

*Miniature
Rose*

Scarlet Rose

Bound By Blood

by
L. Rosario



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Bound By Blood

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Ivy...

This was it. A now or never moment. A do or die. A put up or shut up. The decision had been made, and tonight I would finally look my fantasy dead in the eyes and say, "Hey sexy, your bed or mine?"

At least that was the plan, but I couldn't exactly proposition an empty barstool. I glanced at the clock behind me and frowned. Where the hell was he?

Like clockwork, the star of my fantasies had been strolling into my tavern every night for the past three months at 1:30 a.m. Tonight, he was late. Sure, it was only six minutes past, but he'd never been late before.

Perhaps his wife hadn't let him out tonight?

Oh God, what if he *did* have a wife? Given how utterly gorgeous he was, I wouldn't be surprised. Could I sleep with a married man? Had I become that desperate? Or worse, what if he was gay? Now that would be an awful waste.

"Night, Ivy." The mumbled salutation preceded the jingle of the door's bell, but I didn't bother to look up. Swiping a damp towel over the counter, I couldn't stop contemplating all the reasons *he* wasn't here yet. Though what could be worse than a wife or being gay? Oh God, maybe he was dead on the side of the road somewhere. Or—

"Could I have a tall glass of ice water?" His deep voice washed over me like a soothing rain.

With my heart in my throat, I set the damp towel aside and turned to prepare his unusual drink. It was always

water, every night. Why come to an out of the way tavern to order ice water? It was just one of the questions I had yet to gain the courage to ask him. I also longed to know his name, his age, his marital status, his occupation...you get the idea. I wanted to know everything about this man—inside and out.

The ice chilled my palm through the glass before I could set it down on the square coaster. “Will that be all?”

Despite the perfected you’re-sexier-than-hell-but-you-don’t-effect-me tone, my insides were in a muddle. One look from this guy’s silver eyes was enough to turn me to jelly. Was this something men learned early on in life? How to flash just the right smoldering look? If so, hats off to this one’s tutor, because he did it like no one before him ever had.

What else would he excel at?

A blush crept into my face as I considered the possibilities. Wicked possibilities, naughty even. Oh yes, I could get very naughty with this man. His black, shiny curls were just begging to be twisted around my fingers, and his lips...Lord, his lips were molded to be kissed and sucked. Did he have any idea how fantastic he was? Did he have any idea what I was thinking right now? For my sake, I sure hoped not.

“Thank you,” he offered while wrapping his long, elegant fingers around the glass and lifting it to his lips. Those fingers could probably explore places I didn’t even know I had.

Oh yes...

“I’ve been meaning to ask you a question, Ivy.”

The sound of my name could not have been more shocking. I blinked at him and gaped like an idiot.

He smiled and set the glass in the center of the coaster. “Of course, I know your name. Did you think I haven’t been paying attention these last few months? I hear the guys

saying good night to you as I come in, and I even know that the Grant in Grant's Tavern was your grandfather. My guess is he willed the place to you." He arched a coal black brow. "How close am I?"

"Y-yes, Grant was my grandfather, and yes, I inherited this place after he died. I suppose you know how long ago that was, too?" I hadn't intended to respond with sarcasm, but it bugged me when people knew things about me that I hadn't offered.

"No, I don't know how long." He reached for his water again and took several sips. A sigh of pleasure passed his lips and the smile returned. "You serve excellent water."

"I'm sure it tastes the same as what comes out of your tap." Again, the sarcasm was unintentional. I'd have to watch it or I'd be going home alone again tonight, and that wasn't the plan.

"Perhaps it does," he said. "But the company adds a certain unique flavor to this glass."

Ah...charm.

I tossed the towel onto the counter behind me and propped my elbows on the bar to bring my gaze level with his. "Tell me your name."

"I thought you'd never ask, Ivy." Before saying more, he took another sip of water and slowly licked his lips.

So, he wanted to tease me, did he? I stared at his mouth to let him know exactly what I was thinking about. His lips curled into a cocky grin, and I swept my gaze up to his eyes in time to catch his wink. The night was looking up.

"Benedict Sabinus." He extended his hand, and I accepted, surprised when he carried my knuckles to his lips. He kissed me as if I were a princess from long ago. "At your service, my lovely." The entire time he spoke and held my

hand, his eyes remained locked on mine, making it damn hard to breathe or think.

I considered pulling my hand free, but before I could, he shifted his hold and laced our fingers together. Palm to palm now, his skin felt cool against the damp moisture of mine. I gasped for air and pain seared my lungs as I collected too much, too quickly. Benedict's smile didn't help matters. It continued to widen while promising me everything I could possibly fantasize about. It was tempting to lock the tavern door and get this guy out of my system, here and now.

Somehow I found my voice and forced it to work. "That's a very unique name. It sounds old."

He looked down at our joined hands and nodded. The gesture sent wayward curls bouncing over his forehead to land against his cheeks. He really did have great hair. "It is very old. My ancestors were Roman gladiators."

Well, that was impressive. "How did you end up in America?" Sometimes curiosity just couldn't be thwarted. Despite how desperate I was to lean over the counter and kiss him, his comment intrigued me.

His gaze swept to my face, drawing my attention to how enviable his lashes were. "It's a rather long story, and somehow I doubt hearing it is how you really wish to pass the night. I could be wrong, and if I am, say so and I'll spin quite a tale for you."

"I do want to know, but maybe you can tell me tomorrow night?" How was that for baiting the hook?

"You assume there will be a tomorrow night for us?"

If I had anything to say about it, there would be. "I don't do one night stands." Which was true. I'd been married for ten years and divorced for almost one, and I was only thirty-four. Not a lot of time in there to pick up guys and send them packing the next day. Sure, I could have gone after some

action this past year, but I'd needed some time to detox from my incredibly crappy marriage.

Benedict was really the first guy to attract my attention. Not that it was a mystery how he had done so. Being tall, gorgeous, and built like a god pretty much guaranteed I would take a second look. Not only did I take that second look, I'd been staring—all right, drooling—for three long months.

