



Darkest Hours

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Dedication

Thank you Jack for believing in me, and Tawanna for your support and motivation.

Chapter One

Fall sighed a gentle breeze, felling numerous leaves of gold and red from gnarled branches of the huge Oak tree that stood in the center of Plainview, surrounded by the old red brick roads of the town square. Many of the homeless leaves drifted down onto the roofs of the small businesses dotted throughout the square while others silently glided to the sidewalks where some landed under Ebony White's feet, crunching as she walked over them. The peaceful wind caressed her skin and tossed strands of golden hair out from her head then allowed them to fall haphazardly back down around her face.

The townspeople were out in full swing. Some clapped old friends on the back and chatted about the wonderful weather while others window shopped and sampled bread from old Mrs. Chatterfield's bakery. Ebony didn't notice any of these things as she walked along, not even the aroma of her favorite coffee could entice her from the black thoughts immersing her mind.

Today started as any normal day. Ebony had gotten up that morning at her usual time of seven, ate her ordinary breakfast of soggy cornflakes drenched in skim milk, and then walked ten blocks to the library where she reported to work promptly at eight-thirty. She had unlocked the old, creaky doors of the one story brick building and followed her routine of turning on lights and putting away books checked in late the day before. Yes, everything started normal and right.

It only took two minutes for Dr. Brown to pull the proverbial rug of life out from under her, sending her in a shocking sprawl landing her flat on her behind. She never expected anything to come of the simple tests taken the week before for the headaches she had been suffering. The unusual chill of her body for such a mild day attested to the stealthy fingers of shock snaking through every pore. She shivered and drew her favorite blue jacket tighter around her.

She still remembered the day her Aunt Jackie had given her the jacket, remembered it as vividly as if it happened yesterday. She and her Aunt had been out shopping four years earlier when Ebony had spotted the jacket hanging in the window of Ms. Payton's small clothes store, Fashions 4 U. It was the most unusual shade of blue suede, teetering between baby and ice and lined in soft, white wool. The

thing that had caught her eye most though was the seven silver fasteners up the front in the shape of roses.

She had vowed to get the jacket with her paycheck the following week, only to be disappointed when she found out it had been sold. She wasn't a shopaholic by any means and usually waited for sales to buy most of her plain but serviceable clothing, and even though the jacket was quite pricey, she was willing to splurge this one time. It was just one of those things in life. Kind of like when there is one piece of chocolate left in the box. No matter how full you are, you know you're going to eat it then feel guilty about it later, after the sinful taste was gone and good sense sets back in.

Later that night, she was talking to her Aunt and told her about the jacket. Her Aunt just smiled a smile that made Ebony feel as if she were the only one not in on the joke. Aunt Jackie had left the room, came back a few moments later with a box adorned with a huge pink bow and handed it to Ebony. She was delighted when she saw the blue jacket amid the conglomeration of white tissue paper. It was an early birthday present, and Ebony would never forget her Aunt's kindness.

Unwanted reality invaded her happy memory as another chill ran the length of her spine, causing goose bumps to cover her skin's surface. How had the simple headache turned into terminal cancer? Her life had been dotted with tragic events, but she had always made it through, usually by embracing the advice her mother had given her many times, starting when she was very young. She would say, "My dearest little girl, live every moment to the fullest, make the best decisions you can, love with all your heart, and have no regrets."

The words that usually calmed Ebony, embracing her in the arms of comfort in the absence of her mother, could not soothe her this time. This was not like when she cheated on her math test in first grade or when she stole a dollar from her mother's purse to buy an ice cream. Yes, it had felt good to get that A in math, and the creamy, chocolate ice cream had been heaven in her mouth, but the satisfaction had worn off quickly only to be replaced by regret and guilt. She had cried for at least an hour after the confessions to her mother and knew her mother's saying was correct. Regret hurt, especially when it was due to an irrational or impulsive decision, and she didn't want to live her life filled with it.

No, this was not like those times at all. Her life was being stolen by the icy hands of death, little by little, and there was nothing she could do about it. No decision would change that, and when she thought about it, she did have regrets—or at least one big one.

Her emotions were stretched, and the thoughts of her mother brought tears to her eyes. Her mother had been beautiful with kind eyes and a smile that could light up a room. Ebony missed her mother dearly and desperately wished she could talk to her now. She wished for the gentle and magical touch only her mother had possessed, the one that could take all bad things away, no matter how horrible, even if only for a few moments. She shook her head furiously, blonde hair fanning in all directions. No, she would not wish for her mother to go through her only daughter's death.

Two small boys with ruffled brown hair and rosy cheeks ran by Ebony, distracting her for a moment. They continued past her, dodging in and out of others walking, oblivious to everyone and everything but themselves. How wonderful it would be to be that young and carefree once again, to have not a worry in the world. She wrapped her arms tightly around her middle trying to ward off the continuous chill that ran up her spine. It was amazing how twenty-seven could be viewed as so young or so old depending on the circumstances. If she thought about the fact that she was still a virgin, twenty-seven seemed ancient. On the other hand, having terminal cancer, twenty-seven seemed astonishingly young.

Which brought her to her one biggest regret in life—she had never fallen in love or experienced sex. She longed for that one spectacular moment when she knew she would love the man she was about to share her body with until the day she died. She was fond of some of the men she had dated, but only in the same way she was fond of her favorite fluffy slippers. They were comfortable, and she would miss them for awhile when they were gone, but they didn't strike any sparks of undeniable lust. The waiting never seemed to be a big deal, and she kept faith that the right man would come along one day, but now, there wasn't time, and there wouldn't be one day or a happily ever after.

Within a few feet, she saw the approaching alleyway, veered off the street and headed straight for it. The nearing darkness usually saw her avoiding this particular shortcut on her daily route home, but she was walking home earlier than usual, and the opportunity to avoid small talk with the locals was too inviting to resist. She loved the small community in which she lived. Everyone knew everybody, and in many ways, most of the people were like an extended family. But, today she simply could not face them.

After taking only a couple steps into the shaded alley, the familiar fog of claustrophobia began choking her. This was the reason she avoided the alley. Not because she was scared, although if she were truthful, she would have to admit that her imagination had worked overtime trying to convince her

that someone or something was stalking her the few times she had ventured down the old passageway, and this time would be no different.

The constant urge to look over her shoulder in search of her make-believe follower would encourage her heart into a gallop and make a laugh bubble in her throat at her silliness after she reached the other end. She could hear the eerie music of *The Omen* drifting through her head and giggled. She was such a sucker for a horror flick, and at times like this she wondered if she should give them up. *No way am I giving up Dracula, Frankenstein, The Mummy or any other creature that can scare the heck out of me.* She loved the rush from those movies.

How many more horror movies would she see before she died? She had so many things she wanted to do, and now it seemed she wouldn't have time to do them. *What am I going to do?* She was scared and carried the weight of the world on her slender shoulders at this very moment.

The sound of her cell phone ringing startled her, and she rummaged through her bag to find it. Pulling it out, she hit the connect button automatically before realizing she probably didn't want to talk to whoever it was. "Hello."

"Hey, girlfriend! What's up?" Avril's voice carried its usual cheeriness.

Her best friend, Avril Taylor, whom she had met at the library on a bitter, snow-covered day, still gave her a hard time over her "old-fashionedness." Although Ebony didn't consider wanting to wait for her wedding night to give up her virginity old-fashioned.

Five years ago Ebony had been at work in the town's small library watching the fluffy snowflakes fall from the overcast sky when Avril had come in for a short reprieve from the cold. A conversation between the two about life in general started them on their journey to friendship.

They were complete opposites, Avril being outgoing, bold and up-front, usually saying whatever popped into her mind at any given time, and Ebony with her reserved, shy manner. Avril was tall and slender and had a weird affinity for black clothes especially those that favored anything goth. Ebony was short, curvy and preferred casual clothing in a variety of colors. Avril's eyes were brown and her short

black hair cupped her face in a flattering manner, showing off her smooth dark skin to perfection where Ebony's eyes were green and her long hair fell in blonde waves around her pixie-like face.

No matter, Avril proved to be a true, loyal and honest friend. While they would never agree on everything, their distinct views allowed them to see things in a different light. She loved Avril like a sister and knew she could count on her with the same certainty that Avril could count on her. Even though Ebony had many friends, until she met Avril, she hadn't acknowledged the void in her life. Until they had become close, she hadn't realized she had been holding everyone else at arm's length, not quite letting them nestle as close to her heart as true friends should be. She had effectively slammed that part of her heart closed after her family was taken from her. She didn't want to ever be that close to anyone again because it hurt too badly when they were gone.

Avril, somehow had managed to wake that part of her which she thought to be dead. Avril helped her heal in ways she would have never healed on her own. Avril had become the sister she never had, and the little black stain of insecurity and caution was wiped from her soul.

"Oh, hi Avril." Ebony stifled the weariness and worry before it crept into her voice because she wasn't sure at this point she wanted to tell Avril, or anyone for that matter, about the results of her doctor's appointment. She didn't want to lie to her best friend, and her mind kicked into overtime trying to figure out what to say if she asked . . . and she would. It was an odd situation as she usually talked to Avril about anything and everything from a run in her hose to what color nail polish she should wear to the loneliness and utter failure she felt from yet another uneventful date. This was different.

"So you had any hot dates lately? Never mind. I already know the answer to that Miss he-didn't-make-my-toes-curl when he kissed me. Honestly Ebony, you're twenty-seven years old. Isn't it time to lower your standards a little and find a decent guy? I mean you don't want to die a virgin do you?"

Ebony sighed. If there was one thing her friend loved it was to torment her over her men, or rather lack of. Avril insisted one day "Mr. Right" would come along and sweep Ebony off her feet. While she knew Avril wanted her to find true love, the wish didn't come without an ulterior motive. Her friend had a curse and seemed to only attract egomaniacal, chauvinistic pigs and figured Ebony would have to be the one to marry and have kids. And, since her and Avril were as close as true sisters could be even without the blood bond, Avril would consider Ebony's children her nieces and nephews. Avril told her

time and again that she deserved happiness in her life, and while Ebony believed she honestly wanted her to be happy, there was no denying Avril's ambition of wanting to be an aunt.

Avril chatted on and on in her usual don't-let-anyone-else-get-a-word-in way. Only half listening to her rambling on now about some guy she had a date with the night before and how he had ultimately become the epitome of male chauvinistic pig, Ebony decided right then and there she would not tell Avril about her illness. Life was already littered with too much uncertainty and sorrow. She wanted to enjoy what time she had left without sympathy shadowing her every step. She couldn't stomach the thought of seeing her best friend, the one person she loved most in the world, looking at her with those big brown eyes full of hurt or worst of all, pity. No, she wanted her last memories to be happy not of worry over her best friend's pain.

How was she going to get through this? If there was absolutely no other choice but fibbing, so be it. *Yeah, right, because I'm so good at lying.* She was horrible at lying. She chewed her bottom lip, weighing the odds of actually being able to pull off a fib to a stranger, much less her best friend. Every time in her life she had tried to tell a little fabrication, she had ended up a stuttering mess and had given up even trying altogether. Not that she approved of such deceit, but sometimes in life—such as when a woman asks if her butt looks big in these pants, and it does but you say no—it was just easier and less painful.

Avril's rambling slowed a little. "Oh yeah, girl, how did your doctor's appointment go? I almost forgot to ask." Then for the first time since the phone conversation started, Avril was quiet.

The silence was unnerving, and once again swirling, thick fog enveloped her brain, wrapping its tendrils around every thought trying to fight its way out, making it impossible for her to think of something to tell Avril. She sighed and begrudgingly resigned herself to tell Avril the truth, seeing no other way, but before she could say a word she collided with something solid that knocked the phone from her hand. At first, she thought one of the building's crumbling brick walls must be her obstacle until she reached out to steady herself and caught a handful of soft, supple leather at the same time the exotic smell of spicy sandalwood tickled her nose, tempting her lungs to take a deep pull of the intoxicating scent.

She looked up, way up, until she was staring into the face of what had to be the sexiest man on the planet. He stole her breath, and she sucked in a small gasp as she continued her perusal. Glistening, clear eyes the color of the ocean close to the shore with just the right mixture of turquoise and blue,

framed by thick lashes and black eyebrows, stared down at her. She snapped her gaping mouth shut, righted herself and eyed the stranger some more while retaining her hold on his coat. How could anyone be so hard, so solid, so big, so . . . sexy?

His black as night hair floated in the breeze and hung in a silky curtain around a masculine face with a straight nose and a square jaw covered in thick stubble. Full lips, kissable lips, lips that looked as if they were made for fulfilling any woman's most secret desires, framed his mouth. Heat flooded deep in her belly, and she had a strange urge to run her fingers through all that glorious hair. This was so not like her to feel this way and discerning when she admitted she liked it. *What is wrong with me?* Chasing away all sanity she couldn't resist taking a peek at the rest of him.

His huge frame loomed well over six feet, and a form-fitting, black shirt encased broad shoulders and a wide chest that tapered down to a lean waist, showing off his ripped, sculpted body to perfection. Black leather pants were filled out nicely by muscular thighs, and on his feet were black biker boots. The grip she had on his black trench coat pulled it open to allow her this fortunate view of superb male physique. He reminded her somewhat of Hugh Jackman in *Van Helsing*. Hating to admit it as Hugh was a God, even he paled in comparison. *Holy cow! He has got to be the sexiest thing I have ever laid eyes upon.*

She had seen pictures in the magazines of male models with their oiled up bodies, perfectly manicured within an inch of their lives, and knew instantly that all of them had gotten it so wrong. They tried to portray the male body in all its glorious beauty, but none she had seen even came close to the virility emanating off the man standing in front of her now. He was an exemplary blend of exactly the right amounts of everything male.

She was glad she couldn't see his behind because if it was even half as nice as the front, which she had a feeling it was, she might actually start drooling all over his boots.

Mentally scolding herself for gawking at a complete stranger, she began an awkward apology. "Well, um . . . I-I'm, uh . . . S-sorry for running into you. I wasn't paying attention to where I was, uh . . . going." *Duh, that was obvious now wasn't it?* She felt like smacking her forehead with her open palm for her stupidity.

Avril's voice wavered up faintly from the ground. "Ebony, are you okay! Ebony! Answer me!"

She released his coat with reluctance, her body already craving the lost contact, and bent to retrieve the phone from the ground at the exact moment he did. Her hand came to rest upon big, warm fingers already gripping the cell. Sparks shot through her when she touched him, and electricity ran up her arm. She jerked back as if she had been scalded. If he felt it, he didn't betray it in anyway, keeping his steady, unflinching gaze fixed on her. Both of them stood, and he held the cell out to her. She took it, careful not to touch him again.

Putting the phone to her ear, she said, "Avril, I'm okay. I just dropped the phone. I'll call you later, okay?"

"If you're sure your okay, girlfriend."

She kept her gaze on him. "Yeah, I'm sure." *I hope.* She flipped the phone shut and shoved it back in her purse.

Was she okay? She didn't know this man, and now that she had finished ogling him, she became aware of the tense way he held his frame in complete control. Not one muscle twitched in betrayal of any emotion. He reminded her of a medieval knight waiting for battle, eerily still and accepting of his possible upcoming slaughter. She sensed an aura of danger about him. She couldn't explain it, just a feeling. He seemed . . . different somehow, but for some unknown reason, she also knew he wouldn't hurt her. She'd be willing to bet her life on it.

She moved around him. "I'll just be on my way now."

He never uttered a word. Those turquoise eyes coldly assessed her every move. His face never betrayed one tiny emotion. *Couldn't he have at least acknowledged my apology?* Yeah, right. Who was she kidding? He probably couldn't even understand her mumbling.

The warmth of embarrassment crept up her neck into her cheeks, and she felt as if she were back in third grade talking to a boy she had a crush on. Standing here gawking at some male, however mysterious, dark and gorgeous he may be, was ridiculous and immature. A warm, giddy feeling raced through her veins, strange, invading, confusing, and she tried to ignore it blaming the recent events of her stressful day.

Taking one last look over her shoulder at him proved too much of a challenge to resist. *Wow, there should be a law against men who look that good.* She thought it a little strange that she had never seen him until today and stranger yet, that he was hanging out in the alley. Well, no matter, she wasn't the police, and he wasn't actually doing anything wrong anyway. Was he? Pulling her jacket closer around her body, she hurried on after deciding she didn't want to know.

She felt drawn to the dark stranger and couldn't fathom why. Even now, she was bombarded with the urge to turn around and go back with every step she took away from him. She had no business having such feelings for someone she didn't even know. She had dated a couple of nice men, but no male had ever really caught her interest . . . until now.

He could be a serial killer for Christ's sake! No, her instincts told her he was good, and all she could think about was going back to run her fingers through that dark mane of hair to see if it was as silky as it looked. He called to something deep and unfamiliar inside her that she didn't quite understand.

Why did she have to run into him at this particular time in her life? Even if he had been interested, which he clearly wasn't, what could come of it? No sane man would want her now that she had a death sentence looming over her. No, now she would just be considered a burden and nothing more. She laughed out loud. *Yeah and like I'd know how to handle a man like that anyway. Geez, what an idiot.* Yet her brain whispered, *"But you wouldn't mind trying would you?"*

She rubbed her arm lightly. The lingering tingle from his touch sent another jolt through her body, yet this time it was more of a warm caress, comforting, beckoning. What the heck was that all about? Determined to clear him from her mind, she set a fast pace for home.

Chapter Two

Ashe Aleksandrov stood in the alleyway, waiting for the shadow drifter he had been dogging for days to reveal its hiding place. He had never come across a drifter that was this cunning in the past. The creatures had been exhibiting strange behavior lately, things out of character he didn't like. The changes seemed to hint at an uprising, but for an uprising, there needed to be a leader. The shadow drifters had no leader. They couldn't work together, never had. The slimy things were evil incarnate, made from the devil himself, and how any of his kind would choose to become such was beyond his comprehension.

Most humans had a misconception of immortality. Immortality seemed a good idea, until seven hundred years had passed you by in the blink of an eye, and you had nothing to show for it. Pretty much everyone you had come to care for in the world would be dead. Yes, he was one lucky bastard to have a wonderful family, but the thousands of humans he had befriended over the years were all dust. Even finding the one being destined to be your life mate was next to impossible, and if you did find that person, it didn't always have a happy ending, and boy didn't he know it. Memories that could still cripple his heart with pain and steal the breath from his lungs rushed in at him.

1502, somewhere near Transylvania

The approaching men on horseback, all with grime covered faces and swords capable of cutting through flesh, muscle and bone chased all rational thought from Ashe's head.

Shara's pointing finger and sudden shrieking, "It's him! He's evil! A creature of the night! Kill it! Kill it!" fueled the men's blood-thirsty desires as they circled him. They drew their weapons and stared at one another as if a huge contest were about to begin with the winner being the first one to remove Ashe's head from his shoulders. The horses snorted and nervously pawed the ground, sensing the tension growing in the air.

Ashe could smell the stench of the sweat and dirt on their bodies and tasted the anticipation flowing through their veins. The woman he loved had betrayed him, and now she thought to dispose of him as if he were trash. Though he had been distracted momentarily by the pain of her betrayal, he now

sneered at the men, almost laughing as he knew if they had any idea at all what they were up against they would all be running as fast as they could away from him.

Ashe was a vampire and warrior, a fine-tuned killing machine, enhanced with supernatural speed, strength and senses, who found no human a threat. Yet, he was smart enough to know that one tiny mistake in battle could cost his head. Twenty blood-thirsty men bent on staking, decapitating, and maiming him in any way, might get a little tricky, but he still knew what the outcome would be . . . their deaths.

He took a deep breath, turned the pain throbbing through his veins like a drum into anger, forced his mind to concentrate only on the ensuing fight, and pulled his trusty sword from its scabbard almost comforted by the familiar hiss of steel against steel.

A white-hot rage shot through his blood, consuming him, and a red haze covered his vision. He ran at the men in a blurred pace too fast for them to see, and removed the threat of each, one by one, dealing quick death blows with the razor sharp blade. Blood sprayed his face with each slice, and only a few minutes had passed before the last hiss of breath echoed in his ears as his final enemy died. His muscles quivered as he stood among the slain bodies, and steam floated off his overheated body dancing on the cool air.

He turned his focus on Shara standing a few feet from the fallen men, her eyes huge with surprise and fright. Good, she should be scared. He could barely leash the fury biting and clawing his insides, screaming and demanding that he kill her. Just a few hours earlier he had thought her the most beautiful woman, but now the sight of the long red locks cascading over her shoulders emphasizing the blue eyes and slender form he had once adored made his stomach clench in revulsion.

He made a vow right then and there that he would never trust another woman as long as he lived, and that would probably be a hell of a long time. They were manipulative creatures that would only cause pain. Shara's hands were stained with the shattered remains of his soul, and he would never give another woman that power over him again. A tear slid slowly down his cheek, and his heart struggled to beat through the pain. He vanished, accepting that he would never lay eyes on her again.

Fuck! He hated those memories, tried to drown them, keep them safely tucked away in a corner of his brain, never to be let out. Yet, even after all these years, on occasion they would sputter to the

surface and slither through his mind to spread their venom. He knew everyone had to suffer the death of a loved one at some point in their lives, but no mortal could begin to comprehend losing those you loved over and over for eternity, and to lose the one chance of having a mate, someone to share your infinite years with, someone to love, to cherish, the chance to have babies. It was almost too much for him to bear. Simply put, he was tired.

Shaking his head, he had to admit he could see the allure of becoming a shadow drifter. For the mere price of your soul, Satan himself would grace you with the gift of immunity to any emotions involving compassion, joy or love, effectively dousing your ability to care about anything or anyone but yourself. Yet, it was only a cruel mirage. He bet not one single vampire who turned shadow drifter had stopped to weigh the odds, had never considered that the balance of good and evil was necessary for life. One could not lack all that is good and expect to have a normal life. Yes, the pain of losing those you loved would be gone but would be replaced by constant malevolent urges eating away at your once sane mind.

He, better than any, could understand how the pain of years of heartbreak could drive anyone to contemplate a life without such emotions. Yet, he doubted any of those who had readily given his soul could fathom how fast the darkness would stain every fiber of their being, turning them into nothing but shells of their former selves. There was no saving them, for once Satan had your soul it was lost to you forever. The only option was to dispatch them home to hell, and that's where Ashe came in.

The breeze picked up and blew dead leaves and debris around his feet, flaring the bottom of his coat out into a circle. The small town of Plainview was only one of the many towns near his home in St. Louis. The many small towns surrounding his home proved to be quite a hot bed of activity, and he and his brothers had slain numerous shadow drifters. His home was surrounded by a mixture of well-to-do areas and unsavory locations that most avoided after dark. To him, the dark locations where junkies could be seen selling crack and hookers trying to look inconspicuous dotted the streets were perfect hunting grounds. These places proved attractive to shadow drifters as well as the small, quaint unsuspecting ones.

After all, who would really pay attention to a dead junkie with no family or the hacked up prostitute in the Dumpster? But, Ashe knew they were humans too, no matter what poor choices they had made or what life circumstances had landed them in such situations. Ashe didn't care if the shadow drifter's next victim was the girl next door or the whore on the corner, he would not hold judgment, and both had the same value to their lives. Both wanted to live, and neither deserved to be murdered.

There had been a number of chaotic and tragic events that had taken place on the outskirts of Plainview over the last several days which steered him to the conclusion that this area would most likely be the shadow drifter's next target. His assumptions proved correct, and he had quickly caught the scent of his prey shortly after his arrival. He had watched the people for awhile and knew exactly why they would be easy targets.

Just as had been proven with other small communities, everyone trusted everybody. Most of the houses in the neighborhood had doors propped wide open, inviting the clean scent of fall in. Small towns had an uncanny knack for being trustworthy, its inhabitants usually thinking nothing bad could happen there. The unsuspecting individuals proved easy prey. *Like taking candy from a baby.* If any of the people knew what lurked in their town, watching, waiting, they would lock themselves inside and cower in a corner.

Just as he was sure the shadow drifter was about to show itself, a tiny blonde woman crashed into him. His words had been stolen by shock, and he had watched her in silence as she mumbled something at him. She was now hurrying down the alley past him. During his long existence as a vampire only one other mortal had ever seen him while he was shielded. That was over five hundred years ago. The other human had been the woman who was supposed to be his mate and love him forever . . . the woman who had betrayed him.

Blondie's big, green eyes reminded him of flawless emeralds, and he had imagined how passion would turn them a darker, deeper shade. Her scent of honeysuckle had flowed through his nose into his lungs and embedded deep into his being as if imprinting itself on him. She wasn't classically beautiful by any means, but her long blonde hair, heart shaped face with hints of pink coloring her cheeks, pert little nose, full lips and very curvy body made her one attractive package. Short women didn't usually hold much appeal to him being six foot four, but this time his cock disagreed and did a standing ovation for Blondie.

Nice, plump breasts, full hips and shapely legs definitely made him forget that she was barely over five foot, and the way her snug jeans lovingly hugged every curve of her ass sent shivers of desire crawling deeper through his veins. He didn't go for the anorexic, twelve year old boy look that so many women and men seemed to think was the epitome of being beautiful nowadays. He went for women who looked like women, curvy, full breasts and full hips. She fit that bill perfectly.

Blondie had craned her neck back so far to stare at him, he thought she might snap it, and what a shame that would have been. The gentle curve of it had beckoned to him as well as the blood that pulsed and throbbed through her jugular. A vivid picture of him piercing that smooth skin, pulling her essence deep, while plunging his body into hers over and over played through his mind like a movie, stretching the tiny strings of his control to near breaking point. That thought had not been a welcome one, and he immediately discarded it under the *do not open* file in his brain. Since Shara, he had not tasted a woman during sex. While it heightened the act, it was too personal in his opinion and should be reserved for someone you loved.

He never planned to revisit that unpleasant road and kept his feeding strictly for sustenance. It kept things simple and uncomplicated. He was not a man to mince words either. No woman he had taken his pleasure from over the years had ever been mistaken that their tryst would lead to anything other than sex. He was relentless in letting them know in no uncertain terms that the only thing they would share was a mutual act of slaking needs, and no emotions would be involved on his part, ever. He would never hit or abuse a woman, nor would he lie to one about his lack of emotions. If he sensed any of his partners had a problem understanding his conditions, the encounter would end then and there.

He was a skilled lover, and the women he bedded were completely satisfied with the arrangement. He'd ease both of their body's sexual demands, and they would be happy with whatever trinket he gave them, whether it was a diamond necklace or simply a fulfillment of lonely needs. Only a few had complicated things by falling in love with him. Those few he walked away from without looking back. He knew it had not been love and had more to do with how he could pleasure their body. Women had a way of confusing an orgasm with love.

His dark brows furrowed when he recalled the spark Blondie's touch evoked. Erotic sensation had whispered at emotions he thought long dead, and he didn't care to question why. The touch was a mere brushing of skin when she had reached for the cell phone at the same moment as he, but it was enough to awake the beast in him. It demanded he take her, claim her so no other would dare even look at her. After she had said a quick good-bye to whomever she was talking to and dropped the phone in her bag, she muttered an apology for running into him at the same time she sidled her way around him.

The quick look she had given him over her shoulder as she walked away hadn't escaped his attention. He hadn't sensed fear from her, put that backward glance down to curiosity and watched her lovely hips sway with each step she took away from him. How was it that she had seen him? Only other vampires or immortals, with the exception of shadow drifters, could see him in his shielded state. The

only mortal that could see a vampire while shielded was supposed to be that vampire's *viata amant* or life love, but there had to be another explanation.

"Like hell will I go through another Shara episode," Ashe growled to himself as he abruptly turned and started to follow Blondie.

He should be heading home now instead of following her. After the encounter with Blondie, he no longer felt the shadow drifter's presence in the area and knew it must have shimmered far away. He figured it must have sensed him when his guard was down for those few minutes and probably wouldn't return now that it knew it was being hunted. Although, this town seemed to be filled with trusting souls, and that might prove too easy of an opportunity for the drifter to pass up.

He glanced at the graying sky. He didn't enjoy being in the daylight any more than necessary but at least the late afternoon removed some of the sun's intensity. It wouldn't burn him like vampire lore suggested, but his eyes were overly sensitive to it, and even though shadow drifters liked the sunlight even less than vampires, their twisted minds believed they were less likely to be tracked during daylight hours. They were wrong, and many had found that out while being dragged down into the bowels of hell after Ashe's sword had removed their head.

He kept a discreet distance as he followed Blondie, trying to come up with other explanations as to why she had seen him while shielded. This had to be a joke his brother was playing on him. Ashe was the oldest of his siblings. Aldin was next to oldest and held an aura of quiet and lethal intensity. At times his brother was unsettling and reminded him of a wild animal ready to pounce at any moment. Estril was the youngest and the only girl. She was the light, laughter and everything pure in the Aleksandrov household. Then, there was Aiston, the third youngest. Aiston lived to irritate the hell out of his siblings and loved to chase anything in a skirt.

Aiston had come to the conclusion long ago that playing jokes and pranks on Ashe was one of his missions in life. He felt it would help his big bro be more carefree like him. However, this particular prank would prove on the cruel side even for Aiston, yet he didn't want to accept the other possibility. There was no way Blondie could be meant for him. He couldn't go through another betrayal.

He settled on blaming his brother for the time being.

Blondie must really be another vampire, and Aiston had found a way to disguise her as a human. Ashe didn't know of any such thing ever happening, but who else could find a way if not his crafty, pain in the ass brother? He was going to follow Blondie back to her destination, and he bet his brother would be there waiting to reward her for her good deed.

He was going to catch Aiston in the middle of this little farce, kick his prank playing ass all the way back to the estate, and make sure he felt guilty enough to leave him alone for a long time. Not having to worry about his brother's irritating interferences for a while would be a luxury in itself. A slow smile crept across his face as he quietly continued his pursuit.

* * * *

The drudge followed close behind Ashe. The Master's mind link kept its presence shielded from the vampire. The drudge was very careful of any betraying thoughts and did exactly as The Master wanted or the consequences could be extremely dire. Had the little blonde not come into the picture, the drudge was sure The Master would have called a halt to the surveillance for the day.

The drudge knew The Master's curiosity would have been assuaged had the vampire's encounter with Blondie ended in the alley. But, since Ashe showed enough interest to follow the human home, curiosity had quickly turned to rage. The vampire had probably just signed the girl's death warrant by merely showing a little interest, for the drudge knew The Master would not allow such a thing. *Stupid, stupid, man.*

"The girl must not be allowed to interfere with my plans." The Master's voice interrupted the excited, begging, whimpering, boiling thoughts pleading for a chance to inflict pain.

"Bring her to me unharmed." The command was final.

Disappointment flared, and anger ensued. The Master took away every opportunity for fun. It would have been nice to torture the human a little, to hear her scream for mercy as she was tormented for hours. She deserved it. Everyone deserved it. *Why should anyone be happy after the horrifying life forced upon me?* Setting in to wait for the right time to ambush the girl, the figure crouched, unmoving . . . waiting.

Death would have been preferable to the horrible abomination The Master had made the drudge into so many years ago . . . too many years ago. Being a slave to a vampire was not exactly a gift, especially when you were thought of as ignorant, worthless and dispensable at any moment. Quality of life was knocked down a few notches when you were looked at in the same manner as something unwanted scraped off the bottom of a shoe.

The countless years had proved useful in mastering the skills of deception and the ability to mask and hide true emotions at any time. The Master's ignorance of the drudge's true intentions gave intense pleasure. Who was the ignorant one after all? Revenge had a way of pumping life even into the soulless. Yes, all the relentless hell The Master had meted out over the years without sympathy would be worth it. Revenge was within grasp now. The chance would be coming soon, and this time nothing would stand in the way. Ashe Aleksandrov would die.

Chapter Three

Ebony slowly walked along the gray sidewalk that ran parallel to the pretty picket fence lining her front yard. The whole week she spent last summer stripping off the old paint and repainting the fence crisp white had been worth it. Avril had helped, and they had taken frequent breaks, sitting on her shaded porch fending off the humid day with huge, sweaty glasses of ice-cold lemonade. Memories such as those would live forever in her mind. *Yeah, too bad forever is getting cut very short.* She snorted at the irony and refused to allow the tears clouding her vision to fall.

She hadn't much extra money to fix up the old Victorian house and felt it her duty to tackle any job she thought herself capable, and a few that turned out to be a little too challenging. She had envisioned each improvement down to its last detail and made sure each job was done exact before starting the next.

It had taken her two weeks to find the unique shade of pale blue paint on the house, and the burgundy color on the shutters that complimented the color perfectly. A local handyman had prepped the house then she, with Avril's help of course, had painted it. It took her a whole month to get it perfect and complete. Unfortunately, right at this moment, the countless days she had spent on the house seemed such a waste. She hoped whoever ended up with her house after she was gone appreciated all of the work she had put into it.

She shuffled along the walkway that led up to her porch and dug her keys out of her pocket. She bent down to pat the head of the huge, yellow tomcat with green eyes that hung around. Of course, that might have something to do with the scraps of food she handed out to him on a regular basis.

"Hello big boy. How are you today?" The cat arched and rubbed against Ebony's hand, and she smiled as his soft fur tickled her skin. That would mark the second time today that a male had distracted her from her problems. Giving the cat one last pat, she straightened and unlocked the door.

She set her keys on the side table inside the entryway after she shut and locked the door. She was probably the only one in town that actually locked her doors. She kicked off her shoes and decided

to have a quick shower before fixing dinner, which would probably consist of some frozen concoction being thrown in the microwave. Her walk through the cozy living room with pale green walls, ivory lace curtains, dark stained wood floors and color coordinated furniture, was suddenly interrupted as a fist curled painfully in her hair and wrenched her backward. She gasped, was then pushed forward and started falling as a scream bubbled up from her throat and pierced the air. She threw her hands out to break her fall a little too late as her face hit the floor with enough force to make her eyes water. What she could only assume was a knee, pushed hard into the middle of her back, imprisoning her.

Ebony fought to turn her head, but the brutal fist pushing her cheek hard into the floor was relentless, holding her seemingly with no effort. Terror engulfed her body and spurred another scream to bubble in her throat as she tried to wiggle and buck the person off her back, desperate for escape. But before the piercing sound could erupt, her head was yanked back, and a cold hand slammed over her mouth.

“Don’t fight me, or better yet, please do.”

The words drifted heavy in the air, so close to her ear, warm breath fanned across her cheek, the sound so cold and menacing Ebony froze. The fear inside screamed at her to bite, claw, kick, get away! Yet common sense and the threatening voice triggered instinct that warned doing so could get her hurt . . . or worse. If she had had any inclination her day would be so horrible, she would have never gotten out of bed this morning. She hadn’t thought it could possibly get any worse after the doctor’s visit, but she had been terribly mistaken.

“Tsk, tsk, I like it better when I have to force compliance. Don’t you have a little fight in you? I would so enjoy teaching you obedience, human.”

Though it was hard to define the gravelly whisper, Ebony was positive her attacker was a woman, and she found it strange to be referred to as *human*. No matter, if she didn’t figure out a way to get free soon, she had a feeling the cancer wouldn’t be what killed her. *Think, Ebony, think*. Genius she wasn’t, but she valued herself as being more than passably intelligent, yet her mind remained paralyzed by the situation and struggled to come up with any ideas.

How could this woman be so strong? She had barely moved when Ebony had struggled with all her strength to get free. *Maybe she’s hyped up on drugs*. If that was so the whole situation just became

scarier, if that was possible. Before she had a chance to think on that scenario further, the voice grated in her ear once again, making the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

“I’m going to take my hand off your mouth now, and I promise you, if you scream, it will be the last thing you hear as I slit your throat from ear to ear. Do you understand?” Before Ebony could nod, the woman shifted off her back, apparently satisfied she had adequately threatened her into silence. The fist painfully tightened in her hair a second before she was pulled up, her back to her attacker’s front. “Now we are going on a little trip. My Master wants to meet you.”

“Please!” Ebony cried. “If you want money I can give you money o-or just take w-whatever you want.” She didn’t want to leave the house with this woman. She knew statistics proved that anytime a person was taken from their house or car against their will, it usually proved a bad outcome for the poor victim. She didn’t want to die this way. She didn’t want Avril to get a call to come and identify the body of her best friend.

“You stupid human! I don’t want money or anything else in your repulsive little house. I’m just doing what I was told which you should be thankful for because I assure you had I no instructions, you would be screaming in agony at this very moment.”

What was the deal with the human referral again? Ebony frantically searched the room for something, anything to fend this woman off. It seemed useless, but she couldn’t give up. Suddenly the front door exploded and splintered small chips of wood throughout the entryway and living room. *Oh god! Now what?*

* * * *

A piercing scream shredded the peaceful air and startled the hell out of Ashe. Heart pumping he shot off in a blurred speed toward Blondie’s front door.

After smashing the front door in, he calmly surveyed the scene unfolding before him and was upon Blondie and her attacker in two steps. With age-old instinct, he dropped to the floor and kicked his

leg out in a clean sweep that had them both pitching headlong to the floor, landing in a sprawl. The impact of the fall was jarring enough to cause the release of Blondie's hair, and she let out a cry of relief for her freedom.

In an instant Ashe was back on his feet, and pulled his trusty sword from the scabbard strapped to his back, camouflaged perfectly by his black trench coat. He lunged at the cloaked figure, swinging the razor sharp blade in a deadly arc only to slice through air as his target vanished a split-second before contact. His senses had warned him Blondie's attacker was immortal, and now the opportunity to remove the threat once and for all was gone. *Dammit!*

He initially thought a shadow drifter was attacking Blondie. He assumed that when she had stumbled upon him in the alleyway earlier, the drifter he had been hunting must have observed their encounter and then seen Ashe following her. Taking out a human associated with him would be a honey-coated opportunity since he was dedicated to protecting humans from drifters and well-hated among them. No drifter would pass up a chance for any type of violence, especially one that had even a slight possibility of annoying a hunter.

This had been no shadow drifter. In fact, he wasn't sure what it was. He wasn't able to see its features being cloaked in black from head to toe. Sighing, he knew it would now be his responsibility to protect Blondie until this whole mess was under control. After all, a mere human didn't have a chance against an immortal, much less an evil immortal.

He turned to find Blondie sitting on the floor, resembling a deer caught in headlights, but even that couldn't detract from her beauty. Her eyes were enormous, clear pools of green, and her mouth moved as if to speak but remained silent. He walked toward her after putting his sword away and held his hand out to help her up only to witness her crab-walk backward away from him after her mouth snapped shut. Her fear lashed at him with tiny invisible fists. He stopped and crouched slowly in front of her, hands up in surrender and spoke softly to her.

"Hey, it's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. Let me help you up." Again, he held his hand out toward her. He knew by the way her cool green eyes assessed him that she was not sure if she could trust him, and he couldn't blame her under the circumstances. He tried to keep his voice soft and reassuring. "Come on. Take my hand. I just want to help."

He breathed a sigh of relief when her eyes flashed recognition, and she took a deep breath and reached for him. He nearly smiled at the way his bigger hand engulfed her tiny one. She shivered at his touch, and he wondered if she could sense the upcoming upheaval of her small world of reality. He pulled her to her feet gently then made sure she was steady before releasing her.

He ignored the fact that once again simple contact from this unknown woman had sent a current crawling through his skin. Teasing long lost feelings and coaxing them back to life. Her green eyes stared into his turquoise ones, and his heart missed a beat.

Ebony blinked several times. "Who are you? Why are you here? Did my attacker just vanish? What the hell is going on?"

She cautiously watched him and waited for answers, chin jutting out in defiance. He admired her courage, situation considered, but was a little amused by it as well. He didn't think she'd appreciate the latter and hid any sign of it by clearing his throat before answering her questions.

"My name is Ashe Aleksandrov, I'm here saving you, yes your attacker vanished, and I haven't a clue yet." He studied her, hands on his hips.

He knew she was going to have a hard time with the vanishing bit and could tell she was mulling this information around by the way her small, white teeth chewed on her bottom lip and her brows drew together. Too bad, he thought it best for her to know a little about what she was dealing with right off so she would know the danger she now faced. Maybe if she knew, she wouldn't fight him as hard when he informed her that she would be staying with him until he figured this mess out. *Yeah, right.* If he knew one thing about women it was that they never made anything easy.

Even though he tried to respect other people's privacy he read her mind. Her thoughts were typical. She knew it was not possible for someone to just disappear into thin air and looked at him like he was an alien or just plain crazy.

"Yes, it is and no, I'm not on both counts. So get used to it."

Her eyes widened. He knew the sound of his voice floating around in her brain would rattle her already frazzled nerves.

"No, you're not hallucinating, and there are things you are going to learn that will be hard for you to understand, but you must try."

Her eyes widened farther, and she took a small step back. "How are you doing that? Are you some kind of psychic or ventriloquist or something?"

"Yeah or something." He ran his fingers through his thick black hair, contemplating pulling it out. First, tell me your name, and then I will explain a few things to you while you go get packed." Ashe glanced around the house and immediately headed for a door leading off the living room that he correctly guessed to be her bedroom.

Ebony followed Ashe and watched as he grabbed a couple of duffel bags then threw them on her bed. "My name is Ebony, Ebony White." Her teeth clenched. *Wait, what did he say?* She marched over to him and poked her finger in his chest. "What do you mean while I get packed? I'm not going anywhere, and what do you think you are doing in my bedroom going through my closet?"

He quirked a brow at her name but figured she probably had had her fill of remarks about it and decided to keep quiet. "Well, Ebony White, I suggest you get whatever you need for a possible lengthy stay at my estate." He knew she was angry and would have found it amusing at another time, but right now he just wanted to get her to safety.

She caught a laugh before it had time to escape. "Are you crazy? I don't even know you, and you think I'm just going to your estate. I don't think so. I'll make a report to the police, and I will be just fine on my own. Now, please leave." Ebony crossed her arms in front of her chest and moved from the doorway to make room for him to go by, but he remained exactly where he was. "Don't look at me with that smug look. Leave."

"We've already been through the crazy bit and again, no I'm not. Ebony, I'm not leaving, and you won't be fine on your own."

"I have been fine—"

He took one intimidating step toward her, sufficiently cutting her protest short. "You will pack, and you will be staying with me until I figure this mess out. What did you plan on telling the police? Your attacker just vanished? Do you think the police will believe that one? You can't even describe him." Ashe was trying to be patient, but the need to get her out of here gnawed at his gut and increased in intensity with every minute.

He should have used a small compulsion on her, and they would have been back at his estate by now, but for some reason, it didn't feel right to use it on her. Reading her mind and forcing her will were two entirely different things. *Yeah, right. 'Cause when did you become such a caring, sensitive bastard?*

"Stop telling me what to do, and my attacker was a woman not a man. She also had a weird half moon scar on the back of her hand." She took two steps and plopped down on the end of the bed like a sullen child. She fixed a determined, stubborn stare on him. "I can take care of myself. I'm not going anywhere with you."

Well that solved the problem of what her attacker was. Every drudge was marked with the same half moon on one of their hands. The situation had just become more dangerous. "You can't protect yourself against your attacker because she was a drudge, but I can because I am a vampire and immortal like her."

Ashe watched her, fully expecting her to bolt after this news sunk in and didn't have to read her mind to know she was thinking just that by the way her eyes darted wildly to the door every few seconds while she paced the room.

"Don't run Ebony. I can easily catch you, and it will only make this situation harder. I swear to you, I won't hurt you, and I don't belong to a cult." He refused to acknowledge the insanity issue again. The thought of chasing her down was a little too appealing, and he found a certain body part reacting to the possibility. *"God Ebony, please don't run."*

“Stop doing that! What do you mean you’re a vampire? There are no such things.” She threw her hands up in the air clearly frustrated. “And, what are drudges?” Ebony looked at Ashe as if she couldn’t wait to hear the next load of crap he fed her.

