "It's as if she's been bathed in blood."

I imagined what the child had witnessed and anger swelled inside me. She'd not only lost her mother, it had happened brutally and in front of her. It was something Hannah would never forget and it very likely was all my fault. They thought the child, these people were important to me. If they weren't before, they sure as hell were now.

Will looked at me, his eyes registering the horror. "They did this in front of her?"

Jennifer climbed to her feet. "Let them in, Stanley."

They were at the front door now. Christian's face was filled with fury, determination and the thirst for revenge. In Hannah's I saw nothing. It was as if every thought, every feeling had been sucked out of her.

"Can you call Wes?" I asked Jennifer.

"Of course, his Margo is about the same size as the little one. I'll see if he can bring her some fresh clothes. Stanley, can you get something for Byron's friend to wear?"

"Right away," Stanley replied. He headed for the door. When he reached the threshold he paused, turning back to face me. I smelled his fear. It was an emotion Stanley wasn't accustomed to. "How the hell are we going to fight something impervious?"

I thought of Violet. "We all have vulnerabilities."

"True," Will agreed.

"We're going to need a plane," I said. "Can you get us one?"

Will nodded. "It's going to cost us. I know someone who owes me. I'll call him."

"Money isn't a problem. Whatever it takes. Whatever the cost." I checked my watch. "Cain's footing the bill. The market's open in Tokyo. It's time for me to go back to work."

Chapter Twenty-one

“Will you join us for dinner?” Jennifer asked.

I’d found a quiet guest room upstairs and had been working for several hours making trades and transferring funds, essentially decimating the private coffers of the Dominie. Most of the money had been sitting there, where I’d left it, which didn’t surprise me. Someone had moved a bit of it around, changed a couple passwords, nothing substantial and nothing that erased the backdoor access I’d ensured I would always have, just in case. In the past few hours I’d stolen hundreds of billions of dollars without batting an eye. I didn’t intend to keep it, necessarily. My intention was to bargain with it, to hold it hostage, to use it to get my mate back.

I didn’t even look up. “I’m not hungry.”

“You need to eat.” Jennifer peered over my shoulder.

I promptly put the computer to sleep. As soon as the screen faded to black I spun around in the swivel chair and faced her.

“What’s going to happen?” I asked pointedly.

Jennifer sat on the edge of the bed and sighed. “I wish I knew, but I don’t.”

I raised an eyebrow, uncertain whether to believe her. “I’d rather know than not. Even if it’s bad, even if it’s the end, I’d rather know. You saw inside the compound?”

Jennifer nodded.

“Can you try again? Can you try to see Violet?”

“It doesn’t exactly work that way.”

“Try. Please?”

She swallowed, then closed her eyes. Her forehead furrowed. I waited patiently while a minute passed, then another. “I’m sorry,” she said, finally opening them again. “I’m not getting anything.”

I reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. “If you do?”

She squeezed back. “You’ll be the first to know.”

“How is Hannah?” I asked her, changing the subject.

Jennifer stood and smoothed down her skirt. “Wes says she’s in shock. He gave her something to help her sleep.”

“You don’t approve.”

She walked over to the windows that overlooked the back yard. "Sleep won't erase the horror and it won't bring back her mother. Dead is dead. Unless, of course, you're immortal." She turned around and smiled at me.

"Which I'm not," I told her. "Not anymore."

"How does it work?" Stanley asked.

He was leaning in the doorway. How long he'd been there I wasn't sure. The man had an uncanny ability that allowed him to sneak up on me that left me feeling uneasy.

He scratched the back of his head self-consciously. "Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. There's something I wanted you to see back in the control room. Then we need to talk."

"Fine, I'm through here."

I let Stanley lead the way.

"Will and I interviewed Christian and Wes," he began. "They both say there's a lot they don't know. We need more information about the Dominie, about Cain, about BaMidbar. We've compiled a long list of questions."

"I wired the money to the account numbers you provided." I followed him down the staircase. "And I have the list of e-mail addresses for you."

"And the corresponding messages?"

"Those, too." I handed him the flash drive I'd tucked into my pocket earlier.

Stanley accepted the small stick. "Now you understand you must check in once every twenty-four hours to avoid execution of your instructions. Once every twenty-four hours without fail."

"Yes. I understand," I told him. "If we don't make it..."

"Yo, Stanley!" a deep voice boomed from downstairs. "We've got the feed."

"Hurry!" Stanley rushed down the stairs. "This we don't want to miss."

I followed him into the control room, pausing briefly to take in the change. A series of card tables had been set up. They were covered with equipment. And several new people had arrived, people I neither recognized nor trusted.

"Where's Romeo?" I asked. "Who are these people?"

"Relax. They're here to help." Will pointed to the main screen in the room.

A pale young man with almost-white hair and angular features hit a few buttons on the console and the screen filled with images. They were far away, but familiar.

Will walked up to the screen and pointed to an area off to the left where there was a diffused pattern of red dots.

"Is this the place?" Will asked. He turned to the young man at the console. "Zoom in, Pixel."

I recognized the landing strip and the nearby surface buildings immediately. I'd been there just weeks before for a command performance. Cain had summoned me. He'd wanted a financial report.

"That's it," I acknowledged.

"It's all underground?" he asked.

"Yes."

"How do we get in?" asked the very large, very black man who belonged to the booming voice. "Ray, by the way," he said, extending his hand. I accepted it.

"Byron. What do you mean by we?" I looked around the room. "I'm doing this alone."

He shook his head. "No, you're not."

"That's what they're counting on," Will interjected. "It's what they're expecting. So, we lull them into believing it's the case. Once they do, we strike."

"Strike?" I laughed. "No offense, guys. But you'll be no more annoying than a half-a-dozen gnats."

"We know we can't outmuscle them," Stanley said. "But you said it yourself. We all have vulnerabilities, we just need to determine what theirs are."

I glanced around the room, my eyes flitting from one human to another. Dead is dead. Maybe it was true they were all going to die anyways. Maybe it was true that in the blink of an eye their time on this planet will have passed. But they were here, now. This was their lifetime and I couldn't ask them to sacrifice it, not even for Violet.

"I need to speak to you privately," I told Stanley. I didn't wait for a response. I walked abruptly from the room, down the hall, and into the kitchen. Jennifer was there, standing at the island, tossing a large salad.

"Leave us," I commanded.

"Don't mind me." She waved her hand. "Continue."

"Byron," Stanley started. "You can't hope to do this by yourself. We've got a crack team here. Ray, the big guy who called us downstairs, he's an explosives expert. Pixel, he can hack into anything. Will—"

"They don't understand," a quiet voice said.

I turned to look at Christian. He wasn't a big guy to begin with, but now he appeared even smaller, more vulnerable. He was almost swallowed up by Stanley's shirt.

"How is Hannah?" I asked him.