Good thing he wasn't an animal, or he would have known the first night that I was in heat for him. Though maybe that would have made things easier? I'd never been good at picking up guys. In fact, I'd never picked up a guy in my life. What on earth made me think I could do so now? And why pick Mr. Sexy to start with? Maybe I should have tried my luck on a lesser mortal first? Too late now.

"Are you coming onto me, Ivy?" His tone indicated if I was, he didn't mind all that much.

I tried really hard not to blush. Sophisticated, single women on the prowl did not blush. "Are you interested?" I purred the question and leaned further over the bar. Doing so pulled my tight, pink t-shirt across my breasts, and Benedict lowered his gaze to take a look. Did he like what he saw? Maybe he preferred his women to be a little less endowed?

Appreciation shone in his eyes when he raised them to meet mine. "I'm very interested, but I don't do one night stands either."

"Meaning?"

He took hold of my other hand and lifted it to his lips. He spoke with his mouth pressed to my skin. "I have every intention of getting to know you very well, Ivy, so bow out now if you're not up to it."

The movement of his lips over my hand made me shiver. I swallowed and tried to will my heart to slow down. "What exactly do I need to be up to?"

At the moment, I'd do just about anything, as long as he promised to press his mouth to other parts of my body. I suppressed a groan as the image of him suckling my breast filled my mind. Inside my bra, my nipples puckered, making me squirm a little. A knowing gleam sparked in Benedict's eyes.

"You have to be willing to surrender to me." He joined my hands together in one of his and reached out to cup my cheek. "Will you surrender to me tonight?"

Tonight, tomorrow...whenever.

I kept the thought to myself and managed a stiff nod. His cool fingers slid over my cheek and into my loose hair. With a light grip on the side of my head, he eased my face forward, and I braced myself to finally feel the heat of his mouth.

"I'm not going to kiss you yet," he whispered with his lips nearly touching mine. "In fact, I'm not going to kiss you until you've begged me to. Have you ever begged a man for anything, Ivy?"

"N-no." I tried to push closer, but he tightened his grip within my hair and held me off. I licked my dry lips and began to breathe faster. Did he want me to beg now? If so, I was ready to.

Without warning, he released me and pushed away from the bar. "Do what you must to close up, and meet me outside." He took a moment to smooth the wrinkles from his charcoal gray trench coat before heading for the door.

"Wait!" I called after him. He halted only a few steps away and turned back. The light from the neon sign behind the bar washed over his features, turning them a strange shade of red. It did nothing to dampen his allure. "Where are we going to go?"

Not that it really mattered, but I was afraid to let him walk out of the tavern. What if he wasn't outside when I

finished closing up? What if this was a game to him, and I was about to learn a really harsh lesson?

"I'd like to take you to my place, but I'll leave it up to you."

I nodded then shoved my long hair out of my face. "Y-yes, your place would be good." There was nothing in his expression to make me believe this wasn't going to happen. His eyes held mine with open sincerity and interest. He wanted me. I might not know if he wanted me as desperately as I wanted him, but the need was certainly there. "It won't take me long to take care of things in here."

He shook his head and gestured lightly with his hand. "There is no need to hurry, I'll wait."

I had to disagree. If ever there was a need to hurry, it was now.

I kept my gaze trained on his back until the door closed behind him. Was it my imagination, or did his scent linger in the air? I sniffed, definitely catching the tantalizing aroma of musk and man. Did he wear cologne, or would he smell the same all over?

The prospect of finding out was more than enough incentive to fly through the ritual of closing down the tavern. In no time at all, I was outside, setting the alarm and locking up for the night.

As promised, he waited in his car by the curb. The passenger window slid down and I bent over to see inside. "Do you mind if I follow you?" I wasn't quite ready to step into a situation I couldn't easily get out of.

"Of course," he said with a nod. "Whatever makes you comfortable." He put the window back up, effectively ending the conversation.

Aware of his gaze, I walked around the building to get my car. Instinct told me I wouldn't want to leave his place

early, but better safe than sorry. A gal just read too many horror stories these days.

Once tucked inside my cherry-red VW Beetle, I clicked the radio on and headed around to the street. Benedict's headlights were bright in my rearview mirror as he pulled out behind me. A little flash made me switch lanes, and he sidled up next to me. I glanced over, and he winked before pulling out in front. With a goofy smile on my face and a warm heavy feeling down below, I followed him into the exciting unknown.

So, if I say the word "villa," what comes to mind? Do you picture a sprawling home overlooking the Mediterranean? You know; white-washed walls and colorful tiles? If not, do so, and you'll have a dead on visual of Benedict's house. Who knew such a place was just up the road from where I had worked, and nearly lived, for the past two and a half years? To admit I was impressed would be an understatement. Awestruck was a better description.

While Benedict tucked his shiny, silver Lexus away in the garage, I gaped at the façade of his house. Balconies extended from each of the upper floor windows, and the scrollwork of their iron railings was exquisite. I tried to take it all in, but the large stone lions flanking the wide front steps, were really too much. I shook my head and chuckled. This must be what it felt like to step into a magazine, or better yet, a mafia movie. Regardless, it was pretty cool.

The front doors opened, and Benedict stepped out, smiling. Yeah, I'd smile too, if I lived here. He beckoned me up the steps, and feeling entranced, I went. Somewhere between the garage and the front door, he'd shed his trenchcoat, leaving him in black dress pants and a lovely gray pinstriped shirt. Both accentuated his glorious body. Some guys might rely on tight jeans and tank tops, but not

Benedict. There was simply no way to hide his muscled perfection. I stared at the open neck of his shirt and the tiny round pendant resting in the hollow of his throat. It was strung on black leather, and I'd never noticed it before.

Maybe later I'd ask what, if anything, it symbolized.

His cool fingers took possession of my hand, and he guided me over the threshold and into the foyer. My gasp was loud and somewhat embarrassing, but he only chuckled and tucked my hand into the crook of his arm. "I stopped bringing women here years ago."

I tore my eyes from a set of marble floor-to-ceiling columns and glanced over. "Were you tired of the gaping mouths and awestruck gasps?"

He chuckled again and shook his head. "No, I was tired of trying to be exactly what they expected me to be, given the house I live in."