“Look, I am a vampire, and drudges are servants of vampires. Since vampires can gift any of their powers to a drudge for a short period, it is possible for a drudge to vanish. Therefore, I can only assume that another vampire is behind your attack. To make matters worse, it is most likely a shadow drifter vampire.”

Although, now that he thought for a moment it probably was not a shadow drifter’s drudge. Drifters could make drudges, but it was almost unheard of as drifters were so violent their poor drudges usually didn’t last long. That left the only other possibility. It was a vampire’s drudge, but why would one of his kind have a drudge attack Ebony? It just didn’t make sense. Ebony remained staring at him like he was the lunatic she accused him of being. He knew she didn’t believe a word he said, but she would, soon.

“Yeah, surrrre, whatever you say. You’re a blood-sucking creature who can read my mind and disappear into thin air. Anything else? Oh yeah, you probably sleep in a coffin, have super strength, hate crosses, holy water, and have spidey senses.” *Good grief, he is crazy.* “Tell me something. Do you give Stephen King pointers for his books?” She pinched her arm hard. *Ouch! Nope, I’m definitely not dreaming—vampires, drudges and shadow drifters, oh my!*

He let her sarcasm pass for now. *“Look, I don’t sleep in a coffin. I do possess considerable strength and heightened senses. Crosses or holy water don’t bother me in the least, and I only have to drink blood once or twice a week. You already know I can speak to you in your mind since I’m doing it at this moment. Now, I’m giving you five minutes to get your things together so we can get the hell out of here. We can discuss my strengths and weaknesses in more detail later.”*

He only drinks blood once or twice a week. Eeww! “Whatever you say, but I’m still staying—”

Ashe gently grabbed her by the arms and pulled her against him. One minute they were in her bedroom, and the next they were standing in Ashe’s study. He watched her skin turn ghostly white. She blinked rapidly as if trying to focus and swayed before he put his big hands on her shoulders to steady her.

He leveled a determined stare at her. “Ebony, this is your last chance. I’m going to take us back to your bedroom and give you five”—he looked at his watch—“no four minutes, to get your things together. If you aren’t finished in four minutes, we will come back here with nothing.”

Just like that they were standing in Ebony’s bedroom once again. Ashe knew shimmering would most likely scare the hell out of her, but it was the quickest way he knew of showing her that her world of reality was not absolute.

He watched as she moved around the room, opening the dresser drawers and throwing clothing into the duffel bags with choppy motions. She reminded him of a zombie as she collected her things. Her eyes were flat, her body stiff. After she finished packing the clothes, she went into the bathroom and collected a small makeup bag, toothbrush and hair dryer then threw them in the smaller duffel. She zipped them and stood rigid with her back to Ashe, white knuckling a bag in each hand.

He gently placed his hands on her tense shoulders and turned her to face him. He took the bags from the death grip she had on them, let them drop to the floor then cupped her chin. He stroked his thumb back and forth on her soft cheek. “Look at me Ebony,” he said coaxingly.

When she turned those beautiful, confused and tired green eyes fringed with thick lashes up to him, he almost groaned. God the woman was beautiful and had skin like silk. Letting his gaze travel to her lips, he could almost feel how soft they would be if he kissed them. He wanted to kiss her, taste her. Desire rode him hard, and he knew without a doubt his turquoise eyes were black now, betraying his emotions.

Her eyes skittered to his lips, and her green eyes turned deep green reflecting his own desire. He watched the confusion and indecision play across her lovely face until her pale skin turned pink. He could feel the excitement bouncing off her in rolling waves. He could hear the thundering of her heart. Even though she had been through hell, he knew without a doubt that she wanted him to kiss her.

It would be so easy to breach the tiny distance to her lips and taste her. *Yeah, and you’d be a real asshole for taking advantage of her too.* He took a deep breath and tamped down the fire burning through his veins.

She licked her lips as he leaned toward her. *Get a hold of yourself. You barely know the man!*
“No, I can’t—”

He placed a finger over her lips, silencing her words. “You’ve had a terrible shock, but everything will be okay. I promise I will find out who attacked you tonight, and it will be safe for you to return home soon. My house is secure, and I can protect you there. The entire property is surrounded by ten foot fencing with monitors, not to mention that my brothers will be there to help.” He knew women well and was sure he wasn’t imagining the spark of desire in her eyes and the way she leaned into his hand. All the blood in his body rushed to his cock in response. He took a deep breath and once again tamped his desire down and silenced the beast. “Now are you ready?”

Fear invaded her green eyes once again wiping out all trace of desire. “Please. I don’t want to leave my house. Isn’t there some other solution?”

Her pleading eyes nearly cracked his armor, but he refused to compromise her safety. “No. I’m sorry. I know you want to stay, but I can’t protect you here. We need to go, now.”

Her indecision obvious, he knew the exact moment she conceded defeat as she sighed in resignation. She looked around her comfortable bedroom, squared her shoulders and gave him a tight nod. The black circles under her eyes emphasized her exhaustion and vulnerability. Ashe had to admit he was proud of Ebony’s determination and courage. Any other woman would probably be crying uncontrollably or lying in a dead faint at his feet about now.

“Let’s go.” He pulled her closer and shimmered back to his study once again.

“Wait. Where are we?”

“St. Louis.”

“Oh.” *She shivered and closed her eyes. At least he didn’t zap me to China or the Amazon.*

The books lining the walls and the huge desk sitting in the middle of the room were about all that was visible in the dark study. Ebony swayed against Ashe, and he picked her up, carried her out of the room, and up a huge set of stairs. She laid her head against his shoulder, buried her nose against his shirt and breathed in deeply.

As he reached the top of the stairs, she snuggled into his chest and gave a small sigh. Her softness pressed into him, and her hair smelled of honeysuckle and warm sunny days. His body became painfully aware of that softness, and he focused on anything but her closeness, trying to discourage his growing erection. *Real good, Ashe, the woman is practically passed out, and you're getting yet another hard-on.* Stifling a groan for the second time tonight, he entered one of the many guest rooms off the hallway and gently laid her on the bed.

A breathy sigh escaped her full lips when he placed her on the soft, comfortable bed and was like kindling thrown on the desire he was trying hard to ignore. *"Ebony, the bathroom is to your left. I will leave a light on and the door cracked for you. Get some rest and we can talk more tomorrow."*

She sighed. "Fine."

He knew she was asleep within seconds after laying her on the bed. He pulled her shoes off and tucked the comforter around her tiny frame. He turned the light on in the bathroom and once again found himself staring down at her sleeping form. He really needed to get control of himself. She was only a woman. He shut the door to her bedroom and walked to his own next door while his mind whispered, *Not just any woman, your woman. Mine.*

He was too tired to argue with himself now. While he only required a couple hours of rest here and there and preferred to sleep during the day, he had been up for nearly a week now without any. He crawled into his own bed and nodded off, images of Ebony floating through his mind.

* * * *

“You failed me. I should just end your miserable existence right now.” Amusement crept across the lines of anger on The Master’s face as the drudge crouched even lower and shivered with terror. The Master reveled in striking fear into inferiors, and that included most. The miserable drudge should be killed. However, this particular one seemed very dedicated to following all plans involving Ashe Aleksandrov thus far, and this was the first time failure resulted.

“Please, Master, give me another chance. I won’t fail you again. I swear it.”

“Get out of my sight. I’ll deal with you another time.” The Master dismissed the drudge with a curt wave of the hand that had the drudge scurrying for the door. Now another plan would have to be organized to get Ashe’s attention. Kidnapping the human would have been a perfect way to lure him here. He was so dedicated to saving the pathetic things after all. Maybe that was still an option. Patience would see great reward, however patience was running thin. The drudge would be given one chance to make up for the failure of tonight, and if failure were the result again . . . “Hmmm . . .” A small smile crossed The Master’s face at the thought of teaching the drudge a little lesson about her inability.

Chapter Four

The throbbing headache Ebony awoke to the next morning drew a low groan from her throat. The familiar pain now seemed to plague her more and more often. *Not another one already.* This particular one she could probably attribute to the stress of yesterday. Memories of the night before rushed back. She abruptly sat up then slammed her eyes shut and winced at the sudden increased pain. She rubbed the back of her neck while mentally scolding herself for such a stupid move. After a few moments she cracked her eyes open and jumped in surprise to find a woman standing at the end of the huge bed.

Ebony's voice came as a squeak. "Who are you?"

"I'm sorry I frightened you. I'm Estril, Ashe's sister." Estril slowly sat on the end of Ebony's bed and demurely folded her hands in her lap.

Estril's hair glimmered red with natural sun-kissed, coppery highlights, the kind of color women would pay a fortune for. The color enhanced the unique golden brown of her shining eyes, eyes that reflected age-old wisdom and knowledge even though she appeared to be nineteen or twenty. She was slender and taller than Ebony, of course. Everyone was taller than Ebony. Dressed in an emerald green dress she portrayed perfect elegance. Easing her way off the bed, Ebony winced again at her head's protest and ignored the pain the best she could.

"Where is Ashe? I need to talk to him."

"Ashe is in his room, which is next to yours on the left. Mine is across the hall to the right. Aiston and Aldin, my other brothers, sleep in the West Wing of the estate. They prefer to be able to come and go as they please without disturbing anyone else in the house. I think it's more so they can bring their women friends home without getting caught, but they would never admit to it. Well, at least Aldin wouldn't anyway."

West Wing? Good grief. How big is this place anyway? Ebony swayed a little after standing.

Estril casually leaned on one hand and continued talking while a gentle smile curved her lips. “McKayla is our housekeeper and cook. She stays in a room off the kitchen which is down the stairs to the left. If you want to shower and change, McKayla will have breakfast ready in about forty-five minutes. It’s ready every morning at nine.”

Dizziness robbed Ebony of balance for a moment after she stood, and a small but surprisingly strong hand slipped around her arm, supporting her with seemingly no effort. “Thanks, Estril. I just have a bit of a, um headache. I g-get them sometimes.” Remembering Estril’s depthless, all-knowing eyes and her own inability to lie, Ebony stared at the floor, focusing on the plush carpet. “After I shower I’ll feel better.” She didn’t know if she was trying to convince Estril or herself of that at the moment.

Estril watched the young woman tentatively. Then her eyes flew wide. “Ebony, you should see a doctor. I’ll go get Ashe immediately and inform him of your condition.”

Estril knew, but how? Ebony grabbed her hand in wide-eyed alarm and confusion. “No, please I don’t want anyone to know about my illness. I know it’s silly of me, but I don’t want to be pitied for the rest of my life, however long that may be.” Surely Estril couldn’t have figured it out just from her lie? *Then how does she know? Did she read my mind?* She decided not to ask because she wasn’t sure she wanted to hear the answer at the moment. She had too many strange things to come to terms with already regarding Ashe and his claim of being a vampire.

Estril didn’t so much as wince at the death grip Ebony had on her arm. “Oh, Ebony, no one will pity you. You need to be under a physician’s care.” She smiled encouragingly and gently squeezed her hand.

“All I need is some aspirin, and I’ll feel as good as new. Please, I don’t want Ashe or anyone else to know. I just want to live the rest of my life as normal as possible. I want to be like everyone else as long as I can be. Please, please don’t tell anyone.” Ebony began to wonder if it was wise to keep her condition from everyone. After all what did it matter? Yeah, and then everyone would be saying, “Oh, poor Ebony this and poor Ebony that.” No! She couldn’t handle the pity.

Estril sighed. "I'll keep your secret for now Ebony, but you have to know that I don't think it's right keeping this from Ashe. But, I'll only keep quiet if you promise me something."

Ebony looked at Estril with hesitancy in her eyes and released her hand. "What?"

"I'll let you come to your own terms on when and how, but you must tell Ashe, but, Ebony, if you get worse I will tell him if you haven't." Ebony barely kept the tears from her eyes when she nodded in agreement. "Have you told anyone?"

"No. Not even my best friend, Avril. Actually, I just found out less than twenty four hours ago myself." Hopefully this mess would be cleared up, and she would be out of here before she had to make good on her promise of telling Ashe. "I decided not to tell anyone right before I bumped into Ashe in the alleyway on my way home yesterday afternoon." Ebony reached down for one of the duffel bags, unzipped it and rummaged through the contents. After pulling out a pair of jeans, socks, shirt, a bra, toothbrush and a bottle of aspirin she tossed the bag back on the floor. She headed for the bathroom in hopes of getting away from the uncomfortable situation of talking about her illness any further. "I'm feeling better now. Thank you for your understanding about my wishes."

"Wait a minute, Ebony. You saw Ashe yesterday? During the day?"

Ebony nodded in confusion wondering why this question seemed so important. "Yeah."

Oh my God! Ebony is Ashe's viata amant. Estril's shoulders tensed a little.

Ebony asked the obvious when Estril remained silent. "Why?"

"Oh, I just wondered that's all."

Ebony knew by the way the woman studied her that there was way more to it than that. Why would Estril wonder at such a trivial thing as what time Ebony had seen her brother? Ebony shrugged her shoulders. “Oookay. If you say so.”

Estril assessed Ebony one last time. “If you’re sure you’re all right, I’ll give you some privacy and see you downstairs?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Thanks again.” Ebony turned to enter the huge bathroom after watching Estril’s exit. The small smile Estril had given before she left—the one that resembled the expression the cat would give after getting the cream—made her wonder what Estril knew that she didn’t. That thought fled her mind as she gaped at the vast space she had just walked into. Good grief, the bedroom and bathroom alone were as big as the whole bottom floor of her house.

Looking longingly at the deep whirlpool tub, Ebony turned the polished gold knobs on in the separate shower that was big enough for four people. She would make sure to take a soak in the marvelous tub later. For now, she needed to hurry so she could pay Ashe a little visit. It was time for some explanations, and she was determined to get them. She admired the smoothness of the huge vanity with double sinks and marble floor as she undressed then stepped into the steamy shower, sighing as the hot water massaged some of the tension out of her shoulders. Her headache slowly melted away as the hot water and aspirin worked their magic, and another sigh of pleasure escaped.

* * * *

Ashe grimaced at the constant pounding on his door, rolled over on his back and rubbed his eyes. “What!” Estril poked her red head around the door as he swung his legs over the side of the bed and stretched leaving the sheet draped around his waist. Her sly grin spelled trouble with a capital T. He wasn’t in the mood to deal with whatever it was she was up to this morning. *Great, just what I need.* He leveled his I-know-you’re-up-to-something-and-I-don’t-want-to-hear-it stare on her. “What do you want, Estril?”

Estril sighed. "I just had a nice little chat with Ebony. She's very pretty, Ashe. Smart, too. I like her. Where did you say you met her?"

Damn, when did his stare stop serving as a sufficient means to shut Estril up? He was going to have to work on a new one. He ran his hand through his ruffled hair. "I didn't say where I met her. You know I didn't, and you're here to stir something up so why not just get it over with." Ashe just wanted a long, hot shower, and his patience wore thinner by the minute. Estril was one of the kindest souls he knew, yet she had a way of poking her nose where it didn't belong as did most women.

"Ashe, Ebony said she ran into you yesterday."

"Yeah, I think I already told you I met her yesterday, didn't I?" So that's where she was heading with this conversation. The expectant look that was mixed with hope on Estril's face clenched his stomach into a thousand tiny knots. He yawned and tried to look bored.

"It was during the day. I know you always hunt shielded. You know what this means. You have to at least acknowledge it, Ashe." She hugged her arms around her middle and tapped her fingers impatiently on her arm.

All right, enough was enough. This discussion was over. He wasn't going there now. "Estril, this conversation is over. I'm getting up now, and I suggest you vacate my room as I'm not wearing a stitch of clothing." Ashe gripped the sheet to make good on his promise and watched as his sister put her back to him as he stood up. His smile of triumph was short lived as she continued her conversation instead of leaving his room.

"Please. It's not like I've never seen a naked man. How naïve do you think I am? Don't get me wrong, I have no desire to see you nude, brother, but neither will I run shrieking for the door because you threaten me with it.

His jaw dropped. "My God. I do not even want to know about any man you might have seen nude. I'd have to kill him."

“Oh please. I’m six hundred and eighty-five years old, Ashe. I’m not a nun you know.”

Ashe wanted to scrub that particular image of his sister from his mind. Yeah, she was no saint he was sure, but she was still his sister, and he was very protective of her as were Aiston and Aldin. “Look, Estril, some conversations are better left unsaid. And, you seeing naked men and me and Ebony are two of them.”

“Ashe, I’m going, but you have to confront this at some point in time. You know this means Ebony is your viata amant.” She slowly moved to the door. “I love you, and I only want to see you happy. Ebony’s nothing like Shara. She’s good, Ashe. I can sense it, and I know you can, too.”

“Doesn’t matter what I do or don’t sense, Estril. Ebony’s not for me, and I’m certainly nothing she’d want.”

Estril moved toward the door but paused before leaving. “Don’t be so sure.” She slipped out the door.

Ashe loved his sister, and knew she meant well, but hearing those words clenched his gut in dread once again. He couldn’t handle another betrayal. The last one nearly destroyed him. Of course, he knew Ebony was a genuinely decent person. Kindness practically rolled off her in waves. However, Shara started out as a good person too, and look where that got him. He didn’t want to know anything further about Ebony and had blocked himself from her emotions after their initial encounter. The thought of opening himself completely to her sent a foreboding shiver through his body laced with a small hint of anticipation. The latter he tried hard to ignore.

He flipped the jets in the shower on full blast and stepped under them, steam engulfing his body. An image of green eyes swam through his mind and dented his resolve. He slammed his fist against the shower wall. An ominous crack sounded loudly. No, he would not go there again. His head jerked, and his nostrils flared as honeysuckle invaded his senses. He snapped the water off, stepped out and knotted a towel around his hips. The object of his thoughts had just entered his room. The question was why?

* * * *

When her soft knock went unanswered, Ebony turned the handle and found the door unlocked. She poked her head in Ashe's dark room and squinted to see. She could see the big bed in the middle of the room but couldn't tell if he was still in it. She slipped into the room and suddenly a big, hard body crowded against her back pushing her into the door she had just clicked shut. Sandalwood and soap teased her nose, and she was in no doubt whose body trapped her. Her nipples peaked in want. Embarrassed that she was finding his closeness a little too appealing, she began to protest when Ashe spoke. Mouth close to her ear, his warm breath fanned her neck sparking her nerves, waking them with promises of unknown pleasure.

"Ebony, why are you in my room?" His words flowed low and sexy next to her ear.

The heat from his body seeped through her back deep into her bones. Her bottom snuggled intimately in the cradle of his hips, and she could feel the hardness of his erection pressed against her. She slowly turned to face him, and he braced his hands against the wall on either side of her head. Her eyes followed the corded muscles in his forearms to his wide shoulders. A small, almost discernible squeak escaped her when she realized he was completely nude except for the white towel that hung loosely around his narrow hips. She licked her lips, and her fingers itched to yank the towel off. God, he was gorgeous.

Water drops glistened and slowly trailed down his chest, and she had an overwhelming urge to dry him off, drop by drop with her tongue. Small brown nipples were nestled in a dusting of black hair that ran down to his navel where it made a trail to . . . *Oh, my*. Embarrassment flooded her cheeks as she quickly snapped her eyes back to his face. She had never seen a man completely nude, other than the few peeks she had caught at the naughty movies on late at night, but she was sure he would be a perfect specimen. His body was ripped in all the right places with hard muscle. Her mouth went dry, and her body grew warmer.

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to talk to you, and I thought maybe you were still a-asleep when you didn't answer the door."

Ebony's small pink tongue darted out and back in again while she perused his body. She couldn't help but take another quick glance at his towel clad arousal. She sucked in a breath and felt overheated.

She knew the pale skin on her neck and face was turning beat red from embarrassment. Her heart thudded in her ears.

He gave her a wicked predatory grin and watched her with hooded eyes. "I can lose the towel if you want."

"Ashe!" Oh my god. If he drops that towel I'm going to die. You are such a little liar. She wasn't exactly sure what she'd do if he dropped that towel, but it sure as hell wouldn't be dying.

He shrugged. "What? That is what you were thinking wasn't it? I've never been shy. If you want to take a look, I have no objections."

"Please. Just stop it. I just came to talk to you." She wondered what he'd do if she grabbed the towel herself and yanked it off.

"So you thought you'd come wake me for a little chat?" Ashe sighed at her naivety. "Ebony, it is not a good idea for a woman like you to come into a man's room you do not know." Her blush was immediately replaced with a scowl.

"What do you mean a woman like me?" What exactly was that supposed to mean? Was he suggesting she was unattractive? She knew she had a couple extra pounds and wasn't exactly modelesque, but she wasn't ugly.

Ashe moved his face closer to hers, and she pressed back harder against the door trying to put some distance between them.

He breathed in deep. "Let me rephrase that. It is not wise for a woman as desirable as you to come into my room, especially if I had still been in bed since I sleep in the nude. It might lead me to think you were interested in more than just idle chat." He watched her jaw drop in understanding.

She could drown in the vast pools of his turquoise eyes and never miss air. "Oh." He thought she was desirable? Surely a man as beautiful as he could not be the least bit interested in her. He was the type of man that usually had a model on his arm, not someone as plain as she was. She gasped as his eyes turned to near black and remembered they had done the same thing the night before when she thought he was going to kiss her. She couldn't help herself and leaned toward him as his lips found her soft skin.

A low, predatory growl escaped Ashe as he nipped and kissed his way along her jaw, stoking the heat flowing through her veins. Her heart pounded, and need coiled low in her belly while her breathing grew ragged. His touch hinted at a primal pleasure. Her body writhed in anticipation. His whispered name slipped from her lips, "Ashe," right before his mouth covered hers, and all rational thought ceased as overwhelming need engulfed her, swallowing her whole.

His tongue tasted the softness of her lips as the tip ran along the seam, gently biting then sucking on her lower lip to ease the sting.

"Open for me, Ebony." His eyes flared blacker as without hesitation, her lips parted, and he fastened his mouth back on hers. Thrusting his tongue inside he cupped the back of her head to hold her to him and deepened the kiss.

The man's mouth should be declared a lethal weapon. She couldn't have told him no when he asked her to open for him if she wanted to. God, the man could kiss. Her toes were actually starting to curl. She hadn't kissed many men, but she knew Ashe would take home the gold in that competition, and had obviously had plenty of experience himself. Jealousy licked along her veins at the thought. Ashe's tongue tangled with hers, and she sagged against the door, her legs turning to jelly. He tasted wild and spicy and . . . male.

"Mmmm." She wrapped her arms around his neck, and he groaned before kissing her possessively as if branding her as his own. She wanted to be branded by him. Wanted him to possess her. Wanted to possess him.

He devoured her. She wanted nothing more than to feel him slide deep into the welcoming heat of her body. She wanted to feel him stretch her, fill her, wanted him where no other man had ever been welcomed. She had never wanted another man like this, never thought she'd find a man she wanted like

this. And, yet, she did want him. She wanted him more than anything. Her body cried out for him, weeped for him, burned for him.

Her hands trailed a path of fire from his neck, down his back, and gently kneaded the tense muscles. He shifted his big body and began lifting the hem of her shirt. His breath fanned across her skin in long, excited gasps. His hands smoothed down her arms and then cupped her breasts. She fit in them perfectly. Before he could explore further, a knock sounded on the door.

“Ashe?” Estril’s voice sounded faint through the pounding of Ebony’s heart. “Breakfast is ready, and both Aldin and Aiston are here. I told them you would probably want to talk to them. I already told Ebony about breakfast. She should be down soon.” Her footsteps retreated down the hall.

Every muscle in Ebony’s body tensed. “Ebony?” Ashe whispered her name.

She was mortified at almost being caught by Estril. *Oh my, I’ve known him for less than twenty-four hours, and I’m acting like a teenager in heat.* Even the deep sound of his voice made her body clench in want. What was wrong with her? She lost all control around this man. Embarrassed by her wantonness, she spun around, opened the door and practically ran down the hall.

* * * *

Estril’s senses were as fine tuned as his, and he silently thanked his sister for not letting on she knew Ebony was with him. Ebony’s face had turned beet red when his sister knocked on the door. He’d never seen a woman blush so much in his life. He watched as she ran down the hallway. She reminded him of a gazelle being stalked by a predator, which when he thought about it was not too far from the truth. Dammit, Estril had to have the worst timing. If she hadn’t knocked on the door, he’d probably have Ebony up against it by now, his body buried deep in hers where it ached to be. He took a deep breath, held it for a moment before letting it out in a long rush. After thinking on it, maybe Estril had good timing.

He hadn't been able to stop himself from touching her. The need to taste her, to feel her delicate, pink tongue mate with his own had been too strong. A low growl escaped him as thoughts of other carnal acts flooded his mind. The sweetness of her blood and rhythmic thumping of her pulse called to him, enticed him when his lips had touched the delicate skin of her neck. The scent of her life force mingled with the scent of desire had hardened his cock to the point of pain.

He had been nearly blinded with the need to bury himself in her until he came over and over, filling her with his seed. His brain screamed at him in fury. *Mine! Take her!* Everything she did drove him crazy. The little sighs of pleasure that escaped her when he thrust his tongue in her mouth, mimicking what his body craved. The feel of the tight peaks of her nipples pushed against his bare chest through the fabric of her shirt. The way her lips looked swollen and red after his kisses. He wanted to claim her. Make her his in every way. Put his mark on her to leave no doubt within any male that might come near her that she was his.

Since Shara's betrayal he had never met a woman who was this appealing to him. *Appealing?* Yeah, if you called soul consuming, want to hump you over and over until you scream appealing. Obsessed might be a better description. *I am so fucked.*

He didn't need this complication right now. He was supposed to be protecting Ebony, not mauling her. She didn't deserve the rough handling he had just subjected her to, but once he had touched her, he was damned if he could think of one reason why he shouldn't. He would make sure to maintain distance between them from now on. There was no other choice because when he got close to her his mind caved to his body's demands. She didn't deserve what he had to offer, which was sex with no strings attached. She deserved love, and he was not the man to give it to her.

He got dressed then headed downstairs. He needed to talk to his brothers about forming a plan to catch Ebony's attacker. They had to find the information they needed, get this matter cleared up as soon as possible, and get Ebony back home where she belonged, away from him.

Chapter Five

Ebony breathed in deeply then out slowly and repeated the process several times, an exercise she used often to calm her nerves. The staircase was quite impressive with its deep mahogany color shined to perfection. She had heard the term 'grand staircase' and was convinced this would be considered such. She let out a small gasp when she walked through the swinging doors to the kitchen. It was no less impressive than the rest of the house.

Thick rich marble covered the floors, and stainless steel appliances were neatly tucked in various places beside the hand carved cherry cabinets. It was a chef's dream. Ebony was realizing how wealthy the Aleksandrov family must be. The small trust fund she had inherited from her mother and father's tragic deaths cushioned her meager income at the library well enough to live comfortably, but in no way allowed her to afford such luxuries as the ones she had seen thus far in this house.

The familiar twinge of pain in her chest made its presence known as it always did when she thought about her mother and father. Her parents truly loved one another, and she remembered how her father used to watch her mother do something as simple as wash the dishes with pride and joy shining in his eyes as if he were the richest man on earth; or how her mother would find any excuse to hold her father's hand. She dreamed of one day finding a love like her parents shared. Maybe she had set her standards too high as Avril always accused her of doing. She seemed to have no problem finding something wrong with the few men she had dated.

She had only been ten when her parents were killed by a drunk driver. Her Aunt Jackie had been babysitting her that night. She would never forget the haunting sound of her Aunt's sobs after opening the door to the police officer's knocks. She hadn't heard what the officer said, but even as a child, a deep foreboding had settled into her stomach. She knew something horrible had happened.

Aunt Jackie confirmed her suspicions within moments. She had never cried so hard in her life before or since then. Her aunt had been her only living relative, and from that night on, she lived with her in the Victorian house she had grown to love. After awhile, she had become content living with her aunt, and they shared a close relationship. What were the chances the same thing would happen to her

Aunt Jackie nine years later? If people would only stop to think of the pain their careless actions could cause others, maybe the world would be a better place.

She tamped down the horrible memories and noticed Estril and two other men sitting at the counter with plates of food in front of them. A short plump woman with mousy brown hair hovered over the stove, spatula in hand. The smell of cooking made her stomach grumble with protest, and the plates of eggs, fried potatoes, pancakes and bacon kicked the hunger pangs up another notch.

The men were absolutely gorgeous. One had short cropped black hair, the other, shoulder length blond, and she assumed they must be Aiston and Aldin. That thought was confirmed when she found two pairs of eyes assessing her, colored a similar turquoise to Ashe's. The one with the blond hair smiled at her big enough to show off his perfect, even, white teeth while the other merely raised his lip slightly in somewhat of a Billy Idol sneer.

She had not seen Ashe smile, yet somehow knew he'd have a perfect one with even, white teeth as well. The thought of teeth made her wonder if they were all supposed to be vampires. So where were the fangs? What about Estril? Never mind, she didn't want to go there.

The way the two men were staring at her reminded her of the way Estril had looked earlier, like the cat who got the cream. She felt like she was left out of a little inside joke between the three.

The man with the blond hair stood and motioned for Ebony to come sit on an empty stool. "You must be Ebony. I'm the youngest and most charming Aleksandrov brother, Aiston." Taking her hand, he gave her a mock bow and kissed the back of her fingers, lingering a little longer than necessary.

"Aiston, give it a rest," Estril chided him while using the mental link they shared. "You'll have to excuse him, Ebony. He's quite full of himself." Estril nodded in the direction of the other man. "That is Aldin, the middle brother, and that's McKayla, our housekeeper and cook." Estril motioned toward the plump woman now facing the four. She had on a yellow apron, and her eyes were a clear hazel. She nodded and smiled.

Ebony couldn't quite pinpoint what exactly made her think so, but there seemed to be something different about McKayla. That was ironic thinking now wasn't it? Everything was different here. For crying out loud, the whole room probably consisted of vampires.

Aldin barely nodded to Ebony at Estril's introduction. He possessed a quiet intenseness about him not unlike a calm day before a wild storm blew in. Although he didn't necessarily scare her, he had an air of danger about him as well and put her a little on edge, as if he was waiting for her to do something wrong. He reminded her of a panther, waiting for the perfect moment to pounce.

Aiston and Aldin both were huge, standing well over six foot. *It must run in the family.* While both men were absolutely gorgeous, neither provoked any feelings in her other than pure admiration for such beautiful male specimens. Ashe seemed to be the only one who could make her burn by a mere glance, and that was very disturbing on many levels.

* * * *

"She's sick."

"Yes, she is, but she asked me not to tell Ashe, Aldin." Estril knew her brothers would pick up on it as she had.

"What do you mean she asked you not to tell him? Surely he knows. I mean damn, she's practically got a neon sign hanging around her neck."

"Cut it out, Aiston. I guess I might as well let you two in on the details as Ashe probably won't tell you either."

"Oh please do, dear sister."

She cut Aiston a seething look before continuing. *“Apparently Ebony ran into Ashe yesterday while he was hunting.”*

“Yeah, so what.”

“Geez Aiston! Why can’t you be quiet like Aldin sometimes and just listen? For your information she ran into him during the day.”

She never thought she would see shock on her brothers’ faces. Nothing seemed to surprise them any more. But, yet she never thought she’d see the day Ashe would be presented a second opportunity to share his life with someone. Estril knew Ebony was nothing like Shara. She had sensed the kindness in her from the start. Still Ashe’s past with Shara had led him to swear off relationships. She had never known Ashe to outright disrespect a woman, but she also was aware that he viewed them very differently now. He was leery of women in general, didn’t trust them or allow any emotional ties.

Unfortunately, their earlier conversation in his room proved that he was in denial about Ebony. Her brothers were so stubborn and pigheaded sometimes. She hoped he’d finally realize that Shara had been weak. Some humans couldn’t accept that vampires existed—no matter what. Ebony might be ill, but she was strong. Estril knew in her heart that Ebony would not hurt her brother, but trying to convince Ashe of that would be a feat in itself.

Estril wanted her brother to find happiness so badly. She remembered him laughing and joking before Shara, but since then he rarely smiled much less laughed. She knew the real reason he refused to get close to another woman all these years was simple. He was scared. She also knew that no man ever wanted to admit to that.

“Well, I guess this situation is going to turn to shit fast.”

“I hope it turns out to be a good situation for Ashe, Aldin. He deserves to be happy doesn’t he?”

"Of course he does, but I think we are all aware of what that bitch Shara did to him." Aldin stared at Ebony.

"He's never gotten over it, and you know how stubborn Ashe can be. Why do you think I'm always playing pranks on him, trying to get him to loosen up a little?"

"Aiston, you play pranks on all of us because you are a pain in the butt. Anyway, now you both know that she is his viata amant, and you both know he is denying it to the point that he hasn't even realized she is ill. I only promised not to tell Ashe as long as Ebony agreed to tell him herself soon. If she gets worse, I will tell him. I say let them work it out for now."

"Damn. Do you really think either one of us wants to get in the middle of this brewing mess anyway?"

Estril watched Aiston and Aldin exchange a doubtful glance, and Aldin shook his head, probably in doubt of Ebony and Ashe ever working anything out. She had faith that her brother was given a second chance for a reason, and that reason was he deserved to be happy.

"Well if he doesn't want her, I'll take her. She sure is a pretty little thing."

Would Aiston never stop acting like a naughty, four year old boy in need of constant scolding? How could a man of six hundred and ninety be so childish? *"Aiston, cut it out. You know if you even think about touching her, Ashe will skin you alive. Even if he is denying that Ebony is his life love, his body knows who she is, and he will not allow another man to touch her, including his chauvinistic brother."*

"Okay, okay. Just chill out, Estril. I get the point."

* * * *

McKayla handed Ebony a plate and began putting more food on the counter as Ashe walked in. He had on black jeans and white shirt and went to pour himself some coffee after spooning some sugar in his cup. Ebony couldn't help but admire his rear. This was the first time she actually saw it, and it was as perfect as the rest of him. She pulled her gaze back to her plate before he caught her ogling his perfect butt, took a bite of her bacon and sighed in pleasure at the mouth-watering crispy taste.

Ashe leaned against the counter and took a long sip of coffee then promptly spit it into the sink. "Son of a bitch, Aiston! When are you going to cut this shit out?"

Aiston's laughter only lasted for a moment before he hid it behind a cough. "It was only salt. It's not like it's poison or anything."

"Oh for crying out loud!" Estril threw her hands up in frustration.

Aldin didn't say a word but fixed a stare on Aiston that scared the heck out of Ebony. If looks could kill, Aiston would be dead on the floor at this moment. She thought switching the sugar for salt was a little childish but had found it a little amusing as well until she saw Ashe's face turn red, highlighting the now throbbing vein in his forehead.

"I swear if you play one more prank on me, I'm going to kick your ass, little brother." Ashe splashed the rest of his coffee down the drain and poured a new cup, minus the salt. "No, I'll go one even further. I'm going to get you for this. You won't know when or where, but I will."

Aiston held his hands up in surrender. "Okay, okay. Point made. Let's just forget about it, and I promise I'll lay off for awhile. Now why don't you tell me all about our beautiful house guest."

"I know what that smug grin means, Aiston. Don't even think about going there."

"Why whatever are you talking about, bro?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. We all know how you like to play around with anything with tits. Don't try it with Ebony. She's not one of your bimbos. Besides, if you even think about touching her, I swear to God I will rip your fucking balls off. She's under my protection, and she isn't for your enjoyment."

"Damn. Take it easy. Nothing wrong with having a little fun now and then, you know?"

"Yeah, well have all the fun you want without Ebony."

"Whatever you say, bro." Aiston gave a cocky grin in return to his brother's murderous glare.

"McKayla, the coffee is wonderful as usual." McKayla gave Ashe a small smile and nodded at his compliment. "So Estril, why don't you show Ebony the gardens and main layout of the house today while I talk with Aiston and Aldin."

Ebony bristled at that suggestion. She had no doubt they would be talking about the situation involving her, and she didn't want to be excluded. She wiped her mouth with her napkin. "I think I'd like to join your meeting. After all, it will be me you're discussing won't it?" She sat back and crossed her arms lightly about her waist. She was getting seriously annoyed at Ashe's bossiness.

"Yes, Ashe, it will be about Ebony, won't it? I think you should let her join us." Aiston smiled at Ashe.

Ashe's fists clenched. *"Aiston, don't fuck with me on this. I only gave you a brief rundown of what happened yesterday and you don't know all the facts involved in her situation at the moment. It isn't safe for her to be in the middle of this. She needs to be kept out of it until we make it secure for her to return home. I can't believe that even you would want to risk her safety for the satisfaction of annoying me."*

“Ashe, how serious is it?”

“Pretty serious, Aldin. Let’s go to the study, and I’ll fill you both in on all the details.”

“Ebony, I’m sorry, but we will take care of this. You will not be involved.” Her eyes blazed with anger, and he raised his hand to stop the coming protest. “I don’t want to hear another word about it. It’s final, and I’ll lock you in your room if you don’t stay out of it.”

Ooooooh. The man is soooooo irritating. What was she, ten? She wasn’t a child that needed a parent to look after her. She was a grown woman capable of making her own decisions. She knew she wasn’t going to make any progress in convincing him of that at the moment though as ‘Ashe the Stubborn’ had returned. He made her want to pull her hair out. She was determined to find a way to be involved, but knew she would never win directly butting heads with him.

No, she had to use her brains and wiggle her way under his radar without him ever suspecting. She had to come up with a plan. Looking at Estril, she had a feeling that she knew exactly what it was like to be bullied by her brothers. Just as she decided Estril had the potential of making a great accomplice, McKayla reached in front of her to take her empty plate, revealing a small, half-moon symbol on the back of her hand.

Ebony jumped up as fear choked her, knocking her chair over backward with a loud thump. The room went completely silent, and everyone stared at her as if she were the creature from the black lagoon.

Ebony pointed at McKayla and shouted while backing toward the hall. “She’s a drudge! She’s one of those things that attacked me!”

Ashe’s hands came down on her shoulders firmly to keep her from running. “Aiston, Aldin, I’ll meet you in the study in a few minutes. Estril, please wait here until I bring Ebony back.” Ashe turned her toward the door and ushered her into the hall.

“Why the hell would you have one of those things in your house?” She wrapped her arms tight around her waist.

He wrapped his arms around her and held her close. “It’s okay. Calm down and listen to me. Not all drudges are bad. They only do what their masters tell them to do, otherwise they are fairly normal.”

“Fairly normal, but—”

“Look, McKayla is not our drudge. She was made by a shadow drifter who tortured her until I rescued her. She has been living here, under her own free will, ever since. She won’t hurt you or anyone else. I promise.”

Her shoulders relaxed a little as she began to think she may have overreacted a bit. But how was she supposed to know all the details? Guilt began creeping in, and she knew now that McKayla had not deserved the unfair treatment Ebony had subjected her to.

“I’m sorry. I just freaked out a little when I saw that symbol on her hand.”

Unwrapping her from his arms, he pushed her chin up with his finger, bringing her eyes to his. “No, it’s my fault. I should have told you all about her. I should have figured that this might happen. I’m sorry.”

She had treated McKayla horribly, and all she could do was stand here and wish Ashe would put his arms back around her. “Well whatever, it is over now, and I think I owe an apology to McKayla.” Ebony walked back toward the kitchen.

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes. I’m sure.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“No. I’ll be fine. After I apologize, I’ll ask Estril if she will still take me for that tour of the gardens you suggested.” Estril and McKayla were both seated at the table, and McKayla jumped up when she saw Ebony. It was evident she was upset, and Ebony felt even worse. “No, please McKayla. I’m so sorry I overreacted. A drudge attacked me last night, and when I saw your scar . . . well I just kind of had a horrible flashback. Can you forgive me?”

“It’s understandable. There’s nothing to forgive you for. It’s really no big deal.”

“Oh, but it is. I prejudged you, and I shouldn’t have.”

McKayla shook her head. “No, really, it’s okay. Let’s just forget it and start over okay?”

Ebony returned McKayla’s smile. “I would really like that. Thanks.” Ebony gave McKayla a quick hug then turned to Estril. “I would like to see the gardens. Would you mind showing them to me?”

“Sure, let’s go.”

Ebony returned to her room three hours later and decided to finally try out the huge Jacuzzi tub in her bathroom. Soaking in the hot, bubbly water relaxed her. She enjoyed the tour of the gardens. She couldn’t ever remember seeing so many colors of flowers in one place. The vibrant and varying shades of blue, violet, red, yellow, orange, peach, pink, white and even black wove and meshed together so beautifully she had been mesmerized. She was surprised and maybe a little envious when Estril had admitted to being the creator of the garden. Ebony didn’t have a green thumb. In fact, Avril had jokingly said she had a black thumb because everything she planted promptly wilted and died.

Avril. She missed Avril. At least Avril wouldn’t be worried about her for a few days since it was Saturday. She remembered that Avril would be out of town visiting her parents until tomorrow evening.

After her bath she would find Ashe and see about calling her friend tomorrow since he had taken her cell phone. She didn't want her friend to be worried when she couldn't reach her.

Now she needed to tackle her other problem. Ashe. How was she going to get him to keep her posted on what he found out about her attack? She skirted the issue with Estril while walking in the garden. Estril didn't flat out refuse to help, but she insisted that she would not do anything that might put Ebony in danger. Estril was a good person, and Ebony could see her becoming a good friend. However, she was not so blind to see that Estril's utmost loyalty lay with her family. It was an admirable trait Ebony could not fault.

So how was she going to get information from Ashe? She had a feeling she could rip his fingernails out one by one, and he wouldn't utter a word. How to do it? *Hmmmm*. The steam and hot water soaked into her skin for a good twenty minutes before she came up with a plan.

"Bingo." Ebony sat up as an idea formed. "Maybe I could seduce him." Hearing that thought out loud, it sounded ridiculous. *Yeah, right. I'm a virgin and don't know the first thing about seducing anyone.* The man screamed sex, and she knew if she tried to carry this plan out and wasn't extremely careful, he would pounce and devour her before she realized what happened. However, there was obviously an attraction between them, and he seemed to thoroughly enjoy their kisses.

She would like to experience sex before she died, and she was certain he would make a wonderful lover. Her toes curled as the image of him in his towel played through her mind. Even though the man was huge he had not hurt her in any way during their encounter in his bedroom. He had been gentle with her. She knew he would be an excellent teacher.

Heat seeped into her body at the mere thought, burning a sensual path down deep in her belly. This plan had several advantages stacked in its favor. Didn't most women say that you could control a man to some extent with sex? How hard could it possibly be?

After stepping out of the tub, she reached for a fluffy white towel. She argued with herself while drying, then finally made up her mind. She was going to do it. She had to plan it carefully and keep it completely impersonal, for if she didn't, she had a feeling she would be nothing but an empty shell at the end of it all. She mustn't get emotionally involved with him because he made it clear when this mess was over, he would return her home. She knew his intentions were to walk away from her afterward.

What did she really have to lose? Great sex with a gorgeous man that made her burn was not a loss, but a broken heart would be. Could she really pull it off without getting hurt? She didn't know, but at this point she was willing to risk it. *Okay Ebony, sex and that's it. Keep your mind focused.*

She distracted herself from lingering on the possible consequences by rummaging through her clothes. *What does one wear to seduce someone?* She didn't have many choices, only having a meager wardrobe with her. She pulled out her snuggest jeans and a close fitting, red shirt. It was the only top she owned that showed a little cleavage. She hoped it was enough and not too much at the same time.

She dried her hair and put a small dab of blush on. After teasing her hair a bit, she let it fall around her shoulders to frame the cleavage she so carefully put on display. She looked in the mirror. *Wow, is that really me?* She actually looked sexy. She normally didn't look sexy. She was just plain Ebony. She felt anxiety creep back in, and her shoulders slumped. *I can't do this.*

After pacing around the room a few times she worked her courage back up. *Yes, I can do this.* She squared her shoulders and made her way back downstairs before she could change her mind again. She had decided to figure it out as she went and not plan too many details, which would probably lead to her chickening out.

