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 Darkest
Book II

Darkest Desires

S.K. Yule

Amira Press

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Dedication

To my father. I miss you every day. You never let the fear of failure stop you from doing anything in life. Thank you for passing that trait on to me.

Chapter One

Tiny fingers of dread tickled her nape. Dread? Was that the right word to describe what she'd been feeling throughout her otherwise normal weekend routine at work? No. Dread was what she'd felt as she walked to the front of the classroom in Junior High when her Study Hall teacher had demanded she read the note he'd confiscated out loud. The one she'd been passing to a friend mooning about how gorgeous her eighth grade crush, Joey Robinson, was—who, by the way, sat in the front row. So what was it she was feeling? She wasn't sure, but something didn't feel right. Something felt . . . off balance.

Her skin tingled in warning, but of what she didn't know. Something she undoubtedly was not going to like, something life changing. *Good God, Avril Taylor! Get a hold of yourself. Since when did you turn psychic?* Yet, even the mental scolding she gave herself couldn't shake off basic human instinct. The sole thing once so heavily relied upon for survival. The thing most humans didn't notice existed in today's modern world until it was too late. The thing that people shook off as some ridiculous feeling caused by stress or fatigue instead of recognizing it as the hard-wired tool of the human psyche that notifies of impending danger.

She took a deep breath and nearly groaned as the smell of stale smoke, alcohol and cheap cologne assailed her nostrils. No matter how long she worked at Mac's Tavern she'd never get used to the unsavory smells or tasteless décor that plagued the old hole in the wall. She glanced around the room and sighed. The walls were covered with posters of scantily clad women and neon beer signs. The only thing it had going for it was its cleanliness, which was due to the fact that she kept it that way. Cleaning wasn't part of her job, but she wasn't sure she'd want to continue working at the dank place if it went back to the filthy state it had been in when she had first taken the weekend bartending position a couple years ago.

Her eyes rested on the deer head with huge antlers hanging above her and she grimaced. That, in particular, made her stomach crawl in sympathy for the once magnificent animal that sported them. Its dead, black eyes stared back at her. She tried hard not to look at the offending trophy as the same horror movie played in her mind every time she allowed herself to focus more than twenty seconds on the thing. Even now the image of the beautiful, living creature in his natural habitat—scenting a gorgeous, brown-eyed doe—danced in slow motion through her over-active imagination. His head raised on a thick, golden neck while he sniffed the air for his doe, cautiously approaching his target only to find an intruder on two legs had tricked him with spray that smelled like his potential mate.

The buck, now terrified, would turn and run, belatedly fleeing. Shot down with one clean bang, his life ended in a pool of blood caused by man. Avril knew that it was a necessary thing to control certain species of animal populations, but it didn't mean she had to like it.

She placed an iced mug under the tap, and let the beer flow until the foam hovered half an inch over the rim in a neat cap that sat precariously on top of the golden liquid. She rolled her eyes after sliding the mug down the slick surface of the bar to the dark man sitting at the end where he neatly stopped it with his hand from crashing to the floor before giving her an exaggerated wink. Being a bartender had its ups and downs. One of the ups was the cushion the income provided in addition to her full-time day job at the City Hall Record's Department. Constantly being picked up on by the local drunks was one of the downs. Especially, since she had pretty much given up on men altogether, having not met one in the last five years who hadn't turned out to be a chauvinistic pig. Dealing with her small town's luses on a regular basis, whose egos were inflated to the size of blimps, supported that decision.

Lately, she began to wonder if she was fatally flawed where relationships were concerned, and had given some serious thought to giving up on men altogether. Yet, her sub-conscious refused to allow the recurring dream of Mr. Right, a picket fence, and two point five kids—one of the most sought after American dreams—die a respectable death. *Yeah, like that's ever going to happen.* Agitated, she blew out an agitated breath and began wiping down glasses with a fluffy, white rag until they squeaked in clean glee.

A small smile tugged at her lips as she thought about her best friend. Ebony had gotten married over a year ago and already had a new son, Marcus. Ebony had dated literally three or four men the whole time Avril had known her. She was shy and had still been a virgin at twenty-seven—which Avril was amazed, shocked, and proud of—when she met her husband, Ashe Aleksandrov. The fact that Ebony found her true love was not surprising, as Ebony was a genuine, down-to-earth, sweet girl. However, Avril had been completely thrown off-kilter when she'd found out that Ebony's husband and family were vampires. Not to mention her best friend was now one, too.

She had thought Ebony was cuckoo—as any normal human would—when she'd first told her what the Aleksandrovs were, but that was before she had attended a ball thrown by the family and witnessed, with her own eyes, two lovers in a seemingly normal embrace. Normal until she realized that the man's teeth had been buried in the woman's throat while the woman's head had been thrown back in, not fear but ecstasy. She had attended the ball with Aiston, one of Ashe's brothers, yet another chauvinistic pig. He definitely wasn't hard on the eyes by any means—none of the Aleksandrov men were—and he had a suave charm about him, undoubtedly from years and years of practicing the art of womanizing. She didn't like to think too much about Aiston, as no matter how vehemently she denied it, she was attracted to him, plain and simple. *Yep that's me. I should have a sign stamped on my forehead: All losers apply here.*

It had taken her awhile to accept the fact that vampires existed, among many other creatures that she didn't even want to think about at the moment. A shiver ran down her spine, reminding her, once again, that her little world of reality now contained things that, at one time, she'd never thought possible. Things that would give the term *bump-in-the-night* a whole new, terrifying meaning.

But, no matter how hard she had to work at accepting such things, she couldn't be happier that Ebony had found Ashe, because had Ashe not turned her friend vampire, Ebony would probably be dead by now from the terminal cancer she had been diagnosed with. She couldn't imagine what it would be like standing here right now knowing her best friend was gone. Her world would be much lonelier without Ebony's smile. She was truly happy for Ebony, happy that she was still alive, happy that she was still in her life, and happy that she'd made her an aunt, because Ebony was, after all, the closest thing to a sister she'd ever had.

A small, unwanted whisper of jealousy slyly slithered through her. She sighed and continued wiping down the glasses. She didn't even know if it truly was jealousy that she felt, but maybe more of a longing, a yearning to find someone that loved her as fiercely as Ashe loved Ebony. Another down side, for Avril anyway, was that Ebony's marriage encouraged Avril's mother, Caren, to harass her even more over her single status. She loved her mother, but every time she visited her parents, it was the same old, same old. Her mother repeatedly tried to fix her up with sons of friends and could never stress enough how lovely it would be to finally have grandchildren. Her father, Aaron, would quietly stand in the background shaking his head in bewilderment at his wife's persistence while Caren went on and on.

Ebony insisted Avril would find her soul mate. That it would happen one day when she least expected it. Yet, Avril seriously doubted that at the moment. She had heard somewhere that most women felt incomplete without a man and would end up settling for less than their ideal mate if their biological clock got too close to ticking its last second. Avril was comfortable with who she was, with or without a man. Although, if she were completely honest with herself, it would be nice to know someone was waiting for her at home. Someone who would rub her achy feet and listen as she complained about her horrible day at work. Someone to cuddle on the couch with, someone to fight with, someone to make love with or just to snuggle up to every night as she fell asleep. Yet, she knew in her heart that no matter how much she might long for those things, she would never settle for less than true love.

She thought herself passably attractive and didn't seem to have much of a problem getting a date if she wanted one. The thing was, she seemed to attract all the egomaniacs that were looking for a quick toss in the hay. Her last relationship had actually seemed promising, but that was before the big stink bomb had been dropped right in the middle of her happy little world.

Matt had been charming, caring and attentive. She'd started to believe that she might have finally found a decent man. That was until day she and Matt had been enjoying a quiet evening at her apartment, and had been interrupted by insistent pounding on the door, which had revealed none other than Matt's angry wife.

When she looked back on it, she knew she'd been a naïve fool. There had been so many clues of his deception they had practically slapped her in the face. She and Matt had always met at her house or a restaurant, or the park, or the movies. She had never set foot in his house. He had claimed to have a very hectic work schedule, which meant they had to use many of his lunch hours to spend time together or grab a couple hours here or there. He had never been able to spend the night at her house, and the couple times they had spent the weekend together, they had gone out of town. She had been a blind

idiot. Maybe she had a personality flaw that attracted these types. Bad karma, fate, flaw, whatever it was, she was through being a jerk magnet.

So much had happened in the last year her head swirled, and she almost missed Brad calling her over to order another beer. Brad Connelly was by no means hard to look at with his golden skin, dark hair and gray eyes, but he was a regular and very drunk. She had a rule about the regular drunks. Nuh uh, and no way. Besides, Brad rubbed her the wrong way.

“Hey, sweetcakes. How about another round?”

“Don’t you think you’ve had enough for tonight, Brad?” Avril hoped that he would take the hint and realize she had no intention of serving him any more liquor. Her shift would be over in half an hour and she could hardly wait to close up and go home.

“Awww, come on, Avril. We go through this little charade all the time. Just be a good girl and get me another beer.” He looked her up and down with his bleary eyes and licked his lips before digging a cigarette out of a mangled pack lying on the bar in front of him.

Brad was a pain in the ass and had been trying to get her to go out with him for months. *Go out with him? More like trying to get in my pants.* She politely refused each time, but lately, he had become more aggressive with the come-ons.

“Look, Brad. You know I can’t serve you anymore. The bar closes in a half hour, and last call was five minutes ago. Why don’t you just walk home and sleep it off?”

Good grief. Couldn’t he just leave? She just wanted this night to end. Her feet hurt, she felt the beginning of a headache, and she wanted to go home and pack for her week-long stay with Ebony that started tomorrow. Since the scare with her friend’s cancer, they had grown even closer, if that was possible. She stayed with Ebony on and off to visit with her and baby Marcus and to just get away from the mind numbing humdrum of daily living.

“Why don’t you come home and sl-sleep it off with me? I mean, I’ve asked you out about a hundred times now, Avril. What’s wrong? Do you think you’re too good for me?” He put the cigarette to his lips, lit it, then took a long drawl off it. He blew a thick cloud of smoke toward the ceiling.

Here we go again. She hated smoke, probably more so even than most since she was forced to breathe it in every weekend she worked. No one was supposed to smoke in the bar, but so far, Mac turned a blind eye and let everyone continue to do just that.

Avril let out a long sigh before answering. “Brad, you know I’m taking a break from dating. I’ve told you that over and over. Please quit asking, don’t cause any trouble, and go home, okay?” Even if she wasn’t taking a break, he wouldn’t have a chance in hell.

When Brad leaned toward her, she caught Hank Tanner's big, tense frame moving slowly in her direction from the corner of her eye. Brad, even in his inebriated state, realized the bouncer's intentions and quickly diverted his direction to off the stool and toward the door.

"Fine, Avril. But one day you're going to realize what you're m-missing. Then it'll be too late." Brad took a couple more long draws from the cigarette before throwing it on the floor and toeing it with his shoe.

"Bye, Brad, take it easy." Geez! The man was never going to give up. She flashed Hank a quick smile of gratitude. The bouncer was an irreplaceable asset to the bar, and had an almost eerie knack for maintaining peace among the rowdy customers. Most of the regulars wouldn't think about causing a problem with Hank in the room. The man was the size of a tank and intimidated the hell out of anyone with a brain. It was hard to believe such a small town needed a bouncer, but in a dinky town, getting drunk at the bar was pretty much the only thing to do for entertainment.

The last patron wandered out the door twenty minutes later, and Avril began wiping down the tables, sticky with droplets of booze, as Hank locked up the back door.

"I'll wait around until you're done and walk you home."

Avril noted the concern lining his tanned face. He usually insisted on walking her home as she only live a few blocks away, but she had to tally up the receipts tonight and didn't want him to wait around. "Don't worry about it, Hank. You go on home to Lorena."

She knew he was going to object before he did it. She wanted him to get home to his wife who was eight months pregnant. It was obvious by the way his habitual knuckle cracking became more and more frequent as it got closer and closer to quitting time that he didn't like to be away from Lorena when she was this close to her due date. Avril could almost tell time by those cracks. *Crack*. Eight o'clock. *Crack, crack*. Ten o'clock. *Crackity, crack, crack*. Half hour until closing time. She smiled and wondered if he even realized his habit.

"But—"

"No buts, just go home. Come on. I've done this countless times, and tonight's no different. Besides, I have to cash out and I'll be awhile. Just twist the lock on your way out so no one can get in and I'll lock up as usual after I finish up." She held up her hand to cut off his next attempt at protest.

Hank shook his head slowly from side to side. "You know, you really shouldn't work here." He shook his head again. "I know, I know. Plainview is a pretty safe little town, but hell, Avril, even things happen in small towns after dark around bars, especially with the likes of Brad Connelly hanging around. I just don't want to see anything happen to you."

Avril gave Hank a big smile. "Aw. Aren't you sweet." She giggled when he blushed. "Sorry, you know I have a way with running off at the mouth. I know you are concerned Hank, and, trust me, I truly appreciate it. But really, I'll be fine. Brad's all talk, and besides, he's probably passed out face down on

his couch in a big puddle of drool at this very minute. Now get home to that wife of yours and tell her I said hello.”

His shoulders slumped. “Fine, but be careful. I’ll see you in a couple weeks, and tell Ebony hi for me.”

“I will. And, Hank, tell Lorena after she has that baby and gets back to normal I want some of that famous banana-nut bread she makes.”

Hank smiled. “I’ll do that.” He gave her one last worried look and walked to the door where he stared outside, first to the right then left, undoubtedly checking the surroundings for any sign of Brad, before he clicked the lock behind him.

Avril finished wiping down the tables and bar and cashed out the register, making sure everything balanced. She left her boss, Mac Wilkerson, the deposit that needed to be made along with a short note reminding him that she wouldn’t be in for her next normal shift. After a quick check to make sure she didn’t forget anything, she grabbed her jacket and walked out the front door.

Goose bumps immediately broke out on her arms. Summer was coming to an end, and the nights were growing cooler. As she turned to lock the door, a bruising hand gripped her arm and spun her around where she found Brad’s furious eyes peering down at her.

“S-So you think you can just keep turning me down? Who do you think you are?”

Uh-oh. Brad had always been kind of pushy, but she’d never seen him angry like he appeared to be now. He was still completely sloshed, and now enraged on top of it. Alcohol and anger were never two good things to mix.

“What are you doing?” She tried to sound calm, as she didn’t want to rile him any further, even though her stomach began churning nervously. “Please let go of my arm.”

“I th-think you owe me an apology, and I think a kiss would do just fine.”

Avril pulled hard on her arm in an attempt to escape, but Brad was strong and she got nowhere with the effort. “Look, Brad, I don’t know why you are doing this, but you need to stop before things get out of hand.”

Avril was usually cool-headed in stressful situations, but fear began clawing at her stomach, and her heart raced in adrenaline-induced fight or flight mode. She was alone with a man who was twice her size in front of a dark bar at two-thirty in the morning with not a soul in sight. If she lived in a big city instead of this dinky town of Plainview, there might be people about who could help her. But, her tiny town was completely quiet, and most of the residents had probably been asleep for several hours now. She glanced around in hopes that there would be a straggler somewhere.

"N-No one is going to help you and you know it. Bes-sides, what's the problem? I can make you like men again." Brad pushed her up against the door and smashed against her, effectively pinning her in place.

"Brad, this is one of the reasons why I have a problem with men. Please, stop this and let me go." She tried to wriggle out from under him, but made no progress. He was just too strong.

"Well, I still say I can make you like me. You always say you don't want to go out w-with me, but I see the way you look at me with those big, brown eyes of yours. Women say I have a lot to offer, if you know what I mean."

Her eyes widened in disgust as he rubbed his palm down the front of his jeans, leaving her no doubt what he meant. He put his lips close to her ear and trailed a line of sloppy kisses along her neck while pressing his erection against her abdomen.

The stench of alcohol on his breath made her stomach roil and bile rose to the back of her throat. This could not be happening. What the hell was she going to do? And more importantly, exactly what all did Brad think he was going to do? She was not going to go down without a fight. She let herself go limp, pulled her knee back as slowly as possible while trying not to draw attention to the action, and rammed it into his groin with all her might. He doubled over, and she sprinted away from him, but not fast enough.

"You little bitch!"

His big hand grabbed the back of her hair, faster than she thought a drunken man should be able to move. She cried out as he spun her around and backhanded her hard across the cheekbone. Stars danced across her sight, and she thought she might pass out for a moment from the pain. But, she knew if she did, she'd have no chance at all. She gulped in several deep breaths, willing away the blackness clouding her vision.

Sheer terror raced through her veins, and she took a deep breath, filling her lungs for a night-piercing scream, but once again, he was too quick. His hand came down hard over her mouth, cutting off her cry for help while his other one roughly worked up under her shirt. He found her breast and squeezed it hard enough to bring tears to her eyes. God, what was she going to do?

"You know, you're quite a curvy little thing. I can just picture all those wavy, dark curls of yours spread out on my pillow as you open your legs wide for me. I'm going to fuck you so good, baby, that you won't ever want another man but me."

She struggled as hard as she could, but he was just too big and she was weak and wobbly from the blow to her face. She screamed until her lungs were on fire against his hand, but the sound was muffled, and she knew no one would hear. A tear escaped down her cheek as he continued his assault on her body. He was rough, and she could only imagine the bruises he would leave behind. Damn it! Why hadn't she just let Hank wait for her?

She squeezed her eyes shut as his hand now traveled to the button of her jeans. She wiggled harder, trying in earnest to get away. Finally, the hand he held over her mouth slipped just enough that she was able to get her teeth on one of his fingers. She bit down hard. Her cheekbone felt as if it exploded this time when he hit her, and when everything began to spin and her stomach turned queasy, she knew passing out wasn't something she'd be able to avoid again. She hoped that when Brad was done with her, he didn't decide to kill her too. Then, another terrifying thought entered her numbing mind. Maybe she didn't want to wake up anyway after Brad raped her. No! She had too much to live for, damn it! She would survive this and she would not allow this filth to destroy her life.

The last thing she remembered before her body slid down to the ground and the darkness claimed her was Brad's loud yelp.

Chapter Two

Aiston Aleksandrov eyed the shadowdrifter as they circled one another. The thing looked so normal he had almost missed it . . . almost. All of the drifters he had encountered in his nearly seven hundred years had been macabre in appearance with beady eyes, grayish colored skin, stringy hair, and yellow-stained fangs. All of them up to this point anyway. If he hadn't been paying close attention to the scent and behavior of this one, he might have dismissed it as human. The one thing he doubted a drifter could ever hide was its unmistakable scent of decaying flesh. Faint as it was that most humans couldn't smell it, he and his kind had no problem detecting it with their enhanced senses.

The drifters had changed dramatically in their behavior, and now appearance, in the last several months. He and his brothers, Ashe and Aldin, were dedicated hunters, protecting humans by ridding the earth of the rogue vampires.

The drifters were notorious for maiming, torturing, and killing humans for sport, not to mention any poor animal that might get in their way. He hated killing them, as all drifters had, at one time, been vampires like he, but had chosen a different path, a path of stealing souls and being stripped of all feelings of joy and happiness, leaving despair and hate to rule their bodies. When a drifter was eliminated, all the human souls it had stolen were freed, and the shadowdrifter took a swift journey to hell to meet the one who had made them what they were. Satan. A vampire could exchange his soul for the gift of feeling no love, joy or happiness ever again. Most would not understand why anyone would choose such an existence. Yet, most did not understand what it was like watching everything and everyone they loved die over and over, year after year after decade after decade, non-stop for possibly eternity.

Aiston was on his usual weekend errand to Mac's Tavern to make sure Avril, his sister-in-law, Ebony's best friend, made it home safe. Ebony was always worried about her friend going home by herself late at night, and Aiston agreed to see to her safety if only because his brother Ashe threatened to make his life miserable if he refused. Avril never knew he watched her. Hell, she'd probably have a fit if she had any inkling about how close he was to her on a regular basis. The woman had a grudge against men, and, in particular, against him. For some reason, she'd disliked him on first sight, though he hadn't done anything to her. *Women. How the hell are we supposed to figure them out?*

The fact that that thought had even crossed his mind was strange. He had never wanted to figure a woman out. He wined them, dined them, seduced them, and left them. He had never once

given a shit about any of their feelings—other than the sexual ones. They were a means to his pleasure and that was it. He had never been able to bring himself to feel guilty about it either since the women he entertained knew exactly what they were getting into with him. In fact, most initiated the encounter and wanted nothing but the same as he—a seductive roll in the sheets. If he knew anything, it was how to please a woman in bed, and the women who sought him knew it.

The drifter warily watched Aiston as he circled him. Aiston reached over his shoulder and pulled the sword from the sheath strapped to his back. The malevolent hiss whispered in relief of its freedom spurred the drifter to attack. He was ready and dodged the wicked claws protruding from each of the thing's fingertips. He knew the talons could shred him to the bone, mortally wounding him by causing severe blood loss, not to mention they were poisonous. The poison wasn't potent enough to kill a vampire by itself, but the venom was strong enough to weaken one and give the drifter a distinct advantage.

The drifter ran at Aiston again. Aiston spun out of reach, once again, but this time, followed the creature around. He brought the sword down across its shoulder, and sliced through flesh and muscle. The blade stopped only when it hit bone. The drifter screamed a high-pitched sound that nearly shattered Aiston's eardrums.

"You're going to die, hunter." The jumbled, hissed whisper was barely understandable.

"I don't think so." *Not today you putrid son of a bitch.* Aiston brought his sword up in front of him, held it with both hands, and planted his feet firmly on the road. "Come and get me you slimy bastard."

The thing screeched again and ran at Aiston, both hands pointing ten claws at him. Aiston stood completely still, not moving an inch until the very last second. Right before the talons made contact with his stomach, he swung the sword in a blurring speed that most human eyes would miss and nearly removed the head of the drifter. He spun around and raised the blade once again to finish the job. Before he made his death blow, the drifter gurgled around some last words.

"Save it for your maker." He cleanly sliced through the last few inches of skin and muscle holding the drifter's head on, sending the creature back to hell. His sword remained raised for the few seconds it took him to calm his adrenaline-rushed heartbeat and breathing. He crinkled his nose as the remains of the drifter—now a bubbling black, stinking goo—seeped into the ground while he pushed the blade back into the sheath.

It had been a quick fight he dominated, and he was now in the same pissed off mood he always was after killing a former vampire. It was a job that had to be done for the sake of humans, but some of the drifters had been old friends before they'd chosen the darker side. He barely saw the small blue orbs racing into the sky toward the heavens. When the souls a drifter had stolen were released after its death, they were rarely seen. He had been fortunate enough to experience one of those exceptions. They were beautiful, and Aiston was glad he had caught a glimpse of them. They served as a good reminder as to why it was necessary to dispatch the drifters, and soothed his anger to some degree.

He slowly turned and continued walking toward the destination the drifter had forced him to take a detour from. As he neared the bar, a man's angry voice followed by a loud smack and a small cry drifted clearly through the still night. His blood turned to ice, and rage replaced the remnants of leftover anger from the fight at the sound of that cry. It belonged to Avril. The predator inside him screamed for freedom and ramped up his adrenaline, which made his blood boil ten times harder than when he had fought the drifter only moments ago. The anguished cry was laced with terror and pain, and whoever was the source of that terror and pain was about to meet their worst nightmare.

He stopped and shimmered to the bar's back door. In a mere moment, he was standing directly behind the man who had just hit Avril. His vision blurred filmy red and his veins sang with rage when he saw the man's hand working the zipper of her jeans open. She looked so small next to him. Her glazed eyes told him she was nearly unconscious, and she'd have never stood a chance against the bigger man on her own. Avril's attacker reeked of alcohol and excitement. Heat radiated from Aiston, and the familiar stirring of fire licked at his burning skin. He took a deep breath, trying to control the anger encouraging the inferno at his fingertips to life.

His gift, his curse, his strength, was the element of fire. It had taken him years to master the ability. Years littered with accidents. He'd nearly burned Sighasora, the small village he and his brothers grew up in, down on more than one occasion. His mother and father had been patient with his struggles to contain his powers, but he remembered even his mild-mannered dad getting a little irate the day Aiston had set his hair on fire. His fingertips glowed red, and within seconds, flames flickered from each end, mocking ten lit cigarette lighters. He breathed deep again, and the flames died out, yet his fingertips continued glowing. He was master of the fire now. Could control it without much thought except when he was angry. Then he could rain a fury of fire down that hell would be envious of. The downside to his ability was that it weakened him when he used it.

He grabbed the man by the collar and slung him against the brick wall like a rag doll before he wrapped one hand around his throat—easily holding him, feet dangling off the ground, enjoying the way his eyes bulged. He could disintegrate the man with a mere thought, but he was supposed to protect humans, not kill them. Although he was having a hard time considering this asshole a human.

The man struggled for breath. "W-Who are you?"

Aiston felt the darkness creep across his eyes, and knew the familiar blue color that had stared back at him countless times in the mirror was turning black like the fog turned the cerulean sea gray. "I'm your worst nightmare, buddy." Aiston smiled when the man's eyes flew wide, and the smell of urine assailed his nostrils. The fact that he'd made the coward piss himself was a very small concession. Aiston growled. Wild, untamed need to kill the bastard coursed through him.

The man gasped again. "That's just my girlfriend. She likes it rough like that. I didn't hurt her none."

Aiston sneered, rammed his face closer to the lying bastard and took pleasure in the sight of his cheeks turning beat red and his forehead breaking out with droplets of sweat. "Really, I thought that

was Avril, my sister-in-law's best friend. And, believe me when I say, I'm pretty sure she has no boyfriend, much less a scum bag like you."

The red drained from the man's face, leaving pale, pasty white skin. "Please, I swear, I'll never touch her again. Just don't hurt me."

Aiston laughed at the man's whiny plea, and heard a quiet moan behind him. He glanced at Avril lying on the ground. "Oh, I have no doubt you will not touch her again. In fact, you will not come near her again, and you will find a different bar to drink at." Aiston pushed his face even closer to the man's face and let one of his fangs slide below his lip. "Because, I swear, if you come near her again, I'll fucking kill you." Aiston let the man drop back to the pavement, and made sure his relief was short lived. He punched him hard in the face, knocking him out and sending him thudding to the ground with a loud crack.

The man would be sore and bruised for at least a week, but that gave him only a small amount of satisfaction. He could have easily crushed the man's skull with that one simple punch, and it had been very hard to not do so. Yeah, he may use women himself, but he didn't believe in hitting or abusing them. There wasn't too much that pissed him off more.

He kneeled by Avril's limp body and pushed the dark mass of short, wavy hair away from her face. She moaned again and an unfamiliar, invisible wave of protectiveness flowed over his skin and sank deep into him. He picked her up and shimmered them both to her apartment. He laid her gently on the bed. When he saw the deep purple bruise coloring her cheek, he barely contained the need clawing at him to go back and kill the bastard behind the bar. He took a deep, calming breath, and went to find a wash rag in the bathroom. After he found one in a small closet beside the toilet, he wet it with cold water and wrung it out. When he laid the cold cloth on her cheek, she moaned again and her lovely, chocolate brown eyes fluttered open. Suddenly, her arms and legs flailed, striking out at him awkwardly.

He gently restrained her. "Avril, it's me, Aiston." The blankness in her eyes told him she was still in a fog from being unconscious, and wasn't thinking clearly. He figured she probably thought she was still back at the bar with that asshole.

"Avril, look at me. It's okay. I've got you." He knew the minute his familiar voice finally penetrated her mind by the way her eyes cleared.

"Aiston?"

"Yeah, you're okay now. You're home." He let her go when she calmed down, and watched as she eased into a sitting position before gently trailing her fingers along her bruised cheek. She cradled her head between her hands and moaned. Aiston picked up the cold rag that had fallen to the floor in the struggle and placed it against her face once again.

She let out a little sigh that sent a strange ache through his heart. "Why were you at the bar, and what did you do to Brad?"

"You mean you actually know that fu—scumbag?" Anger slithered through him once again at that thought.

"Yeah, only because he is a regular at the bar. I mean, I had no idea his flirting would turn violent."

His blood boiled. "Well, he won't be bothering you anymore."

She pulled the rag away from her face. "What do you mean? What did you do?"

"I didn't kill him if that's what you're worried about. But, believe me, I wanted to, and if he ever touches you again, I will."

She let out a long breath that sounded much like relief. "You didn't answer my other question. Why were you at the bar?"

He shrugged. "I was in the area."

She eyed him suspiciously. "Uh huh. If you say so." She shivered, and Aiston took her hand in his.

"Hey, it's okay. You're safe now."