Chris looked down at his shoes. Then he bent and scraped off a spot of dried blood. "Motherless," he replied, his voice sounding hollow.

"I'm terribly sorry about Isabelle," I told him, opening myself to him, trying to absorb some of his pain.

As soon as he felt the connection he looked up, his eyes meeting mine.

"I should have mated with her," he whispered, his voice so quiet I wasn't sure the others would have been able to hear.

"Why didn't you?"

“Not for the reason you think. Not because I was being noble.”

“Why?”

“I wasn’t free. I’m not free. I belong to someone.” He rolled up his sleeve, revealing a mark I’d only seen one other time in my existence.

“The mark of the Lilan,” I gasped, unable to keep the surprise from my voice. “That’s why you weren’t sleeping.”

“Who are the Lilan?” Stanley asked. “Vampires?”

“Not vampires,” I said. “Demons. They are descendents of Lilith. Succubi.”

“There are succubi? Bloody hell!” Stanley cried. He turned to Jennifer. “Did you know about the succubi?”

“No, honey. I didn’t know about the succubi.” She handed him a cheese grater and a wedge of Parmesan. “Grate.”

“I loved Isabelle,” Christian declared. “This?” He held up his forearm defiantly. “This is not about love.”

“It’s not your fault.” I reached out to comfort him. “Isabelle’s death, Sophie’s disappearance, those things are my fault.”

He pushed away from me so abruptly it almost caused me to stumble.

“Don’t take away my pain!” he shouted. Then, more quietly, he added, “It’s all I have.”

“You have me,” came the small voice from the doorway.

“Sorry.” Wes scooped Hannah up. “I thought you’d finally drifted off, poppet.”

“A lady came. She—”

Christian moved with preternatural speed. Before Hannah was able to complete her sentence she was in his arms. “She what?”

“She was beautiful, like a fairy, with butterfly wings and a long gown that shimmers in the moonlight.” Hannah yawned.

It was the Lilan.

“She’s not a fairy, baby,” Chris told her.

Hannah frowned. “Are you sure? She leaves a trail of pixie dust behind her when she moves, like Tinkerbell. See?” She pointed to just over my right shoulder.

I spun around, placing myself between the Lilan and the younger members of my Clan, children it was my duty to protect.

“Father,” she said, her tone soft and melodious.

She was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. Her indigo hair hung in loose curls framing her face and cascading over her shoulders and down her back. The gown she wore clung to her body like a

second skin, ending in a pool of what looked like liquid mercury. Her azure blue wings fluttered behind her lazily, releasing what appeared to be a sprinkling of metallic silver powder.

“Stanley!” Jennifer hissed.

“Yes, dear?” Stanley replied, his voice sounding wistful and almost dreamy.

“Step away from the succubus!”

Stanley shook his head. “Yes, dear.” He sidled up to Jennifer, dutifully encircling her waist with his arm.

I bowed to the Lilan, careful to avoid direct eye contact. “Lilan, you are outside your bounds. No one sleeps here.”

The demon lowered her eyes. She pressed her hands together as if in prayer and bowed before me, lowering herself in subjugation. It appeared as if she were almost melting into the floor. Her gown billowed around her, a series of concentric circles, the edges spread to lap at my feet like the incoming tide. Then she lowered her face, slowly to the ground, until her forehead rested on the tips of my shoes.

She rose. “I am Luna,” she said simply.

It took me a moment to recover from the mere shock of the display. It wasn’t at all what I expected.

“What do you want?” I asked.

She moved, gliding across the floor, trying to peer around me. I moved with her, careful to keep myself between her and Christian. It was a foolish thing to do. She was stronger than I and far more powerful.

Luna smiled. And when she did, light radiated from her. A soft glow that seemed to warm the entire room. “Creatures like us, we are not always what we seem, are we, Dominie?”

“Maybe not always, but more often than not, at least in my experience.”

“Some of us choose to fight our nature and follow our hearts.” She reached into the folds of her gown. “You understand that, don’t you, Dominie.”

Stanley pulled a gun out of nowhere. He trained the weapon on the Lilan. “Will, I need backup in the kitchen!”

“No, wait!” I shouted.

Will swung around the kitchen corner, gun drawn.

“Hold your position!” Stanley yelled.

Luna held a sphere in the palm of her hand. Inside were rolling clouds of pink with flashes of purple. I’d never seen anything like it. It was obviously magical.

“It wasn’t me,” she said, her eyes searching out Christian’s. “I had nothing to do with Isabelle’s death or your child’s disappearance. I am sorry. I feel your pain. I wish to comfort you.”

“Please,” Christian choked out, “please leave me in peace.”

Luna bent and carefully placed the sphere on the floor. When she looked back up, her eyes were brimming with tears. "I know you will never love me. But that doesn't stop me from loving you."

"You can't love!" Christian shouted.

The force of his anger seemed to shake her, but only momentarily.

"I had someone do a spell," Luna said. "Her aura is protected."

"Get her back for me. Get her back and I'll do whatever you want, be whatever you want," he pleaded.

"And how would I do that?"

"Do as you always do. Attack while your victim is asleep."

She looked away and softly muttered. "Whatever you may think of me, I am not your enemy. If you knew what I'd risked..."

She raised her eyes to meet mine and I looked at her steadily, seeing her in a different light, as a kindred spirit trapped in a cloak of misguided nobility for reasons long forgotten or no longer realized.

"You have your answer, Dominie," she said. Then she faded into the ether.

"I think I need to sit," Stanley said. He looked a bit pale. Jennifer quickly guided him to a chair.

"You're shaking," she observed.

"It's the effect of the Lilan." Wes slid into the chair next to Stanley. "They can't help it."

"What about the talking in riddles? Can they help that?" Jennifer asked.

"It wasn't a riddle," I said. "She was trying to help us. Immortals are vulnerable to the succubi while we're sleeping. In that state we are helpless to fight back."

"Magics?" Christian asked as he bent over to retrieve the globe the Lilan had left behind. He held it up to the light, inspecting it closely. "Could we use magics to make them sleep and get Violet and Sophie back?"

"Cain employed mages from time to time to help with security, but Thomas always handled the details. I don't know anyone that powerful," I admitted. "Do you?"

Christian shook his head.

"Think!" I pushed. "There must be someone we can ask. You found Angelina. There must be other vampires like you, like Angelina, other vampires who have rebelled and left the Clan. Maybe one of them would know someone."

"I'm not a part of their network, Byron. I know there is one, but I honestly don't know how to contact them. I've been on my own since my parents died when I was fourteen. Angelina found me, not the other way around. And, I haven't been able to reach her, not since... Hannah said she left with them. Whether of her free will or not, I don't know. I'm sorry."

"Dammit!" I turned to Jennifer. "Do you think your friend who owns the bar might—"

"What about a chemically induced sleep? Could that work?" Wes asked.