* * * *

Ashe drummed his fingers impatiently on the smooth cherry surface of the big desk he sat behind. After filling his brothers in on all the details of Ebony's attack, well, except for the little detail of her seeing him while shielded, they had decided at this point it would be best to spend the next several days scouting for information. He was sure Estril had told them that she thought Ebony was his viata amant, but at least they had been smart enough to leave his love life alone. *Yeah, what love life?* He didn't have one, and he didn't want one.

Since Aiston spent a lot of his time in establishments frequented by many vampires, he was the number one choice to make discreet inquiries about any in the area who still kept drudges. Not to mention he had access to the high paid escorts of those establishments as well. Men had a tendency to

run their mouths around attractive women about anything they thought might impress them. Ashe and Aldin also had several contacts among fellow shadow drifter hunters.

Estril had interrupted to remind them about the annual Midnight Ball in a week. She had managed to bully them into having a Midnight Ball every year on Halloween. Midnight Balls were a tradition among their kind. However, the brothers didn't really care to dress up in tuxes, or what they referred to as monkey suits, and get social. Estril informed them it was good for them, and that was how they came about being utterly bored, irritated and somewhat humiliated for several hours every year.

They hated the whole ordeal, but of course, they would endure it for Estril. After some discussion they decided the ball might not be such a bad idea this year since it could possibly prove useful by providing a perfect opportunity to gain information about Ebony's attacker.

Vampires were, more often than not, guarded with the information they shared. How better to get conversation flowing than a party? Most would relax a little during a gathering, and the stocked bar would loosen tongues up even more. Vampires didn't stay drunk long as their bodies would heal this affliction rather quickly, but most could stay fairly intoxicated by drinking at a moderate pace.

Ashe had decided that this year Ebony could help Estril with the arrangements. He figured this would serve as an effective distraction to keep Ebony out of his hair while trying to find her attacker. He knew she was definitely going to cause him trouble if he didn't keep her busy.

Light footsteps coming toward the study pulled him from his thoughts. The sweet smell of honeysuckle teased his nose. Any time she got near, her scent curled its way through his body and wrapped itself around him, embracing him, caressing him like a lover. *For Christ's sake! Get it together.* He barked "come in" even though she hadn't yet knocked. The sight of her stole his breath, and his body instantly hardened when she turned to shut the door. Her jeans hugged her fine ass, perfectly outlining every delicious curves.

She sauntered across the room. Sauntered? Ebony did not saunter. She didn't need to. Her movements were naturally graceful and sexy. He watched as she propped her curvy hip on his desk and batted her eyelashes at him. What the hell was going on?

"Hi, Ashe."

The words came out breathy and overexaggerated to his ears. What the hell? Was she flirting with him? He sucked in a breath when she leaned down and treated him to a view of her delectable cleavage. *Damn it!* He could not believe what she was trying to do. Her thoughts were practically screaming at him, broadcasting live what her intentions were. He tried to be respectful and stay out of her mind, but thoughts were amplified when strong emotions such as fear or nervousness were involved, and even though she was trying hard to hide it, she was nervous.

His dark mood suddenly lifted. So she wanted to play did she? "How did you like your tour of the gardens?" He clasped his hands behind his head and sat back in the chair stretching his long legs in front of him, and crossed his feet at the ankles. He was pleased by her surprised look at his nonchalant reaction. However, the pleasure turned to desire when she suddenly bent over and stretched her body like a cat to tie her shoelace. She gave an exaggerated wiggle to her jean clad ass, and he sucked in a harsh breath.

"Yes, it was one of the most gorgeous things I have ever seen." She gave her behind one last wiggle before standing and propping her hip back on the desk.

Ashe couldn't believe she was trying to seduce information out of him. She obviously didn't know how much she fired his blood simply by just being herself. If she ever realized how unnecessary her acting was, she would be horribly embarrassed. Although, he had to admit, wiggling her ass in front of him wasn't such a bad idea. In fact a specific other part of his anatomy thought it was an exceptional idea.

Hadn't she learned that she should be more careful with such things from the incident in his bedroom? Hadn't she learned that she was too innocent to play such games with him? He took another look at her luscious behind and felt his cock stand in full salute. *Aw hell, she's got to learn to stop playing around with me like this!* This would be the second time now that she had placed herself in a possibly precarious situation with a man she barely knew. Although, he had to admit, it felt like he had known her forever.

Enough was enough. Leaning forward, he grabbed her firmly around the waist and pulled her on his lap, putting his lips to her ear. "What are you doing, Ebony?"

Ebony squeaked as Ashe's arms clamped around her and pulled her down on his hard thighs. "What do you mean, Ashe?" She struggled to turn around, but he held her firm.

"Oh I think you know, baby." His words were low, predatory. He pushed his nose in her hair and inhaled deep then traced the outline of her ear with his tongue.

Need raged in his veins. She squirmed to get away, but the friction on his lap caused his already interested arousal to ache. The scent of her desire floated through the air, invading his body, promising pleasure, promising relief, promising submission.

He put his lips against her neck, just below her ear and inhaled her scent even deeper. It seeped into every pore of his body, imprinting her on him forever. The beast in him demanded to taste her. Need surged through his veins. He thought his cock might explode and shifted a little to ease the strain against his jeans.

He moved one hand up under her shirt, cupped her breast through the lacey bra and toyed with her nipple, rolling it between his thumb and finger until it hardened through the material. He continued teasing the hard peak gently while his other hand worked on the button of her jeans. Her skin was like silk and satin, smooth and soft. "So soft, so sweet."

A small moan escaped her when he cupped her breast. He wanted her to need him as he needed her. He wanted her body to scream for him as his did for hers. Her skin was hot. Her body begged for more of his touch. He undid her jeans and slid his hand under the top of her panties where he cupped her, gently palming her sensitive little nub. She sucked in a sharp breath and froze.

"Ashe?"

His balls tightened in anticipation when he felt the tight curls, damp with moisture, brush his palm. He wanted to plunge his finger into her tight little sheath and feel her wetness and heat surround him. But, he knew he had to take it slow when her body tensed at his intimate touch. He wanted to

please her, show her the countless ways a man could pleasure a woman. He stilled his trembling hand and kissed her neck while he continued to stroke her nipple.

“Relax, baby. I won’t do anything you don’t want me to do. Do you want me to stop?” He hoped like hell she’d say yes . . . He hoped like hell she’d say no.

He teetered on the brink while he waited for her answer. She pushed her nipple harder into his hand, and he palmed and gently kneaded it. A rush of wetness coated his fingers, and he growled low in the back of his throat. Her body was an instrument, and he wanted to play the perfect chord.

“No, please don’t stop, Ashe.”

Her breathy little plea was nearly his undoing. The beast roared in victory as he pulled her mouth around and plunged his tongue inside imitating what he wanted to do with his body. He was lost to all but the feel and scent of her. He wanted to devour her, possess her, and hear her soft moans turn into screams as he made her come over and over. She was driving him mad with need.

He pulled his mouth from hers and put it on her nipple, sucking the already sensitized peak deep into his mouth. He groaned at her taste and when she tugged his hair to pull him closer, he could no longer keep his hand still and began to thumb her core, making small, slow circles as his index finger split her slick folds, stroking back and forth. She was so wet and hot, he wanted to yank her jeans off and drive his full length into her.

She gasped and then sighed as his finger slid deeper. He knew he needed to go slow for her, but his control was slipping, and the beast continued to demand he claim her.

“Just relax, baby.”

She was so hot and wet, her body instinctively strained toward the unknown. He pressed into her even deeper, and she gasped, clutching her thighs around his hand as she bucked against him. She

rode his finger as it worked in and out of her, thumb still rubbing her sensitive bud. Small pants of pleasure escaped her lips.

“Oh, Ashe!”

She was so tight. He imagined his cock buried in her sheath while it enveloped, gripped and milked him dry. He was so close to coming. The small contractions of her inner muscles warned him she was as close as he was.

“Easy, baby. Come for me.” He pushed deeper and deeper into her slickness.

“I can’t.” Ebony cried out and bucked her hips forward, welcoming him deeper. Her body demanding more. She thrashed her head back and forth, panting. It’s too much, Ashe. Please I can’t.”

The words had barely left her mouth when a low keening noise chased them. Her body tensed, and her muscles clamped down on him. “Oh God, Ebony, that’s it. Just let go, baby.” Her release hit him, wave after wave calling to him like a seductress. Pure instinct to possess captured him as his fangs unsheathed. He slid them effortlessly into her neck. Her blood ran thick and rich into his mouth, and it was the sweetest thing he had ever tasted. Her limp body quickly tensed, and he knew he had just made a horrible mistake.

He firmly held her in place to avoid tearing her soft flesh while he gently eased his teeth out of her beautiful neck. He licked the punctures to seal the wounds. The tiny marks left on her smooth and flawless skin would be gone by morning. She jumped off his lap as soon as he released his hold on her and spun around. He watched the fear chase the last hints of passion from her eyes and cursed himself.

Shit! He hadn’t warned her of what he was about to do. *Of course you didn’t because you were scared she’d say no.* Instead he had taken the coward’s way out and did exactly what he wanted, selfishly not caring about her feelings one tiny bit. He knew she still hadn’t completely accepted him as a vampire, but she would have no doubts now.

Ebony backed up as Ashe stood and slowly walked toward her. Clutching the doorknob behind her, she wrenched it open and ran upstairs. He heard the slam of her room door, the click of her lock, and the sobs that immediately followed. He raked his fingers through his hair then punched the wall with his fist.

Chapter Six

He really screwed up this time. When he realized Ebony was trying to seduce him he had been angry. He knew she was too naive to realize the possible ramifications of her actions and just wanted to show her how dangerous the game of seduction could be for an innocent like her to play with a sexually experienced man. He hadn't planned on it backfiring horribly.

He shouldn't have let things go as far they had, but once he touched her and saw the desire burning in her eyes his good intentions had been forgotten in a flood of burning want of his own. He'd been lost to all reasoning. The only thing he had proven was that he was no better than any other cad. He had to go to her and apologize. He nearly ran over Estril on his way up the stairs, a testament to just how preoccupied his thoughts were.

"Is something wrong, Ashe? Is Ebony okay? What happened?"

Concern vibrated like a tuning fork off Estril and bounced in the air around him. *"Don't worry about it, Estril. Nothing's wrong."* Why did his sister have such a knack for being in the wrong place at the wrong time? He didn't have time to stand here and shoot the fucking breeze. He needed to get to Ebony.

"Did something happen to Ebony? I heard her door slam a few moments ago. Is she okay?"

Ashe shot her an annoyed look. *"Look, Estril, I said don't worry about it. Now, please will you give it a rest?"*

Estril's eyes widened in surprise at the sharp tone Ashe used. Now he had hurt his sister's feelings too. He pulled a deep, calming breath into his lungs and briefly closed his eyes when he let it out. *"I'm sorry, Estril. Look, I just need to talk with Ebony, okay?"* After squeezing her shoulders in brief apology, he darted the rest of the way up the stairs.

* * * *

"Come on Ebony, open the door."

Ebony easily ignored the soft knocking on her door, but when the warm invasion of his voice flowed through her brain, well that she couldn't. It was like not eating that last piece of chocolate with creamy filling in the box. It just wasn't possible.

"Go away, Ashe!" She was so stupid! She couldn't believe she had actually tried to seduce the man. How had she been able to convince herself that it had been a good idea? He was completely out of her league in more ways than one and had turned the situation around effortlessly, making her the one being seduced. She had assumed he would take the bait like any normal male. *Yeah, but he isn't normal now is he?* No, that wasn't exactly true. She just hadn't wanted to believe he was a vampire. Well, she believed it now.

After the incident in his bedroom she should have known better than to think she could get casually physical with the man. And, boy had it gotten physical and not casual in any way. He sent flames through her body with a mere glance. The man made her burn with no effort, and once his mouth had touched hers, she had been lost to all rational thought.

"Please Ebony, open the door."

She knew he was too dang stubborn to just go away. Ebony slid off the bed, wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and freed the deadbolt from the lock, determined to get this confrontation over with. She was surprised when Ashe didn't enter her room and continued standing where he was, staring at her expectantly. Was that actually guilt on his face?

"Well, aren't you going to come in?"

Ebony shuffled over to stare out the window at the approaching dusk and waited to see what Ashe would do. She wanted him to go away . . . She wanted him to stay. Who actually enjoyed being bitten by someone? *You did*. He really was a vampire! Maybe if she said it a few hundred more times, it wouldn't seem so strange. *Sure*.

"Ebony, I'm sorry." He held his hands out and then dropped them at his sides in surrender. She spun on him and crossed the room so fast he took a small step back. She poked her finger in his chest making sure he knew she was angry.

"Exactly what are you sorry for, Ashe? Let's see." She held her hand up and began counting each thing off, one finger at a time. "Could it be for taking me from my home against my will? Or, maybe for only telling me what you think is appropriate for me to know? How about mauling me one minute and then acting as though you can't stand the sight of me the next?" Snapping her fingers in the air, she continued. "Oh, I know. You must be sorry for scaring the hell out of me downstairs."

She paced back and forth, an irritating habit she had picked up many years ago when she was agitated or nervous. "Did you even stop to think for one second about how it might make me feel if you bit me?"

Ebony shook with a mixture of anger and frustration. Sure, he had scared the hell out of her, but a little voice in her head whispered, "Hypocrite," because it had also been the most erotic, mind-blowing thing she had ever experienced. After the initial shock of his teeth sliding into her flesh, complete bliss had washed through her, sparking desire once again. Her blood had fired hot, and she would have done anything he asked at that moment. It had been her plan to seduce him for information, and she shouldn't be so angry that it had backfired on her.

"Look. I'm sorry I scared you. It was not my intention to do so. I didn't mean to let things go so far, I lost control, and I shouldn't have. I know this is a lot for you to take in, but I'm really just trying to keep you safe, Ebony. I swear I would never intentionally do anything to hurt you."

"I just don't know what to say. I'm so confused over this whole mess." She began rubbing the back of her neck, trying to massage away some of the building tension before her head took up a pounding that would put orchestral drums to shame.

"Do you have a headache?" He stepped up behind her, removed her hands from her neck and replaced them with his, massaging the tight muscles gently.

She knew deep down that Ashe would never hurt her. Her body had known it from the start. It had just taken longer for her mind to catch up. "I'm okay. Just a little stressed is all."

God, his hands felt good. She could feel the tension receding with every magical rub of his long, warm fingers. His touch once again heated her blood, sending small shivers of pleasure deep into her belly. It took all her willpower to step away from him, but she had questions she wanted answered.

"I really am sorry. I can only hope you believe me and maybe even forgive me?"

She was beginning to feel a little guilty letting him take all the blame. After all, it wouldn't have happened if not for her hair-brained scheme. "Look, it was mostly my fault anyway. It was a huge mistake, and it should have never happened. I just wanted to be involved in finding who attacked me."

"Hell, it wasn't your fault, Ebony. I'm the one who let things get out of hand, but I still refuse to let you be a part of it. It's just too dangerous." She knew he'd never budge on the topic. "Although I have to admit, after my initial anger was over at figuring out what you were up to, I did find your methods very interesting." The corner of his mouth turned up, almost in a smile at her wide-eyed expression.

"Ashe! You are incorrigible! All I did was make a complete fool of myself. I'm surprised you didn't laugh at me."

He shook his head in disagreement. "If you only knew how far off you are with that statement. I'd have to say you did a pretty good job of catching my interest." His eyes darkened. "In fact, I'd have to say, the furthest thing from my mind was laughter."

He took a step toward her, and she took a step back. This kind of talk was going to lead her right back into the fire, and she was too smart to get burnt twice, or at least too smart to get burnt twice in one day. She had questions she wanted answered and knew now was her chance. He was feeling guilty and would probably, no hopefully, be more open to her questions. Maybe her plan hadn't completely backfired after all. She wasn't ashamed to take advantage of the opportunity if it was the only way to get answers. This was her life, after all.

"Ashe, how did you become a vampire?"

He sighed and then pushed his fingers through his hair. "My father was born a human. He met my mother, who is a vampire, and she turned him. I was born a vampire about seven hundred years ago to them in a small town called Sighisoara. It was near Romania and Transylvania and no longer exists. I am the oldest of my siblings. My father was burned to death when I was around two hundred years old by vampire hunters. My mother, Marilena, took it extremely hard and has not been the same since. She travels and visits us on occasion. She's a remarkable woman, but she's never fully recovered from the loss of my father."

"You said you are seven hundred years old?" Holy mother of God, was he kidding her? "Can you die?"

"Yes, I can die. But, only from excessive blood loss, decapitation or burning. If vampires are fortunate enough to avoid those situations we can live indefinitely."

Biting her lower lip, Ebony turned to face him. She mentally filed away the information he was providing her with so she could think on it further later. However, at the moment she wanted to get in as many questions as possible. She had the feeling if she asked him to elaborate too much on one particular subject he would get weary of the discussion before she could get all the answers she wanted.

"You said your mother turned your father? So, you can turn humans into vampires?" Her head was spinning from the abundance of questions rolling around inside.

"No, we can't turn just any human. Only our viata amant, or life love."

“What do you mean life love?”

He sighed once again and began the long explanation. “Every vampire has someone who is destined to be their life love or soul mate as you might call it. Those are the only humans who can be turned vampire. Unfortunately, most humans have a problem coping with the reality of vampires and an even bigger problem contemplating becoming one. Finding a life love doesn’t always end in a happily ever after.” *Don’t I know it.*

She couldn’t pinpoint what made her think so—maybe the near discernible way his body tensed—but she got the feeling that he was extremely uncomfortable talking about this particular subject. She wanted to know more about viata amants, but thought it might be best to go on to a different question, at least for the time being. “So, how did the first vampire come into existence?”

“There are legends that say there is a father of all vampires. His name is Ragnar, and he is supposedly born of two Gods. It is said that Ragnar’s father was cursed by a jilted lover. Supposedly any children fathered by him would require blood to survive and be forever doomed to walk in the night. While Ragnar’s father sought a way to reverse the curse, he never found any way to completely lift it. He was able to alter it in such a matter to allow Ragnar to walk in the daylight and eat normal food, but he could never find a way to lift the part of the curse where Ragnar must drink blood to survive.

Being the offspring of Gods, vampires inherited extra perceptive abilities such as hearing, sight, taste, smell and even immense strength, speed and of course, immortality. Since Gods have different powers, many vampires are unique in certain ways. Such as some have the ability to shape shift while others are able to command the weather, fire, or animals. There is speculation that there are even those who can shift time and travel to the past or future, but I have never met such a vampire in my existence. I, myself, have the ability to do several things on a smaller scale. Though, I have to admit, no one has ever seen Ragnar, or at least no one has said so if they have. Nonetheless, it is the only explanation I have for how we came to exist.”

“Are you telling me that you can shape shift and command fire and weather?”

“Ebony, I can shape shift and control several things on a small scale with my mind, but you have to understand that these things take much of my energy and make me weak. Unless there is dire need to do one of these things for survival, I do not do them. I am a warrior and prefer to fight.”

He could shape shift, and there were others who excelled in such things? While all these things scared her, they were also fascinating. She could not imagine in her wildest dreams being capable of doing any of these things and respected him so much more knowing the power he had at his fingertips and the honorable man he undoubtedly was to control it and not take advantage of those who were weaker, which pretty much consisted of the entire human population.

She found the whole shimmering thing a little difficult to understand. It seemed complex and had conditions on when it could and could not be achieved. If a vampire were a guest in another vampire’s home, he could not shimmer within the walls unless invited to do so. If invited, from that moment on, shimmering could be accomplished anywhere in the house unless a new vampire took possession, and then one would have to be invited again to do so. If a vampire tried to shimmer inside another vampire’s home without being invited, shimmering would fail, and the vampire would become weak for a short time.

Most vampires did not allow other vampires to shimmer inside their homes for protective reasons. One never knew when a best friend might turn shadow drifter. There were no other contingencies on shimmering in and out of any other home or building as long as it was not owned by another vampire. Ashe explained to her that no one understood why there were such constraints or how they were enforced. The legend was that Ragnar had supposedly placed such rules upon his children to protect them.

She knew about his telepathic ability, but seemed surprised to find out he could read her thoughts and control her if he desired. Unless her safety was threatened and there was no other option, he assured her that he would do neither. She was extremely happy about that and knew he must have told the truth or he’d know of her illness. She looked a little skeptical when he told her he, among most other vampires, tried to respect the privacy of others and stay out of their minds as much as possible. Most vampires shielded their minds from other vampires. However, if a vampire was weak, distracted or young, their minds were easily breached.

He also explained that most of the time human minds were read accidentally because, by nature, humans let emotions control them and didn’t even realize that they were advertising them so

loudly. Anger, love and jealousy among other stronger emotions tended to come off humans in waves, penetrating vampire senses rather easily. These stronger emotions made it difficult for younger vampires to ignore. As a vampire aged, the noise—what they called human emotions—was easier to block or turn down. The same went for hearing. Younger vampires had to adjust themselves to all their new abilities and learn to deal with and control them.

She was very intrigued when he told her that his saliva contained a healing agent, and that was why he had licked the puncture wounds where he bit her. She confirmed it when she looked in the mirror to find that the skin was no longer open, but closed and already turning pink. Wow, what could modern medicine do with such an agent? She could only imagine, yet she could understand why vampires were never likely to share such a thing with science. They would be picked apart, dissected and any other grueling thing possible until they were most likely wiped off the face of the earth. It would end in an all out war. Humans were so typical in that way. It was really sad.

“I know you eat, but you also said you drink blood. How do you do it without hurting people?” Ebony wasn’t sure she wanted to know this just yet, but she asked before she lost her nerve. After all, she knew he bit people, didn’t she? Surely he didn’t just go up and grab someone and start sucking on their neck when he was hungry, did he?

“As I told you before, I only have to feed once or twice a week, unless I’m injured. Then I need more to repair my wounds. I use compulsion on my sources to make it as comfortable as possible for them. I only take what I need, and they leave unharmed with a pleasant memory of walking in the park or such.”

Ashe sat down on the side of the bed, and Ebony continued on with a barrage of questions. “So when you use compulsion on someone, do they know it is happening during or even after?”

“No. Not unless one is toying with a human, intentionally trying to scare them which is usually only done by shadow drifters. Sometimes after, you might have a feeling as if you were dreaming but can’t quite remember what you were dreaming. That is about all though.”

“Compel me to do something.” She didn’t know why she had said it and wished she could take the words back as soon as they left her mouth. However, her cursed curiosity got the better of her yet again before she could stop her lips from uttering the request.

“Ebony, I really don’t want to do that.”

“Just something small so I can see what it feels like.” The fact that he didn’t want to do it gave her comfort.

“Come to me now, Ebony.” He reached out his hand toward her and watched as her expression blanked, and she began walking to him without hesitation, without emotion. When she reached him he commanded her to remember what had just happened.

One minute she was across the room, the next minute she was standing in front of him. She remembered him telling her to come to him. She remembered doing it, but it was like a dream just as he had said. As if she had done it, but not really.

“Wow, that is really weird.”

“No, it is very normal to us.” A slight quirk of his lips played at the corners of his mouth. “It’s just very weird to you.”

The thought that he was not the only one that existed capable of controlling someone with such ease was rather frightening. It disturbed her to think about the power wielded by vampires.

“You know, what you’re telling me doesn’t fit in with anything I know about vampires. I mean, what about stakes through the heart and being a blood-thirsty fiend? You know you would never find Bella Lugosi walking around in the daylight or eating normal food?”

Ebony was puzzled over Ashe’s conflicting information about vampires. Yet it was kind of silly to compare these things to what he was telling her because until a short time ago, everything she knew about vampires came from horror movies and novels. It was even sillier when she realized she didn’t actually know anything about vampires since what she did recall was information that had been passed down tale after tale through generations and generations of people then enhanced by Hollywood.

"We aren't blood-thirsty fiends, Ebony. Well, I guess shadow drifters are. Why don't you view it as vampires are physically enhanced humans that require a certain substance to survive, being blood? And, by the way, we can be killed by a stake to the heart. After all, that falls under excessive blood loss. There have been several vampires who have been staked over the years by vampire hunters and survived to tell about it just because someone happened to be near enough to replenish their blood fast enough. There have also been many who were not as fortunate."

Ashe explained to Ebony that he'd seen every vampire movie out there, and while proving to be great entertainment, the huge inaccuracy of information amazed him. He explained that the tales of vampires and shadow drifters had become intermingled throughout the years. Vampires had gotten labeled with many of the drifters' ghoulish characteristics.

"Well, I find it very hard to consider anything about you normal." Seeing a look cross his face that she thought resembled hurt, she hurried on to her next questions. "You said your mother was your father's life love. Do you have a life love, Ashe? And, how do you know who this person is?"

She sat down next to him and immediately knew she hadn't been imagining his discomfort over this subject earlier since his muscles visibly tensed once again. She wondered what, or more likely who, made this an uncomfortable subject for him. He pulled away from her every time feelings came into the equation. She knew he wanted her, but wanting sex and feeling an emotional attachment were entirely two different things, especially where men were concerned.

He raked a hand over his face. "We know by several things. Only our viata amant can see us in our shielded state. And, only our viata amant can speak with us minti conversatie or mind talk. I had a viata amant. She's dead."

His life love was dead? How horrible. Now she was beginning to understand why he withheld emotion. Had his life love not been able to accept he was a vampire? She couldn't imagine having the love of a man such as Ashe and throwing it away. Yes, he was a vampire, he was stubborn and had faults just like everyone else, but he was strong, drop-dead gorgeous and honest. She decided it would be best to back off from the subject once again when she noticed the slight tick of his jaw muscle.

“What is a shielded state? Can vampires mind talk to one another and see each other in shielded state? If so, couldn’t any of them be your viata amant? Ebony hoped Ashe was patient a little longer. Her brain buzzed, and the fascinating and strange things she was trying to comprehend were intriguing to her.

“Yes, we can communicate with each other mind speak and see each other shielded, but our viata amants are usually human. It is very rare for two vampires to be viata amants. Therefore, it does make it difficult in those instances to realize that they are life loves.

“We shield ourselves when we hunt shadow drifters. It makes us invisible to all but other vampires. Shadow drifters cannot shield themselves or see us while we are shielded, giving us the advantage of ambush.” He then gave her a short explanation of how drifters were made.

“Shadow drifters are known as such because they are a shadow of their former selves. Satan offers a deal open to all vampires. He will rid them of any emotion involving joy or love, essentially releasing them from the pain of losing loved ones over and over, in exchange for their soul. If a vampire accepts, he becomes wholly evil, and torture and destruction become his driving force. After a vampire turns drifter, each kill he makes forces a soul into entrapment, never to be free again until the day the drifter is destroyed. Only upon death, can the souls be released. Drifters can never be cured and must be exterminated to stop their torturous destruction.”

“Shadow drifters have the same powers as vampires?”

“Yes, except for the shielding ability as I mentioned before.”

She shivered. The thought of a vampire controlling her mind was scary enough, but to think something consumed with evil could do the same. Well, she understood why humans would have a very difficult time accepting vampires into their world. She wasn’t for sure how well she would take it once she absorbed it all. It was fascinating, alluring, amazing . . . terrifying.

Ashe stood abruptly, and she knew he was finished answering her questions. She had so much more she wanted to ask him—how many vampires existed, how old was the oldest vampire, would her town be safe from shadow drifters. But, there was one more thing she had to know.

“Ashe, why did you bite me?” When it had first happened, she thought maybe it was just his nature, but after talking to him, she realized he would not bite her just for the simple fact that he was a vampire. Had he needed her blood? Was he using her to feed?

His large shoulders shrugged, and he let out a long sigh. “I already told you, I got carried away.”

“So do vampires always bite when they get, um, carried away, Ashe, or did you need to feed?” She didn’t know why, but the true reason as to why he bit her was important. She just needed to figure out why.

“Ebony, I didn’t need to feed. Look, just forget it okay? I won’t do it again.”

“But I thought—”

“Ebony, we are throwing a ball next Saturday, and I was wondering if you would want to help plan it? Actually, Estril is throwing it, and you would be helping her. It might make your stay here a little less mundane.”

Brow furrowed, she thought about it. She knew he was trying to sidetrack her from her questions, but this ball sounded interesting. She didn’t even realize people held balls any longer. She had never organized a party, much less a ball, and thought it might be fun. It would most assuredly keep her occupied better than sitting around wondering what was going on. Curiosity got the best of her.

“What kind of ball?”

“It’s a Midnight Ball, and is a tradition among our kind. Estril insists on us having one every year on Halloween. You can help her with all the arrangements. I’m sure she would welcome the help since she gets none from her brothers. Estril takes this task on every year by herself, and she will welcome input, especially from another female.”

“Okay. I don’t mind helping Estril. It sounds interesting.”

Ebony was excited about her new task. It would be fun and give her something to do. She stood and watched as he reached to brush a stray hair off her cheek. Somehow she managed to stop her body from swaying into his touch. The humiliation was still strong from earlier, but so was the desire. He had managed to turn her into a writhing, moaning wanton within a matter of minutes. He was very gifted in the area of seduction, and her traitorous body wanted to learn more.

Before she could say another word, he left the room with a hasty, “I’ll tell Estril you’ll be helping with the arrangements.”

Ebony was not so preoccupied with ideas about her new task that she missed it when Ashe’s eyes turned black with desire when he touched her hair. He looked as if he were a predator about to pounce. Her body flared hot in instant recognition and anticipation of his desire. She was like a bee, and he was nectar, enticing her, drawing her to his warmth. She watched him jerk back from her, and he hastily left with a mumble of something about Estril. Maybe he regretted the passionate encounters they had shared.

She should have known that a ‘plain Jane’ like her could never hold the attention of a man like Ashe for long. She didn’t consider herself ugly, but she was short and had a few extra pounds she just couldn’t get rid of no matter what she did. The man probably preferred the stick-thin model type. She could never compete with that. Oh well, she was not going to dwell on this right now. She had more important things to do. Like planning a ball. It still sounded strange, but fascinating. *No time like the present.* She had a feeling this ball was more than just a fun get-together and was somehow tied to her situation. Muttering to herself she set out to find Estril.

* * * *

Later that night, Ebony lay in bed awake while thousands of thoughts fluttered in her mind. Thoughts about the plans she had started working on for the ball, thoughts of her illness and thoughts of

home. It was strange how all of them were pushed to the back of her brain for one thing. Ashe. His turquoise eyes and beautiful face were vivid in her mind.

Suddenly their conversation from earlier came rushing back. She was particularly interested in the life love subject. It had been daytime when she had seen Ashe. Didn't he say that vampires shielded themselves while they were hunting? Had he been hunting, and was he shielded? He almost had to be on both counts, otherwise why else would he have been out during the day? He told her he could be out in the daytime but didn't enjoy it as his eyes were overly sensitive to the sun.

Did this mean she was his life love? She felt tension building in her. It was a terrifying yet pleasing thought. No it wasn't possible. After all she was dying. Surely even turning her wouldn't fix that, would it? There had to be some other explanation. Maybe he was on his way home from hunting and was no longer shielded. That must be it.

Even though her mind had found a logical explanation, she did not feel relieved. Instead, a dull ache in her chest pleaded denial. She drifted into sleep, taking Ashe into her dreams. The next morning she woke up with a deep ache in her belly, remembering just how vivid those dreams had been. Ashe had been kissing and caressing, touching her everywhere with those big strong hands while she writhed and moaned in ecstasy. She awoke just as she was about to follow that fascinating trail of hair that trailed under his navel she had gotten a glimpse of that day in his bedroom. Feeling flushed, excited, and a little embarrassed, she flung the covers off her overheated body and got out of bed to shower and dress.

* * * *

He rested his head against Ebony's door. He was in deep shit. When he knocked earlier and she told him to go away, Ashe knew she hadn't realized that she had spoken the words to him minti conversatie. He never thought someone telling him to go away could sound so sweet. Those three words whispered through his mind like a lover's caress. That fact alone sealed the viata amant deal. She was no doubt his life love. No other human but the one destined for him could speak to him

telepathically. That combined with her seeing him that day in the alley while he was shielded was irrefutable proof.

The facts still hadn't changed though. He couldn't claim her, and there was nothing written in stone that said he had to. He would only make her life miserable if he did so, although, his would be miserable without her. That he could handle. Hell, he had been miserable most of his life anyway. If it kept her happy he would do it, and he was certain she wouldn't be happy spending her life with him. He was too scarred from Shara and didn't have anything to offer her emotionally.

When she had opened the door and let him in, the tear tracks leading from her red puffy eyes made him feel guilty as hell. He was such an ass for tasting her. Yet even through his guilt, when she looked at him with those big eyes that reminded him of green pools, he swore they beckoned him to jump in. He recognized that if he wasn't careful he'd lose his soul to her.

He watched her carefully while he answered her assault of questions fully expecting her to become horrified at the information he gave her. Fully expecting her to think he was evil incarnate as Shara had. Yet, she stood there with her arms crossed over her beautiful breasts and watched him expectantly. Her determination was one of the things he liked best about her. Actually, he liked everything about her. Her determination, courage, strength, and he especially liked that luscious mouth.

He hadn't become uncomfortable until she started asking questions about viata amants. He wanted to avoid details about that one. He didn't want her to figure out that she was his. It would probably scare the hell out of her if she knew it took every ounce of his control to keep his body's relentless pursuit of her in check. If she even caught a glimpse of the predator in him screaming to claim her every second she was near, she would probably run screaming out the front door. Since he had no intention of claiming her, avoidance of the subject was definitely best. Thankfully she had steered the questions away from the subject. Yet he found himself growing uncomfortable for other reasons.

The longer he was near her, the more his need for her grew. The rhythmic beat of her heart pushing the blood through her veins called to him with every pump. Each passing moment it became more difficult for him to keep his hands off her. He wanted to push her under him on the soft bed and possess her. He hadn't wanted to upset her any more than he had already and used every ounce of his willpower to tamp down the growing desire raging in him.

He knew his control was reaching its limits when she asked him why he had bitten her. Just the memory of it made his cock jump in demand. No way in hell was he going to admit to her that he had not bitten a woman for pleasure for over five hundred years, that at the same time he wanted to taste her and bury himself in her so far he couldn't tell where he ended and she began. The need had consumed him in such a rush he was as helpless to it as a beach to the ocean's pounding waves.

At that particular moment he had taken the opportunity to ask if she would help Estril with the Midnight Ball. He was hoping she'd take the bait since her involvement would serve two purposes. One, it would put an end to the questions, and, two, it would keep her preoccupied enough to forget about trying to help with the search for her attacker.

He'd seen the excitement dancing in her eyes along with the sparkle. The sparkle which made him aware that she knew he was using the ball as an effective means to stop her from pestering him. After she told him she'd help, he started toward the door, planning to make his exit, only to get distracted once again as he watched her small white teeth bite her lower lip. He was envious of those teeth. She had the softest, sweetest tasting mouth, and he wanted to kiss her again.

He couldn't resist reaching for a soft strand of stray hair. He brushed it off her cheek, letting the silky strands slide against his fingers. He wanted to bury both his hands in its silkiness, bring it to his nose and inhale her sweet scent. His cock twitched again in anticipation, and he dropped the silky strands and backed away. He had to keep his hands off her. She was an innocent, and he hoped he was man enough to let her remain so even though the beast in him wanted to possess.

Her essence beckoned him, called to him. Not touching her was beginning to be too much of a challenge. The fact that he was having trouble controlling his emotions was a warning in itself that he would claim her soon if he didn't find her attacker and get her the hell away from him. He knew that he would be relentlessly drawn to her. That's the way it was with *viata amants*. No! He wouldn't get his heart ripped out again. *You're a coward, and you know she's nothing like Shara.*

He pushed away from the door and went to his own room where he got undressed and stood under the pounding spray of the cold shower which did absolutely nothing to relieve his horniness. Images of Ebony's luscious, curvy body kept him restless and hard. He imagined everything he wanted to do to her. Her soft pleas and moans as he caressed, kissed and licked every inch of her body were vivid

in his mind. The need to be inside her, possess her, and taste her beat at him with unrelenting fists that were getting stronger as the storm built, trying to reach its full rage. Reaching down, he wrapped his hand around his erection, brought himself to quick release and hoped it would allow him a small reprieve from his rampant desire.

After snapping the shower off, he dried himself and got dressed before he headed downstairs.

Chapter Seven

The next few days flew by in a flurry of activity. Ashe had let Ebony call Avril. She had been happy to hear her friend's soothing voice and laughed when Avril filled her in on the weekend visit with her parents. Avril's mother, Caren, tended to ramble on and on when it came to Avril's single status, continuously tried to set her daughter up on dates, and reminded her constantly that her biological clock was tick, tick, ticking away. Her father, Aaron, usually stood quietly in the background, listening as his wife lovingly hounded their daughter. Avril told Ebony that her father didn't mind if she never got married but did understand Caren's wish to see her settled with a nice man and grandbabies.

Ebony knew Avril's mother had nothing but the best intentions at heart, and Aaron usually tried to make light of the situation by sticking out his tongue behind Caren's rambling back. On occasion, Avril would bust out laughing at his antics, and Caren would give him a look that told him she knew exactly what he had been doing and that he'd pay for it later. Neither Ebony nor Avril thought Aaron minded paying the price to his beautiful wife.

Ebony had briefly filled Avril in on the attack, leaving out all the vampire stuff. Avril was not impressed by Ashe and told Ebony he was just probably out to get in her pants. If Avril knew Ebony didn't think that was such a horrible thing, she'd probably be shocked. Avril's long line of not-so-happy relationships pushed her to be a little cynical where men were involved. Well, a lot cynical. Ebony had invited Avril to Ashe's estate, with his permission of course, and she was supposed to show up Thursday and would stay to attend the ball. Ebony was looking forward to seeing her friend.

Tomorrow would be Thursday already. She had lost track of time since she had begun helping Estril with the ball. There had been so much to do, and Ebony didn't see how Estril did all of it by herself every year. Today had been a treat since Estril and she had the privilege of tasting dozens of food samples from the caterers they had been considering. The deal had been sealed on which they would pick when they tasted the mouth-watering lobster hor d'oeuvres from one of the smaller companies. Not to mention the bite-sized cakes with the rich, lemon icing.

They had chosen a small orchestra of nine that played several genres of music, but would mostly cover classical pieces. Rich bold colors of gold, copper, and blue would be used for place settings and hang in long delicate folds of silk loosely wrapped around each column in the ballroom.

It would be a grand black-tie affair with the ladies in flowing ball gowns and the gentlemen in tuxes. Estril had insisted on inviting a family friend, Tina, over on Tuesday, who just so happened to be a clothes designer, to fit Ebony for a gown. Ebony had insisted that she would not need a gown since she and Avril would help with the catering and make sure things ran smoothly. Estril's persistence won out in the end, and Ebony soon found herself picking out a luscious velvet burgundy gown. After taking countless measurements, Tina assured Ebony it would fit perfectly and show her curves to perfection.

Ebony wasn't so sure about her curves being perfect in any way, but was stunned when she had tried the gown on Wednesday evening when Tina had returned with it for the fitting. The gown needed very little altering and flowed down her body like a fountain. The material was rich and enhanced by eggshell lace on the bodice and sleeves. It complimented her coloring and, did indeed, show off her curves stunningly. She was a little nervous about the amount of cleavage it showed, but Tina assured her that all the ladies would be wearing similar designs. After taking the final measurements, Tina promised to deliver the dress along with the royal blue one she had picked for Avril Saturday morning of the ball with matching ribbon for their hair.

Ebony smiled while she thought of her friend. Avril was just going to be ecstatic over getting dressed up in a ball gown. Not! Her friend leaned a little toward the goth side. She knew Avril would go through with it, but all the same, it would be fun to watch her fuss. Ebony had a feeling deep down Avril would end up enjoying the whole affair and would secretly delight in feeling so feminine in all the silk, velvet and lace. Nonetheless, she didn't plan to tell Avril of the change in plans until the dresses were delivered Saturday, and there would be no excuse to back out.

With all that business out of the way, Ebony decided to lay down for a quick nap. She had not been sleeping well because every time she closed her eyes, thoughts of Ashe crept through her mind, holding it prisoner, mesmerized. The last time she had seen him for any length of time was in her bedroom after her little seduction-gone-wrong scheme. Since then, they had briefly talked on a few occasions when they had bumped into each other on the stairway or kitchen. He didn't stick around long and always found an excuse to leave. She knew he was avoiding her, but why? A small pain squeezed her heart at the thought.

She still hardly knew the man and shouldn't be bothered by his avoidance. Maybe he had decided their encounters had been a mistake and didn't want to have anything further to do with her. Remembering how his eyes had turned black with desire when he had touched her had her doubting that. He had wanted her as much as she wanted him. Then why was he going to such great lengths to stay away? When she reached her room and lay down, exhaustion overtook her, and she fell into a fitful sleep.

* * * *

Ashe was running out of reasons to avoid Ebony. Sitting behind his desk, he rolled a pen back and forth between his fingers as he contemplated the past few days. He hadn't gotten as much as an hour of sleep and suspected she hadn't slept well either, evidenced by the black circles he had seen marring her beautiful eyes. Estril had filled Ashe in on the plans Ebony and she had made for the ball. He was proud of Ebony and Estril for the elegance they had injected into the project. It looked to be a stunning turn out, and he was sure everyone would be impressed. Now, if only it served to find them a lead to Ebony's attacker it would almost make wearing that damn monkey suit bearable this year.

Aldin had run into dead ends. His brother had been out every night since Ebony's arrival, but every lead had proved to be nothing. They had several contacts with other hunters and checked in with one another on occasion for leads on known shadow drifter locations and hideouts. None knew of any drifter or vampire in the near vicinity that were known to keep drudges. He had practically exhausted his source of possible information, and they were beginning to lose hope in finding anything out about the drudge who attacked Ebony.

Aiston had fared no better. Either no one knew anything, or they weren't talking. Although, Ashe and his brothers thought it was most likely that no one knew. While most vampires were tight-lipped with information and kept to themselves, some of the younger vampires were still cocky, drunk with their powers and tended to brag about most anything feeling it made them look important, suave and all-knowing. Ashe thought it pretty much just made them look like asses. Ashe hadn't found out any useful information either. He figured at this point they would have to wait until the ball, and hopefully it would provide new opportunities.

Ashe had been able to stay away from Ebony for the most part, not that it hadn't been harder than hell. His urge to claim her had nearly consumed him, and he knew the next time he was alone with her, he would have her. There had already been countless times that it had taken every inch of his will to keep from going to her room and taking what his body insisted was his.

The few times they had found themselves together the past several days, he had made excuse after excuse to leave, and the disappointment that had flashed in her eyes each time made him feel guilty and angry. He couldn't take that hurt look of rejection one more time. It was obvious she knew he was avoiding her. He was caving, and he was going to lose himself down that spiraling, emotional ladder if he wasn't careful.

Estril told him she had ordered a gown for Ebony and her friend, Avril, for Saturday. Estril also hinted it might be nice if Ashe invited Ebony as his date. The thought of holding Ebony in his arms, dancing, and being with her the whole evening seemed almost more than he could bear. Estril told him that Aiston was more than eager to take Ebony to the ball if he wasn't interested. Breaking his brother's neck if he saw him touching Ebony was not something he really wanted to do.

Grudgingly, he accepted the inevitable and planned to ask Ebony if he could escort her to the ball tonight after dinner. The least he could do was show his appreciation for her hard work. He knew Avril was coming tomorrow and would stay until Sunday. He was hoping she would provide the perfect distraction for Ebony and the perfect solution for him to maintain distance from her. While he didn't care for the idea of Avril being brought into any possible danger, he knew her friend's presence would be a comfort to Ebony.