"Yeah, I know. It's just . . . well, I don't even want to think about what could be happening right now if you hadn't shown up." Avril shifted and placed a small kiss on Aiston's cheek. "Thank you."

He watched in amusement as she toyed with the corner of her shirt in obvious discomfort of making physical contact with him. He liked the reaction. It proved he wasn't the only one feeling the attraction between them. Unfortunately, he knew Avril well enough to know she'd fight it with everything she had.

* * * *

God, the man rubbed her the wrong way. He was the epitome of a male chauvinistic pig. He was a womanizer and played with the opposite sex like pawns in a game. And, to top it off, his ego was inflated to near bursting. Yet, still she couldn't deny his absolute gorgeousness. She doubted any woman who witnessed his ocean blue eyes, thick blond hair and perfectly sculpted body could think anything other than he was hot. The whole package was quite impressive, but she wanted a man with more than just looks to offer. And, she certainly didn't want to play any games with him. *Liar*. She could think of several games she'd like to play with him. All that would end in them being hot, sweaty and entangled around one another.

Pushing those images from her mind, she was more than thankful he had come along when he had. A vivid picture of what could be happening behind the bar nearly invaded her brain again before she angrily pushed the thought away and shivered. Brad had done enough to her. The incident was over and she would not allow him to continue to haunt her.

Before she had time to thoroughly recover from her imagination, Aiston leaned in and covered her mouth with his own. He was so not her type. So why was a slow burn igniting in her from the mere touch of his lips then? *Has to be a simple, hormonal response to his hotness.* She wanted to pull away, but all rational thought left her brain when his tongue dipped into the cavern of her mouth.

She moaned and the hot invasion coaxed her tongue into an instinctive, age-old dance with his. Heat licked along her every nerve ending, and small sparks of electricity zinged through her blood. One of his hands crept up and rested on the back of her nape while the other stroked her lower back, urging her closer to his hard body. She put her hands up to stop this nonsense only to lose her train of thought when she came into contact with his perfectly sculpted chest. Instead of pushing him away as she had intended, she traced her fingers the smooth contours of muscle through the soft fabric of his shirt and danced over every defined ridge in delight.

She encouraged his body to respond with infinite ease. When he took his mouth from hers, she felt abandoned and nearly cried out until his lips trailed a scorching path along her jaw.

He carefully kissed her bruised cheek. "God you are making me crazy." He continued the path to her ear where he nibbled on the soft, fleshy lobe.

She leaned back, giving him full access to her neck as he continued the sweet torture by dragging his teeth over her sensitive skin. Want engulfed each tiny cell inside her, and every time she tried to tell herself this was wrong, her body refused to listen.

"Mmmm." She trailed her fingers through his thick hair and played with the blond strands, pulled on them just a little each time his teeth scraped her neck.

Wait a minute! Teeth . . . neck. His kisses must have boiled her brains because she had forgotten he was a vampire. She remembered now, though, and the thought he might actually bite her was as effective as throwing a bucket of ice water on her. She wasn't actually scared of him, but even after knowing what he was for so long, her instincts kicked on autopilot and flooded her with fear of the unfamiliar.

She jerked back and stared into a face that gave the false impression of being young with its smooth lines and flawless texture. "What the hell are you doing?"

Aiston shook his head as if trying to clear it. His brows dipped toward his straight nose. "You know exactly what I was doing. Correction, what we were doing."

She gasped. "Nuh, uh, no way. It's not going to happen." She scooted away from him and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Well, excuse me, but you seemed to be enjoying yourself as much as I.” He grimaced and shifted, obviously trying to ease the pressure of the impressive bulge in his jeans.

She tried to keep her eyes averted from the tantalizing sight, but couldn’t resist a couple quick glances. “Well, sorry if you thought something was going to happen. I just got carried away a little. Must have been the trauma of tonight’s events. I’m not one of your women.”

She looked at the carpet to avoid his piercing, all-knowing eyes. She was perfectly aware of what she had been doing—was it so wrong for a girl to want to climb all over a hot guy who had a magical mouth?—and felt guilty about trying to put all the blame on him. She was pretty sure that he knew it, as well. Although, if he pulled any of that vampire crap like reading her mind, she was going to deck him.

He flexed his shoulders in apparent agitation. “One of my women? What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Oh you know exactly what it means, Aiston.”

His eyes smoldered, and her body clenched with need. Damn, the man was good. He probably only had to crook a little finger at a woman and she’d be at his feet.

“Look, Avril—”

“Can we just forget about it, please?” She didn’t want to have this discussion with him right now. She felt too vulnerable, too raw. Her nerves were a jumbled mess of desire for a man she had no business having such feelings for.

“Fine.” He got up, leaned against the door, and folded his arms over his chest.

“Um, I was going to the mansion in the morning, as I’m sure you already know. Do you think you could take me there tonight instead?”

“No problem. Let me know when you’re ready.” He spun away from her and walked into the living room.

It would be better this way since she was pretty sure he’d insist on staying at her apartment tonight. At least this way, she’d feel safe and not have to deal with Aiston in her dinky apartment. If the Aleksandrov men were anything, stubborn was at the top of the list right along with overly protective. And, if he kissed her again, she wasn’t sure she’d have the strength to say no a second time in one night. After all that had happened, she would feel safer at Ebony’s, and a good, solid sleep would go great lengths in soothing her nerves. She would just put everything out of her mind and start her week with her friend well rested and clear headed. *Yeah, right*. She might be able to put Brad out of her mind, but Aiston was another story.

Shaking her head to clear the unwanted thoughts, she began gathering the things she’d need for her stay. About fifteen minutes later, she was ready and knew she had packed way too much stuff. She couldn’t help it, a girl needed options. She closed her eyes and thought of crystal blue skies, sandy

beaches, and felt some of the tension seep from her tight muscles. She opened her eyes and called for Aiston. She glanced in the corner longingly at her paint supplies right before he walked back into her room and coaxed her heart to do a little flip-flop. He really was an amazing-looking man. Too bad he lacked the other qualities she looked for like respect and faithfulness.

He walked over to her, picked up the two suitcases with one hand, and wrapped his other arm around her. "Take a deep breath and close your eyes."

As soon as she did, a strange feeling swam through her, almost as if her insides were being tugged outwards. But as quickly as it started, it was gone and she was standing in the guest bedroom she normally occupied at the mansion. The rich golds and greens that decorated the room weren't something she would have picked, but it was an absolutely gorgeous room nonetheless. It was tasteful, and everything in it was luxurious and of superb quality. The Aleksandrovs were loaded, and Avril could only imagine what it would be like to never have to worry about paying bills, never have to worry about a regular job, and never be denied whatever you might want.

Her bone-deep exhaustion must have been evident as Aiston gave her a small, concerned look and brushed a thumb gently under her eye, no doubt over the black circle that lay beneath it.

"Are you going to be all right?"

"Yeah, thanks again." She wanted him to leave . . . she wanted him to stay and hold and comfort her.

"I'll let Ebony know you are here and will be down for breakfast in the morning."

The morning breakfast ritual at Ebony's was the Aleksandrovs' way of making sure that they had some family time together every day. She still found it strange that vampires ate, but she guessed it was no stranger than knowing they actually existed.

"Okay." He turned to walk away. "Aiston?"

"Yes."

"Please don't tell Ebony what happened tonight with Brad."

"I think she's going to figure it out in the morning when she sees your face."

"Yeah, I know." Avril plopped down on the bed. "I'll tell her at breakfast. I just don't want her to worry tonight."

"I won't say a word when I tell her your here, but just remember, when she chews my ass out in the morning for not telling her about the incident with Brad, you owe me one. Goodnight, Avril." She flopped on her side on the soft bed.

"Thanks again." Avril's head hit the pillow, and she fell asleep instantly with all her clothes still on.

* * * *

Avril's thanks were barely audible, but Aiston heard them clearly with his sensitive ears. He walked back to the bed and watched her for a moment while she slept. He pulled a throw from the chair in the corner and covered her with it. He didn't want to move her under the comforter for fear of waking her up.

He couldn't remember the last time he had wanted a woman this badly. He'd never gone long without female company, until recently. Even before that, his sexual romps had become more of a routine than actual lust . . . until now. He would have taken Avril in her apartment without a second thought had she not stopped him. And, he still wanted her. Hell, want was such a trivial word for what he felt. A deep need to possess her clawed through his veins like a wild beast trapped in a cage fighting for freedom.

He was glad she asked him to bring her to the mansion because he had no intention of leaving her alone at her apartment. And, he was sure that would have resulted in a whole other argument. She could protest all she wanted, but she wanted him as much as he wanted her. Her sweet mouth told him no, but her body sang to his touch.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and let some of the tension slide out with the expelled air. He bent and placed a kiss on her bruised cheek. He touched her marred flesh with his tongue quickly. The brief touch wouldn't heal it completely, but even the minimal contact with his saliva would speed up the process. After tucking the throw under her chin, he left her room and went to inform Ashe and Ebony of her early arrival.

Chapter Three

The next morning, Avril felt somewhat better. The only reminder of last night's ordeal was a lingering headache and an aching cheekbone. She stumbled out of bed and headed for the bathroom, grumbling when she saw the time on the clock as she passed by. She caught her toe on the doorjamb of the bathroom and grabbed her foot.

"Son of a—" She hopped around on one foot. "Ow, ow, ow, ow!" After her poor toe finally quit throbbing, she stood gingerly, testing her weight on the mangled appendage. She was so not a morning person.

She limped over to flip the water on as hot as she could stand it without melting her skin off, shrugged out of her rumpled clothes, and took a lingering, steamy shower that soothed some of her aches, which went a long way to making her feel somewhat human again. She knew that she wouldn't quite be there until she had her coffee. She was such a caffeine freak. She turned the jets off and grabbed a towel. As she wiped the fog from the large mirror over the marble sink, she sucked in a sharp breath at the image staring back at her. Her cheek was swollen and bruised black with a tinge of green.

"Brad, you son of a bitch!" It was not a pretty sight. Although, she guessed it was a good thing that Brad had smacked her on the same cheek both times because she could imagine what her face would look like if both sides had received blows.

She took a closer look, tilted her head sideways, and pressed her fingers gently to the discolored skin. It looked horrible, yet it wasn't as bad as she thought it probably should be. Brad hadn't held back, and she was sure he'd broken her cheekbone when he landed the second blow. But, if he had, her eye would most likely be swollen shut. She poked her tongue into the side of her cheek, puffing it out, then sighed.

She reached for her makeup, hoping to cover up at least part of the bruise. She wasn't normally a violent person, but she hoped Aiston had cleaned Brad's clock for him. The thought that Brad was probably faring worse than she this morning made her feel marginally better. Her lips turned up in a grin, and she dabbed concealer on her cheek and massaged it gently into her skin.

Twenty minutes later, her teeth were brushed, she had on her favorite black jeans and shirt, had shoved her short hair into a haphazard ponytail, and now stood admiring her handiwork. She had to admit that if her face weren't swollen, the bruise would barely be noticeable. She made her way down

to the dining room for the nine o'clock traditional Aleksandrov breakfast. She still couldn't believe that vampires ate just like normal people. Well, almost like normal people. After all, normal people didn't drink blood. *Ewww!* She tried not to think too much about it and was starting to get pretty used to the idea, but every once in a while all the vampire "stuff" crept into her mind and grossed her out a little.

When she walked through the dining room door, the first sight that greeted her was Ebony trying to soothe a wiggling Marcus. He was adorable, and at eighteen months, he was getting to be quite a handful. Glancing at Ashe, she knew why. Ashe was domineering and stubborn to a fault, but loved her best friend and had proven that he would give his life to keep her safe when he had rescued her from another vampire and drudge. A drudge who turned out to be his former life mate and the servant of a former girlfriend. He also went out of his way to make Ebony happy, and Avril couldn't hold his faults against him too much knowing that.

Aldin, the brother she thought of as the "brooding one," was watching the struggle between Ebony and Marcus, a grin almost forming on his face. That was about as much emotion as she had ever seen him show. He was a gorgeous man, just as all the Aleksandrov brothers were. They all had the same eerie, ocean-colored eyes only differing in the underlying shade. Ashe's were turquoise, Aldin's, icy green and Aiston's, icy blue. Ashe and Aldin had the same pitch black hair. Aiston was the only brother who had blond hair. Aiston was also the shortest and youngest brother, although six feet wasn't considered short any more than being nearly seven hundred years old was young. The men were all huge, and could be rather intimidating to those who didn't know them, and to most that did. They all had a presence about them that said, *Don't screw with me, you won't like it.*

Aiston stared at her in his usual unsettling way. His eyes penetrated her, made her feel uncomfortable because she knew he was capable of seeing her deepest, darkest, rawest emotions. After a while, she had learned to ignore it to some extent. *Yeah, right. Like anyone, especially a woman, could ignore Aiston.* She had no doubt his sinful, sexy looks went great lengths in allowing him to become the womanizer he was rumored to be. The man screamed sex from his wide shoulders to his mouth-watering, rock-hard ass to the fluid swagger of his walk that demanded the appreciative attention from every woman close enough to witness his prowling. She disgusted herself. Even though he was the epitome of everything she hated in a man, she couldn't deny his physical appeal. He was not for her, though, and she would not get caught up with another jerk. Not even a jerk who could make her blood sizzle with a mere look.

She walked toward Ebony. Ebony's eyes flew wide and she jumped up to hug Avril. "Oh, Avril, I've missed you. I know it's only been a couple weeks since I last saw you, but it seems like forever when you are gone since I'm pretty much the only woman in this testosterone-invaded house!"

"Hey, now, no jokes about us this early in the day. Besides, we can't help that we are so masculine."

Ashe gave Avril a quick wink and Ebony one of those toe curling grins that said he'd get her later for that remark, only in a purely sexual way. Avril wished a man would look at her like that. Avril and Ebony giggled. Avril tweaked Marcus gently on the nose and was rewarded with a giggle.

“Aril!” Marcus cooed.

Avril laughed. Marcus still had trouble pronouncing v’s and she was growing quite fond of him calling her Aril. She gave him a quick kiss on the head. “You are just too adorable, Marcus. And you are growing so fast!”

“Yeah, he is, isn’t he?” Ebony spooned some more oatmeal toward her son and sighed when he turned his head away and said, “No, mama.”

“Ah, stubborn just like his father, I see.” Avril knew the crap was about to hit the fan when she turned to sit down at the table, exposing her bruised cheek to the whole room, and Ebony jumped up.

“Oh my God, Avril! What happened to your cheek?”

Ebony’s outburst was the last sound in the room before it went totally quiet and all eyes focused on her. Even McKayla, the Aleksandrovs’ live-in housekeeper, a shadowdrifter’s former drudge Ashe had rescued, turned to look.

Avril put a hand to her cheek and shrugged. “Just a little incident last night. No biggie. I’m okay.” She helped herself to coffee and food, knowing that wishing Ebony would just let it drop was entirely too much to hope for.

“What do you mean ‘no biggie’? Avril, your face is bruised and swollen. What happened?” Ebony’s concern was evident in the tremble of her voice.

“Ebony, I’m okay. Honest. I had a little run-in with one of the usual customers at the bar after I closed up last night. Aiston showed up and took care of everything. It’s all okay.”

All attention snapped to Aiston at that point. She was kind of glad that it wasn’t directed at her any longer. Although, his warning from last night that “she’d owe him one” when he got his ass chewed by Ebony whispered through her brain, encouraging tiny butterflies to flutter their little wings happily all over the inside of her stomach.

“Aiston! Why didn’t you tell us something happened last night?” Ebony was a very gentle soul by nature, but became a tigress when she thought her family or friends were in danger.

Aiston shot Avril an I-told-you-so stare filled with promise of retribution and she shivered. Her mind conjured up several sensual ways he could make her pay.

* * * *

"Look, I didn't tell you because Avril asked me not to. She didn't want you to be worried all night." Aiston looked at his brothers' smirking faces. *And you two are starting to piss me off. Ashe, your wife is treating me like a naughty puppy who messed on the floor.* He used the mind link, which they called *minti conversatie* to speak to his brothers so no one else could hear.

"*Yeah, she's pretty good at that, isn't she?*" Aldin's eyes sparked in amusement and Ashe adoringly gazed at his wife.

"But she's my best friend, Aiston. You should have told me."

"*Ashe, call her off already*". Aiston glared at Ashe.

Ashe got up and squeezed his wife's shoulders in a comforting gesture. "Look, Ebony, I know it's upsetting, but Aiston obviously took care of the situation and just did what Avril asked. I actually agree that it was probably better you didn't know last night. You know how you worry. You probably wouldn't have gotten any sleep, and you really needed it after being up with Marcus the last several nights while he's been teething."

Ebony's shoulders sagged a little. "Yeah, I guess you're right." Ashe kissed her on the cheek. "But don't get smug, mister. You aren't right that often."

Ashe smiled and kissed his wife again, this time on the lips. Ebony sighed as she watched him walk back to his seat. "*I'm right all the time, baby.*"

Aiston rolled his eyes. "*Come on. You guys are killing me with the gushy, love crap.*"

"I'm sorry, Aiston. It was just a shock." Ebony raised a brow at her husband.

"Don't worry about it, Ebony." He looked at his brother in amazement and admiration that he could calm his wife down with such ease.

Aldin stepped over to the counter to refill his coffee. When he sat back down a loud *frrrrrrrrrrt* sound filled the air. Marcus giggled. Ashe and Ebony rolled their eyes, and Avril smirked.

* * * *

"Well now, that's a fine tension breaker there, isn't it?" Aiston was shaking so hard with laughter that Avril thought he might actually fall out of the chair.

The look on Aldin's face was enough to make any normal person wet himself in fright. "That's it! I'm going to kill you!" He lunged at his brother, but Ashe was between them before Aldin could get his hands on Aiston.

Ashe stood between them until Aiston finally quit laughing, and Aldin's face turned a little less red. He plucked the Whoopee Cushion off Aldin's chair and tossed it at Aiston. "When the hell are you going to cut this crap out?"

"Never. It's in my blood, what can I say?" Aiston shrugged.

By now, everyone was smirking except for Aldin. Avril noticed that no one dared laugh out loud, though. Aldin sat back down and glared at his younger brother. Avril knew firsthand from hanging out in the mansion that Aiston was a notorious prankster and never tired of tormenting his brothers. So far, the targets of his little fiascos had been limited to Ashe and Aldin. From the talks she and Ebony had had, the rest of the household hoped it stayed that way. The pranks were definitely amusing at times, but obviously less so for the one getting pranked.

Marcus still giggled and pointed at Aldin, trying to mimic the noise by squeezing his lips together and blowing.

"Okay, that's enough, little man." Ebony wiped the slobber off his face and looked at Aiston.

"Do you see what you are teaching your nephew?"

She shook her head, and Avril could tell it was taking effort to keep her lips from slipping into a grin. "Okay, now that that's all out of the way, when do we get to have girl time?" Avril turned to Ebony and wiggled her eyebrows up and down.

Ebony giggled. "Well, how about tonight? I'm pretty sure I could persuade McKayla to look in on Marcus off and on after I put him down." McKayla nodded in agreement at Ebony's suggestion. "I would ask my husband, but he insists that the Aleksandrov brothers must have an important meeting tonight. He won't tell me what it's about, but I do plan to get the information out of him any way I can."

Ebony smiled at her husband in that wicked way when she was up to something. Avril grinned. She knew what Ebony was hinting at. Her friend had filled her in on an interesting story about when she had first met Ashe. Ashe had practically kidnapped Ebony one night after she had been attacked at her house, and had forbidden her involvement in anything to do with finding who had been behind her attack, having insisted it was too dangerous. Even though Ebony had been a virgin and pretty much naïve in the ways of love, she had tried to seduce Ashe to get information out of him. Ashe had figured the plan out and turned it around on her. Avril had been thoroughly amused and didn't miss the irony of a virgin trying to seduce a man who'd been around for over seven hundred years.

"Sounds great! We'll order pizza with extra cheese. Do you have any chocolate around?" Avril sighed in anticipation when Ebony said she had plenty of chocolate. Their "girl's night" tradition consisted of sitting in front of the television watching happily-ever-after stories, eating pizza, chocolate,

drinking wine, and gossiping. She was ashamed to admit, though, that she was a little jealous that her friend could eat anything she wanted, any time she wanted, and not worry about gaining weight. Avril had always been slim, but she was quickly approaching her thirties and knew her metabolism would start slowing down sooner rather than later.

"I sure wish Estril was here so she could hang with us too." Ebony sighed.

"Yeah, I miss her. Have you talked to her lately?"

"It's been a few days, but she's doing well and glad to be away from all her overbearing brothers for awhile." Ebony glared at each man, but they were all acting busy so they could avoid her scathing stares.

"Well, tell her hello for me next time she calls."

"I will. She misses all of us as we do her, but insists she needs the time away. I guess I can understand that"

Avril grabbed Marcus out of his high chair after Ebony wiped his face clean once again. "Well, I'm going to spend some time playing with my nephew if you don't mind, Ebony. But first, I'm going to take him upstairs and change him. Someone is stinky."

Marcus giggled when Avril blew a raspberry on his chubby belly, and she headed to the nursery with him.

* * * *

"I'll catch up with you in a few minutes." Ebony watched Avril disappear and smiled at the thought of the coming night they would have together. She turned her gaze back to the Aleksandrov men. "So, what are you boys up to today?"

"Nothing much." Ashe gave her a wink.

"Mmm hmm. Like I believe that." Ebony knew the activity with the drifters had become very strange and intense lately, and she was sure Ashe and his brothers were going to be discussing the problem in their little meeting.

* * * *

Aldin and Aiston finished eating and got up from the table to take their dishes over to the sink. *"I had another strange encounter with a drifter last night. They are getting out of hand."*

Ashe didn't feel comfortable keeping things from his wife, unless it was for her own good, which meant anything having to do with her safety. He would never lie to her, but some things he'd rather not involve her in. The drifters included. The further away he could keep her from those evil bastards, the better.

"Yeah, I know. Let's meet in the den in ten minutes." Ashe watched his brothers leave, then went to kiss his wife once again before he followed. "You are the best thing that's ever happened to me, woman. I love you."

* * * *

"Oh, I soo love you too." She chewed on her bottom lip. "Ashe, what's going on? I know something is wrong. I can feel it."

"Baby, don't worry about it. We are having an unusual amount of drifters showing up lately, and we are just going to try to figure out what is causing it."

She admired her husband for his dedication to fighting the drifters to save innocents from being caught in their path of destruction, but she still worried about him. He could take care of himself. He was a warrior and immortal, but he could still be killed. She hugged him hard, and they shared a heated kiss that lasted several seconds. She'd never get tired of his kisses, and she knew that if she lived for five thousand years, he'd still be able to start a fire in her with the mere touch of his sexy mouth.

Ashe pulled away and leaned his forehead against hers. "You're killing me, Ebony. You know when you kiss me like that all I want to do is rip off your clothes and have you under me."

"Yeah, but I still like to remind you of it." She chuckled. "You know I feel the same way about you. I don't mind in the least being under you, or on top of you for that matter."

He chuckled "Don't think for a minute that I won't take you up on that offer. But I have to get to work and figure this mess with the drifters out. Please understand, and I promise I'll make it up to you later." He gave her another lingering kiss. She sighed into his mouth and he growled in that delicious predatory way that made her toes curl.

"Okay, but I'm holding you to that promise. And please make sure Avril is safe when she's not here too, okay?"

"Of course I will. I know how much she means to you. As far as I'm concerned, she's part of this family. Don't worry, from now on when she's not here, she'll be protected."

"Thank you." She watched as he turned to leave the kitchen. He would undoubtedly be hunting tonight with Aldin and Aiston and her stomach clenched.

"Ashe?"

"Yeah?"

"Please be careful."

"You know I'm always careful, especially now that I have you and our son to come home to."

She loved when they talked minti conversatie. When he was in her mind, she felt safe and cocooned in love.

"I love you."

"Love you too, babe."

This was one of the downsides about being married to a hunter. She always worried about him. She understood that he was fighting for the good of everyone, but she couldn't help but want him here, with her, safe and sound. She'd known what he did before she'd agreed to marry him, and accepted it, but it didn't make it easy. At times, she was so fraught with worry she thought she might go out of her mind. Sometimes all she could think about was that fateful night he had come home before they were married almost drained of blood from fighting an especially ferocious shadowdrifter. He had lost so much that she didn't think he would be able to recover. She'd still been human at the time and insisted, even against his adamant refusal, on giving him her blood.

She saved his life, but the memory haunted her still. Her faith in his strength and skills was the only thing that kept her sane when he was out fighting. He was a lethal man when challenged, and she reminded herself of that. A lot. Trying to shove the dismal thoughts away, she carried the rest of the dishes to the sink for McKayla, and went upstairs to see how Avril was getting along with Marcus.

Chapter Four

Ashe, Aldin, and Aiston sat in the den, silently contemplating the increasing number of drifters lately and what it could possibly mean.

“Okay, so we know that the drifters’ odd behavior started a little over a year ago. But I’ve only noticed the increase in aggressiveness the past couple months. What about you guys?” Ashe waited for his brothers’ answers while impatiently pushing his fingers through his thick hair.

“Yeah, that’s why I was a little late the other night to Avril’s rescue.” Aiston still felt guilt and anger at his belated arrival. Had he been any later . . . Sparks of rage instantaneously shot through him, and he had to take a deep breath to calm himself. He couldn’t even think about what would have happened. And, he knew without a moment’s doubt that had it happened, Brad would now be a dead man. “I came across one of our little friends about two blocks before the bar. I nearly mistook it for a human. It was trying real hard to look normal and blend in. If I hadn’t caught the faint scent of it, I probably would have passed it by without a single thought. And when I did detect its presence, it didn’t hesitate to attack. I mean, the cowardly little bastards usually run when they see one of us, and look like zombie Devil’s spawn.”

“Did it say anything to you, anything unusual?” Ashe’s mouth was drawn in a tight line of frustration and Aiston was feeling much the same.

“Yeah, it did say some strange things, now that you mention it. It was kind of hard to understand since it was dying at the time, but I think it was something like we were all going to get ours soon because their new king is more powerful than ours.”

“Damn. I had one say pretty much the same thing to me. What about you, Ashe?” Aldin’s wide shoulders tensed when he sat straighter in the chair.

“Nope. None has said anything strange to me, but like I said, the aggression is getting much worse. I’ve come across several more who have initiated fights.”

Aiston recalled how one of those initiated fights had nearly cost his brother his life. Ashe had gone hunting one night as a distraction from Ebony. Before they were married, Ashe found out Ebony had withheld the fact that she had been terminally ill from him and had felt betrayed. A drifter had sliced his brother open, and Ashe had nearly bled out before he had been able to shimmer back to the

mansion. Ebony had insisted on giving him her blood, and Aiston's respect for his sister-in-law had become impenetrable that night. She had to have been frightened and confused as she had still been grappling with the fact that vampires were real. Yet, she had saved his brother, and Aiston would give his life for her without thought.

Ashe drummed his fingers on the desk. "A couple even had weapons. I've never seen one carry a weapon. They've always preferred to use those damn wicked claws of theirs when cornered. Any ideas about who the hell their king might be?"

"Huh-uh." Aldin's response was tense and quiet.

"Nope. But let's start from the beginning. First, they become bolder, and then they start making comments about their king being stronger than ours. I find that strange in itself, since our king is only a legend. No one has actually seen Ragnor. There have only been stories about him existing, but I have never run across one of our own in my entire existence who has actually claimed to have seen him." Being nearly seven hundred years old, Aiston figured he would have run across some kind of proof if, in fact, Ragnor was real. Aiston knew legends usually had some grain of truth to them, but hell, after this many years, surely Ragnor would have reared his mug somewhere for someone. Wouldn't he have?

"Yeah, same here. I've heard lots of stories, but no claims from any of our kind to have seen him in the flesh." Ashe continued drumming his fingers on the desk.

Aldin nodded in agreement. "Maybe we should dig deeper into the legend of our so-called king and find out everything we can. Even if he doesn't exist, maybe whoever this supposed new leader of the shadowdrifters believes he's real and has used it as leverage to keep the drifters under his thumb. And we can't overlook the fact that, if there's someone leading them, whoever it is must be powerful. The drifters have never been able to work together much less let someone tell them what to do."

"Sounds like a good plan." Ashe pushed away from the desk and stood. "Let's hunt in pairs for the time being when possible, and at the very least, keep each other informed of the locations we'll be scouting. Also, we'll notify all the other hunters in the surrounding areas. See if they've heard or seen anything out of the ordinary. Get all the info we can and warn them to be careful. See if things are only heating up around here, or other places too. Aldin, why don't you use your computer skills and reach out around the world to our other contacts?"

