



NOBLE BLOOD

THE GRAY COURT

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SAMHAIN

Nobility has its privileges...and its price. Sometimes it just sucks.

The Gray Court, Book 2

For Lord Duncan Malmayne, it was love at first sight with his true bond, the lovely half-Sidhe, half-leprechaun Moira Dunne. Yet something is missing from his relationship with the fiery redhead, something that prevents him from completing the Claiming and making Moira his forever.

As problems multiply in what should be a magical, idyllic time, the depression weighing on Moira's Sidhe heart signals a potentially devastating condition. Mate sickness. Her instinct tells her what's missing: Jaden Blackthorn, Gray Court vampire, Duncan's bond brother and closest friend—who tactfully withdrew from their lives after Duncan declared his love.

Jaden is both heartbroken and elated that the two people he loves most in the world are together. It's best he cut off all contact to give them space to complete the Claiming. But trouble is brewing in the Malmayne clan, and when Jaden's forced back into their lives by the Hob, their extremely rare tribond clicks with a reaction that's swift, sensual and all-consuming.

But not everyone looks upon it as a blessing. In fact, the price of their love could be a potentially fatal shift of power...

Warning: This book contains explicit sex, graphic language, and M/M/F love scenes between a Sidhe lord, a vampire and a leprechaun. And no, that's not the start of a dirty joke no matter what my Beta readers said.

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Noble Blood

Dana Marie Bell

Dedication

To Mom, who only heard half of a racy conversation between her kids and turned it that much raunchier. (Dildos, lesbians and supplements? And you say Memom has a dirty mind!)

To Dad, who introduced me to Kahlua and eggnog during the holidays. Yum!

To Dusty, who encourages breeding among my plot bunnies. When I tell him the bunnies need to go back in the hutch and wait their turns, he laughs. Then he puts a new bunny in the hutch and waits for the fun to begin. Love you, sweetheart.

And to all the readers who wrote to me after my surgery to wish me a speedy recovery, thank you. You guys are the best.

Chapter One

New York City, 100 years ago...

Jaden Blackthorn shivered in the darkness, his eyes glued to the cat spitting and hissing in the corner of the alleyway. Damn, he was *so* hungry. But the thought of feeding from a human, of doing what *he'd* asked him to do, turned his stomach. Jaden couldn't kill that way.

He just couldn't.

They'd laughed at him, the poor little half-breed who'd refused to feed, refused to fight. Refused to kill. Then they'd kicked his ass out into the night and wished him a quick death. It was the best he could hope for, too, because he was an abomination now, something to be feared, someone to be hunted. He could never go home again. He was what his Sire called *leanan sidhe*.

He was death.

A crimson tear slid down his cheek. The end was near. If he didn't feed soon he would be left with only two choices. Sit in the sun and die, or let go, let the creature within control him and feed until some knight of the so-called White Court found him and put him out of his misery.

He almost wished one of them would. He was adrift, lost in a world that had never accepted him from the day of his birth. His white father had abandoned his Seneca mother before he was ever born, his mother passing away when he was only ten years old. He'd grown up in one of the state run orphanages, lived there for six years before he was turned out. He'd slowly worked his way across the state before finally landing in New York City at the age of twenty, only to find things were far worse than he'd ever imagined they would be. He'd managed to eke out a living before he'd met his Sire, but it had been hungry work, and bleak.

His Sire had taken him, turned him against his will and offered him a place, a way to belong, something he'd never before had. Jaden had been tempted by his dark promises that he would never be alone again. He couldn't deny that. But the price of belonging to his new "family" was higher than Jaden was willing to pay.

He could still hear his Sire's voice in his head. "When you're hungry enough, you will be back."

No. He wouldn't. Not ever.

He could hear the cat's heartbeat, terror making it race. He couldn't wait much longer or the poor creature would suffer even more than it was already going to. He didn't want to kill the creature, but what choice did he have? His Sire had told him the only way he could feed was to kill his prey.

Damn it to hell and back again. Jaden *liked* cats. This one was just as dirty, scared and hungry as he was. He stared into the green eyes, willing the creature to calm down, trying to ease its fears before he was forced to fight it.

His newly sensitive ears picked up the sound of laughter at the end of the alley. He ducked back into the shadows, praying whoever it was wouldn't see him in all his dirty glory.

The cat meowed, the sound pitiful and starved, curious now that the predator in Jaden was no longer focused on it.

One of the pair of footsteps paused. "Father? Would you excuse me for a moment?"

Shit. The voice belonged to one of the rich types who sometimes slumped in this neighborhood. He could tell by the smooth voice, rich as cream, deep and full of confidence. The idiot was going to get himself killed if he wasn't careful. Jaden bit back the bout of hysterical laughter. He pushed back even farther into the shadows, his back hitting the harsh bricks, their pinprick unevenness scratching him through the thin material of his cotton shirt. His eyes darkened to deepest black, the whites all but gone. He could feel the flames of his hunger dancing inside his pupils.

Please. Please don't come down this alley.

The heartbeat of the man was strong, the barest hint of blood tickling Jaden's nostrils. The man had cut himself at some point during the day and cleaned the wound, washing off the blood, but not enough.

Not nearly enough.

The rich, tangy scent called to him in a way the poor cat never could. There was something there, something different. Something he'd never scented before that had saliva pooling in his mouth. He battled his hunger, desperate to hold off the inevitable.

Why hadn't he fed off the cat? Some stranger's life was in danger because he had been too pathetic to even kill a cat.

"Here, kitty kitty."

Jaden blinked, stunned. The man was calling...to the cat?

"It's all right, little one. I won't hurt you."

Jaden shuddered. The man's voice nearly had him walking out of the shadows and into his light. The promise of safety in that voice was almost his undoing.

The scent of the man's blood would mean his death.

"Go away," he whispered, barely aware he'd spoken. He closed his eyes tight. "Please go away." God, his teeth ached.

The sound of the man's footfalls stopped. "Who is there?" Wariness had entered that rich voice.

Jaden didn't understand why he was compelled to answer, but he did. "Nightmares. Go away."

"Come out where I can see you."

Jaden smiled. If he came out the man would never leave this alley. "No."

“I will not hurt you.”

At that Jaden laughed. “No. But I might hurt you, and I do not want to do that.”

“I doubt you could hurt me, little one.”

Jaden growled. *Little one?* His fangs descended. That tantalizing scent of blood was closer now. How had the man approached without Jaden hearing it? “I am not a little one.” *I am a monster.*

“No, I can see that.”

Jaden gasped, his head rapping against the brick wall. There, in front of him, was one of the most beautiful men he’d ever seen. Blond hair framed a face sculpted by the angels themselves. Strong, masculine, the expression full of compassion, it was a face meant to grace the most elegant dining rooms. Jaden felt small and ugly by comparison. The man’s shoulders were wide, his hands strong, the fingers lean. Those fingers reached up and tipped up Jaden’s chin, taking in every nuance of his face. The black, inhuman eyes, the fangs, the dirt and the bloody tears all proclaimed Jaden’s inhumanity. His long black hair was matted with filth and he stank to high heaven. By all rights the man should be reeling in horror and disgust.

Jaden was startled to realize the man before him was only a few inches taller than he. His scent, that incredible bloody scent... He ripped his face away, hiding his fangs behind his arm. “Get away.”

“No.”

“Go!”

The man shook his head, something strange sparking in those steely gray eyes. “No. You need help.”

The hunger was out of control. Jaden’s entire being hurt. He was going to kill this man if he didn’t leave *now*. “I don’t need help.”

A soft hand cupped his cheek. “Yes, you do. I know exactly what you need.”

Oh, God, that was the hand the man had cut. Jaden could smell it, see the little seam where the blood had formed a scab. All he had to do was reach out and... “Go away.” *Please, dear God, go away.* He could feel the tears start up again.

He was going to kill this man. Then he was going to kill himself.

He closed his eyes and prepared himself for a dying man’s feast.

When he opened them again the blond was gently pushing his head away from his neck. “That’s enough for now, my friend.”

Jaden blinked. The hunger was gone. The feral need to kill had abated. The man...the man was still alive. Jaden licked his lips and moaned.

The man tasted delicious. Almost effervescent. Definitely not human. “Who are you?”

The man smiled. “Duncan Malmayne, at your service.” And he bowed, *bowed* to Jaden Blackthorne, ex-Black Court vampire and unwanted half-breed, with all the grace he would show to a visiting prince.

“*Mrow.*”

Duncan laughed and offered his hand to the small cat Jaden had attempted to feed from. “Hello to you too, young madam.”

“Who *are* you?”

Duncan’s eyes gleamed, silver sparks dancing in their depths. His skin gleamed under the shadowed moon. His ears, now that Jaden looked closely, were delicately pointed. Silver danced along his skin. “I am Duncan Malmayne, Seelie Sidhe lord and heir to the Malmayne Clan.”

White Court. Seelie meant White Court. That was the first thing his Sire had pounded into his head, to avoid the White Court like the very plague. They hunted his kind, killed them with glee. “Why?”

The man tilted his head. “Why what?”

“Why feed me?” *Why save me? I’m not worth it.*

“Because you did everything in your power to send me away. *You* tried to save *me* at the expense of your own life.”

“I’m vampire.” Evil. Born and bred, it was in his blood now. He would never be free of the taint.

“Truly?” Duncan’s eyes widened comically, the oval pupils proving once and for all that he was far from human. “I had no clue.”

The laughter in his voice made mockery of that which had filled his Sire’s. That laughter had been cold and cruel. Duncan Malmayne’s laughter drew Jaden in, made him smile. Made him warm for the first time in weeks. “Thank you for...” He swallowed hard. He couldn’t even bring himself to say it.

Duncan Malmayne’s laughter subsided. There was no pity in his gaze, only understanding. “You’ve been abandoned?”

Jaden nodded. He still was not sure if what ran through him was relief or rage that his sire had discarded him two weeks ago.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-three.”

Duncan shook his head. “No. How *old* are you?”

Oh. “A month, my lord.” Something about Malmayne demanded the honorific from him.

Malmayne’s jaw clenched. “Have you petitioned the Gray Court for admittance?”

“The...*Gray* Court?” What was the Gray Court? His Sire had never mentioned that there were more than two Courts, the White and the Black. It was death to even approach the White Court, but Jaden couldn’t bring himself to embrace the pure evil the Black Court embodied.

But a *Gray* Court? A place where a vampire like him, reviled by both Seelie and Unseelie, might find a place to belong? Was it possible?

“I thought not.” Malmayne put his hand on Jaden’s filthy sleeve. “Come with me.” Fear shot through Jaden. Was Malmayne going to kill him now? “I’ll explain things to you, help you find your way. When you’re ready to leave, you’ll be able to take care of yourself. I promise nothing will happen to you in my

care.” He knelt and picked up the mewling cat, cuddling the creature close and scratching behind its filthy ear.

Jaden’s heart pounded. Something about the way Malmayne touched the cat, despite its dirt, made him long for something he couldn’t name. “Why are you doing this?”

For the first time, the Sidhe seemed uncertain. “I’m not sure. But there’s something about you. I cannot leave you here to die.” The uncertainty fled, leaving behind determination. “So you will come with me and live.” He held out his hand.

Jaden didn’t hesitate. He took Duncan Malmayne’s hand, knowing his life would never be the same again.

Nebraska, present day and just after Halloween...

Moira watched her family disappear into the distance, the only home she’d ever known nothing more than a dollhouse on the horizon. The tall man beside her hadn’t given her much of an option about leaving. She’d found herself bundled into his limo before she could blink.

Of course, she’d still been reeling from the incredible kiss he’d placed on her lips just moments before she found herself in the vehicle and on her way. Something within her had responded to the stranger, something that kept her from fighting his Claim on her.

What was up with that?

Moira *never* went with the flow. She always followed her own path. She was a leader, not a follower, and damn proud of it. So why had she followed like a meek little lamb while this man bundled her up and drove away?

Why did it bother her so much that they’d left Jaden Blackthorn behind?

“Moira?”

She turned to the stunning blond sitting next to her. His charcoal gray suit was much darker than the silver gray of his eyes. His blond hair was slightly longer than was fashionable, brushing the tops of his shoulders. His lips were full and pink, calling her for another taste. With the way his body filled out that suit she bet he was massive everywhere. He had the face of an angel and the body of a warrior. Despite the suit he managed to trip every he-man fantasy she’d ever had, and then some.

“Do you know who I am?”

She rolled her eyes. She might be just this side of blond but she was far from the stereotype. “Duncan Malmayne, new lord of Clan Malmayne. You’re a five-hundred-year-old Sidhe who is blood bonded to Jaden Blackthorn, the vampire who kidnapped Ruby. Your sister was a psychotic bitch and your father—”

“Is dead.”

The cool tone of voice told her nothing. Did he grieve his father, or was he glad that the man who'd allowed his daughter to deal out so much grief and pain was dead?

"I'm sorry." She wasn't, but it seemed like the right thing to say.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Didn't I just answer that question?" She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him.

His lips twitched. "Redheads. I'd forgotten about that temper."

Her eyes narrowed. He was beginning to piss her off. "Strawberry blonde."

He tugged on one red-gold curl. "More strawberry than blonde." He tipped her chin up. "I'm yours, and you're mine."

She could feel her eyes go wide at the silver sparks dancing in his eyes. "Wait. What?"

"You know what I'm talking about. You tasted it when we kissed."

Oh, crap. "That's not possible. I don't have enough Sidhe blood to recognize or Claim a true bond."

She blinked. Or did she?

The children of Sean Dunne each had unique abilities their half-Sidhe, half-Leprechaun blood granted them. Leo, for all that his powers tended toward his Sidhe half, had still managed to claim land in the leprechaun way. He'd used the leprechaun's bond with the earth to find and rescue his true bond, Ruby, but the bond was weak and his powers over the land miniscule.

Shane, a true half-blood, could summon whatever his imagination could conjure up so long as the materials it was made out of were "of the earth", a concept he'd tried and failed to explain to her. He couldn't make a plastic water bottle, but he could make silk shirts. Unfortunately, using the ability exhausted him beyond belief. The more intricate the item, the more tired he became.

As for herself, Moira took after her father the most. She would count herself almost pure leprechaun. Her bond to the earth was strong. She could hear the trees whisper to one another, feel the grass grow beneath her feet. The earth itself told her things in her dreams, things that would send her father into a tizzy if he knew about them. She hadn't ever planned on leaving the Dunne farm; the land called to her the same way it did to her father. She couldn't imagine living in a big city, surrounded by concrete and glass. She needed dirt beneath her feet and green, growing things. She hoped Duncan understood that or they'd have problems from the get-go.

"You know I'm right, Moira."

She blew her bangs out of her eyes. Yes, he was right, and it was her mother's fault. Aileen Joloun Dunne was pure blooded Sidhe, and aristocratic. It was possible that Moira could tap into that part of her heritage unconsciously, know her true bond when she tasted him. Maybe even Claim him and Bind him with the Vows, though she had to ask herself if it would be as *strong* a bond.

Besides, who knew she'd find her mate so young? By Sidhe standards she was still a child at only fifty years old. Sidhe weren't considered adults until they reached the age of one hundred years. She eyed

the man next to her, feeling anything but childish. *Then again, by leprechaun standards I'm a grown woman.*

She had to admit, Duncan Malmayne tasted damn good. She licked her lips, remembering when his mouth had descended on hers. She'd stood there in her father's yard, watching Jaden by the limo, his long, dark hair dancing on the evening breeze. She'd been strangely eager to see him again, to know that the mental voice he'd used to soothe her fears and calm her mind had been the true man. The vampire who'd kidnapped Ruby and forced Moira to fight to defend her had turned out to be their greatest ally in the Malmayne house. The thought of seeing him again had her twitchy, restless. She needed to see him, to see for herself that the terrible wound Jeremy West had inflicted on him had in fact healed. She'd felt the piercing of the stake through Jaden's back, had known that he would have died if Jeremy's aim had been truer. The blood on her own back had terrified her parents, but Moira knew that she'd suffered along with the vampire, if only mildly in comparison.

Then he was there, his dark eyes dancing, and she'd known beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was fine.

They'd arranged to meet with the new Malmayne lord at night due to the vampire's susceptibility to sunlight, a courtesy that hadn't gone unnoticed by Jaden. Jaden had looked pleased to see her, a gleam in his dark eyes that seemed directed solely at her. His Native American heritage was obvious in his dark hair and bronzed skin, skin that hadn't faded in the years since he'd been turned. Her belly had turned in lazy circles, her breath coming faster. Somehow she'd just known the vampire had come solely to claim her. The affection that had poured out of him for her had eased her fears about the other man in the limo, the newly minted lord of the Malmayne clan and her mother's ex-fiancé. Despite Leo's reassurances that the new head of the Malmayne clan had not come to claim blood debt, she still felt that his entrance into their lives would change things forever.

Duncan had stepped out of the limo and proceeded to prove her right.

"Perhaps we should test the theory. See if what I believe is true." Duncan tipped up her face with a smile.

She blinked, the memory of Jaden's face when Duncan had descended on her fading from her mind. The vampire had looked stunned, even...hurt? But then Duncan's face had blocked out the night, the startled joy in his face making her heart race. He'd kissed her, and nothing else had mattered.

Not her family. Not even the defeat of the Malmaynes who had done their best to destroy the Dunnes. Only the presence of Jaden had continued to tickle her senses.

Just the thought of him still did.

She stomped out the shiver of unease at the thought of the vampire. She was almost positive Duncan was her true bond. She shouldn't be entertaining thoughts of the seductive vampire. She licked his lips and could almost taste him again. "Maybe we should."

Duncan bent to her, his lips touching hers with reverence. She smiled against his mouth, waiting for the Sidhe lord to take what he so obviously believed was his.

He played with her mouth, teasing little sips that left her wanting more. By the time he parted her lips she was dying for a real taste. He dipped inside, offering her the spicy taste of a Sidhe, and she took it and demanded more.

He gave it to her. He hauled her into his arms and devoured her. His taste exploded on her tongue, drove through her with a shaft of need, of want that left her writhing on the leather seat.

Oh, yeah. He's the One. She no longer had any doubts.

Duncan Malmayne was meant to be hers.

So why did her thoughts instantly return to the vampire they'd left behind? Some small part of her knew he suffered agony, but she didn't know why. If it was a physical pain she would have ordered Duncan to turn the limo around and damn the consequences.

But something had hurt Jaden's heart before he shut her out of their weak blood bond. Was it the knowledge that Duncan had found his true bond and begun to Claim her? Was he jealous that he'd have to share his bond brother's affections?

She didn't know. She just hoped whatever had caused Jaden grief he would get over it, and soon. She didn't like the thought of him suffering. Not one little bit.

Duncan was ecstatic. He'd found his true bond, the one person the universe had created just for him. To find out that she was the descendant of the woman he'd been contracted to wed was irony of the tallest order.

Duncan couldn't believe the luck he'd had. All of the things that made Aileen Dunne such a beautiful woman existed in her daughter, but they were refined, honed, tempered by her inner fire. While Aileen was gorgeous, there was a gentleness about her that no one could deny.

Despite what others might say, she was well-matched to her leprechaun husband. Duncan was quite glad things had worked out the way they had. If they had gone through with the arranged marriage the way their families had wanted they both would have been miserable. He needed someone to keep him on his toes, and Aileen was too soft for that. Her softness grounded her husband, Sean, tempered his wild ways. They were a perfect match in every way.

Her daughter, on the other hand, was truly stunning, with her mother's gentle eyes and her father's warrior's stance. He'd stepped one foot out of the limousine and felt like he'd been punched right in the stomach.

There had been only one other time when he'd felt like that. He frowned, but shook thoughts of Jaden aside. He couldn't allow himself to be distracted by thoughts of his bond brother. Besides, his bond with Jaden was nothing like the one he'd have with Moira.

He had a mate to Claim, and he couldn't be happier about it.

His first sight of Moira Dunne would be burned into his memory for all eternity. Waist length red-gold curls, bound in a loose braid, had called his fingers to bathe in their fire. Stunning green eyes flashed at him, intelligence simmering in their depths. Her pink lips had curled up in a welcoming smile even while her fisted hands revealed her wariness. She'd stood with her feet braced apart, a warrior queen ready to defend her own. Something had passed between Jaden and Moira, something that brought a softening of the smile on her lips, relaxed the tense set of her shoulders. He'd been grateful for whatever reassurances Jaden had given her, but he had no time to thank the man.

Duncan *had* to have Moira. After four hundred years of waiting, of longing, he'd finally seen the woman meant to be his. The breath had left his lungs in a rush. The lust nearly toppled him to his knees. He was damn surprised he'd been able to walk toward her without falling at her feet. His cock had been rock-hard in seconds, an ache between his legs he had no intention of denying. He'd moved forward in a daze, his hands reaching for her, his mind reeling with the knowledge that here, *here* where he'd least expected it, he'd found the keeper of his heart. He'd kissed her, tasted her and known what he had to do.

He had to take her. She belonged to him.

So he bundled her into the limo with a smile, informed her family that she was his, and waited for Jaden to get into the car.

Jaden had refused. Duncan was still trying to figure that one out. If he'd stayed behind only to fill in the gaps for the Dunne family why had he shut Duncan out of his mind? True, he'd mentioned something about giving him privacy with Moira, but still. They'd never been apart for long, at least not mentally. The last few weeks in Paris, unable to communicate with Jaden, had been a strange sort of torture he'd never before been forced to endure.

Another thing he needed to discuss with the vampire. Was it possible that their bond had become *too* strong? Duncan had actually started to feel ill while in France, a rare occurrence for the Sidhe. He'd returned home as soon as possible only to feel the near-fatal blow Kaitlynn's "friend", Jeremy West, had dealt Jaden. The pain had nearly dropped him. Only the knowledge that Jaden had survived kept Duncan from losing his mind long enough to get to him.

Only to find Leo Dunne had connected with the land in order to save his wife from Kaitlynn. The reassurance that Jaden would live, that the land itself was sustaining him, had eased the terror riding him. If Leo hadn't killed Jeremy in such a spectacular way Duncan was certain he would have found a way to make the Black Court vampire suffer a thousand deaths for harming Jaden.

Duncan shook his head and turned his attention back to Moira. Jaden would be home soon, and then everything would come clear. In the meantime, he had Moira in his arms, and he had no intention of wasting any time in making her his.

Too bad he just couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right.

Jaden watched the fading dust of the limo and turned to the Dunne family with a smile. Inside, his heart was broken in two. He laughed to himself. It made perfect sense that it was in two pieces. It had just been ripped from his chest, and wasn't it fitting that Moira and Duncan each held a piece? Still, he had things to do, places to go, yadda yadda. He was certain that someday he'd be able to see Duncan and Moira together, happily bonded, and not want to drop to his knees in agony.

And maybe someday monkeys will fly out of my butt.

"What the hell is going on?"

Jaden turned to Aileen Dunne, the sight of her reminding him of the woman who had just taken off with a piece of him in her little hands. "Seems Duncan has found his true bond." He shrugged. "You know how it goes. You get a little kiss, do a little mattress mambo, mutter a few words and before you know it you've got a little wife nagging at you to lower the toilet seat."

Leo Dunne was the only one of the Dunne family to look even remotely amused. Sean Dunne glared at him, his green eyes flashing, the pebbles at his feet popping like water on a hot skillet. "That isn't remotely amusing, vampire."

"Dad, chill. It's okay. Jaden's cool."

Jaden blinked in shock. The last person he'd expected to stand up for him just had. "Thanks, Shane."

Shane Joloun Dunne shrugged his shoulders, an easy grin on his face. "I know what you did in that control room, and I know how you saved Ruby. You're all right as far as I'm concerned." The man brushed his golden curls off his forehead, his emerald eyes twinkling. "Besides, something tells me that you're not done with us. Not by a long shot. We might as well get used to you being around, right?" Shane winked at him, looking like he knew something no one else did, including Jaden.

That's it. I hereby declare you a freaky-ass dude. "Yeah. Well. My bond brother just mated your sister. I'm betting we'll see each other over Thanksgiving turkey once in a while." *Not.* If the pain he was experiencing now was anything like what he'd feel when he saw Moira and Duncan happily snuggled together he'd probably be forced to do a little sunbathing. Enough sunlight would eventually render him dead enough not to care what happened between the only two people he'd ever loved.

Even Leo, the normally easy-going brother, was looking at Shane like he'd lost his damn mind. "What the *hell* are you talking about?" From the amused exasperation in the Sidhe's voice it wasn't the first time he'd been forced to ask Shane that question.

"You'll see." Shane slung an arm around his mother's shoulder. The poor woman was so tense she jumped. "Let's go inside and have a nice cup of tea. Okay, Ma?"

"But, Moira." Aileen refused to allow her son to turn her, keeping her gaze focused on Jaden. She was wringing her delicate hands. Jaden was worried she'd start ripping off fingers if she tugged any harder. "Where is Duncan taking my daughter?"

If I know my bond brother, to the nearest bed. “Probably back to Dunne’s new house.” He pointed to Leo, who was cuddling his wife close to his side. Ruby was a delightful armful, with rounded breasts and hips and a pouty mouth that Jaden, under other circumstances, would have loved to taste. “Don’t worry.” He stared down the road. He couldn’t catch even a fleeting glimpse of the limo. “Your daughter’s with the best man I know.” He turned to face them again and plastered a smile on his face. “Tea sounds good.” The bow he gave them was exaggerated. He was delighted when Ruby giggled. “Shall we?” He offered the brunette his arm, grinning when she took it. He stuck his tongue out at Leo and sauntered into the house with the newest Dunne, trying his best to pretend that he wasn’t bleeding to death inside.

Chapter Two

Las Vegas, two weeks before Christmas...

Jaden danced across the floor, wondering what the fuck was wrong with him. He was starving, and not just for blood. But none of the many hot, available bodies called to him. Hell, at this point he'd be willing to *pay* for a body that appealed, but none of them did. Not one, damn it. Not even the blond with the blue eyes whose build so reminded him of...

Okay, not going there.

Jaden loved a big, strong man, and dayum if that guy didn't have big and strong down to an art form. Not even the stupid Santa hat detracted from his looks.

Then the guy had to go and ruin it by lifting some little twink up in the air and almost dropping him.

Jaden laughed and rolled his eyes. *Or not.*

He hit the edge of the dance floor and made his way through the crowd, pausing only long enough to check his watch. Almost two thirty, and he still hadn't fed *or* gotten laid like he'd originally planned. As a vampire he couldn't even get good and drunk without a little veinicular help.

Heh. *Veinicular.*

Jaden sighed and propped up a wall. It was pretty fucking bad when the best part of the evening was a lame vampire joke. He hadn't been laid in more months than he could count, and sucking without fucking was, well, chocolate without peanut butter. Coke without rum.

Turner without Hooch.

Jaden rubbed his chest. The ache that kept him from following that blond's tight end right to nirvana had been growing by the night. He knew exactly who to blame for it too.

Damn it, he missed them. He missed them both so much it hurt.

"You okay?"

He grimaced and stared down at the small Asian woman in front of him. "Yeah, I'm good."

She shook her head, her glossy black hair shimmering under the lights. "If you're hungry I could feed you." Her startling eyes looked up at him with a mild expression, almost as if she was offering to order him something off the dollar menu at Taco Bell.

Akane Russo had the weirdest eyes of anyone he'd ever met. One eye was dark brown with a startling light hazel star in the center. The other eye was a pure light hazel. Black brows were a straight slash above them, giving her a stern expression.

Those eyes freaked him the fuck out every time he saw the woman. Considering how many times they'd worked together over the years, he'd found himself freaked out quite a lot. He'd long ago become used to the sensation and counted her as one of his few real friends. "Nah. I'm good."

One brow rose in disbelief. It was almost Spockish in its elegance. "You sure? You look really hungry, Jade."

He grinned and tried to make it look like he meant it. "I'll be fine."

She shrugged. "All right then. But eat soon, okay? I'd hate to have to hunt your ass if you go feral." She started to walk away, ignoring his shiver, but before she got very far she turned back. That golden star in the center of one of her eyes widened. "There's something different about you."

Oh, boy. He had no idea what she was seeing, but there was a curiosity in her expression he could live without. He had no desire to be dragged off to her lair and dissected. "My shirt is new. It's Marc Jacobs." He spun, making sure to leer at her over his shoulder. "You like?"

Her eyes rolled, the star shrinking to its normal proportions. "Please. I'm probably the only piece of ass in this bar not interested."

He wiggled his butt, confident she would turn him down. "You sure?"

She laughed, the sound remarkably sweet from a woman he'd once seen rip the head off a Black Court vampire. "I'm sure. I don't poach, remember?"

He frowned and wondered what the hell she was talking about. Before he could ask she waved good-bye and headed back to the dance floor.

"Freaky ass dragon bitch."

She glared over her shoulder at him. "I heard that."

That startled a laugh out of him. How she did that he'd never know, but it sounded like she was standing next to him in a nice, quiet room. He shook his head and turned back to the dancers. He had no idea if he was going to be able to find a *real* meal tonight, but he was sure as hell going to try.

The sight of the blond man bent over the red-headed twink brought home that no, he wasn't. Damn it.

He headed toward the door, his hunger effectively demolished by the thought of Duncan and Moira. It still amazed him that she'd let him in after his role in kidnapping her sister-in-law Ruby. The human had been a trouper when faced with the Deranged Darling.

Just thinking about Kaitlynn was enough to have him clenching his teeth in rage. So he brought forth the memory of how he'd made her pay oh-so-dearly for everything she'd done, including the murder of her own father. She'd been bitter going down his throat, but at least he had the satisfaction of knowing she'd never hurt anyone else ever again.

Duncan was now head of the Malmayne clan and newly mated to Jaden's dream woman. Too bad Jaden couldn't be there with him to celebrate. The way Moira had defended her new sister-in-law had

earned Jaden's undying respect. He'd left a piece of his heart in her soft hands. Hell, he'd left fully half of it there, since that's all he'd had left to give. Duncan owned the other half, and had for a century.

He couldn't even muster up any enthusiasm when his favorite song came on. It had been a while since he'd heard Seal's "Kiss from a Rose". He always smiled when he heard the line, "I compare you to a kiss from a rose on the gray." Everyone thought that the line was "rose on the *grave*", but they were wrong. He'd looked it up one night, wondering why that line haunted him.

A rose on the gray. Damn it. Visions of Duncan's gray eyes and Moira's fiery hair danced before him.

Aw, hell. Now he was getting all mushy and stuff. Next thing he knew he'd be sending little Hallmark moments to the both of them over Facebook or something. If he didn't get himself under control soon he was going to wind up destroying all of them. Duncan, ah, beautiful Duncan and his sweet little leprechaun deserved better than that.

This was Jaden's burden to bear, and bear it he would. No matter the cost.

He left the club, still starving, snarling at the small, blonde female who sidled up to him.

"Leash it, Blackthorn. I'm *so* not in the mood."

Jaden stumbled as that smooth *male* voice washed over him, sweat already popping out on his back. *Fuck. What did I do to draw Robin's attention?* "Consider it leashed."

The amused smile on Robin's face wasn't what scared the shit out of him. It was the flash of iridescent green in those guileless brown eyes that did. "Good."

They walked for a bit, but it was anything but soothing. Finally, Robin spoke. "We have a problem that you're uniquely situated to deal with."

He didn't dare run away screaming like a little girl no matter how badly he wanted to. It just wasn't in the macho vampire code. "And what would that situation be?" Thank God his voice was steady. He didn't think he could show his face at the next vampire convention if he acted like a total wuss.

Robin eyed him sideways. It didn't matter that the form Robin walked in was a full head shorter than Jaden's, he still wanted to crap his pants. "A Malmayne situation."

Jaden stopped. *No fucking way.* "Sorry, you'll have to find someone else. Someone a little less prejudiced."

Robin turned and faced him. "Look, I have an idea how you feel." Those cupid's bow lips looked weird wrapped around the deep voice of the Hob, but there you go. The man was a strange motherfucker. "If the two people I wanted most in the world wound up mated to each other, leaving me out in the cold, I'd be pretty pissed too."

Jaden ignored the pity in Robin's expression and focused on the cold determination. He couldn't deal with the fact that apparently Robin understood why he refused to return home.

"But there are...rumors that Kaitlynn was involved in more than just wanting Leo Dunne to herself. The Malmayne name is being linked to some dark doings."

Jaden shivered. “Duncan would never...” Not in a million years would Duncan ally himself or his clan with the Black Court. Only something of that magnitude would draw the personal attention of the Hob.

“No, we don’t believe Duncan is. But there are other factions in the Malmayne clan who apparently *are*.”

Oh, hell no. If Duncan had any clue that the Malmaynes were inching toward the Black he’d flip his fucking lid and go after whoever was stupid enough to endanger them all. *Shit.* The noble asshole would get himself killed. The same sense of *noblesse oblige* that sent Duncan into that alley after a raggedy vampire would send him riding off in his white limo, ready to take on the world. *All hail Duncan Do-Right.* “My job?” He could already tell this was not going to end well.

Robin smiled. Jaden shivered. “Find out who it is and deal with them, however you see fit.” Robin reached up and patted his cheek, the tips of his long, black nails startlingly cold in contrast to the warmth of his palm. “I trust your judgment.”

Jaden’s head drooped. He rubbed his forehead, willing the ache away. The Hob had just given him *carte blanche* on an assassination job. It wasn’t the first one he’d been assigned since becoming a Blade, but it was the first one where he’d have to go after a loved one’s family.

Well, looks like I’m well and truly fucked. Just not the way I’d hoped to be.

When he looked back up, Robin was gone.

Akane Russo looked over at the tiny, blonde female who’d just sat next to her. She recognized that scent. It was one every dragon was taught from birth. “Sir.”

Those full, pouty lips quirked up in a smile. “We have a situation.”

Akane nodded, pretending that deep, masculine voice was totally natural coming from those very feminine lips. “Where to?”

“The Malmayne estate in Nebraska.”

“On my way.” She dropped the glass to the top of the bar and started toward the door.

“Don’t you want to know the assignment?”

Akane smiled, not even bothering to turn around. They could hear each other just fine, despite the sea of sweaty humanity. The star in the center of her iris went wide, letting her see what she needed to. She already had a clue what was going on with her erstwhile partner. “Jade needs me.” She flipped her hair back over her shoulder and sniffed, getting a whiff of the Hob’s rich, earthy scent again, a hint of which she’d recently caught on someone else. “Are you going to tell him or let him figure it out on his own?”

“What would be the fun in telling him?”

“That’s mean.” There was no answer; the Hob had already left. “He certainly knows how to make an exit.” She shook her head and made her way to her convertible. She had a plane to catch and a vampire to watch over.

She just hoped Robin knew what he was doing.

Moira watched Duncan pace the length of the library and back again. What was wrong with her? *The better question might be, what is wrong with him?* Weren't they mated? Hadn't he Claimed her, taken her to his home? Told her he cared for her? So why? Why hadn't he touched her? Beyond a few kisses and some increasingly sad smiles, he was so...distant. Why did he pace night after night, mourning something he couldn't explain?

Why did *she* feel like mourning?

If it wasn't for the fact that she and Duncan were destined mates she would have left by now, her heart and pride in tatters. But Aileen had told her to be patient, that something was desperately wrong. It was up to Moira, as Duncan's future wife, to find out what that something was and rectify it. So far, Moira hadn't been able to figure out anything other than Duncan was steadily growing worse.

She was tired, oh so tired. Duncan's depression dragged at her, and not even the comfort of her mother could ease the pain. She accepted that Duncan wanted her, needed her. He'd made it clear the one time she, in desperation, offered to leave him alone. She hadn't meant forever, she'd meant just for a few days, but the desolation in his eyes had made her stay. She'd fallen asleep in his arms, calming him, soothing him. Letting him know that she was there for him, whether he wanted her or not. But the Binding and the Vow remained undone, and without that connection Moira wasn't certain how much more she could take before she broke. She *knew*, without a shadow of a doubt, that Duncan needed her, that the Claiming wouldn't have happened if they weren't destined to be together. But something held them *both* back from taking the final steps that would bind them together forever. If it hadn't, she would have gotten him drunk and taken care of the matter herself.

Something tugged at both their hearts, and she was desperately afraid of what it might be. Not even the cheerful Christmas decorations she'd roped the entire household into putting up brightened her mood, and she *loved* watching Christmas lights twinkle at night. The human holidays were her favorite time of year, but she just couldn't get into the spirit of it.

The hell with this. Whatever was bothering Duncan, he refused to discuss it. He was heartbroken every night, reaching for something that was never there. No. Not something. *Someone.* She wished with all her heart that someone was her.

Don't lie to yourself, Moira. Not all your heart, girl.

She winced, hoping Duncan hadn't noticed. No matter how badly she wanted to forget that night, Jaden Blackthorn refused to leave her mind, or her heart. And that was just wrong when her fated mate paced not ten feet away from her.

It would have been so easy for Jaden to hurt her beyond knocking her out. He could have sipped her blood without creating the bond, but he *had* created it. He'd used that bond to reassure her when she was frightened by Ruby's kidnapping and Leo's fight with Kaitlynn. She'd felt his pain as the rowan stake pierced his back, nearly killing him.

The flare of agony as Duncan Claimed her had been intense before Jaden cut her off cold. She still wondered at it, wondered if that agony had been for her or for Duncan. She bit her lip. That wondering had begun taking her down a path she'd never thought was possible before.

Was it?

She bit her lip, watching Duncan pace back and forth, back and forth. Nothing seemed to reach him anymore. The only thing that had caught his attention recently was Ian, Duncan's long-time butler, mentioning...Jaden.

She took a deep breath and allowed the possibility to sink in that what she was thinking might be fact rather than fantasy.

She didn't expect much resistance from her family if she was right. They understood now that Jaden had been working all along to slow Kaitlynn down. It had been a surprise to her family, but Duncan had known. Duncan trusted Jaden more than anyone in the world except her. That trust Duncan showed her reassured her when nothing else could. If he trusted her enough to let her in, to let her feel his grief and hold him close when no one else could go near him without getting their heads bitten off, then he trusted her enough to fix whatever it was that had gone so wrong between them.