Looking at his watch, he only had an hour to kill before dinner. He would ask Ebony to the ball afterward. She didn't actually have a choice in the matter. He had to have her close to him to keep an eye on her. However, chivalry was not beyond him, and he knew she would be more willing to go with him if he asked instead of demanded. He wondered if she had realized the effect she had on him yet. At least he would be able to hold her and not worry about losing control. After all, it wouldn't be possible to take her in front of more than a hundred guests. Hurrying up to his room, he took off his clothes and went for a quick shower before heading down to eat.

By the time Ashe came down to dinner, Estril and Aiston were already at the table and informed him that Aldin was out and would not be joining them. Aiston filled Ashe in on last night's progress which consisted of about thirty seconds of nothing. Ebony's attacker was apparently very clever in concealing the fact that he had drudges. No matter, someone somewhere knew something, and when he found that lead, Ashe would follow the trail to the source. He would take great pleasure in eliminating the threat to Ebony. He had every intention of making sure she had a safe life to look forward to. Hell, maybe he could even look after her here and again without her knowing, after she returned home.

The soft sound of footsteps announced Ebony's arrival, and Ashe sucked in a silent breath at her appearance. God, she was beautiful. Her hair was shiny and loose and hung over her shoulders. The cornflower blue top she wore showed her breasts to perfection and gently lay over a black skirt that hugged her luscious hips lovingly. The slender curves of her ankles were emphasized by the black heels on her tiny feet. He grew hard instantly.

She smiled at Estril and Aiston and gave Ashe a tentative look before sitting down. He knew she was weary of him avoiding her and decided he would do so no more. He could handle almost anything, but knowing he was hurting her was out of bounds for him. If he found himself alone with her again, he would just have to be as polite as he could and stay for just enough time to ease her weariness.

"So, Ebony, you must tell me about your friend, Avril." Aiston gave her a grin, swirling his wine in the dainty stemmed glass. "Is she pretty or hideous? Does she have a big wart on her nose or anything else grotesque?"

Grinning, she said, "No, no wart on her nose, just the big one on her chin. But, you don't really notice because when she smiles the gap from her two missing front teeth camouflage it." She burst out laughing at the same time Aiston and Estril did. Ashe looked astonished for a moment before he began to chuckle. Ebony, Aiston, and Estril's mouths fell open at the sound.

"Aiston, you should be ashamed of yourself. Avril is a gorgeous, smart woman. She's also had her share of miserable men and has been on a male bashing crusade for the last couple of months so you better watch out." Helping herself to some fettuccini and a piece of crusty, buttery bread, she glanced at Ashe wearily.

“Sounds like you might just come in contact with a woman who won’t be willing to be your love slave. It’s about time someone knocked you off your high horse, brother.”

“Absolutely not.” Aiston chewed thoughtfully before saying, “I never back down from a challenge, and I have never lost one yet. Women are like putty in my hands. Once Avril meets me, she will be ruined for other men.” Aiston chuckled some more before finishing his meal and excused himself.

“Well that was interesting and somewhat amusing to say the least.” Ashe hoped Avril would prove to be the one challenge Aiston lost. He hoped she could be the one to finally teach him that not all women were ninny headed puppies that would follow him around with their tails wagging, waiting to jump at his next command.

“How are you tonight, Ebony?” Ashe loved the way she laughed. It was a magical sound that washed away his tension.

She cleared her throat after nearly choking on her bread. “Fine, Ashe. Just a little tired from all the planning of the ball, but very excited to see Avril tomorrow.”

The dark circles under her eyes were still visible, and he wondered if she was getting enough sleep. “Yes, I’m sure it will be nice for you to see your friend.”

“Well, I’m off to make some last minute phone calls.” Estril got up from the table after gently dabbing at the corners of her mouth and headed out the door and up the stairs.

Estril was gone before Ashe could come up with a reason to stop her. Great, he didn’t think he would find himself alone with Ebony so soon. He could already imagine throwing everything off the table and replacing it with Ebony. She would make a fine feast. The finest feast he would ever have. Damn! He had to control himself.

Ebony finished her meal and scooted the chair back. "I'm going to go find a movie to watch in the family room. I hope you enjoy the rest of your meal. It was nice seeing you." With a false smile she started for the door.

Ashe lightly grabbed her arm as she tried to make her exit. "You don't have to go. I know it seems I've been avoiding you lately, but it's not what you think."

"Look Ashe, what it seems is you can't stand the sight of me and don't want to be anywhere near me. That's what it seems like, so don't worry. I won't bother you anymore." She tugged at her arm, but he refused to let go.

He sighed. "It's not true that I don't want to be near you, but it is true I don't want to be alone with you." Tears pooled in her eyes. Standing, he gently brought her hand to his mouth and kissed the back of it. He turned it and lightly ran his tongue along her palm before cupping her cheek in his other hand. "But it's not because I can't stand the sight of you. It's because I'm afraid I won't be able to keep my hands off of you. That's why I don't want to be alone with you. Do you know every time I'm near you all I want is to be inside you?"

She gasped. "Oh," was all she could manage in response before his hand tangled in her hair, guiding her lips to his own.

He tasted her slowly. His tongue pushed into her mouth with lazy, greedy, thrusts. She moaned and tilted her head back, and he deepened the kiss. She tasted of wine and woman. He devoured her with his mouth and hands, kissing, nipping, licking and massaging. When he withdrew from her, she let out a small sigh. He kissed a hot trail along her jaw and down her neck wincing a little when she tensed.

Ashe whispered in her ear. "Ebony, I promise I won't drink you again unless you tell me it's okay." He hoped he could make good on the promise because need to taste her sweet blood sang through every cell. "Trust me." Ashe began exploring her neck again with gentle kisses and nibbles. Her muscles relaxed once again, and he scooped her up and carried her toward the family room.

He toed the door shut behind them, sat her on the soft, oversized couch and knelt beside her on the floor. He wanted to shimmer them both to his room where he could take her on the huge bed but

he was too worried about upsetting her, and he couldn't deny his need for her any longer. Yet, no matter that it would be next to impossible for him to stop now, he would if she said no.

"Ebony, look at me." Her beautiful green eyes were glazed with passion, and he thought he would perish in their depths. "I want you, but if you want me to stop, you have to tell me now." Gritting his teeth he prayed she wouldn't ask him to. "If you want me to stop, say so now, because in a few more minutes I don't think I will be able to. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

She nodded her head in understanding. "Please don't stop, Ashe." Her reply came in a breathy rush.

Her words brought relief along with swift pleasure to his very soul. He reached for her top, yanked it off over her head and began kissing her with all his pent up need, devouring her mouth, branding her. She was his, and he would kill anyone who tried to take her from him. His tongue delved in her mouth, tangled with hers in a sultry dance. Her desire pounded at his senses but he vowed to be careful with her. Her first time would be painful regardless of anything he did or did not do, but he wanted to be sure she was completely ready for him, hoping to keep her discomfort to a very minimum.

He took her mouth once again in a hot, demanding, soul searing kiss. Her body felt soft and pliant against his hard one. Her blood along with the need to take her thrummed loud in his ears. He trailed his lips down her neck to the top of her breasts and rained kisses on them while he unfastened the front clasp of her bra. When the cool air touched her skin, her nipples beaded into tiny, pink begging buds. *Mine!* He licked his lips before fastening his mouth on one of the tips, lapping, licking and sucking. She curled her fingers in his hair and tugged it, holding him to her while she arched into him and moaned her approval.

Another small cry escaped her lips when he scraped his whiskers against her delicate skin before moving to the other nipple. He treated it to the same sweet torture, rolling his tongue around it until she arched even harder into him, silently begging for more. His hands came up and cupped both breasts pushing them together so he could feast on both at the same time with his fingers and mouth. He wanted more. He needed more.

"Ashe, please. I feel like my skin is on fire."

He sat up and unbuttoned his shirt. As he pulled it off his shoulders she ran her hands over his chest through the dusting of black hair. She gently pinched his nipples, and he growled low in his throat as they puckered at her touch. She explored further lightly drawing her nails back and forth and then down across his tight abdomen. He groaned in pleasure as her hand traveled lower and cupped his erection through his jeans. He grabbed her hand and moved it away from him then reached for her skirt, pulled it down her shapely legs then tossed it to the floor along with her shoes.

He sucked in a sharp breath. "My God, you're beautiful." Her black lace panties highlighted the paleness of her smooth skin. Her blonde hair was tousled and fell in disarray over her shoulders, and her lips were pink and swollen from his kisses. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes on, and he was finally going to have her. He stood, unzipped his jeans and slowly worked them along with his boxers down his thighs never taking his eyes from hers. He kicked them and his shoes off in one smooth move.

Ebony gasped when his erection sprung free from his jeans. "Um, Ashe?"

He sensed her doubt and smiled a wicked grin. "Don't worry. I promise I will fit."

"I'm not sure about that."

"I'm sure." He reached for her hand and guided it to him. "Touch me, Ebony."

Her small, pink tongue darted out and glided along her lower lip. She stroked tentatively from tip to base and back again. Then stopped at his harsh intake of air and snatched her hand back. "I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

Ashe chuckled and pulled her hand back to him. "No, you didn't hurt me. You're killing me." Her blush quickly turned into a wicked smile.

He wrapped her fingers around his shaft and showed her how to touch him. She gripped him with one hand, stroking him over and over while palming his balls in the other, testing their weight. She grew bolder at his growled approvals. He bucked his hips up every time she pushed down. He watched in fascination as her hand pleased him, enticing a small bead of clear moisture to the head of his erection. She licked her lips and bent forward, but he stopped her before she reached her destination. Her disappointment bounced through the air.

It was obvious she wasn't done exploring, but he was nearing the edge, and if her sweet mouth had touched him, it would have been over. "No more." He urged her onto her back, wedged one leg between her thighs and gently blanketed her body with his own. She was so tiny, and he was careful to keep most of his weight off her.

He caressed her body, exploring everywhere with his hands—the back of her knee, the crook of her arm—while he kissed her long and possessively. He wanted to touch every single inch of her skin. He was claiming her, branding her as his own. His body demanded more, and he moved down to her breasts again, only to shower small kisses over them as he burned a fiery trail to her belly. She gasped and arched into his mouth when he ran his tongue around her belly button.

He let out another low, predatory growl when he pulled her panties down her legs discarding them on the floor with the rest of their clothes. He grasped her hips, pulling her to his mouth. He inhaled her scent deeply. She gasped and tried to sit up in response to the unknown intimacy, but he pushed her down and held her still with one strong hand on her soft belly. "Trust me, Ebony."

"But, oh!" His wicked tongue flicked a small circle around the tiny nub nestled in her soft curls, and she cried out his name. Her stomach muscles clenched under his hand, and he gave one long lick down then back up her delicate folds, briefly stopping to lick her center. She tried to move her hips, but he held her firmly in place. She reached down and tangled her fingers in his hair to hold him to her, surrendering to the passion he promised.

He moved his hands entrapping a creamy thigh in each, holding her against him while he tasted her sweet, intoxicating scent. He wanted to devour her. He could taste her like this for hours, and still it would never be enough. He knew she was close to climax by her small gasps and the tugging of her fingers in his hair. He released one of her thighs, ran his index finger through her blonde curls and placed it at her opening. He continued to lick and lightly suck her clit as he gently eased inside her heat.

A shudder ran through him as her tight wetness clamped around his finger, and he let out a tortured groan. For a split second after he entered her, he thought he would disgrace himself and come. "My God, you're so tight and ready for me, Ebony." He sucked in a deep, steady breath and fought for control as he eased in and out of her, stretching her body, readying it for his invasion. Her body coiled tighter and tighter, inner muscles clenching and unclenching in anticipation.

Then, she cried out as she tumbled over the edge. His body burned, screamed at him to take her. He rose above her and took possession of her lips once again. He nudged against her slick opening, and her muscles tensed. He kissed and caressed her, calming her doubts, coaxing her body back to full flame. He pushed a little deeper and wondered if he might actually be too big to fit inside her. He clenched his teeth, fighting the inner demand to bury himself inside her while working slowly into her tightness.

"Ashe, you won't fit. Please."

Her beautiful face was marred by a grimace, and her eyes were squeezed shut. He stopped pushing, his muscles quivering as he held perfectly still even though he knew he was nearly half way to his destination. "Ebony, look at me."

Her green eyes flashed open, and he was again taken in by the sheer beauty of her. He knew at that moment he was lost and would do anything for this woman. He brushed her silky hair off her face. "It will be okay. I promise."

He knew he was going to hurt her, but there was no way in hell he could stop now, and her small nod of acquiescence, her complete surrender to him, her complete trust in him, nearly undid him. He began kissing her once again, nipping her lower lip then mating his tongue with hers in an erotic dance. He knew she was as ready as she would ever be, and before she had time to think, he sat back on his knees, encircled each knee and pulled her to him, seating his cock fully inside her.

Her body tightened around his in response to his invasion, and her tender flesh tore as he broke through her innocence. She cried out. A small tear escaped the corner of her eye leaving a wet trail down her cheek. His heart ached with the knowledge that he had caused her pain. Ashe could stand

anything but her tears. He trembled, every muscle taut from the effort it was taking to remain still after he had plunged into her. He cupped each side of her face and licked away the tear that had spilled down her cheek. "I'm sorry I hurt you, Ebony." His chest ached, and he refused to hurt her further. He started to pull out of her when her legs came up and circled his waist, locking him to her.

She smiled at him as he gazed down at her in question. She tightened her legs around his waist and refused to let him leave her. She made a small, careful arch of her hips, seating his body deep inside hers once again. His eyes widened a mere second before he began moving with her. She wrapped her arms around him and ran her hands up and down his broad back, gently cupping his hard butt encouraging him on. He began moving faster, thrusting in and out of her silky tightness, burying himself deeper and deeper.

He rode her hard and fast hoping like hell he wasn't causing her too much discomfort. His skin felt tight. The pressure built in his cock. Her fingers dug in his back, and he rolled his hips, seating himself fully inside her heat before pulling almost all the way out then pushing back in. She dug her heels into his ass, and a fine sheen of sweat coated his back as he continued taking her. His breaths came in gasps against her neck. His teeth scraped her tender flesh promising even more pleasure.

She panted. "Ashe, take me how you need to, please. I want you to."

His turquoise eyes snapped to her face. He slowed the rhythm of his possession, and Ebony closed her eyes for a moment then opened them to look at him again. "Do it, Ashe. I want to be yours in every way." He began to protest, but she put her fingers to his lips. "I'm not scared. I know you won't hurt me."

The beast in him roared to life and refused to give her time to have second thoughts. He could not deny himself the chance to make her his completely. He carefully sank his teeth deep in the soft skin at her throat, and her sweetness poured through him, coppery, tangy, Ebony. He pumped his body harder. Her muscles coiled tighter, gripping him. He knew from this moment on this woman would be a part of him.

His body quivered from the all-consuming pure ecstasy of claiming his mate and tasting her life force. Her body clutched his once again, squeezing him, and she cried out his name as shudders wracked her body. His muscles clenched, his skin burned, and his cock hardened even more. He pushed into her,

once, twice then threw his head back and growled as he spilled himself into her, warm and pulsing, deep in her womb. He had never come so hard in his life. It had taken every ounce of control to keep his release at bay until Ebony had climaxed. She smiled at him, and even though he had just possessed her his body hardened once again. He refused to take her again as he knew she'd be sore. He'd wait no matter how hard it would be. He watched as her eyes drifted shut.

He eased his body from hers, already missing the contact, and reached down for his shirt to gently clean the blood staining her thighs. Once all the evidence of her innocence was gone, he grabbed the blanket from the back of the couch and threw it over both of them after he pulled her into his arms and placed her head on his chest. She had already fallen into a light doze and felt like heaven snuggled against him, all silk and softness.

His contentment quickly disappeared. The hair on the back of his neck rose, a foreboding of something he hadn't sensed before. Ebony was sick. No, she was way more than sick. She was dying.

He had gone to such great lengths to distance himself from her he hadn't even picked up on her illness. Even though still reluctant to do so, he gently probed her mind. She didn't want him to know. She didn't want anyone to know. Estril knew. Hell, even his brothers knew. Why hadn't anyone mentioned it to him? He was pretty sure he knew the answer. Estril had picked up on it the morning after the attack and since she had also figured out that Ebony was his viata amant and knew he would not readily accept the idea, she advised Aiston and Aldin to stay out of it. He was going to tan all their hides for this little stunt. How could his family keep something like this from him? How could Ebony?

Anger slowly sparked, lit and burned through him as hot as a forest fire. He wanted to shake Ebony awake and demand answers. He couldn't lose her. Didn't she know he could save her? Thoughts of forcing her to tell him warred with the reasons why she hadn't told him. He read in her mind, and he began to understand the motivation behind her silence. He couldn't say he agreed with it totally, but he now acknowledged her reluctance in telling anyone. If it were him, he wouldn't want to see pity in the eyes of his family every time he entered their presence or be subject to the sympathetic whispers that would undoubtedly be there as well.

In the end, he concluded he wanted her to decide he was important enough to confide in on her own without force of any kind. If she trusted and cared for him enough to tell him, maybe he could have a relationship with her after all . . . and if she didn't tell him? He wasn't sure he could let her go at this point, but he would not be betrayed again either.

He might be able to handle that she had not trusted him enough at this point to tell him. They could build trust between them later. However, the thought of her not caring . . . well he didn't want to think about it. For some reason, he found her feelings for him, or lack of, had become very important. She had to tell him, and he would give her time to do so. *Yeah, but what if she doesn't? You sorry bastard, you're going to get screwed again.* How in the hell could fate deal him two women who would betray him?

He got up and pulled his jeans on, picked up her clothes and gently lifted her with the blanket still wrapped around her. He carried her up to her room and placed her in bed. He gently kissed her on the forehead, made sure she was covered, and then left. Emotions pounded at him—anger, frustration, sadness, loneliness, desperation . . . love? He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts and decided a good fight with a shadow drifter would prove a great distraction.

Mind made up, he changed into all black and strapped his sword to his back before covering it with his trench coat. He headed downstairs, hoping he could find a worthy adversary tonight, took a deep breath and walked out into the pitch black. His body grew tense with anticipation of a possible battle, tuned into every movement, every sound. He became the night, blended into the darkness, and began the hunt.

* * * *

Ebony couldn't even open her eyes when Ashe picked her up and carried her up the stairs to her room. She felt as if her bones were actually gone and replaced by jelly. When he placed her in her bed she immediately felt herself drifting into sleep, completely satiated. How could she have gone twenty-seven years without ever feeling this? The answer was simple, because she hadn't met Ashe.

She sighed and let images of their lovemaking slide through her tired brain. His body reminded her of a Greek God's, lean and rippling with the smooth flow of muscle in all the right places. He was perfection. And now she finally knew where the dark trail of hair from his navel ended. He had been magnificent. Gentle, possessive, and her body had responded to every kiss, every touch. She welcomed his possession and submitted to his every demand. *Oh my! I'm in love with him.* She didn't know how it was possible in such a short time, but she knew it was the simple truth.

She wondered if he could ever love her back then chastised herself for being so selfish. She was dying. And, even though she knew it was wrong to wish for such a thing when she had nothing to offer in return, she still found herself dreaming of just that. She wanted Ashe to love her, to cherish her, to look at her like she was the only woman in the world. She couldn't deny it and felt guilty for wanting it when in the end her illness would take her from him.

She sighed in contentment once again and let sleep claim her.

Chapter Eight

Forty-five minutes later the scent of prey littered the air, and Ashe followed it silently through the dank, winding alleyways lined with brick walls. The stench of blood formed an invisible trail he had no trouble seeing. The scent trail was as effective as leaving a paved pathway. The shadow drifter would be even more crazed and dangerous after a fresh kill. Ashe vowed to make sure the drifter's victim had not died in vain. Finally catching a glimpse of his target ahead, Ashe paused when the drifter stopped and sniffed the air and then abruptly turned in Ashe's direction.

Ashe was surprised when the shadow drifter turned toward him in blunt opposition. Drifters were cowards who preferred running from the hunters and would only fight when cornered. Ashe figured the odd behavior must be the result of an exceptionally brutal kill to fuel the beast enough for confrontation.

Ashe pulled his sword from the scabbard. A menacing hiss echoed in the air. "So, you're not going to run tonight." The shadow drifter honed in on Ashe and sneered. Spittle ran down his chin, and he took a fighter's stance. Ashe once again found the drifter's behavior strange. "I hope you're ready to die, because I'm dispatching you to hell."

The drifter let out a hideous scream and launched itself at Ashe, striking out with its long, sharp claws missing by a mere thread. The breeze from the missed blow tickled Ashe's cheek as he spun and kicked the drifter behind the knee. The momentum of the kick tossed the drifter through the air a few feet before it landed with an audible crack on the ground. It screeched in fury and was back on its feet, charging before Ashe could blink.

The creature would strike, barely miss, then Ashe would deliver a blow that either sent it crashing to the ground or bouncing off the brick wall. After several minutes, the shadow drifter's movements became slow and sloppy and, Ashe knew the fight would soon be over. Ashe moved in for the kill, but before he could deal the death blow an agonizing pain pierced his chest. He dropped to one knee, and his sword clattered on the ground beside him. He looked down to find the end of a large wooden stake protruding from his body. Holy shit! When the hell had drifters started carrying weapons? He had disposed of hundreds of drifters throughout his existence, and not one had ever carried a

weapon. Shadow drifters preferred fighting with their claws, which wasn't a bad choice since they were eight inches long, razor sharp, and poisonous. The poison wouldn't kill a vampire but was potent enough to make one sick and weak for a time.

The drifter assumed it had won the fight and gave Ashe an ego spurred sneer. It would prove a deadly mistake. It strolled toward Ashe ready to deal out death, but before the drifter could finish the job, Ashe dropped to the ground in a roll, grabbed his sword on his way back on his feet and sliced its hideous head clean from its shoulders. The body and head turned into a thick black substance that soaked into the ground and left a horrible stench behind. Bright blue poured from the black remains as souls the drifter had stolen were freed and floated toward the heavens.

Ashe groaned as he slid the sword back in its scabbard. He gripped the stake, gave a hard pull and yanked it out. Blood ran out of the wound steadily with each beat of his now slowing heart, soaking his shirt and pants. He was in danger of bleeding out. He became dizzy and weak, and he knew he would not be able to find a source on his own fast enough to replenish his life force. He used his last ounce of strength, shimmered back to his house and ended up flat on his back in the hallway leading to his room. *"Aldin, Aiston, I need you now. I'm in the hallway."* Maybe hunting hadn't been such a good idea as a way to get Ebony off his mind. Instead, she had proved a distraction that almost got him killed, or maybe had gotten him killed. He wasn't sure yet exactly how this would end. A mere second later Aldin, Aiston and Estril were standing in the hall gaping at their nearly unconscious brother.

* * * *

The drudge watched The Master sit back in the soft chair of red silk, envelope in hand. A wicked smirk crossed full lips. She knew The Master held an invitation to the Aleksandrov annual Midnight Ball. The drudge kept the smile from her face as she thought of The Master's new plan. The little blonde human didn't even know it, but was going to help The Master finally obtain the object of her obsession. Ashe Aleksandrov. Little did The Master know things were going to turn out very differently than planned.

The long, unfelt emotion of excitement flared into anticipation. Much must be done before Saturday night. Careful plans must be made without mistakes. This time the much sought outcome that had been longed for years would not be denied. This time all desires would be obtained no matter the cost. The Master would soon find out that not everything one wanted was attainable.

The drudge was jerked from her thoughts when The Master screeched. "Drudge! It is time to make amends for your failed service to me!"

The drudge carefully kept all emotion in check as she listened to the plan once again. She wanted to scream that it didn't matter but knew she had to stay alive long enough to kill Ashe. Excitement stirred her blood once again, and she tamped it down refusing to ruin this final chance for revenge. The Master would kill her for her betrayal, but she didn't care. Her death would be worth the look on her Master's face when the realization set in that the object of obsession for years was gone for good, taken out by the lowly servant nonetheless. No, Ashe would be no toy for The Master. He would die. He ruined her life, and she would take his in exchange.

* * * *

Ebony stirred from a sound sleep. She couldn't figure out what had awakened her until she heard muffled voices outside her room in the hallway. She had never heard anyone this late at night, not that she was naïve enough to think that vampires weren't up and about at this time. She knew the silence had been out of courtesy and respect for her. The noises increased and sounded as if someone were putting up a struggle of some sort. Curious as to what was going on, she put her slippers on, tiptoed across to the door and opened it a crack to allow her a non-conspicuous view of the hallway. She caught a quick glance of Ashe practically being carried into his room by his two brothers, followed anxiously by Estril. Now alarmed, and worried, she flung the door open and ran the few feet to Ashe's room, halting in the doorway at the sight that greeted her.

Aiston and Aldin laid Ashe on the bed and Ebony nearly fainted when she saw him. The front of his shirt and pants were coated in blood. Had it not been smeared up the side of his neck and on his brother's arms, she might not have realized it was blood since his black clothes camouflaged the dark

red color. She gasped and everyone in the room spun to stare at her in concern. Even Aldin's face showed tight lines pulling at his mouth with worry. His obvious concern kicked her anxiety up a notch as Aldin rarely got riled about anything. Ashe's eyes, nearly black, ringed with only a thin line of turquoise, trained on her and a shiver of fear slithered through her veins. She knew he wouldn't hurt her but he looked as if he were a lion sizing up its next meal, which appeared to be her.

"My God! What happened?" Ebony took a tentative step forward only to have Aiston block her way.

Aiston gently lay his hands on her shoulders. "Ebony, you should go back to your room. Everything will be okay, but it's too dangerous for you to be here right now." He gave her a gentle push toward the door. "Come on, I'll walk you back to your room."

Ebony batted his hand away. "No, Aiston. What happened? Please tell me. Is Ashe going to be okay?" Ebony tried to look around Aiston to see Ashe when Estril came over and gently took Ebony's hand.

Estril now put her arm around Ebony's shoulders. "Listen, Ebony. Ashe was injured while hunting a shadow drifter. He's lost a lot of blood and even though his body is healing, it's taking longer than usual because of the extent of the wound. But, you need to—"

"He told me he could die from excessive blood loss. Is he going to be okay? I need to see him." Aiston and Estril's resistance frightened Ebony even more. "Please let me go to him!"

"Aiston, go back over to Ashe and let me talk to Ebony for a minute."

"You know it's dangerous for her to be here. Ashe needs blood and he can smell hers. If she gets too close to him and he loses much more, he could hurt her. You need to get her to leave." Aiston slowly walked back to his brothers.

"You have to listen carefully to me, Ebony. Ashe needs blood and he will see you as a source. He can't help it. His body is demanding it of him for survival. It's very dangerous for the source when a vampire must feed in such a state. Vampires can feed on each other but our mingled blood will fight for supremacy at first delaying precious time that could be used for healing. Ashe would end up needing more blood since his body would use up even more trying to fight ours. We aren't harmed by feeding on one another under normal circumstances. However, it is usually only done for recreational purposes." Estril's cheeks flamed at this statement. "If you get near him, I can't promise we can control him. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Will he die without my blood?" Ebony didn't relish the thought of being on the dinner menu, but if it came between her giving a little blood and Ashe dying, well, there was no debate. She would not let him die if she could help it. She loved him and wouldn't run away scared when he needed her most.

"It's a possibility. Yes."

"Then get out of the way. I can save him and I plan to do just that." Ebony didn't care how many vampires were in the room, she was going to get to Ashe if she had to pick her way through every one of them.

"Wait! You have to calm down first Ebony. We can all feel your concern bouncing through the air. This will only excite Ashe more. You have to relax."

Ebony nodded and took a deep, calming breath. "Okay. I'll try."

"Aiston, Aldin, Ebony wants to help Ashe. I told her what could happen but she still insists."

"No! Get her out of here!" Ashe's connection was weak, but determined.

"Ashe, it's the only way. If we take time to bring you another source, it will be too late."

"No Aiston! If I hurt her, I'll die anyway. Do you understand me? I couldn't live with myself!"

The siblings exchanged knowing looks. He had just proven his love for Ebony.

"Ashe, please let me help you!" Ebony tried frantically to get around Aiston and Aldin, but Estril had a firm grip on her arm.

"Give us a minute, okay? Remember you need to stay calm for Ashe's sake." Estril's gentle voice was urgent.

"I can feel her panic. I don't want her in here. I'm going to hurt her! Please."

Aldin pleaded with his brother. *"Listen to me, Ashe. Ebony is willing to do this. She's only panicked because she wants to help you, and we are holding her back. Aiston and I are here and will make sure you don't hurt her. You have to do this. It is the only way. I give you my word, brother. I won't let you harm her."*

Ashe closed his eyes and blew out a defeated breath. He reached his hand out. "Ebony, come to me." She rushed between his brothers to his side.

She tried to remain calm, but Ashe's skin had a sick, gray tint to it and the thick coppery smell of blood was overwhelming. His cheeks were sunken and his eyes were now completely black. His canines had grown into two pointy fangs that were visible below his upper lip. He looked feral and lethal. She took a deep breath, and tamped her fear into submission. "What do you want me to do?"

Instead of replying he wound his shaking hand in her hair and pulled her down for his kiss. He tasted of danger and the man she loved. All doubts of what she was doing left her mind in a rush replaced by desire. She even forgot about the others in the room, returning his kiss with urgency.

He nibbled a path along her jaw and before she had time to think, his fangs slid painlessly into her neck. Fire burned through her and she let out a long gasp. His mouth pulled at her neck and she wanted the erotic feeling to last forever, but after only a few minutes, she felt strange almost as if she were floating. Her vision turned fuzzy and then blackness engulfed her.

* * * *

Ebony opened her heavy eyes with effort. Sitting up, her head began to spin and she closed her eyes to wait it out. Her eyes flew open once again when a low, gravelly voice interrupted the silence.

“Ebony, you need to lie back down and rest some more.” Ashe walked over to her bed and sat on the edge. “Actually, before you lay down do you think you can drink some orange juice?”

“Ashe, you’re okay? You look completely normal again. I can’t even believe you were injured.”

“Yes, thanks to you. Ebony, promise me you will never do such a thing again. I could have hurt you or worse. I barely stopped in time.” He wouldn’t have been injured if he had been focused on fighting that shadow drifter. Until now, a drifter had never injured him this badly. After he’d sensed Ebony’s illness, he hadn’t been able to focus on anything but her. The thought that hunting would provide a distraction was a huge mistake on his part and proved how much Ebony had come to mean to him.

“But you did stop in time. You didn’t hurt me. Ashe, you wouldn’t hurt me. I know you wouldn’t.”

He took her small hand in his and caressed the silky skin with his thumb. “You don’t know what all I’m capable of, especially when I’m injured.”

He could change her and save her, but she needed to tell him she was sick first. He had already bitten her with her permission twice. It took three bites, of which the viata amant had to consent to and a blood exchange after the third bite to change a human to vampire. A viata amant could not be changed by force. Without consent, the change would not take place. This was a failsafe that controlled the vampire population. If anyone could be changed at anytime, the world would be overrun with vampires. There would be no food source and a mass slaughter would follow with vampires killing each other off until only a few remained.

She smiled at him and squeezed his hand in reassurance. "Ashe, regardless of what you think, I know you wouldn't hurt me. Please have a little more confidence in that. I have trusted you with my life. And, guess what? I'm still alive."

He handed her the cup and gave up the argument for the moment. "Drink this. It will make you feel better." At least she didn't argue with him over this and drank all of the orange juice. He reached to brush a small trickle of the juice off her chin after she finished then licked the liquid off his finger. He would never get used to the softness of her skin and the spark that ran through him every time he touched her. "The ball is the day after tomorrow. Will you do me the honor of letting me escort you?"

Her mouth formed a small "o." "Of course, I would be happy to go with you." He gave her an easy smile and leaned in for a kiss he gave her for her response.

He pulled his lips back a scant inch from hers. "By the way, thank you for saving me last night."

"You're welcome." Her brows furrowed. "Ashe, why did you go out hunting right after we, um, you know?" Her face turned pink and she fiddled with the corner of the blanket.

He knew she would ask but he had no intention of telling her why he had done it. "I got a tip from another hunter and had to go."

"Oh."

The woman was too smart for her own good. He knew she didn't believe his explanation but that was the only one he was willing to give at the moment. "Look, you really need to rest and —"

"Oh! This is Thursday. Avril will be here this afternoon! I have to get everything ready for her."

Ebony began to scramble off the bed and Ashe caught her gently by the arm when she swayed a little.

"Everything is ready for Avril and you need to take it easy today." He was worried about her after taking so much of her blood and knew she would require extra time for recovery because of her illness. Why couldn't she just tell him? She had to trust him to offer her life force to him, didn't she? Surely she must care about him at least a little? "All you need to do is pamper yourself today and not worry about anything else. When Avril gets here, you two can catch up and have a wonderful girl's night of gossiping, watching 'chick flicks' and eating pizza."

Chuckling, "What would make you think we gossip? And, pizza? Uh, no, we need chocolate and lots of it." Ashe smiled and shook his head back and forth in an easy, laid-back motion that made her giggle again.

"You girls always gossip and I'll make sure you have all the chocolate you can eat as long as you promise me you'll rest until Avril gets here." He could see the excitement bubbling as she anticipated the coming day's activities. It was wonderful to see her happy. He wished to be the one that made her so. He was actually jealous of Avril. How ridiculous was that?

"Okay. But, I'm not lying in bed all day. First, I'll have a long soak in that huge tub, then I'll give myself a manicure and pedicure, nothing stressful, just pampering—deal?" She reached out her hand to Ashe. Instead of shaking it, he pulled her to him and kissed her possessively. Her lips were soft and full and tasted of orange juice. He kissed her long and lazy hinting at the pleasure he could give her. The mere thought of possessing her again hardened his body. He'd never get enough of her. When she sighed and leaned into him, he pulled away. He smiled when she frowned and tucked a stray hair behind her ear.

"I have a few things to do, but if you need me, I'll be downstairs. Okay?" Ashe wanted to make love to Ebony, it had been almost impossible to pull away from her sweet lips, but he'd already taken enough from her for one day. His body's demands nearly made him crush her back to him and damn the consequences, but he wouldn't do it. She deserved better than to be mauled by him in her weakened state. It would be selfish. Of course, he never denied being a selfish bastard on occasion, but not when it could possibly harm Ebony. Giving her a quick, soft kiss on her cheek, he walked out the door and headed downstairs.

* * * *

Ebony relaxed and pampered herself all day as she had promised. She even got Estril to join in on the pedicure and manicure. Estril picked pink polish and Ebony picked red. She didn't know why since she usually stuck with funky colors like blues, greens and yellows. It was one of those things she did to be a little rebellious. It was funny that such a simple thing could make her feel that way yet, red just seemed like a perfect choice for tonight. She thought of red as sexy and she had felt that way ever since Ashe had kissed her earlier. Even though she had wanted him to make love to her she knew he wouldn't because she was pretty sure he still felt guilty about taking her blood. She did feel weak from the ordeal, but it didn't stop her from wanting him.

But, if there was one thing she had figured out about Ashe Aleksandrov other than he was irritatingly stubborn, it was that he was extremely gentle where she was concerned. Yes, he had been a little rough at times when they were intimate, but he had never put a scratch on her and she knew by the way his muscles tensed and bunched that he held himself tightly in check, probably worried he would hurt her. She wished he would trust himself with her. Let go completely. She wasn't a porcelain doll that would break easily and she wanted all of him.

Since he had explained that he had avoided her simply because he had trouble keeping his hands off her, she had been consumed with an achy need. Every touch, every caress, every kiss from him made her feel like the most cherished woman in the world. He was so careful with her and yet she could feel the possessiveness vibrate off him when she was around. She couldn't blame him or call him chauvinistic because she felt the same way about him. Just the thought of another woman touching him, or—No! She couldn't think of it. She wasn't normally a violent person, but such thoughts ended with her wanting to rip the imaginary tart's hair out.

She and Estril shared some laughs during their pampering session and Ebony invited her to join girl's night. She thought Estril would accept, but then she declined telling her she didn't want to interfere since Ebony hadn't seen her friend for awhile. When she assured Estril that they would love to have her there, she agreed to visit for awhile. She thought Estril could use some more female company and a night with 'the girls' would be good for her. Estril thanked her, told her she'd see her later and left. Right after dressing in comfortable jeans and T-shirt, she heard Aiston's voice yelling that Avril was there. She quickly ran a brush through her hair and ran downstairs to see her friend.

Chapter Nine

Avril was not amused by the man who greeted her at the door. He was one of those men she categorized under the 'womanizing' tab in her mental filing cabinet. She had to admit he wasn't lacking in the looks department by any means. In fact, it was a little strange that he seemed completely unflawed. No scars and not one wrinkle. He had blonde hair, ocean blue eyes and a lean body most women would drool over, but she wasn't one of those women. No sir, she had dated her share of jerks in the past and had decided all men were born with a chauvinistic pig gene. After all, it couldn't be her every time could it?

When he had greeted her in a mock bow and introduced himself as Aiston Aleksandrov, flashing her that quick, yeah-I'm-sexy-I-know-it-and-so-should-you smile, she vowed right then and there to steer clear of him. He was exactly what she didn't need, another distraction that would no-doubt end up with her heart being trampled, yet again. Though, he was a fine specimen that would most likely give a memorable night or two. *Nuh, uh, no freaking way.*

Before she could think on it further, Ebony ran down the stairs and hurled herself at her, embracing her in a huge hug that almost knocked them both over. Avril laughed and hugged her friend back. "Yeah, I missed you too, girlfriend. We are going to have so much fun."

"Oh, Avril, I'm so glad you're here. We are going to have a girl's night with chocolate and movies and pizza and—"

"Whoa, slow down. What happened to you? I'm usually the one you can't get a word in on." Ebony gave her a surprise grin right before they both broke into laughter.

Ashe and Estril walked in and Ebony introduced them. "This is Ashe and this is his sister Estril. I assume you already met Aiston?"

“Nice to meet you Ashe, Estril.” After giving a small smile to Estril she turned to Ashe, “So you’re Ebony’s bodyguard.” Avril smiled as she shook Ashe’s hand. Dang! Did GQ looks run in this whole family or what? He was absolutely gorgeous.

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far. I’m just making sure she stays safe until her situation gets resolved.”

“Good. That’s the most important thing. I wouldn’t know what to do without my best friend here.” Avril gave Ebony another quick hug.

“And, yes, Aiston and I already met.” She gave him a quick glance then ignored him.

Ebony quirked a brow at her friend and smirked. “Come on, I’ll show you your room. You’ll probably meet Aldin tomorrow. He’s the middle brother.” Avril’s room of rich greens and golds was next to Estril’s and across the hall from Ebony’s.

Avril followed Ebony, both chatting non-stop the whole way to her room. “Wow, this is like the first mansion I’ve ever been in. It’s very impressive.”

* * * *

Ashe and Estril both watched the women make their way up the stairs. Neither missed Avril’s none too subtle cold shoulder directed at Aiston. She obviously didn’t care for him already.

“I wonder what he did now.” Estril wondered if Aiston had finally met a woman who wouldn’t drool all over him instantly.

“I don’t know, but I can’t wait to find out.” Ashe chuckled when Aiston stalked by them.

"You guys know I can hear you. And nothing happened! So don't worry about it."

* * * *

Avril followed Ebony up the stairs and down the hall. Ebony swung a door open. "Your room, my lady."

Avril gasped. "Holy cow. This is absolutely freaking gorgeous! I've died and gone to heaven."

"You think this is heaven, wait until you see your bathroom." Ebony swung another door open showing a bathroom similar to her own and laughed again at Avril's exaggerated gasp.

"Man, girl. You could swim in that tub."

"Yes, I know. I've taken a few laps in mine." Ebony felt a lot of the tension that had built up over the past several days fading. Avril had always had this affect on her. She couldn't ask for a better friend and was glad she was here.

Avril plopped on the bed and eyed Ebony suspiciously. "So, what's going on, Ebony? I don't understand why you're staying here instead of calling the police to handle this matter. I mean, why is Ashe protecting you, is he an ex-cop or something, and how did you meet him in the first place?"

Ebony knew this would come up as her explanation to Avril days before on the phone was fast, scant and incomplete. She was trying to avoid the whole vampire ordeal but wasn't sure how to do it. She still didn't want to lie to her best friend, but she was going to think she was nuts if she told her the

truth. She had discussed the possibility of telling Avril that Ashe and his family were vampires with him and he told her that it was up to her and he trusted her judgment. It was a huge decision to make. Should she, or shouldn't she?

"I know it's a little weird, but Ashe is in the, uh, business of protecting people." *Yeah, from shadow drifters and drudges.* "Fortunately for me he happened to be in the area the night I was attacked and saved me." She knew Avril wouldn't let it go and thought maybe she should just tell her the truth.

"You know I can always tell when you aren't telling the whole truth? I mean you have to be the most horrible liar on the planet. I'm just worried about you and want you to be safe."

Ebony sighed and sat beside Avril on the bed. "I know. You're my best friend and I love you, but it's kind of complicated and I didn't lie to you. I just omitted a few details. Besides, if I told you, you wouldn't believe me anyway. You have to trust me when I say Ashe is truly protecting me and he would never hurt me, ever."

Avril stared at Ebony for a few seconds. "You know I trust you and you also know you can talk to me about anything, right? I mean whatever it is, it can't be that bad."

Ebony shook her head. "You have no idea."

"Come on, you always think things are worse than they are. Just spill it."

Before she could stop the words blurted out. "They are all vampires!"

Avril sat up slowly and stared at her as if she was an alien from Mars. "What do you mean they're vampires? Do you mean like blood-sucking creature vampires?"

"Well, yeah, I guess that is what I mean." Ebony watched Avril eyeing her as if she had totally lost her marbles.

"You honestly believe they are vampires? Come on, give me a break. Did they actually tell you this?" Avril began laughing.

"Yeah, and yes I do believe it." This was not going well, but she expected that. Avril obviously thought she was pulling a prank on her.

Avril finally stopped laughing when Ebony stood staring, straight faced. Avril put her hand up. "Okay. Wait a minute. Let me get this straight, they told you they were vampires?"

"Yes, but—"

"They obviously just think they are vampires. You know like those Goth people that dress all in black and have their canines filed into fangs and claim they drink blood. That must be it. I mean come on, there aren't such things as real vampires."

Ebony didn't want to push the issue because she had a feeling they would be arguing about it for hours. "Well, I don't know. I just know what I was told." *And what I've seen.* "Let's just forget it, okay? I don't want to spend your first night here talking about this."

"Okay, but I'll say one more thing then we'll forget it. You know, they probably honestly believe they really are vampires. I just hope they aren't lunatics and try to actually suck my blood. Oh my God! They didn't try that on you did they."

Ebony couldn't help herself and cracked up. If Avril only knew, but maybe it was better to let her believe what she would at this point. She could have a clear conscience because she didn't lie to her friend. She just hoped Avril didn't freak out when she realized she had told the truth.

She held her hand up. "Alright, that's enough. Let's move on to the next subject, shall we?"

"Fine, what's up with you and Ashe?"

Ebony eyed her friend hoping she wouldn't push the subject too far. "What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean. The way the man looked at you downstairs practically set the room on fire.

She really didn't want to discuss what was going on between her and Ashe as she still wasn't quite sure herself. Other than she had finally admitted to herself that she loved him, but she still didn't have a clue about how he felt about her. Oh she knew he desired her and would protect her with his life, but that was the extent of her knowledge of his feelings. It didn't really matter anyway as her illness was still a problem and she couldn't foresee a happy ending for them one way or the other. "Please Avril, I really don't want to talk about this right now, okay?"

Avril begrudgingly gave in. "Okay. But I have been your friend for a long time and I know you well enough to see that you have some kind of feelings for him. I just don't want you to get hurt. So on that note, I'm here when you want to talk about it."

"You are the best friend ever! Thank you."

"Flattery will get you nowhere." Avril chuckled along with Ebony for a moment before asking, "So what are the big plans for girls' night?"