My confusion must have shone, because without prompting, he explained. "One look at the house and they all wanted me to act as if the world was mine to give them. It is not, and even if it were, I had yet to meet a woman I'd offer it to."

Something in his tone warmed my flesh, and I lowered my gaze.

He hooked a finger beneath my chin to force my attention back up. "I thought you'd like to know that you are the first woman I've brought here in a very long time. I hope the knowledge puts you at ease."

"I never said I was uncomfortable."

"Words are not always necessary, Ivy." He removed his finger and swept it across my lips. "That is just one thing you will learn tonight."

I wanted to ask what else I would learn but wasn't given the chance.

“Would you care for a glass of wine?”

I nodded, and he led me between the columns and into a vast living room. Along the back wall sat a very impressive bar, complete with stools and a counter. Benedict released my hand and crossed the room to select a bottle of wine. Popping the cork, he waved it under his nose. His sigh was audible all the way across the room, and my mouth watered with the promise of delicious wine. With two glasses full of blood-red liquid, he came back to my side and pressed one into my hand.

“It is the best I have.”

I smiled and clinked my glass against his before taking the first sip. Never in my life had I tasted anything as rich and smooth as the wine that glided down my throat. I hummed my approval and drank some more, all the while aware of Benedict’s steady regard. Finally, I lowered the glass and nodded toward his. “You haven’t touched yours.”

“I crave a different vintage.” He fixed his gaze on my mouth as he spoke, his meaning all too clear.

Quickly, I took another large swallow of wine and wondered if it was too soon to beg for that kiss.

To my surprise, Benedict plucked the glass from my hand and placed it and his atop a nearby table. “I fear I cannot wait a moment longer.” He reached for me and took a firm grip of my shoulders. “I promise you may have all the wine you desire once I have had my fill of you.”

Dear God, he said things I’d only read in books. It was comforting to know that guys like this really did exist, but who knew you had to work in a tavern to find them? Astounding.

“Should I beg you to kiss me now?” I was oh so ready.

My question prompted a smile, but he shook his head. “No. You’ll know when the time is right for that.”

And if I didn't? I might just die if he didn't kiss me tonight.

"Ah, my lovely Ivy, being denied my kiss will not kill you."

Jesus, was I *that* obvious? I opened my mouth with the intent to offer some sort of lame defense, but he lowered his lips to the side of my neck, rendering me absolutely speechless. He might not be willing to kiss me on the mouth, but this would certainly do. I arched, and his lips swept to my jaw. The teasing moisture of his tongue followed, and I gripped the front of his shirt as my knees went weak.

"I've spent three months envisioning my lips at your neck."

Really?

"I've dreamt of your taste," he went on, "and ached to feel the heat of your skin. You surpass anything I could have imagined."

The smooth velvet words and the feel of his lips elicited a moan from deep inside me. His hands left my shoulders to meet at the small of my back. Pulling me closer, he parted his lips and scraped my skin with his teeth. I shivered and twisted the silky fabric of his shirt around my fingers. Would he be angry with me if I gave into the urge to tear the garment off his body? Did he crave the feel of my mouth against *his* skin? It was certainly something I wanted.

"You may touch me however you please," he murmured against my neck.

Perhaps I was speaking out loud? Perhaps it didn't really matter how he knew what I wanted? Permission had been granted, and I wasn't about to ignore the opportunity.

Blindly, I gathered two fistfuls of his shirt and yanked. Buttons popped and fabric ripped. His breath whooshed out

hot against my neck, then he nibbled on me as I spread my fingers over his bare chest.

I explored every hard inch I could reach, from the hollow of his throat to the tight contours of his abdomen, and back again. A light dusting of hair tickled my palms as I sought out his pebbled nipples. Feeling bold, I twisted and plucked at them until the pressure of his teeth at my neck garnered all of my attention.

“Sorry,” I forced out.

The pressure eased, then he dug his hands in my hair to lift my head so that we looked into each other’s eyes. “You have no need to apologize.”

“I assumed you bit me to get me to stop.”

He flashed a smile unlike any I’d ever seen before. Against the olive complexion of his face, his teeth were bright white and beautiful. “You’ll know when I bite you, my lovely.”

I arched a brow, assuming the taunt was nothing but a tease. “Is that so? I don’t recall saying you could bite me at all.”

“When you agreed to come here, you agreed to surrender completely.”

It didn’t sound like he was teasing anymore, and I felt a little uneasy. “Maybe you should tell me exactly what I’m surrendering to.”

For several moments, he simply stared at me, and I was afraid I’d ruined everything. “Perhaps it would be better to show you?”

Show me? What—

He pressed his mouth to my neck once more, and I forgot to think.

“You must relax, Ivy.”

If I were any more relaxed, I’d be a puddle at his feet. “Benedict.” His name rolled off my tongue as if I’d been

whispering it my whole life. I felt him smile against my skin a moment before his teeth pinched me. I gasped, but it never occurred to me to pull away. The pinch turned into a hard pressure and then my skin gave way beneath his grip. If not for the hold he had on my shoulders, I would have crumpled to the floor under the forceful pleasure that shot through my entire body. Never before had I felt like this.

There was no way to measure the passage of time while Benedict suckled at my neck, nor did I care to. My body opened to him, making me aware of the humming in my veins and the rush of blood to his mouth. I felt the warm spill of it trickle past his lips and heard the unmistakable sound of him swallowing.

In that moment, I knew.

Benedict Sabinus, the man I had decided to give myself to after a year of avoiding any sort of sexual entanglements, was a vampire.

Benedict...

The first swallow of blood, and I knew I was in trouble.

My reasons for approaching Ivy had been simple; I required a human servant. For those of you who may not know what that means, I needed someone by my side to provide fresh blood.

After years of feeding at random, I'd grown bored and discontent and I longed for a constant companion. The prospect of that companion being a stunning blonde, blue-eyed woman had compelled me to seek out Ivy night after night for the past three months. Sitting in the tavern had shown me her habits, her personality, and her suppressed need for an intimate connection.

She wanted what I wanted, minus the blood, of course.