Aldin nodded. "I'll get on it right away."

"I'll see if I can find out anything from my usual haunts around town." Aiston hung out in several clubs that were mainly inhabited by vampires. Surely rumors about any strange drifter activity would be flying by now, and most of the clubs' patrons loved to drink and gossip. Something big was brewing. He felt it deep in his cells the way a mended broken human bone felt the sharp bite of an impending storm. He just hoped they could figure out what before the drifters got totally out of hand. If there was an uprising, thousands of humans could be slaughtered. Not to mention, the hunters would be in more danger, as well.

“Fine. Let’s plan on meeting again in a few days to discuss what info, if any, we’ve discovered, and see if we can make more sense of this mess. Also, I’m going to make a call to a couple hunters I know and see if I can get them to come to our next meeting.” Ashe let out a long sigh.

“Hey, when is Estril supposed to call again? Did she say?” Aiston was halfway to the door.

Ashe shook his head. “No. It’ll be soon, though. She’s been good about not letting more than a week or so go by without calling us. I think she knows that if she waits too long, we’ll be hunting her down. Oh, by the way, Mom called yesterday. She is planning on visiting soon.”

Their sister, Estril, had decided to go off on an adventure of her own shortly after Marcus had been born. She kept her promise to her brothers to check in on occasion. They weren’t happy about her leaving, but couldn’t really stop her, and no amount of persuasion had worked against her insistence that she was going.

“I don’t understand why Estril had to leave in the—holy shit! Did you say Mom is visiting? But she hasn’t been here in years.” Aiston’s jaw nearly hit the floor.

“I can’t believe she’s coming here. She’s been gone so long.” Aldin’s brows drew down.

“Well, I assume it probably has something to do with her having a new grandson. Maybe Marcus will be a good thing for Mom. You know she hasn’t been the same since Dad died.”

Aiston and Aldin nodded and started to leave. Aldin was already out the door, Aiston close behind, when Ashe stopped him. “Aiston, I need to talk to you about something else.”

Aiston turned around, already feeling the noose tightening around his neck. When his brother got that quiet, intense look, he knew whatever he was about to say wouldn’t fair well for him. Aiston respected his brother, but didn’t envy him. Being the oldest Aleksandrov brother, he took care of all the family business. A lot of responsibility rested on his shoulders.

“Until we figure out this drifter mess, I need you to watch over Avril when she’s not here, and I don’t just mean on the usual weekend nights at the bar. I mean twenty-four, seven.”

Aiston threw his hands up. “Come on, Ashe! The woman practically hates me. Can’t you or Aldin do it?” He’d rather be staked than be saddled with Avril. The woman irritated him. The woman intrigued him. The woman confused him.

“You know you are the most logical man for the job. Aldin would probably intimidate the hell out of her, and I need to be home more now that Marcus is here.”

Knowing there would be no escape, Aiston hung his head. Ashe was right about Aldin. He was too overbearing for Avril. Although, he didn’t think intimidation would be the word he’d use to describe the situation if Aldin did watch over Avril. That woman had a short fuse and he had a feeling Aldin would have his hands full.

“Then you tell Ebony to break it to her. I’m not going to do it unless she knows about it. Avril is about as bullheaded as you are, and I don’t want to be the one who has to convince her it’s for her own good.”

“I’ll take care of it. I know it’s not something you want to do, but Avril is very important to Ebony, and I consider her part of this family. Please take this matter seriously.”

“I know, I know. She’s part of the family. She’s that annoying second sister we never had. You know, the one who likes to pull your hair and give you glaring looks when you do something she doesn’t like. The one who gets enjoyment out of framing you for something naughty, and then laughing while you get in trouble for it.”

Ashe just chuckled. “She’s not that bad, Aiston. Maybe if you gave her a chance, you’d see.”

“Whatever.” It’d be a cold day in hell when she cut him any slack.

“Thanks, Aiston. And, by the way, neither she nor I is any more stubborn than you are.”

“I am not stubborn, and don’t think I won’t get you for this.” Aiston quickly disappeared before Ashe could think up another form of torture. He doubted anything could be worse. Yet, he was failing miserably at convincing himself of that fact, especially when he thought about the kiss that he and Avril had shared the other night. His blood heated, and his cock jumped to attention every time he thought about her soft lips pressed against his.

It would be pure torture being around her because he wanted to touch her, and he knew she wasn’t going to let him. Maybe he could figure out some way to change her mind. He smiled and walked toward his room. Yeah, he’d always had a way with the ladies. He’d never backed down from a challenge in his life. *I’ll find a way to crack that armor, Avril.*

* * * *

Ashe sat back down, thinking of his mother’s impending visit. He hoped Marcus could finally bring her out of her stupor. Their father had been killed by vampire hunters hundreds of years ago, and Marilena had not recovered fully from that tragic event. Since that time, she hadn’t lived in one place for long and rarely visited. She kept in touch regularly, but he’d always gotten the idea that it was too painful for her to see them in person since she had constantly told him and his brothers how much they looked like their father when they were growing up. He sighed and pulled some books off the shelves to do some research.

* * * *

“What? You can’t be serious. He’s a male chauvinistic pig of the utmost, and I don’t want him constantly hanging around me.” Avril couldn’t believe Ebony actually wanted her to accept that Aiston would be trailing her every move from now on when she wasn’t at the mansion. She’d come down for an innocent girls’ night and had this sprung upon her? What the hell? It was like getting a brand-new pair of to-die-for shoes and stepping in a pile of dog doo. Except she didn’t think Aiston would be as easy to scrape off and get rid of.

“Avril, listen to me. This is important. The problem with the drifters is getting out of hand. They have always been after the Aleksandrovs even more so than any other hunters because Ashe and his brothers are the ones who first started hunting them. If they think they can get to us, they will. That includes torturing and killing you.”

The torturing and killing thing kind of got her attention. “Are you serious? Do you really think they would come after me?”

“You don’t understand what they are capable of doing. If you did, you’d have no doubt. Once a vampire turns into a drifter, he’s purely evil. They thrive on torture, destruction, maiming, killing. They enjoy and live for any act that inflicts pain upon others. They don’t feel love, joy, guilt. And yes, they would not hesitate for a second if they thought doing horrid things to you would hurt us. Avril, if one got his hands on you, he’d steal your soul. And until the day he was killed, you would be trapped inside him.”

Avril’s skin turned clammy at the thought because she knew if her soul was stolen that would mean she’d be dead. But, Aiston! Damn her luck. “But he’s such an ass!” *And he’s the best kisser on the planet.* And her life was beginning to resemble *Night of the Living Dead*.

“Please. Just do this for me. I don’t ask a lot of you, but this is important to me. I don’t know what I’d do if anything happened to you.” Ebony reached for Avril’s hands and squeezed them gently.

Well, Avril could definitely understand that. She felt the same way about Ebony. “How long will I have to put up with him?”

“I don’t know. Ashe, Aiston, and Aldin are working on finding out what’s going on now. But I don’t know how long it will take.” Ebony chewed her bottom lip.

“Fine, I’ll do this, but only for you. And I need some privacy when I’m at my apartment.” She watched and knew Ebony was deciding if she should protest. When Ebony’s shoulders slumped slightly, she knew she’d decided not to push her luck at the moment.

Ebony sighed in relief and gave her friend a quick hug. "Thank you. Now let's enjoy our night together."

"Yeah, but you owe me big time." She knew Ebony hadn't a clue as to how hard it was going to be for her to be around Aiston. Every time she thought of him, she'd remember the way his firm lips felt on hers. Demanding, possessive, taking everything she offered, coaxing out of her things she hadn't offered and more. Her skin tingled, and she willed her raging hormones to calm. She couldn't allow it to go any further between them. He was not the type of man she wanted. Before those thoughts had time to leave her mind, she knew it was a lie. *This is so not going to go well for me.*

"Oh, and Ebony?"

"Yes?"

"Don't think that I don't remember that you still owe me for the Midnight Ball either." Before Ebony and Ashe had married, the Aleksandrovs had thrown their yearly traditional ball on Halloween night. She was supposed to help Ebony make sure everything ran smoothly since her friend had agreed to help Estril plan the whole party. But, when she had arrived at the mansion, she found out she'd been duped when Ebony showed her the ball gown she'd secretly had made for her. She smiled. She wasn't one for wearing frilly, girly things, and she'd never admit that she'd felt utterly and ridiculously feminine in that gown.

"Like I'd ever think the human elephant would forget. You never forget anything."

They both giggled. "And don't forget it."

"I might. You're the elephant."

They giggled again, dialed up their favorite pizza place, and ordered a thick crust with everything on it and extra cheese.

* * * *

The week at Ebony's flew by as usual, and the next week, as well. Tonight would be Avril's first night back at the bar. She wasn't looking forward to it but wasn't too upset as she knew Hank would watch over her, not to mention Aiston. Even though she despised him, a part of her, the traitorous part, found relief in the fact that he would be protecting her. She felt safe around him and knew he would keep her from harm. She decided to cut those thoughts off right there before they led to places she

didn't want to go. No matter how much she had scolded herself, she couldn't get their kiss out of her mind.

Maybe she should just sleep with him and get him out of her system. *Yeah, and maybe I should just shoot myself in the head and put me out of misery.* Sleeping with Aiston wouldn't solve anything, and would most likely only cause more heartache for her. He wasn't for her. If she told herself that enough times, maybe it would finally sink into her thick head. She fidgeted with hem of her shirt and concentrated on clearing her tired brain. The night before, dreams of Aiston had plagued her, robbing her of any restful sleep. She decided to lay down for a quick nap before she had to go to work. She walked to the small wooden table beside her bed and set the alarm before letting her weary body slide under the sheets.

She jerked awake two hours later. *Damn it! I'm going to be late!* Her undependable alarm hadn't gone off yet again. She was going to have to buy a new one. She jumped out of bed and ran for a quick shower. She dried off and dressed quickly, pulled a brush through her hair and grabbed her purse. She opened her apartment door and ran smack into the one person she didn't want to see, Aiston. The impact made her drop her keys, and she reached for them the same time he did, butting her head against his with a crack.

"Ouch!"

"Ow!"

"What are you doing here?" She absently rubbed at her forehead.

"You know what I'm doing here. Let's not start already, okay?"

"Yeah, well we are going to have to set some ground rules or something. You can't be breathing down my neck every second. I'll go crazy." Not to mention she'd probably end up jumping the man's bones. She was pathetic. She felt like a stick of dynamite with a slow-burning lit fuse around Aiston. She didn't doubt it wouldn't take long for her to go boom.

She practically felt his eyes staring a hole in her back while she locked the door. A mere second after she removed her key from the lock, he spun her around. "Let go of me, you big bully." She struggled for a moment to no avail.

"Listen to me!" He gave her a gentle shake.

The shake got her attention, and she finally noticed how irritated he was. What did he have to be irritated about? She was the one being manhandled. "What?"

"This is serious, Avril. Believe me when I tell you I don't want to be here anymore than you want me to be. But you could be in danger, and you need protection. You're just going to have to accept that, and that I'm going to be around for awhile. We'll get along a lot better when you come to terms with those facts."

"Look, I accept that I could be in danger, but isn't there some other way?" He didn't want to be here. Ridiculous, but the words set off a small ache in her chest.

He shook his head and muttered under his breath. "Hell. Does she hate me that much?"

"What?"

"Nothing." He hurried on. "The only other alternative is for you to live at the mansion until we figure everything out."

She couldn't stay at the mansion. It would be a hassle for her to get to work. Her apartment was within walking distance of both her jobs. "No. That's not practical for me." Although he could simply shimmer her back and forth, but no way was she going to ask him for any favors.

"Well, then the way I see it is, you promised Ebony you would cooperate, and I promised Ashe I would protect you. Now it's time to play grown-up and be responsible."

She glared at him before allowing her shoulders to sag. She knew he was right. He just ruffled her feathers, and she didn't like it. "I'm sorry, I'll try."

"You're going to have to do more than try."

"Okay, but you need to back off a little and stay out of my personal space." He was too close and all she could think about was running her fingers through the silky blond hair that lay in gentle waves caressing his shoulders. He crowded her, and she pressed as close against the wall as she could, trying to put some space between them. She could feel the heat radiating off him and sinking into her.

"Why? Do I bother you?"

He pushed a stray hair off her face, and she shivered. "No." Oh, he so did. Everything about him bothered her, especially that smile he wore at the moment. It reminded her of the spider who had the fly caught in its web. She was the fly. She just hoped she'd find a way to get out before he ate her alive. *Oh, but wouldn't it be glorious fun if she didn't get out?*

"Then it wouldn't bother you if I did this." He leaned in and gave her a scorching kiss on the neck. She moaned, instantly forgot all the reasons she hated him, and leaned her head back to give him better access to the sensitive skin he was now nibbling.

His mouth was hot and his lips were soft and firm at the same time. He trailed a hot path up her neck, then along her jaw until he was a mere breath from her lips. She was on fire. She wanted more and all common sense had taken an abrupt vacation from the logical part of her brain. She stood on tiptoe to close the distance between them, and his mouth crashed down on hers possessively. Their tongues instantly tangled, and he pushed the whole length of his body against hers. She strained against him, begged for more. If she got any hotter, she might just melt into a puddle right on the floor. She had never felt anything so intense in her entire life.

His hand came up and stroked her breast. She pushed the beaded tip poking through the fabric of her shirt against him, moaning her pleasure, aching for more. He pulled his mouth from hers and brushed it against her ear. "Avril, I want you."

Oh my God! What am I doing? She pulled away from him. "I'm going to be late for work. I have to go." She sprinted away from him down the hall without a backward glance. Another moment and she would have let him take her right there in the hallway.

What the hell was she doing letting him maul her like that? No, she couldn't say maul. After all, she had been enjoying it. In fact, her body stills sang with the aftereffects of his kiss and his heated words. But that was the problem. She didn't want to enjoy it and he was soooo wrong for her. She didn't know how, but she was going to have to find a way to fight her attraction to him, and boy, it wasn't going to be easy.

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Jeez, the woman was exasperating and beautiful. He didn't like the way she made him feel. Alive for the first time in years, excited over a woman. He couldn't remember the last time a woman had gotten under his skin like she did. In fact, he wasn't for sure a woman had ever affected him the way Avril did.

She infuriated him and turned him on at the same time. He didn't understand all the conflicting emotions when he was around her. One minute he wanted to shake her, the next he wanted to bury himself in her. God, just thinking about it now had him growing an inopportune hard-on.

Aiston watched her flee and fought every instinct that screamed at him to chase her down, hunt her, take her. A part of him wanted to protect, possess, and dominate her, and another wanted to worship, give, and submit. He literally banged his head against the wall a few times in hope of pounding some sense into his thick skull and went after her. He didn't know if he'd ever figure out what made this woman tick. But trying was going to be one hell of an adventurous ride.

Chapter Five

That night at work was fairly uneventful if one discounted the fact that Avril was so distracted over Aiston's presence that she had already broken six glasses. She never broke glasses. It wasn't like he was really doing anything except sitting in the corner of the bar watching everyone. The eerie thing was that every time his gaze rested upon her, she felt it. She grew taut, wary, wanting . . . aware. She'd try to ignore it each time the tiny hairs stood on her arms, but eventually, she gave in and glanced at him, only to find him staring back with half-closed, smoldering eyes. One time, he even had the nerve to wink at her. That was when she broke the first glass and the others followed shortly with a smile here, another wink there. The man unsettled her.

It was still two hours until closing, and she was in agony. Her emotions were wreaking havoc on her system, and she teetered between hating him and wanting to rip his clothes off so she could ravish his gorgeous body. She was so confused. She didn't know what to do, and there was no way she was going to talk to Ebony about this. She could just see it now. Ebony would squeal with delight and tell her that it was all normal and that she had finally met a man that would make a great match for her. Her friend seemed to turn a blind eye to Aiston's little habit of using women, and that was the one thing she, herself, couldn't look past. If he was used to women doing everything he wanted and giving nothing in return, what would make her any different? She couldn't live like that. *Been there, done that, not going there again.* She gave him a quick peek from under her lashes and sighed. *No matter how incredibly sexy he is.*

"Oh! Who is that hunk of gorgeous male flesh over there?"

Avril's back stiffened when she caught Martha's words. She hadn't seen Martha for a few weeks and had actually wondered a few times what had happened to the blonde with the huge boobs and even huger addiction to alcohol. Martha had a reputation for being loose and free with the men. Avril never understood it because the woman was very attractive and could probably be nearly model gorgeous with a makeover and a good detox.

"He's not your type, Martha." Avril nearly groaned when the woman snapped her eyes to Avril in amusement as if she'd just tossed a challenge to her. *Like a dog after a bone.*

"You interested, Avril? He with you?" Martha turned and watched Aiston openly.

Avril figured Aiston would be all over a woman like Martha. Gorgeous and easy was surely his type. Hell, it was most men's type. Yet, he met Martha's stare only once briefly, coolly, as if assessing her, then promptly dismissing her. Interesting.

"He's with me, but he isn't with me, if you know what I mean."

"Shame on you, girl, for letting a hunk like that slip through your fingers. And tell me, Avril, why is he not my type?"

Crap. She had meant that he wasn't her type because he was a vampire, but she couldn't tell her that. "I just meant that, well . . . um—"

Martha giggled. "You are interested in him, aren't you? Well, honey, let me show you how to land that man there."

Avril watched as Martha scooted off the stool and pushed her boobs up even farther out the top of her tight, red top. Suddenly, Avril's mouth went dry and she wanted to rip old Martha bald-headed. Instead, she clenched her fists and turned her back to the spectacle that was about to happen. Problem was that she could see everything in the mirror that hung behind the gazillion bottles of liquor lined on the shelf against the wall.

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Aiston watched Avril as she, once again, scrubbed her hands down the sides of her jeans, a move she unconsciously did every time she was agitated. A grin tugged at his lips, and he wondered if she was aware of the little telling habit. He had no doubt what the cause of that agitation was. That thought tugged his grin even wider. He could read her mind, but decided he'd learned his lesson from that one already. He'd never forget the first night she'd come to the mansion to visit Ebony. The first night he'd laid eyes on her. She'd stood there in the entryway with her dark hair; rich, chocolate eyes; and lithe figure looking like a goddess. He'd never seen a more beautiful woman. That's when he'd made the unfortunate mistake of taking a quick stroll through her thoughts. She hadn't liked him, and some very unflattering things formed her perception of him, male chauvinistic pig being the favorite.

He'd been a little out of sorts after that since most women fawned over him. He hadn't been quite sure how to handle Avril. And it seemed no matter what he did, her impression of him never wavered. She obviously wanted him as much as he wanted her, yet she fought the attraction every step of the way. *I don't need this shit!* He needed to get her off his mind. Maybe after he saw her home tonight he would find some female companionship.

His favorite club, Drake's, employed the voluptuous redheaded Liv. Liv knew how to please a man and never asked for anything in return other than mutual pleasure. He always showed the women he was with respect, but let them know up front that nothing permanent would come of their liaisons. He smiled. What problem couldn't be solved by having a shapely pair of legs wrapped around you? He caught a subtle whisper from the traitorous part of his mind. *Idiot*. Then, he promptly squashed it.

Even though he had been alive for nearly seven hundred years, he'd never been with one woman that he wanted anything from other than sexual gratification and maybe occasional conversation. Avril was a different story, and he needed to get her out of his system. Yeah, a little tryst with Liv was exactly what he needed.

He glanced at his watch. Only two hours to go, and then he could see Avril home safely and be on his way to getting her off his mind. So far, everything had gone well, and he hadn't seen anything or anyone out of the ordinary. He just hoped it stayed that way.

Son of a bitch! The blonde with the big boobs that had sashayed into the bar about ten minutes ago and had been talking to Avril was now making a beeline for him. He'd seen her eyeing him and had done his best to make it clear he wasn't interested. She obviously hadn't taken the hint.

"Hey, there. Mind if I sit down?"

He leaned back in the chair and nodded. "It's a free country."

He sighed when she plopped her ass right in his lap instead of on the ten or so chairs around him. She turned and snaked her arms around his neck. "You are a very handsome man." She ran her fingertip down the front of his shirt. "I'm sure you already know that though, don't you?"

"Ma'am—"

She placed her finger over his mouth. "Martha. Or, hell, you can call me whatever you want."

He trapped her hand between his fingers and chest when it started trailing once again down the front of his shirt, stopping its downward journey. "Martha. I'm not looking for what you're offering tonight. I'm with Avril, and I'd appreciate it if you'd get off my lap."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about Avril. She said you weren't with her."

He glanced over at Avril and found her stiff as a board, her back to him, and staring at him in the big mirror on the wall behind the bar. *Hmmm. She doesn't like Martha on my lap, now does she? Very interesting.* "Well, Martha, as tempting as your offer is, I can assure you, once again, regardless of what Avril said, I am, in fact, *with* her. Now, please get off my lap, or I'm going to deposit you on the floor."

"Are you fucking serious?"

His eyes never wavered from her wide gray ones. "Serious as hell."

It didn't take Martha long to let him know what a miserable bastard he was, what he'd be missing out on, and to quickly find another lap to sit on while glaring at him. He chuckled and turned back to watch Avril. She was a little less tense now. She'd told him time and again that she didn't want to have anything to do with him, yet she didn't like Martha on his lap. Maybe the situation wasn't as hopeless as he'd originally thought. A woman didn't get jealous if she didn't have some sort of feelings for you.

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Avril locked the door to the bar and turned to Aiston. He had just finished strapping the sword to his back, and pulled the brown leather duster over it. She had insisted that he take them both off before they went into the bar. He didn't like it, but compromised, and agreed to do so as long as he could keep it draped over the chair beside him. His brothers also carried swords concealed by dusters when they were hunting. It was an Aleksandrov tradition. It was sexier than hell.

"Well, let's go."

Aiston didn't say a word, and started walking stiff-backed in the direction of her apartment. She wondered what his problem was. He acted like he was angry with her, but she hadn't done anything. Had she? She hadn't been the one with a strange man on her lap. *You are such an idiot. Why the hell should it even matter anyway?* They walked on silently for about two blocks, and then he abruptly stopped and pushed her behind him against the wall of a brick building. He turned to her and covered her mouth with his hand when she started to speak. He put one, long finger against his mouth.

"Shhh."

She nodded and he pulled the wicked-looking sword he'd strapped on a few minutes earlier from his back.

She admired his graceful movement as he turned and walked toward the alley only a few feet in front of them and to the left. His silent, predatory glide screamed dominance, confidence, sex. She knew the Aleksandrovs were vampires, but she'd never in her life seen men as big as they were move with such elegant grace.

Something was wrong, and she was scared, but she couldn't stop ogling him. She really had to get a handle on this. She stood completely still, muscles locked and ready to flee, waiting to see what would happen next. Aiston disappeared around the corner and chaos broke out. Blood-curdling screeches rent the air and nearly popped her eardrums along with the sound of what she could only assume was flesh hitting flesh. She wanted to see what was going on, but was too scared to move . . .

almost. She tiptoed over to the corner, and peered around it. She had to slap her hand over her mouth to keep a scream from escaping at the sight that greeted her. She had never seen a drifter in the flesh, and even the horrible images she had conjured from Ebony's descriptions hadn't come close to what she now witnessed.

Two ghastly-looking creatures with wicked claws were fighting with Aiston. Their hideous screeches continued, making her wince and cover her ears. She was amazed Aiston, with his enhanced hearing, wasn't writhing on the ground in pain from the noise. The smaller creature had spittle dribbling off its chin and the other's soulless, empty eyes nearly encouraged the scream she'd contained in her throat to escape. Aiston beheaded the smaller drifter with one clean slice of his sword. It flopped to the ground and started to dissolve into a murky, thick, black substance.

The smell was horrible, and she coughed and nearly gagged. Aiston turned at the sound, giving the remaining drifter the perfect opportunity to rake its talons across his back. The claws easily penetrated leather fabric and skin. The drifter sneered in enjoyment at the wounds he had inflicted and turned its dead eyes on Avril. Even though the thing only looked at her for a second, she shivered with dread, instinctively seeming to know what acts of evil it was capable of. Aiston's hands tightened on the sword handle, and she swore she saw fire flicker from the ends of his fingers.

Aiston hadn't so much as flinched when the drifter had sliced into him, and turned back to his opponent. She'd never believe he'd been hurt had she not witnessed it since not one muscle had twitched in betrayal of the pain that was no doubt inflicted by the drifter's talons. She felt guilty because the distraction she had caused was the reason he'd been wounded. He was a fluid, skilled fighter and his moves were as beautiful and graceful as a ballroom waltz.

He lunged at the drifter and took a slice off its side, forcing another blood-curdling screech from it. The drifter retaliated with another blow of its bloodied claws to Aiston's midsection. Again, Aiston showed no indication that he had been touched. He spun and caught the creature in the throat with a wicked kick. The motion was so fast it was a blur. Aiston continued to solidly land blows and kicks, which infuriated the drifter until it made a fatal mistake and left itself open to his sword. He spun and took the thing's head off in one, clean cut.

The smell of one dying drifter was enough to make anyone want to wretch, but two made it impossible to keep from doing so. Avril doubled over, holding her stomach while heaving its contents onto the ground. After taking a few deep breaths, she recovered and straightened only to find Aiston's ice blue eyes mere inches from hers.

"Are you okay?"

She nodded and remembered he had been hurt in the fight. "Oh my God! How badly are you hurt?" Judging by the size of the drifter's claws, he must have some very nasty wounds.

"I'm fine. Let's get you home." He took her by the arm and guided her the last couple of blocks to her apartment.

She didn't believe he was fine. He was very quiet, his mouth pulled in a taut line, and his skin turned paler by the moment. They made it to her apartment, and he waited while she opened the door. He gently pushed her aside and went in to make sure it was secure. After motioning to her that it was clear, he stepped back toward the door.

"You'll be safe now. I have to go."

"Aiston."

He turned as she walked toward him. "What?"

"I know you're hurt. Please let me clean your wounds."

"No. Don't come near me. I have to go." Before he could get out the door, she clamped her hand around his arm.

"Aiston, please. This is the second time you've kept me from harm, and I want to at least make sure your wounds are cleaned. I don't want them to get infected."

He turned abruptly. "Are you forgetting what I am? I assure you, I will not get an infection. However, I do need sustenance to heal properly, and I don't think you are volunteering now, are you?" His closed his eyes when a small gasp of surprise escaped her lips. "I'm sorry, but you don't understand. It's not as simple as me needing blood. My body is demanding it of me, and if I don't get out of here soon, you could be in danger."

She almost ran when she saw black creeping over his eyes, smothering the beautiful blue out, and the pointy tip of a fang poking below his top lip. She realized she wasn't scared, though. No matter what he said, he would not hurt her. She didn't know why, but she knew that without a doubt. When he staggered a little, she saw blood dripping off the bottom of his duster. "You've lost a lot of blood, haven't you? You're getting weak."

"Avril, I have to get to a source before I lose control. If I lose much more blood I might not be able to stop myself from hurting someone."

"Then there's no getting around it. Use me as your source." She almost laughed at the horror that crossed his face.

"No! You're Ebony's best friend, and she would have me drawn and quartered."

She watched as he staggered again, and knew his situation was becoming critical fast. She grabbed a handful of leather and insistently tugged him to the couch. She pulled off his duster and sword before she pushed him down and was a little alarmed at how easy it was to do so. She quickly reigned in her alarm, not letting it show on her face, when she saw the large slashes in his shirt soaked with blood. She took a deep breath to calm herself.

“Okay, bite me.” She would be stupid if she didn’t admit that she was a little scared, but she was going to do this. She would not let him die from protecting her, from a stupid distraction she’d caused. And he could die from excessive blood loss. There was no other choice.

He chuckled. “Avril, I don’t want to hurt you.” He tried to get up, but he was too weak.

“Look, Aiston, just do it, for God’s sake! I’m offering myself freely to you. You won’t hurt me.” His skin was turning a sickly ashen color and she was becoming increasingly worried. “Now, how do you want to do this?”

He sighed. “God save me from my brother and Ebony, but I’m going to have to take you up on your offer. Come here.”

He opened his arms, and she crawled across his lap like a good sacrificial lamb. “Neither Ashe nor Ebony have any room to talk. Ebony gave Ashe her blood in a similar situation.”

“We can talk about it later. Come here.”

She was working hard keeping her fear at bay when she felt his warm lips on hers. She relaxed and turned limp at his touch. He really was a good kisser. Good? No, phenomenal. His tongue pushed at her lips, and she opened for him. “Mmmm.”