Ebony filled Avril in and then they chatted a little more about what was happening at home and who was doing what with whom. Avril worked at their town's small City Hall in the Record Department during the week and the local bar on the weekends and heard all kinds of juicy gossip and kept Ebony up-to-date. She had worked half a day today and took Friday and Saturday off to spend an extended weekend with Ebony. After a few more laughs and "no, she didn't do that" or "you're kidding me, that didn't happen," Ebony decided to give Avril some time to freshen up and unpack. Before leaving, she

gave her another quick hug and told her about McKayla, the general layout of the house and when breakfast was each morning. She then closed the door and made her way downstairs.

She went to the family room to pick a few movies out for girls' night. She was surprised to see Ashe sitting on the oversized couch, head back, eyes closed, wine glass in hand and classical music flowing through the air. She loved classical music. A small smile touched his lips when she walked in. She knew he was aware of her presence, he always knew. *Must be those vampire super senses kicking in.*

Ashe didn't move. "How was your visit with Avril?"

Shivers ran down her spine as his deep voice caressed her and memories of what they had done on that couch a few days ago made her face flame hot. She had no self control where he was concerned. The man could turn her to mush by merely talking to her. "It was good. Thank you for letting her visit." Ebony sat beside him and told him of her plans to keep the fact that Avril and Ebony would actually be attending the ball and not working it a secret until Saturday morning when the dresses arrived.

His deep chuckle floated through the room. "I'm sure she'll love you even more for your deception. I think this might provide an opportunity for me to get one over on Aiston."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if I'm not mistaken, which I'm not, I believe Avril had immediate dislike for my brother. And, I know for a fact Aiston knew it which means he was snooping around in your friend's head. And, in case you hadn't noticed, my brother thinks he is irresistible to all women. Case in point, he was not happy about Avril's reaction."

Ebony raised a brow in interest. "Yeah, I did kind of get the feeling that Avril didn't like Aiston too much, but I kind of boiled it down to her little men-are-pigs crusade."

"Well, I think this is a perfect opportunity to pay my little bro back for some of the pranks he has pulled on me. I think it would be a marvelous idea for him to escort Avril to the ball Saturday night, for

her protection of course. Because if it's for her protection, how can he refuse? Ashe wiggled his brows and grinned.

When Ashe told her his idea, she thought it was perfect. Avril would keep Aiston miserable and in-line all night. Maybe he would actually learn that not all women were at his beck and call. She agreed to persuade her friend that it would be a good idea to let Aiston escort her. She only hoped Avril could be persuaded. "Ooh. That is such a good idea." She giggled.

Ashe stood and held his hand out to Ebony. "Come with me. I have something to show you."

She took his hand and admired his wide shoulders as she followed him to the kitchen. He led her to the counter where at least ten boxes of imported chocolates lay. Her eyes widened and her jaw went slack. There were chocolate covered caramels, nougats, crèmes and several other flavors she didn't even know existed.

"Oh my." She wanted to try every single one of them. She turned to Ashe. "I can't believe this. How did you get all of these in such a short time?"

He reached out and stroked his knuckles down her soft cheek, "You'd be surprised at what I can accomplish."

Ebony was dumfounded. She stood on tiptoe to place a kiss on his cheek. "Thank you." Her lips had barely left his cheek when he pulled her to him and kissed her aggressively, stroking her tongue with his. She didn't mind in the least, gave back as good as she got and wrapped her arms around his neck. If he would just keep making that wonderful growling noise, she would kiss him all day. The sound was primitive, possessive and made her want more than kissing.

He lifted her and set her on the edge of the counter, stepping between her legs, never breaking their kiss. His hands were all over her, caressing and stoking a fire wherever they touched. Her desire built, burned out of control, his hardness pressed against her through their clothes. She boldly rubbed his chest, searing a path to his erection where she stroked him. He broke the kiss, put his forehead against hers and gritted his teeth while she continued her exploration. Just as she started unbuttoning his jeans someone cleared their throat behind them.

Ebony's eyes flew wide, her cheeks turned bright red and her hand dropped from Ashe as if scalded.

"You two kids having fun?" Aiston choked off his laugh when Ashe shot him a murderous glare.

Ashe helped Ebony off the counter and held her at his side. "Aiston, just the person I was looking for." A grin spread over Ashe's face.

Uh oh. That evil grin tells me I'm in deep shit. "Oh, yeah? I didn't get the impression you were looking for anyone from where I'm standing. What do you need, bro?"

Ashe walked Ebony to the stairs, kissed her on the cheek and whispered to her. "Don't be embarrassed, Ebony. I'm going to put our plan in action." He winked at her and she smiled. She mouthed, "Good luck," to him and sprinted up the stairs.

* * * *

Ashe turned to Aiston, "Please brother, we have some business to discuss regarding Saturday night." He motioned for Aiston to follow him to the study.

Ten minutes later Aiston stood arguing with his brother. "No fucking way. I'm not doing it."

Ashe laced his fingers behind his head and watched Aiston's face turn red. "I think you are. You know that Avril could be in danger since she's Ebony's friend. She needs protection and I'm going to be escorting Ebony so I can't do it."

"Then let Aldin do it."

"Yeah, I don't think so. While I'd trust anyone's life with Aldin, he'd likely scare the hell out of her. Besides, what's the big deal?" Ashe barely contained a chuckle as Aiston paced the room.

"You fucking know what the big deal is. She can't stand me and I have no clue as to why. Hell I don't even know her."

"Well, maybe she's a smart one after all then if she can sniff out that you like to play around with women within seconds of meeting you. And, maybe this is a good lesson for you to stay out of people's minds."

"Are you seriously going to make me do this bro?"

"Yeah, I think so." He was finding goading the hell out of his brother amusing.

Aiston glared at his brother's smirk. "I'm going to get you back for this one."

"Yeah, probably, but I figure I owe you a few."

"Fine, I'll do it, but mark my words. I'll have her eating out of my hand before this is all over with."

Ashe's laughter could be heard throughout the house and so could Aiston's stomping retreat.

Ashe decided to go out and patrol the area while the girls had their little get together. He was surprised and pleased when Estril came down with Ebony and Avril. While his sister was beautiful and charming and everyone loved her, she was a little on the shy side. He was happy to see that she joined them. The girls had collected all of the chocolate boxes, some bottles of wine and closed the door behind them in the family room. He wondered if they were going to hang a hand written sign on the

door that said 'No Boys Allowed!' With a light heart, he let himself out the front door and melted into the shadows of the night.

* * * *

The girls were having a grand blast. They put in a happily-ever-after chick flick and had spread the boxes of chocolate all over the coffee table with all the lids off. They had devoured at least two boxes, a bottle of wine and when the first movie ended, they ordered a pizza.

"So Ebony, you never told me what's up between you and Ashe." Ebony and Estril laughed at the wicked grin Avril gave Ebony, bobbing her eyebrows up and down.

"I never told you, because nothing's up between us. What would make you think such a thing anyway?" She should have known her friend wouldn't just let the subject drop that easy.

"I told you I saw the way he looked at you, like he wanted to eat you up, Little Red Riding Hood. And, I'm pretty sure 'something's' up between you two. " Avril burst out laughing.

"Whatever." Smiling, she thought two could play this game. "How about the way Aiston was looking at you like he wanted to throttle you? What did you do to him?" Ebony didn't think Avril had probably done anything to him except 'think' a lot of stuff that he invaded her mind to read. If he had indeed done so, he deserved everything he got. Maybe next time he would respect someone's privacy.

"Me? Now, come on, would I do anything to annoy him?" Avril giggled. "He is very good looking, but so is Ashe. Unfortunately, looks tend to make a man an even bigger pig." Ebony and Estril laughed at that remark and Avril joined in shortly.

“You know, he is a bit of a pig now and again with the ladies. I mean he does think they all live just to fawn over him. It can be quite sickening at times.” Estril blushed.

The doorbell interrupted and Ebony jumped up. “Saved by the pizza.” A few minutes later she brought the steaming pie back with her, set it on the table along with the chocolates and opened the lid. Everyone groaned as the delicious aroma of melted cheese, mushrooms, pepperoni, onions and peppers filled the room. They all took a slice and started eating. The room was silent for awhile, which was a testament to how good the pizza was.

The rest of the evening was filled with talking, eating more chocolate and speculation over things to come. They called it a night around midnight and Ebony and Avril dragged themselves up to their rooms with Estril following. Of course, Estril didn’t show any weariness and seemed just as wide awake as she was at the start of their little pow wow. Ebony wished she had even an ounce of Estril’s stamina. Lately, she noticed she was getting worn out easier than usual. She knew this wasn’t a good sign. Although she tried to ignore it, a niggling voice constantly whispered that her time was running out.

Why did she have to find a wonderful man such as Ashe and his extraordinary family now? It made her angry and just a little bitter to have this discovery now only to look forward to having it ripped from her. She tamped the negative thoughts down and decided she would try harder from now on to be thankful for what she had instead of feeling sorry for herself and vowed to enjoy every moment she had left with Ashe, his family and her best friend. She wished Avril and Estril goodnight at the top of the stairs and went to bed.

She was asleep within minutes of her head hitting the pillow. She found she could ease her restless mind and sleep decently if she allowed herself to think of Ashe. His gorgeous turquoise eyes, his mouth, his touch, his . . . everything. He was the last thing she thought of at the end of the day and the first thing she thought of at the beginning of each. If only she could keep him forever.

Chapter Ten

The next morning everyone ate breakfast together. Aldin had been absent the past few mornings and Ebony was glad to see him back and safe. She wasn't sure where he had been, but had a feeling it probably had something to do with her, and if not, then she probably didn't want to know. McKayla provided a huge and delicious abundance of food, as usual, and conversation flowed easily. Although, come to think of it, Aiston seemed a little out of sorts as he was unusually quiet as he cast thoughtful looks at Avril, ones that made Ebony aware that he was definitely up to something.

After breakfast Ashe pulled her aside, away from everyone and had given her a kiss that curled her toes. Even now, lounging with Avril in the family room, they had still not uncurled completely. All in all everything seemed normal until later that afternoon.

An unfamiliar female voice drifted from the entryway. "Ashe, darling, so long no see. How have you been?" Ebony got up from the couch, went to the door and peeked around it into the entryway where she saw an impossibly thin and tall woman with flowing platinum blonde hair, dressed in designer clothing, kissing Ashe right on the mouth. Fury filled her veins at the way this woman was pawing at him. She wanted to claw the slut's eyes out.

"Who's that?" Avril whispered in Ebony's ear from behind.

"I don't know. Let's find out." Ebony pushed the door wider and stepped out in the entryway, Avril close behind.

Ashe turned their way and waved them over with a tight smile. The blonde trained her sight on both of them as if sizing them up and squinted her eyes into evil looking slits. A chill tiptoed down the full length of Ebony's spine. This woman was obviously interested in Ashe and viewed one or both of them as competition. The woman stood next to Ashe and had to be at least six foot tall as she appeared to only be a couple inches shorter. She had perfectly manicured, blood red fingernails that looked more like talons, full, pouty lips painted to match, green-brown eyes, an uncommon but very flattering color, and smooth, flawless skin the color of porcelain. The red, silk dress she wore clung to her body like a

second skin and her height was defined to its fullest by the matching spiked heels. Definitely the model-type.

“Ebony, Avril, this is Alaina Czernik. Alaina, Ebony White and Avril Taylor. Alaina will be attending the ball tomorrow and will be staying as a guest tonight.”

Avril only acknowledged Alaina with a small nod while Ebony extended her hand. The woman instantly pasted a huge, wide-eyed innocent smile on at Ashe’s introduction and Ebony wanted to puke. This woman was as fake as Pamela what’s-her-face’s boobs and Ebony didn’t like her one bit.

“Ebony White? What an interesting little name, very cute, indeed.” Alaina briefly took Ebony’s hand then released it and wiped her fingers on her dress as if trying to remove the taint of Ebony’s touch.

Ebony was used to people commenting on her name and ignored the remark. She wondered if Alaina was a vampire, too. She most likely was as she had that unflawed look that seemed common. At least common in the vampires she had met so far. Ebony watched as Aiston bound down the stairs, kissed Alaina on both cheeks and made small talk with her for a moment. The encounter seemed strange to Ebony. Aiston, the womanizer, the one who was completely at ease with any woman, even seemed tense around Alaina. After deciding which room she would occupy, McKayla had appeared to help Aiston lug Alaina’s cases up the stairs.

Ebony thought sparks might shoot out of her eyes at any moment. She didn’t like the woman and she was sure Ashe was aware of it by his permanent scowl. She watched as he brushed his fingers through his hair, an action she was starting to associate with him being agitated or upset. Call it women’s intuition but she was pretty sure there was more than just friendship between Ashe and Alaina, or at least there had been at one time. Ebony thought Alaina made it crystal clear that she still wanted there to be more between them the way she leaned into Ashe and touched him at every opportunity.

At least Ebony got a little satisfaction out of Ashe’s nonchalant behavior towards Alaina. Ebony grabbed Avril by the hand and led her upstairs shooting another glare over her shoulder at Ashe. She didn’t know what she had expected him to do. *Maybe throw the beautiful Alaina out on her ear?*

* * * *

Alaina watched as McKayla unpacked her clothes and put them in the wardrobe. She had read every one of Ebony's thoughts in the entryway. The pathetic girl thought she had some kind of claim on Ashe. Well, she had news for her. Ashe was hers. They shared a past and she had every intention of reviving that past and no little blonde human or anyone else for that matter would stand in her way. No man had ever left her before or after Ashe and no man before or after had proved to be anywhere close to Ashe's caliber. He was powerful, rich, well respected among their kind, sexy and knew how to please a woman in bed. He was the only one that was good enough to be her equal. She knew he wouldn't see things her way at first, but she could work on him and gradually bring him around.

McKayla left and Alaina went over her plans in her head. First thing was to shatter Ebony's love for Ashe. It would be such an easy task. Humans were such foolish creatures with their love and sympathy and all the other useless emotions they let rule their lives. She had no such worries interfering in her existence and knew exactly how to drain the love for Ashe right out of Ebony's pathetic little heart. She hadn't lived in this world for over six hundred years without learning a few things. The most important being, love was for the weak. Oh, she wasn't so cynical that she couldn't hold some affection for those who deserved it, but she would never let her heart rule her head again. Ashe had been the only one in her entire existence that had made her lose sight of that rule.

When Ashe had ended things with her after meeting that little whore, Shara, she had been murderously angry. After some time had passed, she realized that she had been the cause. Her love for him had made her a simpering idiot and Ashe, being the warrior he is, of course, craved a strong woman, but that still didn't explain why he had picked a sniveling human to leave her for. She didn't believe in *viata amants* even though Ashe had insisted Shara had been his.

Now there was the blonde tart, Ebony. She gave the meaning to weakling. The woman was sickly and disgustingly in love. Since Ashe kept his mind closed to her, she hadn't been able to read his feelings for Ebony. This was one of the things she would have to convince him to change. He couldn't save every human that needed help and why would he want to anyway? After all, they were just sources. She would teach him to embrace his power and use it as needed against all the weaker and a good starting point would be Ebony. He would finally see how strong Alaina was and what a perfect mate she could be for him. Smiling, she walked into the bathroom to have a nice, steamy soak before dinner.

* * * *

Ebony sat at the dinner table with Ashe, Estril, Avril, Aldin, Aiston, and Alaina. Of course, the bimbo had weasled a seat next to Ashe, and if she touched his arm one more time Ebony was going to pull her blonde hair out one strand at a time. And that fake, tinny laugh reminded her of someone running their nails down a chalkboard.

"Ebony, there's no need to be upset. She doesn't mean anything." Ashe's voice whispered through her mind like a calm summer breeze.

"Yeah, Easy for you to say. Does she always paw at you?"

Ashe smiled. *"Jealous?"*

"Are you kidding me? I'm just embarrassed for you."

"It's just how Alaina is. It's nothing. Do not bother yourself with it."

"Tell the bimbo to get her hands off you, and I won't be bothered!" Wait a second. How come no one else was staring at them? After all, she was making a huge ass of herself wasn't she?

A small 'oh' formed on Ebony's lips when she realized why no one was staring. She was talking with Ashe telepathically or what was it he called it? Minti conversatie? Didn't he say this was another sign of being a viata amant? No, she couldn't be his. It would be too cruel for fate to let her find such a mate when she didn't have a lifetime to spend with him.

"Ashe?"

"It's okay, baby. I was wondering when you'd realize. It's not the first time you know?"

"It isn't?"

"No. Remember the day I knocked on your door after the little, uh, incident in the study?"

She thought about it for a moment and then remembered when she had told him to go away after he knocked on her door. She had talked to him telepathically and she hadn't even noticed it just as she hadn't noticed it a few moments ago. It felt natural, right. *"Oh. I can't believe I didn't realize it before now."* Her mind screamed that this was another sign that she could be his life love. He had to be aware of it too. In fact, she was a little hurt because he had obviously been aware of it the day of the incident in the study. If she were possibly his viata amant, why didn't he say anything to her? Her heart fluttered and her chest ached when she wondered if he didn't tell her because he didn't want her. Oh yes, he made it clear he wanted her body, but he obviously didn't want anything else.

"Ebony?"

"What?"

"It feels very nice to have you in my head."

Her body shivered in response to his smoldering gaze. This time his words were accompanied by what felt like a caress, an intimate caress that made her body clench in response. And, those ten simple words pushed her sad thoughts to the back of her mind and made her burn for him. Ebony didn't utter another word and sat through the rest of dinner watching Alaina ignore everything but Ashe and listened to everyone chat about this and that. She did find Aldin's behavior rather odd, even for him. He was always unusually quiet, brooding even, but tonight he seemed distracted. She couldn't help but notice how his eyes drifted time and again to Alaina. His expression remained unreadable though and she had no idea what to make of it. Why couldn't the bitch paw at him or Aiston?

She was relieved when it was over and was glad to be able to get away from Alaina. The woman really did rub her the wrong way. When McKayla started clearing the table, Estril and Aiston excused themselves. Then, of course, Alaina came up with some excuse as to why Ashe should escort her to her room. Honestly, the woman acted as if she were the Queen of the castle. Ebony would probably laugh at such a thing under normal circumstances, but Alaina had her sights on Ashe and she wasn't feeling anything but jealousy and anger toward the woman. Ashe politely excused himself and Aldin followed shortly after. Ebony and Avril went to spend another relaxing evening in front of the big screen watching horror movies.

Ebony was distracted as to what might be going on with Ashe and Alaina and gave up trying to watch the movie about an hour into it. Avril caught on to Ebony's discomfort and turned the movie off to talk. Ebony knew Avril had an idea that she had feelings for Ashe before, but she undoubtedly knew for sure after her little display of jealousy upon Alaina's arrival. She was very thankful, however, that Avril had not brought the subject up again and they talked late into the night.

Yawning, they both decided they should get some sleep as tomorrow would be hectic with the final preparations for the ball. They made their way up the stairs and went to their own rooms. Ebony had just closed her door and leaned back up against it when Ashe appeared right in front of her. She nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Dammit! Don't do that to me. You scared me half to death!" She put her hand on her chest over her racing heart, willing it to settle.

"I'm sorry. I just needed to see you. We haven't had a chance to spend much time together since Avril arrived." He walked forward and brushed his knuckles down her jaw.

Ebony pulled away from him, walked to the window and sat on the built in bench underneath. "Shouldn't you be entertaining your little friend?" She was mad. She got even angrier when Ashe smiled at her remark.

He followed her to the window seat and pulled her back up and into his arms. "Don't be jealous, Ebony. There is no need."

She tried to pull away again, but he held her tighter. “Jealous? I’m not jealous. Why should I be jealous? I told you I’m just embarrassed for you. I mean, the woman has been all over you since her arrival. Don’t you feel a little smothered?”

He chuckled and she bristled. “Let me just say that most men would not be embarrassed by such attention. However, I personally find it more irritating than anything, but she is a guest in my house and I am trying my best to be a gentleman.”

He was irritated that the beautiful Alaina wouldn’t keep her hands off him? “What is she to you? Is she your girlfriend? She must be something, because she is extremely comfortable with touching you and seems very possessive. That’s not the behavior of just a friend.”

Ashe let out a long sigh. “Alaina and I go way back. Yes, we do have a history together, but it has been over for literally hundreds of years. Alaina sometimes thinks she can rekindle what we once had even though I have explained to her that there is no chance of us ever being together again. She was a mistake, Ebony, one that I will not make again. Please trust me.”

Ebony had the feeling that Ashe was asking so much more than for her to trust him regarding Alaina. There was almost a pleading look on his face as he spoke those words. Her anger slowly seeped out and she relaxed back against his chest loving the warmth of his big hands stroking her back.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have gotten so carried away. I don’t know what came over me.” She knew what came over her—love. But he didn’t need to be burdened with her love. He could find someone else that would have a lifetime to offer him. She wouldn’t do that to him. She had to put some distance between them or she would end up making love to him again. Her body became heated and ready for his possession every time he was near. Grief overwhelmed her at the thought of leaving this man and she would, when she died.

Ebony sobbed, jerked out of his arms and ran into the bathroom. The door shut and the lock clicked into place behind her. If she could just avoid being alone with him until after the ball they would find her attacker and she could go home.

“Ebony, what’s wrong? Please open the door.” Complete silence filled the room. “If you don’t open the door, I’m coming in anyway.”

“Go away! I’m fine. I just need some time alone right now.”

He didn’t bother working the lock open, he simply shimmered. Ebony spun and found herself pinned against the door by his hard body. It really wasn’t fair that he could pop in and out like that. Ashe kissed her tenderly on the lips and her body heated even more.

“Why did you run away from me, Ebony? What’s wrong?”

“I just needed some time to—I can’t be alone with you.” Ebony stared at the floor in embarrassment.

Ashe gently pushed her chin up with his finger and peered deep into her green eyes. Her emotions beat at him in waves. “Why do you need to be away from me? Why can’t you be alone with me?”

She knew she had hurt him and hated herself for doing so. “It’s not you, Ashe. I know it’s so cliché, but it’s me. I don’t think we should pursue this thing between us any longer. I don’t think we are compatible. I just—” A small sob escaped as a lone tear trailed down her cheek.

God she loved him so much. The thought that he probably didn’t love her made her knees weak and her chest ache. She couldn’t tell him though. If she did she’d only make things awkward between them. And, if by some miracle he did have feelings for her, she would just hurt him when she died. She didn’t want to hurt him. She couldn’t hurt the man she loved.

“You know we are compatible Ebony. We’ve more than proved that point. God baby you make me hard just by looking at me.”

"I don't mean that Ashe." She blushed furiously. She wanted to tell him she was dying so badly but she didn't think she could take his pity. "It's just that you will find my attacker soon and, and then I'll go home." She drew in a gasp when she saw the brief rage flash in his eyes. It was the first time she got a glimpse of the true predator he was.

"Ebony, don't fight what we have. It's too special. If you don't want me forever, then let's just enjoy the time we have. Don't deny us what we can share while you're here."

Sobbing louder, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him with every fiber of her being. His big arms circled her and held her tightly as he hungrily kissed her back, devouring her very soul. She didn't care anymore. If he wanted her soul, she would gladly give it to him. She loved him so much the thought she had hurt him, even a little, gave her a dull ache deep in her chest. She honestly couldn't think of anything she did want more than to be with him forever, but it just wasn't possible.

The next thing she knew she was under him on her bed. Maybe the shimmering thing wasn't such a bad thing after all. His hands were all over her, stroking and teasing until she thought she would melt into a puddle. His touch was rough, possessive and urgent, stoking fire into her veins. She reveled in his possessive touch. She reached to unbutton his shirt, but he pushed her back down on the bed, holding her in place with one hand on her belly.

He pushed her skirt up with the other hand revealing her shapely legs, and wadded the fabric around her waist. With a quick turn of his wrist, her panties were ripped from her and tossed to the floor a mere second before he pushed his tongue into her wetness, wringing a small gasp of surprise from her throat. He licked and sucked and nibbled at her delicate folds. His assault was relentless and he continued to hold her down with his other hand. He pushed two long fingers into her tightness while he lavished her core with his tongue. Within seconds, her orgasm ripped through her and she laid limp, satiated, yet her body craved more. It craved him.

He pulled her skirt back down into place and gathered her in his arms, spooning against her back. She amazed him and her little cries of passion were the most wonderful sounds he had ever heard. She reached back and gently stroked him through his jeans.

He removed her hand and pulled her even closer. She felt like heaven, all soft and sweet smelling. "That was for you, Ebony. Just relax and let me hold you."

“But you didn’t get to—”

“It’s okay. I don’t need to. Giving you pleasure, gives me all the pleasure I need. Now get some sleep. Tomorrow will be busy.”

Ebony knew he was aroused by the thick bulge pressing into her backside. She wanted to give him the same release he had given her, but he was insistent she get some rest which didn’t seem like a bad idea at the moment as she could feel herself already drifting. His warmth pressed up against her put her in such a state of relaxation that she couldn’t help but take advantage of what he offered.

* * * *

He watched her eyes flutter shut and gently pushed his fingers through her hair. He loved the feel of her, the scent of her. Her softness pressed into his hardness and he ached to bury himself deep inside her. He closed his eyes and willed his body to behave.

He hadn’t wanted to invade her mind, but when she fled him and locked herself in the bathroom, he feared she was feeling ill. If she were, he would have made her see a doctor, be damned if she was mad at him for reading her thoughts. And if she had just decided she simply didn’t want to be around him any longer, well he would have dealt with that too. Yet when he stealthily slid into her brain he found something unexpected. She didn’t want to be alone with him because she wanted him too much. She couldn’t have him because she was dying and didn’t want to hurt him. She loved him. He closed his eyes as this discovery soothed his battered heart and soul, healing them, making them whole once again. Why couldn’t she just tell him? He could fix everything and they could have an eternity together.

He listened to her breathing even out as she slipped into a deep sleep. He knew she had been unusually tired lately and needed it. He held her for another hour before tucking her in. He gave her a gentle kiss on the forehead and shimmered quickly to his room where he picked up the package he had

had delivered earlier. He shimmered back to Ebony's room and placed it on her dresser by her brush where she would be sure to find it.

He stared down at her and regretted that he must leave her, but he needed to feed. The last time had been the night he was injured and he had to make sure he was at full strength for tomorrow in case it proved successful in finding Ebony's attacker. He shimmered outside the house and set out to find his food source for the night. It wasn't long before he saw a young woman sitting on a bench, grief rolling off her. As he neared she looked up at him with a startled and scared expression. She had just lost her husband to a violent accident. She was too young to have to deal with such pain.

He stared in her eyes. "Come to me." The woman's eyes blanked over, voiding all emotion as she immediately stood and obeyed his command. He took only what he needed and left the woman with soothing memories of her husband and refocused her attention to not his recent death, but all the love and memories they had shared. A small smile tugged at her mouth as she turned and walked away.

Chapter Eleven

Ebony stumbled out of bed and headed for a long shower the next morning. She was looking forward to the ball tonight and she had just had the best night of sleep in her entire life. She knew it had everything to do with Ashe's warm body wrapped around her, cocooning her in safety. She had drifted off in his arms and slept soundly throughout the night. She felt a little lonely when she woke and he was gone, but thoughts of his selfless act in pleasuring her brought a small smile to her lips as the warm jets of water cascaded down her back.

Every time she thought of him a little ache throbbed through her heart as she remembered that her time was limited. How many more times would she be able to make love with him, or see him smile or laugh or simply lie in his arms feeling warm and safe like she did last night? She loved him mind, heart, body and soul. The past few days she had been plagued by small dizzy spells but had merely dismissed them as being caused by her stressful situation. Even though deep down inside she knew it was not that simple. The cancer was spreading fast and she felt time slipping away from her quickly. Determined more than ever not to dwell on her condition and enjoy what life she had left, she flipped the water off.

She dried, dressed then went to the dresser to brush her hair out when she noticed a box lying there with a big red ribbon. She picked it up and took the small card off the top to read it. *I can't wait to escort the most beautiful woman in the world to the ball tonight. Yours always, A.* She gasped when she lifted the lid and looked inside. The most gorgeous ruby necklace and matching earrings twinkled back at her. She carefully lifted the necklace, placed it against her neck and whistled under her breath. Definitely not costume jewelry. The pieces must have cost a fortune. They were flawless and stunning. The deep burgundy red color of the set would match her gown perfectly.

A knock sounded on the door and Estril popped her head around it when Ebony called "come in." She walked over to admire the pieces of jewelry. "They are exquisite. Do you like them?"

"How could I not? They are breathtaking. I could never have imagined receiving such a gift. It just seems too much."

Estril chuckled and patted Ebony's hand. "You don't worry at all about that. Ashe is more than able to afford them and I can't remember him ever giving a woman such a gift. You know, I think he is growing quite fond of you."

Ebony gave Estril a hopeful look. "Really? Most of the time I haven't a clue of what he's feeling." She took a last longing look at the jewelry before placing it back on the dresser.

"Well, believe me when I tell you that a woman hasn't had an affect on him like you have for hundreds of years. You're good for each other and don't let him convince you otherwise."

"You know I care for your brother and would never hurt him." Ebony would sooner die than hurt him. Wasn't that ironic?

"No. But I know you love him and would never hurt him." She smiled as Ebony's shocked expression turned into acknowledgement. "Have you told him you're sick yet?"

Ebony's skin paled which gave Estril her answer. "No. I want to so bad, but I can't seem to bring myself to do it. I know I need to, but it's so hard." She sat on the end of the bed and hung her head in defeat. "Oh, Estril, I don't want him to pity me and yes I do love him but I have nothing to offer him! I'm dying."

Estril walked over, sat down beside her, put her arm around Ebony's shoulders and gave her a gentle squeeze. "He won't pity you. He cares about you and would only have concern for you. Ashe isn't the type of man that would intentionally make you feel pitied or weak. You should trust him. He might have a completely different response than you are expecting."

"I do trust him." Ebony caught a quick look of doubt on Estril's face and held her hand up. "I know, if I did, I would tell him. I think it's just more that I'm still in denial. I feel like it's not quite reality until I say it out loud. I know it's stupid, but it's how I feel."

"I understand Ebony but you should really talk to him. Not everything is as black and white as you might think."

"Well I don't see how it can be any other way." Ebony was a little confused when Estril chuckled.

"Well, let's just forget about all of this now and focus on today. I came up to tell you that the dresses are here. I think it's time to get Avril and let her know that she will be a bell of the ball and not a servant." Estril giggled along with Ebony as they both walked across the hall to knock on Avril's door. It swung open after a few minutes with a disheveled Avril standing there obviously fresh out of bed.

"What time is it? It has to be too early to be up." She yawned. "What do you girls want and why are you wearing those mischievous grins? You two are up to no good. I know an ambush when I see one." She tried to push the door shut but Ebony put her foot in it blocking its progress.

"My, my, aren't we bright eyed and bushy tailed this morning." Ebony knew Avril was not a morning person by any means and needed at least two cups of coffee before feeling human. "Come on. Go get ready and meet us downstairs in the family room. There will be steaming hot coffee just awaiting your arrival in the kitchen, madam." Estril giggled at Ebony when she gave Avril a mock bow.

Avril mumbled at them that she would be down in a half hour and shut the door. Ebony and Estril went to the kitchen, grabbed some coffee and toast and headed for the family room. Laid out on the huge couch were three gorgeous gowns, a burgundy, royal blue and black one. All three had white or creamy lace accents and full flowing skirts. Ebony picked the burgundy one up and removed the protective plastic. Walking over to a full length mirror that hung on the wall, she held the dress up in front of her.

"It's just beautiful." She turned as Estril came up beside her mimicking Ebony's moves holding the black dress up.

"Yes, they both are. Tina is a miracle worker."

They both stood for a few minutes admiring the richness of the velvet and silk material. Ebony was imagining how soft the fabric would feel on her skin when the door opened showing a wide-eyed Avril with a cinnamon roll hanging out of her mouth and a cup of coffee in her hand. She stared at Estril and Ebony for a few moments before she noticed the royal blue gown lying on the couch. Her eyes widened even more when she realized what was up.

“Oh, I don’t think so girlfriend. You know how I feel about wearing frilly things. Nuh, uh, and no way.”

Before Avril could escape, Estril had shut the door behind her blocking her exit. “Damn you’re quick.” Ebony laid her gown down and grabbed Avril’s hand leading her to the blue one.

Pulling plastic off once again, she held it in front of Avril. “It’s absolutely perfect. It compliments your dark coloring just as I thought it would.”

Ebony smiled with that pleading, pouty look she rarely gave Avril, but when she did, Avril always caved. Knowing she couldn’t resist her friend, she grabbed the dress and marched to the mirror, Ebony and Estril followed close behind. When she saw her reflection, she had to admit the dress did, indeed, compliment her. Maybe it wouldn’t be so horrible to feel feminine and frilly this one time.

“Okay. Obviously, you two duped me. Being the good sport and friend I am, I will do it for you. But, you owe me big time.”

“Well I might owe you more when I tell you the rest.” Ebony worked her bottom lip with her teeth as she wasn’t looking forward to Avril’s reaction over the next bit of news, the pleading pouty look could only get her so far after all.

Avril tossed a worried look at her friend from over her shoulder. “What is the rest?”

“Aiston is going to be your date to the ball.”

Ebony and Estril watched indecision play on Avril's face. However, it was quickly replaced by a small smile and Avril laughed and said "whatever." Hmmm. Ebony thought that was way too easy.

Ebony and Estril exchanged confusing looks before they all started discussing hair dos and nail colors. They chatted like this for awhile before being interrupted by Alaina.

"Oh, so sorry darlings. Did I interrupt your little girl chat?" Alaina waved her hand about as if shooing away a fly as she walked, or rather sashayed in an over-dramatic way, to sit on the couch and adjusted her dress over the legs that ran all the way up to her neck.

Estril moved toward Alaina to pick the plastic covering up for her dress. "Not at all. We were just looking at our gowns for this evening. I was actually getting ready to excuse myself to go make sure all the preparations were coming along smoothly."

With that statement made, Estril left without a further word. Ebony took Estril's body language as distinct dislike of Alaina. She didn't blame her. Avril had agreed with Ebony that Alaina was a blonde bimbo with an agenda, an agenda that had something to do with Ashe and most likely getting into his pants. Ebony kept the fact that Alaina had been there before and most likely did indeed want a return visit to herself.

"Well aren't those pretty little gowns." Alaina gave a quick, dismissive look at Ebony and Avril's gowns as if she wouldn't be caught dead in such attire.

Ebony gave a tight smile to Alaina. "I assume you already have your gown ready for tonight."

"Oh yes, dear. My gown was hand made special and flown in from Paris. I had to send it back twice because they just couldn't get the details quite right, but finally after showing them exactly what I wanted, they got it perfect. Sometimes people can be so dense without proper instruction."

"I'm sure it is beautiful. I look forward to seeing it." Ebony grabbed Avril's hand and started for the door.

"Yes, I'm sure. Maybe you can see what a real gown looks like. By the way, have you seen Ashe this morning? I simply must see him."

"Why you little bi—" Ebony jerked Avril back as she started for Alaina, cutting her off mid-sentence.

Gritting her teeth and putting on a fake smile, Ebony said, "No, I haven't seen him, but I'll be sure to let him know that you're looking for him if I run into him." She then turned to Avril. Let's go."

"You be sure to do that now." Alaina smirked and then laughed out loud.

Out in the entryway, Ebony dragged Avril by the hand up the stairs, which was hard to do since she was carrying both dresses.

"You should have let me scratch that bitch's eyes out, Ebony! She was so being nasty on purpose."

"I know, Avril, but she isn't worth it. She'll be gone tomorrow so let's just forget it okay? I don't want to let her ruin tonight."

"Fine, but we need to steer clear of her if possible. I don't know if I'll be able to stop myself from smacking that bitchy look off her face next time she makes a smart ass remark."

They both laughed and spent the rest of the morning trying out different hair styles until they found the perfect one. Avril would wear hers in a modern French braid and Ebony would wear hers up with stray tendrils framing her face. They would both wear the matching ribbons in their hair. Ebony showed Avril the necklace and earrings Ashe had given her and Avril pretended to swoon.

“So, he must have feelings for you, Ebony. A man doesn’t just give a casual friend a gift like that. I mean it would probably take ten years of my yearly wages to buy something like that.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. He’s just so hard to read. Sometimes I really believe he cares for me and other times he seems so cold and distant I just don’t know what to think.”

“Well, just let it ride and hopefully he won’t turn into a pig like so much of the rest of the male population. I hate to say it, and I certainly wouldn’t admit it to him at the moment, but I actually kind of like him.”

“Wow, coming from the male hater herself!” Ebony chuckled.

“Look, maybe I’m a little cynical when it comes to men, but my track record isn’t so hot. It doesn’t mean that there aren’t decent men out there. It just means I haven’t met any yet. However, at the cost of losing some of my men-are-pigs credibility, I think Ashe just might be one of the good guys. And even though you haven’t wanted to discuss it much, I know you love him.”

“But, how do you know that?” Ebony stared at her friend.

“Oh come on, Ebony. We’re best friends and I know what that moony look you give Ashe every time he is around means. It means you love him.” Avril stared right back at her as if daring her to even deny it.

Ebony sighed. “Okay. You are right. I do love him, but I still don’t know how he feels about me.”

“Well, all I can tell you is that he would be stupid to not love you. You are smart, funny and beautiful. And you know what? I don’t think Ashe is stupid by far. Besides, the man looks as if he will strangle anyone who dares as to so much harm a hair on your head. Men aren’t protective like that for no reason. I’m telling you he has feelings for you.”

Ebony sighed. "I don't know. I just don't want to expect too much. I don't want to get hurt." Hurt? When she left her heart would be destroyed.

"Look Ebony, I'm telling you, he has feelings for you and besides he won't hurt you. Because if he does, I'll rip his balls off and find a very nasty dog to feed them too."

Ebony giggled. "Okay, okay. I get it. You are protective of me too. And, I love you for it. But, I don't want to talk about this anymore."

Avril finally let the subject drop and they talked more of failed relationships, old friends and childhood memories. Ebony assured Avril that there was a guy out there somewhere just waiting for her. Avril just chuckled and told Ebony the only perfect man for her was the one in her dreams every night. Ebony was sure he might be a little closer than that, but reserved her opinion for now.

They decided to get ready in Ebony's room so they could help each other with the fastenings on their dresses and it was now finally time to put on the gowns. They had just smoothed their skirts out and made final touches to their hair and make-up when a knock sounded on the door. Ebony opened it to find Aiston standing on the other side with a sheepish grin holding a black rose.

"Is Avril in there? I've come to take her down to the ball now. The guests are arriving and I thought I could maybe introduce her around."

Was Aiston actually nervous? Surely not. However, Ebony suspected that he was just that. "Yeah, Aiston, she's here. "Avril, Aiston's here." Ebony noticed the look that came over Avril's face, it screamed what-the-hell-did-I-agree-to with maybe a hint of excitement. She had a feeling that Avril found Aiston very attractive but was fighting it every step of the way.

Avril stepped around Ebony to stand in front of Aiston when a small, almost discernible sound, something that sounded like a groan escaped under his breath. "Did you say something?"

Aiston cleared his throat and stood straighter handing the rose to Avril. "Uh, you look really nice. Are you ready to go?"

"Yeah, I think so." Avril took the rose, thanked Aiston and asked Ebony if she wouldn't mind putting it in some water.

Aiston held his arm out to Avril and placed his hand over the top of hers when she took it. "Okay then, let's go."

"Oh, by the way, you look very nice too Aiston."

Aiston pulled at his bowtie a little. "Uh, thanks."

"We'll see you later, Ebony." Avril called over her shoulder as she followed Aiston out into the hallway.

"Yeah, later, Ebony."

"You two kids have fun now and don't be out after curfew." Ebony laughed when Avril chuckled at her comment then closed the door.

Well that was quite interesting, Ebony thought to herself as she finished getting ready.

Ebony looked at herself in the mirror to make sure everything looked just right then remembered she needed to put the necklace and earrings on Ashe had given her and went back to the dresser to get them.

She pushed the earrings through each ear and fastened the backs. She looked down to pick up the necklace and jumped when warm hands rested upon her shoulders. A deep, familiar voice penetrated her soul.

“Let me fasten it for you.” He fastened the necklace and let his fingers linger on her neck, rubbing small circles on her smooth skin. He put his mouth close to her ear. “God Ebony, you are so beautiful all I want to do is throw the skirt up on your gown and bury myself deep inside you.”

She gasped when his lips grazed her neck. “A grown man shouldn’t feel this out of control, but damned if I can help it when I’m around you.”

His warm breath on her neck made the short hairs there stand on end. “Oh, Ashe.” The words came out in a strangled whisper. The man was absolutely gorgeous in his black tux. It fit him perfectly and showcased his lean, muscular body. His shoulders looked impossibly wide and the black material clung to his thighs. Her fingers itched to run up and down those wonderfully sculpted legs. She was so turned on that she hoped he would take her, make-up and hair be damned.

He took a deep breath and briefly rested his forehead on her shoulder. “Let’s go before I ruin that gorgeous dress you’re wearing.” He held his arm out for her.

She felt disappointment shoot through her and placed her shaking hand on his offered arm. She stood on tiptoe and placed a quick kiss on his cheek. “Thank you for the necklace and earrings. I don’t think I have ever seen anything quite so beautiful.”

He gave her a long, searing look that made her knees turn weak. “I have.” He kissed her long and leisurely then grabbed her hand and pulled her to the door. “Now let’s get downstairs while we still can.” He guided her downstairs and took his place by the door, Ebony by his side, and greeted the arriving guests along with Aiston, Avril, Estril and Aldin.

Chapter Twelve

Estril looked gorgeous as she did every year. She had an elegant beauty about her that was unique. The black dress flowed perfectly over her lean form and complimented her flawless complexion. He smirked at his two brothers, remembering the fiasco of dressing in their tuxes earlier. They had helped each other with buttons and ties, grumbling the whole time about the damned monkey suits. All of them stood around glaring at one another, itching and scratching at the offending material before finally giving in and going downstairs. Every year they swore they'd never wear one again and yet when the next year rolled around, they'd be grumbling and cursing as they went through the whole demeaning process once more just to please their sister. It was a battle they would never win, but they still had to complain. After all, it wasn't in their nature to give in humbly.

By twelve-thirty all of the guests had arrived with the exception of a few stragglers and Aldin was making rounds trying to find any information that might help with Ebony's situation. Aldin was the only one besides Estril who didn't have a date, therefore, he was the one given this task as he could move around without hindrance. Later Ashe was supposed to leave Ebony with Aiston and Avril for a short amount of time to see if he could find anything useful. Then, Avril and Ebony would stay with Ashe while Aiston took a turn. Some of the guests were better acquainted with one brother or the other so they figured this was the best course of action to take.

Of course, Estril knew what was going on and had her ears open for anything important also. Avril and Ebony were supposed to stay completely out of it for safety reasons. Avril wasn't a problem as she didn't realize the underlying reason for the ball other than it being tradition. However, Ashe had a sneaking suspicion Ebony knew exactly what was going on. He just hoped she wouldn't try anything foolish.

He would be too distracted to do what needed done if he had to worry about what she might be up to every second. He would never forgive himself if something happened to her. She seemed to accept lately that he didn't want her involved in any way, but he knew she could be stubborn when she wanted. He hoped she wouldn't pick tonight to showcase that particular trait. He had instructed her to stay with him or one of his brothers and if she needed to use a restroom to use one on the main floor. She was not to leave the main floor by herself.

As he and Ebony walked towards the back of the house, the orchestra began playing a slow sonata and Ashe asked Ebony to dance. The room the ball was being held in was closed off most of the year and only used for formal occasions. It was huge with shiny marble floors and several stone pillars that ran from floor to the top of the cathedral ceiling. The ceiling was mostly glass skylights and showed the clear night sky with its millions of twinkling stars. It proved a spectacular sight.