One taste had shot all of my carefully planned reasoning straight to hell. If I continued to pursue Ivy and managed to persuade her to become my companion, I'd be getting much more than a blood donor. I'd acquire a soulmate. How did I know such a thing? Suffice it to say, a vampire can determine much by the taste of one's blood.

Perhaps it's hard to comprehend, but the prospect of acquiring more than fresh blood terrified me. It had been a very long time since the word "love" had entered my mind, but the sweet tangy flavor of Ivy coiled around my heart and squeezed with all the tenacity of a stubborn child begging for a favored toy. If I didn't wish to be forever entangled with this woman, I needed to release her now.

Despite this knowledge, or perhaps because of it, I tightened my arms around her and drank with greater abandon than usual. It was not enough for me to feel the warmth of her blood coating my mouth and sliding down my throat. Nor was it enough to feel the renewed life in my veins. I needed to absorb her very essence. I wanted to feel all that she was and hold it close to my dark soul.

Such strong emotions are not common among vampires, at least none I have chanced to encounter over the centuries. We are cold, emotionless creatures, driven by our need to feed. Some are driven by needs much darker than that, but I'll save those horrid tales for another time. None of us, however, seem driven by the need to find everlasting love. Perhaps being immortal curses us against such notions.

Nothing lasts *forever*, certainly not love.

Ivy moaned in my arms, making her blood flow faster and bringing my thoughts back into focus. I sucked greedily then finally eased my mouth from her neck. Slowly, she lifted her head and blinked in her attempt to focus on my steady gaze. Her beauty possessed the power to stun me. It had the

first time I laid eyes on her, and it had lost none of its impact. If possible, the lingering taste of her made her lovelier, and all the more dangerous. Saliva pooled in my mouth, and I swallowed slowly to savor the very last drop of her blood.

“Leave it to me to find the one vampire in all of Philadelphia.” Her smile was weak, but at least she attempted one.

“I assure you, I am not the only one.”

Her eyes widened, and her smile vanished. For several moments she merely stared into my eyes. Then, wetting her lips, she finally voiced the question I could hear forming in her mind. “What do you want from me?”

I let her go, hoping some distance between us would lessen her discomfort and my growing dependency on her. It did not. Even with the large couch between us, I itched to pull her back into my arms. Most disconcerting of all was the knowledge that I craved her touch more than I craved her blood. This really was not going at all the way it should.

“I would find it easier to tell you what I do not want from you, if that is all right?” It was not like me to be at a loss for words, but Ivy effectively tied my tongue around my emotions. This should be the moment I laid it all out on the line for her, but here I was hedging and hoping to beat a little around the bush.

She nodded while reaching up to cup her hand over her neck. My bite had not caused her any pain, but I understood her need to satisfy her curiosity about what had happened. “Any sort of answer will do,” she said.

I retrieved my glass of wine and took a long drink before answering her. The wine, although an excellent vintage, could not compete with what I had tasted just a short time ago. Nothing would ever compare to Ivy, and if I did not tread carefully in the next few moments, I’d never taste her again.

"I do not wish to hurt you, and I certainly have no desire to frighten you."

"I'm not scared, just a little confused." She lowered her hand from her neck and circled the couch to come toward me. I held my ground, almost afraid to move. "Is my blood the only thing you want from me?"

The question shocked me, and I assure you, this is a very difficult thing to do. I've been around for over one thousand years, and my senses were dull to most outside forces. Very little surprised me and nearly nothing frightened me. Ivy had done both in a very short span of time.

"Your blood possesses a quality I have never sampled, and of course, I crave more." I went on before she could give voice to the thoughts in her head. "But is it all I want?"

Shaking my head, I closed the distance between us and reached out to cup her smooth cheek. She sighed and leaned into my palm. Her reaction tightened my grip on the wine glass, and I quickly set it aside lest I shatter it. With her face now cupped in both hands, I angled her chin up and gazed into her eyes. "I'm afraid of all the things you make me want." The truth, sometimes the hardest thing to voice, felt right hovering between us.

Confusion narrowed her eyes. "I think you need to explain that."

As if I could. "Why did you agree to come here tonight?" I asked.

For a moment she considered forcing the other issue but chose to answer my question instead. "I came here because I thought you could give me what I've been missing for quite a while."

Sex.

The word hung between us like a poised guillotine. If that were truly all she wanted, I could give it to her in spades,

but her eyes and her thoughts revealed the lie. She craved, as I did, so much more. It would be so easy to crawl deeper into her thoughts to force the truth from her, but mind control left a sour taste in my mouth, and Ivy did not deserve to be violated in such a fashion.

Some powers lost their allure rather quickly, and I had not taken over a mortal for close to three hundred years. If I could not acquire what I needed and wanted without trickery, perhaps I did not truly deserve to have it?

Believing thus forced me to wait for Ivy to offer more. Thankfully the wait was short.

“For the past three months, I’ve thought of little else but you,” she continued in a much softer tone. “While you sat by yourself sipping ice water, I conjured ways to make a pass at you, all the while wondering if you were the least bit interested.” Her shaky smile packed a powerful punch.

“I was. I am.”

Her expression relaxed, making her clear blue eyes sparkle. “Obviously, but I’m at a loss as to what to do now.” She gestured back and forth between us. “This whole vampire thing is something I didn’t plan for. I figured the biggest obstacle would be a wife or a boyfriend.”

“A boyfriend?” My surprise was impossible to suppress. I’d known many men who would have enjoyed my company in their beds, but I’d never strolled down that path. “You’ll never have to compete with a man, Ivy.”

“I kind of figured that out.” She blushed as she spoke. “But what about another woman?”

“Are you looking for an exclusive relationship?” I offered the question lightly, knowing she would never guess at the enormous weight of it. Becoming my human servant would introduce her to a level of exclusiveness she could not begin to fathom. Was she ready for such a commitment?

“Isn’t that what all women want?”

“No.” My tone came out harder than I would have wished, but it was a brutal truth.

Ivy’s gaze softened. “Let’s see how the night goes before we decide to pledge ourselves to each other, okay?” Spoken like a true victim of past mistakes.