His tongue tangled with hers and stroked the tender flesh of her mouth. She moaned, and his body hardened under her thighs. He pulled his lips from hers and trailed a quick path of kisses along her jaw to her neck. Her heart pounded and pumped the blood through her veins that she knew called to him. She sucked in a quick breath when his fangs sank into her neck. She wasn’t for sure what she had expected, but she figured pain would be a part of it. Yet, she felt only a small pinch of discomfort that was quickly chased away by lightning licking at her veins. The sucking motion of his mouth on her neck coaxed her nipples to draw into points. Her belly tightened deep inside and wetness dampened her inner thighs.

Her hands came up and tangled in his hair, pulling him even tighter against her neck as she pushed her hips down on his hardened body. Instantly, one of his hands was under her shirt, long fingers pinching, then soothing her nipple while the other worked down the front of her jeans, gliding under her panties and finding the sensitive nub that was crying out for attention. When he circled it with his thumb, she cried out and pushed against him, urging him to continue the sweet torment. He pushed two fingers into her wetness while his thumb continued massaging her. She rode his hand and, within seconds, her release hit her like a tsunami, and she screamed his name while she pulsed around him. He pulled his fangs gently from her neck and began kissing her again as she rode the ebbing waves of her climax.

* * * *

The aftershock of her release sent small tremors through her, and he used the last ounce of control he possessed to pull his fingers from deep inside where he wanted to be buried so badly. He knew that she wanted him, and he was in no doubt about how bad he wanted her, but he also knew she would regret it. He couldn't willingly take her knowing that she would wish it had never happened afterwards.

All the while, his mind chanted, "Mine," over and over like a spoiled child who'd been denied a favorite toy.

Chapter Six

The sound of running water from the bathroom sent images of Aiston, naked under the shower, through Avril's mind even though the source of the water was the small sink. He was cleaning himself up the best he could, and she was glad that he hadn't opted for the shower, or she might have done something incredibly stupid like join him. He insisted that his wounds would be closed and healed soon, thanks to her, and didn't need help attending to them. Her stomach was still in knots over his injury. The possibility that he could have died stayed with her and scared her more than she thought it should.

She was still on fire from his kisses and caresses, and her body wanted more. She touched her lips and sighed, the feel of him imprinted on the slightly swollen skin. The erotic encounter had been the most raw, explosive experience she'd ever shared with a man. But even the fact that her universe shifted on its axis at his touch couldn't change the obvious. He was still the womanizing pig she knew him to be, and she was still not interested in men like him. She ignored the tiny question whispering through her brain. *If he's such a womanizing pig, why was he the one who put a halt to your heated encounter in your living room?*

Nothing good could come of this situation. *Yeah, except for the most mind-blowing sex you've ever had!* Sex? Hell, they hadn't even had sex. She couldn't begin to wrap her mind around what that would be like. He had given her the best orgasm of her life, and she still ached for him, felt cheated because he hadn't taken her completely. Her inner muscles clenched at the thought of him sliding into her.

Aiston finally came out of the bathroom and reminded her of a naughty little boy who just got caught being mischievous. She almost chuckled, but figured she might be pushing her luck a little too far. "Are you feeling better?"

Yeah, if you call having a hard-on that would rival a horse feeling better.

Avril tensed. "What did you just say?"

His eyes snapped to her and coldly assessed her, yet she swore fire burned in their depths. *No way did she hear that.*

"Yes way, I did hear that, and it was not mannerly in the least." Now he was looking at her as if she had suddenly sprouted an extra head.

“Holy shit! You couldn’t have heard that, Avril. I only thought it, and that would mean . . . no never mind. I have to go.”

Before she could say another word, he vanished. She hated when he did that. Why was it such a big deal that she heard him anyway? *Wait a minute. Oh no!* Suddenly, she remembered a conversation between her and Ebony where Ebony had been explaining what a vampire’s *viata amant* was. A human who was destined to be a vampire’s *viata amant* could communicate telepathically with their intended mate. There was no way that she could be Aiston’s life mate. They were not compatible. Fate could not be so cruel as to strap her with a man who would never be faithful.

She racked her brain, trying to remember what else her friend had told her. She smacked her forehead as if to force the memories back, and sighed in relief when they finally surfaced. According to Ebony, if she were Aiston’s life mate, she would also be able to see him when he was shielded. A vampire would sometimes shield himself when hunting shadowdrifters. No one except another vampire or a life mate could see them while in that state—not even drifters—giving the vampire the advantage of a surprise ambush on the creatures. She knew she had not seen him while he was shielded, or at least she didn’t think she had. No. She couldn’t have. Because based on the not so subtle reaction he’d had to her hearing his thoughts, had she ever seen him shielded, she was sure his response to the event would have tipped her off.

She relaxed a little. Maybe the little telepathic thing tonight was just a freak incident brought on by witnessing the decapitation of a creature condemned to hell. She remembered Ebony had also told her that, even though vampires could read human minds, they usually refrained from it out of respect. However, when a human was experiencing a strong emotion such as joy or sorrow, it came off in waves, and vampires felt them unintentionally. *Yeah, that’s probably it. It has to be.* Ignoring the fact that this still didn’t explain why she heard his thoughts, she looked at the clock and exhaustion sank into her bones as dawn quickly approached. She dragged herself off the couch, took a quick, steamy hot shower, and crawled into bed. Her mind was simply too tired to worry about the night’s events any further, and she drifted into a deep sleep filled with dreams of ocean blue eyes, blond hair, and strong hands roaming her body.

Unfortunately, she awoke only a half hour later, wired and unable to go back to sleep. Geez! The man was even cutting in to her sleep time now. She threw the covers back and got out of bed. Only one thing would calm her nerves enough to allow her to go back to sleep.

* * * *

Aiston hadn’t been able to get out of Avril’s apartment fast enough. Things were getting way too deep for him. He had never been the settling-down type. In fact, the mere thought of it used to make his

knees weak with fear. Yet, curiously, he found himself wandering down that path often lately. The thought of spending forever with Avril wasn't unappealing in the least. That scared the shit out of him because he had never come close to feeling the way he did about Avril for any other woman.

And exactly how is the way you feel about Avril? No, he didn't want to go there. He wasn't ready to delve into the confusing emotions engulfing his soul. He simply couldn't change who he was, who he'd always been. His motto was "too many women, too little time." And that was a joke since he probably had enough time to sleep with half the women on the earth if he wanted. The beast inside him cried foul. It knew better even if he didn't. He had many years of controlling the beast, and tamped it down into submission . . . for the time being.

The soothing, steamy water of the shower rained on him while he tried to forget the woman who insisted on plaguing his mind. He couldn't believe she had heard his thoughts, and he continued to deny the implications. Would it be so bad if she were his life mate? *Are you delusional, man?* They were so unsuited for one another. She was headstrong and too outspoken. She never held back. When she had a thought, she didn't hesitate to let it cross her lips, which usually ended in some kind of insult toward him or men in general. Yet, she was soft and passionate and melted when he touched her. The few erotic encounters they had shared were unforgettable, and he wanted more. She was beautiful, loyal, and kind. Her huge, brown eyes alone could make a man's heart skip a beat or two, and even though she was slim, she had the most sensational, curvy ass he'd ever laid eyes upon.

And she would rather hurl herself off the nearest building than find out she was my life mate. He was trying to convince himself this thing between them wouldn't work, but instead, his idiotic heart insisted it had to. He felt overly possessive of her, and knew that was also a sign of a *viata amant*. There was one way he could be absolutely, positively sure. But did he want to know? Was he ready to know? If she could see him when he was shielded it would seal their fate. He turned off the water and decided he wanted to live in denial for at least a little while longer.

He dried off and groaned at his quickly healing, but still aching, body and got dressed. He would need sleep soon thanks to his injury, but it was only a couple of hours until breakfast. He'd grab a few z's tomorrow during the day since Avril would be safe at her job. Tonight, he'd get the hell over to Drake's and find out if anyone else had noticed anything strange with the drifters. He needed a distraction in a bad way. Maybe his hormones were thrown out of kilter because he'd been without a woman for so long, or at least a long time for him. *And why do you think that is?* He'd missed out on his plan to let Liv take his mind off Avril last night, but maybe tonight, he'd get his chance. *Coward.*

Aiston made his way downstairs to the family room to play some morbid video games. Kicking the shit out of someone always made him feel better even if it was only virtual reality ass whooping.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Ashe was sitting in the family room when he walked in.

"Uh, I live here."

"Damn it, Aiston! You know what I mean. You are supposed to be keeping an eye on Avril." Ashe stood and walked over to face him.

Aiston sighed. Ashe could be a real pain in the ass. "She's safe at home, and you know drifters rarely go out in the daytime."

"I told you she needed to be watched around the clock, and you agreed. Besides, we can't count on the drifters doing anything they've always done any longer."

"Look, Ashe. I'm not going to let anything happen to her, okay? I had a rough night, and I wanted to relax a little before I resumed my babysitting job."

Ashe treated his brother to some serious scrutiny. "What the hell happened? Your skin has a gray cast to it."

Aiston told Ashe all about the drifters and how he had been wounded. He'd known that Ashe wasn't going to be happy when he told him about using Avril as a source.

"How the hell could you do that?" Ashe began pacing.

"I tried to leave. She wouldn't let me, and by the time I finished arguing the point with her, I had two choices. Take what she was offering or bleed out. Would you rather I had chosen the latter? Would you have chosen the latter?" Aiston already knew the answer to that as a similar incident had happened to Ashe before he had turned Ebony, and Ebony had insisted on giving him blood. When the beast was calling for blood, it was nearly impossible to refuse it.

Ashe pushed his fingers through his thick hair. "You know I wouldn't rather you be dead, Aiston. You're my brother, and I don't want you harmed in any way much less six feet under."

"Yeah, well, then there you have it." Aiston watched Ashe take in a deep breath and let it out along with his anger.

"Look, I didn't mean to go off on you. I know you wouldn't have done it if there was any other option. I'm just under a lot of pressure at the moment trying to figure out this whole drifter thing, trying to spend time with my new son, and trying to keep my wife safe and out of this whole mess. There would be no consoling her if something happened to Avril."

Aiston took a deep breath and, letting it out slow and long, mimicked his brother's action of just a few seconds earlier. "I know Ashe. We are all on pins and needles trying to figure this thing out. I promise I'll be back over at Avril's before she goes anywhere, and I'll keep an eye on her. I just needed a little break, okay?"

Ashe eyed his brother, and Aiston had no doubt he knew there was more to it than that. He got up and walked toward the door. "I'll see you at breakfast. By the way, I have a meeting set up for Friday night. Let's just hope nothing new happens with the drifters until then." Ashe paused before leaving the room, his shoulders tense. "Aiston, I'm glad you're okay. I never want to lose one of my brothers."

Aiston watched his brother leave and sat down on the couch. Ashe was under a lot of pressure—hell, they all were—and he knew that he shouldn't have left Avril, but he would have never done so if he thought she would be in any kind of danger. He was always careful and made certain they were never followed. He scrubbed his hands over his face fiercely as if he could wipe the woman completely out of his mind. He laughed. She was branded there, and he would never be rid of her.

He squeezed his eyes tightly shut for a minute before he shimmered back to his room. He took another deep breath and decided he might as well just give up the fight. He strapped his sword to his back, pulled a new duster over it since his other one had been destroyed in the fight, and shimmered to Avril's living room. Looked like he'd be getting that much needed sleep today instead of tomorrow, and he wouldn't be eating breakfast with his family after all. He was sure of one thing, though. He was going to talk Avril into staying at the mansion until things got back to normal because he didn't know how much longer he'd be able to keep his hands off her. He removed the duster and sword he had pulled on just moments before, and dropped them on her coffee table. He walked to her bedroom door and was surprised to see her sitting in a corner of the tiny room, back to him, fiercely painting on a huge canvas.

He walked closer, and the smell of oils assailed his nostrils. She was completely immersed in her task and hadn't heard him approach. He watched in fascination as she made bold strokes of blue with a thin, fat brush, then fanned them out with gentler strokes, blending and softening the darker colors with the lighter ones. The picture was a beautiful landscape of the ocean. The waves nearly splashed off the canvas at him they were so lifelike. She was an exceptional painter, and possessed a talent most could only wish to be blessed with.

"It's beautiful."

Avril jumped, dropped the paintbrush, and spun to look at her silent intruder. "You are going to give me a freaking heart attack doing that one of these days!"

"I'm sorry." He treated her to his famous lopsided grin. The one that had the ability to make women swoon, but she only looked annoyed.

She put her brush down and toyed with the hem of her shirt. "Why are you here?"

"We've been through that." She was breathtaking in her tight tank top and loose pajama bottoms, cuffs rolled up, exposing her bare feet and shapely calves.

"No, I know that, but I didn't think I had anything to worry about during the day, and since it's past dawn . . ." She shrugged.

"Most of the time, you don't. But, the drifters seem to be doing things out of the ordinary lately so we aren't assuming they will stick to normalcy any longer."

"Oh." She watched as he walked closer to her painting.

Aiston studied it closer. It was flawless, and he swore he could almost smell the salt of the sea spray. "You are very talented, Avril." He cast a quick glance at her, silently wondering why the hell she was working two jobs when she could do this.

Avril shrugged. "It's just a hobby. Something I do when I'm stressed."

"Huh-uh. It's way more than that."

"Whatever." She began cleaning her brushes. "I was about ready to quit anyway and catch a few hours of sleep. I was trying to unwind."

He continued to stare at the painting for a while before finally deciding now wasn't the time to argue with her about why she wasn't showing off her talent to the whole world. He watched as she cleaned the brushes, and admired the graceful movements of her hands, the hands that were capable of painting one of the most beautiful pictures he'd ever seen. And he had seen a lot in his existence. Hands that were able to set his body on fire with one single stroke of a dainty finger.

"You know where everything is. I'm hitting the sack for awhile."

He watched as she stood, her arms across her chest, tapping her foot in agitation. He knew she was dismissing him and he didn't like it. He stepped closer to her and she put her hands up in protest of his approach. He stopped a mere inch before his lips touched hers. "Stop fighting it."

She talked through clenched teeth. "I'm not fighting anything. Please get out of my bedroom."

He raised his hand and trailed a finger down her cheek, not missing the way she slightly leaned into his touch. "Yes you are."

"Get out!"

He knew if he touched his lips to hers, he could have her. But there would no doubt be a huge argument afterwards. And hell if he felt like arguing with her at the moment. He spun around and headed for the living room. "Fine."

Thirty minutes later, Aiston stood by Avril's bed and stared down at her sleeping form. She was absolutely breathtaking. Her tousled hair fanned out over the white pillowcase her head rested on. One of her shapely legs was on top of the comforter, and her arms were bent up, lying on either side of her head. The position pulled her shirt tight over her breasts and outlined them perfectly. He closed his eyes and breathed in deep, demanding himself not to reach out and cup one of them. He knew they fit perfectly in his hands, and he wanted to touch them, feel her nipples pebble into tight peaks once again in response to him. She'd be responsive, she always was, but she would also most likely regret making love to him still at this point in time. He wasn't going to take advantage of her sleep-induced vulnerability.

He watched her chest rise and fall with even breaths for a couple seconds longer before going back to the living room and lying on the tiny couch. He closed his eyes and nodded off.

* * * *

A few hours later, Avril dragged herself out of bed and shuffled to her living room to find a man sprawled on her couch. A small squeak escaped her throat.

Aiston sat bolt upright with such speed Avril stumbled back a few steps. Her heart pounded in surprise. He looked perfect. She perused his huge body as casually as possible so he wouldn't figure out what she was doing. She would have never guessed he'd been sleeping by his unruffled appearance and was a little envious. She knew her hair was messy, and at least one eye had to have a smudge of crust in it.

"What the hell are you screaming at?" His voice held an edge of grumpiness.

"Sorry. I forgot you were here." He was solid muscle without an ounce of extra fat anywhere. His jeans hugged his thighs and hips, showcasing just how spectacular he was. His broad chest was emphasized by the shirt that lay taut over it. She loved his hair, too. Her fingers never failed to itch when she looked at it, and begged to have a quick run through the ruffled, spiky top to the short waves in the back.

He let out an irritated huff of breath and stood. He stretched, hands over his head, and her mouth watered at the glimpse she got of the narrow path of hair under his navel.

He walked to her kitchen where he began preparing a pot of coffee. "Coffee?"

"Yes."

She watched him, admiring his wide back while chastising herself for wanting him at the same time. They would be electric in bed together. Tension always proved to make sex explosive, but she didn't want to sleep with him just because she knew it would be good. *Liar*. No. She wanted more than just sex. She wanted love, faithfulness . . . the happily-ever-after dream. And he wasn't the type to give it to her. The only dreams he'd fulfill would be her dark, erotic, kinky dreams. And, while it would be great while it lasted, the aftermath would be a nightmare.

He spun around, and her eyes flew wide. "Stop staring at me like that."

"Um, like what?" She wiped her hands nervously up and down her legs.

"You know like what, and I'd suggest you cut it or get naked."

“What? Are you freaking crazy? I can’t believe you just said that to me. You are such an ass.” She was embarrassed and a little ashamed of herself because his words made her want to rip her clothes off, right after ripping his off.

“Stop pretending, Avril. I’m not in the mood.” He turned and continued the task of getting the coffee brewing. “And don’t have such a smart mouth.”

She opened her mouth to argue with him but knew it was useless. He was right. God, what was she going to do? She wondered if it wouldn’t just be better to stay at the mansion. She didn’t think she could stand being around him much longer in close proximity and keep her hands off him. She sighed and grabbed two cups out of the cupboard.

“Look, I understand the situation, but you can’t stay here in my apartment the whole time I’m here. It’s too small. I need some privacy. I mean, I just, oh, I don’t know!” She resisted the urge to stamp her foot in the childish way she wanted to. “And I don’t have a smart mouth.”

He turned and eyed her from her red toenails to her blushing cheeks and blew out another breath, this time in obvious surrender. “Look, Avril, I know you don’t like me, although I don’t know why because I’ve never done anything to you. I guess we all have our own opinions and conclusions to draw. But we are going to have to make the best of this situation.”

“Fine. I give up. I’ll make a couple calls today, put in for some personal time, and I’ll go stay at the mansion.” She could tell he didn’t want to be here, and he certainly didn’t want to waste his time watching her when he could most likely be out cavorting with his women friends. “But I need to have some time to myself at least a few hours a week, and Ebony and Ashe and all of you are just going to have to accept that.”

“Avril, if you want to stay here, I’m sure we can work something out. I mean, it doesn’t bother me to stay here and watch over you.” *Oh, it bothers you all right.*

She shook her head. She had heard his thoughts once again. “Yeah, right. I can see how much you love being here, babysitting me. Probably about as much as I like being babysat. Why bother when I can stay at the mansion and put you out of your misery?” She turned to grab the pot of steaming coffee, but before her hand touched the handle, she found herself trapped between Aiston’s hands gripping the counter on either side of her. *Damn, the man is fast.*

His eyes, nearly black now, stared through her. She sucked in a deep breath, and the familiar burn of excitement coursed through her in response to his nearness. The man was gorgeous, sexy, and he smelled so good she wanted to take a bite out of him. *Ha! I want to take a bite out of him?* It always came back to the vampire thing.

He pushed his face close to hers. “Let’s cut the crap okay? You want me—”

“No—”

“And I want you. We both know it, so let’s not argue about it. For some reason, you don’t like me and have convinced yourself that being with me is not for you. Fine. I get it.” *And I’m a liar because I don’t get it and I’m not fine with it.* “So that would be the reason I would be in misery, if I were.”

Avril felt bad. He looked hurt. Had she done that to him? If she had, it had to be an ego thing. After all, she was pretty sure that he was not accustomed to being turned down by women. “Aiston, I don’t dislike you, it’s just—”

“Just forget it okay, Avril? I’ve got a lot on my mind, and I don’t need a long, drawn-out explanation of why I’m not good enough for you.”

Now she really felt bad. While his womanizing ways were a big turn off, he was a loyal, fierce man who dedicated a big part of his life to protecting humans. He was good enough for her, he just wasn’t right for her. She grabbed his arm before he could push away from her. “Aiston, please, I never said that you weren’t good enough. You are—”

“Avril, I don’t need some sugar-coated, bullshit speech about what kind of man I am. I’ve been me for almost seven hundred years. I know what kind of man I am, faults and all. I’m not going to apologize for how I’ve lived my life.”

She had hurt him. She hadn’t known he was capable of feeling strongly enough about any one woman for one to hurt him in the first place. Did he truly feel something for her? *Yeah, he feels an ego bruising at my rejection. Nothing more.* For some reason, she couldn’t fully convince herself of that. Before rationality reared its ugly head, she stood on tiptoe, circled her arms around his neck, and placed her lips softly on his.

His eyes remained open, and he froze. His muscles tensed under her fingers. His lips were firm against her soft ones and his exotic, spicy scent crept through her veins like tendrils of smoke, suffocating any protests. He held his breath as if afraid to break the spell she must be under while her lips continued to play on his.

Avril cried out when the kiss suddenly changed from lingering and sweet to primitive. Aiston pushed her hard against the countertop and covered her with his big body. He tangled one hand into her dark, thick hair and held her head still for his possession. His mouth came down hard on hers, and a low, deep growl grated in the back of his throat. She was excited, scared, and never wanted him to stop. She moaned and he took full advantage of her open lips, slipping his tongue deep inside, tasting her, breathing her in, stoking the flames higher.

He ravaged her mouth, and she tangled her tongue with his, straining her closer to him, her softness colliding with the hard planes of his muscles. She could feel her lips swelling under the assault, and tasted blood where one of her teeth had probably come in contact with her lip from the pressure of his kiss. She didn’t care. She wanted more. This was the most erotic, soul-searing kiss that she’d ever experienced, and she wanted it to go on forever. She felt hot and achy and needed more.

She dropped her arms around his waist and encouraged him to continue, crying out in pleasure every time he nipped her sensitive skin. His other hand found her breast and toyed with the hard tip through her shirt. His erection pressed against her belly, and she wished they didn't have the barrier of their clothing between them. She wanted to feel him skin against skin. She wanted him inside her. She arched and widened her legs to welcome him between her thighs. He pushed against her and created a most sensational friction where she wanted him most.

Avril felt Aiston's withdrawal immediately. Her breaths still came in quick gasps, but now, instead of kissing Aiston, she was once again staring into his black eyes and he was pushing her away from him instead of holding her.

"Avril, if we don't stop now there's going to be no going back. I want to bury myself so deeply in you that we won't be able to tell where I end and you begin; to make you cry out my name over and over while your slick, wet heat contracts around me in wave after wave of release as I give you pleasure; and to feel your magical hands on my body stoking the flame you ignite into a full rage. Is that what you want?"

She knew that he saw the brief flicker of doubt in her eyes at his words when he tensed. Avril didn't know what to say. His words were heaven and hell. Heaven because she knew nothing on earth would feel as close to heaven as his body inside hers. Hell because, afterward, reality would slither in like a venomous serpent and slowly kill the heart she had given to a man who could not be true to her. She watched him turn his back to her, fill a mug of coffee, and sit down at her small kitchen table.

"Why do your eyes turn black?" She didn't know where the question came from. It wasn't even appropriate at the moment, but she still wanted to know.

He glared at her, and she noted they were nearly back to the icy, ocean blue she loved. "They turn black when I feel strong emotions." He nodded toward the living room. "Go make your calls and let's get out of here."

His voice was strained, quiet. Angry? Well, hell with him. She was angry too. He knew that she didn't want a relationship with him, and then the second she had given in to all reason and decided what the hell, he rejected her. Well, screw him. She didn't need this. "Fine!"

* * * *

He listened to her stomp out of the kitchen. He was an ass. He knew he had hurt her. She had finally given in to their mutual desire, and he had done the worse thing a man could do to a willing woman. Reject her. It didn't matter. It was better this way because he knew deep down she would have

still regretted it. *Fuck! What is wrong with me?* He had the opportunity to have exactly what he had been wanting and he hadn't taken it. Enough was enough. He was going to find a way to get her off his mind once and for all.

Right now, he felt like pounding the shit out of something. Too bad there wasn't a drifter around.

Chapter Seven

"I'm glad you decided to stay for a while. I was worried about you." Ebony watched Avril unpack.

"Yeah, it's better this way." How could Aiston toy with her like that? She had practically thrown herself at him, and he had rejected her. *Get over it already. Good lord!* "But you have to allow me a few hours a week at my apartment by myself. I'll only go during the day. I need to paint to unwind in stressful situations, and boy, is this one of those situations."

"Avril, there is plenty of room here. We can bring your painting supplies here, and you could have a whole room to yourself. Besides, you know I'm here anytime you want to talk."

Avril sighed. "Yeah, I do." She also knew her friend would know something was bothering her, and she usually told Ebony everything. But the situation, or whatever you wanted to call it, with Aiston was not something she wanted to discuss at the moment. It was too new, too confusing, too . . . everything. "You're my best friend in the whole world. You've always been there for me, but I need to have someplace that I can go away from here to calm my nerves. At least for now. I'm just not ready to talk about it yet, okay?" Avril shrugged.

Ebony hugged her. "Okay. I'll take the hint." She watched as Avril put away the last of her things. "Well, how about if we have some fun tonight?"

"Another girls' night?" Avril smiled and plopped on the bed.

"Well, something like that. I thought maybe we could do something out of the norm and go to a club tonight. I'm sure my dear husband would be more than happy to accompany us, and we can have a few drinks and do a little dancing."

* * * *

"Don't be so sure, baby."

"Ashe! I'm talking to Avril. Get out of my head."

"Why are you planning on dragging me to a club?"

"Well, I know how very possessive you are, and I know you are not going to want me to go to a club with so many good-looking men gyrating around by myself, now are you?"

His chuckle caressed her mind and sent shivers down her spine. *"No more than you are going to want me to go to a club on my own with a bunch of gorgeous women gyrating around."*

"Okay, okay. You know me too well. I'd scratch any woman's eyes out that touched you."

"Baby, you know you can trust me."

"Oh, it's not you I don't trust, Ashe."

"All right. Don't get yourself riled, baby. You know I'd kill any man who so much as looked at you for more than about three seconds."

"So you'll take us tonight?"

"I know when I'm beat. Of course I'll take you. I love you."

"I love you too."

* * * *

Avril watched her friend's face as it went from playful to anger to smiling. "Talking to Ashe, are you?" She knew Ebony and Ashe couldn't stay out of each other's minds for very long and that they spoke telepathically often. It was rather sweet.

Ebony blushed. "Sorry."

"No, don't be." Avril waved her hand and laughed. "You two kids enjoy yourselves. Just don't be talking about anything kinky while I'm around. That'd just be too weird. Yuck!" Avril and Ebony both giggled.

"So, how about it? My wonderful husband just confirmed that he'd be more than happy to escort us tonight."

"Hmm. Well, you know, that actually sounds like fun. I haven't been dancing for a long time." And she could definitely use a couple drinks to take her mind off things, or should she say, one thing in

particular. She wasn't one to normally drink much, but as long as she was going to be with friends and safe, why not?

"The meeting Ashe had scheduled in a couple of days got moved to tonight, but I don't think it'll run too late so we should be able to get out of here by nine. Sound good?"

Avril nodded. Her friend was amazing. She admired the new found confidence Ebony had discovered since meeting Ashe and having her son. "Yeah, I'll pick something out to wear, and after that I'm going to grab something to eat. I'll find you later, okay?"

"Okay. Just let McKayla know what you'd like and she'll fix whatever you want."

"Nah, I'll just scrounge around in the fridge myself and find something. I don't want to bother her."

"Well, she wouldn't mind, but you know you're welcome to do whatever you wish here. I consider you family, and so does everyone else. I'm so glad you're staying for awhile." Ebony hugged Avril and hurried out the door.

Ten minutes later, Avril stood at her temporary closet and pursed her lips. Finally, she pulled out a slinky red dress and matching heels. *Why not?* She had bought the dress a year ago and hadn't worn it once. She looked the sheer fabric over and toyed with the hem of her shirt. Maybe it was a little too provocative to wear. She didn't even know why she had brought the dress with her. *Liar*. Deep down she knew that she'd brought it because she was hoping for a chance to wear it in front of Aiston. Well, too bad. Now he was going to be the one missing out. She smiled, hung the dress on the door for later, and made her way to the kitchen.

She was sitting at the table eating some leftover grilled chicken when Aldin walked in. The next-to-oldest Aleksandrov brother was broodingly quiet. He was just as gorgeous as Ashe and Aiston, but somehow he oozed more lethality than the other two, if that was possible. He always moved with near silence, not unlike a panther stalking its unsuspecting prey, and she always felt a little on edge when he was near. Ebony had said much the same, but both knew he would protect them with his life. Nonetheless, the man was dangerous. The old saying "the quiet ones are the ones you have to watch out for" always came to mind when Aldin entered the room.