It was a little hard to make it to the floor through the crowd of tuxedos and swirling gowns of silk. The ball had a great turn-out. Many couples were already dancing and Aston and Avril were among them. Finally making it to the floor, Ashe took Ebony in his arms. She felt good there, like home. Her soft warmth seeped into him and her delicate scent weaved through his senses, comforting him. She laid her head on his shoulder and followed his lead. He could feel his control slip and prayed for strength when the song finally ended and they made their way around the crowd talking to some of the guests.

Ashe introduced Ebony to several of the guests and was surprised to admit that he was actually having a good time. He grinned at her when she quirked a brow at him while Mrs. Maddox charmed her with an endearing story of her pet poodles that she considered children. Mr. Maddox just wanted to talk about his indoor golf course and how Ashe and Ebony should stop by for a game sometime.

They talked to several other couples before Ashe was able to pull Ebony back onto the dance floor for yet another slow number. Ebony sighed as his strong arms encircled her. "Everyone seems so normal."

"Well what did you expect?"

"I don't know really. I just figured maybe . . ." Ebony chewed her bottom lip. "Well—"

Ashe laughed. "It's okay. I get what you're saying." She was the cutest thing when she was flustered, her brow drawn down in concentration. She swayed in perfect unison with the music and his body.

"Your dancing is impeccable."

"I've had many years to practice. I'm glad I learned because it gives me an excuse to hold you. You feel good in my arms."

"You feel pretty good, too." Ebony sighed again and leaned in closer to him.

They enjoyed the rest of the dance in silence, absorbing each other's warmth. The music stopped and the orchestra announced they would take a very short break when an unwanted voice interrupted their bliss.

"Hello, Ashe."

Ashe pulled Ebony to his side in a possessive manner when he felt her body tense at Alaina's arrival. "Hello Alaina, you look lovely as usual."

The silver and red dress Alaina wore hugged her body's every line and left nothing to the imagination. He could never deny Alaina was a beautiful woman on the outside, but the inside was something else. He wondered how he could have ever been attracted to her. She was cold, calculating and never took no for an answer. She was a spoiled brat.

"Good grief. How did she get into that dress?" Ebony looked down at her gown then back at Alaina. *"I could never wear something like that. I don't think they even make something like that in my size."*

"You outnumber her in every way. You have no reason to feel insecure in the least where Alaina is concerned or any other woman for that matter. And you would look stunning in that dress. Not that I would allow you to be seen by any other man but me in it."

Ebony smiled. *"Thank you."*

"Oooh, the perfect gentleman as always," Alaina preened, batted her lashes at Ashe

"That woman makes me want to rip her hair out."

Ashe chuckled. *"Jealous again baby?"* He didn't miss the look Ebony shot him. The one that told him she wanted to do him bodily harm.

At that inopportune moment the orchestra returned from break and started in on yet another slow piece. *"Come dance with me, Ashe."* Alaina put her hand on his arm. *"Surely Ebony will let you go long enough for that, won't she?"* Alaina fixed a cold stare in Ebony's direction.

"Actually, I have promised all of my dances to Ebony tonight. I'm sorry." He didn't want to dance with Alaina but he also wanted to avoid angering her. She could be quite the bitch when provoked and he didn't feel like dealing with it tonight.

"No, go ahead, Ashe. One dance won't hurt anything. Besides, I could use a cold drink." She gave him a reassuring smile.

"Are you sure, Ebony? I don't want to do anything to upset you."

"I'm sure. Please, I don't want her to think I'm so jealous and insecure that I don't even trust you to dance with her. I trust you."

Ashe watched Ebony make her way through the throng of people as Alaina draped herself over him and started dancing, swaying her hips in blatant invitation of what she'd really like to be doing with him. He kept his muscles taut and maintained a respectable space between their bodies.

"Ashe, darling, you should have never left me. You know we make such a perfect pair." Alaina rubbed against him provocatively.

God, the woman was annoying. Didn't she know that she did absolutely nothing for him?
"Alaina, you know why I left. Besides our relationship was only sexual in nature, I told you that from the start. That was a long time ago anyway. As they say, just let sleeping dogs lie."

He didn't miss the anger that flashed briefly in her eyes before she puckered her lips into a perfect imitation of a pout. "Oh, you can be so stubborn."

"Not stubborn, just realistic."

"Whatever, darling, rumor has it that you are seeking certain information about a certain incident."

His eyes snapped to her face. "What do you know?" Ashe didn't trust her, but hell he would take a chance if it could possibly lead to anything that would help Ebony. He only hoped that when this whole mess was straightened out, Ebony wouldn't want to go home still. He wanted her to stay with him.

"Oh, my, that certainly got your attention. I'll tell you what. Why don't you grab us a nice drink and meet me in your study. We'll have a nice little chat there, hmmm?"

"Why don't you just tell me what you know now?"

"Now darling what would be the fun in that?" She trailed her fingernails down the front of his tux.

Sighing, he nodded and went to get the drinks. He didn't see Ebony anywhere, but assumed she had gone to freshen up or maybe she and Avril ran into each other. Either way, he knew she was safe down here with his brothers and with any luck, he would get whatever information Alaina had and be back before Ebony missed him.

* * * *

When Alaina saw Ebony leave the bar she read her mind and knew she was going to the lavatory. She used compulsion on her and suggested she go to the study afterwards.

Now that she had Ashe's attention, it was time to put her plan in motion. Men were such easy creatures to manipulate. His interest in that little blonde human would almost be comical if it weren't so sad. He was blind to think that Ebony would make a good match for him. She was weak and unremarkable.

Alaina knew he couldn't refuse her invitation to go to the study even if he didn't quite believe her and he shouldn't. No matter if he did or didn't, he would follow her even if there was a minute possibility that she knew anything that would help his little pathetic Ebony. And boy did she know, but she certainly wouldn't tell him.

* * * *

Avril was surprised that she was having such a good time with Aiston. He had turned out to be quite charming. He hadn't been chauvinistic at all, but she was still waiting for it to come. He was a great dancer and had made her laugh several times with his witty come-backs and jokes. They had just finished another number on the floor when she asked if there might be someplace she could get some fresh air as she was a little hot from the dancing. He nodded and led her to the bar for a cool drink to take along.

She followed him as he weaved through the crowd stopping off and on to reply to a remark someone had made to him. They finally made their way out the back where it opened onto a gorgeous and humongous paved patio that overlooked a huge backyard with a perfectly manicured flower garden highlighted by the full moon. She sighed in pleasure as the different scents from the flowers gently

flowed through the air. Aiston handed her one of the cold drinks and they stood side by side in silence for a moment. She took a sip and set it on the railing that surrounded the patio.

“It is stunning. I could never get used to all of this.”

“Yes, you could. I mean, the appreciation never leaves, but the shock eventually wears off.” He playfully laughed at her thoughtful expression.

“It’s easy to say that when you are around it every day. I couldn’t imagine having all of this.” She spread her arms wide and did a full spin. Aiston’s eyes turned black and he sucked in a breath.

Avril studied him for a moment and then began walking down the steps that led to the garden. She could hear Aiston following behind and came to an abrupt halt as she rounded the first corner where a shocking sight greeted her. Aiston almost knocked her over, but she steadied herself as she stared in disbelief at the scene in front of her. A man and woman were sprawled on a bench. The woman was sitting beside the man, head thrown back moaning, while he was . . . biting her on the neck.

“My God! Ebony was telling me the truth. You really are vampires!” She gazed back at Aiston with wide eyes, realization hitting her hard that he was a vampire, too.

“Avril, it’s okay. Let’s just go back inside.” Avril tensed ready to run but before she could flee, Aiston gripped her arm gently but firmly. “Don’t run Avril. I don’t want to scare you more, but if you run, I will chase you. And, I will catch you.”

His words made a shiver run down her spine and his black eyes made her feel as if she were being stalked. “You’re one, too. What the hell? I can’t believe this. I mean, how . . . what . . . I don’t even know what to say.” Avril was confused and a little scared. She came to her senses somewhat though and figured she was pretty safe, as any of them could have hurt her at any time and didn’t. She knew for certain that Ebony would never put her in a position that could lead to her being harmed. This thought allowed her to relax a little.

Aiston gently put his hand on her back and turned her toward the house. "Come on, we'll go someplace quiet and talk."

Avril reluctantly went with him. An hour later, they both sat in the study and her head was spinning from everything Aiston had told her. He had even given her proof by shimmering in and out of the room. It was actually kind of neat after she finished freaking out. Ebony must have been as weirded out as she had been when she found out. Now she felt kind of bad for not believing her. It was probably a hard thing to know without anyone to share it with. She was doing her best to understand, but decided to go back to her room instead of returning to the ball. It was getting very late and she had an overall great night. Well, until all the vampire crap.

Aiston insisted on seeing her to her room. She hadn't seen Ebony for awhile and wondered if she had gotten tired and turned in already as well. She planned on peeking in her room quickly on the way to her own to see if she was there.

Chapter Thirteen

Drinks in hand, Ashe reluctantly made his way to the study, hoping to run into Ebony on the way so he could explain what was going on. Unfortunately, he didn't see her and found himself in front of the door. He let himself in to find Alaina sprawled on the couch showing more leg than necessary. He handed her a drink, placed the other on his desk and leaned against it folding his arms over his chest.

"So, tell me what you've heard." Ashe eyed Alaina as she gave her cat-like smile and stretched before she got up and walked over to him.

She positioned herself just far enough away to allow him a grand view of her full cleavage when she bent to smooth her hands along his arms, tugging them to rest at his sides. She ran her hands along his chest smoothing out imaginary wrinkles in his tux and leaned in a little closer. "It's been so long since I've seen you can't we catch up a little before talking business?"

Her heavily perfumed scent almost gagged him. He knew Alaina had a short-fused temper and didn't want to piss her off before he got the information from her. However, he was beginning to seriously doubt that she had any info that would help him in the least. This would most likely turn out to be another one of her famous ruses to try to get him in bed. Well that would never happen again and he was getting real tired of trying to get that through her thick head.

"Alaina, we don't have any catching up to do. You know that. Aren't we beyond these games?" He watched the brief flash of anger in her eyes as she continued to toy with the front of his tux and ran her hands dangerously close to his crotch, which, by the way, was not responding in the least to her attention.

"You can be so boring sometimes. Don't you ever miss what we had together? I know I think about us. The way our bodies fit perfectly together and the way you would screw me senseless. You can't possibly expect me to believe you don't think about that?" Her lips formed another of her trademark pouts.

"You know what we had is over and dead, and no, I do not think about it, ever. It's in the past and that's where it's staying." Ashe was irritated now, but still clung to the small possibility that she could give him a lead on Ebony's attacker. If not for that small fact, he would have been long gone.

Fury surfaced in Alaina's eyes once again. "Come on now Ashe. I know if you let me show you what you've been missing, you'll change your mind." She pushed her body up against his, rubbing sinuously as she kicked off one of her heels and massaged his calf with her bare foot. She wrapped her arms around his waist and began nibbling on his neck. He tried to detach himself from her but she tightened her hold and brought her mouth to his. Her tongue pushed into his mouth and came close to triggering his gag reflex. He couldn't believe he ever shared anything with this woman. He pulled away from her, ready to make clear that nothing was going to happen when a small gasp penetrated the silence in the room.

Ashe looked toward the door where Ebony stood, staring at them. He felt pain shoot through his heart as tears formed in her eyes. Fuck! He had hurt her again. Something he vowed to never do.

Her gown billowed out behind her as she turned and ran from the room. *Ebony! It's not what it looks like. Please come back!*

Stay out of my head you lying bastard! And, stay away from me.

"Dammit, Alaina! I have to go!" Ashe tried to get around her only to feel a hand clamp on his arm.

"Forget about the little human, Ashe. She's not worth it. She's out of your life now and we can be together."

Alaina gave him a smile that turned his stomach. She had a knack for making him sick. He pushed her hand off his arm and pulled her close to him so she would be sure to hear every word he said. "There is no us and there never will be. Get that through your head. I don't want you and I don't

want anything further to do with you. In fact, I prefer you to gather your things and leave right now. Whether Ebony was here or not, there would still not be a chance in hell for you and me! Deal with it!"

* * * *

Ashe didn't bother knocking on Ebony's door since he knew she wouldn't let him in. He simply shimmered in and found her lying on her stomach across the bed crying. She had traded her gown for jeans and a t-shirt. He walked over to stroke her back gently and she sat up, scooted to the far end of the bed and glared at him.

He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "Ebony, it's not what you think. Please—

"It's not what I think? I think—no—I'm sure I saw Alaina's tongue down your throat, and it didn't look like you were putting up much of a fight. Why did you lie to me, Ashe? I trusted you." Anger flashed in his eyes and her brows turned down.

"You trusted me?" He gave a short laugh. "Yeah, right. First of all, Alaina kissed me. I didn't kiss her, I didn't want to kiss her and I didn't invite her to kiss me. Secondly, why would I want to kiss her when I can kiss you? And, third, you don't trust me at all."

"I don't understand wh—"

Ashe stalked over to her bending close. "Let me fill you in. If you trusted me, you would know that I love you and would never kiss another woman, and if you trusted me you would have told me about your illness. I don't think you trust me at all." All his worry and anger over her illness from the past few days crashed in on him. She should have just told him. He wanted her to trust him enough to tell him. She never did though and now she had the nerve to sit here and tell him he was untrustworthy. Well wasn't that the pot calling the kettle black?

* * * *

When Ebony had seen Alaina draped over Ashe like a second skin, rubbing her body against him her heart broke. She thought Ashe lied about there not being anything between him and Alaina. She thought he had betrayed her. She had obviously been mistaken.

He loved her? Her heart overflowed with joy at that statement. She only hoped she hadn't lost that love when she had just discovered it. She watched as he paced the room. She had never seen him so angry and hurt. He knew about her sickness and wanted her to tell him. She wanted to on several occasions, but could never bring herself to do so. She went to him and laid a hand on his back only to snatch it back when he turned abruptly, raining his full hurt and anger down on her.

He began telling her about Shara, his viata amant and her betrayal. He didn't stop until every last horrid detail was laid out in the open. Ebony's eyes filled with tears. "That is why I decided to never trust or love another woman again. I mean, I'd have to be a complete idiot to allow yet another woman to betray me and yet, here I am being screwed once again."

The story he had just told her was horrible. She couldn't imagine the hurt he must have endured at the betrayal. She knew how much it had cost him to tell her about it. Her chest ached at the thought of him knowing about her condition and wanting her to trust him enough to tell him. The one thing she could have given him that Shara had ripped away so long ago, she had failed to give him. Then, another part of the story popped into her head. Had he said that he wanted to change Shara so they could spend forever together? Did that mean he could change her too, regardless of her illness? Was there actually a possibility that they could have a future together after all?

She suddenly realized that she had misinterpreted the situation badly with Alaina. She knew how hard it must have been for him to admit that he loved her after what he had been through with Shara. He wasn't a man that would simply say those words to appease the situation. She knew he was telling the truth. "Ashe, I'm so sorry."

He walked away from her and stood peering out the window. "Don't feel sorry for me, Ebony. It's all in the past, as well as we should be. I can't believe I was so stupid as to fall for another woman after I vowed to never do so again, especially one who doesn't even trust me. I mean where could it possibly lead? "

She walked over to him and placed her hand on his back once again, his muscles tensed and she thought he would pull away from her but he didn't. What a huge mistake she had made. She never could have comprehended the depth at which such a simple thing in her mind could cause him such pain. Her heart was on the precipice of breaking. Surely it would kill her if he walked away from her now after feeling such joy at finding out he loved her. No one's heart could take an overflow of emotion like that and then recover to normal, could it? "Please, Ashe. Just listen to me for a minute, okay?"

She saw his reluctant nod and plunged into the depths with both feet, hoping she didn't drown. "I don't feel sorry for you, Ashe. Yes, I'm sorry you were hurt, but whatever happened in your past is partly what made you who you are today. I can't be sorry for that because you are a strong, wonderful honorable man." She was relieved when his muscles relaxed just a bit and it gave her the courage to continue.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was sick. I do trust you, I swear. I just didn't want anyone to pity me, least of all you. I didn't even tell Avril. Estril knew right away because I had a headache the first day she visited me and she read my thoughts. I made her promise not to tell you. Please don't be mad at her." He didn't say a word, just kept staring out the window, so she continued on.

"I never thought I would find someone like you Ashe. I was so angry at finding you after I found out I was sick. I found a man I could respect and trust and fell madly in love with him, only I had nothing to offer in return. I couldn't expect to have a relationship when I didn't have a lifetime to offer. I know I kept it from you for mainly selfish reasons, but I wanted to enjoy what we had without my sickness looming over our heads every second."

He turned and looked at her. Quietly watching as she began sobbing again.

"I'm so sorry I hurt you. I love you so much. Can you ever forgive me?" She looked at him with hope in her eyes.

"You love me?"

She almost missed his low, whispered words. "I've loved you from the first day I set eyes on you." She felt relief sweep through her when a smile began playing at his lips.

He gathered her in a tight hug. "I've loved you from that first day, too. I just refused to admit it for a long time. And, you have so much to offer me, but right now, I really need to be inside you."

Upon hearing her little gasp of excitement he pinned her against the wall by the window. He pulled her shirt over her head and was relieved to see she wasn't wearing a bra. He gave her a scorching kiss before moving his mouth to her nipple, nipping and sucking, then soothing the little stings of pain from his teeth with his tongue. He let her feet touch the floor long enough to pull her jeans and panties off while lavishing more attention on her breasts. Her little gasps and the handful of his hair she was tugging urgently on drove him crazy. He undid the fastening on his tux pants and pushed her back against the wall once again as he stood. "I need you right now Ebony. Fast and hard."

"Then take me." Her legs came up and around his waist and his hands cupped her bottom firmly as he entered her with one long, smooth thrust, burying himself completely. They both stilled at the intense sensations that assailed them and groaned before he began pumping in and out of her, picking up the pace as he went, encouraged by her gasps. She pulled his head down for another searing kiss as he increased the rhythm faster and faster. Their bodies writhed in an age-old dance as the waves of climax began building, rushing for shore. Within minutes Ashe threw his head back and let out a primitive growl as his release overtook him, searing his blood. She cried out at the same time with her own climax and her inner muscles clamped tightly around him, milking every last drop from his body.

He held her against the wall for a moment longer as they both clung to the aftermath of their love making. Then, he gently pulled his body from hers and let her slide down slowly to the floor. She was so tiny next to him, barely coming to his shoulder. He finished removing his clothes then swung her up into his arms and carried her to the bathroom. He flipped the jets in the shower on, checked the temperature of the water and pulled her in with him.

Their desire grew hot once again as they soaped each other. Ebony found herself pressed against the shower wall with Ashe inside her once again. She would never get enough of this man. This time he made love to her leisurely. They savored each touch, kiss and thrust, groaning and gasping. Several long minutes passed before they found their release simultaneously once again. Ebony's legs felt boneless and she didn't think she could walk. However, after he shut off the water, she had just enough strength left to dry off. Ashe lazily dried himself as he watched her, then picked her up and carried her to the bed and crawled under the covers beside her. He pulled her close and she lay half draped over his big body with her head resting on his chest.

She smiled up at him. "Say it again."

His turquoise eyes sparkled back at her as he took her face in his hands and kissed the tip of her nose. "I love you."

She sighed and snuggled closer to him. "I love you, too."

* * * *

He'd almost lost the best thing in his life. He knew if things were reversed he would have probably withheld such an illness from her as well. He had been so blinded by past events he couldn't see that she wasn't intentionally keeping it from him to betray him or because she didn't trust him. It had been a simple case of pride. And, he had been guilty of hiding information from her as well. He knew she was his viata amant from the very start and no matter how he felt about it, she had a right to know. He felt like such a cad now for judging her so harshly. His information was just as life altering as hers.

He never thought he would ever feel like this again. It was time to tell her that he could save her and they could spend eternity together. He was worried about how she would react. Even though he had been upset over her not telling him she was sick, he would be a complete bastard if he didn't understand her reasoning behind it. He would probably feel the same way. Now that it was all out in the open, it seemed such a trivial matter, but would she understand his reasoning for not telling her? He knew she was nothing like Shara, but still, something deep inside him was scared of her reaction to him asking her to become a vampire.

He wasn't a man to procrastinate when he made up his mind to do something, so it was now or never. Tightening his hold on her he told her about the process of the change. He told her how she would be completely cured of her sickness and they could be together forever. He explained that he could only change her with her permission and that it would only take one more time as he had already bitten her twice before with her consent. She cringed when he explained that she would have to exchange blood with him for the change to be complete the third time, but she didn't seem unduly

distressed. He explained all of the details. That she would be required to drink blood in addition to eating and have all the heightened senses and powers. He didn't want to leave anything out because if she chose to change, and she had to because he couldn't live without her, he didn't want any doubts in her head.

"So my sickness won't affect the change?"

"I won't lie to you. It is possible that it could lead to complications, but your will is strong and I will get you through it."

"What would happen if there were complications?"

"It doesn't matter because there won't be complications." He couldn't even utter the words that she would either go through the change perfectly or die. He didn't want to put doubts in her head. He knew that under certain circumstances a human that was ill sometimes did not survive the change. Some had but there was no guarantee. No! She would be fine because he simply would not allow her to die.

She grabbed him by the hand and squeezed as he started to get up. "No matter what I decide, Ashe, remember I'm nothing like Shara and I love you and won't betray you, ever."

He pulled her to him for a quick kiss. "I know. I trust you. But for now, if you really want your hour, I have to get out of here before I lose control and ravish your beautiful body again."

* * * *

Everything Ashe had told her swirled in her brain. He could save her—if there weren't complications—but did it really matter? She would die for sure if he didn't change her, but if he did she would be a vampire. Would it be worth it? Would she be damned? He told her vampires had souls and were only damned if they became shadow drifters. What it all came down to was she could be with Ashe

forever. She wanted it so badly, but she was a little scared. She asked him if she could have some time alone to think about it before deciding and he reluctantly agreed to give her one hour.

She giggled as she let go of his hand and snuggled under the covers. She watched his muscles ripple as he bent to pick up his clothing. She would never tire of looking at him. She promised him when he came back she would give him her answer. She wouldn't make him wait long, it wouldn't be fair. After dressing, he gathered her in his arms and placed a tender kiss upon her lips, smiled at her, told her he'd see her in an hour then left.

He made sure to lock her door and planned to only be down the stairs in the study. He knew he would hear if anyone tried to gain entry through her door and he knew none of the vampires here tonight had been invited to shimmer in his home, although, a niggling feeling of unease at that thought stirred in his brain.

Ebony stretched and got up to put her jeans and shirt back on. She was going to let Ashe change her, she just wanted a little time to accept the idea. She trusted him with her life and knew she would pull through it if only because he'd be waiting for her. She would be stupid to not take what he was offering, wouldn't she? She would have to tell Avril and hoped her friend wouldn't be too freaked out. She walked over to the mirror to take her hair down and brush it out.

She was glad the ball was almost over and she wouldn't have to worry about running into Alaina any longer. She knew it probably wouldn't happen as Ashe told her he asked her to leave. However, she would be surprised if that woman gave up so easily. She was startled as she looked up to see a reflection of the woman she had just been thinking of standing behind her. She turned around and gasped as Alaina grabbed her by the throat. She didn't exactly cut the air off, but her grip was strong and painful.

"Well, well. What do we have here?" Alaina sneered at Ebony as she tried to choke out a response. "No, don't try to talk. If you do, I might have to squeeze a little harder." Alaina pushed her hard against the dresser.

"You think you're going to live happily ever after with my man? I don't think so. You fell perfectly into my trap. Now we'll see who gets Ashe and who, well, just gets it. Drudge, come to me now!"

Instantly, a figure in a black cloak shimmered into the room. A shiver of foreboding snaked down Ebony's back as she took in its appearance. She had a feeling that she had just come face-to-face with her attacker once again. She watched as the drudge pulled the hood from her head and fixed a bone-chilling stare on Ebony.

"Take her back to the mansion and don't let her out of your sight, and remember, if you screw up this time, it will be your last." Alaina pushed Ebony toward the drudge and she was grasped from behind in another choke hold.

Ebony frantically wanted to stall for time in hopes Ashe would come back early. "Wait! How did you shimmer in here? Ashe told me you had to be invited to shimmer into another vampire's house."

Alaina gave her a bored stare as if she were the dumbest female on earth. "Well, well now. I guess that will teach Ashe to try to dismiss me from his life. He must have forgotten about our little sexual encounter that started downstairs and ended up in his bedroom so many years ago." Alaina laughed again. "Then again I shouldn't refer as anything with or on Ashe as little either. You know, we didn't walk up the stairs then. We were both in too much of a hurry and let me just say, Ashe is very, very good, but of course, you know that by now don't you?"

Fury and jealousy swamped Ebony's body. She wanted to smack that knowing look right off Alaina's perfect face and maybe add a few claw marks with it. Before she could say anything else Alaina gave her drudge orders again.

"Now enough of this! Get her out of here now."

Alaina removed her trademark black pearl earrings and carefully arranged them in plain view on the dresser. Yes, Master." The drudge then vanished with Ebony.

Chapter Fourteen

Ashe's instincts told him to run upstairs and demand Ebony's answer, but he promised her an hour to make her decision. He didn't know what he'd do if she said no. He couldn't force her as the change wouldn't take place without her consent. She had to say yes, that's all there was too it. He honestly didn't know if he could let her go. In fact, he was sure he would chase her to the ends of the earth if he had to. No matter how hard he concentrated, he kept looking at his watch as that damned hour ticked by slower than his last hundred years of existence.

He sifted through the now dying crowd for his brothers but couldn't find either. He sent them a message telepathically. They had tried to avoid using their mind links for communication tonight because they didn't want someone listening in that might be connected to Ebony's attack. He and his brothers were excellent at blocking, but one never underestimated an enemy's strength. He had a feeling whoever they were looking for was here, just a gut instinct, and he didn't want to blow it.

"Aiston, Aldin, meet me in the study."

Aldin responded first with, *"Five minutes."*

It took a few more seconds before Aiston answered. *"I'll be there."*

Five minutes later Ashe and Aldin were in the study. "So did you find out anything? Aldin's somber scowl and curt shake of his head gave Ashe his answer.

They were still discussing their lack of information when Aiston appeared through the door. Ashe was restless and wanted this charade to end.

"So you finally decided to show up. Where's Avril?"

Aiston gave Ashe a quick account of what Avril witnessed in the garden and told him he hadn't found any useful information either. They were completely stumped. Never had they run into such a dead end. It was strange. Ashe couldn't figure how in the world they couldn't find anything. Someone had to know something. Wait a second, Alaina was the only one who even came close as a possibility tonight and she had been lying . . . or had she? Just then a horrible foreboding tingled in Ashe's mind. How in the hell had he missed that? He'd been completely foolish if the thoughts forming in his head were true, and he had a feeling they were. Suddenly extremely agitated and anxious, he stood up.

"Did anyone you two talked to indicate in any way that they even knew about what happened?"

"No. I was surprised. I couldn't even find one single person who I felt was holding back. Everyone seemed completely in the dark." Aldin watched Ashe.

"Ditto bro. There was no one who had a clue. It was actually a little strange that I couldn't find someone that even knew that the attack had even occurred."

Dammit, he was an idiot! It had been staring him in the face all night long and he hadn't even caught it. He had talked to several guests himself and had the same results as his brothers did except for one person . . . Alaina. She was the only one at the entire ball that had admitted to knowing anything. Son of a bitch! He had been played. He had been too busy trying to get away from her, and then there was the incident in the study with Ebony. He'd bet that little farce had been intentional, too. He knew she was a pain in the ass, but he would have never thought she'd take it this far. Why would she have attacked Ebony? But she hadn't actually attacked Ebony. She had her drudge do her dirty work for her. How in the hell had no one known that she even had a drudge? Unease about the whole situation raced through him and he knew he had dramatically underestimated Alaina and what she was capable of.

He quickly filled his brothers in on his encounter with Alaina. They were a little shocked but that quickly turned to anger.

"Well actually, it all makes sense now. She has been after you for years. And, I for one can attest first hand on what horrible acts jealousy can lead women to."

“By the way, where is Ebony?” Aldin’s question cut right through Ashe.

“She’s upstairs in her room, but I can’t imagine Alaina being stupid enough to try something right under our noses. I mean she knows it would bring a war down upon her. Anyway, I’ve been listening the whole time we’ve been in here and no one has gone up the stairs.”

“It’s not like she can shimmer in and grab Ebony or anything since this is our house and I know none of us would have invited her to shimmer, right? But Ebony’s not in her room. I just took Avril up to her room awhile ago and she stopped by to check in on her, but she wasn’t there.” Aiston laughed but abruptly stopped as every muscle in Ashe’s body tensed.

A staggering memory rushed to Ashe’s brain. He had forgotten that he and Alaina had had a little encounter here during their relationship and that he had invited her to shimmer upstairs with him. Now he came to full realization how conveniently forgetting things to the point of denying them could sneak up and bite one on the ass. If he had faced his past with Alaina and Shara head on instead of repressing and hiding from it, he would have never forgotten that small detail. That one small detail that could possibly cost the woman he loved her life. He was such an idiot and had a sinking feeling his sudden memory came too late. No! He would not, could not, let anything happen to Ebony.

“Shit.” Ashe disappeared while his brothers looked at the void in confusion.

Ashe shimmered into Ebony’s room. She wasn’t on the bed or anywhere else. Maybe she was in the bathroom. The door was open and he knocked before walking in. Okay before he panicked, he’d go over and check with Avril. Maybe Ebony had been in the bathroom when Avril had checked in and had thought she wasn’t there then Ebony probably went across to talk to her friend afterwards. He knew the decision she had to make about being with him was a big one and wouldn’t blame her for needing to talk to her friend.

He shimmered to Avril’s door and knocked. He could hear someone grumbling as footsteps approached the door. It was apparent by Avril’s disheveled appearance that he had woken her. His heart pounded harder.

“Avril, have you seen Ebony?” *Please, please let her be in there.*

She yawned before answering. "No, I haven't seen her since earlier. I thought she was with you. She wasn't in her room when I stopped by awhile ago." She came fully awake now. "Has something happened to her?"

"No, no. I just seem to have lost her in the crowd and thought she might have come up here to talk to you." Ashe didn't want to panic her and tried to stay calm and reassuring as panic clawed at his gut.

"Well, let me get dressed and I'll help you look." Avril was turning to go get her clothes when Ashe stopped her with a hand on the shoulder.

"No, really, it's no big deal. I just wanted to check up here before I looked downstairs. Just go back to sleep." He gave her a small compulsion to follow his suggestion and tried to sound calm because he didn't want Avril involved as it could pose a threat to her.

"Okay, but if you can't find her you'll come back and get me so I can help?"

"No problem. Goodnight." He watched her shut the door and didn't move until he heard the click of the lock.

He immediately shimmered back to Ebony's room. He didn't notice any sign of a struggle or anything out of place. All of her clothes were in the closet and her slippers were still under the side of the bed. He walked over to the dresser and saw the necklace and earrings he had given her along with her brush and . . . Wait, what the hell was that? He bent down and picked up the two smooth, black orbs, rolling them between his fingers. Black pearls. Alaina's trademark. They were one of her prized possessions and she was well known for wearing them. Alaina had taken Ebony and intentionally let it be known that it was she who did it. Didn't she know she was playing a dangerous game? He didn't like to hurt women, but if she so much as put a scratch on Ebony, he'd kill her.

"Aiston, Aldin, get up to Ebony's room now!" He tried hard to contain the rage flowing through him, feeding him, gearing him for battle.

A mere second later his brothers were standing beside him. He showed them the earrings and they made a quick and precise plan for rescue. They knew Alaina had to be keeping her at her mansion, a place she felt safe or she wouldn't have left such a blatant calling card. They had all been there a time or two and were somewhat familiar with the layout. However, one could never know all the secrets of another's lair. Ashe and Aldin would shimmer to the front of the mansion where they would enter, Ashe taking the main floor and Aldin searching the second. Unfortunately, Alaina had never bestowed permission upon Ashe to shimmer inside her home, so he and Aldin would have to take the time to search each and every room on foot. She again had proved to out maneuver him.

Aiston would stay behind and guard Avril. Ashe thought she was relatively safe however, when Alaina's little game got interrupted there was no telling what she might do for leverage. Alaina knew how important Avril was to Ebony, therefore, would be important to Ashe. He was actually kind of surprised she hadn't taken her as well. Maybe she wasn't as smart as he thought she was. That's certainly what he would have done. Aiston complained about staying behind and argued that Avril would be safe, but finally gave in to Ashe's wishes.

Ashe and Aldin shimmered to their own rooms and changed into all black. Each carried a sword on their back. Ashe also added a razor sharp dagger to the side of one boot and he was sure Aldin had the same. Whoever found Ebony was to get her out of the mansion and back here immediately. The main priority was her safety. He wasn't sure exactly what Alaina was after, but he would give his life without a thought for Ebony if necessary. Aldin knew this as well and was determined to make sure it didn't come to that. He loved his brother and wouldn't let anyone slaughter him if he could help it.

* * * *

Ebony came awake abruptly but couldn't clear the fog from her aching head. It took a moment for her to remember what had happened. She tried to look around at her surroundings but could hardly make out anything from the darkness that shrouded the room. She knew she was sitting on a cold stone floor and her feet were freezing. She was glad she had at least pulled on socks earlier. Even though the air was still it was stale and smelled of mildew. A candle was burning in a far corner, which gave off the only light in the room. It sat on a small table and barely lit the outline of a dark object sitting next to it.

“So, the little princess is awake, is she? I was kind of hoping that little tap I gave you on the head would put you out of your misery for good.”

Ebony remembered that voice. It was absolutely without a doubt the drudge who attacked her at her house. She was trying to stay calm but fear crept through her bones. She sat up and reached behind her to find a wall covered in the same stone as the floor. She leaned against it and inched up until she was standing. A dizzy spell almost overtook her, but she fought her way out of it.

“Where am I and what do you want with me?” She tried to keep her voice calm, but it proved difficult.

“I don’t want anything with you. You are worthless to me, although . . . well, we’ll see. It’s my master who wants you. You see, you’re just a pawn in a game. A game my master, or as you know her better as Alaina, is playing with Ashe. Too bad she’s not going to win.”

The sinister voice grated on her nerves. “What do you mean a game? What kind of game and how do you know she won’t win?” A shiver ran up Ebony’s spine at the realization that the drudge had her own agenda, an agenda that Alaina did not know about. Somehow the drudge had fooled Alaina and Ebony had a feeling that the drudge was even more dangerous than Alaina. This was getting worse by the minute.

A cackling came from the corner and then the figure was suddenly standing mere inches from Ebony. “See she wants Ashe and has been trying to find a way to get him ever since he left her over five hundred years ago . . . for me.”

Ebony’s stomach dropped and she thought she might heave. “Oh my God, you’re Shara!” Her whispered words were barely audible.

“So you finally caught on. You’re such a smart one now, aren’t you? Yes, I’m Shara. Ashe’s long lost love, the one who betrayed him. Like hell! He is evil and he wanted to turn me into a blood sucking creature. I knew he had to be destroyed. It was my duty as a God-fearing woman to make sure such a being was sent back to hell where it belonged. Instead, the devil gave him the strength to kill twenty men. He slaughtered them like animals while I stood there and watched then he vanished and left me

there to die. When the men's friends came and found the bloody remains, they blamed it all on me and accused me of being a witch. They put a dagger through my heart and as I lay there dying, Alaina appeared out of the woods and decided she might be able to use me one day in her little game to get Ashe back not to mention a little revenge on a lowly being like me for taking him from her. She was and still is such a fool. He never loved her. She was just a sex toy to him." She sighed as if she were tired of explaining something that should be obvious to Ebony. "So after my last breath, she made me into an abomination. The one thing that I did not want to become, I would have rather died."

Ebony gasped as she pressed herself closer to the wall trying to get further away from Shara. "But he loved you."

"He's not capable of loving. He's a demon's spawn! It doesn't matter anyway. He is why I'm what I am and I have been savoring the chance to pay him back, playing the good little drudge to Alaina. Well, won't she be surprised when I kill Ashe. A life for a life. She will kill me for it, but I don't care. I can only hope God will forgive me for something that was forced upon me. I have lived hundreds of years, playing the good little slave every day, acting dumb as if I didn't have a brain in my tiny head, thriving on the thought that one day . . . one day I would get my revenge."

"And do you think God will forgive you for murder?" Ebony was terrified now. She knew Alaina was using her to get Ashe to come here, but what would happen then? She couldn't bear for anything to happen to him.

"Oh, He will reward me for removing such an evil bastard from the world. I can't wait to see the life drain out of his eyes."

"Actually, I think you will go to hell where you belong." The sharp blow that Shara landed on Ebony's cheek was hard enough to snap her head back, bouncing it off the stone wall. Ebony gasped and held her jaw, fighting to stay conscious.

Shara walked back to the little table and sat back down. "Now be quiet or I'll silence you for good."

Ebony didn't doubt for a minute that she would do it, too. She slid back down to the cold floor and tried to think. Her head pounded so hard it was almost impossible to get a lucid thought through. So Alaina wanted Ashe and Shara wanted to kill him. How in the hell were they going to get out of this? She knew without a doubt that Ashe would come for her, but did he know that he was walking into a trap? He would never allow her to be hurt and would give his life for her. She would never let him do it. Even though she had decided to let him change her, it hadn't actually happened yet and right now, she was still a dying woman. She had such little time she would not allow him to sacrifice his life for a few measly days or months or whatever she had. She had to think. Laying her head on her bent knees, she tried to come up with a plan.

Instead she drifted off only to find herself being shaken. "Get up! Alaina is calling for me to bring you to her."

She slowly stood trying to ignore the dizziness once again. It subsided more slowly this time. Shara grabbed her by the arm and drug her out of the small door beside the table with the candle and up a narrow and steep flight of stairs. She had to concentrate to keep from stumbling. When they reached the top, Shara pulled her through several other rooms before coming to a halt in front of a door in a long hallway. Shara knocked and a few seconds later the door swung open into a bedroom as big as a small house.

It was decorated for a queen and Alaina lay stretched across a king-sized bed that stood in the middle of the room. Silk and rich furs adorned the bed and Alaina reminded her of a spoiled brat. Although, quite a bit more dangerous, unfortunately for her. She still couldn't make up her mind which one of the women posed more of a threat. She had a feeling it was Shara since she didn't seem quite right in the head. It might be possible to actually crack through Alaina's jealousy a little, but she didn't think she had a chance of talking Shara into anything other than revenge.

Maybe if she could get far enough away from Shara she could fill Alaina in on her little plan then maybe Alaina would take care of Shara once and for all. She didn't know if it would work, but it was the only idea she had at the moment. If it did work, it would at least eliminate one threat.

Shara released Ebony once the door was closed, sealing off the only exit to the room. Ebony edged toward Alaina slowly trying not to draw Shara's attention.

“Well, well, if it isn’t little Ebony. Such a pity you had to get in the way, but you know what they say. If you play, you pay.”

Ebony bit back a nasty retort at Alaina’s smug words not wanting to anger her until she could put her plan in motion. She inched her way a bit closer, putting a small distance between her and Shara but not enough to put her out of drudge’s reach.

“Don’t you have anything to say? I’m really surprised you aren’t crying and begging for your life. Humans are such weaklings, after all. Although, if you play your cards right and Ashe cooperates with my wishes maybe you won’t have to die. However, things do rarely go as planned. It wouldn’t be such a waste anyway, would it now? I mean, it’s not like you have much of your pitiful little life left.”

Ebony tried not to let Alaina’s words affect her, but it was hard. She had to concentrate on putting more space between her and Shara. She made a little more progress as Shara had seemed to lose interest in Ebony and anxiously watched the door. She prayed that her plan would work and took another small step toward Alaina.

After her taunts failed to provoke a response from Ebony, Alaina ignored her. “Drudge,” Alaina waited until Shara faced her before continuing. “When Ashe gets here, you get hold of Ebony and do not take your hands off of her. My whole plan relies on his feelings for her. I know he will do as I say if he believes her life is in danger.”

“Yes, Master. I know the plan well.”

“Well, you make sure you do. You remember if anything goes wrong, you get her out of here where Ashe can’t get to her.”

Chapter Fifteen

Aldin moved through the upstairs rooms with stealth, his footsteps betraying not a single sound. He didn't know exactly what to expect but was sure of one thing. Alaina was using Ebony to get to his brother and he wasn't sure exactly how far Alaina would take this little charade. Ebony's life might very well be at stake and he knew Ashe was aware of that as well. The fear he glimpsed in his brother's eyes earlier was unmistakable.

He never thought his brother would get over what Shara had done to him yet somehow, Ebony had gotten through to him. He knew if something happened to Ebony, Ashe would never forgive himself. And, he also knew his brother would never be the same.

He and his brothers had only been in Alaina's house a couple of times, times when Alaina insisted upon their presence because her life was being threatened. Both times ended up being a ruse to get them to some unimportant party or such and she had known damn well that if the Aleksandrov brothers had a weakness it was helping anyone who needed it. She hadn't really cared if Aiston and Aldin showed up, but knew it would be suspicious if she just needed Ashe. After the second time, they all agreed to never return.

Alaina's mansion was the size of a castle and it would take time to check all the rooms. He knew it was taking all the willpower Ashe had to keep from reaching out to try to touch Ebony's mind. Knowing it was possible for Alaina to sense the thread of telepathy from Ebony since she was not able to use blocks, he would not risk putting her in more danger. Aldin glanced at his watch. An hour of searching had turned up nothing. He shielded his mind from anyone but his brother.

"You have anything yet Ashe?"

"I don't have anything yet. Fuck! I know she's here, I can feel her."

The desperation in his brother's voice unbalanced him for a split second. He had never heard Ashe this upset, not even when Shara had betrayed him. *"I haven't found anything either. I'm getting close to being done up here then I'm going to head downstairs. You?"*

"She has to be. If she isn't, I just don't know, man. Honestly, I might lose it."

Aldin remained quiet for several seconds contemplating his words. Ashe might lose it alright, but God help anyone involved in this if it came to that. He would kill every last person connected to this mess with his bare hands if his brother was hurt. Cold, relentless anger clawed through his blood. No one hurt his family and got away with it, not even the beautiful Alaina. He took a deep breath and calmed himself. *"Everything will turn out okay. We'll get her out of here safe and sound."*

"Yeah, I hope so."

* * * *

Back at the estate, Avril was having trouble getting back to sleep. Ashe promised to come back if he didn't find Ebony so she was obviously okay. Right? She turned over to look at the clock. Five in the morning. It would be dawn soon and the noise from downstairs had died down considerably in the last twenty minutes. *Hell with it.* She grabbed her robe and went to find Ebony. She would not get any more rest until she knew her friend was safe. She was now confused as to how she just went back to bed at Ashe's suggestion earlier anyway without knowing her friend was okay. She opened the door and ran into a brick wall. Damn, the man had to be solid muscle.

Ashe had told Aiston that he had given Avril a gentle compulsion to not worry about Ebony earlier, but didn't know how long it would last. This was one of the reasons Aiston was stuck here guarding Avril instead of helping his brothers find Ebony. He was tired of being the damn lackey in everything. Although, he guessed most of the blame lay at his own feet with his constant pranks and

joking. Maybe it was time for him to become a little less childish. Just a little though. All his thoughts fled when a soft body crashed into him.

“What are you doing out here?”

“I do live here you know. Why are you up?”

She didn't like the way he was ogling her and noticed a certain part of his anatomy was starting to stand at attention. She decided it would be best to ignore it. “Ashe stopped by asking if I had seen Ebony earlier and I was just wondering if he found her.”

“Ummm, well . . . You see it's, ummm . . .”

So something was obviously going on and he was going to tell her if she had to beat it out of him. “Spill it.”

He stared at her for a long moment while she stood there with her arms folded over her chest and tapped her foot in annoyance waiting for his answer. Finally, he sighed in defeat.