She clenched her jaw and nodded to herself. It was about damn time she got started. If her hunch was correct, she'd need to have a nice, long talk with her intended. *Soon.*

She shook her head and stood up, feeling like she was heading into battle with blinders on.

"Moira?" Duncan stood as well, his concerned gaze tracking her every move.

She tried to smile, she really did, but she just couldn't manage it. Her own depression was nearly overwhelming. She walked out of the room and climbed the stairs to the bedroom she shared with Duncan. She took her cell phone out of her pocket, sat at the vanity Duncan had installed for her, and did the only thing she could think of.

Moira called her mother.

Duncan watched Moira leave the room. She was too hurt to even give him a real attempt at a smile, but what could he do? He'd been ripped in two. One half sat upstairs in his bedroom, doing the gods only knew what. Possibly making preparations to leave him, not that he didn't deserve it.

The other... Ah, the other...

How had this happened? How could he have known that claiming his heart would tear out his soul? Oh, he was coming to love Moira. How could he not? She did everything she could think of to ease the

unbearable melancholy that had slowly begun to rip him apart since leaving the Dunne farm. Other women would have ripped into him, or tried to hurt him even more for his seeming indifference, but not Moira. Moira almost seemed to understand what he was going through and tried her best to make it better even though he didn't understand it himself. But nothing she did could completely erase the ache of Jaden's absence.

Nothing anyone did could, and it was slowly tearing him apart.

He'd called to Jaden through their bond, but Jaden hadn't answered, not in all the long weeks he'd been gone. Jaden was off somewhere in Nevada, but Duncan didn't get what Jaden was doing there. Was he hurt? Was that why he didn't answer? Why couldn't Duncan let this go long enough to complete the bond with Moira? He'd kissed her, begun Claiming her, but he had yet to make love to her and complete the Claiming. Without that, the Bonding and the Vow would be useless no matter how many times he uttered the words.

He scrubbed his face with the palms of his hands. Was it possible that, after four hundred years waiting, wishing for his mate, he was finally losing his mind? Why couldn't he bring himself to Claim her?

To top it all off, there were restless members of the clan who were unhappy with his choice of mate, kin who thought that by bonding with Moira he'd somehow diluted the Malmayne bloodline. There were a few who had come to congratulate him on his mating, but that was the problem, wasn't it? Instead of paying homage to the clan leader's wife, the majority of the Malmaynes had stayed away, showing their disapproval in the only way open to them that wouldn't result in serious reprisals.

Little did they know. Jaden would...

That knife blade of sorrow was becoming all too familiar. Because Jaden wouldn't.

Jaden wasn't here.

"*Mrow.*"

Duncan looked down at the only real link he had left to Jaden. "Hey, Furball." He picked up the calico cat, smiling as he petted her. He'd have to see to it that she bred soon. He couldn't imagine not having one of Jezebel's grandchildren living with them. The stray Duncan had rescued all those years ago had lived a long and comfortable life. Between Jaden and Duncan they'd raised generations of Jezebel's descendants.

Duncan stared at the door Moira had disappeared through. What in hell he was going to do? For the first time in a very long time he didn't know the answer. The loss of Jaden was an open wound, pouring out his heart's blood, leaving him empty and cold. But Moira... Moira stemmed the tide, keeping the wound from being lethal. If Jaden had left him *completely* alone Duncan would have bled out long since.

He blinked as Ian entered the room without knocking. "My lord, there's someone to see you."

The brownie wouldn't bother him without some justification, especially after he'd given orders not to be disturbed. "Who?"

"Henri Malmayne, my lord."

Duncan refrained from rolling his eyes. “Show him in.”

The butler nodded and regally turned toward the door.

“Ian?”

The butler turned back. “Yes, my lord?”

“No refreshments. I don’t plan on this taking long.”

Ian’s expression remained blank, but his eyes danced. “Yes, my lord.” Henri was a pompous prick when he visited, treating the brownie butler with barely leashed contempt. Under his father’s rule there had been nothing Duncan could do about it. Now that Cullen was dead, however, he’d rectify that attitude in all of his Malmayne relatives. As far as Duncan was concerned Ian was family, and that was that.

Soon enough Henri was shown into the library. Duncan had moved to sit behind the massive, ornate desk, leaving his cousin to approach while he remained seated. It was a small display of dominance that would have tickled both Jaden and Moira if they’d been in the room with him. He could even picture it: Jaden leaning against the edge of the desk, all edgy defiance, Moira next to him, her green eyes ablaze with curiosity and that unique fire that was all her own. He shook the vision away when Henri reached the desk. “Cousin.”

“Duncan.” Henri smiled, but his gray eyes, so much like Duncan’s own, remained chilled.

Duncan waited.

Henri’s smile dimmed. His eyes narrowed, the smile becoming sharper. “My lord.”

Duncan nodded. “Have a seat, Henri.” He waited until Henri was seated, desperately wishing his mate and best friend were here. “What seems to be the problem?”

“The family is becoming restless. You know this. They want to see the Dunnes punished for their destruction of Cullen and Kaitlynn and are wondering why nothing has yet been done.”

Duncan held on to his temper by a thin thread. This was the third visit from Henri, the third demand that the Dunnes pay a debt they hadn’t incurred. The fault lay solely on the shoulders of Cullen and Kaitlynn, but most of the Malmaynes refused to see that. Their spokesman, Henri, made sure Duncan was aware of it, too.

Now he was going to lay down his final answer in a way not even Henri could misconstrue. “There will be no debt paid by the Dunnes.” The Malmaynes, on the other hand, had only just begun to pay for the crimes committed by Kaitlynn.

He saw Henri’s teeth clench behind that smile, a quick flexing of his jaw muscles that betrayed him. “The Dunnes killed our lord, your father. Duncan, honor must be satisfied.”

“Honor has been satisfied, Henri.” He leaned back and began ticking off on his fingers. “Kaitlynn and Cullen conspired to kidnap Shane Dunne. They kidnapped and tortured Ruby Holloway, the wife of Leo Dunne. Kaitlynn, *not* Leo, killed my father.”

“And who killed Kaitlynn?”

Ah, there was the sticking point, wasn't it? "I did."

"You mean your pet vampire did."

It was Duncan's turn to unclench his jaw. Jaden didn't deserve the way the rest of the clan treated him. He never had. "Under my direct orders."

Henri waved his hand. "Still, Kaitlynn's death was a direct result of the Dunne's refusal to abide by the marriage contract. If Leo Dunne had simply done his duty none of this would have happened."

Duncan wasn't so sure of that. Leo had made it clear he wasn't interested in fulfilling the contract when first approached. Duncan had the feeling that by the time they'd approached Leo he'd already been ensnared by his pretty little Ruby, and no amount of persuasion would have been able to force his hand. "Shane Dunne might have been willing to fulfill the contract, if approached correctly." Duncan held up a hand to stall his cousin's rejoinder. It was well known that the hybrid was unacceptable to the bluebloods of the family. That unusual power of his made him less in the eyes of the Sidhe, something Duncan could not understand. The power to create objects out of thin air? How could someone *not* prize that? "However, the point is moot, as I have fulfilled the full terms of the contract."

Not even Henri had the balls to sneer in Duncan's face over Moira. "Still—"

"*Enough.*" Duncan's power rolled through that one softly spoken word. He allowed his eyes to sparkle with silver. Silver motes of light danced in the air as he allowed his human Seeming to drop, reinforcing his command, turning him into a being made of silver and gold. "The Malmaynes and the Dunnes have no quarrel. That is my final word on the affair." He stood, noting that Henri hesitated before following him. He wrapped his human Seeming around himself once more and allowed the motes of light to die out. "Enjoy the rest of your evening."

Henri bowed, but not before Duncan caught the defiance in the man's eyes. "My lord." He turned on his heel and strode out of the library without a backwards glance, his dissatisfaction in every line of his body.

Duncan waited until Henri was out of sight before slowly sinking back into his chair. Fuck, he needed Jaden. He buried his head in his hands and sent out a psychic tendril, hoping against hope that this time Jaden would answer.

When only darkness met him, he damn near howled.

Moira touched her lips, stunned to find out that she might be right. "It's a what?"

"A failed or interrupted Claiming or Bonding."

"Well, we've Claimed each other, mostly."

"Mostly?"

She blushed. "Ma."

“Hmm. Kissed then, but not gone beyond that. Have you tried going naked in front of him?”

“Ma!”

Aileen Dunne giggled like a little girl. “How about those lacy underthings you and Ruby bought together? Have you tried those?”

She didn’t want to admit it, but she hadn’t. She didn’t have the nerve. She’d blushed enough when Ruby, visiting with Leo, had dragged her to the Frederick’s of Hollywood in the mall in Omaha. “Ma. Please. I...I don’t know what to do.”

Her desperation must have gotten through. “My poor child. All right, then. This started almost immediately, you said.”

“Yes.”

“It hasn’t lightened up at all? For either of you?”

“No.” She only wished it had. They might have been able to complete their bond otherwise. Hell, she wished now that neither of them had decided to get to know each other better. Maybe if they’d just boffed like bunnies in the back of that limo two months ago neither of them would be suffering like this. But who could have predicted that Duncan’s gallant desire to get to know her before bonding her would backfire like this? If they’d completed all the steps of the bonding would either of them be suffering like this, or would it have been even worse?

“Anything else happen around that time that was...odd?”

Other than Jaden abandoning us, no. It was time to stop hiding that fact, even from herself. This problem was linked to Jaden, and refusing to discuss it was no longer an option. “Just Jaden refusing to come home.” Damn if she didn’t miss the cocky son of a bitch. She missed the sense of him rattling around in her head, making her laugh, keeping her calm. But he wouldn’t talk to her either, and their blood bond wasn’t nearly as strong as the one he had with Duncan.

Her mother sighed. “Jaden.”

She had one last chance to prove her theory wrong. The men had lived together for a century. She *had* to be wrong. “You think this has something to do with Jaden’s leaving?”

“I think it has everything to do with Jaden’s leaving.”

“Why would you think that, Ma?” She was nearly on the edge of her seat, the sensation that she was about to fall down the rabbit hole stronger than ever.

“Because I think Jaden is Duncan’s, and your, unfulfilled bond.”

She’d known it, but it was still something of a shock to hear her suspicions confirmed. “You think all three of us are true bonds?” She scowled. “How in the name of all that is holy could they have *missed that?*” She got up and began to pace, the phone glued to her ear. She couldn’t wait to hear an explanation.

“It’s entirely possible the blood bond they share held off the worst effects of an interrupted bond. It’s also possible that they’ve never started Claiming one another. If they’ve never shared a kiss the both of

them could believe that any attraction they feel is due to the blood bond.” Aileen sighed. “I’m not as up on my vampire bonding as you are, but from the way you described it that’s what I’m guessing has happened. The three of you need to get together and find out for certain, though.”

“Damn.” She shook her head, totally confused. “But how would their interrupted bond affect *my* bond with Duncan?”

“That’s the problem. Jaden blood bonded both you and Duncan before Duncan Claimed you. Did Jaden ever kiss you?”

She touched her lips again. She’d dreamed that Jaden had kissed her the night he’d come to kidnap Ruby. What if he really had?

What if, with one simple touch of his lips, he’d Claimed her without even meaning to?

“I think so, but I was pretty out of it. What would that mean for all of us if he started Claiming me?”

“It means you’ve got a tribond.”

Moira rubbed her forehead. *Damn damn damn.* “I think I’m getting a headache.”

“Moira. How do you feel about Duncan?”

I want to save him. I want him to stop hurting. I want to see him laughing again. “I want his happiness.”

“How do you feel about Jaden?”

May the Mother be merciful on those two, because I’m not going to be. She sighed, knowing what was going to have to be done. “I want his happiness.”

“And men are?”

Moira’s lips curled up in a silly grin. “Daft.”

“So?”

Filled with new resolve, Moira sat up straight. “I’ll fix this, Ma.” *I’ll get both my men in the bargain.*

“That’s my girl.”

Chapter Three

Jaden stopped at the edge of the drive, suddenly uncertain of his welcome. He'd shut Moira and Duncan out of his life, shoved them out of his head with force at times. He wasn't sure how they'd react to his sudden return, necessary though it was. He definitely wasn't certain how Duncan would react when he found out Jaden had started working for Robin Goodfellow full time. How would his bond brother take Jaden's defection from the family?

At the time it had looked like the only thing to do. He would be away from his biggest heartache yet still be able to keep Duncan and Moira safe. Keeping those two safe was more important to him than any White Court acceptance, any Black Court blandishments waved in his face. It was more important to him than his own life.

Not that he planned on laying that particular commodity on the table any time soon. He kind of liked his skin wrapped around his bones, thank you very much.

He studied the front of the brick mansion and smiled. Duncan had gone all out on the whole holiday thing. Lights were strung everywhere. He bet when night fell the house would be a beacon of cheer for anyone passing by.

"Jaden?"

Fuck. For the first time in eight weeks he allowed Duncan into his mind, but only so far. He couldn't let Duncan in all the way or the man would figure out *exactly* why Jaden had stayed away. He couldn't bring himself to face Duncan's pity, or worse, his scorn. *"Duncan."*

The relief and anger that washed through him staggered him in its intensity. *"Get your ass up here."*

"Duncan—"

"NOW."

That cold Malmayne temper of Duncan's was roused. How bad were things going to get once Duncan realized that Jaden's return was merely temporary? He figured the fireworks, once started, might actually be kind of fun. It would certainly provide him with even more of an excuse to leave when the task was done.

He got out of the car, careful to put a carefree expression on his face. He wanted Duncan to think he'd been out on the town, partying with and fucking anything that moved. He couldn't allow Duncan to know the truth. Not yet, maybe not ever.

God, being noble sucked ass. Thank God Robin had gotten him a bite to eat before bundling him on the plane for Nebraska. Too bad he'd been unable to enjoy more than the bite. He could have used the relief sex would have brought, but the little redhead had reminded him too much of Moira. He'd eaten, but he hadn't really enjoyed it. Robin had to be aware of that, damn him. He'd even offered to join Jaden in the big bed behind him, romping together just the three of them.

Jaden had said no. He never, *ever* wanted to witness Robin's idea of "romping". Robin's grin had held way too many teeth for his comfort.

Hell, even after a hundred years Jaden couldn't classify himself as a party animal. He was by no means celibate, but even during the seventies he'd kept it in his pants more often than not, only giving in when the hunger for sex and blood became more than he could bear.

Wouldn't Duncan be shocked to find *that* out? His Lordship probably had him pegged as a regular man-whore.

The door was flung open by none other than Lord Malmayne himself. Jaden frowned. *He looks like shit.* "Hey Dunc—" That was as far as he got. The fist to his mouth knocked him down, shocking him. The trickle of blood at the corner of his lip told him more about Duncan's rage than anything. It was the first time Duncan had ever bled him.

It was the first time anyone but another vampire had blooded him, actually. *Shit. I'm impressed.*

"Where the *hell* have you been?"

He blinked and sat up. Damn, Duncan had hit him *hard*. He kept forgetting how strong the Sidhe could be, especially one who'd been a warrior once. "Two's company, or so I've heard." He got gingerly to his feet, ignoring the glare Duncan shot him.

"Where were you?"

If anything, his flippant answer seemed to have pissed off his bond brother even more. "Here. There. Everywhere." He leered at his friend. "Thinking about you and Moira's underwear." He waggled his brows, hoping for a laugh. A smile. Hell, just a little less hostility would be nice. *No, wait, I want him hostile. Don't I?*

"I needed you here. Not off doing whatever the hell it was you were doing."

"I had a fun time doing it, too." He put his hands on his hips, desperate to brazen this one out. "What's the matter with you, anyway? You shouldn't have even noticed I was gone." He batted his lashes at Duncan, who was aware that Jaden swung both ways. "Of course, if I'd noticed you missed me *that* much I would have been back sooner." He ignored the dangerous narrowing of Duncan's eyes. "Where's your lovely wife, by the way?"

"Inside. *Now.*" Duncan turned on his heel and actually stomped into the house.

Jaden blinked, stunned for the second time that day. *Huh. The Bonding must be affecting him.* He expected that fiery display of temper from his...*Duncan's* little leprechaun, but never from Duncan

himself. The man was always calm, cool and collected. More than once he'd saved Jaden's ass by refusing to lose his legendary cool. Yet here he was, so pissed off he was stomping.

If the man wasn't mated Jaden would have been flattered. As it was he wondered how long it would take him to wrap up this ugly assignment and knock the dust of the Malmayne household off his canvas sneakers.

"Are you coming in or are you going to stand there and roast all day?"

Jaden rolled his eyes and sauntered into the house. "Fuck. You've gotten cranky, old man." Duncan's response? A low growl that sent shivers down Jaden's spine. He quickly thumped his cock, the pain stilling his newborn erection. "So much for connubial bliss."

"Jaden. Shut the hell up."

Jaden shut up. He followed Duncan into his study, watching the other man closely. He frowned. What the...? Were those silver hairs in among the gold? Fear skated down his spine. In all the time he'd known Duncan the Sidhe Lord had never changed, not by a hair. New clothes and haircuts came and went, but underneath it all was still the same Duncan Malmayne who had pulled his ass out of a dirty alleyway and given him a home. To see silver there after only two months was frightening. "Duncan?"

Blazing gray eyes met his across the desk. "Henri is pushing for the nullification of my marriage to Moira."

Bingo. That had to be the beginning of why Robin had sent him here. "Henri likes to talk out of his sphincter. What else is new?" *Like silver threads through gold? What the fuck?*

"Well, his sphincter is pushing out even more shit. He wants you punished for the murder of Kaitlynn."

His eyebrows shot up. "That was sanctioned." In more ways than one, and he'd play that card if it came down to it. Even if the sanction was posthumous. Not even Glorianna would interfere with a sanctioned Blade assassination.

"Even so, the clan is beginning to get on my nerves. They want...hell, I'm not sure *what* they want. Leo punished for not abiding by the marriage contract and binding himself to Kaitlynn, Ruby for taking Leo away from Kaitlynn, me for not enforcing the contract once Dad was dead." He rubbed his eyes wearily, the anger beginning to leech from his face. "They believe that Moira isn't good enough to fulfill the contract."

Jaden leaned back in his chair, balancing it on two legs. He tried to hide the white-hot flash of rage over the thought that *anyone* believed Moira wasn't good enough. "Why are they so frigging eager to see this done the way *they* want it done?"

Duncan's expression froze. "Good question." He settled down behind his desk, becoming visibly less ruffled. "It's not as if we can bring Kaitlynn back from the dead."

"Well..."

“Don’t even go there, Jaden.”

He grinned. He’d sooner eat, well, Kaitlynn than bring that bitch back. “Wasn’t going to.”

“Good.” A brief smile crossed Duncan’s face. “Welcome home.”

Jaden hid his wince. “Yeah. About that.” Icy fury once more glazed Duncan’s gray eyes, but before he could say anything Jaden’s chair was yanked back, landing him on his back. “Ow.” He looked up to find a pair of perky tits and furious green eyes glaring down at him. He smiled, inexplicably happy to see her again. “Hello, Moira.”

“Where the hell have you been?”

He licked his lips, tasting his own blood. “Is there an echo in here? At least you didn’t punch me.”

One slender foot began to tap next to his head. “Don’t tempt me.”

He eyed that foot, knowing full well what she was capable of. She couldn’t really hurt him, but she could damn well try. “Sweetheart, would you like to put that away? It might go off, and then how bad would you feel?”

She rolled her eyes and bounced her way over to Duncan’s desk. She perched on the edge, her arms folded across her breasts. “I’m going to repeat myself one more time. Where have you been?”

He didn’t even bother getting up off the floor. Knowing Moira she’d probably just dump him on his ass again. He crossed his leg over his knee and settled his hands behind his head. He smirked up at her. “Recently? Vegas.”

“What were you doing there?”

He mock frowned and wagged his finger at her. “Hey. What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.”

She ground her teeth together. “Jaden.” Her shoulders slumped. “You know what? Never mind. Just shut the hell up.”

Jaden smiled and shut up. *Hell, this might actually be fun.*

Duncan watched Jaden, aware that, suddenly, he was...complete. It was a strange sensation, something he shouldn’t be feeling. He had his mate, her glorious hair glistening in the sun streaming through the windows, her eyes glittering down at his bond brother. So why wasn’t it enough for him? Why, only now, did he know true happiness?

He’d missed Jaden. Perhaps it had something to do with the blood bond the two of them shared. Even now Jaden kept the link restricted, kept Duncan mostly out of his mind, but not even that could dampen his pleasure at the other man’s presence.

“We were worried about you, Fangsalot.”

Jaden snorted, his shoulders shaking with laughter. “Fangsalot? You’ve been hanging out with Ruby, haven’t you?”

Moira kicked his shin. “It’s not funny. Duncan and I were worried sick.”

Duncan frowned at Moira. Admittedly, he *had* damn near worried himself sick but Jaden didn't need to know that. The vampire was unreasonably protective of him, and if he found out Duncan had been unwell Jaden would be all over him.

"Oh. Sorry to hear that."

Duncan blinked. The cool nonchalance in Jaden's tone stunned him. Hurt settled deep inside him. "I'll be fine." He shifted in his seat. What had happened to Jaden in Vegas? He'd never been cold to Duncan before. Usually he clowned around him, trying to break through the calm façade Duncan normally wore. "We need to discuss a few things."

"Yeah, like a bath for me and a meal. I'm starving." Jaden got to his feet with exquisite grace. "Let me get settled in and then we'll talk."

Duncan was seriously beginning to worry. His best friend wasn't acting like himself. Duncan prided himself on being able to read the young vampire, but today he couldn't sense a thing. "Is everything all right?" *Had* Jaden been somehow hurt in Vegas? Damn it, he wished he knew what had happened out there!

"Yeah, everything's fine. Don't worry, old man. I just stink."

A reluctant smile curled Duncan's lips. Ever since that alley Jaden hated being dirty with a passion. He'd bathe twice a day whenever possible. "Fine. How about we meet here for a light dinner? Moira and I will fill you in on what's been going on since you left for your...vacation." He couldn't keep the displeasure from his voice. "I'll have Ian inform the kitchen of our needs."

Jaden grinned, but something was missing. The spark that made Jaden so much fun to be around was gone, and in its place... Duncan couldn't quite put his finger on it, but it echoed through him down to his bones.

There was nothing left to do but watch Jaden walk out of the room, leaving behind him one very confused, hurt and angry Sidhe Lord.

Duncan narrowed his eyes. Something was very wrong with Jaden. His bond brother was still trying to shut him out. And Duncan was going to find out why.

Moira watched Jaden leave the room. She could just feel the ragged edges of his emotions. The vampire was hurting just as much as she and Duncan were.

Three's a crowd, eh? Hmph. She crossed her arms over her breasts and thought about the conversation she'd overheard between the two men. Jaden had left to give them time to complete their mating bond, but instead of doing just that Duncan had held off, pining for Jaden.

Yup. A tribond. If she'd had any doubt before, just seeing Duncan and Jaden in the same room removed it. It was like the dark cloud that had been hovering over her and her cranky Sidhe lord had lifted. She pictured Duncan and Jaden kissing and was surprised to find the thought didn't bother her at all. In

fact, it was a surprising turn-on, her entire body heating up at the vision of Duncan's blond head meshed with Jaden's dark.

"That was unexpected."

She turned to her fine-looking Sidhe lord. His gaze was locked on the doorway, silver sparks dancing in their depths. Silver light danced around him, his powers leeching through his iron-willed control. Her eyebrows shot up in alarm.

This was the most animation she'd seen from her fiancé since the day he'd swept her into his limousine and ridden off with her into the sunset. "Duncan. We need to talk."

"About?" Those silver-flecked eyes landed on her, full of intent.

Suddenly she could barely breathe. All of the pent-up need that had lain dormant in Jaden's absence came surging to the fore. "Um. Jaden."

His head tilted to the side. "No. I don't think so."

"What?" The expression on his face was almost frightening in its intensity. Whatever had held him back from Claiming her fully was gone now. Feral heat lit him from within. She had a good idea just what had set off this little display of lust.

Moirra gulped. "Oh, hell." Moirra wasn't a virgin, thank the Lady. From the look Duncan was giving her she had the feeling she was going to be very grateful for that fact in about two seconds.

The slow, sexy curl of his lips had her stomach doing flip-flops. The glazed, sleepy look in his eyes had her nerves screaming to run. "It's time."

A part of her wanted this, wanted the Claiming, the Vow and the Binding. She wanted what her parents had, what Leo had so recently found in Ruby.

But there was something Duncan needed to hear, for both their sakes. For *all* their sakes. She held out her hand, hoping to stave off the inevitable. "Wait. I need to tell you something."

"You do?" He began stalking her around the desk, his movements languid, his expression amused. It was like, after two months of hiding, the man she'd met in the limo was back and horny as hell. Duncan turned the corner and she could see the bulge of his erection beneath the fly of his slacks.

Oh, glory. "I spoke with my mother."

"How is Aileen?" Duncan's gaze darted to the office door. He stepped over and locked it before continuing his pursuit of her.

"She knows what's wrong with you." *With us, but I don't have time to go into that now.*

Duncan stopped, the heat in his eyes chilling. "Wrong with me?"

Uh-oh. Perhaps she could have phrased that better. "She knows why you haven't felt the urge to complete the bond."

"Why would that be?"

She took a deep breath. He was starting to edge toward snarky, which was better than depressed, she supposed. “I need you to trust me. Okay?”

“Of course. You’re my mate.”

“So is Jaden.”

Everything about him stilled, except the erection in his pants. That she saw pulse just once against the restraint of his zipper. “No.”

“My mother thinks the blood bond the two of you share masked the symptoms of the unfinished Claiming.” She walked toward him warily and placed a hand on his chest. “You have...no, *we* have been pining for our other mate.”

His jaw worked, his brow furrowed. “No. I would have known.”

“Not necessarily. The two of you were rarely apart for longer than a week or two. It’s been *two months* since you’ve been in contact, and now all of a sudden it’s like you’ve finally woken up. Think, Duncan! You haven’t been able to finish Claiming me because you never started Claiming Jaden.”

“That’s not possible. I would have *known*.”

“Duncan. Look at me.” Dazed silver eyes met hers. “Do you want me?”

“Gods, yes.”

“Did you before Jaden came back?”

His hands circled her upper arms, his expression full of regret. “Yes, but...”

“But you couldn’t bring yourself to make love to me. Half your heart was missing.”

“No.”

“Yes. Because half of mine has been missing, too.”

His expression completely blanked. “What?”

“I’m half Sidhe, remember? I *know* both you and Jaden are meant to be mine.”

His jaw dropped, but the tension in his body was slowly easing, changing into something else, something more accepting of what she was trying to tell him. “But, how? How could I have missed something like that?”

“The blood bond? Or perhaps it needed all three of us before you could feel it?”

He blinked rapidly. “Mate sickness. I was suffering from *mate sickness* this whole time?”

She nodded. “My mother went through the same thing when her family tried to force her into the marriage with you. She’d found her true bond and they’d been separated.” He stared at her and she grimaced. “Sorry, forgot for a moment you were there. Anyway, when I described what was happening to both of us she realized what was going on almost immediately. Since I haven’t left your side since you took me it *had* to be Jaden who was causing it.”

He shook his head. “That can’t be true.”

“Have you never had the urge to kiss him? To take him into your arms and make love to him?”

Duncan's hands tightened on her arms before he abruptly turned from her. "Yes. Damn it, yes."

She sighed. This was going easier than she'd first thought. "Once the true bond is completed with both of us you'll never suffer like this again."

He turned back to her, his expression full of determination. "He won't agree to this."

"He doesn't like men that way?" Moira hid her own unease. Once she'd spoken to her mother she'd looked up some books. She'd read some romances where men and women made love to one another regardless of gender. Some she liked, some she didn't, but the thought of watching Duncan's golden head bent over Jaden's dark body while she watched was anything but repugnant. She wriggled, the sudden need spiraling through her.

"Oh, he does. It's just. Damn it. He's so damn *noble*." Duncan growled, his frustration obvious.

Moira laughed. "Of course he is. He's a Malmayne."

"He thinks he's still a Blackthorn." Duncan tapped his fingers on the desk with a worried frown. "And to him that makes all the difference."

Akane pulled her car over a few miles from the Malmayne estate. "Nebraska." She stepped out, her high-heeled Prada boot sinking into the dirt road. "Yee-haw." She pulled the heavy wool coat closer around her and studied the rapidly darkening sky.

"Fine. Let's see what we've got here." She settled herself cross-legged on the cooling hood of her metallic blue Porsche Boxster and allowed her inner eye to open. The star in the center of her iris expand, letting her see things beyond the ken of mortal man. "Okay, Jaden. What the hell is going on?"

The first thing she saw made her squirm in embarrassment. "Oh, Robin. You *so* owe me for this."

Jaden took his time in the shower, unsure why he was uneasy. He'd sensed something down in that office, something that left him on edge. Had he played it wrong? Maybe he shouldn't have tried to be so cool. Duncan now suspected something was wrong, something more than what was happening in the Malmayne clan. He'd have to throw him a bone, give him something to sink that intellect into.

He dragged the washcloth down his body, pausing by his cock. The fucker had been rock hard since his first glimpse of Duncan. It had begun weeping the moment Moira appeared.

He sighed and began stroking, bringing up images of the two of them loving one another. Fucking one another. Slick bodies intertwined in a knot of hot, sweaty sex until you couldn't tell where one ended and the other began. He imagined Moira's head bowed back in a throaty moan, Duncan's lips toying with the sensitive juncture of neck and shoulder. Right where Jaden's kiss had once been.

Hell, he let his imagination go even further. What it would be like to have the taste of both of them on his tongue at the same time, that sparkling effervescence that was Duncan, the dark, earthy taste of Moira? His hand moved faster, his cock jerking in his hand. He could picture it, his cock buried deep inside Moira, her red gold hair fanned out beneath her, writhing in ecstasy. He could almost feel Duncan deep inside his body, taking him until he throbbed with the need to come. They'd surround him, love him, bring him to an ecstasy he'd never dared to dream of.

The knowledge that it would never happen almost threw him out of the fantasy. The day Duncan and Moira made love to him would be the day Robin himself fell in love.

Jaden snorted, almost laughing. *Yeah. That'll happen.* He shook his head and returned to his fantasy because, damn it, that's all he would ever have so he might as well enjoy it.

The arousal was becoming unbearable. *Jaden. It has to be.* If Duncan closed his eyes he could almost see the water running down Jaden's naked body, dripping from his sculpted abs, teasing his rock hard nipples. He shuddered, the need pouring through him ten times more intense than what he'd felt in that limo alone with Moira.

Moira was right. Somehow, some way the three of them were mates, meant to bond together into a greater whole. Duncan would do everything in his power to make sure Jaden never left them again.

Moira had begun to pant. "What in the world?" She fell back against the edge of Duncan's desk, her legs rubbing together with a soft *shush shush* of fabric.

"Jaden." Duncan's head tilted back, his nostrils flaring as he took a deep breath. His hand had moved to the front of his slacks, petting himself there. He was so hard he was leaking, leaving behind a wet patch on his boxers. He moaned, the feel of the cloth somehow intertwining with the feel of slick, soapy fingers. God, it was like Jaden was stroking Duncan rather than himself, the sensation ghostly yet intense.

"How?"

Duncan licked his lips. "Doesn't matter. I need you." His hands went to her shirt, ripping it open in a burst of buttons. *Thank the gods, no bra.* "Now."

She opened her mouth to protest but wound up gasping instead. His mouth descended on her breast, his tongue laving her nipple. "Mother of mercy." Her fingers clenched in his hair, tugging at him, holding him in place. "Yes, please. More."

No patience, no time for niceties. He'd have to figure out a way to make it all up to her later. "Sorry, *amoureux*. So sorry." His fingers were on her jeans, tugging at the button, snagging on the zipper. He could feel Jaden's fingers on his cock all the way upstairs, could tell the vampire was close to orgasm. He needed the three of them to come together, a compulsion he had no intention of denying.

Moira whimpered, the sound dragging a tortured groan out of him. He got her jeans down her legs, once again thanking the gods for her need to be barefoot no matter where she was. The jeans flew over his shoulder, her panties soon joining them.

She was so beautiful it made him want to weep.

He damn near whimpered himself when he stroked her pussy. She was sopping wet, ripe and ready for him. “Promise I’ll make it up to you.”

“What?” She sounded drugged. Her hands curled around his ass, tugging him closer. “God, what’s wrong with me?”

“You need to come.” He quickly freed himself from his slacks. Around him his power danced, silver lights filling the room like gleaming fireflies. “The Claiming, love.”

Deep green lights, faint and far less numerous, joined his silver. “Do it.” Her green eyes opened, changing to the lush green color of grass on a warm summer day. Her skin tone darkened, faint whorls appearing here and there as she dropped her human Seeming. Even the red gold of her hair deepened, turning the same color as deep red leaves in the fall. Her scent ripened, earthy and rich and fertile. Her ears were delicately pointed, her pupils oval, a throwback to her Sidhe blood. “Claim me, Sidhe, if you dare.”

The faintest hint of Irish in her voice was enough to drive him over the edge. He had meant to ease himself inside her, but it was too much to bear. Jaden was about to come, and he couldn’t do it alone.

How was he supposed to resist? Both Moira and Jaden needed, and Duncan would provide. He plunged within Moira, shuddering when she gasped in pain. “Moira?”

Her fingers clenched on his shoulders. “Need a minute.”

His forehead dropped to her shoulder as he fought himself for control. His erection throbbed within her tight sheath. Upstairs, Jaden’s hand faltered. Duncan could feel the vampire’s confusion. Jaden had no clue what was happening between them. Duncan nipped her neck, knowing he’d just kissed her where Jaden had, all unknowing, forged the beginnings of the fragile bond between the three of them. His fingers reached down and began to caress Moira’s clit, desperate to bring her back to them. They needed her to come with them. For them.

Duncan sighed in relief when Moira finally lifted against his hand, jarring his trapped erection. She moaned in his ear, her fingers kneading his ass, pulling him to her. He began to fuck her, desperate to bring his woman to orgasm. Jaden’s fingers began to move, pumping his cock in time with Duncan’s thrusts.

Was Jaden aware of what was going on, or did he think all of this was his own fevered fantasy? God, he hoped Jaden knew.

Duncan needed them both, and Jaden was just going to have to accept it.

Jaden's fingers faltered at Moira's soft cry of pain. He blinked, uncertain if that had been reality or fantasy. He was aware through their bond that Moira had been damn near untouched when Duncan Claimed her, but surely by now he'd completed the true bond?

Fucking had to be the best part of the true bond. Jaden couldn't imagine having Moira to himself for two whole months and *not* sinking into that sweet, hot pussy of hers. Hell, he'd imagined it often enough that no other woman would do.

The image in his mind had changed, firmed up in some strange way. Moira was on the edge of Duncan's desk, her hands tugging on Duncan's still-clothed ass. His slacks were drooping off his waist, his hips thrusting as he began a slow rhythm in and out of his wife. Jaden matched Duncan's thrusts, some of the urgency gone now as he watched the two of them making love. He pictured himself in the room with them, sitting in the chair, stroking himself while they fucked. Moira's colors had deepened, her Seeming forgotten as her mate Claimed her. Deep green and silver sparks danced around the room, like moonlight through leaves, dappling their skin in erotic, exotic lights.

Duncan gasped, his head going back. Jaden could see the delicate points of his ears. The Sidhe had also dropped his Seeming, turning all silver and gold and absolutely glorious.

"Amoureux."

Jaden shuddered. Duncan had just called Moira *love*. Oh, and she was all that, sweet, soft, strong, hard, just like love should be.

It was close now, their orgasm. They needed Moira to come, to fill them up, to take the empty places they hadn't even known were there and make them hers. Duncan's thrusts became harder, working toward his own completion, his hand on Moira's pussy making the leprechaun squirm under him.

Moira could feel something building within her, something intense. The feel of Duncan's cock inside her body was more than she'd ever hoped for. She couldn't believe he was finally Claiming her, finally taking the first steps toward making her his.

She could feel Jaden in the back of her mind. He watched them, was a part of them, just as it should be. His pain was her pain, his loneliness hers, and she took that, wrapped it up in her love for him and tried to fill the cracks in his soul.

She was almost shoved out of Jaden's mind, the part of her that belonged to him left battered and bleeding. The slap of rejection nearly tumbled her out of her sexual haze. "Jaden?"

"No time. We'll deal with him later." Duncan's eyes were screwed shut. His skin sparkled. His fingers twisted *just* right and she tumbled, she came, screaming in surprise and a pleasure so deep, so intense it robbed her of breath.

Jaden edged closer. He wanted to watch that hard cock shuttling in and out of Moira, wanted to see the ecstasy on both their faces when they came. He wanted to spill his seed on both of them, mark them, claim them in his own twisted way so they could never leave him, never hurt him again.

Something was wrong. Something didn't make sense, but it was too late now. He tried to pull back, to distance himself from the fantasy but he was coming, pulsing into his hand, the orgasm so intense he saw stars.

Green and silver stars.

Duncan's gasp was followed by a guttural moan as he pulsed deep inside her, giving her his seed, his Claim on her complete. "Moira." He collapsed against her, his eyes tightly closed. His hand cradled the back of her head, bringing her mouth around to his. He kissed her softly. "Moira."

He smiled. Moira's affection peppered her touches, her kisses. It would deepen in time, with care and the attention he hadn't been able to lavish on her before Jaden came home. As far as he and she were concerned, everything would be all right.

As for Jaden? Duncan's eyes narrowed with stubborn intent. Well. He'd just have to *make* it all right.

Jaden panted, his eyes closed tight, his erection still in his fist. He could feel the water beating down on his back, the temperature turning cold. How long had he stood there, beating off, wishing he could be with Duncan and Moira?

Gods, he was so pathetic. He laughed, the sound filled with pain. He needed to wrap this fucking assignment up and get the hell out of fucking Nebraska. Maybe he'd head to New York next, visit some old haunts. Look up his Sire and finally pay the Black Court fucker back.

It was time to live his life on his own.