She smiled and he gave a nearly invisible nod of the head. Something she might have missed if she hadn't been looking for it. He walked to the fridge and got a bottle of cold water. She admired his physique—damn, what a physique—but even he didn't turn her all mushy and hot inside like Aiston did when she watched him swagger about. Aldin was the tallest of the brothers, and she had to admit that she enjoyed looking at him—what living, breathing woman wouldn't—but he did absolutely nothing for her. That was a good thing because the thought of being attracted to Aldin was intimidating . . . scary intimidating. Not that Aiston was a lamb by any means, but Aldin...well, he was all bite and no bark.

She watched as his throat muscles worked with each swallow of the water until the bottle was drained. She sighed and wondered how Ebony could stand living in a house with all these *GQ* men

around, but the answer was simple. Ebony only had eyes for Ashe, and apparently, she only had eyes for Aiston. *What the hell am I going to do?*

Aldin grunted. “You should really turn the emotions down, Avril, if you don’t want everyone in the house to know what you’re thinking.”

She knew her face turned beet red from the instant heat she felt in her cheeks. Yeah, she had to keep her feelings in check. “Sorry, I forgot.”

“No need to apologize. Just didn’t figure you wanted everyone to know your personal life.”

She watched as he swaggered toward the door.

“By the way, he’s not as bad as you think. Maybe you should open your eyes and see past the black-and-white picture you’ve painted of him. There are lots of colors in there, too.”

She didn’t say a word in response as she watched him disappear through the door. Well, of course he’d say that. Aiston was his brother. Although, Aldin definitely didn’t strike her as the type to sugar coat things, or people. Had she done what Aldin had said and not given Aiston a fair shake? Had she just assumed that he would treat her the same way he had all the other women she had heard about? Should she give him a chance? Her confusion grew deeper and she threw the rest of her lunch out, cleaned up her dishes, and headed back upstairs to find Ebony.

Aldin’s response about lots of colors weighed on her. Even though she had painted for years, she’d never really thought about people as having different shades and colors—other than the ones she had painted. Aldin was right. Real people were just like painted people. One could guess about them all one wanted and still never come close to uncovering all of their layers.

* * * *

Ashe, Aldin, and Aiston sat in the den later that night with three other hunters—Dominic Zelasko, who covered the East Coast; Malachi Mannering, who covered the Central Western states; and Conrad Reyes, who covered the West Coast.

“So, we’ve all been experiencing the same things with the drifters?” Conrad’s short, light blond hair lay in little ringlets against his neck, which gave him a boyish look. His dark skin had a natural tanned look to it, and his hazel eyes were piercing. But his six-foot frame of packed muscle was anything but juvenile.

None of the hunters had an ounce of fat on them, and all were lethal in their own ways. Every hunter carried a sword or dagger, or other weapons. None carried guns as they drew too much

attention. Dominic was the youngest at a mere three hundred years, and the smallest at five ten. He looked like the boy next door with his short brown hair and golden eyes, but none of the hunters underestimated his skills. He was known for his speed and stealth. Malachi, on the other hand, was enough to make anyone nervous.

At six seven and weighing in at around two fifty, he was by far the biggest of the hunters. He was ruthless and killed without mercy. His black hair lay straight and long past his shoulders, and his cold, silver eyes usually scared the shit out of most people. At over a thousand years old, he was also the oldest and most experienced.

"Yeah. Increase in activity, communication, and confrontation. The little bastards have actually been initiating fights and carrying weapons. The first one I came across with a weapon nearly got a blade buried in me, I was so surprised." Dominic leaned back on the couch, his legs stretched out in front of him in a casual position, one crossed over the other, black boots peeking out from beneath his worn jeans.

Ashe sighed. "What about you, Malachi? Same?"

"Yes."

If Ashe had ever met someone who spoke less than Aldin, Malachi was the man. The man was always tense, ready for a fight. He sat, back ramrod straight, in the chair across from Ashe. His shoulders were as wide as a bear's and his black leather pants were obviously tailor made for his huge frame. "A couple of the drifters we recently took out actually mentioned something about a leader. One stronger and more powerful than our king I believe was the remark." He looked at the other hunters and knew by their expressions that they had also heard the same.

"What are we going to do about this?" Dominic's voice was low and quiet.

Ashe looked at Aiston, then Aldin. "My brothers and I have decided we should do some extensive research on the legend of our king, for one. And, of course, keep our ears open for more information, but unfortunately, there's not really much we can do other than wait to see what the drifters are brewing up for us next and continue to take as many of the bastards out as we can."

"You're right. Unfortunately, that is all we can do at the moment until we get a lead on this new commander of theirs. Then we can hunt him down and take care of the problem once and for all." Conrad stood and paced over to the bar where he grabbed a shot glass and poured some golden scotch to the rim.

"So, basically this meeting was a waste of our time?" Malachi stood and gave Ashe a wary look.

Ashe stood and leveled a stare back at the hunter. He may be formidable, but Ashe had skills too. "No, Malachi. It wasn't a waste. We need to work together on this. Maybe even recruit some more hunters."

"I work alone."

"Oh, come on. This is an exception. We are all hunters and share the same interest. We all do this to keep the humans safe. We need to cooperate and work together on this before it gets any more out of hand than it already has." Dominic faced Malachi, and even though he looked small standing next to the huge hunter, he showed no fear.

Malachi sighed and walked to the bar, every step near silent, an amazing feat for such a large man. He opted for a shot of Jack and drank it down in one long swallow.

"Okay then. Is everyone agreed that we could use some more recruits, we need to keep in touch and work on this problem together?" Ashe looked around the room at each man.

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

A grunt of agreement was the best they got from Malachi.

"Fine then. All of you are more than welcome to stay here as long as you need. Let's reconvene in, say, a month to see if there have been any new developments. If things intensify for anyone, call in and we'll meet sooner."

"I'm out of here." Malachi flipped the now empty glass down on the bar and left the room.

"What a pleasant little fellow." Aiston laughed, and the rest of the hunters chuckled too.

"Well, I need to get back myself, but thanks for the offer to stay Ashe." Conrad closed the door behind him.

Ashe knew the hunters were a little peeved at him for not inviting them to shimmer in his house, but after what had happened with Ebony, he'd never make that mistake again. If he hadn't invited Alaina Czernik to shimmer in his house when they had been lovers, she would have never gotten her hands on his wife so easily. Vampires could not shimmer inside another vampire's home without permission. No one knew why. It was just one of those unseen boundaries that was enforced by some unknown power. Ashe would never again give someone outside the family permission to shimmer inside the estate.

"I'll take you up on the offer. My house is being repaired from a recent storm so I'd rather crash here for a couple days than in a hotel." Dominic poured a sifter of brandy and drained the glass in no time.

"No problem. Stay as long as you'd like. I'll get McKayla to set you up in a room. Now, I believe my wife has suckered me into taking her and Avril dancing tonight so I must get moving. Would any of you like to join us?"

"Yeah, sounds like fun. Maybe I can find a woman to do a little horizontal dancing between the sheets." Dominic laughed.

Aiston glared at Dominic, then back at Ashe. "Where are you going?"

"Don't know yet. I'm sure Ebony will inform me, though."

"Not for me. See ya later," Aldin called over his shoulder as he left the room.

Aiston assessed Dominic again and said, "Nah, I'm going to burn some steam off myself with a woman."

Ashe didn't miss the way his brother sized Dominic up. He was sure it had something to do with the possibility of Dominic being close to Avril. Even though Aiston tried hard to deny it, his brother had a thing for Ebony's best friend. A real bad thing. Ashe remembered back when he and Ebony had met. He'd denied wanting her almost to the point of losing her. He hoped that his brother didn't make the same mistake he had.

Ashe buzzed the intercom button and McKayla answered. "McKayla, can you please come to the den and show Dominic to a spare room?" McKayla was at the door immediately, and Dominic stood to follow her out. "I'll go find my lovely wife, and see where we are destined to be. Later, Aiston."

"Later."

* * * *

Aiston watched Dominic follow McKayla out of the den. He didn't like the hunter. *The only reason you don't like him is because he's going to the club with Avril.* He was fighting a losing battle where she was concerned. No matter how long she fought it, no matter how long he prolonged the wait, it was inevitable that they would end up burning the sheets up. The mere thought of Dominic being in the same room as Avril heated his fingertips. He closed his eyes and willed the fire that would soon follow away.

Deep down he knew Avril was his. Even if it hadn't been proved one hundred percent, his body, his soul, his heart knew. He still didn't know how to handle these new found emotions, though. They were confusing, they were exhilarating, and they scared the shit out of him. A part of him wanted, needed, demanded that he find a way to convince her that she was his mate while another insisted on running away in denial.

Ten minutes later as he strolled out of the den, he'd decided to just let nature take its course and to let fate play her hand where he and Avril were concerned.

Chapter Eight

Marilena Aleksandrov stared at the estate. A lone tear trickled down her cheek. She missed her family terribly. She had her reasons for staying away as long as she had, and none of them had anything to do with the death of her husband. She let her children believe that to be so, but she had far more important reasons for staying away from them. If they found out that she had lied to them for practically their whole lives, they would hate her. They were the most important things in her life, and it had been a living hell staying away from them for so long.

The reunion she'd long awaited was going to happen soon, and would be bittersweet. While she wished it were only because predictions of the future were finally past and her years of missing them were finally over for positive reasons, this was not the case. The future was finally biting her in the ass. The future she had tried so hard to avoid, the future that could take all of her children from her forever. She should have known that, while it was possible to avoid and maybe even change the future to an extent, one could not run from fate. If certain things were meant to be, they would happen no matter what. He'd warned her of that, but she hadn't listened, couldn't bear to listen at the time since it involved the possible deaths of her children.

She took a deep breath and straightened her back. Her black hair ruffled in the soft breeze. The prediction from so long ago had not come to fruition as of yet, and even though the cycle of events that would lead to it had been set in motion, she'd be damned if she gave up fighting to change it. She would not allow her children to die, and if she had to tell them everything to save them, possibly turning them against her forever, she'd do it. She could live with their hate as long as they were alive, but she could not live while they were dead.

The first thing she wanted to do was see her grandson. Everyone except Marcus and the housekeeper was gone from the house, and that was fine with her at the moment. She'd get settled in, introduce herself to her grandson for the first time, and see her sons soon. She was a little sad that Estril was gone, but hoped she'd be back soon. She missed her daughter just as fiercely as she'd missed her boys.

All right, Marilena. You can't run from the future any longer. The time has come to face the facts.

* * * *

Avril's eyes were still popping at the sight of the club, Drake's, they were sitting in. The place was like none she'd ever seen, although she'd never been inside an exclusive vampire bar either. The floors were stained black, the walls were draped in red silk, and the seating was made of smooth, dark mahogany with plush throw pillows here and there for lounging. It reminded her of what a high-society celebrity's club might look like with a twist of Goth thrown in. Just her thing. She looked down at her miniscule red dress. At least she'd picked the right color.

The dance floor was huge and near to full with couples gyrating to the deep, thumping bass of a song by Faith No More she hadn't heard in years. Some of the moves could put the term "dirty dancing" to shame. Everything about the place was erotic, sexy, sinful, alluring.

A waitress dressed in tight, red leather came by and took their drink orders. She and Ebony ordered wine while Ashe and Dominic ordered beer. Avril glanced over at Dominic. The man was very good-looking and didn't bother hiding the fact that he had been checking her out. Every time she had looked his way since being introduced, he'd been openly staring at her. One thing about vampires, they didn't seem to come in any form of ugly. The waitress returned with their drinks and treated Dominic to a thorough perusal followed up by a wicked smile. Dominic smiled back and watched the waitress sashay off. Amusement twinkled in his golden eyes at the extra shake she put in each step.

The music drifted into a slower number after a few minutes, and Ashe pulled Ebony toward the dance floor. Dominic stood and held his hand out to Avril. "Shall we?"

She wanted to dance with him, but yet, she felt guilty. *Guilty of what exactly?* She and Aiston didn't have a relationship, and she'd come to have fun and get the insufferable man out of her mind for a while. She rubbed her hands up and down the sides of her legs, caught in a moment of indecision. *Hell with it.* She smiled and took his hand. "Sure. Why not?"

"Why not indeed." Dominic gave her a predatory smile that told her in no uncertain terms that he would be extremely happy if she would consent to be his prey for the night.

It wasn't going to happen, but that didn't mean she couldn't have a little fun in the meantime. Dominic tugged her toward the dancing couples, and when they reached the shiny dance floor, he bowed—something she thought only royalty did now days—and took her into his arms. He was an excellent dancer. His hard body swayed in perfect sync with the music. Up close, he was even better looking than she had originally thought. His skin was flawless, his golden eyes smoldered, and he smelled wonderful.

His scent was similar to Aiston's. Spicy, male, erotic, it screamed sex. Yet, where Aiston's scent was lined with a subtle vanilla undertone, Dominic's was earthy. She wondered if all vampires smelled good. Was it an allure of some sorts? She thought about asking, but decided maybe she didn't want to get into a conversation that had anything to do with sex with him.

“So I hear you are Ebony’s best friend?”

Avril nodded. “Yes. She’s like a sister to me.”

“Friends and family are always important.”

She smiled. He chatted with her, giving her the impression that he was a laid-back, normal, easygoing, everyday man. She knew better. He was lethal just like the Aleksandrov men. He was a natural born hunter. He was a vampire. A small shiver crawled the length of her spine when she thought about Aiston killing the drifters. Even though she knew it was necessary, and that he and the other hunters did it to protect her own kind, watching him kill something had been hard.

Death, even when necessary, was traumatic to watch. It was her own damn fault she’d seen the executions. If she had stayed put like he’d told her that night, she would have been spared the sight. She would have been perfectly happy to go along the rest of her life accepting that it happened for the greater good but not actually witnessing it. Now, as she stood in Dominic’s arms, she couldn’t help but be a little nervous when she was pretty sure he’d killed countless drifters himself. *You are being absolutely ridiculous. You’ve seen how evil those things are and know it must be done.*

Ebony had told her stories of what the shadowdrifters were capable of. Of the torture, the maiming, their lust for causing pain. Hell, she knew if they got their hands on her, they would show no mercy. She just wished there was some other way to ensure her safety without having Aiston dog her every step or staying at the mansion. She sighed and knew that any other way was impossible.

She tried to focus her thoughts on something else. *Great. I try to focus on something else, and the only thing I can come up with is Dominic is probably older than my great-great-great grandmother would be if she were still alive.*

“Hey now, love, don’t be going all serious. You should cut loose and have fun tonight. I can tell you need some relaxation, and before you ask, no I’m not reading your mind. I can feel those little sparks of tension you keep giving off slamming into me about every minute.”

She sighed again. She was never going to get used to being around vampires. She was glad he respected her enough to stay out of her mind, though. “I’m sorry. I just—well, I don’t really want to talk about it.”

Dominic laughed. “I’m not here to pry things out of you or to give you a shoulder to cry on love. I’m the last man for that job. But I will show you a real good time if you’re game.”

Avril laughed when he wiggled his eyebrows at her. “Well, we’ll see.” She laughed again as he spun her around, and the music switched to a fast number. She was amazed when he didn’t lead her off the floor but began to move seductively and in perfect rhythm to the song. Most of the men she’d danced with exited the dance floor as if it caught fire when anything faster than “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feelin’” played. She relaxed and decided to forget about her worries for the moment, take Dominic’s advice, and just have a good time. She quickly matched his moves and let her mind go blissfully blank.

* * * *

Aiston walked into Drake's and immediately began searching for Liv, the luscious redhead he'd spent many sweaty nights with in bed. She spotted him about the same time he saw her and sauntered over. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him open mouthed. While it was no less than he expected, his reaction to her was. Normally he'd already be hard and ready for action, but for some reason, his cock had gone into a coma tonight. Deep down, he was pretty sure he knew the reason for it as an image of a face with brown eyes floated through his mind, but he refused to let her ruin his upcoming activities for the night.

He pushed the picture of Avril out of his mind and smiled down at Liv. "Let's get a drink."

"Oh poo!" Her red lips formed a pout even Marilyn Monroe would have envied. "Why waste our time, darling? It's been so long. I was afraid you forgot all about li'l ol' me." She wrapped her arms around him once again and rubbed against him like a contented cat. He wondered that if he stroked her head if she'd purr, and why he'd never noticed that she was quite annoying.

"Why the hurry? Come on." He grabbed her by the hand and led her toward the bar. Before he got halfway to his destination, he stopped so fast at the sight in front of him that Liv smacked right into his back.

"Ow! What did you stop for?"

Aiston didn't answer. He was transfixed on the occupants of the dance floor. Avril was dancing with Dominic Zelasko, and Aiston's blood began to boil. She was wearing a short red dress that hugged every curve of her slim figure. Her pale, creamy skin shimmered invitingly under the soft lights. His tongue snaked over his bottom lip as he imagined licking every inch of it. He watched Dominic's hands skim over Avril's body as they swayed together. He wanted to rip the man's head off. He'd never felt such rage in his life, and his fingertips heated. He started toward them when Avril spotted him. She stopped dancing, and gave him a stare that told him in no uncertain terms to back off. He didn't like it, almost ignored it, but common sense wriggled into his brain.

It would be a really bad idea to start a fight with another vampire in Drake's, especially with a hunter that he was supposed to be working with. It would end in an all out brawl, and Ashe and Ebony would kill him. But even those reasons weren't what stopped him. The thought that Avril could get hurt was what changed his course of desired action. He turned back toward the bar, dragging Liv behind him. If Avril wanted to play this game, he could play it too. And he'd that bet he was much better at it than she was.

* * * *

Aiston was the last person Avril thought she'd see here. And he was towing some trampy, redheaded tart around by the hand. Jealousy wasn't something she was accustomed to feeling much, especially where a man was involved, but the green-eyed monster was gleefully gnawing on her now. She didn't want to feel this way about Aiston. He was bad news, and she had no business having possessive feelings toward the man. However, no matter how many times she had told herself that, she was beginning to understand that she was fighting a losing battle. She had no control over her feelings where he was concerned. They had a mind of their own.

Dominic looked from her to Aiston and back. "Ah. So your boyfriend looks a little upset. Not that I can say I blame him. In fact, if I were him, I would have probably ripped my head off." He glanced back at Aiston. "And, by the looks of him, he's thinking of doing just that."

Avril snapped her eyes back to Dominic. "He's not my boyfriend, nor do I want him to be."

"Well, you may not want him to be your boyfriend, but you do want him. And he definitely wants you. Not that I can blame him. You're a very beautiful and desirable woman, Avril."

Heat licked at her cheeks, a little from Dominic's compliment, a little from anger over Aiston and his bimbo. "Look, maybe I should just go." She tried to leave the floor, but Dominic pulled her back to him.

"Can I make a suggestion, love?"

Avril glanced over at Aiston once again. His back was to her now and his arm was draped around the curvy redhead. Her brain steamed, and she wouldn't have been surprised if smoke started coming out her ears. She gritted her teeth. "What?"

Dominic chuckled. "Don't get mad at me, Avril. I didn't do anything . . . yet."

Avril took a deep breath and focused on Dominic. "You're right. I'm sorry."

"You don't seem to be too happy about the redhead, hmm?" He glanced over at Liv, giving her a once-over. "Not that I can blame you. She looks like she's got a whole hell of a lot of mileage on her. Anyway, it would go without saying that Aiston isn't too happy about me and you either. I would be willing to bet, given Aiston's reputation with the ladies, that he's going to try to make you very jealous. I was merely going to suggest that you play the game better."

"Are you saying that I should act interested in you to make Aiston jealous?" Avril's eyebrows drew down as she thought over the idea.

Dominic placed his hand over his heart. "Act? Oh, you do know how to wound a man don't you, love?"

"Oh, you are such a—"

Dominic placed a finger against her lips. "Shh. I was just kidding, Avril. Even though I would be absolutely honored if you were interested in me, I am no fool. I know I don't stand a chance. Now, what do you say? Would you like to give Aiston a taste of his own medicine?"

She would definitely like to beat him at his own game if that was what he intended. She would have to take Dominic's word for it since he had the vampire senses. Yet, she was certain by the look on his face that Aiston had not been happy in the least to see her there dancing with Dominic. Maybe he was jealous too? Maybe it would serve him right, and teach him not to play around with other people's feelings.

Avril smiled up at Dominic and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Yeah. Let's do it."

"If I wasn't a gentleman, I might take that statement in a very different way."

"If you were a gentleman you would take it no other way and not bring it up."

They both laughed, and Avril decided right then and there that she liked Dominic. He made her smile, and he didn't sugar coat things.

"Now listen very closely, love. Aiston is heading over here right now with that little redhead in tow." When she tried to turn her head to look, Dominic spun her away from Aiston. "No. Don't look. In fact, act as if you don't even notice he's here. Trust me, and do what I say. After all, I am a man and I do know what makes one jealous, love."

"Okay."

"Now relax, and make me the center of your attention. Act as if I'm the only man in the room."

Avril caught a glimpse here and there of Aiston dancing with Liv. Every time she did, she became more irritated and hung on Dominic even more. She could feel Aiston's eyes on her, and a shiver of anticipation ran the length of her spine. She rubbed against Dominic and swore that she heard a growl—one that didn't come from Dominic. Aiston moved toward them right before the music stopped, and the band took a short intermission. Dominic neatly sidestepped the pending confrontation and guided Avril back to the table where Ashe and Ebony had returned.

Avril was glad they were taking a break. She was hot and needed a cold drink. If she were a vampire, she'd be able to dance all night without getting tired—another plus to being immortal. She sat down and watched Dominic make his way to the bar to get their orders. "Are you having fun, Ebony?"

"Yes. I hope you are too. Dominic seems rather, um, interesting."

Avril laughed. "Yeah, that's one way of putting it." Her friend had the concerned look only a mother could give one of her children.

"Avril, I, um—"

"Ebony, there is nothing between me and Dominic. He is a friend and nothing more." She knew exactly what Ebony was thinking. That she belonged with Aiston and Dominic wasn't her type.

Ebony sighed. "Yeah, maybe on your part, but that man would like more than just friendship from you."

"To be fair, I don't think Dominic is one for relationships." Ashe grinned at his wife, and she snuggled against him.

Ebony playfully swatted him on the arm. "You are horrible."

Ashe laughed. "I'm a man. And I'm pretty sure Dominic is definitely not after a relationship with Avril. At least not the kind you are thinking."

"Okay, you two. Enough." Avril giggled. "I may not have vampire senses like you guys, but I'm not blind or deaf either. Yes, Dominic is sexy. Yes, he's a smooth talker. And, yes, I believe he would show me a real good time if that's what I wanted. But I made it very clear I'm not interested in that, and he made it very clear that's all he is interested in. So, don't worry about me, Mom and Dad."

All of them laughed. "I'm sorry. You know I worry about you." Ebony sighed.

"I know. But I'm okay." When Ebony started to speak, Avril held her hand up in protest. "Honestly. I'm having fun, and I'm really glad you invited me. Thank you."

The band came back from break and the music started once again. Avril spotted Aiston and Liv on the floor. Aiston faced her, and Liv rubbed against him sinuously. Avril's stomach dropped, her mouth turned cotton dry, and her heart pounded. When she made eye contact with Aiston, his cocky grin infuriated her. She knew without a doubt now that he was trying to make her jealous, and it was working, damn it! But there was no way in hell she was going to give him the satisfaction of knowing that. She waved at him, laughed. The murderous glare Aiston shot her before she turned around to talk to Ebony and Ashe some more promptly made her reconsider the action.

Another glass of wine was set in front of her, and she glanced up at Dominic. She thanked him and sipped it, enjoying the feel of the cool liquid sliding down her parched throat. After draining the glass, Dominic asked her if she was ready to dance some more.

"Sure, why not?" Her head was a little foggy from the alcohol, and she felt overly sensitive.

Dominic led her to the floor and pulled her close. He began swaying against her in a soothing, sexy motion. Shortly, Aiston and Liv were dancing beside them, and she couldn't seem to pry her eyes off Aiston while her head rested on Dominic's. He was a beautiful man. She wanted him. It was that

simple, and worse yet, she was sure she had fallen in love with him. She was doomed, and she couldn't stop herself from spiraling even further down the forbidden path.

Aiston's eyes fixed on her face. They turned black when Dominic rubbed her back in small circles, coaxing her closer to him. When his eyes turned onyx, she knew this whole little charade had gone too far. Suddenly, Liv pulled his head down to hers and placed her red lips over his.

Avril tensed and Dominic glared at Aiston and Liv. "Avril, don't let him get the best of—"

She pushed away from Dominic. "I'm sorry. I have to go to the ladies room."

* * * *

Dominic sighed and watched her go, nearly at a sprint. He glanced over at Aiston and gave the man a disgusted look. He knew men who would kill for a woman like Avril, and the idiot was throwing her away as if she were nothing. Aiston glared back at Dominic.

"You're a very stupid man."

"You don't know what you're talking about, Dominic. Just shove off!"

"No, you don't know what you're talking about, or are just too damned blind to see."

"Fuck you, and keep your hands to yourself, why don't you?"

"Oh, are we talking about Avril now?"

"You know damn well we are, you bastard."

"Name calling is beneath you, and I don't think you are in any position to be telling me to keep my hands off Avril, now are you?" Dominic arched a brow at Liv wrapped in Aiston's arms. *"If you don't get over yourself real fast, you're going to lose the one thing that can make you whole."*

Dominic could feel Aiston watching him as he walked back over to the table with Ebony and Ashe. "Ebony, I think maybe Avril could use a friend at the moment. She's in the restroom."

Ebony glanced at Aiston. "I'm going to kill him."

Ashe stood. "Not if I get to him first."

“Hold on a minute, you two. Avril needs a friend right now. Not parents, and not a big brawl in the middle of a bar.” Dominic knew Avril felt bad enough, and would feel even worse if she were the cause of a fight between two brothers.

After a moment, Ashe sat back down. Ebony stood. “I’ll go talk to her.”

“Good idea.” He watched Ebony walk toward the restroom Avril had run to earlier. He noticed Aiston and Liv exchanging a few heated words on the floor right before Aiston turned and left her standing by herself.

Dominic chuckled and turned back to Ashe. He was watching the spectacle with a raised brow. “Very interesting.”

“Yeah. And I think it’s about to get even more so.” Both the hunters watched Aiston as he made his way toward the restrooms.

* * * *

Ebony pushed the door to the ladies’ room open. “Avril, are you in here?”

“Yeah.” Avril sat on the cool marble counter of the sink in the corner of the bathroom and watched Ebony lock the door. She wiped her face with a paper towel she had wet with cool water.

Ebony came and stood by her. “Oh, Avril, what’s wrong?”

Avril sniffed and hiccupped. She hated crying, and hated it even more that a man had made her do so. A rotten man, for that matter. “Nothing. I’m fine.”

“Avril, I know you have feelings for Aiston.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Another hiccup escaped, and she held her breath for a few seconds, trying to keep any others at bay.

“I know. I was the same way with Ashe. I didn’t want to talk to you either, remember? I was so confused, Avril. One minute he acted interested, and the next, he ignored me.”

“It doesn’t matter, Ebony. Whether I like Aiston or not, he is bad news.”

“Well, maybe, I guess. I know he has his flaws, as anyone does, but I think he cares for you. I mean, the man practically drools around you. He’s been . . . different since you came along.”

Avril laughed. "Different? Did you see the way he was draped all over that little redheaded tramp out there?"

Ebony sighed. "Yes. And I also saw the way Dominic was draped all over you."

The tears fell again. "Oh, Ebony. I'm such a child. I can't believe I was playing such a stupid game."

"Avril, things tend to get complicated with the Aleksandrov men. And, yes, it was childish of both of you to play such a game."

"I wanted to kill him, Ebony. When I saw him touching her, I just—Oh! I was just so angry." She clenched her fists at her sides.

"Well, Avril, I guarantee you that there is nothing between them other than maybe, um, well, you know." Ebony cleared her throat. "Nothing deep there feeling wise."

"Yeah. Well, if anyone knows better than me that sex isn't everything, show them to me."

Ebony patted Avril's knee. "Is that really what this is about? Sex?"