Taking things one step at a time was the least I could do for her, but little did she know I would do everything in my power to convince her to want me like she’s never wanted another man before. I refused to face the prospect of watching her walk away when she was the one thing I hadn’t even realized I was hunting for. I’d grown immune to the emptiness inside me, but now I was aware it could be filled and I longed to do so.

But for tonight, I would dedicate myself to filling the void within her.

Releasing her face, I captured both of her hands and kissed them in turn. “I’m yours to command, Ivy.”

She giggled softly and blushed bright red. “Careful what you offer; I’ve been celibate for a long time, and I wouldn’t want to hurt you.”

Such pain would be breathtaking. “Perhaps we should continue this discussion somewhere more appropriate?” Already I could picture her sprawled atop my large antique bed. Her skin would glow against the black sheets.

She glanced around before bringing her gaze back to mine. Mischievous danced in her eyes. “I see nothing wrong with where we are.” Pulling her hands free, she walked back around the couch to sprawl on the cushions. Her pale beauty was shown to mouth watering advantage against the chocolate chenille. She patted the space next to her and tossed a look over her shoulder. “Join me?”

I shucked my torn shirt before doing her bidding. Her gaze roamed my bare chest, and she licked her lips, sending a bolt of fire straight to my loins. Lord have mercy, she made my cock ache more than my fangs. Yet another rare occurrence.

Once at her side, I gathered her in my arms and hauled her across my lap. Her pussy was hot through her snug jeans, and she squirmed against my erection. With her hands resting on my shoulders, she leaned close. Her lashes eclipsed her eyes, and her tongue swept over her lips once more to heighten my torment. She wanted a kiss, but I was still determined to hold off. "You haven't begged for it."

Her gaze flew up. "You can read my mind, can't you?" There was nothing in her tone to indicate annoyance, merely curiosity.

I saw no reason to lie. "Yes."

"Then there should be no reason for you not to satisfy me."

A chuckle escaped me without warning. Ivy's easy acceptance was as refreshing as a cool twilight rain, and it made me want her even more. I ran my hands up the center of her back, pressing her breasts into my chest. She possessed the lush curves that I favored, but the rest of her was surprisingly lean and fragile, almost coltish. I'd have to be careful with her. "If I were truly a playboy, I'd say something along the lines of, you're satisfaction is guaranteed, wouldn't I?"

Her girlish giggle made me harder, and she squirmed in response. "No one really says things like that."

I aimed for the underside of her chin and sucked lightly at her skin. She shivered and dug her nails into my shoulders. "I'll do my best, however."

“You’re already doing just fine.” She let out a long sigh of pleasure as I licked a path down the side of her neck and then back up to her chin.

“Ah, Ivy, don’t be too easy.” I threaded my fingers through her hair and held her prisoner to my gaze. “I crave a good challenge.”

Ivy...

I’d never considered myself a challenge, but Benedict made me want to be someone I’d never been before. Maybe it was the experience of feeling his bite and knowing he craved my blood? Maybe it was something else entirely? Whatever the reason, I refused to waste this precious time thinking about it.

Straddling his lap and feeling the hard press of his long erection between my legs was enough to warrant my full attention. He’d offered to escort me to his bedroom, but I wanted to be daring tonight. Already I was out of my comfort zone, so why not go all the way. Making love to a vampire in full view of a floor-to-ceiling window could certainly be considered “going all the way”.

The mere thought made me tremble. The feel of his smooth flesh under my hands only added to the moment.

I pulled free of his grasp to watch my hands roam over his chest. His muscles were solid and well defined, making me wonder if vampires had to worry about working out. Did immortality grant you release from such mundane concerns as an expanding waistline? If so, maybe he and I could strike a bargain later.

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be.” Clearly, he had read my thoughts. Again.

Looking up, I met his gorgeous silver gaze. I'd never seen eyes like his before. Another vampire trait, or had he been blessed at birth? "Most things aren't."

He worked his hands under my shirt and lightly clasped my sides while giving me a little nod. "Yes, you're right about that. I just didn't want you to fall victim to the oh-it-must-be-wonderful-to-be-a-vampire illusion."

Despite my thoughts, I really had no desire to drink blood for all eternity, so he need not worry.

"Do I disgust you? Or worse, frighten you?"

The question was unexpected, but I answered without hesitation. "No." Disgust and fear were really the last emotions he evoked. Lust, desire, yearning... Those about summed it up. "You do what you have to do to survive." Didn't we all?

"I've never quite encountered such an accepting mortal." His hands moved toward my breasts. "Where have you been all my life, Ivy Fiske?"

I started to laugh and think up something witty, but he cupped my breasts and I forgot how to speak. Dropping my head back, I reveled in the feel of his fingers kneading my flesh. My bra was a weak barrier and did little to buffer the chill of his touch. Suddenly, I couldn't help but wonder if his entire body would be as cold. I needed to know.

While he entertained himself under my shirt, and rather exquisitely I might add, I reached for his belt. Our eyes met, and I formed the question in my mind. His nod was all I required, and in no time, his pants gaped open. I held his gaze as I worked my hand inside. The shock of discovering he wore no underwear made my blood run hot.

His expression shifted, and his jaw clenched in reaction. Fascinated by my effect on him, I closed my hand around his erection, awestruck by the cool marble feel, and carefully

repositioned it until the tip covered his naval. I stared as if I'd never seen a naked man before. I'd never had any reason to complain about what my ex-husband brought to bed, but Benedict, quite simply, made my mouth go dry.

With the weight of him resting in my palm, I fisted my hand and tried to make my fingertips touch. God he was thick, and I couldn't wait to take him inside me.

"I want to feel your mouth."

I jerked my gaze up to his face, and my fingers flexed around him.

He hissed and shifted his hips. "Unless you'd rather not," he ground out.

Oh, I wanted to. In fact, it was just one of the naughty things I'd thought about while watching him in the tavern. What *would* my costumers think if they'd known I was imagining myself peeling Benedict's pants off while pouring them a beer?

Slithering down his lap, I knelt on the floor and scooted between his legs. He slouched down further on the couch, then helped me tug his pants down around his thighs. If possible, he grew harder and longer as I bent over him to give him what he wanted. He filled my mouth, and eager, I took too much too soon.