Chapter Four

Jaden entered Duncan's study with as much nonchalance as he could muster. He did *not* want either Duncan or Moira to know what dirty, nasty thoughts had been dancing around in his brain while he'd been supposedly getting squeaky clean.

Well, he'd put so much effort into "cleaning" his cock it probably did squeak.

They weren't there. Jaden sniffed, checking for their scents. His cock went from limp to hallelujah in two seconds flat. They'd had sex in here. Recently. The faint hint of blood lent a sweet, coppery tang to the scent that had him fucking salivating like Pavlov's dog.

Well. Shit. Had he been using his imagination, or had he been in their minds, like some pervert, watching them actually make love?

Man, Duncan was going to kick his ass. The Sidhe as a whole did *not* share well. Toys, cars, lovers, it was all the same. They saw, they wanted, they claimed it as theirs and woe to he who wanted a little taste. Duncan was a powerful Sidhe, over five hundred years old and lord of his clan. He would not take kindly to the knowledge that Jaden had seen his wife naked and having hot, sweaty, grinding sex... Jaden shivered with want and swallowed hard. He had to stop thinking like that. One hint that Jaden had been in Duncan's mind, riding his orgasm, watching Moira's, and Jaden would be one unhappy vamp. Duncan would break out the rotating pineapple attachment for that one.

His asshole clenched just thinking about it.

He glanced toward the window with longing. Maybe he could make a quick getaway, call them from Reno. Or Monte Carlo.

Or Mars. Yeah. Mars might be far enough away. Breathing was highly overrated anyway.

"Jaden, glad you're down early."

Shit. Busted.

Duncan took a seat on the edge of the desk, right where Jaden had imagined the torrid encounter. "There are some things we need to discuss without Moira hearing them."

Jaden blinked, his eyes glued to Duncan's ass resting against the desk. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Duncan's voice had taken on a husky quality. He looked up to find Duncan staring at him, his lips curled in heated amusement.

Wait. Heated?

He decided to focus on something other than whatever was going through Duncan's mind. Because unless he missed his guess it wasn't Duncan's big head that was running the show right now. Why that should be he had no clue, but hell. What did he know about the Sidhe other than what Duncan and the Insane Malmaynes had taught him? Maybe Duncan had some kind of exhibitionism fetish he'd never bothered to tell his best friend about, or he was reliving his afternoon delight with Moira. "Is Moira in danger?"

The heat died in Duncan's eyes, to be replaced with that iron determination Jaden knew so well. It was that determination mixed with the man's compassionate heart that had gotten Jaden out of that alleyway alive all those years ago. "So far there has been talk of discontent over my mating, but no real threats. Not yet, anyway."

Compassionate Duncan might be, but no one had ever claimed he was stupid. "It's a matter of time, then."

"Yes."

Jaden ran his hands through his hair. "There's something you need to know."

Duncan nodded, like he'd been expecting Jaden to say something like that.

"I'm a Blade."

Duncan's whole body tensed. Jaden could hear his heartbeat speed up. "What?"

"I'm one of Oberon's Blades. I've been working some cases for The Hob for the last two months." Longer than that, really, but what Duncan didn't know couldn't get Jaden's ass kicked.

Duncan's jaw was working again. He was going to owe his dentist a fortune if he kept that up. "And now?"

Jaden bit the bullet. If things were bad enough that Moira was on the verge of being threatened then Duncan needed to know. "I'm here on a case."

Duncan's eyes closed. "After the case is over? Will you stay?"

Jaden shrugged, faking a nonchalance he didn't feel. The urge to run his hand over that stubbled jaw was almost irresistible. "Then I move on to the next one." He smiled. "You always knew the baby bird would someday fly the nest, old man."

The slow smile that crossed Duncan's face sent a shiver of fear down his spine. The last time Duncan had smiled like that...well. The man he'd smiled like that over was finally walking again, wasn't he? "We'll see." Duncan shifted, his expression easing. "The case?"

Jaden settled into his usual seat in front of Duncan's desk. He wondered if Ian had set it back up or if Duncan had. "Rumor has it some of the Malmaynes are edging toward the Black."

He shielded his eyes from the sudden burst of silver light that shone from the Malmayne lord. "Henri."

“Care to tone that down? You’d give spotlights hissy fits.” Jaden blinked rapidly, trying to adjust his eyes. “I see spots before my eyes,” he muttered, ignoring Duncan’s chuckle. “Geez, old man. Calm down.” The name Henri finally registered. Henri was the worst sort of toady and firmly of the belief that a Sidhe’s shit didn’t stink. He was also a raging bigot. He bet Henri was horrified that even someone with Leo’s polluted blood almost married into the pure Malmayne bloodline.

No, that wasn’t right. Henri had tried to get Leo to somehow mate into the Malmayne clan. Was almost insistent about it, in fact.

What the *fuck* was going on? At this rate he’d need a flowchart to keep track of the crazies and their plots.

“I still don’t know how they think they’re going to manage to get Leo to fulfill the marriage contract considering the man’s already true bonded to Ruby. Besides, the only female Malmayne candidate is dead unless we start looking at the cousins.”

“You’re true bonded to Moira. That should have been enough to fulfill the contract, even in their eyes, since you’re head of the clan and Moira is a direct descendant of Aileen.” Jaden rubbed his chin, thinking. He ignored the speculative gleam in Duncan’s eyes since, really? The man was acting fucking *weird*. *Had* he figured out that Jaden had taken a little joy ride through his sex life? “So, what? You think they might have another contender to bring forward?” Another Deranged Darling would just make his day. Give him something to sink his teeth into.

“I don’t see how. The contract was between the heads of both families. Aileen has no other descendants and I have no interest in Leo or Shane. Kaitlynn...well. Enough said there.”

Jaden waved his hand. “Of course you have no interest in them. They’re men.” Duncan’s body jerked, but Jaden ignored it, instead focusing on whatever the rest of the Malmayne clan was up to. “So, how often has Henri the Horrible been by?”

“Three visits so far.” Duncan leaned forward, his hands on the edge of the desk, his body bowed over Jaden’s form in the chair, an angry gleam in his eye. “How did the Hob find out that my clan might be leaning toward the Black?”

Jaden opened his mouth to reply, but found he couldn’t. Duncan smelled so *good*. “I have no idea. He comes to me, tells me to check things out. He’s never been wrong before.” He shrugged. “I know that the Blades aren’t just about muscle. It’s possible he’s using gremlins to track their online movements. He might have even gotten a pooka on the inside. I’m not sure, but from what you’ve told me since I came back his information seems to be right on the money.”

“So you go where he tells you and do what he tells you?”

Jaden eyed his bond brother with jaded eyes. “Sure. It’s not that different from my old job.”

Anger flitted across Duncan’s face before it settled into an expressionless mask. “I have not seen nor have I accepted your resignation.” His gaze darted behind Jaden to the door. “Have I?”

“Nope.” Moira joined her mate on the edge of the desk, the two of them staring down at him. Jaden bit back a grin. They had the audacity to double-team him, knowing he was a Blade? “Last I heard Jaden was still a Malmayne.”

Jaden snorted. Duncan might have accepted him all those years ago but none of the rest of the clan had. He was the furthest thing from a Malmayne it was possible to get. “I’m no more a Malmayne than Ian is.”

At that moment Ian chose to enter the office, pushing a tray of food. “Welcome home, Master Jaden.”

Jaden’s head thumped against the back of the chair. Ian treated him like he was one of the Malmaynes when no one else did. As far as Ian was concerned, Duncan’s blood bond with him superseded any other petty concerns such as DNA and Black Court taint. Duncan had declared him one of the clan; therefore, as far as Ian was concerned, Jaden was. “Hey, Ian. How’s it going?”

The man’s smile would light up anyone’s day. “Very well, sir, for the most part.”

“Ian, if you hear anything about the rest of the clan being unhappy, or perhaps plotting something against Duncan or Moira, I want you to bring it straight to me.”

“Of course, sir. I remember your previous instructions.”

Jaden winced. Damn it. Now Duncan was going to ask him questions he really didn’t want to answer. “Yeah, thanks.”

Ian quickly changed the subject, showing the man realized his mistake. “I have some of your favorite dishes, Master Jaden. Mrs. Pagett was quite pleased to hear you had returned.”

Jaden laughed. “I’m sure she was.”

“Did she lock up the cookies?”

Jaden shared a look with Duncan, one full of fond memories. Jaden had a thing for homemade chocolate chip cookies. Mrs. Pagett had a thing for keeping his greedy paws out of her cookie jars. So far Jaden had won most of the battles but the feisty fairy had insisted that one day she *would* win the war.

“Yes, she did, my lord. And she swore this time Master Jaden would not get the better of her.” Ian finished laying out the plates on the coffee table in front of the large leather sofa. “If you require anything else, my lord, please ring.”

“Thank you, Ian, that looks wonderful. Thank Mrs. Pagett for me, will you?”

“Of course, my lord. I’ll make sure you aren’t disturbed.”

Duncan shook his head as the fae wheeled the now empty cart back out of the office, shutting the door behind him. “How the hell does he do that?”

“What?” Moira looked confused.

“Know that I want privacy.”

Jaden smirked. “He’s a brownie, a house sprite. How can he not? Their very nature is to serve their master’s needs.”

“Hmph.” Duncan turned his attention back to Jaden. “What previous instructions had you given him?”

Jaden leaned back in his chair. “I’m in charge of your personal security, remember? If anything and I mean *anything*, looks like it might cause you to get a paper cut I want to know about it.” He gestured toward Moira. “Those orders now include Lady Malmayne.”

Moira was watching him through narrowed eyes. “All right. You’re here to investigate the Malmaynes. They’re making a pain of themselves but so far the only thing they’ve done is try to set aside Duncan’s Claim on me and Leo’s true bond. What are our options?”

Jaden blinked. Claim? He sat up straight, both feet planting themselves on the floor. “You two haven’t finished bonding yet?”

They shared a look that confused the hell out of him. Moira answered him first. “No, not yet.”

He was stunned. “Why not? If you two complete the bonding then Henri and his friends don’t have a leg to stand on! What’s left to do?”

“The Claiming is complete, but we still need to do the Vow and the Binding.” Moira’s expression was mischievous, but Duncan looked deadly serious.

“We can’t complete the ritual.” Duncan held up his hand, forestalling Jaden’s instant protest. “There are things you don’t understand yet. We’ll get into them later. But for now, completing the bond isn’t possible.”

Jaden was now fiercely worried. He didn’t understand why they hadn’t completed a ceremony they were both eager for.

Unless...

He stood, suddenly terrified. Duncan’s weary face suddenly took on ominous meaning. His eyes drifted automatically to the new silver in Duncan’s golden hair. “Is one of you ill?” He gestured toward those fine, terrifying silver hairs. “Duncan?” If there was something wrong with Duncan or Moira not even the Hob would be able to get him away from them. He’d fight Oberon himself to stay until Duncan was well.

A knock sounded on the office door. “I’m sorry, my lord, but there’s a visitor out front. He’s being very insistent that he be let in. I’m afraid I won’t be able to hold him off much longer.”

Moira put her hand on Duncan’s shoulder. “Why don’t you let me try and explain things to Jaden while you go and deal with the latest crisis. Okay?”

He kissed the top of her head. “Fine. Be gentle with him, though.” Duncan smiled and laid his hand on Jaden’s shoulder. “Welcome home.” He exited the office, his shoulders straight, his head held high. Whoever was waiting for the Malmayne lord was going to *find* the Malmayne lord, illness be damned.

You had to admire the man even while you wanted to knock some sense into him. If Duncan was ill he didn’t need to be worrying about anything but getting better. Moira should be tucking his ass into bed, not sending him out to deal with assholes.

“Jaden?”

“Hmm?”

“We need to talk.”

Jaden winced. Hell. It was never a good thing when a woman said *that*.

Moira wanted to kick Jaden and Duncan’s collective butts. How could they have danced around each other for so long? The heat between the two of them was burning her up! But the worry and fear in Jaden was reaching critical mass. She needed to diffuse it fast. “Duncan is suffering from mate sickness.”

Jaden turned on her so fast her head spun. He was quick, but she’d forgotten exactly *how* quick. “Why? Why won’t you complete the mating?” He stalked toward her, black bleeding out to the whites of his eyes. “C’mon, sweet. You can tell me.”

She shivered, the deep purr in his voice calling to her, a siren’s song she longed to answer. Where she found the strength to keep from responding to his vampiric lure she didn’t know. She took a deep breath, drawing in his coppery scent. “We couldn’t. Neither one of us could work ourselves up to it.”

Red flames danced in his eyes. “Why is that, Moira?” He stroked his finger down her cheek. “I can tell you that if I had you waiting in my bed there’s no way I’d hold off on making you mine.”

She smiled. He was trying to intimidate her. She shook her head, amused. *You’d think he’d know better than that*. She had to make him understand why they hadn’t been able to recite the Vow and complete the Binding. “How can you bond to your heart when your soul is missing?” He frowned, confused. Did he even understand what a true bond really meant? “Do you know what each step of the bond entails?”

He huffed out an irritated breath. “There’s the Claiming, which begins with a kiss and ends with a fuck.” She winced. He was being deliberately crude. “Then there’s the Vow and the Binding. The Sidhe recites the Vow, magic swirls, and the Binding takes place. Voila, you are married for eternity, life forces bound together.” He tilted his head to the side. “I hear Leo’s Binding with Ruby was quite the light show.” He smiled, the expression full of evil pleasure. “Kaitlynn was *so* pissed.”

She nodded. She’d been there. She’d known that if anyone had laid a hand on Ruby at that moment, Leo’s power would have destroyed them. It was never a good idea to get between a Sidhe lord and something he wanted. “It was. Do you know what was missing from my Claiming with Duncan?”

“No, but I’m sure you’ll tell me.” For the first time since Duncan left the room Jaden looked truly worried again.

She reached up and stroked his cheek, pleased beyond belief when he nuzzled into her touch. “You, Jaden. You’re the other third of our bond.”

He started to laugh. “Oh, that’s a good one. Try and sell me a bridge. C’mon. You know you want to.”

She kicked him in the shins.

He leaned down and clutched his leg. “Ow!” The surprise in his face would have been amusing if the situation wasn’t so serious.

“I’m not joking. You left, and Duncan and I *both* went into mate sickness. We were pining for you and didn’t even know it.” She figured the only reason she hadn’t been even *more* sick was her leprechaun blood. It must have shielded her. Duncan had taken the full brunt of it, the mark of his anguish left on his body for all to see.

“Uh-huh. Sure.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “So how come after all this time I’m not bound to him? I’d think in the hundred years we’ve been together he would have popped wood over me at *some* point.”

Oh, he was going to be a pain in the ass about this. “My mother thinks—”

“You talked to your *mother* about Duncan’s erectile dysfunction?” He glared down at her. “Has he considered taking your TV away?”

She rubbed the bridge of her nose with a weary sigh. “Jaden.”

“Hey, it’s not like we were together for a hundred years or anything.” He tapped his fingernail against his teeth and sucked in a breath. “No, wait.”

“If you don’t knock it off I’m going to kick your ass so hard you’ll fart everything you say.”

He barked out a startled laugh. “God, I love vicious women.”

She smirked up at him. “Listen. We think the reason Duncan didn’t feel the pull toward you was because of your blood bond. We think it masked the need to Claim you. When you went away and cut off all contact the mating sickness set in.”

Jaden was shaking his head. “Duncan isn’t gay.”

“No, he’s not.” Jaden’s expression turned cynical. “He’s bi, just like you.”

Jaden frowned. “Honey, Duncan has never shown an interest in men. Believe me, I would have known.”

“Of course not. He had you.”

Jaden’s eyes rolled, which looked really weird. They were still vampiric, black with red hot flames in the center. “If Duncan was ever into men then he’s been so far in the closet he’s been living in Narnia.” Jaden turned his back on her. “Are you sure some other funky Sidhe sickness isn’t holding him back?”

“I’m positive.” She put her hand on the small of his back, smiling when he jumped. “He finally Claimed me today.”

“Good for you.”

God, the pain underlying that cheerful façade would drop a stronger man to his knees. She could feel it roiling within him. “Jaden, he *couldn’t* Claim me until you were here. Frankly, I think it was what you were doing in the shower that tipped him over the edge.”

His face turned bright red, his eyes leeching back to normal in shock. “Oh God.”

“Jaden, it’s all right.”

“No it’s not. He’s going to *kill* me.”

“Why?”

He shot her a disbelieving look. “I saw you naked. I rode, *uninvited*, in his head while he...” He gestured toward her body. “On the desk, no less!”

She laughed. Her sexy vamp sounded so prissy! “Are you kidding me? He was thrilled!”

His jaw dropped. “I have to get out of here.”

“Oh, no you don’t.”

His hand curled around her throat, but she wasn’t afraid. She could never be afraid of him. “Sweetheart, how are you planning on stopping me?”

”Like this.” She got up on her tiptoes and kissed him.

Jaden froze against her, his eyes wide. When her tongue reached out and tasted his lips he moaned.

She had to get him to stay. She *had* to. There was only one other man who tasted this wonderful, and no way would she lose either of them. She buried her fingers in the darkness of his hair and opened her mouth, offering herself to him. He tried to pull back but her hand in his hair stopped him. Unless he wanted to lose some of the silky strands or, worse, hurt her, he couldn’t get free.

Jaden would never deliberately hurt her. He’d go sunbathing first.

The tip of one of his fangs touched her lip. She ran her tongue along the tip, uncertain how he would react.

He sucked in a breath and moaned, his hands going to her hips. He held her trapped, unable to move as his mouth devoured hers, taking everything she’d offered and more. She allowed that small spark of Sidhe power inside her to rise to the surface, to surround them both. She dropped her Seeming, letting everything she was sink into him, needing him to accept everything she’d been telling him.

They were meant to be together. He was meant to be hers. If he tried to run again she’d hunt him down and tie his ass to her bed. That was, if Duncan didn’t get to him first.

He pulled back with a gasp. His expression was horrified. “No.”

She was panting, so aroused she could barely breath. “No?”

“You’re Duncan’s. He deserves you.”

She blinked. The way he’d phrased that struck a chord. “And you don’t?”

His jaw clenched. “Duncan deserves the best.” His smile was wistful. “Sweetheart, you’re the best.” He kissed the tip of her nose and let her go. “Let me go, Moira.”

“Can’t.” She grinned up at him. “I’ve begun Claiming you.” She patted his chest, feeling justifiably smug. “You belong to me now, and you’re not going anywhere.” She blinked up at him innocently. “You don’t want me getting sick, do you?”

“Are you serious?” She nodded. Oh yeah. She was deadly serious, and he’d just have to get with the program. “Uh, no. I don’t want you to get sick.” He gulped. He looked like someone had just poked him in the ass with a stick.

“Good.” She brushed a kiss on his chin and let him go. She watched him turn on his heel and damn near stumble out of the office. She leaned back against the desk and chuckled. There was no way her stubborn vamp was leaving Malmayne property any time soon.

This was going to be fun.

Chapter Five

“What the hell do *you* want?”

Charles Malmayne paused on his way out of the white limo, his silvery gray eyes widening in astonishment. “Is that any way to greet your uncle?”

Through sheer force of will Duncan kept himself from grinding his teeth. He did *not* need this right now. He had another mate to Claim, some Vows to recite. He watched his uncle get out of the limo and make his way toward the stairs.

“Perhaps we should take this inside.” Charles gestured to the front door, for all the world as if he was inviting Duncan into *his* home. Charles had always been arrogant, but since Cullen had passed away he’d gotten bold.

“I don’t think so.” Duncan planted himself in front of the door and crossed his arms. “There’s no reason we can’t take care of our business quickly and efficiently. State your business, Uncle.”

“We have much more to discuss than apparently you are aware of.” Charles smiled, and something about the older Sidhe’s expression had Duncan’s shoulders tightening in anticipation. Duncan’s own face must have been colder than he thought, because his uncle’s next words were, “Aren’t you going to invite me inside?”

“No.”

Charles sighed. “Very well. There is unrest among the clan members. Several of us feel you have not upheld the obligations the lord of the Malmaynes must meet.”

“Such as the punishment of the Dunne clan, the mating of Leo and a suitable Malmayne female, and the execution of Jaden Blackthorn?”

“So you are aware of our demands.”

Demands? Duncan could feel his fury trying to creep over his face but managed to keep it off. No way would he allow Charles to see him upset. “We owe honor debt to the Dunnes. You know this.”

“None of it would have happened if Leo Dunne had just chosen to accept the marriage to Kaitlynn. You know this, Duncan. Something could have been arranged with his pet human. It’s not as if it hasn’t been done before.”

“Theirs is a true bond.”

“Oberon himself proved that under the right incentive a true bond could be broken.”

Duncan's eyes went wide. "Oberon's bond was dissolved by the Gods themselves." And that was only after the Dark Queen had been shown to be in league with pure evil.

"So Oberon would have you believe." Charles put his hand on Duncan's arm. Duncan was stunned. How could Charles believe a true bond could be set aside by nothing more than will? "I know two clan members who are willing to fulfill the Malmayne end of the bargain."

He needed to nip that thought before it bloomed. "That contract is between the heads of the two households. As there is no longer a daughter of Clan Malmayne, the contract cannot be fulfilled that way."

Charles shook his head. "Duncan. You *know* who I mean."

His eyes narrowed. "The point is moot. The marriage contract has already been fulfilled. I am married to Moira Dunne."

"She is unsuitable."

Duncan took a deep breath, the rage building deep within him. How *dare* he malign Duncan's chosen? "She is *mine*."

"What about the debt owed by the Dunes?"

Duncan rolled his eyes. He was done with this topic. "Get it through your thick skull. We damaged the Dunes. Got it? *We owe them*."

Charles merely shrugged. "And the vampire?"

In an instant, his fists were curled in Charles's pristine black lapels. For the first time in at least four hundred years he lost his temper in front of a rival. "Jaden is *mine*." Charles was a threat to Duncan's chosen family, and he would see to it that he never came near either Moira or Jaden again.

Charles carefully pulled free of his grasp. "I see. You understand the clan will have something to say about this?"

His lips curled in a feral smile. "Bring it on."

"Very well then." His uncle straightened his jacket and stalked back toward the limo. "Duncan?"

"Yes?"

"I will miss you." Charles got back into the limo with a small wave, shutting the door behind him.

Duncan watched the limousine pull away. What else could go wrong today? He'd have to figure out a way to get Moira and Jaden to return to New York with him, because his worst fears were now confirmed. The clan wanted to replace him as their lord. It was becoming obvious who the rest of the clan wanted as his replacement.

He ground his teeth in fury. Charles Malmayne was his father's younger brother, born fifty years after Duncan. He had the bloodline to lay claim to the clan if Duncan should falter. The others would accept him without hesitation. He had two daughters, each one willing to take Kaitlynn's place on Leo Dunne's arm. Once they discovered he was mated to Jaden they'd have the backing of the White Queen, Glorianna. Her hatred for vampires was legendary in the White Court, which was why most non-Black vampires joined the

Gray Court, even the ones with good hearts like Jaden. Where that hatred sprang from Duncan had no clue, but the Queen could be rabid on the subject. If she backed them up all the way he'd find himself under Charles's thumb before he could blink.

But first he needed to know why the fulfillment of the Malmayne-Joloun marriage contract was so important to his clan. He had to find out before Charles made his move or he would be forced to bow to his uncle's rule. Charles, elitist bigot that he was, would never tolerate a vampire in the clan. Jaden would be put to death on his orders, and there would be nothing Duncan could do about it. Not without...

He frowned. No. That option was a possibility but not something he dared contemplate, not until there were no other options left to them. He'd have to think of something else.

He turned to enter the house, the argument with Charles fresh in his mind. He knew what Moira had been up to in the office, knew she'd begun to lay her Claim to Jaden. Duncan's eyes narrowed. Maybe that was the way to save them both. Claim them, Bind them, make them his in such a way that not even Charles could object. Once the true bond was in place it would take an act of the Gods to separate them no matter what Charles thought. Glorianna would be pissed, but since Jaden was Gray Court there would be nothing she could do about it. Duncan might be able to win the rest of the Clan over, given enough time. He would have to if he wished to remain their lord.

He would need to convince Jaden that bonding him in the Sidhe way was the best course of action. Jaden seemed reluctant to even consider that Duncan might want him, and while Duncan was hurt by that he could understand it. He'd fought his occasional bouts of attraction for the vampire for a century, unwilling to take advantage of his bond brother. Duncan shook his head, disgusted with himself. All of the current anguish could have been avoided if he'd just listened to what his heart was telling him. How could he have been so blind? He'd had no desire for another man after his bonding with Jaden, the need completely veiled though he'd more than slated his lust with women. He hadn't questioned the fact that his desire for other men had gone away for decades.

Maybe he wasn't fit to run the clan after all if he could completely miss the signs of his true bond.

"So? What did Charlie boy want?"

He turned, startled. He hadn't heard Jaden come to the front door. Duncan paused, staring at his bondmate. Something about the way Jaden stood had him concerned. His stance was nonchalant, but Duncan could see the tense set of his shoulders. It could have been the result of Moira's seduction attempt or the knowledge that Charles had been the unexpected, insistent visitor, but Duncan wasn't certain and Jaden was still partially blocking him from his mind. "He wants to take over the clan and have either Constance or Cecelia marry Leo."

Jaden's eyebrows shot up. "You've got to be fucking kidding me."

"Nope." He continued up the stairs, his gaze locked on Jaden's tempting mouth. Sooner or later he'd have to kiss the man, taste him, and begin the process of Claiming him.

He couldn't wait.

"Charles is an idiot." Jaden's eyes were narrowed on the retreating limousine, the tail lights a blur in the distance. "I'll need to investigate him."

"I want you to be careful." He stopped next to Jaden and turned, following his bondmate's gaze. "If Charles is the one behind all of this, we've got more problems than I thought." He didn't need to go into too many details, not with Jaden. They might have to explain it to Moira, but Jaden had been with him long enough to understand the Malmayne family dynamics.

"Think the others will fall into line like good little lemmings?"

Duncan snorted. He shouldn't be amused, but he was. "Right off the cliff and into the Black." He shifted closer to Jaden, hoping his future lover wouldn't notice how their shoulders were almost touching. "Have you tried going to Queen Glorianna?" Jaden shot him a disbelieving look and he winced. "Sorry." The only vampires that served the White Court Sidhe were members of the Gray, like Jaden. Those vampires were barely tolerated and stayed far, far away from Glorianna and her official Court. Suggesting Jaden talk to the White Queen was beyond stupid. He could only blame it on the scent of his bondmate and the desire that he finally allowed to course freely through his veins.

"I'm going to head out for a while." Jaden grinned. "I'm hungry."

Duncan was aware of what Jaden needed and, in the past, had shown himself willing to provide. Maybe it would be the first step in showing Jaden he was wanted by both Moira and himself. "You can eat here."

Jaden laughed, the sound sending shivers of lust down Duncan's spine. Damn, Duncan was definitely an idiot. "I'm not hungry for food."

"Blood, then." He turned to Jaden, unsure if he'd accept all Duncan was prepared to offer.

"Not blood, either." He clapped Duncan on the arm. "Three's a crowd, remember?"

Duncan smiled. Today had been a very long day, and he knew just how he wanted it to end. "I don't think so." Without batting an eye he dove into Jaden's fantasies and began weaving a dream for the man he now realized he loved with all of his soul. If Jaden thought he was going to go off into the night and fuck some random stranger when his bondmates were right here then he had another think coming.

"Duncan?"

He smiled, feeling whole again. He'd known she'd come out. She had to. The fantasy wasn't complete without her. "Moira. Help me get him inside, will you?"

She took one of Jaden's arms, grinning like a loon. "What did you do to him?" Jaden's eyes were glazed as he lived the fantasy Duncan had wrapped around him.

"I'll need your help." Getting them both inside was top priority. He was seeing both his internal vision and his real surroundings, and it was beginning to give him a headache. It had been a while since he'd been

forced to weave a fantasy yet keep most of his own senses in the real world. He had to trust Moira to get them to the bedroom without breaking all their necks.

The biggest surprise was finding out what Jaden's deepest fantasy was. The stench of that alleyway was not something he'd ever expected to visit ever again. Now he'd be forced to inflict it on Moira. He hoped she'd stay in character. If she gave even a hint that she didn't belong Jaden might fight them, and that was the last thing he wanted.

Once they reached the bedroom he had every intention of pulling both his lovers into the fantasy so deeply they might not even realize it wasn't real. He smiled, knowing that if any of his clan got a look at his face just then they'd run for the hills in fear. Nothing, *nothing* was going to stop him from finishing his Vows tonight.

Jaden stumbled and Duncan righted him, holding up his love, helping him the best way he could. Moira adjusted, carrying Jaden's weight with a grunt and a small smile.

Just the way it should be.

They got Jaden naked before they put him in the bed. It would be easier that way on all of them. They were about to hit the point where Duncan interrupted Jaden from feeding on Jezebel, and he'd need Moira to back him up. He slipped out of his own clothes, trying desperately to hold to both Jaden's strong mind and enough of reality to climb into bed before pulling Moira into the fantasy with them.

When she cuddled to Jaden's front with a nod and a smile, he sighed and let go of reality, pulling her along with him.

Moira heard the sound off to her left, the stench from the alley causing her to wrinkle her nose. "Duncan?"

His gaze was glued to something in the dark. "He's in there. Waiting."

She sniffed, and then desperately wished she hadn't. "*This* is his fantasy?"

"This is where I found him and set him free."

"Oh." She brushed her hand down the front of her pinstriped coat. The collar was so high and so starched the skin on her neck crawled. Her feet were encased in boots that had never been designed by Reebok, some kind of torture device was forcing her back straight and her tits out, and she had the kind of hat on her head that she'd vaguely heard referred to as a "vagina hat", all curled up at the sides and so full of feathers at least three ostriches must have given their lives for it. Her skirts, plural mind you, brushed the tops of her so-called boots, and her hands were stuck inside a dead animal.

"It's called a muff."

She looked at him, brows raised.

Duncan coughed, his lips twitching. "Get your mind out of the gutter, Moira."

She looked around. "I thought that's exactly where it was supposed to be."

He bit his lip. "Are you ready?"

If her back wasn't already held straight by the wooden plank she was currently strapped to she would have stiffened her spine. As it was, she was afraid she'd snap something off if she did. "Whenever you are."

He nodded and stepped into the mouth of the alleyway. She followed at a much more cautious distance, one eye on Duncan and the other on the slimy stuff that littered the ground. What the hell was *wrong* with these people? Hadn't they ever heard of a trash can? She dodged a particularly noxious pile of...ew. Or a toilet?

"Here, kitty kitty." Moira blinked as Duncan called to a small, battered cat at the end of the alley. "It's all right, little one. I won't hurt you."

"Go away. Please go away."

Her gloved hand went to her mouth. Jaden sounded scared, desperate. Desolate.

Young. Gods above, how old had he been when he'd been changed?

"Who is there?" Wariness had entered Duncan's voice, but it was an act, part of the illusion Duncan wove for the vampire. It might have been real all those years ago, but now Duncan trusted Jaden with his life.

"Nightmares. Go away."

"Come out where I can see you."

"No."

"I will not hurt you."

At that Jaden laughed. "No. But I might hurt you, and I do not want to do that."

"I doubt you could hurt me, little one."

"I am not a little one."

"No, I can see that."

Jaden gasped, his head rapping against the brick wall. Duncan's fingers had reached out and tipped up Jaden's chin, but the vampire ripped his face away, hiding his fangs behind his arm. "Get away."

"No."

"Go!"

Duncan shook his head. "No. You need help."

"I don't need help."

Moira was astonished. If this was the way it had originally happened, Jaden had fought every instinct he had to save Duncan's life. Even she could see how much pain he was in, how hungry he was. Duncan had seen that inner strength, that shining nobility, and taken him in, given him a life that wasn't about pain and degradation. No wonder Jaden loved him so.

Duncan reached out and cupped Jaden's cheek. "Yes, you do." He smiled, slow and sensual. "I know exactly what you need."

Jaden frowned, looking confused before the hopeless defeat took over once more. "Go *away*." His eyes closed, his head banging once more against the filthy bricks.

"No. Jaden, I won't leave you."

The confused frown returned at Duncan's declaration. "What?"

Duncan smiled. "Moirira?"

She stepped forward, avoiding a rather large, angry-looking rat. If she hadn't known this was a Sidhe fantasy she would have been shrieking and climbing the nearest wall. "Hello, Jaden."

He shivered. The rags he wore barely covered him. "Who are you?"

She smiled. "Deep down, you know who I am." She reached his side and took his hand. "We belong to you, and you belong to us." Her free hand reached for his cheek. Even through the glove she could feel how cold he was. "We've needed you."

His eyes closed again. "No. I'm a monster." His eyes opened, those dark, Vampiric eyes, red flames dancing deep within their depths. "You have to leave."

"Jaden." Duncan placed his hand on the back of Jaden's head. "I told you I know what you need." He gently pulled the vampire forward, tilting his head and exposing his throat. "Drink, and bond with me."

With a sob Jaden struck, sinking his fangs into Duncan's neck. She could hear the faint sucking sounds as Jaden drank deep. He moaned, snuggling up against the taller Sidhe, his arms wrapped so tightly around Duncan she was surprised the other man could breathe.

Duncan's head tipped back, a look of pure ecstasy on his face. He cradled the vampire to him, holding him, rocking against him. With a start she realized that Duncan was getting off on Jaden's bite.

How could he not have known? He *must* have felt this the first time Jaden bit him. Or what about all of the times since then? Did he fool himself into thinking that the desire he felt was nothing more than the result of the bite, Jaden's vampiric nature taking hold and playing with his body?

"Jaden. *Amoureux*. Enough. Moira needs you now."

Jaden lifted his crimson dotted lips, his gaze centering on her. The hunger in their black depths would have frightened her if she hadn't seen the way he'd taken Duncan. For all his hunger he'd been surprisingly gentle, keeping the Sidhe from feeling anything more than he had to.

A red-stained tongue licked his lips. "Moirira." The hungry way he said her name had her quaking in her boots partially from fear, partially from lust. His eyes narrowed on her, his body quivering as if he expected her to run.

She had no intention of doing anything so stupid. She smiled and held out her hand. "Jaden."

He was on her so fast she didn't even have time to gasp. Twin pricks of white-hot pain were her only warning before pure liquid lust shot through her system. Every pull on her neck felt like he'd scraped his

tongue across her clit. Her nipples throbbed with unfulfilled need. She pulled him down to her, content to let him take what he needed and give her everything he was.

Duncan stepped up behind Jaden, circling him from behind, his arm wrapping around Jaden's waist. "You belong to us now."

Jaden whimpered, his fangs retracting. There was wetness along her neck and she had no idea if it was blood, tears or a combination of both. She couldn't find it in her to care, other than her bondmate suffered needlessly, something borne out by his words. "You don't...you don't need me."

Duncan snorted. "Oh, really?" She watched him kiss Jaden's ear. "We weren't complete without you. Please, Jaden. Please come home with us." He pressed a kiss to Jaden's neck. "Make us whole."

She nodded. "Don't leave us alone again."

Jaden stiffened in her arms. When his head lifted they were human again and filled with tears. "I don't want to be alone."

The momentary grief in Duncan's expression matched the loneliness in Jaden's. She had to fix this, had to be the one who warmed them both. "None of us have to be. We're one now, like we were always meant to be." She reached around until she had taken a hand of each of them. "Are we ready to go?"

Jaden gasped. "Wait!" He turned back. "The cat. Please? Let me take the cat."

Duncan smiled. "Of course, Jaden. We can't leave Jezebel here."

"You named her already?" Jaden picked up the now docile cat, cradling her gently in his arms.

"You'll name her after we get the both of you cleaned up." Duncan took Moira's arm and began to lead her from the alley.

Jaden petted the scrawny, filthy cat. "I like the name Jezebel." He smiled, a ghost of the quirky humor he'd display in his prime. "She's a streetwalker like me."

Duncan's free hand went to the small of Jaden's back, but Moira could sense his irritation. He didn't like hearing Jaden describe himself that way. She wondered how he'd reacted the first time he'd heard it. "I'll have us all home shortly. I promise you, you'll never be alone again."

The frown was back in Jaden's eyes, but it was too late. Mist swirled, and suddenly they were in a sumptuous bedroom. The style of the furniture was definitely turn of the century, the pieces done in mahogany with painted floral panels. The wardrobe was mirrored, the legs on all of the pieces tapered and straight with a slight bend at the bottom that led to a club-like end. The mirror on the dressing table had that sort of shield shape common to pieces of the period. The large four poster bed could easily fit all three of them. The floors were polished hardwood. The chair by the dressing table was done in a rose patterned fabric. The windows were covered in airy lace, the walls done in a pale rose.

She hated it on sight. She shuddered delicately. "Grandma, we're home."

Duncan sighed. "Moira."

She shrugged. What could she say? She'd always been something of a mid-century modern girl. If she had her way the farmhouse back home would be done in bright colors and contemporary furniture. As it was she was going to have a lot of redecorating to do at Duncan's place.

Jaden was looking around the bedroom with dazed eyes. "She's right. This is..."

"Mothballs and Ben Gay." She turned to Duncan with her hands on her hips. "Either the décor is going or I'm not coming."

"Moirra!"

"Seriously. It's like sneaking into my grandmother's room to lose my virginity. It sounds naughty on paper but when you actually get there? Ew."

Jaden's shoulders began to shake. The fantasy Duncan had so carefully woven was cracked, but not completely broken.

Duncan glared at her. "Fine. You don't want Jaden's fantasy? How about one of your own?"

Jaden's mouth dropped open. "Wait. Fantasy?" He blinked, his expression turning fierce. Suddenly he looked much more like the hundred year old vampire he truly was. "Duncan."

Uh-oh. "Oops."

Duncan growled, mist swirled, and suddenly they were back in Duncan's office, only this time it was the dead of night. Jaden was spread out on the leather couch, his cock deep in Duncan's mouth. The two men were beautiful in the dappled moonlight, one so fair, the other so dark.

"Oh *shit*." Jaden's head fell back, his hips lifting in time to Duncan's descending mouth.