Avril shrugged. "Must be. That's the kind of men I seem to attract. Ones who are after a good, quick roll in the sheets." She had never been one to sleep around, even though she personally didn't see anything wrong with two consenting adults taking pleasure in one another purely for pleasure's sake. But the men she had been with she thought had cared about her. That was until they all turned out to be jerks and, obviously, had been after only one thing. Even though her pride had been hurt in those instances, she had come out stronger, more cautious, where men were concerned. Yet the thought that Aiston was anything like those men had a completely different impact. She felt helpless, utter misery.

"Oh, Avril. You love him, don't you?"

"I told you I don't want to talk about it." She wiped at her face again with the damp paper towel.

"Excuse me, but I need to talk to Avril."

Ebony and Avril both gasped at Aiston's sudden appearance.

"Aiston! You aren't supposed to be in here. This is the ladies' room." Ebony gave Aiston a scowl that any mother would be proud of.

"Yeah, whatever. Just give me a minute, okay, Ebony?"

Ebony turned back to Avril. "Avril, are you okay with this?"

Avril glanced at Aiston and back at Ebony. She knew that it was useless to deny the confrontation. If she didn't get it over with now, he'd never let up until he had her cornered somewhere and they had it out anyway. "Yeah, I'll be fine, Ebony. Thanks."

She watched her friend go, and Aiston relocked the door.

Avril nodded her head toward the locked door. "That didn't do any good with you, now did it?"

"Yeah, but I knew who was in here. No one else would shimmer in here without knowing who was here."

Aiston walked toward Avril. "God, you are so damned beautiful, and I am such an ass for making you cry."

"What makes you think you're the one who made me cry? Maybe I'm upset because Dominic doesn't like me." She watched him as he moved toward her cautiously. She wasn't going to make it easy for him.

He snorted. "Stop playing games, Avril."

"You seemed to want to play them out there."

"Yeah, and I was an asshole for doing it."

And she was an idiot for doing it, too. He was so close to her she could smell his spicy scent and feel the heat of his body radiate into hers. She instantly grew wet and ready for him. The ease in which her body readied itself for him scared her. "Aiston, look, we have to stop—"

Before she could say another word, she was wrapped in his arms and his lips were on hers. His kiss was gentle, exploring, enticing. She gave one last ditch effort at sanity and pushed against him, but he tightened his hold on her. She sighed in surrender, and his tongue slipped into her mouth. He tasted good, wild, erotic, sexy, Aiston. Her blood immediately heated, and she arched into him and gave up any thought of denying him. His unique vanilla scent floated through her nose and filled her lungs, demanded she breathe him in even deeper.

His cock went from comatose to hard as a rock in a split second against her thigh. Her tongue tangled with his and he groaned. Her breathing came in erratic pants. He pulled back a scant inch and pressed his forehead to hers. "Mmm. You taste good." His eyes were black and stared deep into her soul. "I want to taste all of you, every inch of your skin and, yes, your blood too." He grasped her bare thighs just below the soft fabric of her dress, pulled her toward him slowly, and seated himself fully between her thighs. He groaned at the contact, and she wrapped her legs around his waist.

"This dress is sexy as hell." He kissed her again. This time, his mouth demanded, possessed. When he broke the kiss, he stared into her eyes. "If I ever see another man touch you, I'll kill him." His breathing came in ragged, erratic pants.

Instead of the anger, she thought she should feel at his statement, her heart beat harder and her body ached for his touch. "Aiston, I—"

"Shh."

He put two fingers on her lips and groaned when her tongue snaked out and danced over his skin. He pushed at her shoulders until her back was flat on the countertop, her legs still wrapped around his hips, and dragged the silky fabric of her dress aside to bare one nipple. He swooped down to suck it deep into his mouth. It tightened into a peak, and each pull of his mouth sent butterflies dancing low in her stomach. The wetness of her excitement seeped through her panties. Her body was ready for him, begged for him, craved him deep inside.

She held his head to her breasts as he tortured one, then the other, licking the tips, taking turns pulling one, then the other, deep into his mouth. He stopped to trail kisses over her flat stomach and pushed his forehead against her skin. He breathed deeply, his shoulders expanding with the breath, and raised his head. His black eyes barely visible under half-closed lids were unsettling. They held promise of pleasure.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to do this here, Avril. You deserve better than a mauling on the counter in the john.”

Avril sat up, her legs still wrapped around his hips. “Then what are you going to do about it?”

The words had barely left her mouth when a strange, tingling coursed through her, and she suddenly found herself lying on a soft bed with Aiston’s huge body sprawled on top of her. She felt disoriented for a moment before her head cleared. “You need to warn me before you do that.”

* * * *

“Sorry.” He whispered the word in her ear, and kissed her neck leisurely before making his way back to her mouth. Her pulse was like a siren’s call to him. He wanted to sink his fangs deep into her vein and savor her life force.

He would never forget the way her blood tasted, hot and sweet. It seduced him like drugs enticed an addict. His survival depended upon blood for sustenance, and he enjoyed drinking it to enhance sexual encounters, but hers was different. Hers stirred something primal deep inside him, something he was barely able to control. Yet, he needed to tread carefully with her. She had let him taste her once to save his life, but he didn’t know how she’d react to him biting her for pleasure. And he wouldn’t take her blood without her consent.

Chapter Nine

Their mouths mated for what seemed like eternity before he sat up and began unbuttoning his shirt. She reached to help him, but he pushed her eager fingers away and continued pulling the buttons free of the holes in the black fabric. His eyes stared deep into hers while he slowly removed the shirt, and she gasped at the sight of his bared chest. His shoulders were wide and every muscle defined to perfection from his neatly tucked waist up. She itched to run her fingers through the dusting of crisp, blond hair surrounding his flat nipples.

“You’re beautiful,” she whispered, and his eyes scorched her, ripping every secret from her soul. She shivered as her heart slammed into her ribcage.

“Men aren’t beautiful. Maybe sexy, handsome . . . gorgeous? But not beautiful.” He smiled a feral smile at her and raised one brow.

Her heart skipped a beat as she perused his chest once again. She shook her head slowly from side to side and licked her lips. “Huh-uh. You are beautiful. Magnificent, if you will.”

He reached down, deftly untied the knot of fabric behind her neck that held the top of her dress up, and sucked in a swift breath when the silky material slid down, baring her to the waist. His fingers trailed over her shoulders, down her arms, back up again, around her collar bone, and down to trace lazy circles around each breast before continuing to her navel. “Now that is beautiful.”

His fingers created a delicious friction that sent goose bumps rushing to the surface of her skin. She burned fiery hot and she thought she might explode. Her heart nearly thumped out of her chest and the rougher skin of his fingertips dragging across her nipples drove her mad. She arched into him like a cat begging for another rub, and he bent to take one peak into his mouth, gently lapped and nipped it until she gasped in frustration. She wanted more. She wanted him buried deep inside her.

She wrapped her fingers in his hair and gently tugged his head away from her in silent plea, but he refused to relent.

“Aiston, please.”

“Not yet, Avril. I’ve waited too long for this.”

Before she could protest, he pushed her dress up, leaving her only covering the fabric bunched around her waist and her matching red panties. He pulled her bottom to the edge of the bed and sank to his knees on the floor in front of her. He draped a long, slim leg over each of his shoulders and gripped

her hips with his hands to anchor her in place. He flashed a predatory smile that curled her toes, and she watched his eyes turn even blacker, if that was possible. Her insides clenched in invitation.

"I've wanted to do this for so long." He yanked her panties to one side, exposing her completely to his view. She knew she was more than ready for him, and he groaned before putting his lips to her nether ones. She twisted her fingers in his thick hair, tugged his head to her once again, and cried out his name. His tongue alternated between circling her center and plunging into her slickness. He pushed her to the edge over and over, stopping each time before letting her tumble over into oblivion and beginning the sweet torture all over again.

Her body ached, throbbed, begged for his touch. "Please, Aiston, I can't take any more." She thrust her head back against the bed and let go of his hair to bunch the blanket in each hand. Her heels dug into the hard muscles of his back while his tongue continued its torture on her sensitive flesh, her awaking every cell. "Pleasse." She hissed the plea between clenched teeth.

He groaned against her, and the low vibrations sent another wave of excitement through her overheated body. "You taste like honey."

He buried his tongue in her fully, and circled her clit in soft strokes, finally allowing her coiled body what it desperately sought. Her strangled cry echoed through the bedroom, and her quivering muscles danced in pleasure. He took a deep breath, as if savoring her scent, then rose, letting her legs drop gently to dangle off the side of the bed before positioning himself between them. He slowly unbuttoned his jeans, and she propped herself up on her elbows to watch, not wanting to miss one single second of this moment.

One by one, the buttons popped open, exposing more and more of him until his erection sprang free. She sucked in a quick breath. He was even beautiful there, beautiful and very impressive. She wondered if her fingers would touch around its girth, and she had a very brief instance of worry, wondering if he would fit. He pushed the jeans the rest of the way off, and yanked her dress and panties down her legs. The need to feel him inside her washed away any doubt she had. She opened her arms, and he blanketed her with his body, pushing her back flat on the bed, grabbing a creamy thigh in each hand, and spreading her wide before settling his hips between her legs.

His cock pressed against her belly, and she moaned. He was velvety soft and smooth steel. He took her mouth in a hard, demanding kiss, and she wrapped her arms around his neck while his hands roamed her body, stoking her to an even hotter fevered state than before. His lips trailed to her neck and she leaned back to give him better access. She knew what he wanted and she wanted it too. "Do it, Aiston."

His lips remained pressed to her neck. "Do what, Avril?" He took a deep breath and held it. "Say the words. I need to hear them."

She tangled her fingers in his hair once again and pulled him harder against the pulsing vein in her neck. "You know what I'm talking about, Aiston." His hot breath on her sensitive skin was nearly more than she could handle. The simple act was pushing her to the brink of another orgasm.

"Say it. Say the words, angel."

"God! Just do it, please!" She ached for him, and even though the thought of his fangs buried in her neck should repulse her, she needed him to do it, wanted him to brand her as his.

He smiled against her neck as her fingers tugged his hair, pulling him even harder against her. He ran his tongue over the beating pulse calling to him and groaned. "Say it!"

His muffled cry sent an ache through her chest and she cried out. She had no choice but to say it because, at this point, she didn't know who wanted him to do it worse, him or her. It felt a tiny bit like perversion on her part actually asking him to take her blood, but she didn't care. She knew the ultimate ecstasy the slide of his fangs piercing her flesh would bring. Her pulse jumped and beat in a sultry rhythm inspired only by him. "Please! Take my blood, Aiston. I want to feel you—"

She gasped as his fangs sank deep, and she tumbled over the edge into sweet bliss for the second time. "Oh, Aiston!"

* * * *

He barely allowed the words to cross her lips before piercing her soft skin. He growled when her blood flowed into his mouth, and her body clenched under him. He rolled the rich flavor of her on his tongue before allowing it to slide down his throat. She was the sweetest nectar, and he knew that he would never get enough of her no matter how many times he drank from her. She rubbed her soft hands over his hard back, and the delicate skin of her fingers excited him like nothing had in his entire life. He would possess this woman, claim her. She would be his forever, and no force on earth, nor in heaven or hell, would keep him from doing so. She was his. He gently pulled his fangs from her and licked the small holes left in her skin that would be gone by tomorrow at this time. He reached down and, once again, took one lean, toned thigh in each hand and reared up to finally take what was his.

"Aiston! Get back to the club, quick. We have a problem here and we need you. Hurry!"

Ashe's words slammed into his brain like a train, and tense body jerked at the invasion, demanding he ignore it. But his brother never called out to him unless it was necessary, and he knew he had to go.

Aiston leaned forward and placed a quick kiss on Avril's forehead before he rolled off the bed and began quickly dressing.

"Wh-what's wrong? Did I do something?"

Aiston groaned at the sight of her beautiful, confused face. Fuck, he was going to kill Ashe if there wasn't some serious shit going down at Drake's. He finished dressing and bent to kiss her soft lips. "No. You didn't do anything but all the right things. I have to go. Ashe just contacted me. Something is wrong. He needs my help."

"Oh! Is Ebony okay?" She scrambled off the bed and haphazardly began righting her clothes.

"I don't know what's going on. I have to go."

"Wait, take me with you."

"No. It may be too dangerous." He strapped his sword to his back, foregoing the dark brown leather duster.

"But— "

* * * *

He was gone. Damn it! She was going to seriously kick his ass when he got back. *Yeah, right after you screw him silly.*

"Holy crap!" She finally looked around the room she had been too preoccupied to notice earlier. The bed that she had previously been lying on was covered in red silk sheets and a silky red comforter embroidered with delicate gold designs. The bed itself was huge and trimmed with black stained, hand carved wood. The walls were deep brown and the floor was dark stained hardwood. The rest of the furniture matched the bed. The whole room screamed masculinity and hinted at seduction. She figured that it suited Aiston just fine. A little twinge of jealousy shot through her when she wondered how many women he had entertained here before her.

Avril sighed and headed for her room to take a shower. She had to keep her mind off of whatever was going on with Aiston or she would go completely insane with worry.

* * * *

Aiston stood in the midst of a completely different Drake's than he'd visited just minutes before. The transformation was pure chaos. Chairs, bottles, and glasses were broken and scattered into shards everywhere. Most of the patrons had fled and Ashe, Aldin, and Dominic were circling about eight drifters. Ebony was behind Ashe, and he knew the first priority was to get her out of there. Ashe would be too worried about her safety, a distraction that could cost his brother his life. He shimmered behind her, grabbed her, shimmered back to the mansion where he left her in a fit of fury, and shimmered back to Drake's. He knew that she, being newly changed, was still having trouble shimmering long distances so he wasn't too worried about her finding her way back. Ashe could deal with her anger later.

"Thanks, Aiston." Ashe sounded relieved that Ebony was gone.

"Yeah. No problem. What the hell is going on?"

"Everything was fine one minute, and the next eight of those bastards were in the room trying to kill anyone that moved. They have weapons, and they seem to have some actual fighting skills. Someone has been training them."

"Shall we show them what we're made of then, gentlemen?" Aiston's fingertips grew hot, but he willed the fire away. He didn't want to use it unless he had to since it weakened him. A wicked smile that matched the rest of the hunters' played at his lips as he pulled the sword from his back.

Aiston stepped forward, and engaged one drifter who looked amazingly normal. If he couldn't smell the stench on the thing, he'd swear it was just another vamp, the same as the one the other night. He raised his sword and made a quick lunge at its chest. It barely dodged the strike, and slid a wicked dagger out from the waistband of dark jeans. The drifter went for Aiston's throat, but he blocked the blow with his forearm, then struck a quick blow to its arm, which caused the dagger to fly out of the drifter's hand and across the room. The drifter screeched and bared its wicked, poison-tipped talons.

"Not this time." No way was he going to get tagged by another one of these bastards. When the one in the alley got him the night he'd walked Avril home, he'd felt like shit for hours even after the wounds had closed.

Ashe, Aldin, and Dominic each had two drifters engaged. Ashe was right. These drifters had training. Aiston twisted out of the reach of the talons coming at him at the last second. One barely caught his shirt and tore a hole in the fabric. He spun before the drifter could recover, and took its head off with one, clean slice of his sword. The thing turned into a puddle of boiling black goo and seeped into the floor.

A second drifter came at his back and sliced across his ribs as he tried to twist out of its reach a little too late. He winced at the pain, but pushed it out of his mind, refusing to let it interfere with his concentration. While it was obvious to anyone watching the hunters would win, this was one fight where the drifters were actually holding their own. Aiston noticed several bloody wounds on the other

hunters, but didn't think any looked too serious. They had to take these bastards out quick before someone got hurt bad.

"Everyone shield themselves." Aldin's command drifted through the hunters' minds and, at once, Aldin, Aiston, Ashe, and Dominic went invisible.

There were now only four drifters left, one to each hunter, but only two appeared to be confused by the hunters' disappearance. The other two, however, seemed unfazed. It seemed the things had developed another skill. Drifters had never been able to see hunters while in their shielded state. It was an advantage the hunters used often as sort of an ambush method for attack. Aiston had never known of a drifter able to see a hunter shielded . . . until now.

Dominic and Aldin each took the head off the two drifters who were obviously unable to see them, then Ashe and Aiston engaged the other two. Within moments, the last two were beheaded, and the stench of the dead creatures filled the air.

"Well, that was interesting." Dominic assessed his wounds. "Nothing serious here. Is everyone else okay?"

Ashe and Aldin nodded, and then all eyes turned to Aiston. "You okay, bro?"

"Yeah. Just a little cut, that's all."

Ashe walked over to Aiston and pushed on his shoulder until he turned and put his back to him. "Holy hell! You've got one serious slice across your ribs. You're losing a lot of blood. We need to get you a source before you bleed out."

"I'm fine, really. It looks worse than it is." He clutched the wound and blood seeped between his fingers. He couldn't remember the last time he had a serious injury and this was the second within a few days. He was starting to feel like an inadequate pansy.

Aldin and Ashe guided Aiston to one of the stools that had somehow remained unbroken throughout the fight. Ashe nodded at Dominic. "Dominic. Can you find a source?"

"Yeah." He disappeared.

"I'm okay. It's no big deal." Aldin caught Aiston under the arms before he slid off the stool.

"Yeah, sure, bro. Just hang in there."

Barely five minutes had passed before Dominic returned with a dark-haired woman who was obviously under compulsion. He pushed her toward Aiston. Aiston yanked the woman's wrist to his mouth and clamped his teeth on the exposed skin. She didn't so much as twitch when he sank his fangs deep. After several long draws, Ashe pulled him from the woman. It was hard for a vampire to stop drinking from a source when wounded. Luckily, his brothers were there to stop him from harming anyone.

He staggered a little, and knew he had barely taken enough blood to survive and speed the healing process. He needed more, and would be weak for the next day or two, but he had taken enough to sustain him. He'd been hoping the drifter had gotten him with a blade, but apparently, he'd been tagged, once again, with those damned talons.

"If you need another source I can get one." Dominic raised a brow at Aiston.

"No. I'm fine." Even after the blood loss, the fighting, and the killing, the only thing he could think of was getting back to Avril.

"Are you sure it's wise to go back to her in this state, man?"

Aiston glared at Dominic and gritted his teeth. "It's none of your business, and the next time I see you near her, I'll tear your fucking head off!" If he wasn't so weak, Dominic would never be able to read his mind. He looked at his brothers and knew they were aware of it, as well.

Dominic laughed. "Avril's a special woman and deserves more than a quick tumble in the hay." Before Aiston could say anything, Dominic put his hand on the woman's shoulder. "I'm taking the source back. I'll see you guys later."

Ashe and Aldin nodded at Dominic while Aiston continued to glare at him. He smiled again and disappeared.

"Come on, bro. We'll get you back to the mansion."

Aiston shook Ashe's hands off his shoulders. "I can get myself back."

* * * *

Ashe raised a brow when Aiston disappeared. "Well. Looks like our little brother has it bad."

Aldin smiled, or at least what would be considered a smile for Aldin. "Yep. Looks like. I'd say nearly as bad as you had it for Ebony, maybe worse.

Ashe snorted. "I didn't have it that bad." And he was such a liar.

Aldin snorted back. "Yeah. Uh-huh, whatever you say, bro. Tell you what. You make me a promise, okay?

"What's that?"

"If I ever go moon-eyed over some woman, smash my hard-ass skull with a bat."

Ashe laughed. "It's not that bad, Aldin. In fact, if you find your viata amant, it's the best thing in the world."

"Sorry, I'm not buying into the mushy love crap. Later."

Ashe continued to grin even after Aldin disappeared. It would take one hell of a woman to take the mighty Aldin down, but he had no doubt she was out there somewhere. And he wanted a front row seat for that show.

His amusement died a quick death when he remembered that he had a very angry wife waiting for him at home. No use in putting her off any longer. He shimmered back to the mansion.

Chapter Ten

Avril had just finished her shower when she heard a commotion in the hallway. When she opened the door, she found her furious best friend, who'd just been shimmered without consent. Ebony hadn't quite mastered the ability on her own. She filled her in on the details of what was happening at the club, and Avril was engulfed with worry. Ebony assured Avril that the Aleksandrov boys could handle themselves just fine, but that they were sexist pigs. She wanted to stay and fight with her husband. Avril found her friend's anger a little amusing since she, herself, was usually the one spouting off the men-are-chauvinistic-pigs line.

"And the worst part of it! He didn't even have the—the balls to shimmer me here himself! Aiston did it! I'm going to kill them both!" Ebony paced back and forth in a furious speed that made Avril's head spin.

Avril understood why Ashe wanted her out of there but wouldn't dare tell her best friend that. She'd probably be as mad as Ebony if it had happened to her. Ashe had trained Ebony in self defense but, she was not a warrior, and Avril was thankful that his wife's well-being was always Ashe's first priority, even if it meant relying on one of his brothers to help. She had no doubt that if it came down to it, and his brothers weren't around, Ashe would have no problem forcing his will on Ebony if it meant her safety.

"Whoa! Ebony, slow down. You're making me sick." Avril laughed and Ebony stopped to stare at her a moment before huffing a stray strand of blonde hair off her face.

"I'm sorry. I'm just so mad!" She stomped her foot in frustration.

"Ebony, calm down. You know Ashe only did it to keep you safe."

"Yeah, but I—"

"Look, hon. I know you're mad, and to be completely honest, I'm a little pissed myself as Aiston left me right in the middle of, um, well, never mind. Let's just say he left without explaining to me what was going on. I know you want to be by Ashe's side, but it's just not safe. You wouldn't want to be a distraction for him and get him hurt, would you? Besides, Ebony, I witnessed firsthand what happens during a fight with a drifter, and believe me, you don't want to see it if you don't have to."

Ebony frowned. She let out a big sigh, and her shoulders drooped. "Yeah, you're right about that. And I would never forgive myself if something happened to Ashe because of me. He and Marcus are my life. If something happened to him or our son, I just don't know, Avril."

Avril hugged Ebony. "I know as well as anyone what over protective pigs men are, but—and don't get mad at me when I say this—I'm glad Ashe watches out for you, Ebony. Because I don't know what I'd do without my best friend."

"Oh! I feel the same way about you, Avril." A tear escaped the corner of Ebony's eye and ran down her cheek.

"Oh, stop it! You're going to make me cry, and two times in one night is just too much for me."

Ebony sniffed. "Yeah, what happened with that? Did you and Aiston work things off?" A giggle escaped her. "I mean out?"

"A girl never kisses and tells." Avril frowned.

"What is it? Did he do something to you? I'll have Ashe kick his ass."

Yeah, he did something all right. He didn't finish. She ached for him. "No. No. He didn't do anything, Ebony. It's just, well, I really don't know."

"Uh-oh. I know that look."

Avril backed toward her door. "No. You don't."

Ebony giggled. "Yes. I do. You lo—"

"No! Don't say it." Avril didn't want to hear it aloud, even though she knew it was the truth.

"Okay. Okay. Calm down. I'm sorry. I would never do anything to make you uncomfortable." Ebony sighed. "Avril, don't forget, I was in your situation not long ago. Things will work out. I'm here if you need me. You know that, right?"

"Yeah. I'm just not ready to talk about it yet." She didn't know if she'd ever be ready to talk about it. She'd fallen in love with the one person on the face of the earth that epitomized all of the things she despised in a man.

"I love you. Why don't you try to get some sleep?"

"Love you too, hon." She yawned. "Yeah. I am tired. You should get some shut eye too. Oh, sorry. You don't need that much anymore. I envy you."

Ebony laughed again. "Well, I have to admit I was worried about being bored with so much awake time, but Ashe is very resourceful." She blushed, and Avril giggled.

“Well, if I had a man like Ashe, I wouldn’t be against resourceful either.” Avril turned and opened the door. “Night, hon.”

“Night.”

Later, Avril sat in her own room wondering if she would see Aiston again tonight when the object of her thoughts was suddenly standing in front of her. She barely contained a scream from escaping. “Would you quit doing that? You scared the hell out of me.”

* * * *

Aiston was speechless. He had shielded himself before shimmering to Avril’s room, only intending to drop in to make sure she was okay. He didn’t want her to see him wounded and weak again. Yet, there she sat, talking to him. Holy hell! He knew exactly what that meant. She was the one destined for him. She was his viata amant, his life mate. No wonder he felt mind-blowing possessive of her. No wonder he . . . loved her?

“Well, don’t just stand there. Say something!”

“Avril, I—”

“Oh my God! You’re hurt.” She rushed over to him, unbuttoned his shirt, and pushed the tattered fabric off his shoulders. The remnants hung around his waist by the hem still tucked into his jeans. She gasped when she saw the ugly, red jagged line that ran across his side caked with drying clumps of blood. “Are you okay?” He watched as her lovely skin paled.

He let her tug him to the bed and push him down so he was sitting on the edge of the mattress. He winced when she ran her fingers gently along the jagged edges of the cut, not so much from the contact on his newly healing, tender flesh, but because of the heat her touch sparked. “I’m okay.”

She was his. He’d never be able to walk away from her. It was programmed inside him to want her, protect her . . . need her. And, even if it weren’t, he knew that he’d never feel so strongly for another woman, ever. Only her. She was the one.

She took a good look at his face, and he knew the shock of what he’d just realized must be evident. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Just forget it.” He knew Avril wanted him. He had no doubt of their attraction for one another on a physical level. But she had made her feelings for him clear on more than one occasion. She didn’t trust him and thought he was a low-down womanizer, which in truth, he had been, but no more. His little fiasco with Liv earlier had proven that. He couldn’t imagine having another woman under him but

Avril now. Though he'd never been in love, he was sure he was in love with Avril. He wondered if she'd ever be able to return his feelings, even if only a little, and the doubt made his chest ache.

He couldn't live without her. She was the one destined for him. She communicated with him *menti conversatie*, and she'd seen him shielded. No human but his *viata amant* could speak to him telepathically or see him shielded. Fate had made her especially for him. He had to convince her some way that she could trust him, that he was worthy of her, because he knew deep in his heart, he'd never be able to let her go. And, if he couldn't make her fall in love with him, they were going to have one hell of a horrible relationship.

He sucked in a breath when another fact dawned on him. He had taken her blood, with her consent, on two occasions. If he drank her one more time with an exchange of his own blood, she would be turned vampire. He wanted that more than anything. He wanted to know she'd be strong and not as fragile as she was now. He wanted to know he'd have forever to spend with her. He had to tread carefully because he could not turn her without her permission. She had to be fully aware of what was taking place, and agree to it, or the change would fail.

Supposedly, this had been a way to control the vampire population. Not just anyone could be turned. And no one could be turned without consent. If a vampire tried to turn a human without permission, the change would simply not take place. This was yet another barrier attributed to Ragnor, the father of all vampires. In fact, every constraint on powers was contributed to Ragnor.

"Aiston! Say something."

"Avril, will you go out on a date with me tomorrow night?"

"What?"

"I said, will you go out with me?"

"Um, yeah. Okay. But you actually mean tonight, right?"

He chuckled. Yeah, I guess I do. How about seven?"

"Okay." He turned to leave her room and felt her gaze on him, nearly burning a hole in his back. He wanted to turn around, pull her into his arms, and make love to her.

"Aiston!"

When he spun around, she ran to him and launched herself into his arms. He hugged her tightly, and his body instantly hardened at the feel of her soft curves pressed against him. He breathed in her soft scent deep. He wouldn't take her now. He wanted to court her, treat her right. She deserved the best, and he wanted to be the one to give it to her. He wanted to give her what he'd never given another woman, his heart. He pulled back a little and pushed her dark hair behind her ears. "What's this all about?"

She kissed him on the cheek. "I'm just glad you are okay. I wanted you to know that." She glanced at the jagged wound on his side again and raised a brow in question.

He grinned. "I'm okay, really. This will be gone by tomorrow night." He waved his fingers down his side over the healing wound as if brushing it off as nothing. He kissed her gently on the lips, and it took every ounce of willpower he possessed to pull back from her. He wanted to throw her to the floor and bury himself in her, to make her cry out his name in release, to claim her as his own. "See you later."

* * * *

"See you." She watched Aiston leave her room and sighed. Something significant had changed between them from nearly making love to now, but she wasn't for sure exactly what it was. She loved him but knew that he would never love her. She didn't know if he was capable of loving just one woman. She didn't know if he was capable of loving a woman period. Her heart was going to get crushed yet again, but for once, she didn't care. She wanted to spend every moment possible with him before he tired of her and decided to move on. Had he possibly read her mind? Maybe that's why he had acted so strangely. Maybe he'd seen her love for him. No, he promised he wouldn't do that, and she believed him. But, had he felt it? Could he have possibly sensed her feelings for him?

She sighed when the clock on the bedside table blinked back three-thirty. Dawn was approaching in a short couple hours, and she was going to sleep the morning away. She wanted to be ready for her date tomorrow night, or rather, tonight. Maybe she could find some way to make Aiston love her. She had to try. She had nothing to lose but her heart.