Twisting his hands in my hair, he pulled me off of him and shook his head when I shot him a questioning glance. "I want you to enjoy it, so go slow until you're used to me."

Secretly, I prayed I'd never get used to him. He was destined to live forever, and that seemed like a good amount of time to spend acclimating myself to his body. I tugged against the grip in my hair, and once more closed my lips over the head of his penis. I slicked my tongue down the length, then followed with my mouth until I reached the point where I just couldn't swallow anymore. Gliding back up to the tip, I

did it again, then again, until his fingers flexed and his breath hitched.

Until that moment, I'd been sort of wondering if vampires really breathed. Guess they did. Though Benedict had ceased to; thanks to the suction of my mouth. I'd read little how-to articles about feminine prowess and ways to have a man panting and begging at your fingertips, but I really liked the idea of rendering this one breathless.

Not that he was alone in having difficulty breathing. Between the fullness of him in my mouth, and the anticipation of discovering what he'd feel like imbedded elsewhere, my breaths were rather short and rapid.

He tugged on my hair, and I glanced through my lashes while keeping him encased in my mouth. "Stand up," he growled.

Normally, I didn't care to be bossed around, but I'd forgive Benedict just about anything right now. I stood up between his splayed knees and propped my hands on my hips. "Is this when you start issuing orders?"

His crooked smile amped up the heat between my legs. "Would you obey if I did?"

Oh yes...

His smile grew, and he stretched his arms out along the back of the couch, completely at ease and gloriously exposed. "Take your clothes off."

My hands shook, making the simplest tasks difficult. I struggled to undo my jeans, I nearly killed myself while taking off my boots, and for some reason, my bra refused to unhook. With a growl, I spun it around and viciously tore at the clasp. Benedict's soft laughter grabbed my attention. "This isn't funny," I snarled, then nearly cooed out loud as the bra snapped free to drift to the floor.

Naked and trembling, I lifted my gaze to his. Sweet Jesus, I'd never seen such a look. I stood up a little straighter under the force of the appreciation glowing in his molten silver eyes. Without a word, he got up off the couch, crowding me with his body. I fought the instinctive urge to step back, and instead remained right where I was, basking in the slick feel of his penis brushing my lower belly. With his gaze locked on mine, he removed his shoes and pants, then gathered me in his arms.

"Before I bend you over this couch and fuck the living daylight out of you, I need to ask you a question."

My mind was still back on "fuck the living daylight out of you," so I only managed a numb nod.

"It won't surprise you to hear that vampires require blood to survive, but it may surprise you to learn that most of us crave the blood of only one person. A human servant, as they are known."

Oh boy, I was beginning to see where this might be headed. Was I ready to be the human servant of a vampire? Maybe that was just a fancy term for girlfriend? I would love to be Benedict's girlfriend, or bed mate, or lover, or whatever the hell he chose to call it.

He cradled my face in his palms and offered an amused grin. "If you prefer the word girlfriend, that is fine with me."

"So, you want me to be your human servant? Am I replacing the one you have now?" I glanced around the vast living room, irritated to think there might be a woman hidden somewhere in the house. No. Benedict wasn't like that. He couldn't be like that.

"We are alone, Ivy."

There was no way to doubt the steady tone of his voice. I nodded once and nervously licked my lips. It was starting to feel awkward standing in the middle of his living room naked.

Maybe we should go up to his room? Or at least kill the lights in here. "If I agree to this, what would you expect of me?" Fair question, right?

"I'd expect your blood."

Well, of course. He was a vampire, after all, what else would he expect of—

"I'd also expect you to commit fully to me," he said over my rambling thoughts. "I won't share you with any insignificant mortal men, or other vampires, for that matter."

Was there really a threat that other vampires would want me? I'd barely wrapped my mind around the existence of one, let alone others.

"Your beauty and your spirit will make you irresistible to my kind, Ivy, but I'll keep you safe."

Okay, now things were getting freaky.

Slipping out of his light embrace, I stepped back and crossed my arms over my bare breasts. "I thought we were going to have sex?" It was the first thing that came out, and I knew it sounded selfish and petty.

The very picture of patience, Benedict gave a little shake of his head. "I won't take things further between us until I know how far you are willing to go. If I have sex with you, I'll take your blood as well, and I'll do it with the intent to bind you to me."

"How?" There was that annoying curiosity of mine again.

"The how doesn't matter."

"It matters to me. How exactly will I come out the other side bound to you?" I had visions of being forced to drink his blood. In books that might be sexy, but when faced with the very real prospect, well, I'm not so sure.

"I'll do nothing to hurt you," he assured me.

It wasn't that I feared any sort of pain; I just really didn't relish the notion of drinking vampire blood. Sucking on a

paper cut was one thing, but this seemed like it had the power to change my life.

"I'll understand if you decline my offer. You will not be the first to do so."

Maybe if I hadn't heard the subtle hurt in his tone, I might have managed to gather my clothes and leave. But it was there, and I not only heard it, I related to it.

I mentioned earlier that I'd been married for ten years. Well, the marriage had started out blissful, but quickly turned sour. My husband was the sort of man to find fault with everything. Well, more specifically, everything I did. Disappointment and rejection became my bedfellows, until a friend encouraged me to just walk away. Being on my own didn't erase the years I had spent feeling inferior and unworthy, which was the main reason I had sort of sworn off men.

Until Benedict.

And now here he was, looking oh so sexy and offering me a place at his side as a human servant. Not really what I had expected when arriving at my decision to hit on him, but maybe over thinking things here was a mistake. I liked how I felt in his company, I certainly enjoyed his touch, and deep inside I believed we just might be destined for one another. Chalk it up to crazy romanticism, but a woman's intuition is seldom wrong.

But I wasn't quite ready to jump in head first yet. "Is this a position I can try out for, and then decide whether I like it or not?"

He closed the gap between us but didn't touch me. My body began to hum with awareness. "I would never force you to do anything. Let's see how the night progresses."

I gave a little nod, already feeling better, and glanced toward the couch. "So, are you really intending to bend me

over and fuck the daylights out of me?" The crude words felt odd on my tongue, and my cheeks caught fire.