Moirra smiled. Here was her fantasy, watching her two men love one another, knowing that at the end they would Claim Jaden. Duncan would make him his just as he'd Claimed her. Jaden would be *theirs*. He'd have no way out of it, nowhere he could hide from it.

It was perfect.

She grabbed the chair Jaden had been sitting in earlier and dragged it to the sofa so that she could watch, possibly even participate. She too needed to finish her Claim on Jaden, but for now she was content to watch. When Duncan was done, it would be her turn to Claim her vampire.

She could hardly wait.

"Duncan. Stop. Don't do this." Jaden's hands reached down and tugged on Duncan's hair, trying to pull him off his cock. It was probably the hardest thing he'd ever done, trying to get those perfect lips to let him go, but he had to. Duncan was making a huge mistake, one he'd regret for the rest of his life.

Duncan's teeth bit into him just enough to let Jaden know the Sidhe had no intention of letting him go. Silver gray eyes glittered at him from under a fall of golden bangs, the determination in them so fierce Jaden's hands fell away. Duncan had decided to take Jaden and unless Jaden was willing to hurt him there was nothing he could do about it.

Like I really want to stop him. No, Duncan. I hate blowjobs. Feel free to stop any time now. Jaden snorted.

“What’s so funny?”

His eyes darted to Moira and went wide. She sat there and watched them, naked yet far from vulnerable. He opened his mouth to answer when Duncan swirled his tongue around the head of his cock. “Oh hell.” He groaned. Fuck, the Sidhe knew what he was doing.

Jaden blinked and growled down at the Sidhe. Duncan knew *exactly* what he was doing. “Son of a bitch.”

Moira smirked at him. “Just figured it out, did you?”

He scowled at her, or at least he tried to. It was difficult to be pissed when your cock was being devoured by an expert.

Oh. *Oh*. His eyes damn near crossed. He had to have Duncan explain that swirly tongue thing. That fucking *rocked*. He couldn’t wait to return the favor.

Moira stood up and walked toward him, her nipples begging for his attention. “You know what? I want in.” She bent down and bit at his lower lip. “Are you going to let me play, too?”

He felt more than saw Duncan’s nod of approval and reached for the other half of his heart. “C’mere.” Jaden pulled her down to her knees and took one of her ripe nipples into his mouth, sucking on her with all the hunger in him. He cupped her pussy, delighted to feel the wet fire under his fingertips. He stroked across her clit, enchanted by her moans. His free hand went down to Duncan’s head, ran through the silky golden strands before cupping the back. He wanted to feel Duncan’s rhythm, be part of what was happening rather than the oral sacrifice all laid out and ready to be devoured.

They said they wanted him. They said they needed him. Well, fuck if they weren’t going to *get* him. Nobility be damned, he *ached*.

He wanted to sink into them both, make them a part of him. He needed in ways he never had before. The knowledge that the two people he cared most about were desperate to have him was an aphrodisiac even more potent than his bite.

Vampires may not have the Sidhe Claim, Vow, Binding thing, but they had their own form of mating that was nearly as potent, almost as strong. He would take these two, make them his, declare them his bondmates for all the world to see. No one would ever take them from him or they would face his wrath.

Moira was watching him, her eyes glazed with want, her hips rocking into his hand. He switched his attention to the other nipple, enjoying the gasp she granted him. He didn’t know which one of them he wanted to fuck first.

No. Scratch that. He’d always known. Visions of being sandwiched between the two of them drifted through his mind. He would be buried in Moira’s sweet heat, Duncan behind him, riding them both. He’d lay his bond on Moira first, making her his before he bonded Duncan to him.

They'd taken the initiative, shown him he was wanted. Now he'd show them how much he wanted them.

He turned his attention back to Duncan, pulling his lips from Moira's breast. He ignored her whimper. "Gonna fuck Moira, Duncan. Make her mine. Then I'm going to take you."

Duncan's head paused for just a moment before his mouth lifted off of Jaden's cock. "Who says I won't take you?"

Jaden shivered. It was the response he'd hoped for. While he truly loved fucking women, he also loved being taken by a man. And Duncan had "top" written all over him.

Still, he wasn't going to just give up his ass. He had to make the Sidhe work for it. "You think I can't pin you down and fuck you silly?"

Duncan smiled and swiped his tongue along the head of Jaden's cock. Jaden's fingers froze around Moira's clit. "I know you, Jaden." Another long, wet swipe had his IQ dropping by about ten points. "I know everything about you." Duncan cradled Jaden's balls in the palm of his hand. "I've lived in your mind for a century, and I know how you like your sex."

Jaden whimpered. Duncan knew? Shit. Jaden hadn't exactly been indiscreet, but he was far from virginal. Duncan's hand tightened around his balls as if he could read the vampire's mind. *Oh, wait. He can read my mind.* "All those other men meant nothing to me?" He grinned warily, knowing his mating, and his balls, were on the line here.

"If they had started to mean something to you they wouldn't have lived very long." Duncan's teeth nipped him. "I don't share."

Another set of teeth nipped his nipple and he yelped, staring at Moira in shock. "In case you were wondering, neither do I." The Irish was peeking out of Moira's accent, letting him know just how deeply affected she was.

He looked back and forth between them, his two loves. They wore identical grins on their faces, the piratical look of a Sidhe who has claimed something as his, or her, own. One last little niggling doubt needed to be voiced before he gave himself completely. "Are you sure?"

The two exchanged a look. Moira rolled her eyes, Duncan gave a disgusted snort. "Yes, you idiot." Duncan sat up and grabbed Jaden's hips. He started trying to roll him off the sofa. "I know what you need. Stop fighting me."

He stopped fighting, letting Duncan position them the way he wanted them. Moira wound up on the edge of the sofa, her legs spread wide, her pussy ripe and inviting. Duncan got on his knees behind Jaden, a white tube in his hands. Where he'd gotten it from Jaden didn't know. He wasn't even sure where they really were. Were they fucking on the front steps of Duncan's house, or had Duncan somehow gotten them inside? Knowing how strong Duncan was, right now he could have sexually transmitted road rash and not even realize it.

Duncan brushed his hair away from the side of his neck. He inched forward until his front was pressed against Jaden's back, his erection nudging Jaden's buttocks. "You're going to ride Moira and I'm going to ride you."

Moira pinched his ass hard, reminding him that even though her legs were spread she was far from vulnerable. "Make me feel *good*, Jaden."

Jaden lunged forward, burying himself in her sweet heat. Oh, gods above, she was incredible, tight and hot and wet for him. He licked his lips, eager for another taste of his sweet leprechaun. *His*. He could say that now and allow himself to feel the joy that raced through him, no longer shadowed by guilt. "Moira." He thrust slowly, savoring the feel of her, one hand curled around her hip and the other curled around her neck. He brought her up until their chests met, devoured her mouth while he fucked her with lazy strokes.

Her thighs were twitching, her hands clenching on his biceps. She'd come soon. He wanted to feel that, needed to know he'd been the one to bring her to orgasm. He lifted his mouth from hers and stared down into her beautiful face. Dark green sparks began to dance around them. "Moira?"

"Close." She was breathless, her nipples diamond hard. Her body writhed under him, demanding that he give her what she needed.

"Play with yourself, sweetheart. Come on my cock." He tightened his hold on her neck, kept her face right where he could see it. He didn't want her looking down. He needed to watch as ecstasy etched itself onto her features.

Her fingers brushed his cock before they began circling her clit. Her breathless moan shook him, her contracting pussy nearly distracting him from the squelching sounds behind him.

Duncan was preparing himself.

He couldn't think about that now, not with Moira under him, surrounding him, her eyes dazed with desire. She was so close it scented the air around her, rich and tantalizing. He could taste it on his tongue. His eyes changed, his teeth descending in answer to her orgasm.

The time had come to truly make her his, his bondmate, *his* little leprechaun. This time he wouldn't hesitate. It would be complete; the light bond he'd deepened in the alleyway would become the soul-deep bond it should be. He tilted her head to the side and struck just as she came, forcing her orgasm even deeper. He fed from her, her sex and her blood, filled himself until the only empty spots left within him were made for Duncan to fill.

"More."

He lapped at the wound on her neck, closing the tiny pinpricks.

Her hand tangled in his hair and pulled. "*More*."

Jaden threw his head back and laughed, happier than he could ever remember being. "Yes, ma'am."

She scowled up at him and tightened the muscles of her pussy. “I’m not done with you yet, Bunnacula.”

He snorted a laugh. “Aw, you remembered.” The first time they’d met she’d done her best to protect Ruby, but she’d been unable to withstand his mental pull. Ruby had stopped him from taking Moira by calling him Bunnacula, shocking him into releasing his hold on Moira.

Her lips twitched. “Yes.” She leaned forward until they were nose to nose, and he let her. “Now fuck me.”

His answering grin was predatory. “My pleasure.”

“Hold that thought.” A slick finger gently penetrated his ass, making him gasp. “I wouldn’t want you to forget about me.”

Jaden gulped. Duncan’s finger felt incredible, slick and hard and— “Oh shit.” He trembled. Duncan had found his prostate. “You’re kinda hard to forget.”

Duncan nipped his earlobe and twisted his finger, sending a shudder of delight down Jaden’s spine. “Right there, *amoureux*?”

Jaden blinked away sudden tears. He had a hard time believing that Duncan was calling him that. He licked his lips and moaned, pushing back against that invading finger. “More.”

“I think he likes that.” Moira leaned forward and kissed his lips softly. “Don’t you, *a ghra*?”

He looked down into her eyes. They shimmered with unshed tears. “Don’t cry, Moira. We won’t do this if you don’t want it.” Fuck his determination never to let them go. If it gave Moira a moment’s grief he’d walk away in an instant despite the bond he’d just formed with her.

Her smile lit the room. “Idiot.” She tightened around him just as Duncan carefully inserted another finger. He felt Duncan stretch him, loosening Jaden for his cock. Jaden had to bite his lip to keep from fucking into Moira and tumbling headlong into orgasm. “Don’t think for a second you’re getting away from either one of us.”

“We are a tribond, Jaden.” Duncan fucked him with those two fingers, brushing his prostate with every stroke. “We belong together, all three of us.”

A what? A tribond? They’d mentioned that before, but he’d never heard of such a thing.

Then again, he’d never heard of Sidhe before he’d met Duncan, and they’d turned out to be real enough.

“You and me and Duncan.” Moira shifted, bringing him further inside her. She removed his hand from her neck and lay back, exposing herself, laying herself bare before him. “You know you want this.” Her hands drifted up to her breasts and pinched her nipples. Her hips undulated against him, her clit scraping across his pubic hairs. She arched her back and moaned.

Jaden shuddered. He’d never seen anything so beautiful as Moira in the throes of passion.

Duncan's fingers twisted again, rubbed his prostate with desperate urgency. Jaden swallowed. "Fuck. Do that again." He didn't know which was better, the pull of Moira's pussy or the fingers invading his ass.

"I'll do one better," Duncan whispered in his ear. "Feel this, and know how much I need you." Duncan's fingers left his ass, only to be replaced by the flared head of his cock. "Ready for me?"

Born ready. He laughed. "Are you kidding me?"

Duncan's warm chuckle tickled his ear. "All right, *amoureux*."

He pushed out and the head of Duncan's cock moved past the first ring of muscles. The sting of the invasion was nothing compared to the knowledge that finally every naughty thought he'd ever had about the Sidhe lord taking him were finally coming true.

He rocked to Duncan's motion, taking him in deeper, his cock slipping in and out of Moira's scorching hot body. Duncan's hands clenched on Jaden's waist, pulling him and pushing him to his rhythm, using Jaden to fuck them both.

Jaden was in goddamn fucking heaven. "If this is a dream don't ever wake me up."

Moira grinned. "I'll prove this isn't a dream. You can sleep in the wet spot."

Duncan laughed. "I agree. Vampire in the middle."

Jaden allowed his own smile to break free, let them see the joy flowing through him. "I thought I already was."

Duncan began to pepper his neck with butterfly kisses. "I need you."

Fuck. Those damn tears were back. So much for his macho vampire image. "Take me."

"Bend forward. Fuck Moira for me, Jaden. Let me feel your passion."

Good idea. Fucking Moira like that would push him back into Duncan. In essence, he would be fucking them. He bent forward and leaned on his elbows, his nose inches away from Moira's. "Hi, sweetheart."

Her legs wrapped around his waist. "Hello."

He began to fuck her, slow at first, dragging out the pleasure for all three of them. Duncan's hands remained at his waist, guiding him, petting him. Duncan's low, encouraging murmurs let him know how much pleasure the Sidhe lord took in their mating. Silver lights danced now among the green, swirling around them in a dazzling display.

Hell. They really *were* Claiming him. Both of them. He could feel their power dancing along his skin, sinking into his blood and bone, the sensation both familiar and more intense than he remembered. He understood now that what he'd felt in the shower, their ghostly Claiming of him, had been real, his fate sealed the moment they all came. But it would remain weak until all three of them came together. Jaden sighed, the feel of his lovers moving around him driving him out of his mind. "Close."

Moira nodded, her eyes squeezed shut, her legs dragging on him faster and faster. He held off, waited for Duncan to join them, and now his cock throbbed with the urge to pour himself into Moira.

When Duncan bent down and began pressing kisses down Jaden's spine he damn near lost it then and there. He couldn't, he had to hold on just a few minutes longer. He had to bring them over with him. He looked down at his woman, watching the play of green and silver lights on her face. Light sweat covered her body, shimmering in the whorls of her leprechaun skin. Her face was a mask of ecstasy, the impending orgasm tightening her features. "Play with yourself. Come for me, Moira. For us."

She reached between them and stroked herself. Her hips snapped up; she was so close he could literally smell it. He pushed up slightly and began to pound into her, desperate to bring her off before he lost it completely.

"Bite me. Jaden. Please."

He could hear the plea in Duncan's voice, knew what the Sidhe wanted, needed. He couldn't resist, taking the forearm Duncan pushed in front of him and biting down, drawing Duncan's essence into him more deeply than he ever had before, bonding him as surely as the two fae Claimed him. It was complete. They were his bondmates, his now for all eternity.

Behind him Duncan thrust once, twice and came, a deep, guttural groan that shot through Jaden and forced him into his own orgasm. Under him Moira squirmed and gasped, her eyes scrunching shut as her orgasm shot through her.

Jaden licked Duncan's bite mark and dove into their minds, forcing the orgasms to linger, strengthen. He let them feel the joy of being bonded to a vampire, mated to someone who could rock their worlds. He would bring them the type of ecstasy they'd only dreamt of.

"Gods." It sounded like Duncan spoke through clenched teeth. His big body trembled against Jaden's back as his hips continued to piston against Jaden's ass. "So good."

Moira was panting, deep, gasping breaths as her pussy convulsed around him.

Before he could blink their power spiraled into him and Claimed him, irrevocably sealing his fate to theirs.

Duncan collapsed against his back, his body soaked in sweat. "You two are going to be the death of me."

Jaden held himself off Moira through sheer force of will, unwilling to crush the small leprechaun. He smiled, fully sated for the first time in his life.

Moira reached up and cupped his cheek. "You know what comes next, don't you?" The lilt of Ireland was back in her voice. "Are you ready for that?"

He spoke before he thought. "Are you?" She scowled up at him, but before she could take a bite out of him he leaned down and kissed her. "You've true bonded a Gray Court vampire, Moira. Do you think your White Court family will really approve of that?"

"I think they will." She smiled up at him, her momentary anger gone. "I know Duncan can't wait."

He felt more than heard Duncan's chuckle. "Damn straight. I've waited long enough."

Jaden snorted, still unable to believe that everything he'd ever dreamed of might come true. "You've waited?"

He yelped when Duncan's slap landed on his ass.

Moira laughed. "Wake us up, love." She yawned mid-chuckle. "I could use a nap before we finish what we've started."

Duncan pressed one last kiss to his back. Then mist swirled, and they were in Duncan's bedroom. Jaden was on top of Moira, his semi hard cock still buried inside her. Duncan was draped along his back. "Well, damn. You weren't kidding about the wet spot."

"Nope."

He sighed, truly content for the first time in years. What had he done to deserve such bliss? "Shit."

Chapter Six

Duncan reached out and slapped at the alarm clock, but the damn thing rang again almost immediately. He cracked open one eye and glared at the window.

Still dark out.

Next to him Jaden snuffled. A light snore erupted from the vampire's mouth. Moira's breathing was deep, her sleep undisturbed. Duncan smiled. For the first time in he couldn't remember when he was completely at peace.

Ring.

Duncan sighed. He got out of bed as quietly as he could and headed for his pants. He pulled out his cell phone and walked into the sitting room next to the bedroom, shutting the door quietly behind him. He didn't see the need to wake the other two. He checked the caller ID and frowned.

What the hell does Shane Dunne want at—he squinted at the clock on the mantelpiece—two o'clock in the morning? “Hello?”

“Hello, Duncan. Long time no hear from.”

Shane's low, smooth drawl was so unlike both Moira and Leo it was a shock to hear it. The middle child, Shane Joloun Dunne was unlike anyone Duncan had met before. Pure hybrids were so rare that only four had been recorded in the history of the Sidhe. All of them had been remarkable in one fashion or another. It was said the finest lord of the Sidhe, Nuada Silverhand, had actually been a hybrid. “Do you know what time it is?”

“Roughly two a.m. Listen, I got word that you might be in trouble. Anything I can do to help?”

Duncan blinked and looked at his phone. *What the hell?* Was there anyone who didn't know about his problems? “What kind of trouble have *you* heard about?”

Shane sighed. “Darkness stalks the Malmayne clan. Salvation lies within one man. Accept the bond and pay the price. Shadow wraps around you thrice.”

Duncan took a deep breath. If that meant what he thought it did then they might already be too late. The only question was what the price might be. “Jaden, Moira and I have become bondmates.”

“Huh.” Silence. “My sister's got a tribond? Interesting.”

Duncan rubbed his eyes. He was way too tired to deal with Shane. “Listen, I've been meaning to talk to your father. Is he awake?”

“No, and right now you wouldn’t be able to get much from him anyway. Tell me what’s wrong, I’ll get him the message.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.” He needed Sean Dunne’s help, not his son’s.

“I give you my word my father will receive your message.”

Duncan heard the ring of magic in the other man’s voice. A vow, then. “The Malmaynes are pushing to punish the Dunnes for the deaths of Cullen and Kaitlynn.” He filled Shane in on the discussions he’d already had with both Henri and Charles. “If they have their way, Leo’s true bond will be set aside for the marriage contract, Jaden will die *and* the Dunnes will owe honor debt.” *And I’ll be dead, more than likely.* If losing his bondmate didn’t kill him then Charles would. He’d be a rallying point for any Malmayne not willing to follow the new regime. Killing Duncan would cement Charles’s place as the new Clan Lord.

Shane gave a low whistle. “Yeah. That’s going to be an issue. I’ll get Dad to summon the family. We’ll let you know when we expect you.”

“We’ll be there.”

“All *three* of you.”

Duncan smiled, warmed by the hybrid’s insistence. “I’ll drag Jaden if need be.”

“Good. I’ll call you as soon as I know anything more. Night, Duncan.”

“Good night, Shane.” Duncan hung up the phone and settled into one of the big armchairs in front of the fireplace. He thought about lighting a fire but that would take more energy than he had at the moment.

How the hell had Shane known about their problems? What was with that cryptic riddle? As far as he knew there were no Seers on either the Dunne or the Joloun side, rare creatures that they were. Only one full-blooded Seer still lived, so he must have heard that riddle from another source. The question was, who?

Duncan sat in the dark for another half an hour, pondering his next move. Jaden had every intention of investigating Charles along with the rest of the clan. What other avenues were open to them? He had to stop the fall of the clan, because he refused to bow before the Dark Queen. But how? He rubbed his forehead, all of the problems he’d had before Jaden came back home descending once again on his shoulders. Hell if he’d be able to sleep now.

“Duncan?”

He started and looked over his shoulder. Moira stood there, rubbing her eyes, her gloriously nude body outlined by the moonlight. “Hey. Go back to bed, *amoureux*.”

She smiled and stepped into the room, padding silently across the carpeted floor. “I can hear you thinking. What’s wrong?”

“Shane called. He had a message for me, and an offer of help. He’s going to call a family meeting to see what they can do for us.” He pulled Moira into his lap, settling her head in the crook of his neck. He closed his eyes and nestled her close, letting some of the tension out. He had to release some of the burden to his mates or he’d lose his mind. “I’m not sure what to do.”

“I fight.” He looked over to find Jaden standing there, an odd, green glimmer in his black eyes, barely there before it was gone again. Duncan frowned, concerned. Where had that strange light had come from? There was nothing green in the room; it was done completely in whites and silvery blues. “I’ve been sanctioned to do whatever is necessary to prevent the Malmaynes from falling. There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

Duncan winced. If those were Jaden’s orders, someone would die. “I want you to be careful.” *I don’t want to live without you again.*

Moira’s fingers brushed his cheek. “We’ll help him.”

“Oh no you won’t.” Jaden’s back went rigid, his expression hard. “You keep your pretty asses out of this.”

Moira managed to beat him to the punch. “Excuse me? This is *my* family now, and I fight for my own!” The Irish was back in her voice, but this time it was full of outrage.

“I am a *Blade*, Moira. A fully trained Knight of the Gray Court, one of Oberon’s hand-picked warriors. I work directly for Robin Goodfellow, who, by the way, is scary beyond all sanity. Trust me, I think I can handle Charles Malmayne.”

“You think I can’t?”

Jaden’s eyes narrowed. “No. I have something else in mind for you to do.”

Duncan sat up at that. “Now wait a moment, Jaden.”

He would have said more except Moira’s hand covered his mouth. Now he was getting pissed at *both* of them. “What?”

“I know there are things you can do that a full-blooded leprechaun can’t. Use that to your advantage to protect yourself and Duncan. Let me deal with the outside threats. You take care of our home.”

Duncan’s eyes flashed. He removed Moira’s hand and let his magic seep into the air. “And what will I be doing while you two are combating the rest of the family?”

Jaden smirked. “What a son of the Tuatha Dé does best. Fuck with their minds.”

Moira kissed his cheek. “You’re the only one who can contact Glorianna about this. She’s not going to listen to me, and she certainly won’t listen to Jaden.” Moira shrugged. “Maybe if she knows what’s going on she’ll send help.”

Duncan almost snorted. He had a pretty good idea how Glorianna was going to react to his mating with Jaden and it wouldn’t be pleasant. Unfortunately he wasn’t ready to go to war with Charles. He’d been a warrior once, long ago, but his skills were rusty from disuse. That was something he could begin to rectify immediately. He narrowed his eyes at Jaden, hoping the vampire would know exactly how irritated he was at being left out of the fight. “I want you to spar with me.”

Jaden blinked. “Of course.”

“Me too.”

Jaden threw up his hands. “Oh no, Tiger. I’m still recovering from the last time you kicked my ass.”

Moira snorted. “I don’t need to be able to take you out. I need to be able to take *Charles* out.”

Jaden snorted. “I’ve fought you, sweetheart, and that’s not a problem. You could do that now as long as he doesn’t get into your mind.”

“That *is* going to be a problem,” Duncan muttered. He began drumming his fingers on Moira’s thigh. “Charles is strong, even stronger than I am. He could roll *my* mind without breaking a sweat.” In fact, he wasn’t entirely certain he *could* take Charles’s.

“Then we need to figure out a way to protect you.” Jaden frowned. “Thing is, I don’t know what will work against a Sidhe bent on a serious mind fuck.”

The three lovers exchanged a look. “We need to avoid him.” Duncan patted Moira’s hip, urging her off of him. “We need help.”

“Who?”

Duncan smiled. “I think we should start with Shane Joloun. He knows something about what’s going on. I intend to find out all of it.” Even if it meant rolling his brother-in-law’s mind. “Let’s go back to bed. We have to be at your parent’s house some time tomorrow.” He took Moira’s hand and held the other out for Jaden. “Coming?”

Jaden grinned. “Nah. You two go ahead. I have something I want to take care of first.”

“Jaden.” Duncan’s muscles tightened in instant denial. He hadn’t finished Binding the vampire to him. Jaden could still leave them.

“Don’t worry, old man.” He pressed a soft kiss to Duncan’s lips. “I’ll be back.” Jaden walked back toward the bedroom. “I just need to find something out.”

“Can it wait?”

Jaden’s eyes flashed that eerie green again, there and gone so fast Duncan wondered if he’d imagined it. Was there a light in the yard reflecting through the trees or something? “Nope.” He entered the bedroom. “Moira? What happened to my briefs?”

Moira rolled her eyes and stomped into the bedroom. “On the floor, like everyone else’s.” Duncan could hear the worry in her voice, but what could he do?

Jaden was a Blade. There was nothing that could protect them from that.

Akane shivered and climbed back into her car. She felt numb. How had Jaden resisted them for so long? The love that flowed between the three of them was so strong she was surprised any of them survived the separation. Why hadn’t she known what Jaden was *really* like? He was extraordinarily good at hiding those white knight tendencies of his. That explained why he was one of Robin’s favorites. Robin had a real soft spot for the noble ones. She snorted. It was probably the Hob’s *only* soft spot.

Now that she realized what Jaden was facing, and who some of the players were, it was time to make herself known. But one thing remained unclear to her. A player she didn't recognize. Something about the power there tempted her like nothing else ever had. The taste of it was earthy and exotic, calling to her dragon senses the way no other ever had. Not even the Hob.

Not even Oberon.

She *had* to meet whoever it was.

Akane was a dragon who trusted her instincts, and those instincts were screaming at her that the unknown, powerful entity would profoundly impact her life. She hopped back into her car and started it, smiling at the purr of the powerful engine. She put it in gear and roared into the night.

First order of business: find out who the hell Shane Dunne was.

Jaden slipped into the darkness surrounding the house. He lifted his head and scented the air, his mind sifting through the information gathered. He sensed nothing out of the ordinary. He scented no watchers, heard no human or fae heartbeats. *So, Charlie-boy isn't watching the homestead.* Jaden grinned headed for the garage. *"Duncan? Mind if I borrow the car?"*

There was pause. Duncan had been half asleep. *"That depends. Which car?"*

"Aw, c'mon, old man. Let me have a little fun."

"Can't you drive your car?"

He opened the garage door and looked at the row of brightly colored toys. He rubbed his hands together. *"My Mustang doesn't purr like the M6."* The sweet cherry-red convertible was calling to him.

"My M6? No, Jaden. Remember what you did to my Boxster?"

He slipped the keys off the hook and slid behind the wheel. The scent of premium leather surrounded him. *"That was not my fault. That dryad jumped right out in front of me."* He started the car, damn near purring himself at the sound of the engine. Fuck, Duncan had great taste in cars.

He could almost feel Duncan's chuckles. *"Don't you mean her tree?"*

He put the car in gear and pulled out of the garage, closing the door behind him. *"Leave her tree out of this."*

"Be careful, Jaden. Get a scratch on that car and I'll take it out of your hide."

"Promises, promises." He hit the gate remote and drove out into the night. *"I'm heading toward Charles's place. What time do you need to be at the Dunne's?"*

"No clue. Shane said he'd arrange things with his father and call us back. By the way, you're under family orders to attend."

Well. Shit. So much for working through the family fun-fest. He could just picture what Sean Dunne would do to him when he found out his baby girl was a vampire's bondmate. *"Can't we just say I'm dead?"*

"Jaden. You'll be there and you'll like it." He winced at Moira's tart tone. Apparently there were downsides to this whole bondmate thing, like long distance nagging. *"Jaden. You know what? Just shut up. Get your ass back home before daybreak."*

"That doesn't leave me a whole lot of time, sweetheart." It was already three o'clock in the morning. Daybreak was in roughly three hours.

"Doesn't matter. You need to be rested before you deal with my family."

He rolled his eyes. *"Yes, dear."*

She snorted. How the hell did you snort mentally? *"Be careful, a ghra."*

His heart freaking melted right in his chest. He hoped he never took their love for granted. The gift they'd granted him was priceless, and he planned on treating it as such. *"I will. Promise. Keep yourselves safe, got it?"*

"Will do." Moira sounded sleepy. *"Love you, Jaden."*

"Love you, amoureaux. Get some rest." Duncan sounded much more awake. *"I'll keep watch now. Moira, you can have the morning shift."*

Jaden couldn't stop the smile from crossing his face. Duncan had been pissed at being stuck in the damsel-in-distress role, but Jaden knew Duncan was not prepared for what someone toying with the Black could throw at him. It was up to Jaden to keep them truly safe. *"I'm not expecting a move from them tonight. They've laid down the gauntlet, now they're going to watch how you react to it."*

"Which means they might be expecting you."

"True. I've got plans for that, though."

He felt Duncan's surprise. *"What plans?"*

He smirked. *"You'll see. Don't worry, this isn't my first job."* And it wouldn't be his last, bondmates or no. He helped people every day, people damaged by those who sought quick and dirty ways to power. As far as he was concerned he would be a Blade until the day he died whether he worked for Robin or not.

It was the least he could do to pay back all of the gifts fate had been kind enough to give him.

Jaden pulled up outside the house Charles Malmayne was currently calling home. It was a stately mansion located somewhere between where Leo Dunne now resided and Duncan's latest acquisition, the huge brick mansion Moira was dying to redecorate. Duncan's home, large though it was, still managed to feel like a home. Charles's house, on the other hand, shouted money and power. Clad in pale stucco and stone with Grecian columns and a car port larger than most hotels had, it managed to look both boorish and pretentious. A huge fountain in the circular driveway featured a nude woman pouring water out of an urn surrounded by pissing cherubs. *"It's confirmed. Charles is definitely overcompensating."*

“What?”

“Have you seen his new place?” Jaden backed the car up until the house was out of sight. He pressed the button that raised the car’s roof and locked it into place.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Let’s just say that I doubt he serves cocktail wieners. They probably give him a complex.” He got out of the car and locked it before misting through the bushes and the fence. He solidified on Charles’s property and scented the air. “So far so good. I’m on the grounds.”

“Keep me posted.”

“Will do.” Jaden glided forward, soundless and swift. Vampires could move quickly when motivated, and Jaden had lots of motivation. He reached the side of the mansion within two blinks. He began to climb up the house, heading for the roof. He doubted Charles was stupid enough to leave him an open window, but that was all right.

Jaden didn’t need something to be open to get into a house. All he needed was a tiny crack.

He reached the roof unmolested. “I’m going to try and get into the house now.” He could almost hear Duncan grumbling. “I’m being careful, old man.”

“Stop calling me that.”

Jaden’s brows rose. Duncan’s tone was difficult to decipher. “I didn’t know you disliked me calling you that.” Duncan had never mentioned it before.

“I tolerated it. Now? No way in hell will my lover call me old man.”

Jaden shivered, and his dick turned rock-hard. Just like that he’d gone from Blade to lover. “Shit. Knock it off. How the hell am I supposed to pull a B&E with a hard-on?”

“Don’t go in, Jaden. Stay outside the house.”

“No can do. I need to know what Charlie-boy has planned.” He misted through the slight gap in the weatherproofing of the window casement, solidifying in the dark and musty attic. “No one ever takes care of the attic windows. Did you ever notice that?”

“Can’t say that I have.” If mental voices had teeth, Duncan’s would be clenched.

Jaden smirked. He crawled along the wall, careful to avoid the creaking floorboards because, mansion or hovel, they *all* had creaky floorboards somewhere. Very few of them had creaky walls, however, and that’s what he stuck to. “Spiderman, Spiderman, friendly neighborhood Spiderman.”

“Jaden. No. Please. The last time you did that I had that damn song stuck in my head for a week.”

Moira giggled, sounding sleepy. “Spins a web, any size. Catches thieves just like flies.”

“I hate you both.”

“Look out! Here comes the Spiderman!” Jaden chorused with Moira. He bit his lip to keep from laughing and opened the basement door.

Moira’s mental voice was full of amusement. “Why are we singing that, anyway?”

He stared at the two “men” outside the door. Both of them were holding .38’s pointed right at him. They were dressed like Secret Service men, complete with sunglasses and dangling wires in their ears. *Idiots. “Step into my parlor.”*

“Shit. Jaden?”

He stepped down, carefully lifting his hands into the air. He smiled, showing his fangs. Their scent reeked of moldy mushrooms. *Fucking redcaps.* He now had proof positive that Charles was living in the darker shade of gray. Redcaps only worked at the express order of their overlord, who was firmly in the Black. He strove to keep his voice quiet so as not to awaken any other would-be guardians. “Hey, neighbor. Can I borrow a cup of sugar?”

The goons frowned. One of them lowered his gun by a hair, if that. The other opened his mouth, hand lifting to his ear.

“Thank the gods they’re stupid.” That was all the opening he needed. Jaden pounced. He had the first one in a submission hold before the other could blink. His arm was around the redcap’s throat, cutting off his air. He ripped the wire out of his ear, keeping him from contacting whoever it was he wanted backup from.

“Jaden?”

“Not now, sweetheart. Daddy’s working.” They seemed to move in slow motion, making it easy to avoid their blows. Jaden shifted, moving before the redcap could slam his elbow into Jaden’s stomach. He tightened his grip, using the redcap in his arms as a shield. He kept the Black Court fucker in a sleeper hold, waiting for him to drop. The free redcap feinted to the left, but Jaden didn’t buy it, didn’t give him an opening. Once a redcap had you in his arms it was damn hard to break free. The freaks were super-strong for all they were so thin, especially if they dropped their Seeming.

Jaden hoped they didn’t do that. He did not want to fill his quota of fugly for the day.

The redcap went limp in his arms, almost dragging Jaden to the floor with him. He held up and on, waiting to make sure the redcap was down for the count before dropping his limp form. He bared his fangs at the remaining redcap. “Looks like it’s just you and me, kid.”

The redcap eyed his fallen comrade and glared at Jaden. “You’ll pay for that.”

“That’s what they all say.” He wagged his fingers at the redcap in a “come here” gesture. “Here, stupid, stupid, stupid. C’mon, boy. Come on.”

The redcap growled and charged Jaden.

Perfect. Like I said, thank the gods these guys are idiots. This one hadn’t even thought to use his “hidden” microphone to call for help, let alone his gun.

Jaden used the redcap’s momentum to get behind him, swinging until he rested on the redcap’s back like a baby monkey. He grabbed hold of the redcap’s ears. “Giddy up!”

The redcap opened his mouth to roar. Jaden clamped a hand around that huge maw. “Uh-uh. No calling in reinforcements.” He twisted the ear he still gripped, earning himself a muffled howl. The redcap shook his head in an attempt to dislodge Jaden’s grip. “There ya go.” Jaden leaned down and bit into the side of the redcap’s neck. Instantly the redcap quieted, Jaden’s vampiric mind control kicking in, keeping the creature in his arms docile. He refused to use the power that made this feel good; all Jaden wanted was quiet. He drank until his opponent had suffered enough blood loss to pass out, but not enough to kill.

Blech. Mushrooms. Jaden swiped his tongue across the puncture wounds. He’d briefly considered killing the two goons but decided not to. He didn’t want it obvious he’d been there; that might get Duncan in trouble. It would be better to let Charlie-boy think that the two idiots had fallen asleep on the job. He arranged them so that they were leaning against the attic door, posing them as naturally as he could, heads leaned back and lolling, mouths open, arms draped over knees. He entered both of their minds, erasing his presence from their memories before misting down the hallway.

He reached the staircase to the lower level and solidified, ready to check the next level. He remembered from previous encounters that Charlie-boy preferred his office on the main level of any house he owned, and that was where Jaden was going. He didn’t have enough time to case the entire house. That would have to wait for another night.

“Jaden?”

Jaden sighed. Duncan hadn’t bothered him this much in years. “Yes, dear?”

“How is it going?”

He slid a foot onto the railing, testing to see how slick it was. “I don’t recommend the mushrooms.”

“Redcaps?”

Jaden blinked. How the hell did Duncan know that? He’d never described their taste to Duncan before. “Yes.”

“You aren’t hurt?”

“Pfft. Please.” He misted down the banister. The damn thing seemed a little shaky to him, so crawling down it was definitely out. When he reached the bottom he rematerialized, panting a bit. Misting was damn tiring. “There were only two.”

“Only two? Jaden!”

Jaden winced. Damn, the man could yell. Who knew? “Shh. Daddy’s still working.”

He heard the low growl in his mind. Duncan was going to have words for him when he got back. He grinned. He couldn’t wait. This side of Duncan was one he’d never have suspected before. It gave him all kinds of tingles to know he was the one who had Duncan in full protection mode, misplaced though it was.

He made his way silently through the lower floor, misting in stops and starts. It was a power that only worked for brief periods of time and the energy drain was horrendous. He might have to feed again before leaving the house if he kept this up.

Jaden came to a stop at the last room to the right before the servants' wing. *Ah-hah*. He'd finally found what he was looking for—Charles's office.

He stepped into the room and quietly began to rifle through Charles's desk, careful to disturb as little as possible. He didn't need Charles knowing that he'd been in here.

Jaden had learned long ago how to perform a B&E. He'd been working for Robin almost from the start of his service in the Gray Court. Once he'd proven adept at this aspect of his job Robin himself had taken him under his wing, teaching him the finer points of how to search a home and leave no traces behind. He'd gone for nighttime forays into neighborhoods that would have turned Duncan's hair white if he'd known about it, but Jaden had learned. Oh, he'd learned. Robin was a hard taskmaster, but he had to admit the man was fair. When Jaden had done particularly well the Hob had managed to make the once unwanted boy feel like he'd found a true mentor. Strangely enough, Duncan had never once asked where he went at night. He hadn't cared so long as Jaden came home in one piece. It was why he'd thought Duncan wouldn't mind him taking the job offer Robin had held out like a lifeline all those years ago.

"I cared. I was afraid if I tried to rein you in you'd leave me."

Jaden paused, setting down the papers he'd been reading. *"You never told me that."*

"Of course not. I didn't understand it myself." Duncan sighed. *"We have a lot to talk about."*

Jaden couldn't stop the smile that crossed his face. *"This is the part where we break out the foam curlers, paint our nails and talk about our feelings, isn't it?"*

"Asshole." The amused affection in Duncan's voice took the sting out of the insult. *"Do what you have to do and come home to me, amoureux."*

Jaden's cheeks heated. He put the papers back in their proper place. Damn it, he had to focus on the job, not on his lovers. The risk of getting caught got higher with every minute he spent in Charles's house.