“You mean like a sedative? That’d have to be some whopper of a pill,” Stanley said.

Wes shook his head. “I was thinking more along the lines of a general anesthesia. What if we were to use something like halothane?”

“Halothane?” I asked.

“Or, maybe a Fentanyl vapor. I’m not sure how much you’d need in order for it to work on a vampire. I imagine we’d have to keep the level pretty high, and we’d have to sustain it as long as we needed them to remain out.”

“We can experiment on Byron and Chris!” Jennifer interjected enthusiastically. “It’s not like we can hurt them.”

“If Luna is to be trusted Sophie will be protected. Christian?” I asked.

“For some inexplicable reason I’m important to her. She knows Sophie is important to me. With this, she can be trusted.”

I turned to Wes. “Could it hurt Violet?”

He nodded. “If given too much and not revived in time, yes.”

I didn’t like the sound of that, not one bit. “How much time would we have? Some of the Dominie, including Cain, are older and far stronger than I am.”

“You’re asking questions I don’t know the answers to. Let me call my friend, Jim. He’s an anesthesiologist. We’ll put our heads together. I’ll let you know what I find out.”

“If your idea works, we’ll need a mechanism of distribution.” Stanley said.

“And a way to get it into BaMidbar,” Will added. “Is there anything like a central heating or cooling system?”

I nodded. “Installed about forty years ago. I wrote the check.”

“Do you think the guy who did the work is still alive?” Stanley asked.

“No idea, why?”

“Maybe we could get some plans,” Stanley suggested. “Give whatever information you have to Pixel. Wes? Where would we get some of this stuff?”

“We don’t even know if it’s going to work yet,” Wes cautioned.

“It’ll work,” Jennifer said.

All eyes turned to her. The room fell silent.

Will crossed the room and kissed his sister on the cheek. “I’m on it,” he said. “We’ll want to deal directly with a manufacturer as close to BaMidbar as we can get so we don’t have to transport it. Give me an hour.”

Will pulled out his cell phone and started to dial.

“Let’s say this does work. Once everyone inside is incapacitated we’ll need to somehow contain them,” Stanley said.

I looked over at Jennifer. The instant our eyes met I knew she'd been thinking of the exact same thing. A cold chill raced up my spine. "There are dungeons. I don't know where, exactly. But they're in there somewhere."

"Are the dungeons strong enough to hold them all?" Stanley asked.

I shuddered at the memory of the women in chains. Was that where they planned to take Violet?

"If Cain built a prison, you can bet it's strong enough to hold just about anything."

"Even him?"

"He may be the strongest of the vampires, but there are creatures stronger than we are," Chris added. "Do you think he used magics to secure the prison?"

I nodded. "It would make sense."

Stanley climbed to his feet. "How many will we be up against?"

"I don't know. I've been to events where there are hundreds. Most often a dozen, maybe two at the most."

"Well, seems like we all have our work cut out for us. We're going to need someone on the inside. Someone to let us in once the anesthesia has taken effect."

Stanley looked at me.

I nodded.

"We can set everything up before you go in," he said. "The entire operation can be controlled remotely, but we can't be too far away."

"I think I know a place. I can show you on the map," I volunteered.

"Let's take a look."

We headed back to the control room. "We'll supply you with a mini-respirator, inserted into your nostrils. They won't even know it's there," Stanley suggested on the way.

The three of us walked up to the large screen at the front of the room where there was a satellite image of BaMidbar.

"Can you do it?" Stanley asked softly.

Could I do it? I'd succeeded in keeping my mind closed off when I was there a few weeks ago. But Cain himself hadn't been there then, or so I'd thought at the time.

"Or die trying," I told him, reaching into my pocket. I pulled out my cell phone and dialed.

"Thomas? It's Byron Renfield. Tell Cain I'm on my way. I have something he wants."

Chapter Twenty-two

The elevator doors swooshed open. Thomas stood alone in the rotunda, Cain's private reception area. The room was stark and cold and meant to intimidate. There were no chairs, no furniture at all as a matter of fact. My tennis shoes squeaked on the highly polished black marble floor as I made my way into the room. I'd worn my oldest blue jeans and a t-shirt. A visit to BaMidbar usually called for the finest of my suits, but this wasn't going to be a usual visit. I wasn't planning to do any bowing or scraping.

"This is a new look for you," Thomas observed.

He was dressed in his customary blue robe and white linen turban. The small bells which adorned the hem of his robe chimed as he made his way toward me. Even in the dim lighting of the rotunda, his gold-threaded and jewel-encrusted breastplate sparkled impressively. Only this time, I didn't feel impressed.

Thomas had been Dominie much longer than I had. How long, I wasn't sure. He was closer to Cain than anyone. I could feel his power pressing into me. Pushing. Prodding. But not penetrating. He smiled.

"You've gotten stronger in some ways," he said.

I merely looked at him.

He shook his head, then waved his hand dismissively. "It doesn't matter. What's done is done. You've come to do penance, make amends. That is what matters now."

"Amends," I repeated.

"Even the strongest of us have slipped now and again. We can overcome this. We have before," he said cryptically.

"How?"

"Discreetly. I'm handling this personally, due to the..."

Thomas shook his head as if trying to clear it. It was the first sign the anesthesia was working. I'd been kept waiting in the hall for about twenty minutes and had seen that same early sign in the lesser vamp that had been manning the desk.

"The what?" I prompted.

Thomas cleared his throat then continued, "Due to the delicate nature of your office, of course. I've already found a suitable candidate. A young vampire. American. We'll begin his training as soon as possible, with your help, of course. You'll withdraw from the public eye. Eventually he'll take over."

"Take over?"

“Are you really that naïve?” he asked me. “Must I spell it out for you? He’ll take over your identity. It’s imperative we not shake the beliefs of those who have had the strength to remain faithful.”

He looked at me with disgust. “I’ve always thought you too meek to be made Dominie.”

That pissed me off.

“Where’s my mate?”

“Safe.” He turned his back on me and walked over to the only door in the vast room. “And she’ll remain safe so long as you do your job. You might even be allowed a visit every once in a while. A reward, so to speak, for good performance.”

I knew then who the women were, the women I’d seen in my vision, the women who were chained in the dungeon. I wasn’t the only Dominie to have slipped, to have taken a mate. That much was clear. What I didn’t know was whether all of the others had readily rolled over, accepted their offer, and willingly participated in the proposed charade, training their replacements until they were no longer needed.

I shook my head. “I don’t think so.”

Thomas stopped and slowly turned around. “You don’t *think* so?”

“When was the last time Cain checked the balance?” I asked, casually.