She turned out the lights and crawled under the comforter. Her heavy lids drifted shut. Almost immediately, she fell into a deep sleep where Aiston haunted her dreams, as usual.

* * * *

When Ashe shimmered to his bedroom, Ebony was waiting for him. If looks could kill, he'd be a dead man on the floor. She was pissed, and when he smiled, her eyes widened. His wife was beautiful when she was angry. He walked slowly toward her, thinking of all the ways he was going to work that anger out of her, giving her no doubt about his intentions. Her skin flushed with excitement, a betraying trait he loved. She watched him stalk her, then sighed and opened her arms in welcome.

* * * *

"You're unusually quiet this morning." Ebony looked across the table at Aiston, who sat toying with his food.

Aiston grunted in response while McKayla pulled the coffeepot from the warmer and topped off everyone's cups.

"What's up, Aiston?" Ashe was pretty sure that he knew what was bothering his little bro, and he was going to have some fun torturing him. Ashe had been the brunt of Aiston's many, many jokes in the past, and it was amusing to be the annoying one for a change. Although, he had to admit, lately Aiston had pretty much cut out the prank playing. What was even worse, he kind of missed it. Love would do that to you. It would screw you up all inside and tie your guts in knots while you were trying to figure out what exactly the hell was going on.

"Nothing."

Aldin smirked. *"Nothing my ass."*

"Shut up!"

"Okay, boys. Let's be civil at the table, okay?" Ebony wiped egg off Marcus's chin, and he giggled. "Yeah, your daddy and his brothers need to learn to be sweeter like you, huh?" She tickled his belly and he laughed. All three brothers groaned. "Aiston, you know your brothers are going to hound you to death if you don't tell them what's up."

Aiston sat back in his chair and scrubbed his fingers over his face. "I asked Avril out on a date tonight."

Ashe grabbed his chest. "You! A date? I think I finally found something that will kill me. Shock."

Ebony swatted at Ashe, and he immediately stopped laughing. "Where are you taking her?"

"You mean she actually agreed to go with you?"

Aiston glared at Ashe before answering Ebony. "I thought I'd take her out to eat, but I'm not sure what she likes."

"She really likes Italian. But she likes Chinese too. Actually, I don't think she's too particular. Avril's pretty easygoing." Ebony eyed her brother-in-law.

"Then I thought maybe dancing."

“That’s a great idea!”

“Yeah, maybe you can show her how to tango or cha-cha.” Ashe tried to keep a straight face.

Ebony turned to Ashe and leveled one of her you’re-going-to-get-it-now looks. “Hmm. You know”—she tapped her chin with her finger—“I think maybe I’d like to take tango lessons now that you mention it, Ashe. When would you be available to take lessons?”

The near grin slid from Ashe’s face. “Aw, come on, babe. He’s been driving me and Aldin freaking nuts with his little pranks for years. It’s time for some payback.” He started to grin again until Ebony elbowed him hard in the ribs, making him wince instead.

“That’s it.” Aiston pushed away from the table. “I’m out of here.”

They all watched him go. “You know, you are incorrigible.”

“Aw, come on, Ebony. Don’t you remember how he used to pester the sh—” He looked at the baby. “Shtuffing out of me and Aldin? It’s just a little payback.”

Aldin remained quiet, and Ashe knew he was content to watch his sister-in-law bring his brother to tow the line.

“Not this, Ashe. This is serious.”

Ashe sat silently for a few moments. “Yes, I know.”

Chapter Eleven

Avril slept until eleven and still didn't want to get out of bed. She was, by no means, a morning person and needed caffeine before she felt at all normal when she got up before noon. She drank a lot of coffee since her day job started way before then each day. She missed the routine nine a.m. breakfast of the Aleksandrov household, but figured no one probably expected her anyway. Everyone knew she hadn't gone to bed until the wee hours, and she needed sleep. After all, she was human. She yawned and stretched. She recalled her erotic dreams of Aiston. His icy blue eyes had haunted her the entire time she slept. Most of the dreams started the same way. Aiston staggering in with a horrible gash on his side, blood everywhere. She was horrified, scared. He would turn that magical smile her way and tell her everything was okay. He'd take her in his arms and they'd make love.

She sighed. The searing pain she experienced in her dreams at the mere thought of losing him echoed through her chest even now when she was awake. She had it bad, and she was going to get hurt. She would never recover from this heart break, yet she couldn't muster up enough strength to end it now. She literally ached to be near him, to touch him, to—*Oh, just stop it right now!*

An hour later, she finally dragged herself out of the bed and downstairs where she leaned against the kitchen counter with a steaming mug of black coffee safely cocooned between her hands. She was thankful that the maid, McKayla, kept a hot pot brewing most of the time. The irony of a houseful of vampires drinking so much coffee was not missed by her, and she grinned. She closed her eyes, let the rich scent of the liquid drift through her nose and let out a long breath while the mug warmed her hands.

She looked around the kitchen. She'd never get used to the place. Luxury was a gentle term to use for the mansion. Everything was of the highest quality available from the stainless appliances to the marble floors to the dark, hand-carved woodwork. Even her room, the one she had spent countless nights in, still amazed her. The first few times she'd taken a bath in the huge Jacuzzi tub, she'd wondered if she'd need a flotation device to keep her from drowning, and the bedroom alone was about double the size of her tiny apartment.

She was wrong. She could definitely get used to it. She would never be one to take something like this for granted and knew the Aleksandrovs, especially Ebony, didn't either. If she didn't know they were all rich vampires, she probably wouldn't notice a difference between them and normal, everyday people. The only thing that tipped one off they were different was their almost eerie physical perfection. No flaws anywhere, not a scar or a cut or a bruise, no bags under the eyes, not a hair out of place. Even

Ebony carried that flawless look now. Regardless of what or who they were, they were a kind, loving, loyal family, and she was proud to be a part of it.

It was going to be mighty hard growing old, watching them all stay the same and ultimately dying, leaving them behind. Marcus would grow up and stop aging too. She hated the thought of the burden she could become on them later in life because she knew they would take care of her until the end. Too bad she couldn't be like them too. *Don't say that. It's not possible.* Besides, she didn't know if she could drink blood, although it bothered her less than she thought it should when she thought of using Aiston as her source.

Ebony told her that one vampire could use another vampire as a source as long as neither was injured. If a wounded vampire drank from another vampire, it actually weakened the injured vampire further as the blood warred for supremacy. While it would not harm two healthy vampires to share each other's blood, it would actually slow down the healing process of one that was injured and could ultimately cost his or her life. Most vampires drank from one another simply for pleasure, or to heighten sex. She could vouch for that one first hand. She'd never felt anything close to the pleasure she'd felt the two times Aiston drank from her. Lightning had sizzled through her veins, and she had nearly orgasmed at the mere act alone.

She thought about the times that Ashe had been injured since he and Ebony had been together, and wondered how Ebony coped with knowing he drank from someone else. But, she guessed the alternative would be worse. The alternative would be his possible death and she knew Ebony would do anything, including give her own life, to save Ashe. Ashe would never allow her to do so if he could stop it, but nonetheless, Avril knew it was the truth. Ashe would not hesitate to do the same for Ebony.

Anyone who shared a love that intense, that raw, that thorough was lucky in Avril's book. True love—fated love—did not come along often. Too many times people mistook love for comfortable companionship, for great sex, for crushes. Too many times people ended up divorced. She didn't want that kind of love. She had experienced that kind of love and didn't care to revisit it. She wondered if she would ever experience love like Ashe and Ebony had.

Quit feeling sorry for yourself, Avril. You have a wonderful life with wonderful friends, a wonderful family and a gorgeous nephew. Even if her mom did hound her half to death about getting married and having grandbabies, her mother loved her. Her father was doting, and even though both her parents had been married before they had met, they had the kind of solid, loving relationship she longed for. She would never understand why she always attracted the wrong kind of man. Maybe there really was something wrong with her. Some weird genetic thing that blinked the words, "all jerks, losers, liars, and cheaters apply within."

"What are you thinking?"

Avril jumped and her eyes shot open. *"Stop sneaking up on me!"* She was so deep in thought that she hadn't noticed Aiston standing in the doorway.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you." He continued to stare at her.

The way he raked his eyes over her from head to foot was unsettling to say the least. Her body reacted immediately, and she turned achy and hot with need. "I know. I'm sorry I snapped at you."

"You didn't forget about our date tonight, right?"

She smiled. "I know I can be a little forgetful at times, Aiston, but I'm not senile. We just had the conversation a few hours ago."

He smiled back, baring a full set of even, white teeth. "Well, it was very late—or early— and you were tired."

She frowned and set the coffee mug behind her on the counter. She cocked her head to the side, walked over to him, and, standing on tiptoe, stared at his lips.

He leaned back a little. "Um, Avril. What are you doing?"

She reached up and pushed his upper lip away from his teeth. "Where are you fangs?"

He smiled an even bigger smile than before. "Don't worry. They are there when I need them." He took her hand and kissed the back of it. "You know, I can almost hear those wheels turning in your brain."

"Oh. Oh! I'm sorry. That was really rude of me." She tried to back away, but he caught her arm and stopped her.

"It's okay, Avril. Don't you know by now that you can do anything you want with me?" He wiggled his eyebrows.

Avril cleared her throat. "Uh-huh. Well, I'm going to go up and play with my nephew for awhile before I get ready for tonight. I'll see you later." Her damn body was on fire. She thought for sure she was going to disintegrate before she made it all the way up the stairs.

* * * *

He watched her flee up the stairs, somewhat amused and somewhat frustrated. He wouldn't be able to wait much longer to claim her. The last time she had spoken to him telepathically he had been injured and hadn't felt the full impact of her voice slipping through his mind. It was an erotic caress through his brain that nearly buckled his knees. She still hadn't realized that she'd talked to him minti conversatie, and he still couldn't believe she was fated to be his. She was so damn beautiful he could

nearly weep just looking at her. His body's demands were getting too strong. He blew a couple long breaths out in an attempt to calm the beast and made his way to the family room.

Aldin was sitting on the couch. "All right. How about I kick your ass playing some video games?"

"Yeah, that's what you always say, but you never do."

Aiston looked at his brother and noticed he looked a little distracted, maybe bothered. Aldin wasn't one to show much emotion, and he was a little worried. "Hey. Something up?"

Aldin's brows pointed downward for a moment before he answered. "Not really."

"Doesn't look that way."

"Yeah, well, I don't think I want to be made fun of at the moment."

"Hey, I know I can be a jerk sometimes, but I promise I won't make one joke." Aiston raised his right hand. "Scout's honor."

Aldin sighed. "Well, you remember Alaina Czernick?"

"Yeah, the bitch who almost killed Ebony and wouldn't take the hint that Ashe didn't want her anymore."

Aldin shot Aiston a murderous glare. "Don't call her that. She's changed."

"Yeah, right. Just like a chameleon changes its colors to blend in at the right moments to fool predators."

"Just forget it."

"Sorry, bro. I won't say another word. Go on." What the hell was going on with Aldin? He never got this bent out of shape over anything.

"It's really no big deal. She asked me to show her how to fight the drifters and she's just being really . . . difficult."

"Ah. I'm surprised you'd take on a student. And, by the way, does Ashe know you are fraternizing with the enemy?" What the hell was going on here?

Aldin tensed, and a loud clap of thunder shook the house. "First of all, Ebony forgave her. Secondly, Ashe said he'd give her a chance to prove she is serious about changing, and lastly . . . just fucking forget it!"

"Okay. Okay." Aldin was torqued up about something to make it thunder. Just as Aiston's temper triggered the fire at his fingertips, Aldin's temper triggered the thunder. He could call the thunder, lightning, rain and wind. They'd all come in handy at different times during fights with drifters, but commanding storms was no less power draining than commanding fire. And, if there was one thing

Aldin hated most in the world, it was being weak. Aiston grabbed the controllers and turned on the game.

"Time to get your ass kicked."

"Bring it on, little brother. Bring it on."

* * * *

"So I hear you have a date tonight." Ebony grinned at Avril, who was sitting on the floor playing with Marcus.

Avril glanced up. "Yeah." She gently poked Marcus's pudgy little belly and he squealed and kicked his chubby legs in delight.

"Hmm. Do you have something to wear?"

"Well, truth be told, I didn't bring many dressy clothes with me, but I can always wear the red dress again, I guess."

Ebony bent and picked her son up. She rocked him for a few minutes, then laid him in the crib. "It's time for a nap, little mister."

Avril got off the floor and kissed her nephew's head. He began sucking on his thumb, and his lids grew heavy and sagged closed in sleep.

"I can probably find something for you to wear if you like."

Avril eyed her friend. "Um, no offense, Ebony, because you know you are beautiful, but I don't think I can wear your clothes."

"Yes, yes. I know you are way taller than me, and I can't pretend I'm not envious of that at times, but I'm not talking about my clothes. I think Estril might have left some behind before she left."

Avril thought about Ashe's sister and wondered how she was doing. She missed seeing her around the mansion, but Estril had insisted on going out into the world to find her own way for a while after Marcus was born. The Aleksandrov brothers weren't happy in the least, but Avril understood Estril's need to find her own purpose in the world.

"Oh. Well it wouldn't hurt to take a look." Avril giggled and Ebony playfully smacked her on the shoulder.

"We all can't be model tall and thin, you know."

"Ebony, come on. You are gorgeous and you know it. You know a woman would kill for a body like yours."

"Yeah, well, Ashe sure seems to like it," she whispered. "And don't tell anyone, but I like his, too."

The girls giggled again, and Avril followed Ebony into Estril's room. The room was no less grand than any other in the house. Rich carved wood; thick, luscious carpet; and beautiful coppers and golds gave the room a luxurious, warm feel. Ebony opened the walk in closet and Avril gasped. "Are you telling me she took enough clothes with her and she still has all of these left here? I am so jealous."

"Well, you know, Estril has been around for awhile and didn't just acquire such a wardrobe over night."

"Yeah, that's true. But, my God!" Avril raked her hands through the silky fabrics. She normally liked her clothes simple, black, red, maybe a little gothlike, but she wanted something fabulously sexy and all feminine for tonight. Damn, how a man could change you. This was the second time in a very short span she wanted to feel feminine and sexy. She never liked frilly, feminine crap.

"Oh this would be perfect for you." Ebony grabbed a rich, dark, burgundy suede skirt outfit and held it against Avril. "And it complements your skin to perfection."

The skirt was short, and the half jacket fit over a soft, cream-colored camisole trimmed with delicate lace. "It is beautiful. Are you sure Estril wouldn't mind?"

"Absolutely. She grew very close to you when she was still here. She thinks of you as a sister. She'd love to have you wear this."

Ebony pulled out the matching pair of open toed heels and handed them to Avril. Avril smiled. "This will definitely get Aiston's attention, I think."

"Oh, I have no doubt. But I think you already have his attention. In fact, I think you could show up in sweatpants and flannel shirt and you would have his attention."

"Yeah, well, I guess."

"What's wrong, Avril."

"It's just. Well, you know how he is, Ebony."

"What do you mean 'how he is'?"

"He's everything I hate in a man. He's a womanizer." And everything she loved in a man, too. Sexy, smart and confident.

"Hmm. Well, to be fair, that's only one thing you hate in men."

"Come on, Ebony, you know what I mean."

"Okay. Well let's look at this closer, shall we?"

Avril sighed and sat down on the red cedar chest at the end of Estril's bed. "Okay, let's have it."

"You say he's a womanizer. Okay. I can agree that Aiston is definitely a ladies' man. But, in all fairness, I don't think he's been hanging out with too many women in the last several months. He seems to have lost interest."

"He was just with one of his little tarts last night, Ebony."

"Uh huh. Well, to be fair again, you were kind of with Dominic, too."

"No. I wasn't. I was just . . . oh. So he really was just trying to make me jealous."

"Yeah. I think so. Because, in case you didn't notice, he ended up coming home with you, right?"

Avril cleared her throat. "Yeah."

"So other than that, what is it that you don't like about him? Maybe, what, he's too good-looking, 'cause he is a god. I mean, he's not Ashe, but come on, the man is hot! Or, let's see here, did you think about his loyalty to his family, how he dotes on his nephew, how he fights drifters to keep people safe, how—"

Avril held up her hand in surrender. "Okay. Okay. I get what you are saying. He has a lot of good qualities."

Ebony put her arm around her best friend. "Look, Avril. I know you haven't had very good luck with men. And I can't say that Aiston would make that any different. But I do know how he looks at you—like you are the only one in the room even when there are fifty other people in it— and I know he is protective of you. And I know he wants you."

"Ebony, I'm scared. I don't want to be hurt again."

Ebony sighed. "I know. And you know I wouldn't say this lightly because I don't want to see you hurt either, but I don't think Aiston will hurt you, at least not intentionally."

Yeah. The unintentional stuff is what she was worried about, though. "Do you think I'm the one for him, Ebony? Could I possibly be his life mate?"

"Well, I think maybe that is a question you should ask Aiston because, trust me, if you are, he knows. How would you feel about it if you were? Would you let him turn you?"

"I don't know, Ebony. I'm so scared of being hurt again and this would be the most devastating hurt of all. I don't know if I would fully recover from Aiston breaking my heart. I've tried to convince

myself that it's no big deal. That I want to enjoy whatever time we have and deal with it when he walks away from me. But I'm lying to myself. I know my heart would be irreparably broken if he left. "

"Maybe you should think about that statement, Avril. If he's capable of hurting you that badly already, maybe there is a lot more to you two than you are willing to admit. Maybe you should trust your instincts and know that your soul would not ultimately choose a man to love who was not worthy." Ebony patted Avril's head in a motherly gesture. "Well, why don't you just take it slow and listen to your heart? Ashe didn't listen to his. It almost cost us my life and our relationship. Sometimes the hardest thing in life is opening yourself up to the possibility of being hurt. But, if you have the courage to take that step and it works out, it might just be the best thing that could ever happen to you."

"Thanks for being my friend, Ebony. I don't know what I'd do without you." She hugged her tight. "Now, I need to go and spend a few hours making myself beautiful for my date."

"Nah. You only need about five minutes for that."

"Okay, now you're being too nice."

Chapter Twelve

“I thought I told you I wanted at least one of those damn hunters taken out!”

The shadowdrifter who had been put in charge of the attack crouched in front of the vampire before him. He was afraid, and he didn’t want to look up into the eerie gray eyes that he knew were staring a hole through him. “We tried. They were just too fast and too good at fighting. We need more training. Only two of those sent were able to see the hunters after they shielded themselves. You said we would all be able to see them.”

“Don’t even think for one second to blame any of this on me. I gave you the one thing you needed to see those damn hunters shielded. Do you think I usually give my blood so freely? If I had known how incompetent you idiots really were, I would have never agreed to lead you.”

The drifter was pretty sure that no one had asked to be led. The vampire had shown up one day and killed all the drifters who didn’t agree that a society should be formed to take down the hunters. The drifters were terrified of him and his power. He claimed to be a true blood, a line thought long lost and long dead. Yet, they had been completely entranced when he showed them the things he could teach them. However, the drifter wasn’t stupid and knew that there would be a price. The vampire had his own reasons for wanting the hunters dead, and it had nothing to do with leading the drifters to freedom.

“I’m sorry. I sent the best we had.”

“This will never do. Call the drifters and prepare them for a meeting. We must step up the training. In the meantime, find me that human who attacked Aiston’s little girlfriend in the alley and bring him to me. Alive.” The drifter bowed and left the room.

* * * *

He was pissed and he wanted the hunters' blood, particularly the blood of the Aleksandrovs. His father was going to pay for what he had done. And he could think of no better way than to kill what was dearest to him.

The Aleksandrovs were about to have a world of hurt unleashed on them. He was able to do things thought impossible. With his ancient and true blood, he was able to break all the rules, and he would. Every damn one of them.

* * * *

Avril looked at herself one last time in the mirror. She thought she looked pretty good. The skirt was very short, stopping at upper thigh, but fit her very nicely. The heels accentuated her long legs, and she had pulled her hair up in a loose clip that allowed a few short curls to hang around her face. She put a bit of mascara and lipstick on and spritzed a small amount of lavender on her wrists. The gold necklace Ebony had given her with the locket attached containing a picture of Avril, Ebony and Estril hung around her neck. The camisole dipped low, and the soft curve of her breasts was just visible.

A soft knock echoed on her door, and she took a deep breath before opening it. Her heart pounded wildly at the sight that greeted her. Aiston was dressed in a soft black suit. A red silk shirt was visible under the jacket with the top two buttons open, exposing some of the crisp, golden hairs that peppered his chest. She licked her lips when she remembered how sexy it was completely bare. He smelled good and was holding a single black rose. He was magnificent.

His hot gaze slid over her from head to toe, then back again. "My God. I'm going to have to beat the men off you."

She blushed, took the rose he handed her, and put it in the glass of water on her dresser. Knowing he was watching her, she put a little extra sway in her hips. When she made her way back to him, he grabbed her and covered her mouth in a deep, demanding kiss.

"Woman, if you continue to do things like that, we will never make it out of this house."

Avril acted innocent and batted her lashes at him. "Things like what?"

"You know what." His growled words curled her toes. "Come on."

He led her down the stairs and to the entryway. "Okay. You say I never warn you. I'm warning you. Close your eyes and relax."

She knew exactly what he was doing, and she closed her eyes immediately before the strange feeling of being shimmered washed through her. When she opened them, they were standing inside a

very posh restaurant. A waiter immediately led them to a secluded table in the corner, and Aiston ordered a bottle of the best wine they had.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m just not used to fancy places like this, Aiston. It’s beautiful, don’t get me wrong.”

He grinned. “Well, get used to it.”

She was going to ask him what that meant, but the waiter returned with the wine and filled both their glasses. She brought the glass to her lips and sighed when the rich, red liquid that hinted at sweet fruit burst on her tongue and warmed her throat. “Mmm. This is good.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

They looked at the menu, and that’s when she noticed the restaurant was Italian. “I love Italian food.” He smiled and her toes curled again. “Everything looks so good. I don’t know what to eat.”

His lids closed halfway. “I know what I’d like to eat.”

“Aiston!” She glanced around, wondering if anyone heard his remark.

He wiggled his eyebrows up and down. “What?” Before she could answer, he leaned forward a little. “Would you like for me to order for you?”

She smiled. “Yes, I would like that.”

When the waiter came back, Aiston ordered stuffed pasta with mushroom sauce for both of them.

The salads came right away followed by crusty bread. They had just finished their salads when the main dishes were served. She dug her fork in and took a bite of the pasta. She closed her eyes and savored the taste. “Oh. This is so good.”

Aiston smiled. “I’m happy you like it.”

She watched as he took a bite of his own and heat curled through her once again. The man’s mouth was sinful, and it didn’t help her out-of-control hormones that she knew what he was capable of doing with it.

“Avril.” Her eyes snapped up to his. “Quit looking at me like that or I’m going to have you right here and now, everyone else be damned.”

She pulled her eyes away from him reluctantly. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. Just don’t look at me like that unless you mean it.”

“Oh. I think I mean it, I just don’t think I mean it to be right here at this very moment with all of these people around.”

His breathing deepened into long pulls, and he reached to wipe a tiny splash of sauce from her lip. He groaned when she licked it off the end of his finger. He leaned toward her, closer, closer until his lips were a scant inch from hers. His breath tickled her face. She gasped and waited for his kiss, but it never came. “Tell me a little about yourself.”

“What?”

He chuckled. “Tell me something about you that I don’t know.”

She blew out a breath and took a couple calming breaths. “Okay. But, one for one.”

“One for one?”

“Yeah. I tell you something about myself, and then you tell me something about yourself?”

“Oh. Deal.”

“Let’s see. My mom’s name is Caren, my father’s, Aaron. They are wonderful parents, and my mother pesters me to death about settling down and giving her grandchildren just like any normal mom would. Your turn.”

“Maybe we can do something about that.”

“What?” His words were so low, she hadn’t caught them.

“Nothing. Okay. Something about me. I love to play pranks, my utmost loyalty lies with my family, and I find you incredibly sexy.”

“That’s not fair. I already know all of that about you. Well, at least the first two things.” She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. “You really do find me sexy?”

“Come on. You have to know by now that I do.” He leaned forward again and took her hand. He stroked the back of it with one long finger. “In fact, you are the most incredibly sexy woman I’ve ever laid eyes upon.”

“Now you’re stretching the truth. I mean, come on. You’ve seen, what, thousands, hundreds of thousands of women?” She laughed and quickly stopped when the blackness began creeping over his eyes.

“I know I have many faults, Avril, but I promise you, I won’t lie to you.” He trailed his thumb down her cheek. “You are the sexiest woman I have ever laid eyes on. Don’t doubt it for a moment.”

Her heart flipped over a few times, then pounded in delight. “Oh, well, you are quite—”

“I didn’t say that to get a compliment in return. It was a simple fact. Just say thank you.”

She smiled when he flashed her a lopsided grin. "Okay. But you are pretty sexy yourself."

"Hmm. I thought I was beautiful."

She laughed. "You are." And, God, he was. She wanted him.

"Enough of the beautiful talk. Are you ready to go dancing?"

Her heated, wanton brain took a minute to clear. "Okay."

He handed the waiter some money, pulled her to her feet and toward the front door. Once outside, he wrapped his arms around her. "Close your eyes again."

In an instant, they were standing in the middle of a dance floor swaying to the deep, slow rhythm of music. Aiston's arms felt wonderful around her. Her head rested on his shoulder and his chin rested lightly on top of her head while he rubbed slow, soft, erotic circles on her back with his big hands. She rubbed his back lightly with her fingers in return.

"I want you so bad." His breath was hot in her ear.

"Then take me." His lips descended toward hers and her breath hitched in her chest.

"Aiston!"

Avril felt him tense under her fingers, and looked to see the same redheaded tart coming toward them he had been with at Drake's. Aiston kept his arm possessively around Avril and turned to greet her.

"Hello, Liv. What are you doing here?"

"Well, as you know, babe, Drake's is closed right now."

"Yeah. I wasn't aware you hung out at The Fountain."

"Oh. I hang out wherever the action is. You should know that by now. Come on, dance with me." Liv fixed a cool stare on Avril. "You don't mind, do you?"

Avril had had enough. The woman was being downright rude, and she knew it. "Actually, I do mind, babe."

Liv arched a brow. "Well. Who is your new little plaything, Aiston? She sure is spunky."

Aiston glared at the woman. "This is Avril, and she isn't my plaything, Liv."

Liv must have realized she wasn't going to win this round. "Well, whatever, babe. You two have fun then." She planted a kiss right on Aiston's mouth and slipped Avril a sly grin before turning to walk away. "You know where to find me."

Aiston glanced at Avril. "I'm sorry, Avril. If I'd known she was going to be here I would have never brought you here."

Avril put on a false smile. "No problem, *babe*."

Aiston grimaced, and Avril got some satisfaction out of his discomfort. She couldn't believe the bitch had kissed him right on the mouth in front of her. She wanted to scratch her big, dumb eyes out.

"Hey. We've had a good time up until now, right?"

She shrugged. "Yes."

He took her face between his hands and kissed her cheek. "Let's forget about Liv and continue to have a good time, okay?"

She sighed. "You're right." He was right. Why the hell should she give that little tramp the satisfaction of ruining her night?

"Come on." He led her to a corner table and made sure that she was comfortable before he pushed through the crowd toward the bar to order some drinks.

Aiston hadn't been gone for more than a minute when Liv made a second appearance. "So, what's your story?"

"My story?" Her story was she wished Liv would disappear.

"Yeah, are you just banging him for the night or what?"

"Excuse me, but you are being rather rude, and it's none of your business what I'm doing with him."

"Ah. Possessive, are we? Well, you won't be the first dumb woman to think you actually have a shot at him."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, I can see that you think you are going to be the one to settle Aiston down. I've seen that faraway, infatuated, dreamy look on countless women before you, and believe me, you're fighting a losing battle. The man can't be tamed. He likes women way too much. Get what I mean?"

"Oh, I get what you mean, all right."

"Good, so you'll be a good girl and send him back to me when you are finished playing house?"

"Um, I think that's up to Aiston, not me."

"Oh, you're such a naïve little one, aren't you?" Liv merely brushed off Avril's irritated look. "Nothing is up to a man. They need a little prodding here and there and guidance in the right direction."

"Ah. And Aiston's right direction would be toward you, I guess?"

"Now you're getting it."