He closed his eyes and let his senses lead the way. Sniffing, he noticed that Charles's scent tended to linger over by a particular chair, near the globe and at the fireplace. *Hmm*. He checked out the chair but found nothing of interest, no secret caches or buttons hidden as knotwork. The globe was a standard minibar. He lifted out the booze but found no hidden compartments. Finally he checked out the fireplace.

No hidden passageways, no safe behind the painting. *At least Charlie boy is smarter than the Deranged Darling was*. Last but not least was the computer.

Jaden took out his cell phone. He dialed a number Robin had made him memorize for just such a situation.

"Big Red here."

Jaden grinned. If anyone could break into Charles's files it would be Robin's pet gremlin. "Hey, Red. This is Blackthorn. I have a job for you."

"Bring it on."

He made sure the computer was running before giving Big Red the information he needed to begin rifling through the hard drive. Files began to open and close faster than should be possible, the gremlin's magic touch working on the electronics.

Jaden kept one eye on the dancing files and another on the door, a sense of satisfaction purring through him.

"Hey, Blackthorn? You're not going to believe this."

Jaden checked the file that opened in front of him. He smiled when he saw what Big Red had highlighted. *God, I love my job.* "Download it all and send it to Robin. Hey, Red? Thanks."

"My pleasure. Good luck, and happy hunting."

Jaden hung up the phone and began to make his way out of Charles's house. There was no way the would-be Lord Malmayne would be able to get out of *this* one.

Akane pulled up outside the quaint farmhouse. It was an old Victorian, with white gingerbread accents and a wide front porch. It was difficult to tell the color in the dark, but she bet it was a soothing blue color, the trim a blinding white. It would suit the landscape around it. A huge wrap-around porch with a real porch swing gave the old Victorian a homey feel. A place like this in San Francisco would go for millions.

Out here in the sticks? Probably worth less than a hundred grand.

"Personally, I think it's worth a bit more than that."

Akane didn't blink. How the fuck had the stranger come up on her that quietly? She smiled, pulling out all the charm at her disposal. "Hi. I'm lost."

The man smiled down at her, his expression knowing. "I don't think so, darlin'. I think you're exactly where you're meant to be."

That slow, deep drawl did some strange things to her insides. Blue eyes gleamed down at her, the most dazzling she'd ever seen, like the finest of sapphires. His light hair looked like spun gold in the moonlight. He had to be the most beautiful man she'd ever laid eyes on, but she couldn't let that distract her. She had a job to do, a family to save. "Can you tell me how to get to Highway Nine?" There was always a Highway Nine somewhere around these types of places.

The son of a bitch had the gall to lean his hip against the door of her car. "Now you and I both know you're not looking for Highway Nine."

She blinked up at him, trying to look small and unthreatening. She'd always succeeded in the past. Big lugs like these would fall into the palm of her hand, ready to be crushed into pulp. "Of course I am. I need to get to Omaha."

His lips twitched. "Of course you do." His hand reached out, his fingers tipping up her chin. He studied her face. Something about his close scrutiny had her squirming in her seat like a nine-year-old in front of the principal. "You don't need to lie to me. In fact, I'd prefer it if you didn't."

She laughed, hoping it sounded as confused as she actually was. "Okay. I need to go now."

"Why? You're only going to pull over about a mile away and fly back here. Why not come in for a cup of tea?"

Her jaw dropped. "Excuse me?" Who the hell *was* this guy?

"Shane? Are you out there?"

His eyes twinkled down at her. The lilting tongue of the Sidhe dripped from his firm lips. "I'm busy, Da. Give me a few minutes, please. And can you put on a pot of tea? It seems we have a guest." He stood tall and held out his hand, switching back to English. "Come along, Akane Russo. We have a few things to discuss. Wouldn't it be more comfortable inside, where it's warm?"

"*You're* Shane Dunne?" She let her pupil expand, and her Sight along with it. What she saw had her blinking in shock.

No wonder she'd been fascinated by the power she'd felt. The man was a hybrid! One of the rarest of the rare, with powers not even Oberon himself could comprehend, and here he was on a little Podunk, Nebraska farm. What a waste. Her mother would have a fit when she found out. Hybrids were something of a hobby for her.

Akane tried her best to hide her wince. *Yeah right. Just a hobby.*

He looked down at her as if he knew every single one of her secrets and liked what he saw. "To some." His grip on her hand tightened, his lips just brushing the backs of her knuckles. "I'll be someone else to you."

Her belly flopped, but she got out of the car anyway.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

Chapter Seven

Moira blinked sleepily, smiling at the sight of Duncan's tired face. He was standing by the side of the bed, stroking her hair to wake her. "Hey."

"Hey."

"Is he back yet?"

"Nope. And the sun is coming up."

She threw back the covers. "Do we need to go get him?"

Duncan nodded and handed her a pair of jeans. "He hasn't contacted me in about half an hour."

Shit. That couldn't be good. "Where was he last?"

"Gloating over the fact that some gremlin named Big Red was rifling through Charles's files like a sailor through a whore's panty drawer."

She stumbled, one leg in her jeans. "What?"

"His words, not mine." Duncan sat down and began pulling on his boots. "We'll need to be careful. If Charles has Jaden he can hurt him badly."

Moira scrambled into the rest of her clothes. She ran to the closet and pulled out the cowgirl boots her father had bought for her. "Ready." The polished iron toe on the outside wasn't enough to bother her even with skin to skin contact, but a full-blood Sidhe she kicked in the nuts would feel it for *days*.

Duncan eyed those boots warily. "Um. I'd ask, but I'm not sure I want to know."

"Have you tried contacting him?" She grabbed a pair of leather gloves and pulled them on. She planned on bringing a little back-up to the party.

"Yes. I'm pretty sure he's unharmed, but he's still not answering."

She practically ran down the stairs, grabbing her coat once she hit the foyer. "Let me try. Maybe you haven't been using the right tone of voice."

He eyed her dubiously. "Whatever you say."

She cocked her hip. She knew *exactly* what tone of voice to use. It had always worked on her brothers when her mother had used it. She figured it would work on one pain in the ass vampire. "*Jaden Blackthorn! You answer me right this minute!*"

"*Yeowch. What? Daddy's busy.*"

"*Are you fighting?*"

"*Some might call it that.*"

“What do you call it?”

“Fun.”

She dug the heels of her hands into her eyes. “Jaden.”

“Yes, dear. I’ll put down the nice redcap and be home before you know it.”

“It’s almost sunrise.”

“Yeah. I kinda noticed that, being a vampire and all.”

She took her hands away from her eyes and rolled them. “Duncan, how did you put up with him for a hundred years?”

“Patience. Lots of patience.”

“I heard that.” Jaden paused. “I heard that. Huh. Weird. Ow.”

“Ow?”

“Lucky shot. All right, I’m done playing. I’m headed back for the car. See you in a bit.”

She tapped her foot. “Should we wait for him?”

Duncan shrugged. “He took the M6. Knowing him, he’ll be here in about ten minutes, the way he drives.”

She frowned. “I got the impression that Charles’s place was farther away than that.”

“Yup. He’s about half an hour away, but Jaden likes to drive *fast*.” Duncan turned on his heel and headed for the breakfast room. “Lord above, I need coffee.”

“Not for you, Mr. Malmayne. I think you need a little down time.” She grabbed hold of the back of his shirt and managed to swing him around, pointing him toward the stairs. “Beddy-bye!”

He pouted at her. “Aw, Mom!”

“Don’t sass me, young man. Up you go!”

Duncan grinned down at her, looking like the little boy she’d treated him as. “Good night, *amoureux*.” He picked her up and kissed her. She loved the way Duncan kissed her. He made her feel that she was the only person in his whole world. He held her as if she barely weighed as much as a feather. “Mm. We have a ceremony to perform.”

Her lips twitched. “True. We’ll need to take care of that soon. Maybe when we see my family?”

One of his eyebrows rose. “Do you want your family there when we say our Vows?”

“Of course. They’ll want to watch us all marry each other.” She snuggled in, breathing him in. That warm, masculine scent wafted through her, made her feel safe. Made her feel like she was home. “When all this crap is over and done with I’m going to want a party. A big one.”

“A big one, huh?” He nuzzled her neck, his whiskers tickling her.

She giggled and pulled free. “Oh, yeah. Huge.”

“I think we can arrange that.” His jaw locked, and she could tell he was holding back a yawn.

“Go to bed, Duncan. I can handle Jaden for now.” Hell, she had a bit more than handling in mind, but Duncan needed his sleep. Besides, she’d been with Duncan and she’d been with both of them. It was time to see what her vampire would do when he had just her to think about. She could hardly wait to see what he’d come up with.

“Why do I have the feeling you’re plotting something?”

She grinned up at him. “Because you already know me very well.”

He snorted and finally let her go. “Do what you have to do to keep yourself safe.” He cupped her cheek, looking down at her with sleepy affection. “If anything happens to you I can’t guarantee I won’t go ballistic.”

She nuzzled his hand. “I’ll stay safe. I’ll make sure Jaden isn’t hurt, bang him on your desk and then patrol for a while.”

Duncan blinked. “Bang him, huh?”

She nodded. She dug her toe into the carpet and gave him her best doe eyes. “Uh-huh.”

He chuckled. “Have fun, then.” He pressed a soft kiss to her forehead and yawned again. “Damn it. Think of me while you’re, um, banging.”

She snickered. “Pleasant dreams.”

He groaned and made his way up the stairs. “Evil witch.”

She watched him make his way up the stairs before turning toward the breakfast room. Coffee sounded really good right about now, but tea would be even better. She checked the pots, delighted when she found a pot of hot water. She was even more delighted to find her favorite spiced Chai tea bags ready to be steeped. She settled down and waited for both her tea and her other man.

“Hey, sweetness.” A soft kiss pressed against the side of her neck. “Is Duncan in bed?”

“Mm-hmm.” She leaned her head to the side to give Jaden better access. “How did it go?”

“Beautifully. Big Red found a few interesting things, but we have to talk to Aileen. We need to find out why the Malmayne-Joloun marriage contract is so important to the Malmaynes.” Jaden settled in next to her and watched her prepare her tea. “Your mother might have some information about the Joloun side that could clarify a few things.”

“After my parents were bonded the Jolouns pretty much wrote them off.” She took a sip of her sweetened, creamy tea and sighed in pure pleasure. “Mmm. That’s good.”

“Is it?” Jaden took the cup. “Let me have a taste.” He leaned in and kissed her, sipping at her lips like a connoisseur. He took his time, tasting every inch of her mouth. When he was done, her entire body tingled. “You’re right. It’s delicious.”

“Hmm?” She opened her eyes, unaware until that moment that she’d closed them. His had gone dark, the whites bleeding out to make room for his hunting eyes. Gods above, she couldn’t remember seeing anything sexier than that. He wanted her so badly he had no control over his eyes. “Jaden.” She leaned

forward and returned his kiss, tasting him in turn. There was a lingering, earthy flavor to him she'd never encountered before. Normally she loved earthy tastes, but there was something rotten about this one. "What have you been eating?"

He smiled, his fangs showing. "Redcaps."

She frowned absently and leaned back. "Have you considered Listerine?" The word *redcaps* suddenly hit her. "Wait. Multiple? As in more than one?"

Jaden pulled her off her chair and onto his lap, ignoring her surprised squawk. "Yes, multiple."

"But..." Damn it, he was nibbling her neck, trying to distract her. The hell of it was, it worked. She was so distracted she couldn't remember her own name. "That's not s-safe." *Oh, right there. That is so good.* Too much more of that and she'd be a puddle of goo at his feet.

He scraped his fangs down that sensitive section of her neck, sending a shiver of want through her. Good thing she'd already planned on having her way with him. "Mmm. I've fought them before, sweetheart. They're not really a problem for me."

"Are you hurt?"

Jaden licked her jugular. "No, sweetheart. I'm fine."

"Who's Big Red?"

"Robin's pet gremlin. He found some interesting files on Charles's computer."

Moira lifted her head. "What things?"

He nipped her neck, the sharp pleasure making her hiss. "I'll tell you at your parent's house.

Her parents? Why was he talking about her parents *now*? "Desk?"

"Hmm?"

Her only thought was to get him naked somewhere near a desk. Preferably Duncan's. "Need a desk."

He lifted his head and studied his face. His expression was sinful. "I think that can be arranged." He stood up. She was still cradled in his arms. "You can have your breakfast after I have mine."

Oh, boy. "Sure." She wrapped her arms around his neck and rested her head on his shoulder. She trusted him to get them safely where she wanted to go.

He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "Oh, Moira. That sweet trust of yours will be my undoing."

Right. Moira. I remember now. "You know what I want to do with you?"

He carried her from the breakfast room and strode across the hall. His sneakers made no sound on the marble floor. "No, but I'm pretty sure you're going to tell me." He paused. "Does it involve midgets, paper cuts and Icy Hot?"

She lifted her head and stared at him. "No?"

"You don't sound very sure." He was frowning, but if he wasn't joking then they needed to have a serious talk about therapy.

She shook her head at him. "Has anyone told you how strange you are?"

He shrugged and started walking again. "Your point?"

Her shoulders started to shake. "I don't even know anymore." She let her head drop back down onto his shoulder. "What were we doing again?"

"Heading into Duncan's office so you can bang me on his desk."

She blushed at the naughty, knowing look he sent her. "Eavesdropper."

"Look on the bright side. You just confirmed my faith in eavesdropping. I heard something wonderful." He stepped into Duncan's office and slammed the door shut with his foot. "Have I mentioned I love the idea?" He stalked over to the desk and set her on the edge. He yanked off her boots before he reached for the snap of her jeans, tugging at the zipper with eager hands.

"Not yet, but I kind of got the idea when you started taking my clothes off." She lifted her T-shirt over her head, more than willing to get this going.

"Are you going to object?"

She tossed the shirt over her shoulder and unclasped her bra. "Not on your life." She drew the cups from her breasts, letting the bra fall to the floor.

"Fuck me," Jaden breathed. His hands left her jeans to cup her breasts. "You are so beautiful. My pretty little leprechaun."

She moved eagerly in his hands, dying to feel more. Her nipples were so sensitive, even the lightest brush sent a jolt of pure need straight down to her clit.

"You like that, huh?" He leaned down and lapped at her nipple like he was licking chocolate from a dripping strawberry. He swirled his tongue as if to catch every drop. Meanwhile his other hand plucked her other nipple, sending conflicting messages. Did she arch into his teasing tongue, or moan over the pleasure-pain he was dealing with his hand?

She did both, moaning and arching her back. She damn near sobbed when he sucked her nipple into his mouth, his teeth worrying the hard nub until she was clutching his head and grinding her hips into his. She could feel his fangs scraping along the sides, the sensation driving her insane. "Bite me."

His mouth froze, his hand clenching her almost convulsively.

"Do it. Bite me."

He moaned around her breast and bit, letting his fangs sink into the soft flesh.

Moira almost screamed at the sensation. Every part of her body was more alive than ever before. She couldn't imagine him doing this to anyone other than Duncan ever again. "Oh, Gods above, yes." She ground herself against his covered erection, the urge to come gripping her tight. "Please please please." She looked down and found him watching her, red flames dancing in his pupils as he fed. She whimpered, the sight almost her undoing. "Jaden."

His hand slipped into the open edge of her jeans and stroked over her clit. He suckled her, watched her slide over the edge into an orgasm so intense she couldn't breathe through it.

Jaden licked the puncture marks, closing them. “Beautiful.” He took her mouth, the tang of blood overriding the musty taste of redcap. His hands were urgent on her jeans, pushing them and her panties down her legs. She kicked them off, eager to get his hands back on her.

She let her hands roam over his shoulders, the strength in them amazing her. His build was more slender than Duncan’s, but the sheer power in him was almost overwhelming. The feel of him under her hands was drugging. She couldn’t get enough.

He pulled away from her. “Let me help you with that.” His expression was full of smug male satisfaction. He pulled his shirt up over his head, exposing a chest that would make a nun weep and thank the gods for the beauty of the male form. That clean, hairless chest led to washboard abs she wanted to lick. The saddle of his hips were made for her hands.

She growled. “Now the pants.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Yes, ma’am.”

She dropped her Seeming, letting him see her true self, pointed ears and all. “I want you inside me.”

He took a deep breath and toed off his shoes. He reached for his pants, drawing down the zipper with a slow smile that heated her from the inside out. For just a moment that red flame in the center of his eyes burned bright green. “As you wish.”

She frowned. Something about that green looked familiar, but then his pants were falling and oh, he was beautiful. Between Jaden and Duncan she had every fantasy she’d ever had covered. Where Duncan was built more like a body builder, Jaden resembled a runner, all lean, sinewy muscle. She licked her lips at the sight of his cock bobbing free of his underwear. She wanted a taste of that.

“I know what you’re thinking.” He kicked out of his jeans and stalked toward her. “And I like it.” He reached for her. “C’mere, you.”

She wrapped her legs around his waist and let him carry her to Duncan’s leather sofa. “Will Duncan mind us messing with his leather sofa?”

“Nah. I think that’s why he has the leather in here. It’s easy to clean.” He slid her down his body until her ass rested on the sofa. “I think we’re just going to have to make sure he has some *very* pleasant dreams.”

She scowled. “I’m not sure I like this particular piece of furniture anymore.” Just the thought that either man had made love to someone else here had her seeing red.

He threw back his head and laughed. “Tell you what. Let’s make sure we christen this thoroughly.” He leaned over her, one hand on the back of the sofa, the other cupping her cheek. He tried to brush away the frown with his thumb. “Let’s claim it, make it ours.” He wagged his eyebrows. “Or we could go furniture shopping. Your choice.”

She grabbed hold of his cock and tugged him closer. “It can wait.” She licked the head, turning his laughter into a gasp. “The internet is a wonderful thing.” She licked again, liking the way his eyes were

beginning to glaze over. “All the major furniture stores have online shopping.” She lapped at the drop that suddenly appeared at the tip of his cock. The salty sweet flavor exploded on her tongue. The hint of copper was something she’d never tasted before. “I’m pretty sure I could find something that would suit us all.”

“Moir?”

“Hmm?” She was having fun torturing him.

“For the love of the gods, I will buy you an entire house full of brand new furniture if you suck me.”

He could probably sense her laughter, though she did her best to hide it. “Like this?” She took him in her mouth as far as she could go and sucked with all her might.

“Fuck. Me.” His head fell back with a groan. “Oh, hell.”

“No more talk about other people you’ve fucked on the furniture.”

“What other people?” He gripped the back of her head and pulled her forward. “Moir.”

She couldn’t stop her lips from curling into a satisfied smile. She’d made her bad-ass vampire breathless. “Only us from now on.” She sucked him down again.

“Only us.”

“You, me and Duncan.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You’ll let us bond you, no arguments.”

“Mmm.”

She was pretty sure his IQ had dropped by at least thirty points. Either that, or he’d gone deaf to anything but the need flowing through him. “And I want a Porsche 911.”

“No problem. We’ll get it in green to bring out your eyes.” He tapped the head of his cock against her lips. “Stop teasing. You already know you own us both.”

She grinned. Yeah, deep down she did. She just wanted to make sure *he* did, too. “Want you.” She sucked him down this time with no intention of letting him go.

“God, yes.” Jaden began to fuck her mouth, his movements careful, precise. He was hanging on to his control. Was he afraid of hurting her?

She decided to up the stakes. She wasn’t some little nymph or Sidhe female, delicate and fragile. She was leprechaun, of the earth, and strong as an oak. She reached up and forced his hands to tighten on her head, establishing a rhythm herself. She moved fast, running her tongue along the underside of his cock, desperate to get him to lose control and take her the way she wanted to be. She didn’t want a gentleman; she wanted her warrior, the one who took on multiple redcaps without getting a scratch.

She got him.

He growled, the sound low and hungry, sending a shiver of lust down her spine. He gripped the sides of her head and began to fuck her mouth in earnest. In self defense she wrapped one hand around the base of his cock to keep him from choking her.

He didn't say a word, just kept sawing in and out of her mouth, his cock throbbing along her tongue. He watched her out of black eyes, the red flame in his pupil burning brighter and hotter. His fangs dropped far enough to be seen over his bottom lip. She could feel the sharp pinch of his claws as his fingers flexed.

He'd dropped his human Seeming and lay what he really was before her. She hummed her approval, closing her eyes and letting him have her. She needed this just as much as he did. He needed to know that no matter what she would take everything he was and cherish it.

The smooth thrust of his hips stuttered then resumed. "Shit. Don't think things like that."

"Why not? It's the truth."

His fingers clenched, but still he was careful with his claws. "Oh, shit. Moira." He grunted, coming in her mouth with a hiss of indrawn breath. She swallowed every drop.

He dropped to his knees in front of her, his arms going around her waist, his head nestling into her neck. "You always manage to destroy me."

She hugged him back, fiercely pleased that she'd reduced him to a quivering mess. "Tired, *a ghra*?"

"Not too tired to make you come again." He sat back on his heels, his human eyes full of sleepy satisfaction.

"You were up most of the night, went out and fought bad guys, and now I blew your brains out." She leered up at him, earning a tired chuckle. "Sweetheart, if you need to go to bed I understand. Trust me, I'll wake you up later." She waggled her brows at him.

Jaden sighed. "I might have to take you up on that." He tweaked her breast, earning himself a low moan. "Still, if you give me a few minutes I bet I could wake up a bit."

She grinned. "Tell you what. As tired as you are, let's take this to bed, hmm? That way you can do the man thing."

He snorted and gathered up her clothes, tossing them to her. "Man thing?"

"You know, the three g's."

His eyebrows rose into his hair.

"Get in, get off, get to the z's."

She wasn't all that surprised when her bra hit her in the face. "You are going to be a pita, aren't you?"

Now it was her turn to raise her eyebrows as she shimmied back into her jeans.

"Pain in the ass."

She rolled her eyes. "I thought that was Duncan's job."

"Ha ha." He stretched with a grunt. "Ready?"

She eyed his naked chest, the hunger already building again. "You bet." Moira tugged her shirt on with eager hands, dying to get him upstairs and naked again.

He put his hand around her waist and kissed her. "Let's go."

She allowed him to guide her out of the room and to the stairs.

“Good morning, Master Jaden, Lady Moira. Will you be having breakfast?”

Moira turned to face Ian, surprised to find herself blushing under the butler’s knowing gaze. “Um. In a little bit. Duncan and Jaden will be sleeping in.”

One of the butler’s eyebrows rose. “Very good, Lady Moira.” His lips quirked. “Sleep well, Lord Jaden.” He turned and headed back for the servant’s quarters, his shoulders suspiciously rigid.

“Good grief.” Jaden sagged against the banister. “Now he’s going to Lord me to death, isn’t he?”

Moira shrugged. “That’s what you get when you truebond a lord, Jaden.”

He sighed. “We aren’t truebonded yet.”

She stiffened, narrowing her eyes at him. “Meaning?” If he thought he was getting out of the bond, he had another thing coming.

“Down, tiger. I just meant we haven’t completed the Sidhe ceremony.” He took her hand and pulled her up the steps. “The Vampiric one is already done. You and Duncan belong to me, and no one can change that.”

She blinked. The Vampiric bond was a great deal more simplistic than the Sidhe bond. “You *do* know the Vows, right?”

“Yup.” He continued forward, his stride easy, his voice low and full of promise. “I vow that from this day forward you shall not walk alone. My strength is your protection, my heart is your shelter, and my arms are your home. I shall serve you in all those ways that you require. I pledge to you my living and my dying, each equally in your care. Yours is the name I whisper at the close of each day and the eyes into which I smile each morning. I give you all that is mine to give. My heart and my soul I pledge to you. You are my Chosen One, you are my mate, and you are bound to me for eternity.”

Moira shuddered. To hear the Vows spoken in his rich, deep voice while she and Duncan held him was one of her deepest wishes. It wouldn’t mean shit in the cosmic scheme of things, but damn if she didn’t need that from him. “Yeah. Those are the Vows.” She longed to say them to both her men, but the time wasn’t quite right. She wanted her family there when they exchanged Vows, Binding them together through shared Sidhe magic, entwining their life forces for all eternity.

She blinked. “How long do vampires live?” Vampires were long lived and difficult to kill, but she had no idea if they aged at all.

“Forever, unless we’re killed. Luckily we’re very difficult to kill.”

Forever? “Do I want to know?”

He opened the bedroom door and pulled her through. “Every vampire, upon creation, is both blessed and cursed.” He kept his voice quiet so as not to wake Duncan. “Blessed with long life, but cursed with a weakness that will kill us instantly. That weakness is whispered over our bodies as we change, a magic so devastating not even the gods can remove it. The so-called gift of the Dark Queen to her chosen warriors.” The acidic contempt in his voice was mirrored in his face. “For each of us it’s something different. It could

be as simple as a wooden stake through the heart, or as complex as a rowan branch, blessed in a sacred grove by a druid under a blue moon, thrust through your liver. The reasons that the folklore on how to kill a vampire varies wildly are because of that.” He dropped her hand and removed his jeans. “If I ever created another vampire I would be forced to name the way he dies. The magic would make me.”

She began removing her own clothes, eager to finish what they’d started. Where was her bra? She must have dropped it on the sofa. Ian would probably have a heart attack when he found it. “Have you thought about it?”

“Some. When the loneliness was bad.”

She wasn’t sure she wanted to know, and his expression didn’t exactly invite her to ask. “Oh.” She got up on her toes and kissed him. “You know you’ll never be alone again, right?”

“It’s okay, Moira.” He pointed toward the bed, where Duncan slept soundly. “Get in. I want to see if I can fuck you without waking the old... hmm.” He chuckled softly. “I have to remember not to call him that anymore.”

She slid into the bed, careful not to jar Duncan. “Why not?”

“He told me he doesn’t like it when his lover calls him that.” From the way he stood she could tell he still didn’t quite believe what was happening. True, he’d made them his bondmates, but she bet part of him still expected to be repudiated. His cheeks held an intriguing blush, though, so maybe Duncan had finally begun to get through to him. How could such a strong man be so vulnerable at the same time? It melted her heart to see that vulnerability, to know that she was one of the few people graced with the honor of seeing it. That made the gift of it all the more precious.

Well, she’d just have to prove to him that she wasn’t going anywhere. She crooked her finger at him. “C’mere, you. Let’s see what we can do without waking Duncan.” Jaden shot her one hell of a sexy grin before crawling over her. He stopped once they were nose to nose. Moira spread her legs, cradling him between her thighs. “You’re mine. You know that, right?” She wrapped her arms around his neck. “I’m never going to let you go.”

He frowned. “We haven’t completed the Vows yet.”

She almost laughed. “Duncan and I discussed this. I want to say the Vows in front of my family and claim you both with them as witnesses.”

He paled. “You’re kidding, right?”

She shook her head. “No, love.”

“Your father will kill me.”

She tightened her arms. “No, he won’t.” Moira wouldn’t let him.

“Oh, yes he will. If he doesn’t, Leo will.”

Moira scoffed. “You forget something.”

“That would be?”

She smiled. "I'm half-Sidhe." She pulled him down to her, letting her sparkling green lights envelope him. He jumped, startled at the soft caress of her light. "I protect what's mine, even from my family." She kissed him but wouldn't allow him to deepen it. "But I don't think it will be the issue you seem to think it will be."

He looked skeptical. "We'll see." He leaned down and licked the side of her neck. "Are we going to make love or not?"

He was changing the subject, but that was all right. He'd see, and in the end they'd both get what they wanted. All three of them in one happy family knot.

Speaking of... "Can vampires have children?"

He stiffened. "No."

She heard the question, and the pain, behind that word. "It's all right. Any children Duncan and I have will be yours as well." She petted his hair. "Yours to protect."

His arms tightened around her to the point where she could barely breathe. "Mine." His fangs sank deep, a white-hot pain that quickly became a blinding pleasure. He drew her into him, his mouth working against her flesh. Goosebumps ran up and down her body. Her arms tightened around him convulsively, holding him to her. His fangs lifted away from her neck, his tongue darting out. He licked the wounds, sealing them closed. "You're so beautiful. My leprechaun. I thought I'd lost you."

The thick voice told her just how much her acceptance meant to him. "You will never lose me, Jaden. We're bondmates. You've held half my heart since the day we met."

"I'd better be the one holding the other half," Duncan muttered, rolling over to face them.

"Damn. Busted." Jaden lifted his head, laughing down at her. There was a suspicious dampness to his lashes that she chose to ignore.

Duncan kissed Jaden's shoulder. "I want to watch you fuck her, Jaden. I want you to know we're both yours."

"Will you let me take you later?" Jaden's voice was rough, his body trembling in her embrace.

Duncan put his arm around Jaden's waist. "You'll be my first."

Jaden closed his eyes and shivered. "Fuck me."

"No, fuck Moira." She tugged on his hair. "C'mon, Jaden. I'm waiting."

"You shouldn't leave a lady waiting." Duncan slapped Jaden's ass, making the vampire jump. "So get to it." Duncan yawned.

Jaden leaned down and whispered in her ear. "He'll be asleep before you come the second time."

"I heard that, oh ye of little faith."

She hid her giggle in Jaden's shoulder. Duncan's indignant statement would have worked if he hadn't yawned in the middle of it.

“You know, I have two naked people in bed with me, one with a fit of the giggles and the other one yawning in my face. If I’m not careful I could develop a complex.” Jaden slid his hand down to her breast and began plucking her nipple. “Luckily I have an ego the size of Nebraska.”

She couldn’t stop laughing. “Only Nebraska?” She screeched as he began tickling her. “Stop, stop! Uncle!” Jaden stopped. Both men were looking at her with wicked amusement. “Oh, no. I swear. I *will* get even.” She squirmed, trying to buck Jaden off her, but the vampire wasn’t moving.

Duncan flexed his fingers. “Worth it?”

Jaden grabbed her hands and held her down. “Yup.”

“I will cut both of you off! I mean it.” She tried to clamp her legs shut but Jaden’s body was in the way.

“Now why would you do that?” Duncan’s hand landed on her breast. He plucked at her nipple, sending a jolt of pleasure/pain straight to her clit.

“You’d think we were planning on torturing her or something.” Jaden licked her other nipple before sucking it into his mouth.

“Oh boy.”

Jaden continued to suckle her while Duncan plucked her nipple. “You want Jaden inside you, sweetheart? Hmm? You want him to fuck you?”

“Yes.” She arched her back, her body confused. Should she move closer to Duncan and his wicked fingers or Jaden and his hot mouth?

The decision was taken out of her hands when Duncan’s hand moved down to her wet pussy. He began to circle her clit in a teasing glide. Her hips moved restlessly under his fingers, the combination of his strokes and Jaden’s mouth almost too much.

“You ready for me?”

She had a sudden vision of what she would like to do to both of them. “Wait.”

Duncan’s fingers stopped. Jaden stared down at her, his eyes bled all the way to black.

“I need to move.”

Jaden was frowning, but Duncan began to smile. “I like the way you think.”

She grinned and shoved at Jaden, who reluctantly moved from between her legs. “Okay. What’s going on?”

Duncan rolled over onto his back, his arms going behind his head. He spread his legs with an inviting smile. Moira got on her hands and knees between them and took hold of his cock.

“Getting the picture?”

Jaden grunted and got behind her, his hands on her hips. “I think I got it.”

She leaned down and sucked Duncan into her mouth, her tongue lapping at the vein running along the underside. Duncan moaned, his eyes drifting closed. Moira began to move, taking him as far down as she could. He tasted sweet and effervescent, like sparkling wine.

When Jaden's cock nudged her opening she lifted her hips, inviting him inside. He slid against her. She was already wet and ready for him. "Please. Need you."

He slid into her easily, setting a slow rhythm designed to drive her mad. She used the momentum of his thrusts to set the rhythm she used to suck Duncan's cock, keeping them all on a slow, steady ride to orgasm. Jaden leaned over her, peppering her back with kisses. His hands went around her to press into the mattress, keeping his weight off of her but still enveloping her in his warmth. One of Duncan's hands reached out and wrapped around Jaden's forearm, connecting them all together. Silver lights began to dance as Duncan's touch wove them together.

"Fuck, yes. Fuck her mouth, Duncan. Let her know how much you love it."

Duncan's eyes drifted open, landing first on Jaden and then on Moira.

Hell, she was all for picking up the pace. She tightened the muscles of her pussy, earning a groan from Jaden. She nodded, refusing to let Duncan slip from between her lips, her gaze locked on his face. She wanted him to know that she needed this as badly as he did.

Duncan thrust up into her mouth. She hummed in pleasure around him, loving the soft groan the vibration earned her. She used her tongue, licking the underside of his cock as he glided in and out of her mouth.

Behind her, Jaden was fucking her harder, faster, picking up Duncan's rhythm, keeping them all connected. It wasn't perfect, they weren't living in each other's minds this time, but it was damn close.

Jaden moved, the arm not held by Duncan lifting from the bed. His hand took hold of hers and brought it to her clit. "Stroke yourself, sweetheart. Make yourself come."

She began to do as he said, but it wasn't as easy as she thought it would be. Stroking herself, sucking Duncan and fucking Jaden, she had to find her own balance between the three. Once she did, she teetered on the verge of orgasm.

Duncan's free hand landed in her hair. He drew in a hissing breath. "Close, sweetheart. Ready?"

She nodded, glad he'd warned her first. She was ready when he came in her mouth, swallowing every drop he gave her. He fell back with a sigh and a smile, his eyes glittering behind half-closed lids.

Now she could concentrate solely on what Jaden was doing to her. She bucked back into him, no longer allowing him to be the one who controlled their lovemaking. She was ready to come, and she wanted him to come with her.

She tightened her muscles, milking him, trying to drag him closer to the edge. He shuddered, her actions threatening to push him over an edge he was fighting away from. "I'll come after you do, sweetheart. I want to feel you go over first."

She shared a look with Duncan. “Make him come.”

The corners of Duncan’s mouth lifted.

“Wait— Oh, *hell*.”

She had no idea what Duncan was doing to Jaden, but from the sounds of it Jaden *really* liked it. Jaden’s smooth strokes became jerky, uneven. He began to pound into her, driving himself to orgasm. The hand holding her own let go and grabbed hold of her hip, holding so tightly she’d have a bruise there.

She loved it. Moira gave back everything her vampire gave her, and finally begged for one thing more. “Bite me.”

Sharp pain, then a pleasure so intense she thought she would black out. Her entire body seized as the orgasm consumed her, leaving her too breathless to cry out.

When she was finally able to open her eyes she found her head resting on Duncan’s stomach, his limp, sated cock still close to her lips. Jaden lay beside her, panting softly, one arm draped over both her and Duncan, keeping them connected.

Underneath her, Duncan snored lightly.

“I told you he’d be asleep before you came for the second time.”

She turned her head to glare at him. “That was only one.”

He yawned. “True. I owe you one.” He snuggled closer, pulling her up so that she was sandwiched between him and Duncan. Duncan, oblivious, slumbered on.

Moira kissed Jaden’s forehead, knowing he was fading fast. “Sleep, *a ghra*. You can pay me back later.”

She waited until both men were breathing evenly before slipping out of the bed. She watched them for a moment before slipping into her clothes and gliding out the door.

No one would harm her men while she stood watch.

No one.

Chapter Eight

Akane sat at the Dunne kitchen table and pondered how to get out of the trap she found herself in. She couldn't exactly chew her own arm off, but she was thinking about it. Maybe if she bled enough they'd try and take her to the hospital where she could make her escape.

The Dunes had been everything hospitable, making her feel welcome, even giving her a room at Shane's insistence. He'd even arranged to have her car parked...somewhere. The bastard. He'd guessed she wouldn't leave without her baby.

If he hid it in some kind of pasture she'd kill him. She did *not* want her baby to smell of eau de cow patty.

She'd crawled into bed only after Shane made it clear she wasn't going anywhere. He'd locked the door on her, leaving her no option but to go out the window. When she had, he'd been waiting. Bastard. He'd given her that smug smile, escorted her back to her room and left her with a fucking pat on the head.

That was when she knew she was in hell.

Shane was watching her out of those damn sapphire eyes. His big body was relaxed, his scarred farmer's hands curled around his cup of coffee. He studied her like she was an exotic bug and he was just waiting to see which way she would crawl.

She hated it.

She was pretty sure she hated him. Never mind in the bright light of day he'd been even better looking than she'd first thought. His red-gold hair curled ever so slightly at the nape of his neck. She had the wicked urge to drag her nails through it. His kissable lips were quirked in a knowing smile. His big, booted feet were stretched out under the table, nearly reaching her chair. She bet he broke six foot two easily.

She especially hated that he was so much taller than she was. At five foot four she was shorter than average, but still.

"Shane, does your guest need more coffee?"

He didn't even look at the tiny Sidhe female. "No, Ma. She's fine."

"Well, then. I hope the room was to your liking, Miss Russo."

She couldn't bring herself to bite off Aileen Dunne's head. The woman had done nothing to deserve it other than give birth to the hulking ape across from her. She pasted a smile on her face for the poor woman.

"It was fine, thank you."

Sean Dunne settled into the chair next to his son. He had a suspiciously blank look on his face. “When did they say they’d be here?”

“Moira wanted to wait until dusk.” Aileen glanced out the kitchen window. “I’d give them another ten minutes.”

Moira Dunne? Shit, that meant Jaden was on his way. “Can I go now?”

The elder Dunes lowered their heads, probably to hide their fucking laughter.

Shane shook his head. “Nope.”

Nope? “That’s all you can come up with, Jethro? Nope?”

His father got up from the table and stood at the back door. “They’re here.”

Shit. She couldn’t let Jaden see her. She looked at Aileen, letting some of her desperation show through. Surely the woman would understand and let her sneak out somehow. “Can I use the bathroom?”

“I don’t think so.” Shane took a sip of his coffee.

She kicked him. Hard.

“Ow.”