I was stalling, trying to keep Thomas in the smaller room a little bit longer. I could sense Cain’s presence on the other side of the door. His power was reaching out to me, trying to penetrate my mind. He could initiate a thrall without direct contact, or so I’d heard. If he was still unaffected enough to attempt that, I needed to keep my distance, give the anesthesia more time to work. I fought off the intrusion and, with a sense of deep satisfaction, watched the blood drain from Thomas’s face.

“Which account?” A slight tremor had crept into his normally steady voice. It wouldn’t be long now.

I shrugged. “Any of them. As of yesterday, the balance would be the same—zip.”

I felt it again, Cain was trying to slip inside. This time he was more insistent. I strived to remain calm, focused, when inside I was anything but. Beads of sweat began to roll down my back. It was taking almost all of my concentration to prevent Cain from slipping inside. Slithering black tendrils were reaching out to me, searching for an opening into my psyche.

“Zip?” Thomas asked.

“Zilch, nada, nothing—”

“I know what zip means,” Thomas growled. Except it was less menacing than he meant for it to be because he staggered a bit.

“Careful, Thomas,” I chided, walking past him to the door. “You know, they say the meek shall inherit the earth.”

“Wait!” he cried, grabbing hold of the back of my shirt.

I turned around, wrapped my hand around his wrist and loosened his grasp. He had surprised me, distracted me. It may have been for a fraction of a second, but in the space of that moment I'd dropped my guard. I hadn't meant to, hadn't wanted to, and I instantly regretted it.

I gasped at the force of the intrusion. Icy fingertips probed my mind, snaking inside, searching. Cain was rifling through my fantasies and secrets, familiarizing himself with my fears, my desires. Once he found what he wanted, he left as abruptly as he'd come.

Fuck! I thought, fighting to steady my nerves. My plan had been to wait longer, to give the gas time to take effect, time to weaken Cain. My time was running out. Fortunately, so had Thomas's. He swayed, stumbling back toward the wall, managing to take two steps before falling to his knees.

"What have you done?" he choked out, his voice barely a whisper. Then he slid unceremoniously to the floor, unconscious.

They'd started to pipe gas into BaMidbar before I'd arrived, gradually increasing the volume so they could flood the temple, elevating the levels quickly and incapacitating all its inhabitants. But it had yet to subdue Cain. I could still feel his power. The energy he'd spent rummaging through the recesses of my mind had cost him something, but not enough.

I nudged Thomas's prone body with the toe of my shoe. He was out. How long he'd remain that way I wasn't sure, and I didn't want to waste precious seconds thinking about it. I reached for the handle on the door, turned it, and stepped into Cain's inner sanctum.

There was no sign of him, but I didn't expect there to be. He'd known I was coming and was set on doing the one thing he could to destroy me—killing Violet.

My field of vision narrowed in on the elevator at the far end of the room. The doors had already closed. Cain was going down, the numbers above the elevator marking his quick descent.

I pulled in all of the energy, all of the power I had, then I cast out my line, that imperceptible thread that linked me to Violet. This time, though, it wasn't merely a thread, it was more like a life-line. I intended to reel it in, to let it lead me to her. I bolted for the stairs.

I had one remaining chance, and that was to get to Violet before Cain did. Reaching her first and keeping him away from her long enough for the gas to take effect was it. There was no plan B, no do-overs. Dead is dead.

The spiral staircase was poorly lit, its ancient stone steps slippery and well worn. I flew down them, taking them three or four at a time, my feet barely touching the ground as I propelled myself forward.

I could feel her, somewhere below, somewhere deep in the bowels of the dungeon. Violet was tired and hungry and above all frightened. Into the darkness I descended, the link between us giving me guidance. Air whipped around me, its quality changing. The further I went, the colder and mustier it became. It reeked of lies and betrayal. Of sin, I thought. Then I heard them, cries echoing from below, a chorus of weak moans, the pleas of helpless innocents.

I could feel the thread weakening, Violet's strength diminishing as the gas filled the area, its effect taking hold. It didn't matter, though, I was almost there, the bottom of the staircase was in view. I'd done it. I'd...

My thoughts were interrupted and my hopes dashed as the soft ping of the elevator announced Cain's arrival. I pushed forward, launching myself into the air and jumping over the last couple dozen of steps. I landed hard, bending at the knees to absorb the impact. Almost on instinct I folded in upon myself. Making use of the forward momentum, I completed a series of rolls that brought me close to the row of cells and ended with me poised in a crouch.

My heart was racing, the sound of it thumping in my ears almost deafening. But not loud enough to drown out Cain's chilling laugh as it echoed throughout the space. Slowly, I looked up.

He was there, the oldest of us all, the first, sitting astride her, holding the blade of a jewel-handled knife to my Violet's heart. I could hear it beating, calling to me, pumping along with mine, as if it were mine.

"Just like your father," he spat, his voice filled with disdain. "Once upon a time, you had such promise."

He was fittingly dressed in black. Unlike Thomas, Cain adapted his style of dress to fit the times. He was wearing black trousers and a fine silk shirt. A shirt I was sure cost an obscene amount of money—nothing but the best for our prophet.

"My father," I repeated, with contempt. "You aren't fit to wipe my father's shoes. Get away from my mate."

He glared at me, the narrow slits of his eyes shooting daggers. Normally Cain was the embodiment of calm, cool and collected. Impeccably dressed. Not a hair out of place. Now the thick strands of his obsidian mane hung loosely, forming a curtain in front of his face. His breathing was slightly labored. The nostrils of his hawk-like nose flared menacingly with each exhalation. His usually flawless olive skin appeared dusky and dull. Perhaps the latter was the result of the dim lighting in the dungeon, or perhaps it was that Violet, even unconscious and chained to the ground, outshined him so.

There she was, iron cuffs digging into her wrists and ankles. They'd stripped her bare of clothing, but not of dignity. Naked and bound, yet she still managed to look regal. Her pale, translucent skin a pure canvas against the dark relief of the stone floor of the cell. Her mass of bright red hair spread out around her, unfettered, defiant, just like Violet.

Cain's lips peeled back in a slow smile that made my intestines roil deep in my belly. I was both afraid to move and afraid not to.

"You never should have mated with her," he said, raising the dagger higher.

I moved to lunge, but before my feet left the ground, he stopped me. One wave of his hand and I was suddenly being propelled backwards. I slammed into the wall opposite of the cell, the force of the impact

rattling my teeth and shattering bone. I felt my own consciousness begin to slip away. Bile rose in my throat. And a mist of fine fog began to envelope me. I shook my head, trying desperately to clear it. His laughter rang mockingly in my ears.

Cain swayed, slightly. Again, his use of power had diminished his strength. Or maybe the gas was finally doing its job.

I stumbled forward. "The money's gone."

My knees folded beneath me, betraying me.

"It can't be."

I reached for the cell door and somehow managed to pull myself back into a standing position. I was bleeding, badly. Blood from my head wound rolled down my back, soaking my shirt.