"Oh yes," he said while gathering me in his arms and burying his face in my hair. "Unless you think you can't take it?"

Ooh, a dare. The little girl inside, who had once held the title of queen of truth or dare, reared up to take the challenge. I pulled back within his arms to see his face. "Maybe you're the one who should be worried? What if I'm too much for you to handle?"

Before I could register what was happening, he had me face down on the couch, pinned beneath the weight of his hard body. His lips brushed my ear and his chuckle trickled down my spine. "Part of me hopes you are, my lovely."

Answering back was a little difficult with a face full of couch. I moaned under the pressure of Benedict's unyielding body, then gasped when his hands snaked down my sides to grasp my hips. Hauling my lower half off the cushion, he placed his legs outside mine and taunted me with the thick head of his penis. Had I been able to, I would have begged for mercy. Or maybe I would have begged for something entirely different. As it was, I could do nothing but hold my breath as he continued to lubricate himself between my slick, wet folds.

He was big—no—huge, and I hadn't had sex in a really long time. Pain was sort of inevitable, but it didn't dampen my growing anticipation.

His body curled over mine, and his lips found my ear through the curtain of my hair. "Should I bite you first?"

"No," I breathed into the soft chenille. It was his hard dick I wanted, not his fangs. In answer to my thoughts, or maybe just because he wanted to, he scraped his teeth over the top of my shoulder. I shuddered at the strange feeling and almost changed my mind.

“You’ll never experience anything like the combination of sex and a vampire’s bite,” he said with his lips back at my ear.

I didn’t doubt him for a second. Already the night had been full of things I’d never imagined experiencing. Digging my face out of the couch, I turned and gulped in enough air to speak. “Do it at the same time.”

He pulled back and his fingers flexed on my hips. “Do what?”

He had to know. Did he just want to hear the words out loud?

“Bite me at the same time you...” I wiggled my hips, making myself gasp.

“All in good time, my lovely.” He shifted behind me and spread my legs wider. The first touch of his tongue nearly rocketed me off the couch. His grip left my hips to take hold of my rear end. While his tongue did masterful things to my eager sex, he massaged my buttocks with a touch that was neither gentle nor harsh. The mixture of sensations made my eyes water.

“God, you’re delicious,” he murmured between lashes of his tongue.

Well, there you had it. I was delicious. And this was the opinion of a vampire. A creature who tasted mortals for a living...um...maybe I didn’t want to go there just now. The unexpected pinch of teeth against my inner thigh propelled any and all thoughts right out of my head. I sucked in a great deal of air as realization washed over me.

Benedict was biting me. Again. And not on the neck. On the inner thigh. Heavens...

Maybe this whole biting thing really was as sexy as books made it out to be?

I gyrated against his mouth and his teeth sank deeper. Lust pooled hot and heavy between my legs, making my

muscles clench and my breath hitch. Oh God...I was going to come.

“Oh, no you don’t.” The pressure of his teeth disappeared, and he swiped his tongue through my folds once more before curling over my back. His chest pressed into my spine, and his penis slid between my legs. I longed to squeeze my thighs together to hold the long organ captive, but his firm grip on my rear prevented me from doing so. “You aren’t going to come until I tell you.”

First I couldn’t have a kiss until I begged him, and now I couldn’t come? Was this really fair? Did I really give a damn? I bit my lip and tamped down my growing sexual frustration. “Then just do it, for God’s sake.”

He slid a hand between my thighs to position himself at my opening. One push imbedded the thick head of his erection, but he hesitated before offering more. I bit my lip so hard I drew blood. I moaned at the salty, metallic flavor. Would his taste be the same? As the thought formed, his hand slid along the couch to appear right before my mouth. He turned his wrist to face me and gave me a few more inches of his penis as he leaned over my back.

“Why don’t you take a bite and find out.”

Oh man...

Swallowing, I licked my lips and stared hard at the underside of his wrist. He wasn’t as pale as you’d expect a vampire to be, but I could still make out the tracing of veins. “I can’t possibly rip your skin with my teeth.” Was I really considering biting him? Wow, the promise of great sex really altered a gal’s morals, didn’t it?

He pulled his hand away, then a few seconds later it reappeared. A small wound bled at the base of his thumb. “Suck it,” he hissed in my ear.

I'm sorry if it makes you think less of me, but rather eagerly, I wrapped my lips around the fleshy pad of his thumb and sucked. His blood didn't taste like mine at all. In fact, it didn't taste like anything I'd ever sampled, but it was good. Real good.

"Ah yes." With that hoarse exhalation, he buried the rest of his hard dick inside me.

The word ecstasy sprang to mind, but to be honest, it was really hard to think when all I wanted to do was feel.

Benedict...

I gripped the back of the couch for purchase and forced myself as deep as possible inside Ivy. The feel of her sucking at my hand, combined with the hot grip of her pussy, propelled me toward climax a hell of a lot quicker than I would have liked. Gathering my control and calling on the stillness that lived within my kind, I fought against the mounting pleasure. She moaned and pressed her rear end high against my hips, slightly fracturing my fragile control.

"God, Ivy."

Her tongue stroked up my thumb before her mouth closed once more over the wound I had made. A low rumble of pleasure vibrated through her just as her inner muscles put a choke hold on my cock. My fangs dug into my lower lip as I gritted my teeth and tried to hold on. It was no use. She felt too bloody good. I pulled my hand away from her mouth and released the couch in order to grab her hips. I held her still and pounded into her until she clawed at the cushions and screamed my name. The sound shot straight to my groin. My balls tightened, ready to release the heavy load of sperm collected there.

I held off my climax long enough to find my voice. "Give me permission to bite you." I wouldn't sink my teeth into her unless she allowed it, but God help us both if she said no.

She lifted her head, shook her hair back, and peered over her shoulder. Her face was flushed, her eyes wide, and her lips swollen. I'd never seen anything sexier. "Please."

I took that to be a yes and leaned over to aim for the back of her shoulder. I filled my mouth with her skin and bit down hard. She gasped, and I gentled my bite. I didn't want to cause her any pain, but I needed to feel the pulse of her blood. It throbbed just below the surface, then rushed into my mouth as her skin tore. Yes!