Her head tilted in complete disbelief. The last guy she’d kicked that hard had to deal with a broken bone. This idiot sounded like he’d barely banged a knuckle. “I have to pee,” she gritted out through clenched teeth.

“Liar liar, pants on fire.”

That was it. She was going to reach across that table and splatter Mrs. Dunne’s baby boy all over her nice, clean kitchen.

“Good evening, Dad!” A tall man who bore a striking resemblance to Sean Dunne stepped into the kitchen. Behind him was a short redhead with big, smiling brown eyes. “Hello, Mom. What’s the emergency?”

“Hello, Leo, Ruby.” Aileen kissed her tall son, then embraced her daughter-in-law. “The emergency is getting out of the blue sports car.”

“Duncan’s having problems?” Leo grabbed the coffeepot and poured himself a mug. He held it up. “Ruby?”

She shook her head and took a seat at the Dunne table. “Hi. I’m Ruby Dunne. You are?”

Akane stared at the hand held out to her. “Out of here.” She stood up, ready to bolt out the door.

“Too late.” His voice whispered across her senses, so low she doubted that any of the others had heard him.

“Ma, we’re home!” A fiery little redhead the spitting image of Aileen Dunne bounced through the back door and straight into Aileen’s waiting arms. Behind her came two men, one dark as sin, the other fair as the sun.

“Aw, shit.” Her shoulders slumped.

Jaden looked startled for only a moment before his brows drew down. “Akane? What the hell are you doing here?”

Now she’d have to explain why Robin had sent her, and what she was doing on the Dunne farm.

Could things get any worse?

Jaden glared at the dragoness. Robin had to have sent her to keep an eye on him, and he didn’t like it one little bit. “Well?”

She turned to face him, delicate hands on tiny little hips. If he didn’t know better he’d think she was fragile. “This wasn’t my idea.” She pointed at Shane, one foot tapping impatiently. “*He* made me stay.”

He glanced over at the eldest Dunne child. “Are you causing trouble again?”

Shane pointed at himself, his eyes wide. Probably the only person falling for the man’s innocent act was his mother, who patted him on the shoulder and handed him a cookie. “There, dear. I’m sure there’s no trouble.” The Sidhe female glared at Jaden like it was all somehow *his* fault.

Jaden had a hard time not laughing in his mother-in-law’s face. Gods, he *liked* the hybrid. He had a dragon female corralled on his farm, growling in aggravation. It was the most emotion he’d ever seen in Akane, and he’d known her for years. He had a high Sidhe lady up in arms, and...yup, a leprechaun hiding in his den, having a laughing fit.

Damn, that man can move fast.

A stinging slap landed on his arm. “Ow.”

“Who’s that?” Moira had her arms crossed over her chest. She stared at Akane, her green eyes glittering like emeralds.

Uh-oh. “That’s Akane.”

“And?” Moira drawled.

“Get your mind out of the gutter, darling.” “She’s a Blade.”

Now Akane was glaring at him. “Thanks a lot.”

He returned her glare with interest. “If you think I’m the only one getting run over by that particular bus you are sadly mistaken.”

“So? I mean, why is she here?” Moira was still glaring at Akane, who could probably eat Moira in one dainty bite.

“She’s sometimes my partner.” “Before you ask, no, we’ve never slept together.”

Arms reached around, plucking Moira from his side. “Down, girl.” Duncan’s soothing tones took the fight right out of his little leprechaun. “I’ve met Akane once or twice. Trust me when I say she’s never been Jaden’s type.”

Now Akane looked offended. *Great.* Jaden pinched the bridge of his nose and wondered if he’d be considered a coward if he ducked into the den with Sean.

Then again, did he really want to face his new father-in-law by himself?

Hmm. Pissed off dragon, pissed off leprechaun. He mentally shrugged. *Might as well piss off the Sidhe lady. I wouldn't want to miss anybody.* He pressed a kiss to Moira's forehead. "You know you're one of my onyls, sweetheart."

He risked a quick glance at the Dunne family. Shane looked amused, Leo looked outraged, and Aileen looked...smug?

It's official. This whole family is freaky.

"*I heard that.*" Moira turned to look over Duncan's shoulder at her family. She had to stand on tip-toe to do it. "Didn't Mom tell you about the tribond?"

Shane continued to sit there, looking amused. He was beginning to understand why Akane was so pissed off. Leo, on the other hand, did as predicted. "What tribond?" The Sidhe's eyes had narrowed dangerously, little golden sparks dancing along his skin.

"Leo." Ruby took hold of her husband's arm. "Down boy. Jaden's one of the good guys, remember?"

Leo's hand covered Ruby's, holding her to him. Jaden didn't know if it was out of affection for the woman or to protect his mate from the big bad vampire. "I'm trying to."

"Where do you think you're going?"

Jaden blinked. Shane was standing, ambling through the kitchen toward Akane, who was a lot closer to the dining room now.

"I'm leaving."

Shane shook his head. "I'm still not sure why. You'll only fly back and eavesdrop anyway, so why not sit, be comfortable and have some of Ma's apple pie?"

Akane snorted. "God, Farm Boy. Why not offer to let me milk the cows, because that would be so much fun."

Shane took hold of her arm and began leading her back to the kitchen table. Akane pulled on his hold, but to Jaden's shock she didn't get free. "As you wish." He set Akane down in a chair and handed her a plate. "Enjoy your pie."

What the fuck? Jaden had taken the hybrid with difficulty, true, but the fact that he'd just manhandled a *dragon*? That took strong to a whole new level.

Did that crazy hybrid let me kidnap him?

The small jump Moira gave, the speculative gleam in her eyes as she stared at her brother, let him know she'd heard his thoughts loud and clear. If Moira thought Shane had allowed Jaden to take him, then maybe Jaden was on the right track.

Akane ate her pie, her body tense. Jaden bet she was ready to bolt at the first sign that Shane's vigilance had waned.

“Shane, be nice to the girl. She’s not used to us yet.” Aileen Dunne smiled at Akane, and the dragon suddenly looked terrified. “But I’m thinking she will be.”

“Not in this lifetime.” Akane shoveled another piece of pie in her mouth. “Thanks for the pie, though.”

Jaden almost laughed. Akane was brutally honest when cornered, and it looked like Shane had managed to push all her freak-out buttons. “All right. Let me hazard a guess. Akane, Robin sent you here to make sure I didn’t fuck up—”

“Jaden Blackthorn! Language!”

Jaden pretended to wince. It had been a very long time since he’d been scolded by a mother. “Sorry. Shane caught you and made you come inside. Did he threaten the car?”

The dragon snarled, the sound low and inhuman.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” He turned to Leo. “The rest of us are here for a family meeting about the Malmaynes.”

“Kaitlynn and Cullen are dead. I thought it was over.” Leo sat, pulling a blushing Ruby into his lap. Those two were so cute together it made his fangs ache. “How wrong was I?”

“Completely.” Duncan sat, placing Moira next to him. He gestured for Jaden to take the empty chair to her left, bracketing her between them. Duncan was making a statement, but it put him dangerously close to Leo, who still didn’t look happy about how close Jaden was to his baby sister. The Sidhe was giving him some serious stink-eye. “Charles is set to try and take over the clan. If he does, he’ll begin pressuring Leo to mate with one of his daughters.”

Leo winced. “Ugh. Not those two. Constance and Cecelia are almost as bad as Kaitlynn was.”

“Not quite.” Jaden leaned forward, folding his hands on the table top. “They aren’t bat-shit crazy. They’re just mean.”

“True.” Leo glanced at Duncan, his cheeks turning pink. “No offense.”

“None taken. My sister *was* bat-shit crazy.” Duncan held Moira’s hand. “They’re also trying to set aside my bond with Moira and Jaden.”

There was silence around the Dunne table. “*Both* of them?” Leo leaned forward, staring at Duncan. “You’ve declared them *both* your mates?”

Duncan opened his mouth to respond when an explosion rocked the house. Jaden had Moira on the ground so fast he didn’t know if she even understood what had happened. He pulled Duncan down next, forcing the Sidhe over Moira. “Protect her. I’ll find out what’s going on.”

Duncan nodded, his Seeming falling away, silver stars dancing around him. “Be careful, *amoureux*.”

“I will.” He stood and gestured toward Akane to join him. “Let’s go.”

“I’ve got the front, you get the back.” That freaky eye of hers was glowing. Golden horns peeked out of her hair. She was moments from changing into her dragon form, ready to do battle and defend the Dunnes.

He nodded and misted through the door, rematerializing on the roof of the porch. Lucky for him night had fallen while sitting in the Dunne kitchen.

That luck was offset by the blast radius around what used to be the Dunne barn. “Fuck me.”

“No thanks, your mates might not appreciate it.” That hissing voice had him smiling. Akane had joined him, her wings flapping silently beside him, her amber gaze narrowed on the barn. “Smell anything funny?”

He sniffed, sorting through the various scents. “Redcaps.”

“Headed this way. Guess what else is out there?”

He sniffed again. “Shit. Someone is using a salamander?” The creatures were animals, trainable but not very bright. Salamanders were one of the few things that could kill a vampire before he knew what hit him.

“Let me deal with the salamander. You take on the redcaps.”

“My pleasure.” Jaden allowed his Seeming to drop.

“There. Go.”

He saw where her claw was pointing. Three figures stalked across the ground. He recognized one of them as the redcap he’d drunk from earlier. “They’re Charles’s pets.”

“Great. We now have proof positive he’s working with the Black, if not a card-carrying member himself. We’ll deal with him later.”

Jaden nodded, not taking the time to fill her in. He already had proof positive, but this wasn’t the time and place to give out the deets on Charles’s bad boy ways. He flowed along the roof, eager for the coming fight. He waited until they were almost to the house before dropping into the middle of them, startling them all.

Once again he found himself thanking the gods that redcaps were dumber than a box of rocks. He got hold of the first redcap, determined to take him out quickly. Jaden grabbed the redcap’s head and twisted, snapping his neck. He let the redcap fall and raced toward the next one. He couldn’t afford to let them into the house.

The ground under him trembled. The redcap on his left let out a horrified screech as he was sucked into the earth through a hole the size of a pin. There should have been a fountain of blood and gore flying through the air as the redcap was essentially strung through that hole, but the immense gravity just sucked everything in until there was nothing left, not even a drop.

Sean Dunne stood on the porch, the light of battle in his eyes. He grinned down at the last redcap. “Do you want to be joining your friend?” The strong lilt of Ireland was in the leprechaun’s voice. His black hair

gleamed like the richest earth, his skin showing the faintest whorls common among those whose element was the earth itself. His green eyes had darkened to the color of summer leaves.

And he looked *pissed*.

Jaden damn near did a happy dance. These idiots had confronted a leprechaun on his own fucking land, threatened his family. He bowed to Sean Dunne, according him the respect he deserved. "Allow me."

Sean, never taking his eyes from the redcap, nodded.

"Da! More on the south side!" Leo came running, golden sparks trailing behind him.

"Where's your brother?" Sean followed his middle child around the house and out of Jaden's sight.

Jaden pointed toward the redcap. "I know you! Didn't I feed from you?" He licked his lips. "God, I hope you bathed today. Last time you left a nasty aftertaste."

The redcap's hand went to his neck, his eyes wide. "NO!" The idiot turned and ran, hand still over his neck.

I haven't had this much fun in weeks! Jaden pounced, bringing his prey to the ground and biting into the side of his neck with little finesse. After all, the redcap wasn't going to survive what Jaden did to him.

When he was done, it looked like he'd be paying a little visit to Charles Malmayne's house. It was time for Charles to die.

Duncan pulled Moira to her feet. "Come on." He raced for the opposite side of the house, knowing the explosion had to be a diversion.

"Wait! What about Jaden?"

Duncan sidestepped her father. The fury on Sean Dunne's face would frighten a lesser man. Duncan had faced leprechauns before, but he'd never been stupid enough to do it on their own land. What in hell was Charles thinking? He had to know this was a very bad idea. As Jaden would say, it was a move worthy of a Darwin Award.

He sped out the front door, knowing Moira could move much faster than he. "Jaden has the back. Unless I miss my guess, there will be more out front."

She stopped struggling and joined him. "Ma!"

"I'm heading upstairs with Ruby. I'll keep her safe." The two women pounded up the stairs, much to Duncan's relief. While the little human was feisty, she was no match for a redcap.

He barreled through the front door and skidded to a halt. There in front of him were three redcaps. They'd dropped their Seeming, much to his dismay.

"Oh, ew." Moira wriggled her nose. "Those guys are hideous."

The redcaps had thick, muscle-bound bodies and limbs both skinnier and longer than they should be. Their skin was the color of fresh toadstools and wrinkled like that of extremely old men. Gray beards partially hid their fang-filled mouths. Red eyes glared at them, filled with hate. Steely claws tipped the

fingers of each hand, razor sharp and lethal. All of their teeth were sharp, their eyes too big for their faces and their noses long and pointy. On their feet were iron boots, and on their heads they wore caps dripping with fresh blood. They weren't carrying their traditional pikes; instead, each redcap carried a gun.

Shit.

Duncan tried to push Moira behind him, without luck. She ducked and ran, heading around the porch. One of the redcaps took off after her, firing his gun. Duncan saw her weave her way across the ground, moving faster and faster until she was around the corner.

Duncan had to trust that Moira knew what she was doing. She knew this land almost as well as her father, and that bond would give her some power here.

He turned his attention to the two remaining redcaps. Both had lifted their guns. He had a split second to decide what he was going to do.

Do what a son of the Tuatha Dé does best. Fuck with their minds.

The echo of Jaden's words gave him just what he needed to get moving. He dove into one of their minds, quickly reweaving what the redcap saw. Duncan now seemed to stand where his comrade did, while Duncan himself looked like the redcap's ensorcelled partner.

As he'd hoped the redcap spun and fired on his buddy, hitting him in the head and killing him instantly. Duncan held on to the redcap's mind, sensing its satisfaction at a job well done.

Well, shit. Their orders were to kill him. And the person he saw handing down those orders was his own uncle.

He snarled, gesturing for the redcap to follow him. They ran in the direction Moira had gone. The redcap's orders as far as Moira was concerned were muddled. Part of the redcap wanted to kill her, to feast on her sweet blood. The other...

The other had Duncan seeing things through a filmy haze of rage. The urge to crush the redcap's mind until nothing was left but a slobbering, mindless husk was nearly overwhelming. But he held on. If the other redcap had cornered Moira, he had plans. He'd use this redcap to destroy the other.

Then he'd crush the creature's mind.

They turned the corner to find Moira fighting off the redcap. She was using her link to the earth to pull up rocks, hurling them at the redcap with devastating results. The redcap was bleeding from hundreds of cuts. Bruises peppered his body. One eye was swollen completely shut. Still the rocks came, pelting the redcap with all the force a major league baseball pitcher could put behind a throw.

Duncan could tell Moira was tiring. Sweat beaded her brow, and her aim seemed off. Duncan switched Moira and the other redcap in his redcap's mind. It responded immediately, firing on the redcap menacing Moira.

The bruised redcap fell with a howl. The shot hadn't been lethal. Duncan read the fantasy his redcap had of stripping Moira down and having her, and shuddered. He reached out and looped a fantasy through

the remaining redcap's mind. He grimaced at what the redcap considered nirvana, but he shoved the redcap there anyway and left him to rot. He would never move from that spot without being lifted. He would not eat, drink or sleep.

Duncan had sentenced him to death, and the redcap would never know how or why it had happened, not that Duncan really cared.

Moira joined him, the swirls of her skin dancing with rage. Green firelights danced around her. She was panting, strain showing in fine lines around her eyes and mouth. She rolled her shoulders. "Are there more?"

Duncan picked up the gun and aimed at the howling redcap's head. "I hope not." He pulled the trigger and ended the redcap's life. "Let's go."

Jaden stalked around the corner of the house, his eyes glittering red and green, his claws dripping with blood. "Any more?"

"Other than the one contemplating his navel? No."

Jaden eyed the bodies with satisfaction. "Good." He stared up at the sky, a huge grin crossing his face. "Look up. Akane's playing."

Duncan looked up. "Dear gods. Is that a salamander?"

"Yup." Jaden put an arm around each of them, pulling them close. "And that's my partner beating the shit out of it."

Duncan wasn't surprised when Moira elbowed Jaden in the side. "I thought you and Akane only worked together occasionally?"

Jaden winced. "Yeah, well. Mostly I work alone, but when I partner up I usually prefer Akane. She's all right, you know?"

"She's mine." Shane Dunne stepped off the corner of the porch, his gaze glued to the black and gold dragon fighting the salamander. Unlike popular myth, the dragon wasn't much bigger than the woman had been, and most of that was wingspan. The salamander was roughly the size of a German shepherd, long and sleek and sinewy. Flames shot out of the salamander's mouth, but the dragon was immune, darting in and out, toying with the salamander.

"Gods above. Is that a salamander?" Sean Dunne stood next to his son, staring up at the battle raging above them.

The salamander was tiring. Its flame bursts were coming further and further apart. Akane forced it down, closer to the ground, using her tail to whip its ass into complying. The salamander landed, exhausted. The creature panted, watching them warily through flame red eyes. Its flame dimmed until it looked more like a tall Komodo dragon with longer limbs. After another second it took on its Seeming. The German Shepherd wagged its tail and settled down on its haunches.

Akane landed next to it, turning back into the elegant female she'd been inside the Dunne house. She petted the salamander, smiling when it licked her hand. "I think I'll keep it." She winked at Jaden, earning the vampire glares from two sets of Dunne eyes.

Jaden stared at Shane and Moira. "What did I do now?"

Duncan began herding them all back toward the house. "I think we need to finish that chat we were all having."

"You go on. I think it's time I left." Akane stepped in front of Shane, her hands on her hips. "Where is my car?"

Shane, for the first time, looked uneasy. "The barn?" He gave her a weak grin, backing away from her slowly. "What kind of car was it again?"

Steam literally began to pour from the dragon's ears. "A Porsche Boxster."

Shane swallowed hard. "What year?"

"Brand new."

Ouch. That was going to sting the man's wallet. Duncan was pretty sure Shane could afford to replace the dragon's car, but he was dressed so modestly that he wasn't certain if the man wanted Akane to know how rich he truly was. Dragons were known to covet either wealth or the rare and exotic, and until he got to know her better Akane's preferences would remain a mystery. But from the car she drove and the clothes she wore, he was betting she preferred wealth. Duncan decided to give his bondmate's brother a hand keeping his wealth a secret. "Allow me replace it."

Akane gifted him with a sweet smile. "Thank you, Mr. Malmayne. At least there are *some* gentlemen left in the world."

Duncan wasn't buying that for a moment, but he'd let her get away with it for now. He bowed his head before the Blade. "You're welcome."

"Whew. I'm not sure how much corn I'd have to sell before I could replace a fancy car like that." Shane stuck his hands into his back pockets and rocked on his heels. "How much does one of them go for, anyway? Ten, fifteen thousand?"

The dragoness looked ready to sic her new pet on Shane. Duncan stepped between them, gesturing toward the house once more. "We could use your help, m'lady."

She blew her hair out of her eyes. "Sure. It's not like I can go anywhere, can I, Rhubarb?"

Shane shook his head. "Nope. Not until we get you a rental. Unless you want me to drive you in the tractor?"

Akane spun on her heel and headed for the house, stomping the entire way. The "dog" followed her, obviously seeing her as its new master. The heels of her expensive boots kept sinking into the earth. She let out an annoyed screech and leapt for the porch. She turned the corner and they could hear the screen door slam shut behind her.

“You’re bad.” Jaden draped his arm around Shane’s shoulders. “I like that about you.”

Shane’s shoulders were shaking with laughter. “Thank you kindly.”

“We need to do something about the...” Duncan turned, but there was no sign that the redcaps had ever been there. Even the one gazing at his own navel was missing. “Hmm.”

Sean merely whistled and ambled up onto his porch. “Coming?”

“Remind me not to piss him off.” Jaden followed his new father-in-law up onto the porch.

Duncan took Moira’s hand and followed them. Jaden wasn’t fooling him one little bit. That amused nonchalance was hiding a terrible anger. He had the feeling his personal Gray Knight was going to disappear some time during the night, and in the morning Duncan would hear about a tragedy at Charles Malmayne’s house.

Why? Why had Charles done something so drastically stupid? It didn’t make sense! Why hit the Dunne house?

Duncan pulled out his cell phone and quickly dialed home.

“Hello?”

Shit. Ian sounded breathless. “Is everyone safe?”

“We’ve held off an invasion of redcaps, my lord.”

Duncan swore. “Is anyone injured?”

“No, thank goodness. But the strangest thing happened. One moment they were almost through the door, and the next they were...well, gone. All we could hear were these horrible screams and—” the man gulped, “—wet, crunching sounds.”

Duncan blinked. “Was there anything left of them?”

“No, sir. But we did find a note on the front step.”

“What did the note say?”

“Whoever it was charged us fifty dollars for yard clean up, sir.”

“Anything else?”

“The bill was made out to Lord Jaden, my lord.”

What the hell? “Thank you, Ian. Keep an eye out on things. We think Charles may be behind the attacks.”

“Very good, sir. If I may say so, please be careful.”

“I will. And thank you.” Duncan hung up the phone. There could only be two explanations for this. The first, Charles had declared war on him, deciding to take him out when he least expected it. By hitting the Dunes and his home he guaranteed that the redcaps would find him. The other possibility was that Charles was aware that Jaden had been in his house. It was possible that he also knew Jaden had found incriminating evidence of his collusion with the Black Court. Either way, he had to have known what Jaden would do once he recognized those redcaps. Jaden would make a beeline to Charles, intent on killing him.

Duncan stopped. He had to have *known*.

“Jaden!” He raced toward the house, but it was too late. He heard the roar of an engine, and Jaden was gone.

“What the hell is going on?” Moira watched Duncan’s face pale. “What?”

“He’s going to kill Charles.”

Duh. “I know. And?”

“Charles had to know what Jaden would do if we were threatened, Moira. He *had* to. That means he planned on it.”

Her entire body went cold. “It’s a trap.”

“Of one kind or another. Either he intends to capture Jaden, or he intends to be a martyr. Either way, the Malmaynes will demand Jaden’s head.”

“Despite evidence that Charles is using help from the Black Court.” Moira took a deep breath and turned in a circle, searching for something, anything that could help, but only one thought kept revolving through her mind. “We haven’t completed the Vows, Duncan.” She’d planned on doing that here, in front of family.

His eyes narrowed. “No. But he completed the blood bond. We’re his mates.” He ran around to the front of the house. The car was gone. “Son of a bitch!” Duncan’s Seeming exploded from him, silver lights dancing in a furious display. “We have to go after him.”

“How? We don’t have a car.” Moira took Duncan into her arms. “Contact him. Let him know we think this is a trap.”

“Jaden? Answer me, damn it. We think you’re heading into a trap.”

“I know. But I’ve been ordered by Robin to take care of the Malmayne problem. We’ll have to use the evidence of the redcap attack and what was found in the computer files to prove that he’s been working with the Black.”

“There is no evidence of the attack, Jaden.” Moira tightened her grip on Duncan. *“My father buried it.”*

“Well. That makes things a bit more difficult. Still, I was told to handle this any way I see fit, and I see fit to take his stupid ass out.”

“That might be just what he wants.” Duncan pulled away from Moira and strode toward the house. *“If he becomes a martyr, you know what the clan will do?”*

“They can’t touch me, Duncan, we both know that. Not if it’s a sanctioned Blade hit.”

“We both know that’s not entirely true.” Duncan stepped into the house and nodded toward Shane. “I need your help.”

Shane followed him back out. “What can I do for you?”

“Jaden’s in trouble. I can’t get to him because he took my car.”

Shane slapped him on the back. “No problem. Follow me.”

“*Duncan? You still there?*”

“*He’s a little busy plotting something with my brother.*” Moira followed behind the two men, curious to see how Shane could help.

“*Which brother?*”

The concern in his voice would have amused her if the situation wasn’t so dire. “*Shane.*”

“*Shit. Stay away until it’s over, Moira. Promise me.*”

When hell opened its first ice skating rink.

Shane led the way to the shed, and Moira found herself chuckling. “Oh, boy. You’re letting us borrow Bumblebee?”

Shane threw open the shed doors, exposing the tarp-covered car. He pressed his finger to his lips. “Shh. Just don’t let Akane see it.”

Moira helped her brother uncover the bright yellow Corvette.

Duncan rubbed his hands together with child-like glee. “Happy birthday to me.”

“Uh, no. Still *my* baby, thank you.” Shane took the keys out of his pocket and tossed them to Moira. “Get your own, Mr. Gentleman.”

Moira slid behind the wheel and started the Corvette. “Come on, Duncan.”

“*Moira?*”

She ignored Jaden, gesturing instead to Duncan. “Let’s go.”

“*Moira, damn it, answer me.*”

Duncan climbed into the passenger seat and put on his seat belt. “Let’s go.” He placed his hand on the dashboard and concentrated.

Moira blinked. The beautiful yellow Corvette now looked like some rusty junk ball choking its way out of the shed. Behind her she could hear Shane laughing like an idiot as she drove off, the dust kicking up behind them looking black and thick, enhanced by Duncan’s magic.

“*Duncan. Use your head. You come after me and they’ll blame you. I’m sanctioned for this kill. You most certainly are not.*”

Moira pulled out of the farm’s driveway and onto the road. “You think Shane will tell Akane what’s going on? She’s a witness to the attack. That might come in useful if the clan turns against Jaden.”

Duncan ran his hands through his hair, the gesture screaming his frustration. “I don’t know. I’m still not entirely sure why Charles is doing all this.”

There had to be something in the contract, something that all of them had missed. Moira hadn’t looked too deeply at the contract, and now she was kicking herself. “I doubt it’s revenge. It’s got to be something else.”

“What is so special about Leo Dunne? Why all the focus on him?”

“Other than the fact that his powers are almost pure Sidhe?” Moira shrugged. “I have no clue, but the entire clan keeps harping on that fact.”

“Fuck. Until we figure that part out we’re flying blind.”

“Guys?” Jaden’s voice was full of strained amusement. “*You know I can hear you, right? Where are you?*”

Moira pulled up to the gate leading to Charles Malmayne’s estate. She stared at the huge mansion. The oversized portico was almost obscene, thrusting out from the main body of the house. “*Jaden? You were right. He’s definitely overcompensating.*”

She reached out to press the button that would open the gates.

“Hello?” The voice was deep, almost guttural.

“Duncan Malmayne to see Charles Malmayne.”

“One moment.” There was a click, and the gates swung open.

“*Stupid, stupid move, Moira. They know I’m here now.*”

She couldn’t let herself think about that too much. She was determined to save not only Jaden but the Malmayne clan. The only way to do that was to confront Charles and find out what the hell was going on.

She pulled through the gate and up the long drive, parking in front of the porch. It definitely reminded her of a hotel. All it needed was the oversized ashtray slash trash cans. “Do we need to check our bags at the front desk?”

Duncan didn’t respond other than to step out of Shane’s car. “Let’s get this over with.”

She got out and followed him up the stairs to the door. “What do you think is going to happen?”

His jaw tightened. He rang the bell and took hold of her hand.

“Oh.” She stood as tall as she could despite the fact that she was covered in dirt and redcap blood. She was Lady Malmayne, and as such she pulled on her mother’s teachings to give herself as regal an air as she could. She might not be able to glamour herself into appearing clean and dignified, but damn if she couldn’t make herself look like a warrior queen just off the battlefield.

“*Which you are. Now get back into the car and go home, Queenie. And take Toto with you.*”

She let the corners of her lips lift into a small smile. Duncan was practically vibrating next to her. She bet Jaden would regret calling him that.

The door swung open. Charles’s butler bowed to Duncan. “Lord Malmayne.” He ignored Moira completely. Waving his hand, he gestured for them to enter. “Please, follow me.” Duncan’s hand tightened on hers, but he didn’t correct the butler. They didn’t have time to mess with the fae’s prejudices. They followed the butler past the sweeping, grand staircase to a room off to the left. Moira’s sneakers squeaked on the polished marble floors. The entire entry was done in blinding white and gold, from the Carrera

marbled floors to the gilded stair rail. It made Moira's eyes hurt just looking at it. She preferred the cooler tones of blue and green to this cold museum-like décor.

The butler threw open a door. "Lord Malmayne to see you, sir."

"Show him in, Bradley."

Moira bit her tongue at how they'd been announced. The butler hadn't even said "and guest", leaving Moira to question just where Charles Malmayne lumped her in Duncan's life.

She didn't have to wait for long. "Ah, I see you brought your... wife with you." The sneer that crossed Charles's face and the relaxed, easy posture he held by the mantelpiece were belied by the shaking of his hand as he lit his pipe. "To what do I owe the honor?"

Duncan walked forward, taking Moira with him. From the look on her Sidhe lord's face, things were not going to go well for Charles. "I know you sent the *powrie* to kill me."

Moira hid her surprise. Powrie? She hadn't heard that name for redcaps in years, not since that trip to visit the Dunne half of her family in Ireland. The powrie lived more in Scotland and Ireland, and the Dunne sprites were very familiar with the vile redcaps.

"What makes you think I want you dead?"

"I looked into the mind of one of them before Sean Dunne took steps to remove the threat." Duncan's body language was just as relaxed as Charles's, but he kept a firm grip on Moira's hand, his thumb stroking across the back. "His orders were to kill me. What he planned to do to Moira was merely icing on his sick cake."

Charles's eyes darted to her before returning to his pipe. "I don't know what you're talking about." He took a drag, blowing out a fragrant stream of smoke. "Besides, it's entirely possible that an enemy of ours merely made the redcap *think* I'm the one who gave him those orders."

"Oh, no. I know tampering when I see it, and I saw no signs of it. This was all done by you, Charles."

Charles gave him a cocky grin. "You can't prove that, Duncan, and we both know it."

"One of the powrie was in your employ as a bodyguard."

Charles shook his head. "I would never employ a redcap, Duncan. I did have an invasion of them, true, but it was dealt with."

"Oh? How?"

"At least two of them were found unconscious near the entrance to my attic. Several more were found beaten around the estate. They were removed forthwith by my own men." He took another drag off the stem of his pipe, blowing the smoke right at Moira. "I wonder how they came to be here?" He shifted, shoving one of his hands into his pocket. "They are Black Court, and it's well known the Malmaynes are White Court." He eyed Duncan sideways, a sly smile on his mouth. "One of them appeared to have been bitten. Perhaps your pet vampire knows something about that?"

Duncan returned Charles's smile with interest. "Why don't we ask my bondmate when he gets here?"

The pipe froze. Charles stiffened. “Bondmate?”

Duncan nodded regally. “I have the great good fortune to have formed a tribond, Charles. Congratulate me.”

That last was no request. Duncan demanded respect for his two mates as Lord Malmayne, and Charles, unless he wanted to prove himself a traitor, would have no choice but to comply.

“Congratulations.” The tone was strained, but Charles gave what was required of him. “Although I’m certain how the rest of the clan will feel about this.”

“Does it matter?” Moira kept her eyes on Charles, despite the urge to look at Duncan. His tone and posture were so arrogant she was startled. “I think you keep forgetting something.” Silver sparks began dancing in the air. “I am Lord Malmayne. The clan follows *me*. If they object to my matings, that is their problem, not mine.”

She’d never seen this side of him before, the cold lord demanding respect from someone beneath him.

“It is our problem when you mate with someone so far beneath you, nephew. Think! By marrying Moira you’ve caused endless trouble, not to mention what your mating to that damn vampire will do.”

“Why is it so important that Leo Dunne marry into the Malmayne clan?” When Charles turned away from him Duncan reacted, grabbing hold of the man’s collar and yanking him forward. His Seeming dropped away, revealing him in all his Sidhe glory. He glowed with silver light. He looked beautiful and deadly. “You’re going to tell me what the hell is so important about Leo that he simply *must* be the Dunne that fulfills our contract, and you’re going to explain it *now*.”

Charles tried to shrug off Duncan’s grip but didn’t succeed. He looked surprised at his nephew’s strength. “I don’t have to tell you anything.”

Duncan pulled him closer until they were nose to nose. “Wrong answer.”

Charles gasped, struggling in Duncan’s grip for only a moment. Moira had no idea what was going on until she saw the look on Duncan’s face.

He was building Charles a fantasy from Charles’s own memories, one in which the Sidhe wouldn’t know he was spilling his secrets to Duncan. Duncan had once said that Charles was strong, almost strong enough to roll Duncan’s mind. Apparently he’d been wrong, or the bond he shared with her and Jaden had strengthened him, because he was easily taking control of Charles’s senses. She watched, waiting for the show to begin.

“You should have brought popcorn, sweetheart.”

Jaden was close. She could feel him, almost as if he were right behind her. She almost turned to look, but it was futile. Jaden wasn’t there. Not yet, anyway.

“Hello, Charles,” Duncan purred, pulling her attention back to her Sidhe mate. He eased Charles back, moving his hand from the other Sidhe’s collar down to his arm. “How is the plan coming along?”

Charles bowed low. “Our plan to replace Duncan is coming apace, my lord.”

“How go things with the marriage contract?”

“Once Duncan is removed we can begin pressuring Leo Dunne once more.” Charles preened. “Dealing with his truebond should be no problem. The little human won’t know what hit her.”

Duncan’s eyebrow rose. “You are not considering killing her? Their life forces are bound together.”

Charles scoffed, waving off Duncan’s concerns. “Of course not. We know they’re bound. No, Leo will take one of my daughters to wife, and the contract will be fulfilled the way we’d always dreamed.”

Duncan’s head tilted. “You’ll have to explain exactly how you plan on dealing with Sean Dunne. The leprechaun is quite powerful.”

That sneer was back on Charles’s face. “Once his precious son is in our hands he’ll have nothing to say.”

“And the bond Leo has with his land? You intend to find a way to break that?”

Charles looked confused. “He’s Sidhe. He’s not *really* bound to the land.”

Moira thought Duncan hid his shock admirably. How could Charles be so deluded? Leo’s bond with the land he’d claimed as his own was as strong as her father’s was. Taking Leo from his land would eventually kill him. “How exactly will the Malmaynes benefit from this?”

The confusion smoothed out and Charles relaxed, serene certainty lending him an air of childlike faith. “The child of Dunne will one day perform an act that will change our world.”

Moira frowned. “What the hell?”

Duncan squeezed her hand, silencing her. “Who told you that?”

“The Seer.” Charles shivered. Moira understood why. The Seer was something of an enigma. The last of her kind, her wisdom was sought by many and she gave to all, White, Black or Gray, equally. She claimed no allegiance, though rumor had it that Oberon had offered her sanctuary on more than one occasion when her predictions had caused friction between the Courts.

Duncan took a deep breath. “What makes you think that child will come from Leo?”

“Because he is the only one who is a Dunne Sidhe. We need him bound to us, otherwise we would have let the contract lapse when that bitch mated the leprechaun all those years ago.” Charles made a moue of distaste. “A leprechaun? You might as well mate my butler, or worse, a human.”

Moira saw Jaden slip into the room without a sound. He put his finger to his lips, his eyes glued to the man in Duncan’s grip. From the revulsion he exuded he’d heard more than enough of Charles’s twisted logic.

“You want to be able to control this child of Dunne.”

“He *must* be a Malmayne, you know that! You know why.” Charles shuddered. “You know what she’ll do to us if we don’t deliver what we promised.”

For one brief moment Duncan looked horrified before his expression smoothed out. “Yes, I do. Thank you, Charles.”

Charles blinked rapidly. “You.” He started to lunge for Duncan but pulled himself up short. “You rolled my mind.”

Duncan turned away in disgust. “Jaden.”

“Yes, my lord?”

Moira smiled. Jaden’s tone was respectful, his stance one of easy readiness. She’d seen that stillness in him just before she’d attacked him that day he’d kidnapped Ruby.

“Blood debt is owed. Charles is going to pay it.”

“Wait! Duncan, I owe no blood debt. The Dunnes owe *us!*”

Duncan snarled. “You conspired to have me killed. You’re working with an agent of the Black Court, trying to circumvent prophecy for your own gain. You attacked the Dunne farm knowing that I was there with my mates, hoping one or all of us would be killed. For the crime of working with the Black alone your life is forfeit.” Charles paled. “For the crime of attacking your lord and his bondmates, your life is forfeit. I judge you guilty by your own word and hand. The sentence is death, to be carried out immediately.”

“That stupid human female stole our destiny, Duncan! We should have been mated into the Dunnes, the precious child ours to shape. Think about it! What could we do with such a child! All we have to do is arrange a co-marriage with one of the Malmayne females and the world is ours!”

Duncan let Charles go. “The Hob himself has sent his Blade to mete out justice for your crimes.”

Charles gulped. “Blade?” He looked around the room wildly.

Duncan nodded. “Jaden?”

“Yes, my lord?”

“He’s all yours.”

Jaden smiled and dropped his seeming. Moira, for all that she’d seen Jaden feeding before, hid her face in Duncan’s chest when the first scream was ripped out of Charles’s throat.

Duncan led her out of the room. “This is a side of him, of us, you’ll have to get used to, Moira.”

She nodded. “I know.” She lifted her head and stared into his loving, worried eyes. “I guess I’m not the warrior I thought I was.”

One brow rose. “You pelted a redcap with stones hard enough to break bones and didn’t flinch when I put a bullet into its head. But this bothers you?”

“Jaden’s bite is...intimate. It’s ours. You understand? And now he’s using it to kill.”

Duncan nodded slowly. “Would it help if he tore Charles limb from limb instead?”

She pictured Jaden doing just that and shuddered. “No.”

“You have to let it go. He’s a Blade. Most of the time we won’t see that side of him. We’ll just get to clean him up and love him when he comes home to us.”

“Thank you for that.” Jaden stepped out of the room, carefully wiping the blood from his lips. “It’s done. I need to contact Robin so he knows what happened here. The rest of the clan will also need to be investigated to make sure Charles wasn’t the only one in the Black’s pocket.”

“Kaitlynn, Charles, Henri, possibly my father. Who knows how far or deep into the clan this goes?” Duncan sighed wearily. “What has happened to my clan? How come I didn’t see it?”