"Kill us, and you'll never see it again. That I can promise you."

For a fraction of a second Cain looked surprised.

White dots began to cloud my vision. As I tried to blink them back I realized the impact of my fall had jarred the mini-respirator loose. I shook my head, attempting to clear the cobwebs. It was little use. Unconsciousness was beckoning to me, but it was calling Cain as well. Even through my clouded vision I could see he was slipping, his shoulders rounding from the weight of exhaustion, the knife shaking in his hands.

"You wouldn't do that." His voice was weaker, less certain. "You wouldn't do that to the Chosen, the innocent."

It was my turn to laugh.

"I'm not doing it to them. I'm doing it to you, you sanctimonious bastard!" I shouted.

He looked at me, his face devoid of all emotion.

"You're bluffing," he muttered, making his choice. "You have to be bluffing." He looked down at Violet and with all of his remaining strength, he plunged the knife into her.

Without thought I attacked, throwing myself at him with as much force as I could muster. My body slammed into his, knocking him off and away from Violet. Together we rolled to the far corner of the cell. My head hit the wall for the second time. I was only vaguely aware that Cain was on top of me, his hands closing about my throat.

I remember having a sense of peace wash over me as I realized that even in death, Violet and I were still connected through the claim and that soon I'd be joining her.

Cain lifted my head and slammed it into the ground. God help us, I thought. Blinding pain shot through me. I heard a crack.

"Violet," I whispered, struggling to hold on to my connection with her. Then the world dissolved and I was swallowed by darkness.

Chapter Twenty-three

My eyes fluttered open and I found myself staring into an unfocused haze. I sensed Violet's presence, then I smelled her and felt her. Wherever I was, she was with me.

"Byron?"

I blinked.

"Violet?"

"Thank God."

I looked around the room. I'd been in it before. It was one of the guest rooms in the temple. I started to sit up. Violet pressed her hand against my shoulder.

"Slowly, honey. You've been unconscious for several days."

"Days?"

"Close to a week," she told me. "You've been healing yourself. Chris and Wes kept assuring me you'd be all right. I've been so worried."

"I've been unconscious for almost a week?"

"You lost a lot of blood, left a long trail of it in the elevator and through the rotunda. God only knows how you made it back up to let everyone in."

The memory of it all came flooding back, Violet in chains, Cain kicking my ass. I shook my head slowly.

"No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"The last thing I remember we were all in the cell. Cain and I, we fought and...I lost consciousness."

"You made it out of there, Byron. Stanley said you collapsed in his arms. He said by the looks of things you took the elevator back to the surface. You dragged yourself all the way back to the entrance. There was hardly any blood left in you."

Violet nodded to the IV pole. "You're on your eighth pint."

I let her help me into a sitting position, then I pulled the IV line out of my arm. "I saw Cain stab you."

"Wes said the dagger was stopped by a rib. Broke it, the rib that is. If Cain had been stronger..."

The rest of her sentence was muffled as I pulled her close, clutching her to my chest and holding on tight. I reached down, swept her hair aside, and nuzzled my mark, lapping at its edges, taking comfort. I needed the assurance, assurance it was her, and that we were both still here, still connected.

Violet released a sigh and relaxed against me. “You have no idea how worried I’ve been. I—” A sob escaped her throat and she began to softly cry. If it wasn’t for the realization I was crushing her, we’d probably still be sitting there, wrapped around one another, just like that.

“Sorry,” I told her, pulling back and smiling sheepishly. “Didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“I’m tougher than you think,” she told me.

I reached up to caress the side of her face and her lips parted, then closed. I sensed her hesitation.

“What is it?” I asked.

Violet placed her hand on top of mine and gently guided it to the center of her belly.

I looked down at our joined hands, then glanced back up, searching her eyes.

Violet nodded. “It’s very early.”

“A baby?” I asked, straining to hear a heartbeat. “Are you sure?”

“Jennifer had a feeling, so Wes did a test.”

I dropped to my knees, lifted the hem of her shirt and pressed my ear against her still flat stomach.

“Are you sure we haven’t both died and gone to Heaven?” I asked her, only half teasing.

Violet laughed and it was music to my ears.

“I’m sure.” She ran her fingers through my hair. “It’ll be a few weeks yet before there’s a heartbeat.”

I turned my head and placed a kiss on her tummy.

“Get away from there, your beard tickles.”

I stood, pulling her with me. Then, looking into her eyes, I told her what was true. What was true and real and in my heart. “I love you, Violet. I’ll love you till I turn to dust, whether that’s one day from now or one century.”

“Oh, Ren,” she sighed. “I love you too.” Violet stepped into my embrace and rested her forehead against mine. “You haven’t asked about Rita.”

I kissed her on the tip of her nose. “I’ll catch up with Rita later.”

Violet stepped back. “She isn’t here, Ren. Neither is Sophie or Angelina. We don’t know where they are, and Cain isn’t talking.”

“We’ll see about that.” I reached for the pair of jeans someone, presumably Violet, had laid out on a nearby chair. “Where is he?”

“In the dungeon.”

“It’s strong enough to hold him?”

“Yes, and Stanley installed these really cool panels. They form a false wall that hides all of the cells, which have been reinforced. Turns out there were only a half-a-dozen vamps in the entire compound. Everything’s secure. We weren’t sure what to expect. So far, it’s been pretty quiet.”

“No one comes to BaMidbar unless they’re summoned, and that doesn’t happen very often,” I explained, stepping into my pants. “Shirt?”

“Closet.” She pointed to the narrow door behind me.

I opened the closet and reached inside, grabbed the first thing I could. I slipped it on as I headed for the door.

Violet was on my heels, following me as I proceeded down the hall, around the corner, and to the elevator.

“Where do you think you’re going? You haven’t been awake for five minutes, Ren.”

I turned to look at her. “I’ve already lost a week. I’m fine.” I pushed the button.

Violet plucked a small device from her pocket and placed it over her ear.

“Stanley, he’s awake. We’re coming down.” She looked at me and grinned. “Stanley has the best toys.”

The elevator arrived and I pulled her into it. Turning, I backed her into the wall, pressing my body intimately against hers.

“You’re only allowed to play with my toys,” I growled, a possessive rumble emanating from my chest. I laced my hands through her hair and crushed my lips to hers. The kiss was playful, passionate and perfect except for the fact it ended too soon as the elevator came to a stop and the doors slid open.

“Wow!” I gasped.

In a matter of a few days, the dungeon had been completely transformed. The stone floor was now covered in white tile. There was a ceiling with stark fluorescent lighting and nothing else besides the four empty white walls and an acrylic receptionist’s desk.

“Pretty impressive, huh?”

I nodded. Amazed at the changes, I realized I’d yet to leave the elevator.

“Come on!” Violet tugged on my arm. “The others should be here any minute.”