Somehow I retained enough sense to make sure this wasn't all about me. Curling a hand around her hip, I sought out the damp thatch of curls between her legs and pinched the swollen head of her clit. She squeaked and convulsed around my cock once more.

With her blood in my mouth and her body melting around me, all was right with the world. I'd found my companion at last.

Ivy...

Is it possible for a body to feel too much? Would that be considered sensory overload? I do believe I was experiencing it tenfold.

Benedict was relentless as he pounded into me. At the same time, his long fingers rubbed over my clit and his moist mouth sucked at my shoulder, making me moan and writhe in a way I'd never dreamed of doing. My orgasm came, and then kept coming, until passing out became a very real fear. I'd read about women being pleased to the point of oblivion, but come on, who really believed such things?

I was about to not only believe it but experience it.

My lungs burned as I fought to fill them. "Benedict," I begged. Had he even heard me?

The pressure of his teeth in my shoulder vanished, and his thrusts stilled. Oh man, I hadn't meant for him to stop. "You drive me crazy, Ivy," he mumbled close to my ear.

I shivered at the confession and then collapsed onto my belly. His hard body followed me down, but he braced his weight on his hands so as not to crush me. Several strands of my hair were plastered to my cheek, but I ignored them and simply stared through the pale curtain. I couldn't really focus, but if I closed my eyes, I might faint. "You didn't have to stop." The words came out weak and breathless.

Benedict chuckled and withdrew his rock hard penis from my body in order to gently roll me onto my back. Grasping my knees, he positioned my legs to allow him to move between them, and nudged his way back inside. "Who says I was done with you?" He moved languidly now, but the effect was still breathtaking.

I licked my dry lips and stared into his eyes. They seemed to glimmer. "So, am I your servant now?" I reached a heavy arm up to play with the dangling necklace at his throat. It looked sexy thumping against his body in time to his thrusts.

He leaned down to place his mouth at my neck, smashing my hand between us. I felt his heartbeat and that answered yet another question I'd had. "Is that what you wish to be?"

"Mmm..." was about all I could manage. I closed my eyes and imagined the erotic sting of his teeth. He gave me what I wanted as his penis continued its methodical glide in and out of my body. I wasn't so sure I'd have another orgasm, but it still felt better than good.

Turned out, I was wrong.

I shattered moments later as a result of one really deep thrust. My lips parted, but I couldn't manage a single sound. Gasping for air, I blinked Benedict's face into focus and reveled in his smile before the world faded to black.

I woke up to the feel of him sipping at my lips. Did he realize I had yet to beg for his kiss? If so, seems like the rules had changed. With a smile forming against his mouth, I opened my eyes. He pulled back enough to let me speak. "I didn't beg for it yet."

He sat up and hauled me onto his lap. Burying his hands deep in my hair, he imprisoned my head and my gaze. "Beg now."

"Why should I?" I squirmed against the rising ridge of his arousal. God, could I take more? Who knew, but I was willing to try.

Using his grip, he tugged my face closer and covered my lips in a possessive kiss. I'd never been kissed so deeply. The stroke of his tongue brought to mind the deep plunge of his thrusts, turning me to a pool of hot liquid. I groaned and opened my mouth wider while finally tangling my fingers into his hair. Just as I had expected, the black waves coiled around my knuckles as if they'd been fashioned to do so. A strange swell of emotion rose within me at that very moment, and I choked back a sob and tore my lips away.

His gaze bore into mine, and he eased his hold on my hair. "What is it?" Real concern laced his tone.

I shook my head, unsure how to voice exactly how I felt. Then I recalled I didn't need to find the words. Staring into his eyes, I filled my mind with images of the two of us together. I saw him coming into the tavern every night to take me home. I watched us stroll hand in hand under the full

moon. I imagined the intensity of being in his bed night after night—

“I want the same things, Ivy.”

“Is what I’m feeling real or is it some sort of vampire voodoo?”

He pulled me against his chest for a tight hug, and I felt, more than heard, his rumble of laughter. “I don’t use vampire voodoo.” He kissed the top of my hair and smoothed its length down my bare back. “Though, if you decide to walk away from me, I might be forced to.”

I pushed up to look at him and saw the merriment in his eyes. “How will serving you change my life?”

Something shifted behind his eyes, and his expression sobered. “How about we forget all references to the word servant and use girlfriend instead?”

Yeah, I liked that better too. Nodding, I settled back into his embrace and toyed with his left nipple. It hardened beneath my touch, making me smile. “So we just do the normal boyfriend/girlfriend stuff?”

“With a little blood letting thrown in,” he added.

I glanced up, and he winked. “It should be interesting when I take you to meet my parents.” They had despised my ex-husband, which probably accounted for my overwhelming desire to marry the jerk. But I’d been young and stupid, and I really wanted them to like Benedict. Not sure how they would handle the whole vampire thing, but they had survived my brother coming out of the closet, so maybe...

Benedict suddenly laughed. “You compare dating me to having a gay brother?” He shook his head, then dropped it back against the couch. “Somehow I think they might view things a little differently.”

I shrugged. “We’ll see, won’t we?”

He lifted his head, his expression a tad more serious. "There are things you need to know."

Oh dear. "Such as?"

"The moment you took my blood inside you, you joined with me in a way that's really damn hard to break."

I had sort of figured as much given the strange feeling that had passed through me when I did it. In fact, just discussing the moment made me want another taste. "Are there any perks to this bond?"

His smile returned. "Of course. You need only think about me to summon me to your side."

Really? Hmm...

"Before you get too cocky, my lovely, it works both ways."

"So, you call, and I come?"

He dropped his hands to my waist and lifted me high enough to let his erection slide inside. Immediately, I clenched around him. "You'll come without my having to call you."

A gasp tore from my throat as he forced my hips back down, impaling me fully. I reached for his shoulders and dug my nails into his skin. I should have said something witty and independent; something to let him know I wasn't going to be his sexual slave as well as his blood servant, but words escaped me.

Think of me what you will, but I did nothing more than memorize the beauty of his face and hold on tight as he took me for a ride like no other.