Moira smacked him in the arm. “No pity party. You’ve been lord for a few months, most of those spent in the throes of mating sickness. Your father was murdered, your sister put to death. Your father worked hard to keep you ignorant, didn’t he?” Duncan winced, confirming her thoughts. “A lot has happened. Now we know there’s a problem and we can deal with it, hopefully before it’s too late.”

Duncan’s slow smile was precious to her. “My practical leprechaun.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “You’re right. We need to find the root of the problem and kill it before it drags the rest of the clan down.”

“I agree.” Jaden stepped toward them, holding out his hands. “But first things first. Moira?”

He stood as if he was uncertain of his welcome. Moira ran into his arms, eager to let her lover know that, no matter what, she would be there for him.

He held her tight, his body relaxing into her. “Thank you.”

That soft whisper told her all she needed to know.

Chapter Nine

Akane sat back on her bed with a smile. "They're fine. I have a report to file with Robin, though." She pushed her hair out of her eyes. "I think I'm going to request to be assigned to this case. It's right up my alley." She rubbed her hands together with glee. "Nailing bastards working with the Black is always a joy."

Sean Dunne handed her a cup of tea. "It must be difficult for you, being what you are."

How he'd figured out her most closely guarded secret she'd never know, but he'd followed her into her bedroom and asked her to "keep an eye" on his daughter with a wink and a roguish smile. She glared at him, daring him to say more.

And, like the cheeky Irishman he was, he did. "A hybrid, like my son, and the daughter of the Seer herself. That's quite a burden to live with." He placed his hand on her shoulder, his expression more fatherly than any she'd seen on his face yet. "We know what a burden it is to be a hybrid, Akane. We know what a blessing it can be. If you need to talk, my family is here. We're in your debt."

She blinked back sudden tears. Sean Dunne had just offered something she'd gotten from very few people in her long life: complete acceptance. There was no pity or awe in his face when he gave her that gift, just the look of a father who understood what it was like to raise a special child. "Shane is a lucky man."

Sean smiled. "Luckier than you know." He patted her absently before walking toward the bedroom door. "Get some rest. If you're going to be calling the Hob here I'd best warn Aileen. That man can eat quite a bit for all his small size."

She blinked. Robin Goodfellow had eaten here? When? The way Sean spoke of him, partly resigned, partly amused, the Hob must make regular visits.

The Hob *never* made regular visits to anyone but Oberon.

"Huh." She shook her head and decided to take Sean's advice. She was exhausted after the battle and in need of some sleep. She'd contact Robin tomorrow, after a good night's rest.

"Go boy! Go!"

She was on her feet in a trice, heading for the window to look down into the yard. She hid a surprised smile behind her hand. A glowing red figure dropped what looked like a metallic ball at the feet of the eldest Dunne child, its tail wagging a mile a minute. Shane picked it up and threw it, encouraging the creature to run after it.

Shane Dunne was playing fetch with her salamander.

“That man is *so* strange.”

When those sapphire eyes focused on her window for one blinding second, the mischievous smile in them took her breath away. Akane backed away from the window, startled, terrified, and more turned on than she could ever remember being.

Oh *hell* to the no. She was *not* going to allow herself to be attracted to Jethro. The man was a menace in more ways than one.

She crawled into bed, determined to drive all thoughts of Shane Dunne from her mind.

It turned out to be a lot harder than she thought it would be.

Moira woke up sandwiched between her loves, her face buried in Jaden’s hair. Duncan’s hand cupped her breast, his half hard cock nestled between the cheeks of her ass. Her hand rested on Jaden’s chest, feeling the even rise and fall as he slept in her arms.

All was right with her world. She couldn’t stop the smile that crossed her face, or the happy wiggle she gave. Her men were here and safe and nothing could take that from them.

Jaden’s chest rose under her hand, his leg twitching against hers. “Mmm. Morning, sweetheart.” He lifted her hand to his mouth, kissing the back.

Moira snuggled close. “Morning, *a ghra*.”

She heard the sound of a phone ringing. “Hell.” Duncan rolled over onto his back and slipped out of bed. She watched that amazing ass of his as he bent over to grab his phone. “Hello?”

She watched him begin to pace. “Yes. I understand.” His hand clenched. “No. It will be on *my* terms.” Her passionate Sidhe lord had to be speaking to a Malmayne for him to sound so cold and hard. From the disgust twisting Jaden’s features she bet it was Henri.

She flinched when another ringtone filled the air. This time it was music, the Tatu cover of “How Soon is Now”. Jaden rolled out of bed and grabbed his cell phone. “Lo?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Duncan’s voice dragged her attention back to him. His jaw was clenched, his hands fisted at his sides. “*You* do not dictate to *me*.”

“You want me to what?” Moira looked back at Jaden. His brows had practically disappeared into his hairline. “Hell, no!”

“If that is what you wish. I’ll expect you within the hour.” Duncan hung his phone up. He was so angry silver sparks danced around him. “Expect a deluge of clan members in one hour.”

“Crap.” Moira got out of bed. “Let me guess what they’re objecting to.”

He gave a frustrated sigh. “My bond with Jaden.”

She blinked. “Wait. Why are they objecting to that?”

“They’re claiming that he’s the one who set up all this stuff about the Seer and got Charles to believe it through his Vampiric mind powers.”

“You’re fucking kidding me.”

“Nope. They’re going to demand blood debt.”

“Shit.” She ran her hands through her hair. “What do we do?”

“I’ll be here.” Jaden hung up his phone. “Akane’s on her way over. She knows what’s going on and she’s going to confirm that the hit on Charles was sanctioned.”

“This is just so fucked up,” Moira complained.

“Tell me about it.” Duncan took hold of them and began steering them toward the bathroom. “Showers all around. My darlings, we need to look our best.”

“We need to let Ian and Mrs. Pagett know. How many are coming, Duncan?”

“All of the clan currently in Nebraska.”

She stopped. “How many would that be?”

“About twenty.”

“Shit.”

Jaden began to drag her forward. “That’s maybe a tenth. The Malmayne clan is world-wide.”

Duncan grabbed their toothbrushes and handed them around. “The rest of the family will attend via satellite feed.”

She squealed when Jaden’s hand slapped her ass. “So let’s get moving. Nobody gets to see *my* mates in the buff except me.”

Moira rolled her eyes and brushed her teeth. *This week just keeps getting better and better.*

Duncan settled in behind his desk and stared at the twenty relatives lining the room. Of course Henri was there, fawning over the weeping daughters of Charles. Both Cecelia and Constance bore the Malmayne stamp of blonde hair and willowy figures, reminding him of his sister.

Duncan shuddered. One Kaitlynn had been bad enough.

Moira had made sure she was seated with Akane, off to one side and out of the line of fire. The dragoness seemed completely out of place with her Asian features, but her highly fashionable clothes declared her a force to be reckoned with, at least as far as the rest of the clan would be concerned. They still seemed confused as to the role she was going to play in this meeting. Duncan had every intention of enlightening them.

He rapped his knuckles on the desk. Even though the sound had been quiet the clan immediately quieted down except for the sniffing of the two women.

It was obvious Henri hoped to control this meeting. The man stepped forward, ready to confront him. There was a gleam in his eye that told Duncan he was enjoying what he thought he was about to do.

Duncan smiled. Henri was in for the shock of his pampered, pompous life. “We’re called here today to deal with the fact that The Hob called an inquiry into the doings of Clan Malmayne.” There was a hiss of indrawn breath, but far less shock than Duncan was comfortable with. “His Blades, after careful investigation, determined that Charles Malmayne was working with one or more agents of the Black to force the Dunne family into an unwanted alliance.”

“Unwanted by whom?” Constance asked. As the eldest daughter she stood the best chance of being chosen for an alliance marriage now that Kaitlynn was dead.

“Unwanted by the Dunne Charles hoped to force. Leo Dunne is in a truebond and unwilling to contemplate a second marriage. His bonded wife is also adamant that no other marriage will take place, thus insuring that it would be impossible and unwanted.” Duncan steepled his fingers and watched his clan members carefully. Some still seemed shocked, but the majority of them stared at him with blank faces. “The Malmayne-Dunne marriage contract has been fulfilled by myself.” He held up his hand when Henri tried to complain. “I will hear no more on Moira’s unsuitability. She is a Dunne child.” He said that deliberately, watching the reactions of his relatives. Jaden was listening in the security room, watching the reactions of those who were not on American soil. They planned on keeping each other informed through their bond. “The subject of my mating with Moira is hereby closed.”

“The bond is incomplete,” Cecelia piped up. “Therefore the contract has not been fulfilled.”

Duncan smiled. “Moira requested that the Vows be said with her family standing as witness. That has been arranged.” Something he’d seen to just after Jaden assassinated Charles for his crimes. Sean hadn’t been surprised in the least, and Aileen had been ecstatic. All that was left to do was be there, on the Dunne farm, ready to speak and seal their bond for eternity. “I assure you, our bond is complete. And that is the last time I will talk about my mating with Moira.”

“Then what about the rumors that you also mated with the vampire?”

Duncan kept his expression coolly amused, but he could tell that this was where things got tricky. The disdain most Seelie Sidhe held vampires in would work against him here. Moira was marginally acceptable to them; Jaden would not be. Not that he gave a flying fuck. “That would be correct.” The gasps of outrage were louder this time; never had a White Court Sidhe mated a vampire. “I have the great good pleasure of having been blessed with a tribond.”

Some of the Malmaynes moved restlessly at that, most of them with disapproving expressions.

“Isn’t Jaden the one who killed Charles?” Henri shook his head and tsk’d. “How exactly does that work? I understand Charles was going to challenge you for leadership of the Malmayne clan. How convenient for you that he was executed after your pet vampire accused him of collusion with the Black.”

“Are you saying that I have a Blade in my pocket, Henri?”

Henri threw his arms wide. “What Blade? I don’t see your...I’m sorry, *Robin’s Blade* here.”

Akane stood up, straightening out her Donna Karan skirt. “Did you want to speak to a Blade, Henri Malmayne?” Those odd eyes of hers, one so dark, the other so light, pinned Henri like a bug to a mat. The coldness radiating off the dragoness was intimidating. “That can be arranged.”

Duncan bowed his head toward Akane. “Allow me to present Dame Akane Russo, Knight of The Gray Court and Oberon’s Blade.”

“*She’s* a Blade?” one of the younger Malmaynes whispered. The respect and awe in the young woman’s voice had Duncan damn near smiling.

“Yes, Letitia, Akane is a Blade.” Duncan turned back to Henri, all amusement gone. “She was there when Charles’s powrie attacked the Dunne farm.”

“One of them was identified as having been in Charles’s house prior to the attack. Duncan confirmed that Charles was working with the Black through Charles’s own words. Files on Charles’s computer confirmed that he had, indeed, been in frequent contact with the lord of the redcaps and a known agent of the Dark Queen herself.” Akane spoke as if she’d been there and witnessed everything. Duncan was positive no one would question her. “Sentence was passed by Lord Malmayne and approved by Robin Goodfellow. The execution was carried out by my partner, Jaden Blackthorn.”

No one would *dare* question an order by the Hob. To do so invited his attention and not many people could handle that. Duncan thought about that for a second, and realized there was only *one* who could handle Robin’s undivided attention. Oberon held Robin’s loyalty in a way no one else could.

Akane tilted her head, the movement sinuous and somehow inhuman. “Any questions?”

“Who will pay for my father’s death?” Cecelia shouted despite her sister’s attempts to shush her. “That filthy, half-breed vampire dared lay his hands on a Malmayne! Glorianna will hear of this, and I guarantee you she *will* side with us.”

Oh, shit. There was the thorn in his side, the hidden pinch, that Charles’s children would seek blood debt through the Queen and Court. It was well known that Glorianna *hated* vampires with a passion. The only reason she hadn’t demanded that he turn Jaden over to her was the fact that Jaden had clearly aligned himself with the Gray Court, taking himself out of her jurisdiction. “Jaden is of the Gray and a Blade, Cecelia. He performed his duties as he was required to by both my decree and that of the Hob. Glorianna holds no sway over him.”

“How do you think the Queen will feel having the head of one of the major clans mated to that abomination?” She tossed her hair over her shoulder. “I am positive that a new Lord Malmayne will be declared forthwith once the clan proper makes their dissatisfaction known.”

It was possible. If Glorianna chose to take exception to his tribond he could be removed as Lord Malmayne, and that would open both Moira and Jaden to the machinations of whoever became the *next*

Lord Malmayne. She was the only one who had the power to do so. He'd known all along it was a possibility. But someone like Henri as the next Lord Malmayne?

That was not something he could allow to happen. His clan would be destroyed if Henri was proclaimed Lord.

Duncan could feel his temper beginning to build, the anger swift and hot as flowing blood, as deeply rooted as the earth itself. He had a very bad feeling about this, and from the way Moira and Jaden were murmuring in his head he could tell they shared his concerns. "Who do you propose that next Lord be?"

"Henri." His name was said with such speed and conviction that Duncan guessed his cousins had decided on him before showing up on Duncan's doorstep. "He's been more than supportive of the Malmayne clan and has our best interests at heart." Cecelia practically cooed as she brushed her hand down Henri's arm.

Well. That was a wrinkle dear old Dad didn't know about. Had Cullen been aware of the machinations of his brother Charles? Had Cullen too been duped? How deep was Henri into everything that had happened? "I'm afraid that Henri's life will also be forfeit once Robin finds out he was the go-between for Charles and the Unseelie Sidhe lord he was conspiring with."

The look in Cecelia's eyes would have killed a lesser man. "Prove it."

He barely stopped himself from growling. He didn't have proof, not yet. Charles was dead and hardly likely to throw Henri under the bus even if he were still alive. The bastard had a sick sort of honor that would have prevented him from handing over someone he considered inferior to save himself.

So instead Duncan stood. He leaned forward, hands flat on the desk, and met her stare for stare, allowing her to feel the iron determination to root the Black out of his clan. "I will."

"That went well. What's next? Red hot spikes up the ass?" Jaden flopped into the chair across from Duncan's desk and rubbed his forehead. Moira could really shout when she wanted to, and she'd been pissed as hell at the Malmaynes for calling him an "abomination". Well, they'd called him worse in the past. He'd live. He was more concerned over how livid Duncan was with the results of the meeting.

"We investigate the rest of the clan." Duncan stalked around the room. He'd moved beyond pissed and into homicidal rage. "I want Henri's head on a pike."

Jaden watched his cool Sidhe lord lose his self control, pacing like a caged tiger in front of his desk. "Duncan."

"Cecelia and Constance are up to their necks in whatever's going on, too. I want them taken care of." Silver lights danced around him.

Jaden was starting to get worried. Duncan rarely lost his temper in the hundred years since they'd first met, and in the span of a few days he was losing it on a regular basis. "Duncan!"

Duncan stopped and stared at him. “What?”

“Deep breaths. You’re starting to freak me out.” Duncan actually bared his teeth at him. He had to hold back a laugh. “I’m terrified, oh fangless one.” He rolled his eyes. “You’re going to need anger management therapy if you keep this up.”

Duncan blinked. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“The last time I remember you losing your temper this much was—” Jaden tilted his head, “—never.” He glanced over at Moira and noticed her sudden concern. “Has he been like this since I left?”

That earned him another snarl as Duncan began prowling around the room again. “I am *not* out of control.”

“He was beyond depressed before you came back, and he’s been, well, upset off and on since you came back.”

He nodded. Then he stood, walked over to Duncan and grabbed his shoulder. He forced the Sidhe to face him again and pointed to his chin. “Go ahead. You know you’ve been dying to.”

Duncan rolled his eyes. “I already laid you out flat, remember?”

“But you’re still pissed at me, and it’s leaking over into everything else.” Jaden threw his arms wide. “I’m not going anywhere ever again, unless it’s on assignment.”

Duncan’s jaw clenched. *Ah-hah. There we go.*

“You’re ticked because I didn’t tell you I was a Blade?” He tried not to laugh. “That growl would be a lot more terrifying if I didn’t know you’d never really hurt me.”

“Why did you keep that from me?”

Jaden could hear the anguish under the anger, and sighed. “Because everyone knew who I lived with and worked for.”

“It was the perfect cover? Show up somewhere, party down, someone dies, you come home with none the wiser?”

Jaden lowered his arms. “No. Not every assignment has led to someone’s death. Just because I was built to be a fucking soldier doesn’t make me an automatic killer.”

Moira got between them, her hand over his heart. “Stop it. You know Duncan doesn’t feel that way. And you!” She turned on Duncan. “Stop taking it out on him. If Robin Goodfellow told you to keep a secret, what would you do?”

Duncan rubbed his eyes. “I’d probably superglue my lips shut.”

“See? Would you have told Duncan what you were if you could have?”

Jaden saw no point in telling the truth. “Yes.”

“*Liar.*”

Jaden smiled. “*You get why, don’t you?*”

“*Fucker. You were keeping me safe, weren’t you?*”

Jaden nodded.

“Don’t do it again. What if one of your ‘assignments’ had figured out who you were and come after me? I would have had no way of protecting myself.”

And there Duncan was wrong. Robin himself had promised to keep Duncan safe when Jaden gave his oath as a Blade. “Are you done being pissed at me?”

“I’m thinking about it.”

Moira patted their cheeks. “There now. Feel all better?”

“Not yet, but I will soon.” Jaden leered down at her, patting her on the ass. “What say we take this to the bedroom?”

Moira smacked him in the stomach. Hard. Her surprised expression rapidly turned pained.

Huh. Was that supposed to hurt?

“Ow.” She shook her hand out. “We need to figure out what to do about Henri. What if they really go to the Queen? Can she do something to remove Duncan as head of the clan?”

Jaden shrugged. “Never really cared much about White Court politics.”

“She can, if enough of the clan objects to my mating.” Duncan sagged against his desk. “Enough of them have felt the rough edge of Jaden’s tongue that they might relish the idea of hurting him through me.”

“There are options, but they might not be ones you like.” Akane rose from her seat. She’d been so quiet he’d almost forgotten his sometime-partner was still there. “Option one, remain White Court, even knowing you’ll more than likely lose your position as head of the clan. If that happens, Jaden should still be safe because of his, um, connections.” She looked non-plussed for a moment before her features smoothed back out into their usual calm façade. “Option two, remain White Court and fight not only your clan but your Queen to remain its lord. It will be an uphill battle I’m not sure you’ll win, especially since I can sense that most of your clan is leaning toward the Black now even if they don’t realize it.”

“Option three?” Jaden had the feeling he knew where this was heading.

“Give oaths to Oberon and join the Gray.”

“That would save us but leave the rest of the clan to Henri’s mercies.” Duncan’s fingers drummed on the edge of the desk. “I’m not sure that’s an option we can take.”

“We need to find out how much of the clan is still loyal to the White and Duncan, and how many are in this for what the Seer told Charles it will gain them.”

Akane’s head tilted, her expression one that sent dread through Jaden’s whole body. “The Seer?”

“She told Charles that the child of Dunne will one day perform an act that will change our world.”

Akane’s eyes closed. “That stupid fucker. Idiot male.” Her eyes snapped open. “*When* did she tell him that?”

Duncan opened his mouth to answer, but his brow furrowed. "I'm not sure. I do know that the reason they didn't just give up on the marriage contract when Aileen mated Sean was because of that prophecy." Duncan jerked. "Oh, *fuck*."

Moirá's eyes met his, a hint of panic in them. "It's not a child of Leo's, is it? It's a child of my *father's*." She looked around the room, her eyes wide and wild. "What the hell?"

"Don't panic, sweetheart." Jaden pulled her into the cradle of her arms, frowning when he noticed her shivers. "The thing about prophecy? It's going to happen no matter what you do. If you're the one who makes the decision, then so be it. If it's Leo or Shane, then so be it. Fighting it will only make it happen in such a way that you'll live to regret it."

"He's right." Akane sat back down, her demeanor once more serene. "Don't fight it. Make the decisions you feel are right. It's possible it will be your child or another one of Sean's grandchildren who make the crucial decision. Who knows? It's the child of Dunne."

"Then it won't be Moira's child." Duncan smiled. "She's a Malmayne now."

Akane shook her head. "No, she's not. She's a Blackthorn."

Jaden blinked. What the hell?

"You completed your blood bond with them first, right? That makes them both Blackthorns. The first bond is the one first recognized when it comes to a tribond." Akane frowned. "Didn't you know that?"

All three of them blushed. "No. Besides, we were busy."

"I know." Akane smirked. "I was keeping an eye on you, remember?"

Moirá stepped in front of both of them. "Do I really want to know how much you saw?"

Akane huffed out a laugh. "Probably not."

Something was itching at the back of Jaden's brain. Something that might mean something, something a Dunne had said to Duncan. "Crap. What was it that Shane called you about the other night?"

"You mean that weird rhyme? 'Darkness stalks the Malmayne clan. Salvation lies within one man. Accept the bond and pay the price. Shadow wraps around you thrice.'"

The three of them stared at each other.

"Oh, crap," Akane whispered. "Where did he hear that?"

"He said he had his sources, but wouldn't say."

"Darkness stalks the Malmayne clan. The Black, obviously." Duncan was off, once more prowling the room, but the difference was obvious. This time he was thinking, not stewing. "Salvation lies within one man."

Jaden sprawled in the chair in front of Duncan's desk, *his* preferred thinking spot. "One man. You?"

Duncan snorted. "Obviously not. You, perhaps?"

"Not sure. Accept the bond and pay the price?"

“The tribond,” Moira whispered, settling against the edge of Duncan’s desk. It was a good spot to watch them both, something she seemed to enjoy doing. “But what’s the price? The loss of the clan?”

“My rulership of the clan.” Duncan shook his head. “I would gladly give that up for my bond with you both. It’s not that hard a price to pay. I know I don’t want to live without either of you.”

Jaden was warmed straight through. Duncan had hoped to lead the Malmaynes into the future once Cullen had passed on. He’d spoken of it at length on the nights when his father’s autocratic decrees had weighed on him heavily. But now wasn’t the time to get sentimental. “Shadows wrap around you thrice.”

“The Gray Court?” Moira blew her hair out of her eyes. “We’ll leave the White for the Gray?”

“All of the Malmaynes who don’t wish to fall into the Black, or just the three of us?”

“Shadows wrap around you thrice. Was he speaking only of you, Duncan, or the three of you?” Akane watched them all, her eyes sparkling. She loved a good riddle. All dragons did.

“Either way, it seems to dictate our course, doesn’t it?” Jaden stood. “What say we all?”

Duncan took hold of Jaden’s hand. “If I have to give up my status at least I know you’ll be kept safe. Just because I give oaths to the Gray that doesn’t mean I don’t have every intention of continuing to investigate the clan. They’re still my family and not *all* of them are leaning toward the Black. I’m in.”

Moira took his other hand. “I’m in. I’ll have to let my family know, but I get the feeling it won’t bother them much. They’d rather see us safe and Gray than White and in constant danger.”

Jaden grinned. “Agreed.” He tugged them both closer. “*Now* can we go to bed and fuck like bunnies?” Two elbows hit him in the stomach. “Ow.”

“In the meantime, Duncan can always tell Glorianna what’s going on himself so that she knows to watch the rest of the Malmaynes.” Akane stood. “I’m going to make myself scarce for that conversation. You have fun!” She walked out of the room, headed for the gods knew where. It wasn’t like she had a car and Duncan hadn’t given her permission to borrow any of his.

“Hell. She’s right. I’d better call Glorianna. You two want to be here for this?”

Jaden already had hold of Moira and was dragging her out of the room. “We’ll be naked and waiting. Don’t take too long or we might start without you.” He looked down at Moira, who was desperately trying not to laugh while scowling up at him. “Please stop hitting me. You might hurt yourself.”

Moira lay naked on the bed, Jaden’s big hands roaming her body, when Duncan rejoined them. “How did it go?”

From the grimace crossing his face it didn’t look good. What looked better was how rapidly Duncan got naked. “She knows everything. When the others petition to remove me she’s going to grant it. She can’t allow a vampire mate in one of the Sidhe main houses.”

“What about the fact that the Sidhe house in question has had dealings with the Black?” Moira was outraged. How could the Queen do this to Duncan? He’d been nothing but loyal through all his years in her service.

“She plans on investigating the allegations herself.”

Jaden stilled. “Excuse me? She doesn’t have the trained investigators Robin has. Why isn’t she letting the Blades handle this?”

Duncan growled, his body quivering. He looked two seconds away from pacing again. “She says that the Blades are compromised on this and she can’t trust them.”

Moira began to laugh. “Oh, lord. Let Robin hear about that. *Please* let Robin hear that she actually said his Blades are ‘compromised’.”

The windows blew open with a fierce gust of wind.

“Oh, hell. I didn’t mean *now*.” Moira sat up and pulled the sheet over her. “Hello, Robin.”

Robin Goodfellow stood next to the bed, his blue eyes twinkling merrily. His long red hair was pulled back in a tail that reached the top of his ass. He wore a bright blue silk shirt that almost matched his eyes, and dark brown leather pants. The boots he wore had a slight heel to them, making him seem taller. His nails were painted jet black. “And hello to you too, Moira. Congratulations on your mating.” He bowed to her, full of mischief.

“Thank you.” She pushed her hair out of her eyes. “Glorianna thinks the Blades are compromised.”

“I heard.” Robin waved and one of the chairs glided forward, coming to rest just behind him. He sat, resting a booted foot over his knee, looking like the prince Moira secretly thought he was. “Why would Glorianna think that?”

Duncan bowed gracefully to the Hob, holding one edge of the comforter over his nakedness. “My lord.”

Robin smiled and bowed back from his “seat”. “Duncan. Always a pleasure. I understand my Blade has taken you as his bondmate. Congratulations to you as well.”

“Thank you.” Duncan swallowed hard. “Jaden means the world to both Moira and myself.”

“I know, else I might have put a stop to it.”

Jaden winced, but Moira shivered. If anyone could stop a mating, Robin would be the one. “Thank you for having faith in us.”

For a moment the Hob looked startled, but then he laughed. “Faith. True, one must have faith.” He leaned his chin on one fist, watching them. “So, tell me *exactly* what is going on.”

Moira decided she should begin. After all, Duncan was paler than she’d ever seen him, and Jaden looked like he’d swallowed a frog. She was getting used to dealing with the Hob since he visited her family. She got the feeling he did that because it was one of the few places where people treated him like just another fae. “It started when Henri began to visit Duncan. He kept telling him that he needed to make

my brother Leo mate with either Constance or Cecelia. Turns out the Seer had told Charles Malmayne that the child of Dunne would do something that would change our world, and the Malmaynes wanted that child to be theirs to control. Charles firmly believed that Leo would be the father of that child, but I'm starting to think it will be my Dad who turns out to be the father."

"Interesting." Robin hadn't moved or changed expression. How much of this did the Hob already know?

"We managed to uncover evidence that Charles was working with an Unseelie Sidhe, using redcaps to guard himself. He actually sent them against the farm, but we managed to win."

Robin perked up at that. "He attacked the Dunne farm? How many of you were hurt?"

Moira shrugged. "None of us." She wiggled. "Dad did that nifty thing where he sucks someone through a pinhole without leaving a trace, Akane fought the salamander—" Robin choked, "—and I pelted one with rocks."

Robin frowned, green glittering in his blue eyes. Something about that green light looked alarmingly familiar. "How did you come to be unharmed?"

"I have two brothers. I *know* how to throw." She shared an evil grin with the Hob. Moira heard both her men gulp. "We went to confront Charles, Duncan did his Vulcan mind-meld thing and pretty much got everything Charles knew out of him. He declared his life forfeit and Jaden..." She glanced over at her vampire. "He carried out Duncan's death sentence." She took hold of Jaden's hand with the one that wasn't clutching the sheet to her breast and squeezed.

"And now?" Robin rested his head back down on his fist, but Moira wasn't fooled for a moment. Robin was more like a hawk, watching every nuance of their expressions, waiting for something.

Duncan picked up the tale. "Glorianna knows everything, but she's going to grant the petition to remove me as head of the clan thanks to my mating with Jaden. I got the impression that I was no longer Lord Malmayne the moment I became Jaden's bondmate." Now he looked as furious as Moira knew he was. "But I still plan on investigating the clan. I'll just have to do it from the outside."

"How about the tribond? Are the three of you happy? Does Glorianna's decree change anything for you?"

"Hell no." Duncan rested his hand on Moira's thigh. "Glorianna can't dictate who I love."

Jaden still seemed struck dumb, so she answered. "Other than the fact we have yet to speak the Vows and finish the Binding, yes, I'm happy."

His head lifted from his fist, his expression arrested. "Meaning that all three of you are now *Blackthorns*?"

"Um. Yes?" Moira had no clue where he was going with this, but she bet it would be an interesting ride to get there.

“Well, then.” The Hob simply purred with satisfaction. “Come to the Gray Palace as soon as you can.” He rubbed his hands together, looking strangely satisfied. “We have *plans* to make.”

“But—”

“Uh-uh, Mrs. Blackthorn. That wasn’t a request, you see.” He stood and stretched before leaning down to pat her cheek. The warmth that spread through her at his touch was startling. “I expect you sooner rather than later.” The delight in his eyes was frightening. “And so will Oberon when he hears.”

“Yes, sir.” She nodded, knowing no other answer would satisfy him. She might be used to him, but that didn’t mean he didn’t frighten the ever-loving crap out of her sometimes.

“Good. I’ll see you there soon, hmm?” The wind blew the Hob back out the window, slamming it shut behind him.

“Well.” Jaden cleared his throat. “When’s the next flight to Colorado?”

Duncan, pale and wide-eyed, turned to leave the bedroom. “I’ll go find out.”

“A *ghra*?” Moira bit her lip to keep from laughing.

“What?”

“You forgot something.”

“I have?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Duncan looked around the room. “What did I forget? My cell phone.”

Jaden had his face buried in his pillow, his shoulders shaking.

“Your pants.”

Chapter Ten

Duncan stood on the steps of the Gray Palace and tried not to shiver. Gray was probably the wrong word for it. Oberon had built himself a palatial house, it was true, but he'd built it to match the surrounding terrain. Built of wood and stone, the house easily topped four stories, with large glass windows that gleamed in the sun. The house had two wings that embraced the circular brick drive. Part of that drive had an offshoot to the right, where Duncan was certain the garage was. He could see some lights strung in the bushes by the front door, a nod to the human holiday.

They stepped out of the limo they'd found waiting for them at the airport, Jaden going first as always. Duncan frowned, only now realizing how often Jaden had tried to stand between him and any danger. He tapped Jaden's ass. "I think we're safe here."

He felt more than heard Jaden's grunt, but he moved out of Duncan's way. Duncan climbed out of the limo, watching with some amusement as Jaden held out his hand to help Moira out.

She took it and climbed out, her face lit with awe and not a little bit of greed. "Wow. Nice place."

"You like this? You should see his summer home."

Duncan had to hold back his start of surprise. Robin was seated on the roof of the limo, arms and legs akimbo, laughing at them. "Hello to you, too."

Robin's eyes went wide before he returned Duncan's greetings. "And to you, Mr. Blackthorn."

Duncan shook his head. "We decided our name would be Malmayne-Blackthorn."

"Have you completed the Vows, then?" Robin slid off the roof of the car, landing gracefully on his feet.

"Not yet." Moira was still insisting that her parents be present, but from the look on Robin's face time had just run out.

"Hmm." Robin threaded his arm through Moira's. "Shall we, my dear?"

"Let's." Moira let Robin lead her away.

"Shall we, my dear?" Jaden bowed and held out his elbow, his eyebrows wagging.

Duncan laughed and took his arm, then followed Robin and Moira up the stairs.

Robin was shaking his head. Duncan didn't know if the Hob was amused or not.

The front door opened ahead of them. There stood a man Duncan had only met twice, and both times had sent a shiver of fear and awe through him. Long white hair blew in the cold Colorado air. When Duncan had last seen the man it had been bound into a long tail that reached the man's knees. Gray eyes the

color of a cloudy sky watched them with little emotion. He was dressed in a black suit, with a black shirt and a silver striped tie. He was slender, built more along Jaden's lines than his own. He radiated a power that could burn if not held strictly in check. The immensity of the High King's control was awe inspiring.

King Oberon lifted one white brow and studied them. "You're late."

Robin bowed. "They got here as quickly as they could, sire."

Duncan heard the gentle rebuke in the Hob's voice and wondered at it.

Oberon turned that laser-like focus onto Robin. "Is it your fault that they're late?"

"No. If it was they would be more than merely a few minutes past the time. If *I* had been involved it would have been weeks." Robin shook his head. "Blame rush hour traffic rather than mischief, if you please."

Duncan saw Oberon's lips twitch. "What would be the fun in that?"

Robin heaved a heartfelt sigh. "Might as well blame me for Tunguska."

Oberon's lips definitely lifted into a smile. "You *were* to blame for that."

"Oh. Right." Robin waved his hand. "Still, you know why that happened."

"Yes. I do." The pair exchanged an enigmatic look that did nothing to assuage Duncan's renewed fear.

Duncan shivered. The 1908 explosion over the Tunguska region of Russia was something he still recalled with dread. Scientists believed a meteor or comet fragment exploded roughly three miles above the spot that had been decimated, but there was no solid proof of what had happened. It had the impact of roughly ten to fifteen *megatons* of TNT. Nothing had survived intact. The fallout from the explosion was seen around the world. Strange light could be seen in England, where he'd been staying before his extended trip to America. It was bright enough to read the newspaper by. When an expedition was finally sent by the Russians in 1927, the pictures of the devastation had been horrifying.

And Robin, the man currently holding on to Duncan's wife, had been responsible?

Duncan nudged Jaden. "*Is he safe?*"

Jaden frowned. "*About as safe as Oberon.*"

Which meant not very. King Oberon was known far and wide as a fair, if rather cold, being. He was a fierce warrior, the High King by both the decree of the gods and the might of his arm. Neither Glorianna nor the Dark Queen could override a decision from the High King, no matter what the reason for it. Oberon had been known to hand victories to both his ex-wife and Glorianna with a fairness none could fault.

Robin more than made up for Oberon's coldness, tugging Moira forward with a carefree smile, leaving Duncan and Jaden no choice but to follow. "My king, may I present the Blackthorns?"

Oberon studied them, leaving Duncan with the feeling he'd somehow been found lacking. He bowed. "Sire."

Jaden also bowed. "Sire."

None of Duncan's uneasiness was reflected in Jaden, immediately putting him at ease. Jaden had long ago spoken his vows before the High King, had presumably met him on numerous occasions. He seemed comfortable with Oberon, surprising Duncan. Moira smiled at the High King like he was some long lost friend.

There was more to either of lovers than he'd thought. Duncan couldn't be prouder of them.

Something in Oberon's expression lightened, surprising him. "Come in. It's freezing out there." Oberon held the door open and ushered them inside. "Welcome to the Gray Palace."

Duncan understood now why it was called that. The interior was as cool as the exterior had been warm. It was done in colors of white, silver and gray, all shades of gray. Very little color made its way into Oberon's palace. What color there was had the chaotic essence of the Hob written all over it, brilliant, randomly placed splashes of art both antique and modern. The few ornaments that decorated the hall were silver, except for one bright, chaotic star at the top of the white aluminum tree. Duncan had no doubts as to whom that star belonged to.

"Let me guess. You've put us in the gray room."

Moira slapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide, but it was too late. Oberon had clearly heard. He faced them, his expression quizzical. "Are all the Dunnes like you?"

Moira nodded. "Mostly. Ruby's worse."

Oberon nodded. "I can understand why Robin likes to visit, then."

The doorbell rang. Oberon, for the first time, showed emotion. He looked startled, and not a little annoyed. "Robin?"

"I didn't do it!" Robin turned and answered the door. There stood Leo, Ruby, Sean, Aileen, Shane and... Akane? Akane looked remarkably pissed off, her arm held firmly by Shane Dunne. "Well. What have we here?" Robin's shoulders shook. "Akane, did you do this?"

She growled out from between gritted teeth, "Do I *look* like I want to be here?"

"Hush now, sweet." Shane smiled sweetly at Akane. "You'll give the Hob a complex. He might even think you don't like him."

Robin threw his head back and laughed. "By the gods, your family becomes more delightful every time I meet them." He bowed over Aileen's hand. "What brings you here, my lady?"

Sean firmly removed his wife's hand from the rogue's grasp. "Shane said our daughter would say her vows this day and pledge herself before Oberon. We're here to support her."

Aileen nodded. "And pledge our own oaths, if need be." She lifted her head proudly. "The Dunnes stand behind their own."

The first hint of true warmth leeches into Oberon's expression. "Be welcome, then. You understand that they'll be giving oath under their married names?"

"Yes. We do."

Ruby was openly studying everything she could see. “Wow. This place could use a—”

Whatever she’d been about to say was cut off by her husband’s hand over her mouth. He was pale and almost shaking. “Don’t. Say. *Anything.*”

Ruby rolled her eyes but let her husband shush her.

Robin looked back at Oberon. “See what I mean?”

“Yes, I do. Are you sure none of them share your blood?”

“Only one does.”

“Which is why I’m allowing what you propose. It will certainly upset a few people once the deed is done.”

“Do you honestly care about that?”

Oberon smiled, the expression sending a cold shiver down Duncan’s spine. “No.”

“Well then.”

Duncan cleared his throat. “Do I want to know?”

Robin strolled over and clapped his shoulder. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

Oberon gestured and a small brownie stepped forward, dressed all in black. “Escort them to my throne room once their coats are seen to.”

The brownie bowed. “As you wish, sire.”

Oberon turned on his heel and strode away, that shimmering fall of pale hair swaying behind him.

Duncan took off his coat and handed it to the butler. The rest of the family did the same. They followed the butler down the gray and silver hallway toward a set of double doors. The butler paused, hands on the handles. “The Gray Throne. When his majesty is in there he’s all business.”

He hadn’t been before? Duncan nodded and the butler pulled the doors open, and a wave of sound slammed into them. The court was filled with glittering Sidhe, brown-skinned brownies, pale-haired sylphs, pale-skinned vampires, hideous hobgoblins, and an assortment of fae, both lesser and greater, more than Duncan could ever remember in one place. Even some nymphs and naiads were there, far from their watery home, their brightly colored hair vibrant against their gleaming gowns and suits. Before them all sat Oberon in his robes of office on the Gray Throne, his silver crown atop his head. His hands rested loosely on the arms of the chair, and his expression was cool, his lips unsmiling.