I followed her over to the desk. “Others?”

Violet pulled out the chair. “They’re all still here. They’ve been waiting...and working.”

“Waiting?”

“For you to come to, Byron,” Violet said. “Meanwhile we’ve been going through BaMidbar room by room, documenting everything, gathering intelligence, trying to piece together as much as we can. Sit and look in here.”

“What is it?”

“Retinal scan. We took your image while you were out. In order to open the panels, you need to go through the scan, then enter the secret password.”

With more than a little trepidation I looked into the scanner.

“All done.” Violet reached for the keyboard. I leaned to the side and watched her type.

“Immortality bites?” I asked, amused. “Someone has a sense of humor.”

She winked at me.

“Or profound insight,” I added.

There was an audible clunk. Sections of the wall started to push first outward, then off to one side. With a whoosh they slid open, exposing the cells that had once held Violet and a host of other women prisoners.

“The other women?” I asked, turning to look at Violet.

“You weren’t the only Dominie to have a mate. There were five other captives. One of the women had been here close to a century. Some say their mates abandoned them, others say they had no choice.”

“There’s always a choice,” a hate-filled voice called out. “Isn’t that true, son?”

I shook my head. “Don’t call me son.”

From my position I could see him, Cain. He was in the same cell Violet had occupied. Only he hadn’t been stripped naked. He wasn’t lying on the floor in chains. Christ, the humans had even given him a comfy cot to sleep in. It seemed like more than he deserved.

“What the hell are we going to do with him?” Violet murmured.

I stood and slowly made my way toward him. Standing just outside the perimeter of the panels, I stared into the face of the being I once believed was our salvation. And I felt nothing. He was strong still, don’t misunderstand, but the power he once held over me...was gone.

The elevator chimed, drawing my attention away for a moment. I swallowed as the doors opened and a group of women poured out. Will, Wes, Chris, Ray, Pixel and Stanley were with them.

Violet reached for my hand. “They want to thank you.”

“That isn’t necessary.”

“And they’re hoping you can get him to tell you where their mates are.” She nodded toward Cain.

I turned back to face him. His expression was impassive, uncaring.

“What have you done with their mates?” I asked.

He yawned, dramatically, then flopped onto his cot.

I stepped closer, anger boiling up in me. “Have you no honor?”

He threw his hand up, much like he did the night we’d last fought. Only this time the force of his power didn’t send me flying back into the wall.

Cain seemed every bit as shocked and surprised as I was that I’d stood my ground. He sat back up, ratcheting up his power.

I gathered up my strength and pressed forward, right into it. Absorbing the energy and letting it pass through me.

Before he had time to climb to his feet, I’d reached his cell. The cot was up against the bars. I let loose a powerful kick. It went flying, spilling Cain onto the floor before forcefully crashing into the wall.

“What of the sacrifices that have been made for you!” I growled. “It’s all been nothing but lies.”

“Has it?” Cain climbed to his feet and brushed the dust from his trousers.

“Have you no remorse for what you’ve done? Not even to these women? Look at them. You locked them in here like animals!”

“Who cares?” With a flick of his wrist he sent them reeling, flinging them like puppets, pinning them to the ceiling.

“Stop it!” I shouted, my voice drowned out by the women’s terrified screams.

Cain grinned. “As you wish.” He mercilessly dropped them to the floor. “In the big scheme of things, they don’t matter. They are nothing!”

“You bastard!” One of the women had managed to climb to her feet. She was lunging toward him.

I caught her in my arms and held her close. “You matter,” I whispered into her ear. She began to sob, quietly.

I turned to look at the other women. Some of them were already standing again on their own accord, proud and erect towers of strength. Others were in the process of climbing to their feet aided by the men and by Violet. Together they stood, hands clasped, expressions determined.

“I care,” I said, quietly. Then I cleared my throat and said it again, louder this time. They needed to hear it and I needed to say it. “I care.”

“Why do you care?” Cain was at the door to his cell, his hands wrapped around the reinforced bars.

“You know why I care.”

“Because you’re weak!” Cain sneered.

He was so close. I could have reached out and touched him. His knuckles were white. Sweat was beading on his brow. His mask of indifference was slipping.

“I’m not weak, and we both know it.”

“You’re a fool!”

I shook my head. “You want to know why I care? I care because I’ve learned the lesson.”

“What lesson is that, Byron?”

“I am my brother’s keeper.”

He smiled. It was a sickly grin and it made my skin crawl. “Please. These people are not your brothers. You’ll never be like them. And...I’ll outlast you all.”

He was right, of course. I reached back and waited for Violet to slip her hand into mine. “I may not be, but some of my children will be, and more of their children.”

“You’re being naïve. And stupid. It’s only a matter of time before everything is once again as it should be. The faithful will come for me.”

“We’ll see.”

“Or, eventually I’ll grow strong enough to break free.”

“Perhaps.” I shrugged. “But not today.”

Then I turned and stepped back, prepared to walk away. Away from Cain and into my new life.

“Is that all you have to say?” Thomas shouted from a nearby cell.

I looked into the eyes of the people who had crowded around me, each and every one of them. Those who had been held in chains, enslaved by the monsters, and those who had joined forces with one in order to perhaps save us all. I wanted to remember them. I wanted to remember this moment.

Violet squeezed my hand.

“Something that matters, huh?” I asked her, staring into her beautiful eyes as I recalled the conversation we’d had the night before she was abducted.

Violet nodded in understanding, slowly and silently.

“No,” I said, shoving my hands deep into the pockets of my tattered blue jeans. “That’s not all I have to say.”

I turned back to once again face Cain, feeling more humble than I believe I ever had in my entire existence. I stared down at my still bare feet. The enormity of the situation weighed heavily on me and for a moment I found myself wondering how I’d gotten here. Then I remembered—it had all started by my simply opening the door on that fateful day back on my island.

“Well?” Thomas had always been a bit on the impatient side.

I looked up and bowed slightly, first toward Thomas, then Cain. It was my last and final act of deference. With a quiet resolve, I simply told them.

“Welcome to the Revolution.”

About the Author

Samantha Sommersby lives in San Diego with her husband and teenaged son. She is the author of multiple novels and novellas including the critically acclaimed *Forbidden* series. In 2007 Samantha left what she used to call her “real life” day job as a psychotherapist to pursue writing full-time. She now happily spends her days immersed in the world of the *Forbidden*, a world where vampires, werewolves, and demons are real, where magic is possible, and where love still conquers all.

To learn more about Samantha Sommersby, to follow her on Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, or Yahoo, or to sign up for her monthly newsletter, visit www.samanthasommersby.com. You may contact the author through her website or by sending an email to samantha@samanthasommersby.com.