Avril's shock quickly turned to outrage after Aiston told her about the night Ebony had been attacked. And, how Ashe had rescued her and practically kidnapped her, insisting that she was staying with him until he could clean up the whole mess. The final straw was when she heard how Alaina had been behind the whole thing and had kidnapped Ebony. “That bitch! I knew Alaina was trouble from the first time I set eyes on her.”

“She's definitely caused Ashe heaps of trouble since he's known her, but none of us expected her to do anything like this.” Avril's face flushed with anger.

“See that’s what’s wrong with men. They always underestimate what women are capable of. Well, we have to go help her. I mean Ebony’s my best friend in the whole world. I couldn’t stand it if she was hurt or . . . worse.”

Her bottom lip slightly quivered. Oh shit. She was going to cry. She hated crying and she certainly didn’t want to do so in front of Aiston. Before she could stop it, a fat tear rolled down her cheek. Aiston stepped forward and pulled her to him in a hug. He stroked the back of her hair before stepping back to look her in the eyes.

“Avril, everything will be okay. Ashe and Aldin are both looking for her and believe me when I say there is no one else better for the job. They will find her and bring her back here safe and sound. You would only be a distraction to them. We just need to relax and try to keep busy while we wait.”

She stood for several seconds, feeling helpless. She finally let out a long breath before slowly walking back to her bed and sat on the end, tucking her feet under her. Aiston shut the door and walked over to sit on the bench beneath the window.

“So, do you have any suggestions how we can pass the time?”

He quirked a brow. “Oh, I could think of a few things.” He flashed her a wide smile.

“Yeah, try it and you’ll leave here limping.” She felt a little smug when his eyes widened and his smile turned to a frown. She wanted to help her friend, but since she didn’t know where Alaina lived and Aiston wasn’t going to magically teleport her there, as much as she hated the fact, she had no choice but to wait. “I have a deck of cards on the dresser. We could play for awhile if you like.” She would do anything at the moment if it would keep her from losing her mind with worry.

Aiston walked to the dresser, picked up the deck and carried it to the bed where he sat beside her and started dealing out the cards for a game of poker. They played several hands. “Wow, you’re pretty good.”

"Thanks." She was so worried about her friend. Her stomach knotted and the tears rolled down her cheeks once again.

Aiston sat frozen for a minute before he gently put an arm around her shoulders and simply held her. Avril finally fell asleep, exhausted from the night's activities and her sobbing. Aiston laid her gently on the bed, grabbed a throw and covered her with it. He then walked back to the window and stared out into the tendrils of dawn stretching like fingers across the sky.

* * * *

Ashe's patience was reaching its end as he crossed the huge room that led past the staircase and into a hallway. He looked up and down the hall and took note of at least ten doors leading to rooms he would have to search. Just as he decided to take the left side first he heard a noise. He immediately froze, afraid to breathe, waiting, hoping to hear it again. After what seemed like an eternity, he started to dismiss the noise as wishful thinking when he heard it again, coming from the door right in front of him. He could hear the distinct sound of Alaina's voice and then another that sounded vaguely familiar. Then, he heard the one sound he had been praying to hear, Ebony's voice. His knees almost buckled as relief swamped him. She was alive.

"Aldin, I found her."

"Wait for me, I'm on my way."

"No! Alaina is waiting for me and if you show up, she might do something rash. Let me try to get Ebony out of there first. If things go to shit, then by all means, come in full force, but for now just give me some time."

"Fine, but I'm making my way to your location so I can be close."

Ashe could tell Aldin wasn't happy, but he knew this was the best plan. He had a feeling Alaina wouldn't be as willing to cooperate with Aldin in the picture. Moving closer to the door, he wanted to listen for a moment longer to see if he could pinpoint exactly where everyone's position was in the room. The unknown third voice remained silent for the moment and he decided to try to speak to Ebony. He just hoped Alaina and her little companion didn't catch on to what was going on.

* * * *

Ebony finally felt comfortable with the distance she had put between her and Shara now, confident that she was out of her immediate reach. She had just decided to tell Alaina what Shara was up to when a welcome voice caressed her mind.

"Ebony, continue doing whatever your doing and don't let them catch on that I'm talking to you. I need to know who all is in there with you and their positions in the room."

It took everything in her to keep from sagging to the floor in relief. *"Ashe! You have to be careful. You're in danger."*

"Baby, my whole life is dangerous. Trust me to know what I'm doing. Aldin is here too for backup. Now don't worry about me and give me the information I asked for."

"It's just Alaina and her drudge, the same one that attacked me, but you don't understand. Alaina plans to use me to get you to cooperate with her, and you already know what she wants. You. But, it's the drudge. She wants to kill you. Ashe, she's—"

"What do you think you're doing?" Ebony winced at the painful hand now gripping her arm. "You can't be talking to people now. Nice trick, Ashe, I know you're here and I know you're talking to your little girlfriend. Now get in here before she gets hurt!"

Alaina caught her before she could tell Ashe about Shara. She tried to tell him anyway, but Alaina had put some kind of shield around the room, cutting off their mind links and she cried out in frustration. Alaina shoved her hard toward Shara who grabbed her from behind and put a wicked looking knife to her throat.

Alaina was standing about ten feet in front of him and her drudge was standing in the corner holding a knife to Ebony's throat when Ashe opened the door.

"I'm here Alaina, now let Ebony go." Fear flashed briefly across Alaina's face when she saw the deadly stare Ashe fixed upon her. She quickly concealed it, obviously not wanting him to know she was frightened of him.

"Now, now darling, do you think I'm just going to let her go since you're here. I mean what would I bargain with then?"

"Cut the crap and tell me what you want." Ashe's voice made the hairs on the back of Ebony's neck stand on end. He sounded lethal and rage seemed to emanate through the room.

"You know what I want. I want you. I always have. I mean, come on, you know we could practically rule the world together." She looked at him thoughtfully before approaching him and ran her finger up and down his chest.

"Alaina, I don't want you. I've told you that already, several times."

"Yes, you have. But, you could learn to love me again. I know you could."

"Love you! I never loved you. I only love one woman and will always only love one woman. That's Ebony. And, if you hurt her, I swear I will kill you, woman or not."

"You Bastard! You know you loved me. Quit denying it!" Alaina's fury was palpable.

"Alaina. You knew from the start that our relationship had nothing to do with emotions other than sexual ones."

"Yes, and you didn't mind one bit taking pleasure anytime you wanted did you?"

"Oh come on! You didn't hesitate to do the taking when you wanted either. You knew from the start that our relationship was nothing more than that. Get over it."

"How could you possibly want that little weakling instead of me? She's nothing!"

Ashe snorted. "Don't flatter yourself. That little weakling as you so call her has more class, honor and loyalty than you will ever be capable of. She is sincere and unselfish. She gives and never asks for anything in return. Does that sound like anything you could do?" Ashe stared for a moment as indecision crossed Alaina's face. "No, I didn't think so. That is why I want her instead of you, that is why I would choose her over you time and again and that is why I wouldn't have you even if I had never met her."

Alaina huffed in irritation waving her hand as if his words didn't matter or register. "It's simple really darling. I'm willing to spare her if you agree to my terms."

"And what would those be?"

She strutted back to where she was standing when he first came in and placed her hands on her hips. "You come here and live with me. Once you realize that we were meant to be, we'll go back to your place and live where we will put into action plans to make you king of our kind. Once that happens, I will be your queen and we will have control beyond our wildest dreams."

"You are freaking crazy. I don't want to be king of our kind. We've never had a king and I doubt our kind would ever allow there to be one. It's not possible. Also, have you ever considered the huge holes in your plans if legends about Ragnar are true? Do you honestly believe he would ever allow anyone to rule our kind?" Alaina began fidgeting in obvious agitation.

“Oh come on. No one has ever seen Ragnar and we all know he is just that, a legend. I mean do you think if he were real none of our kind would have ever laid eyes upon him? He has supposedly been around for what, five thousand or more years now? That is just trivial bullshit that doesn’t have anything to do with this.”

“It doesn’t matter anyway. It wouldn’t work. It’s simply ridiculous and I won’t allow Ebony to be hurt by this nonsense.”

“I cannot believe after everything that I’ve done for you that you would choose this loser human over me. I hadn’t planned on hurting her at all, but I’m beginning to wonder if that’s the only way to get your cooperation.”

Ashe roared and Alaina shrank back in terror. “What you’ve done for me! What the hell have you done for me other than torment the hell out of me and harass and threaten the one thing in this world that means most to me?”

“But, I just wanted—”

“Just shut up! I’ve had enough of this shit! I cannot believe even you would do something like this.” He glanced at Ebony. *“Don’t worry baby. Everything’s going to be okay.”*

Chapter Sixteen

A piercing screech tore through the air effectively ending the argument between Ashe and Alaina. Ashe turned toward the drudge and wondered what had made such an unholy sound come out of it. The drudge was a lot closer than it had been when he first walked into the room. He looked down to see Ebony sit up and scoot toward the far corner of the room on her butt. When the drudge limped toward him slowly he realized what Ebony had done. *"I'm going to throttle your beautiful behind when we get back to my place."*

Ebony's eyes widened. *"But I had to get your attention somehow. And, stomping on her foot was the only thing I could think of."*

"What the hell are you doing?" Alaina screamed at the drudge.

"Something that should have been done years ago! You think you're going to get him. Well think again! He's mine. And believe me when I say I don't want to bed him or be his mate. That's one mistake I would never make again! In fact the only mistakes made here were yours, Master. You think you are so smart and all the rest of us are so stupid. Well, you're the stupid one. You couldn't even figure out all these years that I was fooling you. The whole time I had planned this moment, savored it. This one moment in time, this one moment when I will get everything I deserve will make all of my existence in your pathetic service worth it."

"I will kill you for your impudence!"

"Oh, I have no doubt about that, have known it all along. It will be worth it!"

Ashe was completely confused. What was she talking about and why was she directing so much anger toward him? Did he know her? Suddenly things became crystal clear and the blood drained from his face when the drudge yanked the hood off her head.

"Shara?" He couldn't quite believe his eyes. This couldn't be.

"Surprised, darling?" Shara treated him with a cold grin and her black eyes spit daggers of hatred at him.

"You could say that." Although, surprise didn't even come close to what he was feeling. Horror, anger, confusion and maybe a hundred other emotions invaded him. "Alaina, why would you do this?" He couldn't believe that even Alaina had sunk this low. He knew she was a bitch, but hell, this was going way too far.

Alaina had regained some composure. "Do you think I could just let the poor dear lie there after you left her all alone? You know those men you killed had friends and they decided to finish her by sticking a knife in her heart. You shouldn't have left her there all alone. You should have protected the love of your life."

"I didn't leave her all alone. She chose to betray me and our love. She sent those men to kill me and when I left she was whole and alive. You shouldn't have interfered, Alaina. Why couldn't you have just stayed the hell out of it?"

"I am going to torture you and make sure you linger on the brink of death for days, begging me for mercy before I finally finish you for this betrayal." Alaina's words were laced with venom.

Shara just laughed a chilling laugh. "I died over five hundred years ago and you just happened to come along and give me a second chance to carry out my revenge. Do you think I fear death? God will give me my just rewards for killing this abomination. He will die, and I will do the deed myself."

Shara leapt at Ashe with speed even he didn't think possible. He felt her knife slice against his neck before knocking her off him. She screeched in rage and lunged at him again, knife raised above her head aimed at his chest, but before she could land the blow he kicked her in the abdomen and watched her fly back, landing on her stomach then smacking her head hard against the wall. She didn't move and he turned his focus back to Alaina.

Shara lay perfectly still on the floor, her head cocked at an odd angle against the wall. The knife flew out of her hand upon impact and now lay only inches from Ebony's feet. She picked it up quickly and held it behind her back.

"Now, can we be done with this? I'm growing weary of this game." Ashe seriously didn't condone violence against women, but he was getting close to forgetting that little rule of his for at least a few minutes.

"Ashe, I know you won't believe me, but I had no idea that she tried to kill you. I know I'm a complete bitch sometimes, but I never wanted you hurt." Tears pooled in Alaina's eyes.

"When are you going to learn to leave things alone? You know I should kill you for this. You threatened Ebony and I can't ever forget that." He couldn't make up his mind on what to do with her. He didn't feel right about killing her outright. Yes, she was a bitch and maybe a little off her rocker, but he thought she was genuinely realizing that she was wrong. Would it even be possible for her to reform? "And, don't think for a minute that those fake tears are going to work on me."

"Please, I swear—"

Once again a shriek sounded through the room only to be cut off and replaced by a gurgling noise. Ashe's eyes widened as he saw Shara's face, a horrible gurgle came from her open lips. Ebony was standing behind her with a blank expression. Shara fell to the floor with a thump, a huge knife protruding from her back and Ebony promptly fainted. He rushed to Ebony, sat beside her on the floor and gently pulled her into his arms. He decided to give Alaina a chance and hoped to God he wouldn't regret it.

"Alaina, I would suggest that you pack up and leave, because if I ever see you again, I'm going to forget all my morals about maiming and killing women. Do you understand? Please tell me you understand?"

Alaina just nodded. A tear escaped down her face.

"Ashe, I really am so—"

Ashe threw his hand up to silence her words. "Don't! Just go. Now!"

Alaina instantly vanished.

"Aldin, you can come in now."

The door opened and Aldin stared at the scene before him.

"What the hell. Is that . . . is that Shara?"

Ashe nodded and told Aldin everything. When Aldin turned Shara on her back a wickedly sharp dagger gleamed in her hand. She would have most likely stabbed it through Ashe's heart if not for Ebony. He would have bled out at an alarming rate had that happened. Ebony had probably just saved his life again. He was sick at how she would handle the fact that she had killed. Even though Shara was a raging, evil lunatic, Ebony would have a hard time coming to terms with what she had done. He would help her through it somehow.

He looked down at her, gently kissed her forehead and took her face between his thumb and fingers and gently shook her. "Ebony, can you hear me? Wake up, baby."

She moaned softly, and when he gently shook her again she opened her beautiful eyes, stared at him and smiled. The smile turned into a wince and his relief was short lived.

"What's wrong? Are you hurt?" He began looking at her hands and face closer for signs of injury.

"No. I'm fine, just a headache." He could barely hear her whisper and watched as she closed her eyes again and slumped against him.

"Aldin, go back to the house and let Aiston, Avril and Estril know what happened. I'll be there with Ebony shortly."

Aldin nodded and left the room. Ashe didn't miss the concern that briefly crossed his brother's face but he hadn't come this far for nothing. Ebony would be okay. He couldn't live without her. He stood up, pulled her closer, found his way back out of the mansion and shimmered them back to his room. He laid her on his bed, covered her with the blanket then went to get her a cold washcloth. He could feel the sickness emanating from her body, throbbing through him. Death was coming for her soon and he didn't have much time to save her. He had to get her to wake up.

When he returned with the washcloth, Avril, Aiston, Estril and Aldin were all standing by the bed looking at Ebony. He wanted to yell at them all to get out, but he knew they loved her too and were only concerned.

"Aiston, does Avril know that Ebony's sick?"

"No, I don't think she ever told her."

"Don't tell her. I'm going to turn her as soon as she wakes up."

"Did she agree to it?" Estril's worried whisper floated softly through him.

"She didn't give me her answer as we got interrupted by Alaina's little charade, but I will get her permission. I can't lose her. I won't survive it."

"What's wrong with her?" Avril sat on the bed beside Ebony and took her ice-cold hand in her own.

"It's okay Avril. She'll be fine. She just took a little knock to the head. Don't worry about her I'll make sure she has the best care." Ashe needed them all to leave, but knew Avril needed a few minutes to reassure herself that her friend would recover.

Avril sat by Ebony while Ashe placed the cold rag on her head. Ebony moaned and Avril's eyes darted anxiously from Ebony to Ashe.

"Really Avril, she's fine. It's just a natural reaction to the coolness." Ashe was getting desperate to get rid of them.

"Aiston, get Avril out of here. I need to change Ebony soon."

After a lot of encouragement and coaxing, Aiston convinced Avril that Ebony would be fine and recover quicker if everyone would let her rest. She agreed only if she would be allowed to check on her friend at least once an hour. Ashe agreed and Avril reluctantly left after a few more minutes.

"I'll make sure all the guests are gone and everything is secure."

"Thanks Aldin."

"Any time, bro." Aldin disappeared out the door and Ashe was finally left alone with Ebony.

* * * *

Aiston walked Avril to her room and pulled the blankets back for her to get into bed. She got in and he covered her up, but when he turned to leave she grabbed his hand. "Aiston, would you please stay. I mean, just until I fall asleep."

"Of course." He didn't mind in the least. She was asleep within five minutes and he sent a small compulsion for her to sleep for several hours. He knew Ashe wouldn't have enough time with Ebony alone if Avril checked on her soon and Avril needed the sleep anyway. He still didn't feel completely right about invading her mind in such a matter, but knew it was necessary and the best thing for everyone at this particular moment. He stood, stretched and shut the door after letting himself out.

He found Aldin downstairs and they both decided to play some video games while waiting to see what happened with Ashe and Ebony.

"What happens if Ebony won't let Ashe change her?"

"She has to. Ashe can't take another broken heart. We thought it was bad with Shara, but this time it would destroy him." Aiston nodded at Aldin somberly.

"She's nothing like Shara. I can't believe Shara was alive all these years and we didn't have a clue. She could have tried to kill him at any time. Why did she wait so long?"

"Alaina kept a tight leash on her and she just bided her time for the right opportunity."

"Yeah, I can't imagine Ashe's shock at seeing her again." Aiston was glad Shara was dead for good this time. He didn't pity anyone who wanted to hurt his family and Shara had gone way beyond simply hurting Ashe. She had come damn close to completely destroying him. They weren't for sure if he would snap out of it for awhile after the incident with Shara and he hadn't been the same since. However, ever since Ebony came, the old Ashe started to surface and it was damn good to see him back to himself after all this time.

"Everything will work out like it should. Ashe has suffered enough. I don't think Ebony wants to lose him any more than he wants to lose her. Her will is strong."

"I hope you're right, bro."

Aiston put a morbid fight game in and handed Aldin a controller. They both plopped down on the couch and waited for it to start.

“Well at least we can pass the time being manly and beating the crap out of each other.” Aiston laughed as the game began.

“Yeah, but you know I always win.”

“Uh, huh. We’ll see.”

Chapter Seventeen

Ashe sat on the bed beside Ebony. He removed the wash cloth that was now lukewarm and tossed it on the bathroom floor. He brushed her hair back with his fingers and closed his eyes at the silky feel. He should have protected her better. All of the stress from the previous days must have weakened her allowing the disease to speed its assault on her body. He couldn't perform the change without her consent so she had to wake.

He loved Ebony more than he thought possible. Any lingering doubt that he might have was gone after his confrontation with Shara. He had not felt one thing for the woman. No regret, no love, nothing. He knew then that Ebony had healed the damage done by Shara. She had to stay with him because she made him whole.

"Ebony, please, you have to wake up. Can you do that for me, baby?"

Ashe saw Ebony's eyes flutter and a small moan escaped her pale lips. *"That's it, Ebony. Open those beautiful eyes."*

After another interminable minute passed he decided he had no choice and commanded her with a strong compulsion. *"Wake up now, Ebony."*

The sharp command jerked Ebony out of her unconscious state right back to reality. She opened her eyes only to turquoise ones staring back. He felt her relief pour through him like warm honey.

"I'm okay baby. Most of all, you're okay and that's the most important thing." Her skin was so pale it scared him.

"Oh my God! I killed Shara!"

Ashe thought to never hear anything sweeter than her voice at the moment even if it was distressed. "Relax, Ebony. You had no choice."

"I know. She was going to kill you. I tried to warn you, but Alaina stopped me." Her lopsided grin made his heart miss a beat.

"I know, baby. Alaina put up a telepathic shield as soon as she realized we were talking to each other. It's not your fault."

"I don't regret it, although I will probably always feel a certain amount of guilt. Ashe, I would do it again if I had to. I would never have forgiven myself if I had done nothing. I couldn't let her hurt you, not again."

Her voice was so fragile and yet her will was strong and determined. Her strength was one of the things he loved most about her. He bent to kiss her on the top of the head and she threw her arms around him, hugging him tight. He wrapped his arms around her in return and cradled her against him. They sat like that for several minutes, relishing the feel of one another's warmth, of being safe. He finally sat back and watched her under half-closed lids.

She grabbed her head and moaned. "What's wrong, baby?" He put his hands on her shoulders and gently massaged the tight muscles.

"I feel like there are a hundred tiny hammers banging away in my skull. Ashe, I feel different. This doesn't feel like one of my normal headaches. It feels, I don't know, just different."

He hugged her to him then pulled back slightly. He pushed a silky strand of hair behind her ear. "Ebony, did you make your decision about us?" He knew why her headache was different. The disease had progressed quickly and she was nearing the end of her life. He could feel the icy hands of death reaching for her. She gasped and he knew that she had realized her precarious situation by the rush of emotions that crossed her face.

“Yes, I made my decision.” She stroked her fingers down his cheek and sighed. “I love you with all my heart and I want to be with you forever, but is it too late for me now?”

He had never been more relieved in his life. He hugged her to him and nuzzled her soft hair with his nose, breathing her scent deep into his very soul. “No it’s not too late. It can’t be too late. I can’t lose you, I won’t allow it, but we need to start right away.” He pulled back and gazed into her eyes, still not quite believing that she had agreed to be his forever.

“Will it hurt?”

“No.”

“How will the exchange happen? I mean, will I have to bite you?”

He chuckled. “No. You won’t have fangs until the change is complete. I will take your blood then I will make a small cut on my body for the exchange.”

“Oh. “It won’t hurt you will it?”

He would never get over her selflessness. Her life was in jeopardy and she was worried about him once again. He laughed. “Do you remember how you felt when I tasted you?”

“Of course.” A blush crept up her cheeks.

Feeding during sex enhanced the experience to levels most could never imagine and he knew she was remembering how she had felt. He smiled at her blush. God he’d never get tired of it. “Exactly, baby.”

“Then in that case, I prefer the chest.” She turned even a deeper shade of red and looked away, letting out a nervous giggle.

He laughed at her request. “Your wish is my command, my lady.”

He didn’t want to give her too much time to think about what she had to do. Even though it was second nature to him, he knew it would take time for her to accept that she would have to drink blood. He would be able to provide for her unless she was injured. In that case, she would need human blood. However, he would never let her come to harm again. She had already experienced too much violence and pain in her short life. He would spend the rest of his days making her happy and she would make him happy simply by being alive and near him.

She squeaked when he scooped her up and carried her to the bathroom. He sat on the edge of the tub with her on his lap and turned the tap on. While the water ran he pulled her shirt over her head showering her collarbone with light kisses. He was pleased that she was still without a bra. Her pink nipples stood puckered from her creamy breasts in anticipation of his touch. Before he could oblige, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him in for a deep, demanding kiss. It was full of promises of things to come. She was sweet and tasted of the nectar of the Gods and the subtle aroma of honeysuckle floated through the air. He groaned as her tongue circled his, dancing and dueling with it. He pulled her harder against him and ravished her mouth, nipping, biting, sucking and soothing. When the kiss ended, her mouth was swollen and glistened.

She pulled his hands away when he stood and began removing his shirt. “Let me. I’ve never gotten to undress you. I want to now.” She pulled him close to look at the place where Shara had sliced into his neck. “It’s almost healed.”

He let out a deep chuckle. “It’s okay, Ebony. It wasn’t as bad as it looked.” She sighed and kissed him right on the now disappearing wound as if she could make it better even faster before continuing to undress him.

She rolled the bottom of his shirt up exposing his flat abdomen, her eyes drinking him in hungrily. She pushed the shirt even higher, exposing his chest and flat male nipples that were beginning to harden. He bent down to let her pull it over his head. When he straightened she sighed. Her hands delved into the crisp hair, pulling it gently, skimming his nipples with her soft fingers. She placed her

mouth on him and kissed his chest, playfully sucking each nipple into her mouth before trailing her kisses lower. His growl told her that he was enjoying her ministrations.

She tongued his navel and kissed his abdomen as she went down on her knees ignoring the dizziness that threatened. She reached for the button on his black leather pants, undoing it then pulling the zipper down slowly over the bulge residing behind. He sprang free, long, hard and proud, and she pushed his pants down his muscular legs so he could step out of them. She worshipped his thighs with her kisses and gently cupped his sac in one hand. She wrapped her other hand around his shaft. It was so big her fingers barely touched and she began to gently stroke him from base to tip then repeated the action.

His growls grew louder and that was all the encouragement she needed to continue. "I love when you do that."

"What?"

"Growl."

He chuckled and perused her slowly with his now black eyes. "Well baby, that's good because I have a feeling I'm going to be doing it a lot around you."

She bent and licked the tip of him, tasting the droplet of salty fluid from his arousal. She licked around the broad head while she continued stroking him with her hand then took him into her mouth. She settled into a firm sucking rhythm, taking him all the way to the back of her throat then releasing him until only the head of his erection was barely in her mouth, then sucked him in deep again, his hands tangled in her hair, pulling her to and from him, showing her what he wanted. He threw his head back and pumped into her luscious mouth until he neared release then tugged her up to him laughing at her confusion.

He reached over and turned the taps off. "Baby, if you do that much longer, I'm going to finish before we get started." She was still so innocent and not just sexually. He was going to thoroughly enjoy teaching her the many ways they could enjoy one another. Although, he had a feeling she might teach him a few things too. He finished undressing her then stepped into the tub lifting her as he went, arranging her on top of him so she faced him straddling his lap. The water was the perfect temperature

and steam swirled around their bodies. He grabbed a sponge, poured some soap on it and began washing her shoulders, arms, chest and belly.

By the time he reached between her thighs, her breathing came in small gasps. She grabbed the sponge from him and soaped him as thoroughly as he had her.

He ran his hands down her arms then over her nipples, rolling them between his fingers until they tightened into dark pink buds. He bent his head and took one in his mouth and her hands came up to grip his shoulders. He tongued them until she threw her head back and moaned.

“You like that, don’t you?”

“Oh yes, Ashe. It feels so wonderful.”

She let out a strangled gasp as he sucked one nipple deep into his mouth. “Ashe.” Her voice came in a strangled whimper.

He continued torturing her nipples, sucking them deep into his mouth then rolling his tongue around the hardened peaks. She writhed under him and he could feel her body growing hotter by the second. “Ebony, come for me just like this.” His ragged breath puffed across her skin.

She cried out again before pulling his head from her. “Not like this, I want you inside me.”

He let out a growl in response and pulled her closer to his cock. “Then ride me, Ebony. I’m yours, take me.”

Her pupils dilated and her breathing came in quick, excited gasps. He wanted to pull her under him and drive into her but he wanted her to know that she had free reign of his body. He welcomed her possession as easily as she welcomed his. He knew she would understand that he was giving her a gift by entrusting her to have such power over him.

She positioned herself over his arousal and he felt the tip press into her slickness. She sat up just a little, grasped him with one hand and slowly lowered herself onto him one agonizing inch at a time until she was seated fully on him. He filled her completely. Her inner muscles worked around him and squeezed him in small spasms. She began riding him, pulling up until just the tip of him remained inside her then pushing back down, fully impaling herself. His fingers gripped her hips hard, guiding her movement. Water sloshed around them as the thrusts became faster and harder.

Ashe gritted his teeth as he felt himself sliding over the edge and hoped she was close too. Within seconds she let out a cry and inner muscles gripped him tight as her climax pulsed hard, sending him to his own release. He let out a guttural moan and felt her slump against him in exhaustion. He gently slid out of her, rinsed them both then picked her up and carried her to the bed. She could barely keep her eyes open and he knew it was time.

He laid her on the bed and covered her with his hard body. *"Ashe, if I died right at this moment, I'd die happy."*

"Don't ever say that, baby. You aren't ever leaving me. I won't let you. I've waited too long for you." He began kissing her breasts, laving them gently. He then worked his way down her belly until he reached her damp curls and started to tongue her. Desire burned through his veins once again. Her hips strained toward him but before she reached climax, he slipped back up her body and slowly slid into her.

She sighed, wrapped her arms around him and held him tight as if refusing to ever let him go. *"I love you so much."*

He still couldn't believe that God had given him such a gift. Even though he wasn't a religious man, he knew she couldn't have been sent from anywhere else but heaven. He gave her a quick kiss and then nibbled his way to her neck as he continued thrusting in and out of her at a lazy pace.

"I love you too. You make me happier than I've ever been and we are going to have a wonderful life. Just remember, even when we have difficult times, I will never stop loving you. I will always lay down my life for you and protect you from harm."

He slid his fangs deep into her neck, and he shivered in rapture as her sweet, coppery blood flowed into him. *"Oh, Ashe!"*

He would never get used to the exotic and exquisite flavor that was her and her alone. Her essence flowed into him, became a part of him, wrapped around every molecule in his body, merged with his cells. Her arms tightened around his back and he thought he might burn up from the fire scorching his blood. When he was done, he licked the red drops dotting the punctures and sat up, pulling her with him, never breaking the connection of their bodies. Her legs spread wide and rested on top of his thighs as he sat on his heels and kept one arm locked around her, supporting her. He reached for a small knife on the bedside table. She watched through slightly opened eyes as he made a small cut across his chest. He put the knife down and tugged her closer to him.

The arm supporting her tightened and he cupped the back of her head with his other hand and pushed her face toward the cut. *"Hurry, baby, or the wound will heal."*

Her small tongue darted out, barely touching his chest. After a small taste, she licked a few more drops then clamped her small mouth over him. He threw his head back in ecstasy, letting out a guttural cry and began pumping into her fast. The suction from her mouth was driving him mad. He cupped her head harder against him, urging her to take more. She was tentative and shy at first, but then became bolder and pulled his life force into her mouth harder seeming to enjoy her task.

"You taste hot, tangy, and spicy. So good. I never thought it would be like this." He grinned.

"That's exactly how you taste to me, baby." He watched her drink from him in fascination until a blush crept up her neck, and she gently pulled her mouth from him. *"Everything's going to be okay now. Don't ever be embarrassed for wanting me like this. Believe me. I enjoy it as much as you do."* Although, he didn't think anyone could enjoy it as much as he did. He'd never get enough of her.

He pulled her to him and kissed the top of her head, then gently pushed her back down and thrust his hips over and over until their climaxes took control, her muscles milked him with convulsive spasms, tightening and releasing, pulling every last drop from him. He kissed her slowly and thoroughly then let his body slip from hers. He was careful to keep most of his weight off her, supporting himself on his elbows. She still looked so tired and she would need sleep to allow her body to go through the change.

He rolled on his side and pulled her back against his chest tucking her head under his chin. "Go to sleep. You need to rest while your body changes."

"I don't think that will be a problem. I feel like I haven't slept for days. Will you stay with me?"

"Yes." He would stay with her until she woke again. Hell could stay like this with her in his arms forever. She would have a little trouble adjusting to her new senses at first and he wanted to make sure she was not alone the first time she felt them.

She wiggled closer to him and was asleep in seconds.

Chapter Eighteen

Estril found Aldin and Aiston sprawled on the couch in the family room playing video games. *Men, they never grow up.* Although, she had to admit it was a comforting sight to see. She knew her brothers loved one another, and her as well, she just craved a closer relationship between all of them sometimes. They were always kind and caring and loyal to a fault and only got into tiffs now and again, usually at the expense of one of Aiston's pranks gone wrong. However, they rarely spent quality time together as a family.

There was always breakfast where most times the whole Aleksandrov clan was present, which she thoroughly enjoyed. She wanted times where they would all sit around and play games or just laugh and talk about how their lives were going. Her brothers needed more than just fighting shadow drifters and protecting mankind. She needed more too. She had always felt lonely, but lately it was getting worse. Ebony had helped ease the feeling and the girl's night she shared with her and Avril went great lengths in soothing her.

For some reason she had begun to feel restless like she should be doing something, something important. She had no idea what that may be, but she was sure that whatever it was, fate would lead her to it. She could use some excitement in her life and even though she wanted her family to spend more quality time together, maybe some time away from her brothers wouldn't hurt either. They were wonderful, but sometimes they were over-protective and smothering. She could never find it in her heart to be angry at them for caring though.

"What are you two doing?" She walked over and plopped on the opposite end of the couch.

"Practicing our fighting skills with interactive video." Aiston gave Aldin a smirk.

"Geez, you should really stop putting me in the same category as the other daft females you usually hang out with. I mean you really can't believe I would be dumb enough to fall for that." She tried to hide a smile and failed.

“You know I think you’re way too smart to fall for that little sister.” Aldin grunted in agreement. “We’re just wasting time down here playing games until, um, well—”

“Until Ashe comes down? Yeah, I figured that. Call it women’s intuition but I think everything is going to work out excellently. Ashe deserves a special woman like Ebony. In fact, all of my brothers deserve a woman as wonderful as Ebony.”

“Run, Aldin. Here she goes again.” They both stood as if to make a run for the door.

“Oh, for crying out loud, sit back down.” Estril hoped maybe Avril might be the woman for Aiston. However, she wouldn’t hold her breath because that would be a long, bumpy, possibly disastrous, road to travel. Aldin on the other hand, well he needed a strong woman that could hold her own against his domineering personality. She knew that one woman had to be out there somewhere.

“What about you Estril? When are you going to find a man?”

Aldin choked and Estril cracked up. “Yeah, right, if I brought a man here, he’d be running for the door within two minutes from being harassed by my three brothers. You do remember John?” John Walker, the one and only man she had ever thought herself in love with had taken one look at her three domineering brothers the first time she had brought him home and she had never seen him again after he left that same night. “You know I couldn’t be with a man that wasn’t strong enough to stand up to you three, and I don’t know if such a man even exists in this world. You know you guys can be pretty intimidating.”

Aldin responded this time. “Yeah, but that’s our job. We’re supposed to protect you.”

Aiston chimed in, “Yeah.”

“Give me a break. You know I can take care of myself.” Seeing they were gearing up for an argument she raised her hand in surrender. “Look I really don’t want to talk about this now anyway,

okay?" I just came down, found you guys here and thought it would be nice if we all waited for Ashe. By the way Aiston, is Avril still sleeping?"

He nodded. "I put a compulsion on her earlier after she insisted that she was going to keep checking on Ebony. She should be waking up soon. I should probably go up in a few minutes and see if I can convince her to come down here and wait for Ebony, if she isn't already down here. Which, I hope she is, because I don't think I have a hope in hell of keeping Avril from checking on her."

"Well you could just use compulsion on her again." Estril watched his reaction closely and was pleased by his obvious reluctance at the suggestion.

"Yeah, I guess."

* * * *

Avril woke and stretched her stiff limbs. She rolled and looked at the clock. It had been several hours since she had seen Ebony. She jumped out of bed and grabbed a change of clothes. How could she have slept for so long and not checked on her best friend? She felt guilty and headed to the bathroom after grabbing some clothes. She gave a quick scrub to her face, brushed her teeth and hair and put on the pants, blouse, socks and shoes she had brought in with her.

She sprinted across the bedroom and yanked the door open, just stopping short of running into Aiston. Why was he always in her way? Although she did owe him thanks for sitting with her earlier while she fell asleep. He had been very kind and attentive to her.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came up to see if you were up yet. I thought you might like to come down and sit with Aldin, Estril and me in the family room."

"Maybe later, I need to see how Ebony's doing."

He let out a long breath. "You know, Avril, Ashe is with her and he would let us know if her condition changed. Surely you know by now that he will take very good care of her."

"Of course I know that, but I still want to see my friend." She tried to edge around him, but he blocked her path.

"Please move." She was becoming irritated.

"How about this, I'll go tell Ashe to bring Ebony down and we can all see how she's doing."

"She may not be able to come downstairs. What's the big deal? I want to see her!"

"Ashe get out here, Avril's having a conniption fit wanting to see Ebony. I don't know what to do."

Ashe's door opened across the hall and he stepped out closing it behind him. "Avril, Aiston. What's going on?"

Avril gave Aiston a shove and walked past him to Ashe. "I want to see Ebony and he won't let me. Is something wrong with her?"

Ashe laid his hands lightly on her shoulders. "Ebony's fine Avril, I promise. She woke up awhile ago with a little headache and now that's even gone. She fell back to sleep and I was just getting ready to wake her up. Why don't you go downstairs with Aiston and I'll be down with Ebony in a little while."

She smiled and nodded in agreement. She turned back to Aiston and waited for him to take her downstairs.

"Thanks, Ashe. I didn't feel right using compulsion on her."

"No problem. I don't like it either, but I need to give Ebony a little time to adjust before coming down. She's fine by the way. Let everyone know that we'll be down in about an hour."

"I'm glad to hear everything went okay."

Aiston turned and guided Avril downstairs. He got her a steaming cup of black coffee and then they went and joined Estril and Aldin.

* * * *

Ashe turned and went back into his room where Ebony lay on her stomach sleeping on the big bed, her nude body tangled in the sheets. He sat down beside her and placed his hand on her back, rubbing the smooth skin then bent and kissed her on the shoulder.

"Ebony, it's time to wake up."

She mumbled and turned on her back looking up at him with clear eyes. "Wow, I don't even feel groggy or anything like I normally do after waking up. My head is wonderfully clear and doesn't ache at all." She sat up and threw her arms around him and listened to his rich, deep laugh.

He hugged her back to him. "So you feel okay?"

“Yes! Wait, what was that?”

“What?”

“That chirping noise.” She cocked her head and listened closer

He listened for a minute, smiled and kissed her on the cheek. “It’s just the video game Aiston and Aldin are playing downstairs.”

Her shock registered immediately. “What!”

“You will have to get used to your enhanced senses. You’re hearing, smell, touch, taste, and sight are about twenty times more sensitive now. Don’t worry. You’ll learn to turn it down until you need it. Then, even when you learn that, you will still hear anything that might pose a threat. You have a sixth sense now and it’ll just take a little time to get used to it, but I’m here to help you get through it.”

“Am I really like you now? I mean, I’m not sick anymore? I feel like it’s all a dream and I’m going to wake up and have reality crash down on me.”

“No, baby it’s not a dream and you are completely healthy now. We have forever to spend with each other.” He laughed as she squealed and jumped on him, wrapping her arms around him, squeezing him hard.

He gently pulled her hands from around him and held them in his bigger ones. “That’s another thing you will have to be careful of until you get used to it. You are quite a bit stronger now.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did I hurt you?” He just laughed again and hugged her back to him.

“No. You could never hurt me, but it’s possible you might hurt Avril or another human until you learn, but again, don’t worry. We’ll get through this and I know you’re a fast learner.”

“When will I have to, um . . . you know, eat?” She was working her bottom lip with her teeth like she always did when she was worried.

"I assume you mean blood and you normally only need it every two or three days. However, you will need it more for awhile until your body fully adjusts to all the changes. Unless you are injured, which I will never allow again, you can feed from me." Her relief was obvious.

She ran her tongue over her front teeth. “But, I don’t have any fangs.”

“They come down when you feed.” He loved when her brows drew together in contemplation. In fact, he loved everything about her. “Don’t worry. Instinct will take over when it’s time.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Now, everyone is waiting for us downstairs. They are anxious to see you. We obviously didn’t tell Avril as it’s your decision to tell her or not of the change. And, as much as it might be rushing you, you should feed for the first time before we go down.”

“Okay although, I’m not sure if I can, but I’ll try. What do I do?”

“Just trust me when I tell you that you’ll know what to do when the time is right.” Before she could say anything else he took her mouth in a demanding kiss.

She thought she might faint. She thought making love to him was wonderful before, but now, with her new senses, just his kiss had her close to orgasm. He must surely feel these sensations to and how in the heck did he control something that felt this good? The feel of his tongue thrusting in and out of her mouth, dueling with her own had her so wet and ready she couldn’t wait for him to slide himself

deep inside her. She was burning up and she thought sparks might fly off her at any moment. She moaned and arched into him, rubbing the tiny peaked buds of her nipples against his chest as he continued to kiss her.

He broke their kiss for a short second to pull his shirt off then his mouth was hot and demanding on hers once again. She raked her nails up and down his back causing blood to rise from the shallow scratches they left. Now it was his turn to groan as he bent and suckled one pebbled nipple deep into his mouth while he reached under the sheet pooled in her lap to touch her intimately.

“You’re so wet and ready for me already.” He pushed one finger inside her and growled as her inner muscles clamped down around him.

“Now, I can’t wait any longer. I need you in me now, Ashe!” She clawed at him, pulling him down on her as she fell back, hitting the soft mattress.

He unzipped his pants, freeing his erection and nudged her legs far apart with his knee positioning himself at her opening. He flexed his hips and buried himself to the hilt with one deep thrust at the same time he sank his fangs deep into the fleshy part of her breast. She wrapped her legs around him and encouraged him into a frenzied pace. Seconds before she reached climax, she felt an odd sensation in her mouth and almost pricked her tongue on the fangs that had extended. His blood called to her with each beat of his heart. She could hear it throb through his veins with each thump. His teeth slid out of her breast and she pulled him to her and bit into his neck. Warm, spicy, blood filled her mouth and her orgasm hit her so hard and fast she almost jerked away. She didn’t want to hurt him though and fought to be careful.

Her climax rolled through her relentlessly wave after wave. She thought she might pass out from the sheer pleasure when he stiffened then pumped harder into her releasing his hot seed deep inside her. She swore she could feel the tip of him touching her womb and another wave engulfed her, taking her to a heightened ecstasy she could have never imagined. She pulled her mouth from his neck and licked the tiny puncture marks.

They both lay panting wallowing in the afterglow of passion for several minutes before getting up. They showered quickly and barely controlled the passion that threatened to overtake them once

again. While they were dressing, Ebony saw a mark on Ashe's right hip she had never noticed before that resembled a bruise.

"What is that?" She pointed to the mark.

Ashe smiled. "It's a mated mark."

Looking closer, the bruise was actually a small black rose. "What is a mated mark?"

"When vampires mate with their viata amants, as in change them, the mark appears on both to show they are claimed." He pulled her over to the mirror. "See you have one too."

"Oh my, I do. That is very . . . well I don't know what exactly." She examined the little rose nestled on her hip closer before deciding it was actually kind of cute. "Does every claimed vampire have one?"

"Yes, but if either mate dies, the surviving mate's mark will disappear."

She examined the mark one more time before dressing. Ashe then took her hand and headed downstairs to the family room.

Everyone smiled as they walked in and Avril and Estril jumped up to hug Ebony. Estril kissed Ashe on the cheek and gave him a quick hug as well.

"I'm so happy for you, brother."

"Me, too." Aiston chimed in.

"I am, too."

"Thank you. I can honestly say I am happier than I've ever been." Ashe's hot glance nearly curled Ebony's toes.

"Ebony, you look good. I was so worried about you, girlfriend." Avril hugged her again.

"I'm fine. And, thank you for caring enough to worry about me."

Ashe tugged Ebony over to a chair and down on his lap and everyone else took a seat around the room as well. They laughed and talked for what seemed like hours. A feeling of happiness, love and deep peace flowed through the room. Ashe could only hope that his siblings would find a love like he had. He looked at Aiston, Aldin, Estril and then Avril and made a little wish for fate to lead each of them to a happy destiny, then began to plan a big surprise for Ebony. He smiled in anticipation.

Chapter Nineteen

Ebony stretched the next morning like a contented cat. She hadn't gone to bed until dawn streaked through the night sky and had only been asleep for a few hours. It was awing to her that she felt so completely rested after such a short sleep. She knew over the next few weeks her body would require less and less rest. Ashe had told her that she would need more than normal until her body adjusted fully to all the changes.

She knew he was not accustomed to sleeping so much, but she had asked him to stay until she dozed off. Of course, when he had climbed into bed and wrapped himself around her, passion ignited and it was a while longer before she got any rest. He had made love to her slowly and thoroughly, kissing and stroking every inch of her body bringing her to the edge time and again before finally allowing her to fall over into oblivion. He had then held her in his arms until sleep claimed her.