The Majordomo cracked his staff of office once, twice on the floor and announced them to the court. “Lord Robin Goodfellow, also known as Puck, also known as the Hob.” Robin handed Moira off to Jaden and strode into the room, stopping just short of the steps leading up to the throne. He bowed to the High King, then turned and motioned for the Majordomo to continue. “The Blackthorn family, Lord Jaden, Lord Duncan and Lady Moira, late of the Malmayne clan of the White Court.” Duncan hid his flinch as he and Jaden flanked Moira and proceeded into the room. They halted at the bottom of the stairs at Robin’s barely-there wave. “The Dunne family, Lord Sean, Lady Aileen, Lord Leo and Lady Ruby, and Lord Shane, of the

Dunne clan of the White Court.” Sean’s eyebrows rose at his sudden elevation to the peerage, but he took his wife’s arm and the Dunnes stepped down en masse, Shane still clutching Akane’s arm. “Lady Akane Russo, Knight of Oberon and daughter of the Seer.”

Duncan saw Jaden jerk. Apparently he hadn’t known that little tidbit.

“Thanks a lot, Harold,” Akane muttered as she swept into the room.

“Don’t mention it,” the Majordomo muttered back.

When Robin waved them forward they moved, Duncan, Moira and Jaden leading the way. They stopped at the foot of the stairs leading to the throne. The men bowed, the ladies curtsied.

“Rise.”

They rose.

“Robin Goodfellow has apprised us of the situation between Duncan Malmayne, once Lord of clan Malmayne. Glorianna has officially declared the new lord to be Henri Malmayne.”

Duncan heard Jaden voice a soft hiss. He’d thought Glorianna would at least keep Henri away from a leadership position after his conversation with her. Apparently he’d been wrong.

Oberon’s gaze bore into Duncan. It took all he had not to shiver under the power in that one look. “I understand that you wish to give your oaths to the Gray Court.”

“Yes, sire.”

“All of you?”

Duncan turned and faced the Dunnes, stunned to find them nodding. “Aye, we do, sire.” Sean looked to his wife and smiled. “After the attack on our farm we requested aid from the White. That aid has been refused. The White believes the attack may have been justified due to the presence of Jaden Blackthorn.”

Duncan’s jaw clenched. Now more than ever he regretted ever giving Glorianna his oath. The woman was rabid when it came to vampires.

Oberon showed no signs that he was affected in any way by Sean’s pronouncement. “Then let those oaths be said, here before the court.”

The Dunnes and the Blackthorns sank to their knees. Only Akane and Jaden remained standing, having already given their oaths.

Duncan began, having been the only one to ever give oaths before a royal. The others repeated his words, following them faithfully, even the fully human Ruby. “I hereby renounce all ties to the White Lady, Queen Glorianna, Queen of the White Court, Lady of the Seelie. I declare myself Oberon’s man from this day forth, in honor and in faith, having no other oaths to forswear. By the gods I pledge my loyalty to the Gray Court, High King Oberon and his descendants.” Oberon’s eyes turned icy gray; he had no queen, and it was said he had no wish for one. “I declare myself the sworn servant of the Gray Lord, High King Oberon, King of the Gray Court, Lord over the Fae. I pledge my sword and my honor to uphold the laws of

the Court. I and my house will abide by the laws handed down by the High King. I will faithfully perform all services required by Crown and Court. So swear I, Duncan Malmayne-Blackthorn.”

Moira’s hand clasped his as he spoke his new name. It was surprisingly good to declare himself Jaden’s before the entire court.

Oberon smiled for the first time. “I, High King Oberon, the Gray Lord, Lord of the Fae, hereby hear your oaths and accept them in the name of Crown and Court. I declare you our loyal servant, sworn to our bidding. From this day forth my sword shall defend you, my magic protect you, and my wrath be mighty should you fail of your duty. All former oaths to the White are hereby null and void, by my power as High King. So swear I, Oberon, High King.”

Duncan quivered as the weight of Oberon’s magic settled over him. He was now truly Gray Court, bound to Oberon, no longer a Seelie Sidhe Lord but just another disenfranchised Gray Court Sidhe.

Part of him mourned the loss of his clan. The rest rejoiced that he could openly be with his mates without fear of reprisals.

“Please stand.” The newly minted Gray Court liegemen stood. Oberon’s gaze landed on Duncan. “I understand that one of Glorianna’s, and clan Malmayne’s, objections to your continued leadership was your tribond with both Moira Dunne and Jaden Blackthorn?”

Duncan nodded. “Yes, sire.”

“And that Jaden Blackthorn, Knight of Oberon, has completed the mating with both yourself and Moira Dunne?”

“Yes, sire.”

“The Sidhe Vows and Binding have yet to take place, officially making you all Blackthorns?”

Duncan had no idea where Oberon was going with this. Besides, he’d embraced his new name when he’d given his oath. The new name declared his fresh start, at least in his mind, while also acknowledging his past. “Yes, sire.”

Oberon took a deep breath and viewed the court behind them. “It has long been my understanding that there are those in my court who feel a lack, who feel that, clanless as they are, they might be at a disadvantage.” He stared over their heads, but Duncan was not going to turn around and see who he addressed. “While I myself am clanless, I have yet to feel this lack, for I consider all my Court to be my clan. However, due to certain circumstances, Robin Goodfellow has declared Jaden Blackthorn of his blood. This can, of course, be verified by both Robin and myself.” Oberon turned his silver gaze on Jaden. “I can see the blood running through him, and I detect Robin’s presence. Do any wish to dispute the blood claim Robin has made?”

Silence. He could sense Jaden’s shock. Where and how had the Hob given him blood? Jaden wasn’t a child of the Hob. The glimmer, the spark the Hob’s children tended to have wasn’t there.

Duncan blinked and drew in a breath. The spark *was* there, deep in Jaden's dark eyes, changing the red flame of his hunger to the Hob's iridescent green. "*Jaden?*"

Jaden stared at him. "*You've got me.*"

"The claim Robin has placed on Jaden makes Jaden a Lord under our laws."

Duncan stiffened. He had an inkling of what Oberon was going to say next and almost laughed. Yes, this *would* cause some outrage in certain circles.

"In order to fill the lack of clan for those who have given their oaths to Crown and Court, we hereby declare a new Clan, one open at the discretion of the new Lord, to all those who petition for entrance. This clan will be mixed, as the mating of the leading members is mixed, of all races." Oberon waved his hand. "Step forward, Lord Jaden, and give your oath of office."

Jaden gulped and stepped forward. He knelt before the High King.

Oberon stood and withdrew his sword. Duncan hadn't even seen the king's sword belted at his side. It was possible Oberon had hidden its presence or merely used his unique magic to call it forth. No one knew the full extent of Oberon's magic. Hell, Duncan wasn't even sure what *race* the High King was. Could he be the last of the Tuatha Dé?

Duncan closed his eyes and dictated Jaden's oath to him. "*In the presence of both King and Court, I henceforth swear myself to Clan Blackthorn.*"

Jaden, smiling, repeated the words. He allowed his Seeming to drop, the bright red flames of his dark eyes dotted with iridescent green. His nails brushed against the cold tile of the ground, and his fangs pressed against his lips.

"I promise to exercise my authority over my Clan with respect to the laws of the Gray Court. I swear to administer justice to and for each subject under my rule without malice. I will henceforth conduct myself with the good of the Clan proper always at the forefront of my mind."

"So swear I, Jaden Malmayne-Blackthorn, Knight of Oberon."

Duncan couldn't keep the smile off his face. His once lost vampire was now his lord.

The sword touched down on Jaden's shoulder. "I, King Oberon, hear your oaths. From this day forth, let Clan Blackthorn declare you its leader until such time as you pass from this world, are declared unable to lead, or the clan as a whole request your removal." Oberon lifted the blade. "Rise, Lord Jaden, and greet your clan."

Jaden rose and faced his bondmates, looking startled when the Dunnes behind Duncan raised a cheer. Duncan's chest swelled with pride when all the Dunnes, even Leo, knelt before Jaden.

"*Help me.*" Jaden looked at Duncan. "*What do I do?*"

Duncan took Moira's hand and moved to stand next to Jaden. It was time. He cupped Jaden's cheek. Moira, knowing what was coming next, kissed Jaden's other cheek, her hand resting over his heart, the three of them linked the way they were always meant to be. Jaden nodded, his mouth trembling. Moira had

tears in her eyes, making them sparkle like emeralds. Duncan's own eyes were moist. He'd waited so long for this moment. He let his human Seeming drop. He felt the powerful Sidhe magic, the only one they could truly claim, bend to his will. Bands of light circled him, lethal to anyone but his chosen ones.

Moira's face lit up at the sight, and with a sigh she dropped her own Seeming. Her lights were not nearly as bright or as numerous as his own, but the unusual dappling, like leaves in sunlight, made them uniquely her own.

He could feel Jaden's wish that he too could join the display the Sidhe were putting forth. *"You've already bound us to you, amoureux. No light show can change that."*

Moira wrapped her arm around Jaden's waist. *"Now it's our turn to bind you, a ghra."*

Together they began to recite the Vows, three voices blending into one. "I vow that from this day forward you shall not walk alone. My strength is your protection, my heart is your shelter, and my arms are your home. I shall serve you in all those ways that you require. I pledge to you my living and my dying, each equally in your care. Yours is the name I whisper at the close of each day and the eyes into which I smile each morning. I give you all that is mine to give. My heart and my soul I pledge to you. You are my Chosen One, you are my mate, and you are bound to me for eternity."

Silver light merged with green, both Duncan and Moira's Sidhe powers blending, forming the Bond between not only themselves but Jaden as well.

Somehow, Jaden responded. Something within the new lord, some force unknown to any of them, reached out and joined the silver and green light, a shadow that took those sparks and wove them together into a whole. Whether it was a gift from the Hob's blood or some unique power the tribond gave Jaden, Duncan didn't know or care. He could feel Jaden's awe and joy, and that was enough for him.

The entire court gasped as their joined power circled the three of them before spearing into the lovers in a display of light and shadow the Gray Court would talk about for centuries.

Epilogue

Akane stared out the window at the Colorado night sky and wondered how quickly she could get the hell out of there. Robin had yet to answer her request to investigate the Malmayne clan, and until he did she was sort of in limbo. She'd already been here longer than she'd planned. Spending Christmas at the Court was not something she relished, but when she objected Oberon had merely smiled. Next thing she knew she was in a room in his home and sharing French toast with a Naiad while a Satyr glared at them both.

She was still trying to figure *that* one out.

At least she'd managed to have someone bring one of her cars to her. Duncan had promised that he'd have a replacement car waiting for her at his house once he returned to Nebraska. The new Clan Blackthorn leaders were still meeting and greeting those who wished to join the clan. Not surprising that most of those were vampires. Akane snorted. It was about time a mostly vampiric clan had been formed. She bet over time others would join, but for now they held back and allowed their clanless brothers and sisters to step up first.

Hell, Akane had considered pledging herself to her friend's clan, but the thought of having to bow down to Jade just made her laugh. She was thrilled for him, really she was, but the two of them still had to work together. No, she'd remain his partner and protect him the way she always had.

He'd know that at least one person would have his back out on the field, where his family couldn't be.

She sighed. She couldn't wait to get back out there. Her fingers were starting to itch. There had to be something more going on than Charles had known. The Black Court wouldn't get this involved in nothing more than the fall of a clan, even one as prestigious as the Malmaynes. *No. The Dark Queen wants something specific. All I have to do is figure out what.*

"You'd almost think you were one of those werewolves, the way you're staring at the moon."

Akane closed her eyes. Somewhere deep inside she'd known he'd show up. "Go away, Jethro."

His breath caressed her ear. "Now why would I do that? There's no where else I want to be."

She shivered. "Go. *Away.*"

"Is that any way to treat the man who's offering you a ride back to Nebraska?"

She glared up at him. "Why would I be going back with you?"

"Because Robin's going to give you permission to investigate the Malmaynes with Jaden. If you're doing that, you need to be where Henri and his lovely ladies are currently holed up." He gave her a wide grin, rocking back and forth on his heels. His thumbs were jammed into his front pockets. "Remember, they

still want a Dunne child, which means my family is still in danger.” He leaned forward. “I sure do look forward to being protected by you, Miz Akane.”

She gritted her teeth. He was so... so... She almost rocked back herself.

Bamboozling me. The son of a bitch is trying to fake me out.

She'd watched him give his oath to Oberon. His smooth grace and liquid voice had rolled over her, turning her insides to pure, aroused mush. He'd put most of the Sidhe lords in the room to shame despite the worn denim jeans and faded work shirt he'd worn. She'd damn near melted into a puddle right then and there. Not once had “Jethro” made an appearance.

Well. Two could play *that* game.

“No thanks, Jethro. I prefer not to fly with Chicken Coop Airlines.” She moved around him, barely brushing by him. The contact nearly sent her into a tizzy, his heated, earthy scent invading her until all she could smell was him. Well, she was determined not to be the only one melting, damn it. “I think I'll fly back in Robin's private jet.” She ran her fingers up his arm, trying not to moan at the feeling of thick muscle. “I'm sure he won't mind one little bit.” She smiled up at him and sashayed out of the room, closing the door softly behind her. For all of two seconds she honestly thought she'd gotten the better of him. She might have gone on believing that if she hadn't heard his amused chuckle just before the latch engaged, damn him.

Akane damn near growled. He was driving her insane, and if she didn't get away from him she was going to do something she'd regret. No way was she tying herself to an aggravating, hot as sin, know-it-all Nebraska farm boy.

No. *Way*.

Shane watched his intended saunter out of the room and chuckled quietly to himself.

She didn't know it yet, but she was his.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and dialed a number that would have had his fiery dragon screeching in outrage. “She's on her way back to Nebraska.”

“Good. You know what happens next.”

He smiled. He did indeed. He'd known the moment he saw Akane Russo sitting there in her car, doing her best to look innocent and vulnerable. He'd known better from the start.

Akane Russo was in no way innocent or vulnerable. Not by a long shot.

“Take care of my daughter, Shane.”

“I will. I swear it.” He allowed that small touch of magic to enter his voice. If anyone would sense it *she* would. He hung up and stuck his hands in his pockets. Whistling softly, Shane Joloun Dunne left the room, intent on hunting down his mate.

About the Author

Dana Marie Bell wrote her first short story when she was thirteen years old. She attended the High School for Creative and Performing Arts for creative writing, where freedom of expression was the order of the day. When her parents moved out of the city and placed her in a Catholic high school for her senior year, she tried desperately to get away, but the nuns held fast, and she graduated with honors despite herself.

Dana has lived primarily in the Northeast (Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware, to be precise), with a brief stint on the US Virgin Island of St. Croix. She lives with her soul mate and husband Dusty, their two maniacal children, an evil, ice-cream stealing cat and a bull terrier that thinks it's a Pekinese.

You can learn more about Dana at www.danamariebell.com or contact her at danamariebell@gmail.com.

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To hold onto his love, he must release his beast.

Bear Necessities

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Halle Shifters, Book 1

Once a Bear sets his mind on a mission, it's best to stay out of his way. Alexander "Bunny" Bunsun is that Bear. Something's not right with his cousin Chloe, and he's come to Halle, PA, to sort it out, turn his Harley around and head home to Oregon. Until an enticing scent lures him into the local tattoo shop.

There she is. An inked, Southern-drawled she-Wolf with lime-green hair. His perfect mate.

Tabitha Garwood's rotten day just got worse. Her Outcast status makes her a target for harassment with alarming regularity. And now, in the middle of a root touch-up, looking like a half-melted Skittle, she's met her destined mate. The only upside? She finally has a protector in the form of a huge, tattooed, shaved-head Bear who vibrates with carefully restrained power.

When Chloe is left for dead and Tabby is threatened, only Alex can keep his growing family safe. Giving Tabby the loving home she needs, though, could come at a price—Alex must give up the control he's worked a lifetime to attain.

Which means someone could die at the hands—and claws—of his beast.

Warning: This novel contains explicit sex, graphic language, a hunky Bear named Bunny and... Yes. I said a Bear named Bunny. I don't know about you but I'm not brave enough to make fun of it.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Bear Necessities:

"Ohmigod, ohmigod." Tabby pulled her hair, staring into her closet. It was six forty-five and her mate would be here any minute, she didn't know his name and she had nothing to wear.

"Little black dress." Cyn stuck her head in Tabby's bedroom, grinning at the pile of clothing around Tabby's feet. "Can't go wrong with a little black dress."

"Guh." The panic was threatening to tear Tabby apart. She stared at the three black dresses hanging in her closet, her hand moving between them like a demented butterfly.

Glory's head peeked in from the other side of the doorway. "The sleeveless one."

"Uh?" She held up her sleeveless black dress, the one with the red belt and matching shoes.

Two heads bobbed in agreement.

Tabby stripped, more than used to being naked in front of her roommates. Hell, when she'd first moved in with them, they'd been shocked at how easy she felt being nude. Glory had actually asked her if she was gay and trying to tempt them to "the dark side". She'd giggled and said that she might be susceptible to temptation if the dark side had chocolate. Tabby had just shaken her head and put some clothes on. She'd spent so long as a Wolf, she'd forgotten some of the basic parts of being human, like

pants. The first time she'd used a toilet after so many years had been an interesting experience, something Mrs. Anderson still chuckled about.

When Cyn and Glory had found out what she was, they'd freaked a little. They hadn't accepted her immediately. In fact, there'd been another girl, Brit, who'd worked at Living Art. Brit had left, refusing to believe what she'd seen the night Tabby, drunk off her ass for the first time in her life, let her Wolf loose in the middle of the apartment. She'd gone so far as to quit her job when Glory and Cyn refused to fire her or kick her out of their apartment. But Glory and Cyn, after the initial shock had passed (and after, they claimed, they wiped up the dog drool), had accepted her without reservations. Hell, they'd mocked her once the hangover had passed. There was still a huge bag of Kibbles N' Bits in the pantry the bitches refused to throw away "just in case".

If she thought they'd take it, she'd make them Pack in a heartbeat. She missed having that connection, the knowledge that there were others for her to rely on without a shadow of a doubt. Part of her wondered if her dipshit ex had ever told his father the truth, or if he'd shrugged and let it go. Let her go.

Tabby shook her head and reached for her hairbrush, smoothing down her hair. That didn't matter now. Her mate would be here any minute. She slicked on some berry gloss and stared at herself in the mirror. Then she stuck out her tongue and made a face. She was so nervous, her Wolf was whining. She slipped her feet into the red high heels, grabbed her favorite purse and headed for the living room. "Well?"

Cyn circled her finger. "Twirl."

Tabby twirled.

Glory wolf-whistled. "See you at work tomorrow."

Cyn snickered and threw a bunch of condoms at her. "You'll need these."

Tabby swallowed. "I'm gonna throw up." Nausea roiled in her belly. She bent and picked up the condoms just as the doorbell rang.

Glory had the door open before Tabby could hide the packets. "C'mon in!"

In stepped the hottie from the store. He wore a green shirt that really emphasized his hazel eyes, dark wash jeans that looked painted onto his thighs and thick-soled black boots. Now that she was upright, she could see how tall he was. He towered over her, the top of her head barely reaching his upper lip, even in her four-inch heels. She'd hit his chin in her bare feet. His bald head gleamed, his jaw clean-shaven. She could see the tattoo that circled his biceps and her fingers itched to trace the design. In his hand, he held a daffodil.

My favorite flower. How did he know? Tabby smiled, knowing her mouth was trembling. She couldn't remember the last time someone had given her flowers. "For me?"

He held it out, a smile on his full lips. "Hello, Tabby."

"Thank you." She reached for the daffodil.

He coughed. "I'll take those." He reached over and removed the condoms from her hand, grinning at her embarrassed squawk. "It's okay, honey. I'm just glad one of us is, um, prepared." He eyed the condoms. "Very prepared." He unrolled them, one eyebrow rising in disbelief. "And optimistic."

Glory was practically doubled over with laughter. Tabby's face was beet red. She snatched the condoms back with her free hand, snarling as one got left behind in his big paw. She could hear Cyn snuffling and snorting behind her and just knew they were practically choking on their laughter.

She turned to her two roommates with a smile. "Don't make me forget I'm housebroken." They stopped, but from the way they were clinging together, Tabby figured it was only a matter of time before one of them broke again. She turned back to her new mate. "And you, whose name I don't even know." She smiled at Mr. Chocolate. "Thank you for the flower. My name's Tabitha Garwood."

Mr. Sin held out his paw, the condom miraculously gone. "Bunny." She wondered if he'd dropped it or shoved it into his pocket for later.

Wait. "Bunny," she repeated carefully.

"Alexander Bunsun, but everyone calls me Bunny." He grinned.

She sniffed. Nope, his scent is definitely Bear.

"Are you laughing at my name?" Bunny's hands went to his hips, but she could tell he wasn't pissed by the way his lips quirked up.

She blinked. "Yes."

He coughed, but she could tell he was trying not to laugh. "Dinner?" He held out his arm.

She gave him her sweetest smile and took it. "Yes."

"Hold on." Glory stopped them by placing her hand on Bunny's arm, her expression worried. For all that Glory liked to flirt like mad, when it came down to actual dating she could be a real worrywart.

Bunny chucked her under the chin. "I'll take care of her. My word on it."

Glory studied him, and Bunny stood still, allowing her intense scrutiny. Glory relaxed and nodded, looking relieved. Tabby wasn't sure she felt the same.

Resisting two magical mischief makers definitely wasn't in the job description.

Vanessa Unveiled

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Vanessa Darby, a bounty hunter and tracker for the Veil Alliance League, figures things can't get any crappier than her car breaking down on a deserted highway. Until the two dimension-hopping renegades she's been assigned to capture lure her to their magical love nest in the woods and entangle her in a web of seduction.

How the hell is she supposed to resist a pair of gorgeous male pookas who possess a wicked talent for bringing the sexy?

Rand and Braeden have searched more than three centuries for their one true bond mate. Now that Vanessa's been dropped into their arms, they have no intention of giving her up. Even if it means agreeing to her terms: If they can't persuade her within forty-eight hours that the three of them belong together, they'll give themselves over to the authorities. But convincing a woman who doesn't believe in love, or the concept of forever, is no easy feat. Particularly with one doozy of a dirty secret from their past waiting to trip them up.

Warning: Two hotter-than-should-be-legal pookas sexin' it up with each other and the stubborn woman they love. One magical hotel in the woods that isn't exactly what it seems. And a unicorn who will forever tarnish the image of the species.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Vanessa Unveiled:

Rand sensed the exact moment the emotional shift occurred within Vanessa. An aching sweet note of longing sang from her soul, calling to him. He glanced at Braeden, his mate's rapt stare verifying that he'd also received the summoning. Braeden jumped to his feet, but Rand shook his head in warning. It was too soon. Beneath Vanessa's soulful yearning, a dark specter of fear still lurked. He could detect it skulking in the shadows of her mind, guarding its treasure-trove of negativity. Until they discovered what fed that phantom its power, and destroyed it, they needed to handle Vanessa gently.

"So how did you two meet, anyway?"

He met Vanessa's curious gaze. "At the annual fairy ball held in Titania's honor."

Her eyes grew large. "The queen of the fairies? You've met her? What is she like?"

"Very old and very crabby. But she throws a hell of a party." Braeden began gathering the dishes and Rand quickly stood to offer a hand. Grunting, Braeden waved him off. "You owe me. Go on and finish telling Vanessa about how you fell in love with me at first sight."

It was Rand's turn to grunt. "You have a bloody warped sense of history. The way I recall it, you fell in love with *me* at first sight. Ditched that big-breasted druid right on the dance floor and followed me into the powder room, where I distinctly remember you offered to unzip my trousers with your teeth."

"The druid!" Braeden dropped one of the pans into the sink with a clatter. "Damn, almost forgot about good ole Martina. Too bad she always smelled like a damp basement and talked to trees."

Rand gave Vanessa a dry look behind Braeden's back. "And he wonders why I'm considered the charming one."

Vanessa's smile was so beautiful, it took every ounce of willpower he possessed not to yank her off the stool and kiss the living daylights out of her. "Your love affair started in a bathroom? How oddly romantic."

"There was nothing romantic about it. Brae was merely a horny little bugger."

Braeden tossed another pan into the sink. "Now who's spreading lies?" He peered over his shoulder at Vanessa. "Back then, Rand's skill at weaseling his way beneath any skirt was legendary. Clearly *he* was the hornier of the two of us."

"Debatable."

Vanessa cleared her throat with a pointed cough. "Judging from the way you both are now, perhaps you should just call it a draw."

Rand muzzled his laugh. "Very diplomatic of you."

She rested her chin on her upturned palm and eyed him. "I don't know how to phrase this in a way that won't sound incredibly nosy and blunt, but you both mentioned past *female* relationships. Does that mean...?"

"We were each other's first," he answered in response to the unspoken curiosity in her gaze. "I'd had no interest or attraction to other males before Brae. Other than him, I still don't. But when it comes to the calling of a bond mate, the heart doesn't get caught up in the sticky nuances of gender. It simply wants the person destined to make it whole." He locked her into his stare, knowing full well she'd see a reflection of the feelings he held inside his heart. She averted her gaze and he tried not to let the disappointment crush him. Thank the goddesses he'd never been one to back down from anything, because Vanessa Darby was the queen mother of all challenges.

Apparently reading the sudden tension in the room, Braeden tossed a dishtowel in Rand's direction. Taking the hint, he grabbed the cloth and joined Braeden at the sink. With the two of them working together, they cleaned up the dishes in record time, and with minimal complaints from Braeden regarding Rand's drying abilities, no less. Rand pivoted back toward the island, fully expecting to find Vanessa snickering over their little bicker fest. Her stool was empty, her discarded clothes and boots nowhere to be seen.

Paranoia and dread kicked up his heart rate. Surely she wouldn't attempt another unchaperoned stroll through the hotel. Not after what happened last time. Unless...

Recalling the wall of doubt she'd erected when he'd spoken of bond mates, renewed panic crashed through him. "*Shit.*"

"What?"

Tuning out Braeden, Rand bolted from the kitchen. He was halfway to the elevator when he noticed Vanessa standing just beyond the entrance to the bedroom, her clothes and boots scattered near her feet. Relief instantly blanketed him. Changing course, he walked toward the archway. Vanessa remained so enthralled by whatever held her attention she didn't even look up as he approached. Halting behind her, he peered over her shoulder at the object she was busy inspecting, his mouth tugging into a grin. "Reconsidering my earlier suggestion, sweetest?"

Vanessa jerked and the double-ended dildo in her hand went flying. Her cheeks bright red, she glanced up at him. "I was trying to figure out if that's a baton or...something else."

"What do you think?"

She chuckled, her face still wearing its adorable tint of scarlet. "Um, that you and Braeden should provide *me* a demonstration?"

"Naughty girl." He nuzzled her hair, the soft note of jasmine filling his nose and firing his ever-persistent hunger for her to full blast. "Tempting as that might be, I have a counter suggestion."

"Such as?" The innocence in her tone clashed with the sinful curiosity flashing in her eyes.

He slid his hands around her torso and cupped her breasts, his thumbs teasing her nipples. "Letting me fuck you."

"Hmm, didn't I already let you do that?"

"No. I just sat there while you had your lusty way with me."

"Poor baby. Must have been a hardship enduring all of that."

"Hard doesn't begin to cover it." Rubbing his cock against the dip of her spine for emphasis, he tweaked her nipples gently, making her squirm and gasp. "So what do you say?"

She turned in his arms and he lowered his head to steal a kiss. Before his mouth captured its quarry, she stood on tiptoe and licked the clan marks tattooed on his pectoral, catching him off-guard. An intense shiver ripped through him, nearly knocking him flat on his ass. She tossed him an impish grin. "I've wanted to do that since yesterday."

Braeden's devilish chuckle sounded behind them. "Uh-oh. She's discovered your weak spot. There'll be no living with her now."

Vanessa's eyes widened. "Weak spot? Do tell."

Rand groaned. "One more word out of you, Brae, and you're a dead—"

“The tats. They’re extremely sensitive to the touch,” Braeden explained, ignoring Rand’s growl of warning. “Drives him fucking crazy when you play with them. And I do mean crazy.”

“Really?” Vanessa’s scrutiny returned to the symbols on his chest.

Not trusting the gleam in her irises, he stepped back, knocking into Braeden. His traitorous lover bracketed his arms around his waist, keeping him pinned in place for Vanessa’s roving hands. Her fingertips skated over the tattoos, eliciting his helpless groan. Expression loaded with feminine triumph, she followed the swirling, metallic green curlicue design with her tongue. His head lolled back, the sensations skittering beneath his skin a mix of exquisite pleasure and pure torture. He didn’t know whether to beg her to stop or continue. Not that it mattered. Clearly she possessed her own agenda. She lapped away at him like a mischievous kitten, her tormenting licks growing bolder thanks to Braeden’s not-so-helpful encouragement.

His breathing erratic, Rand locked his knees in an effort to keep from staggering to the floor in an embarrassing heap. “You both are going to pay dearly for this.” He jumped when Braeden sucked on his earlobe. All thoughts of retribution fled as Vanessa’s mouth descended. The tip of her wicked little tongue circled his areola, causing his nipple to harden. Along with other parts of him. As if his cock wasn’t already stiff enough to rudder a ship, it swelled, bumping into Vanessa’s belly. She wiggled against him—earning another of his groans—before she slid down his body, her mouth engulfing his cock in one swift stroke. Scalding pleasure washed over him. “*Fuck.*”

Displaying no timidity, she worked him over, her tongue coasting along every ridge and vein of his shaft before she concentrated exclusively on the head.

“Damn, she might even be better than me.” Braeden’s husky laugh floated past his ear. “Darlin’, don’t forget to show his balls some proper love. You’ll have him wrapped around your pinky.”

Humming a response around his engorged flesh, she cupped his testicles and he quickly widened his stance to keep his knees from buckling. He directed a growl at Braeden. “Just wait till it’s your turn, and I’m the one plotting your torture.” An image sprang into his mind—Vanessa’s pussy gripping his shaft while she sucked Braeden’s cock. Lust bulletted through him. He wanted to make that fantasy a reality. Now.

One man claims her by day, another by night. Together they lay claim to her heart.

Ravenous

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Annabelle Whittington sails toward Jamaica, and marriage to a wealthy plantation owner, on winds of hope. Hope that she hasn't saved her virginity only to be doomed to proper English wifehood, never to fully satisfy her sexual curiosity. Then the sails of the pirate ship *Howling Hades* appear on the horizon.

Captain Galerius' demands are simple: in exchange for her blood to slake his eternal thirst, and her body to quell his voracious lust, he will guarantee safe passage. Except his motives are less than pure. In his hold is another prisoner, Ian Drummond, who must soon be replaced...with Annabelle.

But Ian has plans of his own, and they don't include giving up his lover so easily. And, once he gets a taste of Annabelle's sweet blend of innocence and boldness, he can't imagine living without either one of them.

Annabelle, sensing the tortured soul beneath the monster, refuses to let Galerius intimidate her—and finds an unexpected ally in the infuriating, maddening Ian. As danger threatens the *Hades*, she is faced with a choice. Return to her life of duty, or embrace her spirit of adventure...and sail the high seas with the men who have captured her heart.

Warning: Avast! Here be hot vampire pirate lovin' that won't be coming to a theater near you any time soon; a comely wench who be givin' "boring" the old heave-ho. Cool rum drink recommended.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Ravenous:

Annabelle gasped as Galerius's mouth covered hers. She pressed her fists against his chest, determined to push him away, willing herself to with every second that passed, but the will of her morals lost out to the will of her body.

His lips were shockingly cold, and his tongue tasted of wine. Her hands moved from fists to claws as she gripped his shoulders. For a moment, she thought of the fiancé she had not met, the only man who had a right to do this to her, and she felt a stab of guilt. But she did not know him, and she did not know if she was safe at the hands of this pirate, and—

Yes, that was it! Surely it was not her sinful curiosity that drove her to press harder against Galerius, not the feverish fantasies she indulged in night after night. She did this to protect herself, and to save her life!

She couldn't really believe that, could she?

No.

She pushed back, caught him unawares so that he released her. "No, I'm sorry, I can't—"

"I saw into your mind, Annabelle." He stalked forward, pulling the robe from his shoulders. "I know what you dream of doing with a man."

He could not possibly... She shook her head. "I think of no such thing."

"Oh, but you do." He took her hand and lifted her wrist to his mouth, flicking his tongue over the pulse that leaped there. "And I promise you, there is so much more than what you've imagined."

When she opened her mouth to protest, all that came out was a whimper.

Galerius released her arm and stepped back, finger to his lips as though having an epiphany. "Perhaps I am driving too hard a bargain. How about this, then? The next time we are to sail across the sea, I will make it my personal mission to find your betrothed and deliver you safely to him. Do you find that fair?"

It was too easy, and very suspicious. "Do you often travel across the sea?"

"Of course. We are pirates, after all."

"Fine, then." Her answer was too easy, and very suspicious as well, but she refused to dwell on it. Still, he had not made a move toward her. "I agree. Proceed."

He chuckled, and a hot blush crept up her face. "It would be easier if you took off your gown."

"Oh." She felt foolish and suddenly not as eager to continue with what they had begun. She had supposed she would be naked, but she had imagined it would happen in the heat of passion, as if by magic, so she would not have time to think about it. To remove her clothing now, while he watched her, would be embarrassing and...

Impossible, she realized. On the boat, Mrs. Grimble had helped her with her stays when she dressed and undressed, and the woman tied such ridiculous little knots. "I can't," she said quietly, relief and disappointment mixing in her voice. "I suppose that's—"

Before she could finish, he dropped to his knees in front of her and pulled her gown open, flinging pins across the room and ripping her stomacher. Annabelle gasped. She would not deny she had imagined having her clothes torn off in a moment of passion, but in practice it was a bit unnerving. More so when he reached for a knife on the table and pointed it to her midsection. She yelped and jumped back, and he growled, "Be quiet, I won't hurt you." A horrible tearing sound alerted her to the demise of the ribbons cinching her corset, and at once she stood in the short shift and drawers beneath. The gasp she uttered then was one of relief, not anticipation.

A smile curved his mouth, and he tossed the blade aside. "In my day, women did not wear such ridiculous undergarments."

"And I shan't, now," Annabelle said, but she could not inject appropriate dismay knowing the vile garment was destroyed. "I suppose I will have to make do until we reach Jamaica."

"If we reach Jamaica," he corrected her. "And I don't want to hear any more talk of it. While you are in my company, you are to think of me, not some far-off man whom you have never met." He advanced on

her, backed her up to the edge of the bunk. “And when you return to him, I guarantee you will still be thinking of me.”

Her knees turned to water and she collapsed, chest constricting with a mixture of fear and excitement. Her nipples grew tight beneath her shift, the dark pink of them showing prominently against the sheer muslin of the garment. With one hand at the small of her back, he stroked the side of one breast. Her breath hitched, and she knew then why he supported her so. Without his arm strong around her back, she would collapse from sheer delight. His smile was almost a smirk as he lowered his mouth, maddeningly slowly. “My, but you are innocent.”

“I’m not—” she began to protest, but his lips closed over the peak of one breast through the fabric, and her back arched like a drawn bow. Never had she felt such intense sensation. She had not been able to imagine what this would be like, not properly; she understood that now. The shivers of apprehension and arousal raced toward her most secret place, the part of her she had stroked beneath the covers while indulging in her most naughty fantasies. All from the touch of his mouth. What would happen when— No, she would not think of that. Her skin grew hot just imagining it.

“It has been a very long time since I’ve had a virgin,” he murmured against her flesh. “The blood is too sweet for my tastes. But I forgot how much fun this is.” His palm snaked beneath her shift, gliding across her belly and up to cup her breast.

She shuddered as a rush of heat flooded her core, swelling her untouched flesh and setting a nearly unbearable tension there. She pressed her thighs together and arched her back, moaning. Galerius slid up her body to cover her mouth with his again, his hands bunching the shift and raising it. He broke their kiss only long enough to pull the garment over her head and discard it, then pressed her to him again. When her exposed skin met his, she moaned and opened her legs, raising one to hook around his waist.

He laughed low in his throat and eased her leg back down. “Do not rush me.” His cold, wet mouth moved from hers to kiss her chin, her jaw, suck her earlobe. Annabelle was powerless to do anything but clutch at his shoulders and gasp. He laved a trail down her neck, bit her shoulder gently. He smoothed his hands down her arms, raising gooseflesh there. Every movement he made brought him in contact with a new part of her body, a new part to be set alight with sensation. When his mouth closed over her breast again, she shrieked and writhed beneath him. When he stroked her other breast, rolled the nipple between his fingers, she could not breathe.

All the while, she burned, ached, rubbed against him and bit her lip to stop the senseless pleas that would escape if she tried to speak.

His body was cold and hard, as if it were carved out of stone, yet somehow he felt alive. His breath chilled the places on her skin where moisture still lingered from his kisses. He moved his attention from one breast to the other. The sensation lost nothing to repetition, and she writhed beneath him.

Never in her life had Annabelle felt so out of control, so reckless, so...free. All thoughts of being a proper lady fled, though she had not truly cared to act the part of a proper lady to begin with. Still, being loosed from the restraints of what was and wasn't allowed sent a delicious thrill through her.

Galerius slid down her body, though she gripped his arms and whimpered for him to stay where he was. He trailed his fingers down her stomach, and the flesh there trembled under his touch. He moved ever closer to the part of her that demanded his attention, sliding the muslin drawers over her hips. She held her breath as the cool air touched her enflamed flesh. She was too exposed, too open to his gaze and touch, in a way no one had seen her before. A pang of anxiety forced her legs together, but his body between them impeded her, and he dropped to his knees in front of the bunk and forced her legs wide apart with a hand on each thigh. The breath she had held rushed out of her in a shuddering moan she could not restrain. Certainly he did not intend to put his mouth on her there...certainly he would not...



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