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Forbidden: The Sacrifice

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Forbidden, Book 1

London psychiatrist Wesley Atherton is a man of science. He doesn't believe in love at first sight...until he finds himself inexplicably drawn to a green-eyed American beauty he bumps into on the Tube. Just his luck, Katherine, a fashion design intern, has an engagement ring on her finger.

Wes knows a thing or two about people, though. Instinct tells him there's something more than irresistible temptation behind their attraction. She doesn't love her fiancé, he's sure of it—now if only he can convince her they're meant to be together.

Surviving a deadly train wreck is the first sign his intuition is spot on. The second—a psychic who warns them the Reaper doesn't like to be cheated out of its quarry. The situation defies all logic, but a string of strange and lethal events convinces Wes that he and Katherine are living on borrowed time. Pitted in a battle against death itself, Wes will do anything, make any sacrifice, to protect the woman he loves.

This book has been substantially revised and expanded from its original published version.

Warning: This book contains one bad-ass demon, spectacular shagging, a feisty American heroine, and one very hot, very British, knife-wielding shrink.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Forbidden: The Sacrifice:

"Don't move."

I locked the front door, pulled off my boots and socks, then shed my coat, letting it all fall to the floor. There was another roar of distant thunder. Katherine's back was to the door. I stepped closer to her, then leaned down, lightly brushing my lips across hers.

"I swear, the rain tastes like wine on your lips," I whispered, resisting the urge to deepen the kiss.

I crouched down on one knee to remove her boots. Then as I climbed back to my feet, I pulled the T-shirt I'd been wearing up over my head. Before I had time to toss it onto the growing pile of clothes, Katherine boldly reached out for me, slipping a finger inside the waistband of my jeans and pulling me toward her.

She unfastened the buckle of my belt then paused, her hand at my zipper. I lifted my hand to cup the side of her face and searched out her eyes.

“Lift up your arms,” I told her, gathering up the edge of her sweater and raising it. We lost eye contact for the briefest of moments as I pulled it over her head. Her cap came off as well. I carelessly tossed them aside.

“Wes.”

I placed my hand around Katherine’s neck and, ever so slowly, slid it down, gliding it over her damp flesh, heating it, warming her.

A sigh escaped her lips as I brushed my fingertips across the tops of the full mounds of her breasts.

“White lace.” I reached down to palm one. “It looks so innocent, pure, virginal. I’m having horrible, nasty thoughts.”

“Are you now?” she asked in a breathy voice as I lowered my hands to her zipper.

“Oh, yeah.” I pulled her wet pants past her hips and watched them fall to the floor, then I quickly shed my own jeans. “You have no idea how much I want you right now.”

I crushed my lips to hers in the heat of passion. The lace of her bra scratched against my chest as I pressed my body flush against hers. She parted her lips, and I slipped my tongue inside, boldly exploring the warm, wet cavern, holding nothing back.

Katherine released an intoxicating moan into my mouth that made me want her even more.

I slid my arm around her waist and then snaked my hand inside her matching lace knickers to caress her bottom. My kisses followed the path to her neck and I nibbled gently at her pulse point. She was trembling with need and in truth, so was I.

“Tell me you’re cold.”

“I wasn’t shivering from the cold.” She was flushed with arousal.

“I’m going to go get your robe. I’ve got to get some distance.” Before I could step back, she reached down between us, the back of her hand brushing across the front of my boxers.

“Or what?”

I moved in close, pressing my rock-hard cock into the softness of her belly, my face just a hairsbreadth away from hers.

“I spontaneously combust from all this pent-up sexual tension.”

Katherine’s breath hitched.

“Or I throw you onto the cold marble floor and have my wicked way with you.”

“I vote for—”

I placed my fingers over her mouth to silence her.

“I’ll be right back with a robe. Then I’ll start a fire and get the chill out of the air.”

It took me only a few moments to dash up the stairs, put on a dry pair of jeans and grab the robe I’d promised.

I returned to find Katherine in the living room. She was bending over to turn on a lamp, her back to me.

“Here you go, love.” I held the robe out, behind her. Its hem brushed up against the calves of her legs.

When it did, Katherine let out a terrified scream. She spun around and her scream rippled, echoing throughout the room.

“Christ!”

“Sorry, you startled me,” she gasped placing her hand over her heart, trying to catch her breath.

“Didn’t mean to. Here, slip this on.” I held out the robe. She wasn’t moving. “Katherine?”

She was looking past me, over my shoulder. I turned. She was staring at the large mirror that hung on the wall in the entryway.

“What is it?”

“Nothing. It’s...”

“Yes?”

“It’s nothing.”

There's got to be more to life than studying...

The Trouble With Destiny

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The starving student routine is starting to wear a little thin for Sarah McInnes. If only she could be left alone long enough, she could finish grad school, get a normal nine-to-five and finally afford to move out of her one-room apartment. Maybe even afford a decent wardrobe.

Destiny has other ideas. Not the least of which is the mysterious, overbearing, insufferable Dorian...who also happens to be the hottest thing this side of hell. Three months ago he saved her from certain dismemberment at the hands of a daemon. He also discovered she possesses the ability to send these beasts back to hell where they belong.

Now he not only won't leave her alone, he's forcing her to face certain facts: her social life isn't going to improve anytime soon. And she may never make it to calculus on time again.

It's enough to piss a girl off.

Warning: This title contains a beautiful, capable college student whose mystical tats have gotten her in almost as much trouble as her smart ass mouth. It also includes a devastatingly hot, mysterious warrior whose sense of humor is as non-existent as his humanity.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Trouble With Destiny:

Leaning forward to take the sludgy organ in my hand, I slipped on some goop under my right foot and my body pitched forward. I banged my forehead on the outer rim of the dumpster and it made a hollow *bong* that echoed loudly in my skull as if there were nothing in there but empty space—and that is *not* true. I have a 4.0 grade point average. Or at least I did before all *this* happened to my well-ordered life.

"Ouch. Stupid dumpster." I kicked the inside panel of the container, feeling an overwhelming urge to hurt it as I had been hurt and not much caring that it was just an inanimate hunk of rusty metal.

Why had I even gotten out of bed today? That had obviously been my first mistake. My second mistake—or was it the third already?—and probably not the last if my luck held true, was climbing into this dumpster.

I moaned at the throb of pain in my head, but didn't dare rub it, not with the crap that was all over my hands from rooting around in the garbage. Great. I was going to have a nasty looking goose egg on my temple tomorrow. Just one more perk of a job I don't actually get paid for—a skyrocketing tab at the drugstore for pain meds and makeup to hide all my cuts and bruises.

Carefully, I climbed out of the large metal bin, which is trickier than you'd think when you've got a sword strapped to your back and a daemon's disgusting black heart in your slimy, dirty hands. I'm not making excuses. Try it sometime.

“What the hell are you doing in there, Sarah? If you’re hungry I can go inside and get you some take-out.”