She looked around the room and saw no sign of him. She sat up, grabbed her clothes that were tossed on the floor, shrugged back into them and went to her room to shower and change. She laid a flower patterned skirt that flowed down to her knees and a crisp pale green blouse across the bed before she went to the bathroom, and turned on the jets, allowing the water to get steamy while she brushed her teeth. She figured Ashe was downstairs, either in the study or the kitchen, and planned to search him out when she was done getting ready. She already missed his scent, his touch, and it had only been a scant few hours since she last saw him. Love was grand.

She wondered if she should try to shimmer to the study. The first two times she had tried to shimmer, she only accomplished making herself transparent and then reappeared exactly where she started. No, she would just wait until Ashe gave her a few more lessons before trying again. She finished up quickly and made her way downstairs.

* * * *

Ashe sat behind his big desk looking at the ring twinkling back at him. It had been delivered only a few minutes ago and it was perfect. The house was unusually quiet this morning and he hadn't seen any of his siblings yet. His brothers were probably both out, as they had left together right before he had taken Ebony up to bed. However, since none of them preferred to be out in the daylight he assumed they would be back soon as the sun was beginning to shine in its full glory.

His thoughts drifted to Estril. He had only caught a glimpse of her when she had come down, grabbed a cup of coffee, and headed right back up to her room saying that she wouldn't be eating this morning. She had seemed a little off lately to him, and he was worried. Ebony and Avril's presence seemed to brighten her up, but she appeared to be in somewhat of a stupor lately. He had a nagging feeling in his gut that she was becoming bored and restless and might fly the coop soon. He wasn't worried that she would never come back or anything so drastic, but she was his sister and he wanted her safe and happy. He didn't know how he would keep her safe if she was out running all over God's green earth on her own. He had a habit of conveniently forgetting she was nearly as strong as he. She was certainly smart and capable of taking care of herself but the over-powering instinct as a male to protect her plagued him.

Ebony's footsteps on the stairs brought him out of his thoughts and he slipped the box in the top drawer of the desk right before she poked her head around the door and smiled at him.

"Hey there."

"Hey there to you too." Ashe would never get used to the sight of her. Her beauty radiated off of her like the brilliant twinkle of light radiated off a bright star.

"Did you already eat?"

"Just had coffee. No one was around this morning and Estril wasn't eating so I told McKayla to skip the big breakfast this morning. I figured we could survive on toast and coffee this one time." He grinned and patted his leg.

She gave a sultry pout and swayed her hips in exaggeration as she went to sit on his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck. She gave him a quick kiss as his arms came around her and he followed up with a longer, more satisfying one. She sighed as she sat up and pushed her fingers through his silky black hair.

“Hmmm. Are you trying to seduce me again?”

Ebony’s cheeks turned bright red. Ashe chuckled and nuzzled her neck. “I’ll get you for that, mister.” She stood and sashayed over to the couch.

He followed her, sat down, and pulled her onto his lap. He took her mouth in a searing kiss once again. She laughed and pushed him away playfully.

“My, my Mr. Aleksandrov, but we’ve just met.” She fluttered her eyelashes and placed the back of her hand to her forehead as if she were a high class lady back in the eighteen hundreds ready to swoon at such lewd behavior.

He chuckled once again and tugged her hand to rest on his chest imprisoning it there with his own. “But Miss White, I can’t help myself. Can’t you feel how my heart beats just for you? Surely you can have pity on a poor soul in love.”

Her eyes twinkled and she rushed off his lap to stand in front of the desk. “Oh, but it’s so improper, sir. I would be ruined.”

He stalked her, came up behind her, pulled her back to his chest and bent her forward to rest her hands palm down on the cool wood surface, then whispered in her ear. “Then let us be ruined together.”

Her next words were replaced with a gasp when he began nibbling at her ear. He blew softly in it and smiled when her body melted against him. He pushed up harder behind her and she gripped the edge of the desk and rubbed her backside provocatively against the hardness of his arousal now nudging

her. He reached around the front of her, put his hand down the neck of her blouse and covered one breast, cupping and kneading it gently before rolling the nipple between his fingers.

Her gasps of encouragement fueled him on and he bunched the soft fabric of her skirt up to her waist with his other hand after unbuttoning his jeans. The hand that was playing with her breast now moved to her back, cupping her neck and pushing her forward, pinning her to the hard surface. Her fingers gripped the edge of the desk harder as he yanked her panties to the side and plunged into her with one smooth thrust of his hips. He groaned and rotated his hips forward while she pushed hers back into him, giving, taking, demanding everything. Within seconds they both cried out and he slumped over her heated body and nibbled the soft skin of the top of her shoulder before smoothing her skirt back down and righting his own clothing.

She turned to face him and he pulled her to him for another thorough kiss. He couldn't seem to keep his hands off her. His body was hardening again already. "If we keep this up we're going to kill each other, vampires or not." She giggled as he wiggled his eyebrows up and down.

"Well, if I have to die, this would be my ideal way to go." She playfully smacked him on the arm and he took her into a possessive hug. He figured now would be just as good a time as any to give her his gift, but before he reached the drawer the doorbell sounded. He excused himself and said he'd be right back. He couldn't have been more shocked or angry when he opened the door to reveal his visitor.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" His hands curled into fists at his side as he tried to leash his fury.

Alaina promptly burst into tears. "Please, I just need to talk to you for a second then I promise I will never bother you again."

Her pleading look had little effect on him and he was about to slam the door in her face when Ebony walked up behind him and took one of his hands in hers, rubbing her thumb in soothing strokes over the back of it. When Alaina saw Ebony she put her head down in shame, staring at her own feet.

"I don't think so. Do you know how fortunate you are that I haven't already throttled you or worse? Hell, Alaina, you threatened my family and put the one thing that matters most to me in the world in danger."

"I know and I've been thinking and I've realized how horrible I acted. Please give me a chance to explain." She then looked at Ebony as if begging for her help.

Ashe moved to push the door closed in Alaina's face when Ebony placed a hand on his arm. "Ashe, let her come in and say what she needs to say."

"Ebony, you can't be serious. She almost got you killed." His look of astonishment and anger nearly made her retract her request.

"Yes, I am. It's okay. She can't hurt me while you're here, right? I'll stay right by your side until she leaves." Ebony gave Ashe a reassuring smile.

"Baby, don't you remember what that bitch did to you?"

"Yes. But, everyone deserves a second chance, Ashe."

Damn. She had him there. Fate itself had given him a second chance.

Looking from Ebony's determined face to Alaina's tear stained one, he sighed and stepped back, making sure to keep his body between Alaina and Ebony. "Fine, you have ten minutes." He motioned for Alaina to proceed to the family room and he and Ebony followed.

Closing the door behind them, he folded his arms over his chest. "Talk."

Alaina looked at Ashe and Ebony for a moment before saying her peace. "Just let me say first of all, Ebony, I am truly sorry for putting you in danger. I didn't care at the time, but I realize I was wrong."

Ashe snorted while Ebony remained silent. "And, what would make you realize such a thing."

She sat down, dejectedly on the edge of the couch. "Ashe, I have loved you for as long as I can remember. Wanting you has consumed me and has been the force behind everything I've done for so long. But, last night after everything happened, I realized that maybe I didn't love you as much as I was just obsessed with you. I was hurt and my pride was wounded when you left me, especially, when you left me for Shara. You know I have always viewed humans as weak and I couldn't imagine a lower blow to my dignity than you leaving me for one, which I am now aware, fueled my negative view of humans even more."

"Alaina, I thought you understood from the start that I didn't have deep feelings for you."

"Yeah, you told me that, but I believed that you just needed time to come to love me. I believed I could make you love me and when you left, I just kind of went off the deep end. I mean, I let my thoughts distort themselves into impossible plans that I really believed could become reality. I was lonely and you know my personality doesn't allow much room for friends, so I grabbed onto you and twisted my whole life around you."

"I'm sorry you were hurt, but it doesn't excuse your actions." Had she really finally come to her senses and figured out that she was completely and disturbingly wrong?

"Thank you for saying that and I know my actions are inexcusable and I'll be sorry for them for the rest of my life. I don't know why I became the way I did and the worst thing of all is that I realized years ago that I didn't even love you any more and hadn't for a long time. However, I could never admit that because then everything I had done to get you back would just make me a complete obsessed lunatic, which is exactly what I was." Alaina put her head in her hands and sobbed.

"Ashe I really think she's sincere."

"Don't be so sure, Ebony."

"I'll never say anything other than she was wrong, but I think she was just really lonely. While I don't understand all the reasons why she would do the things she did, I do understand loneliness. I longed for a companion for only a few years, but I can only imagine what it would be like to long for someone to love for hundreds of years."

Alaina hiccupped and raised her eyes to them both as she got to her feet. "That's all I wanted to say that I am honestly sorry for everything I've done. Nothing can excuse it and I don't expect you to forgive me, but I can hope that you might anyway someday. I never would have hurt you, Ashe. I swear I didn't know the true circumstances of that night I turned Shara into a drudge. I would have never done it had I know she tried to have you killed. I'm just . . . sorry."

Alaina shrugged and made her way to leave when Ebony stepped out from behind Ashe and faced her. Ashe laid his hands on her shoulders in a comforting reminder that he was there and would keep her safe.

"Alaina, I can't pretend that I understand what you did, but I can understand how your loneliness and misguided love led you in the wrong direction, even though it still doesn't excuse those actions in any way. However, if I am sure of anything it is that we all make mistakes and must accept responsibility for them. Today I believe you have taken responsibility for yours and have taken steps to correct them."

Alaina stared at Ebony with a spark of hope and Ebony continued. "I forgive you for what you did to me personally, but I cannot forgive you for your actions toward anyone else. They will have to decide to forgive you or not, but realize that this doesn't mean that I trust you. I think you have a long, hard road ahead of you to gain back any amount of trust from those you wronged. I can only say for myself that I hope you are sincere and turn your life around, and if you honestly need someone, you may call upon me."

Alaina's eyes flew wide in surprise, and she gave Ebony a quick hug. "Thank you. You have no idea how much those words mean to me." Alaina turned to leave when Ashe's voice stopped her.

“Alaina, be glad Ebony was here today because you would have never gotten in my door otherwise. My mate has a very trusting and forgiving soul and should you hurt her in any way ever again, make no mistakes, you’re life will be forfeited.” He didn’t know if he could ever forgive her or trust her, but he trusted Ebony’s judgment and planned to sit back and see how it all played out. “And, I admire your courage in coming here today.”

Ashe and Ebony sat on the huge couch. He played with the hair at her nape, twirling it around his finger. “I can’t believe you forgave her.”

Ebony remained quiet a few moments before responding. “At moments I can’t believe it either, but I really got the feeling that she wanted to change and was genuinely sorry. I just hope I’m not wrong. I mean Ashe, we all need friends and someone we can lean on once in awhile. I can’t imagine what it would be like to live for so long without anyone.”

“I think you are entirely too forgiving Miss White, but I respect you and your woman’s intuition. So, for now let’s just give it some time and hope for her sake that she does change.” He hugged her to him for a second before pulling her up.

“Where are we going?”

“I was just getting ready to do something very important before Alaina showed up.”

“And, what was that?” She gave him a curious smile.

“Well, you’ll just have to come with me and find out.” Then he tugged her toward the door.

Chapter Twenty

She didn't know what he was up to, but she was sure that whatever it was she would love it if not simply for the fact that they were sharing it together. When they entered the study, he told her to stand still and stay right where she was in front of the door. He walked to the big desk and pulled something out of the drawer. She tried to see what it was, but he slipped it in his pocket too quickly. He walked back over to her, took her hand and went down on one knee.

Surely he couldn't be doing what she thought he was doing. Her heart pounded in anticipation. He looked her in the eyes with love shining from his own. "Ebony, I love you. You are everything to me and I can't imagine my life without you."

Tears formed in the corners of her eyes as she watched him pull a black velvet box from his pocket. She gasped when he flipped the lid open and saw the green stone sparkling back at her. It was a beautiful, flawless emerald solitaire. The tears now spilled down her cheeks.

"Ashe, it's beautiful."

"I knew it was perfect for you the moment I saw it, it reminds me of your eyes." He pulled the ring out of the box and held her hand, still waiting for her response. "So, can you put me out of misery and answer my question?"

His lopsided grin made her heart flip-flop. "Of course, I'll marry you. I can't imagine my life without you either. In fact, I wouldn't have a life if it weren't for you, Ashe. Thank you."

The ring fit perfectly, he stood, picked her up and twirled her around. He kissed her before letting her slide slowly down his body to the floor. She didn't miss the way his body hardened in response to her touch. "It looks like you are going to be busy planning a wedding, just don't get too busy. I have needs you know?" He chuckled when she playfully smacked him on the arm.

"I didn't even know vampires got married." A wedding, her wedding! She was getting married. A few weeks ago she had given up any dreams of getting married. Now she had found the perfect man and would have more years to spend with him than she could imagine.

"We didn't use to. However, as more and more of our kind found human viata amants, it became a tradition among us since most humans want a wedding ceremony."

"I see. Well, I don't want you to do anything you don't want to, Ashe. I can't lie and say I wouldn't love a wedding to celebrate our love, but I don't need one as long as I have you." She hugged him tightly to her. "You're all I'll ever need."

He placed his cheek against the top of her head and inhaled her scent deeply. "I don't have a problem marrying you, Ebony, especially if it will make you happy. I would do anything to make you happy. I hope you know that. Besides, it will give me the opportunity to let everyone know that you're mine and to keep their hands off, not to mention it would also make me happy. There is one thing though."

"What's that?"

"We have incorporated a vampire tradition into our weddings."

"Which is?" She began to worry a little now.

"All the flowers in the wedding are black roses, even the bride's bouquet. Do you mind?"

She laughed. "Of course I don't mind. Do you have any idea what kind of horrifying things I was thinking it could be for it to turn out to be something as simple as black roses?"

Ashe looked at her as if confused.

“Oh, never mind. I’ll be happy to have black roses. They are very beautiful and unique.” No way did she want to tell him any of those things she thought of from some kind of blood ritual to . . . well who knew what. It was almost comical to her that it had really been such a simple and beautiful tradition. Obviously, that tradition stemmed from the mating mark and it was a very romantic gesture in her mind. She laughed and playfully punched him on the shoulder then started chewing her bottom lip.

He lifted her face to look into her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“I was just wondering what I was going to do with my house. I had forgotten all about it until now.”

“You don’t have to do anything with it if you don’t want.”

“I mean, I can’t just afford to let it sit there and I don’t even know if I still have my job at the library.”

“You don’t need a job anymore, Ebony, and you can afford to do whatever you want from now on.” He put his finger over her mouth, cutting off her protest. “Listen. I have more than enough money to last us for however long we are around, and now that money is yours too. I don’t want any arguments over it.”

“But, I can’t just sit around here all day and do nothing. I have to do something. I would like to at least get the rest of my things from my house, and it would be nice to have a little time to think about what to do with it.” She was used to taking care of herself, letting someone else take care of her would take some getting used to.

“Take all the time you want. And, you really don’t have to go back to work, Ebony, you can do anything you like. Besides, I can think of lots of things to keep you busy.” He let his hands rest lightly on her shoulders.

“Well as much as I enjoy how you keep me busy, even we can’t do that twenty-four seven.”

“I don’t know, but I wouldn’t mind trying in the least.” He chuckled. “But really, Ebony, I will support you in whatever you decide. Well as long as it doesn’t put you in any kind of danger. My heart can’t take that again.”

“Well, there is one other thing I would like you to do.” She continued on while she still had the nerve because she knew he wasn’t going to like what she was about to ask of him. “I want you to teach me to fight.”

“What! You don’t need to learn to fight. Why would you want to do that?”

“Ashe, don’t go all male chauvinistic on me. I want to learn how to defend myself. I felt very helpless at Alaina’s house and I want to have a way to protect myself in case anything like that ever happens again.”

“Ebony, I won’t let anything like that happen to you ever again.”

“Ashe, you can’t control everything. Wouldn’t you rather I was able to defend myself if it did happen?”

A small smile teased her lips as she watched until his tense shoulders finally slumped in defeat. “Okay, you win. I see the logic behind your request. But I don’t want to start your lessons until after our wedding okay?”

“Thank you. I love you so much.” She looked at the clock on the wall. Ten o’clock. Avril should be up now.

She gave him a quick kiss. "I need to go tell Avril I'm getting married." He chuckled as she sprinted up the stairs.

* * * *

"Are you kidding me?" Avril stared at Ebony with wide eyes after hearing the news.

Ebony couldn't contain her laughter any longer at Avril's wide-eyed expression and started giggling uncontrollably while her friend continued to stare. She knew Avril would be shocked as Ebony hadn't ever even dated anyone seriously. This was probably the last thing she thought would happen, especially this quick.

"You're serious, aren't you?" Avril watched Ebony until she finally quit laughing. "Wait a minute. You are glowing! Ebony, are you pregnant? Is that why you're getting married? I mean come on you don't have to get married because of that anymore."

Ebony was now the one wearing the shocked face. "Why would you ask such a thing, and don't you think I know that you don't have to get married for that reason any more?" Her thoughts wondered to the possibility as she subconsciously placed a hand on her belly. Could it really be? The thought hadn't even crossed her mind. She hadn't had a period since before she met Ashe, but she never gave it a second thought with her illness and then the changing. Ashe told her when she turned that she wouldn't suffer her monthlies any longer, but she hadn't thought about the one she missed before that.

What if she was? Joy and fear shot through her. What if the change had hurt the baby? Wouldn't she know if she were pregnant? As she asked herself that question, everything clicked into place and she knew the answer. Yes, she was pregnant and the baby was fine. She didn't know how she knew, but she had a feeling it had to do with her new vampire senses, or maybe it was just motherly instincts. She clapped her hand over her mouth and stared back at her friend.

“Oh. My. God! You are pregnant!” Avril launched herself at Ebony hugging her tightly. “I’m going to be an Aunt! Whoo hoo!”

“Yeah, I guess you are.” Ebony hugged her back and a deep feeling of rightness flowed throughout her as if saying everything was as it should be.

“You still don’t have to get married though you know? I mean, I could help you and baby Avril.”

“Baby Avril?” What makes you think it’s a girl and what makes you think I’d name her Avril?”

“Well, because you would obviously want to name your little girl after the most gorgeous, loyal best friend you will ever have!” Avril laughed and Ebony joined in until tears streamed down both their faces.

“Seriously though Avril, I’m not marrying Ashe because I’m pregnant. In fact, I didn’t even realize I was pregnant until you just mentioned it. I love him. I want to be with him for the rest of my life, which, by the way, brings me to something you might not want to hear.” How in the world would Avril react to finding out her best friend was a vampire?

“Well, as long as you’re sure. I just want you to be happy, honestly.”

“Oh, I know Avril. I want the same for you.”

“Wait a second, don’t even start with that. There is no way I’m getting married, from now on just sex with hot guys. No commitment to the male chauvinistic bastards. They are only good for one thing.”

Ebony knew she wouldn’t be able to change her friend’s mind at the moment, but hoped that one day she would find a guy that would knock her off her feet as effectively as Ashe had her. “Okay, whatever.”

“And, what is this thing I might not want to hear?”

Ebony sighed, stood and walked over to the window, gazing outside. When her eyes started watering she figured it was a result of the sun on her newly over sensitive eyes. She took a deep breath and told Avril the whole story about her illness, why she hadn't told her and how she wasn't sick any longer thanks to Ashe. She just hoped her friend could find it in her heart to forgive her.

“Ebony?” Avril watched as Ebony slowly turned to face her. “You know I love you and yes, I wish you had told me. You can tell me anything, you know? But, if Ashe has saved you from dying, then I owe thanks to him. I would never want you to suffer and would have encouraged you to save yourself if possible. I'm just so sorry that you had to go through everything alone.”

“You are truly the best friend ever. I was so worried you would be mad at me for not telling you or just totally freaked out because I'm a vampire now. Thank you for being you.” Ebony hugged her friend once again.

Avril pushed her away playfully. “Okay. Enough is enough. We have a wedding to plan, so let's get to it! Have you told Estril yet?”

“No, I was going to after I told you.”

“Well, let's go. I bet she will be great helping us out with the plans.”

Ebony and Avril found Estril in her room. Ebony couldn't help but notice that Estril seemed very distant lately. Sadness seemed to cling to her. Of course, Estril hid it well and was happy about the news. They talked for what seemed to be hours about the plans for the wedding. Estril declined Ebony and Avril's invitation to come downstairs and eat with them, deciding to stay in her room. Then Avril realized she was still in her pajamas and went to change. They both gave Estril a quick hug before leaving. Ebony waited for Avril to get dressed then they both headed for the kitchen for toast and coffee.

* * * *

Later that afternoon, Avril decided to head home. She promised she would be back for the wedding. She had to be after all, she was the Maid of Honor. She also promised to be around and help with the wedding plans. Ebony was a little sad to see her go. She had enjoyed her company. She would miss her, but she was also looking forward to all the time alone she would be able to spend with her husband-to-be.

That evening Ebony lay wrapped in Ashe's arms while he recapped the whole ordeal of telling his brothers the news while she giggled. They were both shocked as they knew Ashe and Ebony would always be together, but never thought they would get married. They were very happy for Ashe and Ebony but vowed they would never get caught in the marital trap and Ashe had laughed at their ignorance. They had no idea what they were missing out on. Of course, he hadn't either. Maybe one day the right woman would come along for each of them and change their minds. One that would kick Aiston in the butt and make him tow the line and another that was strong enough to tangle with Aldin, mentally and physically.

They talked and made love all night and decided they would go and pick Ebony's things up from her house the next day. She had decided to make her house into a bookstore. It was such a logical thing for her to do since she worked in the library because she loved books. The bottom would need some remodeling to hold the shelves of books and the upstairs would serve as storage.

She was still reluctant to let Ashe pay for the inventory and remodeling, but he wouldn't give in and insisted that if she had such a problem with him paying for it, she could consider it his wedding present to her. She agreed since she knew he wouldn't take no for an answer anyway. The man was so stubborn. She couldn't be upset though because she would have only had enough money to get things started then would have had to rely on the profits to finish little by little. He was going to spoil her rotten, but she would never take money for granted. She didn't care if he didn't have a penny, she would still love him.

Once she put her plans into action the next day, time seemed to fly by at the speed of light and before she knew it the bookstore was open which she lovingly named A & E Books. It flourished and she was able to hire full-time help so she could focus on her wedding plans.

Chapter Twenty-One

Was she really getting married today? Ebony stared at her image in the full-length mirror. The dress was perfection. It was traditional with its long, lacy train yet modern with its rich ivory color. Its silky material hugged her bosom and waist before flaring gently out at her hips and flowing to the floor, giving it a bit of sexiness as well. She had liked her gown so much from the Midnight Ball that she had asked Tina to make her wedding dress as well. She had definitely made the right decision. It was right out of a fairy tale. *Move over Cinderella.*

“Wow, girl! You look great!” Avril had been in on most of the wedding planning and had stayed with her for the last several days, helping with last minute details. “I don’t know how Ashe is going to make it through the ceremony without throwing you to the ground and giving you a good ravishing.”

“Yes, you look absolutely gorgeous.” Estril had also been irreplaceable the last few days making sure everything was perfect. Although, Ebony was a little sad as Estril had informed them that she would be leaving soon after the wedding. Ashe, Aldin, and Aiston had, of course, been in a tizzy and insisted it was too dangerous for Estril to be running around all over God’s green earth on her own. Estril had remained firm on her decision insisting it was something she must do.

Ebony hadn’t quite understood as Estril didn’t seem to know exactly where she was going. She just explained that she felt it was time for her to get out in the world on her own for awhile. Ebony’s intuition told her that there was more to it than that, but Estril was a grown woman and could make her own decisions. The brothers had finally caved as they really had no choice in the matter. They were not happy but agreed to it if Estril promised to check in on a regular basis to let them know she was okay.

Ebony smiled at her best friend and her new friend. She had come to love Estril over the last few weeks as if she were a sister. In fact, all three of them had become so close Ebony had decided to have two Maids of Honor. They had spent countless hours picking the perfect shade of red for Estril and Avril’s gowns, and Ashe, along with Aiston and Aldin, would wear black tuxes with the same matching red cummerbund and bow tie. Their boutonnieres would, of course, be black roses and the black roses in her bouquet were stunning and sprinkled with tiny sprigs of baby’s breath. The guest list included most of the attendees from the Midnight Ball.

“Well, I guess this is it. I can’t believe I’m getting married.” Ebony’s nerves kicked up a notch and fluttered through her, sending a shiver down her spine. She was getting a pretty good handle on her extra perceptive vampire senses, but they still sometimes got a little out of control. She took a deep breath to calm herself and faced Avril and Estril. “You know I love you two, and I want to thank you for helping me out so much with all of this. I couldn’t have done it without you.” She went and grabbed two small boxes off her dresser and handed one to each of them.

She had been staying in her original room the last few days, insisting that she and Ashe should not sleep together again until their wedding night. She had come up with the idea a few nights after he had proposed. He hadn’t been happy about it, but had begrudgingly given in. Her brilliant plan had effectively turned around and bitten her on the rump, and she was relieved the celibacy would end tonight. She missed his strong body pressed up against her and couldn’t wait to be back in his arms where she belonged. It had been a noble idea, but a stupid one. She never wanted to miss another night in his bed unless it was absolutely unavoidable.

Excitement overtook nervousness as she thought about what his reaction would be to her news. Her wedding gift to him would be the baby. She wondered if she would have a little boy that looked like his father with black, wavy hair and turquoise eyes. That thought was a little disconcerting however, when she realized later she would probably have to beat the women off of him with a stick. Boy or girl, it didn’t matter as long as he or she was healthy. If it was a boy though, she sure hoped he didn’t have Ashe’s stubbornness. She smiled at the thought.

Avril’s gasp reluctantly brought her back to reality. A gold chain with a locket was hanging from her friend’s fingers. It had taken Ebony all day to pick out the gifts for Avril and Estril. The identical gold lockets held the picture of the three of them together she had Ashe take one day when they were in the middle of wedding plans and too busy to notice.

“It’s beautiful.” Avril flipped the locket open and looked at the picture. “Oh! It is absolutely perfect.”

Ebony glanced at Estril and noticed the smile playing at her lips that didn’t quite reach her eyes as if she were happy with her new found friends, but sad because . . . well she wasn’t for sure why. “I

have one, too. I thought this way we could always be together even when we are apart. You know, us women have to stick together.”

“Thank you so much!”

“Yes, it is quite thoughtful of you. I will treasure it always.” Estril fastened the locket around her neck and let it fall under the silk of her red dress as Avril did the same. The girls hugged, cried, redid their makeup, and then it was time for the wedding to start.

Avril and Estril went down the staircase and to the ballroom while Ebony waited at the bottom for the wedding march to introduce her. Aiston and Aldin both had offered to walk her down the aisle, but she had refused. She appreciated the gesture and thanked them both, but knew her father would be with her in spirit. In fact, she was sure both her parents were watching over her today, smiling down at her, raining happiness on this most important day. Before she had time to start crying, she heard the music, took a deep breath, and started walking slowly down the white runner, covered with black rose petals leading to her destination.

Ashe’s breath hitched as she neared. He took her hand and kissed the back of it when after an eternity, she finally reached him. “You are exquisite.”

His whispered compliment rolled through her as she appreciated his appearance. He was tall, dark and gorgeous in his black tux with his black as sin hair curling at his nape. He was a beautiful, masculine man, and he was all hers. She whispered back in reply. “You look pretty good yourself.”

“I can’t wait to peel that dress off you.”

Her cheeks heated at his comment, and she wasn’t sure if it was from embarrassment or excitement.

Probably the latter. She was such a shameful hussy where he was concerned. She started to reply when the minister cleared his throat indicating they should keep silent so he could start the ceremony.

An hour later Ashe and Ebony sat at the main table laid out with beautiful gold trimmed dinnerware. She had to agree that Avril and Estril had indeed put together a beautiful wedding and reception. She was proud that she had such caring and talented friends. She didn't want to be vain, but she gave herself a small pat on the back for her part too. Everything had gone off without a hitch, and it was all perfect down to the last detail.

She looked at Aiston and Aldin sitting to Ashe's left and smiled, thinking it might be nice to have brothers as well as another sister. Although, Estril had warned her about there pig headedness and overprotective nature, it wasn't anything she couldn't handle after dealing with Ashe's stubbornness. She doubted that any man could come close to competing with him where that was concerned. She now found that trait endearing in him and had come to realize that it was more him trying to protect her than actually being stubborn, and she couldn't fault him for that. She could never doubt his love for her when he had fought so hard to keep her safe. They would, no doubt, have many arguments on this subject which she knew would end with them in bed making up. Maybe arguments would be a good thing?

She glanced at Ashe and smiled when she looked into the turquoise eyes she was growing so accustomed to drowning in. He reached for her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, leaned in to kiss her cheek, and whispered in her ear. "When do you think we can get out of here? I can't wait to have you to myself!"

His warm breath tickled her ear, and a shot of desire sizzled through her veins, heating her skin. "Ashe, you know we have to at least have a first dance, and I'm starving." She laughed at his feigned hurt expression.

"I'm starving too, but not for food." He gave her a small nip on her earlobe and watched her skin flush with need. He'd teach the little witch to laugh at him.

Turning the tables on him, she leaned in and placed a soft, lingering kiss on his lips before trailing her mouth down his jaw to his ear and sliding her hand up his thigh under the table. "Ashe, we can't be rude at our own wedding now can we?" She chuckled to herself. Two could play this game.

He placed his hand over hers, effectively stopping its journey upward on his thigh then shifted in obvious discomfort. He whispered in her ear. "I'm going to get you for that."

"I'm counting on it, but right now we have obligations."

"Fine, one dance and a few minutes of mingling, but then we grab a plate of food and eat upstairs in our room."

"We have to cut the wedding cake, too!" He grabbed her hand and headed for the floor. He held her as they danced their first dance together as husband and wife. It was only a few moments before everyone else joined in. As soon as the music ended, he grabbed her hand once again and practically dragged her around the room chatting with and thanking everyone for coming then proceeded to the table with their wedding cake. He admitted it was an impressive piece of work even to him. The cake was four tiers high with several one layer round cakes fanning out in a circle pattern. There was smooth, white icing on all the cakes topped with different variations of closed and open black roses.

Ashe picked up a glass and banged a spoon against it until Ebony thought it would break. Thankfully it didn't, and everyone focused their attention on the bride and groom. She felt the urge to giggle at her new husband's impatience to get her alone but stopped it before it could escape. After all, she really didn't mind.

"Thank you all for coming and celebrating our marriage. I must say, I am the luckiest man in the world to have such a beautiful woman who loves me. I am proud and honored to have Ebony as my wife." Ebony watched Ashe as he made his short speech and willed the tears away before they could escape down her cheeks.

Ashe picked up the silver knife with the red ribbons, handed it to Ebony then placed his hand over hers as they sliced into the delicate, fluffy center of their wedding cake. They pulled a small wedge onto a plate, broke off a piece and held it close to each other's mouths, all the while hearing jeers to smash it into each other's faces. Ebony, delicately bit into the piece Ashe offered her then smiled.

A few seconds later, Ashe wiped the cake off his face that Ebony had smeared all over it while everyone in the room clapped and laughed. He leaned in close to her. "You're going to pay for that one too, my little wife."

"Ooooh. Is that a promise?" Ebony couldn't contain her joy any longer and laughed until she cried.

After the cake cutting, Ebony tossed her bouquet over her head and behind her into the group of excited women. Wouldn't you know that Avril was the one to catch it? Ashe repeated the same thing with Ebony's garter. Aiston was the lucky winner of that one and actually blushed before hurrying out of the room. Ashe was surprised because he didn't think his brother even knew how to blush.

"Enough. I'm done waiting, Ebony." Ashe grabbed Ebony's hand and stopped by the feast laden table that had enough food to feed a small army. Slices of tender beef and chicken dripping with a delicate sweet sauce, shrimp cocktail, various steamed vegetables, and hors d'oeuvres decorated one end, while scrumptious cakes, cheesecakes, and puddings adorned the other end.

He grabbed two plates and piled one high with several of the main dishes and the other with sugary, sinful treats. He then pulled Ebony along with him to the hall, and the next thing she knew they were standing in front of the door to his bedroom or rather *their* bedroom.

"Wait here."

Ashe disappeared for a moment then popped back before Ebony had time to blink. His hands were now empty of the plates, and he swung the door open. He scooped her up and carried her across the threshold, kicking the door shut behind them. There were candles lit all over the room giving off a soft glow in the darkness. The bed was covered in red satin with black rose pedals strewn across it.

"Oh, Ashe, it's beautiful." Ebony sighed and leaned her head in to kiss his cheek.

“Not half as beautiful as you are.” He eased her out of his arms to stand in front of him, turning her so he could get to the zipper at her back. “I’ve been dying to get you out of this dress all night.”

She stepped away from him before he could get the zipper undone. “Wait, I have to tell you something first.” She wanted to tell him the news before they made love for the first time as husband and wife.

Ashe looked concerned. “Is something wrong? What is it?”

“No. No. It’s actually . . . um I mean I’ve known for a little while, but I wanted to wait and surprise you on our wedding night. I’m just not sure how you will take it.” She gave a nervous giggle.

“Ebony, whatever it is, I love you, and nothing you can say will ever change that.”

“We’re going to have a baby.” She stared at him as first shock registered on his face quickly followed by a small smile.

He grabbed her hands. “Are you sure? I mean it usually takes awhile for vampires to conceive.”

“Yes. In fact I think I might have been pregnant before you changed me. Are you happy?”

“Am I happy? Are you kidding me? I’m going to be a dad!” They both laughed as he swung her around. He hugged her tightly. “Thank you. For loving me, for marrying me, for putting up with me, and for being the mother of my child, and for all the years we are going to spend together.”

“You’re welcome, and I love you too!”

“But, I still need you now.” The desire burned in his eyes as he reached for her dress once again.

Ebony was surprised that his fingers seemed to shake a little as he unzipped the back of her dress. Her heart skipped a beat when his warm lips caressed the back of her neck and shoulders. The familiar heat started to build at his touch, and desire coursed through her veins. She laid her head back on his shoulder as his hands continued pushing her dress down until it fell in a soft pool around her feet. She stood before him in her stockings topped with black lacy garters, four inch heels and nothing else. She smiled at his quick intake of breath at her appearance. She slowly turned to allow him a slow perusal of her near naked form.

She turned to face him, and the desire in his eyes matched her own. She let out a small gasp when his big hand covered her breast, and his fingers stroked her nipple, rolling it until it puckered and hardened.

“You are breathtaking. I had every intention of taking this slow, but I don’t think my control is going to last much longer.” Ashe lavished her other breast with the same sweet torture.

“I don’t want to take it slow.” She slid her hand up under his jacket and pushed it off his shoulders, then unbuttoned his shirt and ran her hands over his muscled chest, gently pinching each nipple as she made her way to the buttons on his pants.

Ashe quickly kicked his pants, boxers, socks and shoes off, then lifted Ebony after she stepped out of her heels, and he laid her out like a feast on the red satin. She watched him, admiring the play of his muscles as he bent to roll one stocking slowly down her leg, kissing a scorching trail along the skin he uncovered. Goose bumps broke out all over her as erotic sensations throbbed through her body. He treated the other stocking to the same treatment and sucked in a small breath at the sight of her slightly opened legs and the glistening curls at their apex.

She gasped when he began kissing the inside of her thigh getting closer and closer to the place she most wanted his mouth. He nipped and licked and played until she let out an impatient breath. He shot her a hot predatory stare that curled her toes and growled low in his throat before he gave her one slow lick from the bottom of her soft folds to her core. She thought for sure she would spontaneously combust at any moment, for the fire was raging through her veins now. He pushed her legs wide, holding each creamy thigh in place with his strong hands as he began slowly circling his tongue around her sensitive nub. She let out a keening moan and bucked her hips only to find his grip tightened to pull

her wider, completely exposing her to him. She felt vulnerable, sexy, wanton, and he knew exactly what she wanted and brought her to the edge of climax over and over until she thought she might pass out from the sensation.

Finally, she put her hands in his hair and tugged him up her body, but before he could enter her she placed a hand in the middle of his chest and pushed him on his back to straddle his hips. She smiled at his somewhat surprised look and began kissing him, working her way from his lips to his flat male nipples. She suckled them into tiny hard pebbles then continued down to his navel where she followed that intriguing line of hair she loved so much to his erection. He tried to pull her back up his big body, but before he could manage it she pushed his arms back to the bed and shook her head.

“Uh, huh, it’s my turn now.” Then she circled his shaft with one hand and bent to lick the clear drop of fluid off the tip enticing another low growl out of him.

He was such a beautiful man. Perfect in every way, and she wanted to please him in every way. She smiled and bent farther to lick the underside of the broad head then followed it down to the heavy sac at the base, tonguing it before licking a trail back to the tip. He gasped as she took him into the hot wetness of her mouth and sucked lightly, running her tongue around him. He bucked his hips and grabbed a handful of her hair, holding her steady while he pumped into her luscious mouth as she sucked him in deep.

Suddenly, he pulled her up, tossed her on her back, spread her legs open wide and impaled her tight wetness while he sank his teeth in her neck. He thrust over and over while he pulled her blood into his mouth. *“You taste like heaven.”* She breathed in hard gasps as the tension built and built. He had hardly released his hold on her neck when she planted her own fangs deep into his chest. The sensation heightened his desire to the point where he was nearly frantic with excitement.

She met his thrusts and pushed at him for more, letting her teeth slide out she arched harder into him. He pounded into her while her hips met him thrust for thrust over and over until her inner muscles tightened. She let out a loud cry as he threw his head back with a guttural groan. Her muscles contracted around him while he released into her then he collapsed, rolled to his side, and pulled her with him. She was a satiated boneless heap of Jell-O. He held her tight, and they both smiled, knowing no one could ever be as happy as they were.

* * * *

The next day started the same as most with all of the Aleksandrovs and Avril sitting around yet another huge table of food that McKayla had prepared for breakfast. Ebony and Ashe had decided not to go on a honeymoon right away because they were happy at the moment just spending time together. When Ashe made the announcement of Ebony's pregnancy, it was obvious Aiston and Aldin were the only ones who looked surprised, which meant Avril and Estril already knew.

She smiled when he told her he was happy she had such close friends she could confide in and count on. He passed cigars out to Aldin and Aiston as the women turned their noses up in disgust at them saying the offending smokes were smelly and nasty.

After breakfast Ebony, Estril, and Avril went to the family room to have some more girl time, and the boys went to the study to smoke the cigars.

"I think Ashe will make a wonderful father." Estril smiled at Ebony.

"Oh, I know he will, except I just hope he doesn't spoil him too much."

"Him? What do you mean him? How can you possibly know it is a boy?" Avril looked at her through squinted eyes.

Ebony laughed. "Just call it mother's intuition."

"Oh great! Another male. Just what the world needs."

Estril and Ebony giggled. "You know you will love your nephew just as much as you would a niece."

Avril sighed. "Yeah. I will, but I was looking forward to buying little frilly dresses and playing dolls and—"

Bang! Boom!

The three women jumped at the loud noise that had just come from across the hall.

"What the heck was that?" Ebony asked as they all three got up and went to the study.

Ebony heard loud laughter from inside, and when she opened the door all three of them started giggling. Ashe and Aldin were laughing at Aiston who was sitting on the couch with a blown up cigar hanging from his mouth, and a shocked expression on his face, which was coated with black soot.

"Oh my God! Ashe, did you do that to him?" Ebony could barely get the question out around her laughter.

"Yep. Remember the salt in the coffee, bro? Not to mention the countless other things you've pulled on me."

Amusement quickly replaced disbelief on Aiston's face. "I can't believe it. You got me. I don't know how the hell you did it, but you got me." Aiston promptly joined in on the laughter at his expense.

Epilogue

One year later

Ashe watched as Ebony held their nursing son to her breast. It was one of the most beautiful sights he had ever seen, even though he might be a little jealous of his son at the moment. Marcus Robert Aleksandrov had come screaming into the world four months ago. They had decided on Marcus after Ashe's father, and Ashe had been touched when Ebony was the one who had suggested it. Marcus was healthy and had his father's black wavy hair and dark skin. The one thing that stood out most though was his mother's green eyes. He was a gorgeous baby, and Ashe had a feeling he was going to be trouble. He would enjoy every minute of it.

"Our son seems to have an insatiable appetite." Ashe walked over to Ebony in the rocker and ran his fingers lightly through Marcus's soft curls.

"Yes, just like someone else I know." Ashe returned her knowing smile.

"I still can't believe I have a gorgeous wife and son. It's more than a man could ask for."

"It's more than a woman could ask for too, Ashe. Thank you for our son."

"No, thank you for our son."

She laughed. "Well I think maybe we both had a little something to do with it so let's just compromise on that."

“Sounds good to me. By the way, Uncle Aiston is driving Aunt Avril home as we speak.” He caught the small frown on his wife’s face and knew she was worried about Avril and Aiston. They were constantly at each other’s throats. “Don’t worry. I don’t think Avril plans on killing him quite yet.”

Ebony giggled. “I sure hope they start getting along better because I have a feeling she will be here a lot. I think she is very proud to be an aunt.”

“That’s fine with me. It gives me more time with you. And, they will figure things out.” He squeezed her shoulders. “You know I even caught Aldin holding Marcus the other day? He didn’t seem too happy to have been caught. I think Marcus will be good for this whole family.”

“Me, too.” She looked down at her now sleeping son and gently handed him to Ashe after placing a kiss on his head. Ashe did the same, carefully laid him in his crib, and pulled a soft blanket over his sleeping form.

He then took Ebony’s hand and led her to their room. Being a vampire was absolutely wonderful. While it normally took two months or more to recover fully from childbirth, Ebony had recovered within three days. He kissed her and shut the door.

“Now it’s my turn.” Ashe’s eyes glazed with desire as he took her nipple in his mouth, sucking gently. Ebony sighed. How lucky they were to love one another so much, to have a beautiful son and an eternity to share it all.

* * * *

Geez! That woman was exasperating! No matter what Aiston did, Avril acted like he was the plague. He had gotten the unpleasant task of driving her home after her visit. Maybe he could just disappear from now on when she visited. After all, there were so many other women who clamored for

his attention. He watched Avril close the front door before driving away. He had just stepped out of the car upon his return to the estate when his brother's voice cut sharply through his mind.

"Aiston! Come quick. I'm in the alley on the corner of Second Street."

Aiston immediately shimmered there to find Aldin surrounded by six shadow drifters trying to fight them off while yelling at someone to get the hell out of there. Upon closer inspection that someone was Alaina. "What the hell?"

Aiston and Aldin went back to back and cut the drifters down one by one. The shrieks were horrible, and blood sprayed with each blow. Aldin would take one down while Aiston removed its head with his sword. Within minutes all that was left of the drifters were puddles of black goo seeping into the ground back to hell where they belonged and the horrible stench.

Aldin whipped his head around to find Alaina still standing in the corner. "Are you fucking crazy?"

After a few mumbles from Alaina explaining that she had decided to start fighting shadow drifters, Aldin gave the stupid woman a serious tongue lashing. One didn't just wake up one day and decide to hunt drifters. They were ruthless and cunning, and it took years of training to learn to kill them without being maimed or worse. By the time Aldin was done with her, she was almost in tears, although anger was definitely present too. She told him to go to hell and then vanished.

The shadow drifters seemed to be increasing in numbers and boldness lately, and this worried him. He shook his head in exasperation and looked at his brother. "Women."

"Yeah, you don't have to tell me, bro."

The End

About the Author

S. K. Yule is the author of *Darkest Hours* and has written paranormal and contemporary romance along with several erotica novellas. A passionate affair was born with the heated genres upon the first book read several years ago. From there an inspiration to write such wild, abandoned stories grew.