I groaned and shook my head. Again, *why me?*

I didn’t have to see to know who the smartass standing behind me was. Even in the darkness, with one leg over the edge of the dumpster and my back to the alleyway’s entrance, I just had to hear that disdainful voice and chills ran up and down my spine. And not all of them were bad. While his voice is always dripping with disapproval when he speaks to me, it’s also the deepest, sexiest voice I’ve heard in my twenty-three years.

And so enters the bossman from hell.

Literally. It’s where he was born, or so he tells me. Apparently, he’s also the one who managed to get the last hell gate closed. It’s kind of like a black hole, but rather than sucking everything in the vicinity into it, it spews snarly, unnatural things out from it.

When a hell gate is opened from the other side, daemons can come and go between realms as they please. Just before I came into the picture, one such gate downtown just off of Yonge Street was apparently spilling the things left, right and center.

I thought it an odd location choice at first, but given all the big corporate law firms in that area, it actually makes sense that there’d also be a portal to a hell dimension.

My “boss” was the one who screwed the lid back on that can of noxious worms, and since then the two of us have been busy rounding up the straggler daemons and putting them out of their misery.

Just how he managed to close the gate, I don’t know. Most of the gory details of that feat have not been revealed to me. I pushed him once for more details with no success, and frankly, I’m surprised I managed to get even as much information as I did out of the tight-lipped, modern-day warrior.

What I had been told, though, I believed. The proof was in his deep, chocolate brown eyes. Hard, fathomless orbs that simmered with an unrelenting, unholy fire. A banked fire, but one that was never truly doused.

Even though my ass was pointing toward the sky as I hung over the edge of the dumpster, I was glad not to be facing him. I had a feeling those flames would be burning extra brightly, and that a slight drawing of his brows and barely perceptible tightening of his mouth would go along with the eyes to complete the picture. I had dubbed it his cranky look. Matter of fact, there were only two looks—the cranky look and the insufferable look.

The man sure did find a lot to be insufferably cranky about.

“Dorian.” I hoped my voice sounded calm and in control. Not like I felt. My body was frozen in place, but the essence of my every cell strained toward him. My free hand clutched the edge of the metal bin tighter. I must have looked absolutely ridiculous, and I’m sure I smelled ten times worse.

“Sarah.”

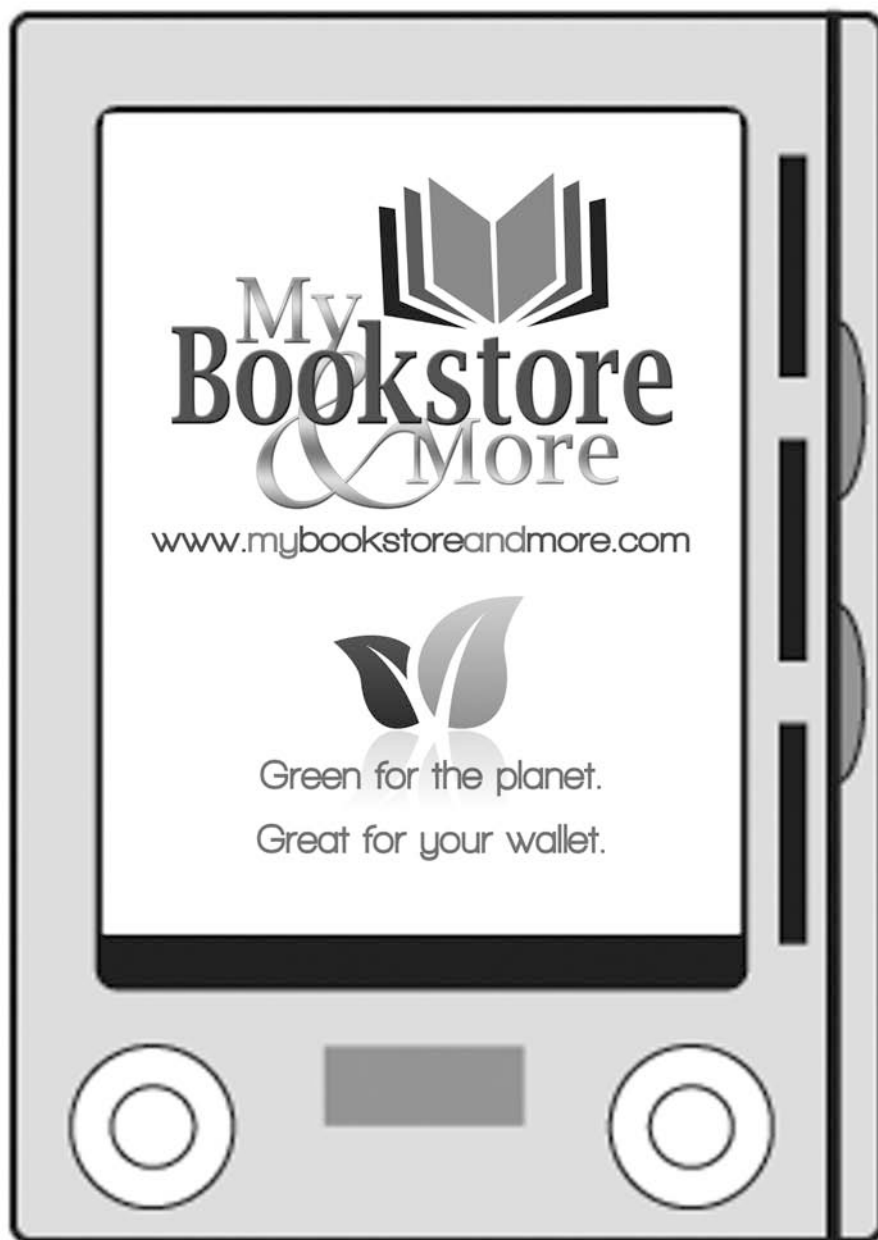
Oh man, that low timbre makes my whole body quiver, hot sparks of electricity shooting right through to my toes. I have no doubt that it's the same kind of thing the poor buzzing fly experiences as it's getting struck with a thousand volts of bright blue electricity from the backyard bug zapper.

The fireworks started to go off behind my eyes, popping in my ears, fizzy little bubbles mingling with all the butterflies in my belly. This was my reaction to just his voice. Embarrassing, especially considering he had never once touched me with anything but professional impartiality.

Our forced proximity the last few weeks had been...disconcerting, and it was getting harder and harder to keep my growing attraction under wraps. The long hours of sweaty physical strength and combat training he had me doing with him every night on top of the daemon hunting didn't help. Even now, with the fetid garbage forming a cloud of stench around me, it was a fight to tamp down the inappropriate reactions of my sex-deprived body.

I could feel his gaze on me, but of course he had yet to offer me any help, was probably just staring at my ass.

And that worked to bring me right back to my senses.



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