Yeah. And this bitch was about to get it, too. Right in her fat mouth. The longer Liv mouthed off, the more she found it hard to believe Aiston had anything to do with such a piece of work. Avril looked the redhead over again. Well, yeah, she could believe it. The woman had huge tits and was obviously easy. *Every man's dream.*

"Yes. And don't forget that."

Avril tensed. "You know, I really don't like people reading my mind."

"Sorry. It's just habit. I promise I won't do it again."

Yeah, and pigs fly. Avril tried to keep her mind as blank as she could. She looked around the redhead, hoping to see Aiston, but he was nowhere in sight. "Look, I really don't want to discuss this any further."

"Oh, I understand. I mean I'd be pretty upset if I was out with a man, and the woman he had slept with just last night was sitting here talking to me." Liv smirked at Avril's hurt expression. "Oh, I'm so sorry again. I just figured you had to know he was with me."

Liv gave Avril another little evil smirk, got up, and sauntered off. Avril was speechless. Could it have been possible that Aiston had gone back to Liv after he'd visited her in her room this morning? She remembered the terrible wound Aiston had had when he had visited her and found it hard to believe that he'd been in any condition to pleasure a woman at that point in time. He was a vampire, though, and healed very quickly.

Avril's heart thumped and her chest ached at the thought. Surely after what they had shared he wouldn't have slept with Liv in between. Would he have? No. She had to stop believing the worst of him. It was obvious Liv was jealous and was saying what she knew would upset Avril the most. After a couple more minutes passed, Avril decided to go find Aiston and simply ask him. If he denied it, she'd believe him.

She pushed through the crowd, avoiding the inviting stares of a few of the men she squeezed past. Finally, she made it to the bar where she was greeted with a sight that nearly stopped her heart altogether. Liv was draped over Aiston kissing him, open mouthed. She literally heard her heart crack and break in a million pieces. A tear slid down her cheek, and she had to choke out a breath through her aching chest. Liv had been telling the truth. She knew Aiston liked women, but after Ebony told her that he had cut back on his romps earlier, she'd begun to have hope that he'd changed. But he hadn't. She should have known. She was a fool for believing he felt something for her, cared for her.

She backed away from him, slowly turned, and ran for the front door. She wasn't sure where she was, but she knew the name of the club. If she could find a payphone, she could call Ebony, and

she'd send Ashe to come get her. She found one just a block down the road and dialed her friend. Ebony assured her she would send Ashe shortly to get her. She hung up the phone and slid down to the seat under it. Huge tears slid down her cheeks. The last couple days, she had cried more than she had in the last few years. And every time had been because of Aiston.

She'd been right from the start. They simply couldn't be together. She needed to go back home, lick her wounds and start over again. She had to talk to Ebony and see if Aldin could watch over her instead of Aiston until the drifter problem was taken care of. She was wiping the tears from her cheeks when she heard a noise and assumed it was Ashe, but when she looked up, a short, dark man stared at her. The man's eyes were haunted, menacing . . . evil. The hair at the back of her neck rose. She stood and pressed her back against the wall of the phone booth.

"Well, well. What have we here? Lost, little girl?" The man spun away from her for an instant and yelled down the dark street. "Oh drudge. I think I found what you've been looking for." He spun back around.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Don't worry about who I am, Avril. Worry about what I am."

How did he know her name? And who was the drudge he was talking to? She didn't see anyone else on the street. She didn't have time to ask and screamed when the man opened his mouth to expose a nasty set of jagged teeth. Talons grew from his fingertips. He came at her. Just when she was sure that she was going to die, a loud scream filled the air, and the nasty little man was flying away from her. Surprise and gratitude flooded her when she realized Ashe had saved her. The two now faced off, but Avril knew the little man was no match for the vampire.

Ashe had to be at least six inches taller than the man and outweighed him by at least fifty pounds of muscle. The hiss of Ashe's sword being pulled from its scabbard pierced the air. She didn't want to watch, yet couldn't take her eyes from the macabre dance. The little man lunged at Ashe, trying to claw his stomach, but Ashe dodged the blow and kicked the man in the knee.

The little man let out a scream that nearly pierced Avril's eardrums. He tried to get back up, but Ashe spun and took his head off in the blink of an eye. The man's body turned into black, bubbling goo and seeped into the sidewalk. The stench was horrible, and Avril nearly gagged.

* * * *

Ashe strode over to Avril. "Where the hell is Aiston?" Ashe grabbed her arm and practically dragged her from the phone booth.

"He-he's in The Fountain."

"Why the hell are you out here by yourself?"

"Because, because, oh! I just am."

"God damn it, Aiston! Get your ass out here right now!" "Whatever the excuse, it's not good enough. You can't be alone right now. Do you see why?"

Avril looked down at the pavement and whispered. "Yeah. I'm sorry."

Ashe hugged her to him after taking a deep breath. "It's okay. I just don't want anything to happen to you. Not to mention, Ebony would go crazy."

"I know. I'm sorry. I just wasn't thinking."

"Just don't do it again, Avril. Your safety is important. Now try to relax. Aiston will be here in a minute."

"No! I don't want to see him right now."

Ashe sighed. "Come on. I'll take you back to the mansion." *"Aiston, I'm taking Avril back to the mansion. She says she doesn't want to see you right now."*

"Like hell. I'm going to be there in just a second."

"Deal with it later. I'm not getting in the middle of this. She'll be at the mansion."

* * * *

Avril squeezed her eyes shut, and an instant later, she was standing outside her door. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Are you going to be okay?"

"Yes." Ashe gave her a worried, fatherly stare before he turned to leave. "Ashe?" He stopped. "Could you please ask Ebony to come to my room? I need to talk to her."

"Yeah, sure."

Chapter Thirteen

Avril opened the bedroom door and walked straight to her bathroom. She took a quick shower and came out to find Ebony sitting on her bed. "Hi."

"Hi." Ebony frowned. "What happened?"

"Oh, Ebony!" Avril began crying once again when her friend hugged her. "I thought he changed. I was so wrong."

"What are you talking about?"

Before Avril could answer, a thunderous voice nearly shook the house. "*Avril!*"

Avril's eyes widened. She pleaded with Ebony. "I don't want to talk to him. Please tell him I don't want to talk to him."

"Avril, I don't think he will listen. Isn't there some way to work this all out?"

"No." Suddenly, Aiston was standing in the middle of her room.

"Where the hell did you go? What is wrong with you? You put your life in danger! Damn it, woman!"

"Do you want me to stay, Avril?"

"She most certainly does not!" Aiston fixed a stare on Ebony that could turn any normal woman's veins to ice.

"Cut the crap, Aiston. If Avril tells me to leave, I will. Otherwise, don't use your intimidation tactics on me. They don't work." Before she got another word in, Ashe was standing between her and Aiston.

"Look, bro. I don't know what went down tonight, but if you so much as give my wife another sideways look, I'm going to kick your ass!"

"Yeah? Well bring it on, bro."

"Wait, wait, wait!" Ebony wedged herself between Ashe and Aiston. "This is not going to happen. Avril, are you okay?" Ebony waited for Avril to nod her head. "Aiston, are you going to quit

acting like a caveman?" After a few moments, Aiston nodded and clenched his fists. "Avril, do you want me, or Ashe, or both of us, to stay?"

Avril took a deep breath. No. She wasn't going to be the cause of a huge fight. She would handle this situation herself and be done with it. "No. I'm fine. You can both leave. Don't worry about me."

* * * *

Ebony pulled Ashe out of the room while he continued to glare at his brother. *"Come on, Ashe. Thank you for protecting me, but Aiston and Avril need to work this out."*

"Ebony, I swear, if he looks at you wrong again, I'll wring his neck, brother or not."

"Shhh. I know. I love you too, but it's okay. Remember how we were? It's hard to deal with new love. Besides, we both know Aiston would never hurt me."

And, wasn't that the understatement of the year? The beginning of their relationship had been somewhat tumultuous, to put it gently.

Ashe finally took a few deep breaths and relaxed. *"Yeah. Now let's go to our room so I can show you how happy I am that we are past this nonsense."*

* * * *

Aiston glared at Avril and she glared right back. "Why did you leave like that?"

"What? Like you don't know?"

"No. I don't know." Holy shit. Had she seen Liv kissing him? The woman had caught him by surprise, and it had taken him a moment to pry her off him. By the time he had gotten back to the table, Avril had been gone.

"Fine. Whatever you say."

"Avril, what the hell is going on? I thought we were having a good time."

"I changed my mind. I don't want to have anything to do with you anymore."

Aiston's heart pounded in his ears. He wanted to shake her. He wanted to kiss her. He couldn't let her go. "I don't understand."

"It's not you. I just can't do this right now. I'm not ready. Please, just respect my wishes."

He circled her forearms with his fingers and yanked her against his chest. "Respect your wishes. What about my wishes, Avril?" His breathing came in long gasps. "What about what I want?"

She pushed at his chest, but he wouldn't release his hold on her. "Please. Just let me go. I want to go home, and I want Aldin to watch over me until it's safe for me to be alone again."

His face fell, and his chest ached. She didn't want him? He knew she wanted him physically, but mentally, no. He thought that had changed. She had gone from hating him, to wanting him, to not wanting him in the blink of an eye. What was he supposed to do? He didn't think he was strong enough to let her go. She was his mate. He couldn't be without her. He couldn't force her either. He was about to do something he never thought he'd do. Beg a woman for mercy. His whispered words were hard to get past the lump in his throat. "Please, Avril. Don't do this."

She tensed. "No. I can't. I'm sorry."

God, Avril, please I'm begging you. Don't turn your back on us.

She began sobbing. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." She tried to pull away once again, but he still refused to let her go. "Aiston, please."

No. He would not allow her to just walk out of his life. He would find a way to make her understand that they were meant to be together. He had to. He'd be a miserable bastard for the rest of his life—which would probably be a very long time—without her. He pulled her closer and gently put his mouth on hers. He took a deep breath, pulling her scent of lavender deep into his lungs, memorizing her. His body went into complete overdrive, demanding he take what was his. It took everything in him to control the urges.

* * * *

His mouth was tender, soft. His lips coaxed hers. She was allowing herself to be pulled right back where she didn't want to go by the mere touch of his lips. He tasted good. Spicy male mixed with his unique hint of vanilla. She wanted to give in, to take whatever he was willing to offer. But, no, she couldn't live like that. She mustered every ounce of willpower she had left and pulled her mouth from his. "No."

He put his forehead against hers. "Okay, Avril. You win. For now. But, I'm warning you. This is not over. You cannot get rid of me this easy."

He finally let her go and stepped back. He reached out; pushed a damp, stray hair from her face; and disappeared.

She had come so close to giving in when a vision of him kissing Liv had flashed through her brain. She still wanted him. She couldn't help it. She would always want him, but she couldn't be with a man who wouldn't be faithful to her. It would ultimately kill her. He'd never know just how sorry she was. Sorry she'd never get to make love to him. Sorry she'd never get to share her life with the man she loved. Sorry he'd never realize what they could have had together.

She took a deep breath and collapsed on the bed. She was going home in the morning. She had to get away from here and Aiston for a while. She would get through this somehow. She just didn't know how yet.

* * * *

Aiston reappeared in his bedroom where he immediately put his fist through the wall. *Fuck! What the hell happened?* He had planned on telling her she was his life mate tonight. He had intended to ask her to spend the rest of her life with him. He was going to ask her to let him turn her. He had actually believed she had come to care for him. Had she been leading him on the whole time?

He thought about it. Thought about how responsive she had been to his kisses, his touch, his body. No. If he was sure of one thing, it was a woman's response to him, and she had not been faking that. So, now he had to figure out what the hell happened and try to find way to fix it. No way was he going to allow her to walk out on what they could have together.

Chapter Fourteen

The next morning, Avril was up way earlier than normal. She'd barely slept, she was cranky, and she was already dressed and packed. It was time for breakfast. She didn't want to go downstairs. Everyone in the house knew what had happened last night with her and Aiston. She was a little embarrassed, to say the least. Ebony would no doubt come up and drag her down if she didn't make an appearance. She pushed her shoulders back, took a deep breath, and went downstairs. Everyone was at the table, Ebony, Ashe, Marcus, Aldin—everyone, that was, except Aiston. She sat down and wondered if she dropped a pin how many times it would echo throughout the dead silence of the room.

"Good morning, Avril." Ebony smiled at her, but Avril could see the concern she was trying to hide.

"Good morning. Um, I didn't tell you last night, but I'm going home today."

"Oh. Yeah, Aiston told us this morning that you were going home. He also said he had some things to take care of and asked if Aldin would take over protecting you for the time being." Ebony tried to sound casual.

Avril was relieved that there wouldn't be a scene over her leaving. "Thanks. I really enjoyed spending time with you and Marcus, Ebony." She looked at Ashe and Aldin. "You guys too, of course."

"We're going to miss you until your next visit. Aren't we, Marcus?" Marcus giggled when Ebony gently tweaked his little chin.

"Yeah, well, I might not be able to visit for awhile. I mean, I took vacation time and personal time to be here this week. I don't think my employers will be all that willing to give me more time off any time soon."

The rest of the meal was quiet aside from a gurgle here and there from Marcus. After everyone was done eating, Avril kissed her nephew and hugged Ebony and Ashe good-bye. She looked at Aldin. "Well, I guess it's just you and me now."

She sighed when his face betrayed how thrilled he was about the situation. Not. He didn't say a word, just followed her to her room when she said she was ready to go.

She had all her stuff sitting on the floor. Aldin picked it all up and motioned for her. She stepped close to him, and within a second, they were standing in her apartment. She was starting to get used to

being shimmered. The weird sensation she usually got was nearly undetectable this time. She glanced at the couch as she walked to her room to begin unpacking. She remembered the night Aiston had gotten hurt, and when he had taken her blood for the first time.

She remembered how he'd resisted taking sustenance from her. He'd been weak, had needed blood badly, yet he'd still been worried about hurting her. He was honor bound to protect her, and he was loyal to a fault where her safety was concerned. Why couldn't he be loyal to her, period? Yes, she'd been stupid enough to fall in love with the insufferable man, but why couldn't he love her back? Why couldn't she be enough for him? Why did he have to chase after other women still? It hurt like nothing had ever hurt in her entire life. Her shoulders sagged, and an utter feeling of defeat washed through her bones.

She wanted to cry, but she didn't. She had done enough of that for awhile. In fact, she'd cried in front of just about everyone except Aldin, and she was determined to spare him her blubbing. After unpacking, she told Aldin she needed to pick up some groceries and run some errands. If she didn't actually know he was watching her, she would have never known he was near. He was eerily quiet for such a large man, and even though she knew she could trust him with her life, he made her a little uneasy. He rarely spoke, and people seemed to naturally avoid him. She couldn't blame them. He was an exceptionally formidable-looking man. If they knew what he really was, they'd probably all go screaming down the street.

While she was in the food market, Aldin's cell phone rang. She tried to give him some privacy, but he refused to allow her to get much more than ten feet from him. The call seemed to unnerve him. His voice became soft, softer than she had ever heard Aldin speak, almost as if he were talking to a lover. *Hmm. I wonder.* He was gorgeous, and she had no doubt that women found him sexy and attractive—they'd have to be blind to not think so—but she also knew it would take a strong woman to handle him. He'd scare the hell out of any normal gal. Had he met such a woman? He certainly appeared to be uncomfortable with whatever the caller was saying to him, and glanced almost nervously at her.

Option number two, the caller could possibly be Aiston. She could see why that would make Aldin uncomfortable, given the current situation. *Stop wondering about Aldin's phone call.* She felt like a horrid little eavesdropper salivating for her next piece of gossip. She couldn't deny that she liked a good story as much as the next person, but Aldin was like family, and it was just weird eavesdropping on your own family. She wasn't really a gossip either. Oh she liked to listen, but she didn't like spreading the details around. In fact, she mostly shared the things she heard at work and around town exclusively with Ebony. And Ebony was definitely not a busybody.

She hurried to pick up the rest of the things she needed and headed for the checkout lane. After what seemed like forever standing behind the little old lady with the gazillion coupons, she finally had her stuff paid for. Aldin stepped up and took bags for her. She thought about telling him that she could carry them fine on her own, but knew it'd be an argument she'd lose and decided she was just too tired to care at the moment anyway. She finished the rest of her errands and walked home, Aldin dogging her heels.

She put her things away after reaching the tiny apartment and began to feel really guilty about Aldin staying at her place. He was bigger than the couch he was going to be sleeping on. "Aldin, while you're here, why don't you sleep in my bed and I'll sleep out here?"

"I'm fine." He gave her a stare that said, "Don't bother arguing 'cause I'm not budging on this one." He had that stare down to perfection.

"Fine. Feel free to watch TV, or a movie, or whatever while I make dinner."

"You're not my cook or my maid. I can take care of myself."

She glared at him. "God! Do all of the Aleksandrov men have to be stubborn, bullheaded pigs?"

Aldin chuckled. He never chuckled, and that pissed her off more.

"Yeah, I think that's a requirement for all the Aleksandrov men."

"Look. I'm making dinner. There will be more than enough for you. If you want to eat, fine. If not, then fine, too!" She didn't wait for his reply and turned and stomped the whole ten feet to the kitchen.

* * * *

Aldin shook his head as he watched Avril scurry to the kitchen like a spoiled child. Yep, Aiston had his hands full with this one. He hoped that they would eventually work out whatever was wrong between them. He just hoped that it would be soon because he had some things to get back to, one being the infuriating Alaina. He'd have to tell Ashe soon that he was training her, and he was pretty sure that Ashe wasn't going to like it. Not one bit. Although, if he were honest with himself, he couldn't blame his brother for feeling that way. If the bitch had kidnapped his viata amant and had resurrected Shara, his dead, first life mate to serve as a drudge, he wasn't sure she'd still be alive today. Even Ebony had forgiven Alaina, and Ashe had given her another chance only because Ebony insisted.

Alaina was still a very sore subject with his brother. She hadn't been back to the mansion since that night months ago when she'd come to apologize for the horrible things she'd done. Aldin knew that Alaina hadn't meant things to get as out of hand as they had, and he knew for a fact that Alaina would have never resurrected Shara from the dead had she known Shara had tried to have Ashe executed. It was going to be a sticky subject indeed, and he wasn't looking forward to having that particular discussion any time soon with Ashe.

* * * *

Aiston sat at The Fountain's bar, brooding over his whiskey. He still hadn't figured out a good plan to win Avril back. Sure, he could throw her over his shoulder and make her come back to the mansion with him. Sure, he could force her to do whatever he wanted with compulsions, but he would never do that. She would hate him even more, and he wouldn't blame her for it. Not to mention, Ebony would slit his throat for daring to do such a thing to her best friend.

He was not good at courting women. No, his talent lay in seducing them, not wooing them. However, Avril was not just any woman. She was *the* woman, *his* woman. Was he good enough to seduce her back to him? *Maybe for a while, but then she would end up hating me again.*

No. He had to figure out a way to convince her that he loved her, wanted her, would be loyal to her, would lay his life down for her. He had to make her see she could trust him, and that he would spend the rest of his life making her happy. But how?

"Hello, babe. Why the long face?"

Liv's voice grated on his nerves. He was finding it very hard to believe that he had once welcomed her attention, her body. "Shove off, Liv."

She smiled and draped one lean arm casually over his shoulder. "Aw, why so cranky?"

He sat up straight so her arm would slide off his shoulders, but was disappointed when it stopped at his back and her fingers rubbed small circles on his tight muscles, making them bunch harder in protest of her touch. "I'm not cranky, and I don't feel like chatting."

"Ah. I see. So your little girlfriend finally got tired of sharing you and told you to take a hike, huh? I warned her you were too much of a man for one woman."

His cheeks heated with anger, and he swung around, positioning his face about an inch from Liv's. Her eyes went wide, and she took a step back. Good. She should be nervous if she so much as harmed a tiny hair on Avril. "What did you just say?"

Liv waved her hand nervously. "It's really no big deal. I just tried to save her some heartache, Aiston. I mean, really, the woman is human, after all."

"Human. *Human*? You don't have a clue what you are talking about." Well, at least now he knew what had turned Avril off him so quickly. The bitch in front of him had filled her head with crap. "Just exactly what did you tell Avril? And don't lie to me, or I'll get very angry."

"I just told her we were together that night at Drake's"

“Together? We weren’t together. Nothing happened that night.”

“Only because of that little spectacle with the drifters. I mean, come on, we both know you would have ended up in my bed and my body.”

Aiston stared at the redhead. He couldn’t believe he had found her attractive at one time. “No, I wouldn’t have. I haven’t been in your bed for quite a while now, and I won’t ever be there again.” He turned his back and moved toward the exit.

“What the hell are you saying? You can’t possibly mean to throw away what we have for some little human tart.”

Liv cringed when he whipped back around. Flames burned his fingertips, and he could feel the blackness creeping over his eyes. His teeth clenched together as he spoke. “Listen real close to me, Liv. If you ever so much as say one more thing to or about Avril—whisper her name even—you will have me to deal with. And, trust me, it will not be pleasant.”

* * * *

Liv didn’t say another word. She knew she had lost. She had played a game and just got called out. She watched Aiston disappear and sighed. One of her favorite toys was gone forever. Now she’d have to find another one, and it wasn’t going to be easy finding one comparable to Aiston. Ashe was off-limits, but there was always the possibility of Aldin. But, even as daring as she was, even as much as she liked a domineering man, Aldin kind of scared the shit out of her.

No, she’d have to find someone completely new. Damn Avril for coming along. Liv sighed and sashayed through the crowd, prowling for her next prey.

* * * *

Aiston was worried that Avril wouldn’t believe him when he told her that Liv had lied about them being together. It hurt like hell that she had automatically assumed the worst of him, but he couldn’t blame her. She’d been screwed over too many times in the past by assholes. And he did, after all, fit the profile of the men she was used to dealing with. How was he going to convince her he was, and had been, interested in only one woman for a long time now?

He knew that it was important that he allowed her time to trust him on her own. If he tried to force the issue, she would resist. And, if he knew anything, the woman was stubborn. It was one of the things he loved about her, but it was the one thing that could cause him the most problems at this particular moment in time. He had to make a plan quick. His body's demand to claim her, the feeling of being half alive without her, was wearing on him, wearing him down. He would have to reach deeper inside himself than he had ever had to in his entire existence for the willpower to stay in control.

He couldn't even think about Aldin being so close to her, in her apartment. He knew that his brother wouldn't make a move on Avril, wasn't interested in her that way at all, but he was still jealous. The overbearing need to protect her ate away at his logical thinking bit by bit. He wouldn't hesitate to fight even his own brother over her if it came to it. But the only way it would come to that is if he allowed his feeling to get in the way of rationality.

One thing he knew for certain—tonight would be the last night Aldin, or anyone else besides him, looked after her. After tonight, whether she liked it or not, he would be her protector.

Chapter Fifteen

Avril lay in her bed wide-eyed and sleep eluded. She glanced at the clock. Two-fifteen in the morning. The probability Aldin was sleeping was nil even though she hadn't heard a sound from the apartment other than the leaky drip of her bathroom faucet hitting the basin every couple minutes. *Blip. Blip.* God, the sound that she normally barely noticed might as well have been nails screeching down a chalkboard on this night.

Was it realistic of her to believe that she could stay away from Aiston? She could do it, albeit with great difficulty, but at what cost? Would it be better for her to be with him, and turn a blind eye to his romps with other women?

She sighed. She'd never be able to do that. She'd never be willing to share Aiston with other women. Even the thought made her blood boil with anger. Maybe she could just have a casual fling with him until he was out of her system. That thought nearly made her laugh out loud. She couldn't have a casual fling with someone she loved, and she most certainly would never get him out of her system. She was certain that, even in the years to come, if she happened to meet a man she could spend the rest of her life with, the part of her heart that belonged to Aiston would remain his until the day she died.

The enormity of the situation began to dawn on her. She would never find another man that she'd be happy with now. She couldn't knowingly have a committed relationship with someone else without being able to give her whole heart. The tears came again. How had she let this happen? A laugh escaped between the tears. She hadn't *let* anything happen. It had been out of her hands, fated. That thought made her sit up slowly. She grasped the sheets in both hands.

She remembered Ebony's stories of how she and Ashe had not been able to stay away from one another. How, even though Ashe had been determined to never let another woman into his heart or life again after his first life mate had betrayed him, he had not been able resist Ebony. They had been fated for one another, and he was unable to deny his feelings for her no matter how hard he'd tried. What if she and Aiston were that way? What if they were genetically engineered by unseen forces to be a perfect match? If this were true, Aiston would never let her go. But, still, she couldn't be with him if he wasn't able to be faithful to her. *And this is what is fated to happen to me, huh?*

She couldn't take it anymore. She had to do something to occupy her mind and distract it from these thoughts. She got out of bed and headed for the kitchen. She barely glanced in the living room on her way through, grabbed a glass from the cabinet, and filled it with cold water from the fridge. She took one sip and turned to head back to her bedroom when her heart stopped. Aldin was not in her living

room. Aiston was. The glass slipped from her fingers, crashed to the floor, and broke in several pieces at her feet.

She immediately bent to pick up the pieces and cut her finger. "Ouch!"

Before she moved another inch, Aiston was crouched beside her. "Damn it. Let me see." He pulled her hand toward him, even though she resisted, and gently inspected her finger. Blood dripped from the deep cut.

"Let go." Her knees nearly gave out from under her when his eyes flashed from blue to black in an instant, then to an eerie glow. The man was breathtakingly gorgeous, and she loved him. No matter how hard she tried to deny it, she loved him. Her heart thumped hard and loud.

"It's obvious you aren't happy about seeing me at the moment, but this needs to be cleaned."

"I can do it mys—" She sucked in a deep breath and held it when he pulled her finger into his mouth, and gently lapped his tongue over the cut. His eyes stared deep into her own, never blinking while he bathed her injury. Her heart galloped, her skin flushed with heat, and she closed her eyes.

* * * *

Her blood hit his system like crack hit an addict's. His body tightened, and he wanted, more than anything, to rip off her clothes and shove his cock into her slick heat. He could smell the soft hint of her arousal calling to him. His dick twitched and hardened in demand. He lapped at the cut for several seconds before finding enough control to pull back. He inspected her finger once again, and was satisfied to see that his saliva had caused the bleeding to stop and the healing to begin.

She jerked her hand from his, and glared at him while he picked the remaining glass up and stood to throw it in the trash can. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Can you please just calm down for a minute?"

"Why?"

"I want to talk to you."

She stiffly walked to the couch and sat down. He followed, but was wise enough to leave some space between them when he sat beside her. "I have nothing to say."

"Well, I do."

"I don't want to hear it."

"Look at me." He waited several seconds for her to finally do what he asked. Her brown eyes were full of hurt, and his chest ached in response. He hated that he was the one to cause her such pain. He had to make it right. "Just let me say what I came to say, and then I'll leave, okay?"

She pulled a couple deep breaths into her lungs. "Fine. Say it, and then get out."

Aiston scrubbed his fingers over his face and took her hands in his even though she resisted. "Avril, I know why you were so upset with me. Liv told me what she said to you about that night at Drake's."

Avril gave a short laugh. "Go figure."

"Would you listen to me?" Her lips formed an *o* of surprise at his sharp words, and he sighed in frustration. "I'm sorry. I'm just a little on edge here."

"Now you know how I feel."

"Avril, I didn't sleep with Liv that night, nor any other night since I laid eyes on you. Yes, I did once have a relationship, if that's what you would call it, with Liv. It was a long time ago, and it's over and will remain over."

"Why? Just because you want me in the picture now? What happens when the newness of me wears off? You'll just go back to her or someone else."

"The *newness* of you will never wear off. I don't want anyone else, and I know it's the last thing you want to hear, but you are mine."

She bristled and stood, took her hands from his, and wrapped her arms around her waist. "Excuse me, but I belong to no one but myself."

"Well then that's a pity because I'm yours and always will be. You are my *viata amant*, Avril, my life mate."

"No. You don't know that." She backed away from him slowly, but he tracked her every step.

"Yes. I do know that. You have talked to me telepathically, and you have seen me shielded."

"Huh-uh. I've never seen you shielded."

"Yes, you have. That night I came to you after the fight with the drifters at Drake's, when I was wounded, I was shielded. I didn't want you to see me injured, but I had to see for myself that you were safe. You saw me then."

"No. This cannot be happening." Fat tears slipped down her cheeks. "I cannot spend my life with a man who will not be faithful to me."

"I will be faithful to you. I swear it. I told you there has not been another woman for me since many months ago when I first met you. Yes, I admit, I don't really know how to behave in a committed relationship since I've never had one, but I will learn, and I will never cheat on you . . . ever. Avril, I love you."

* * * *

She couldn't believe this was happening. She had suspected she could be his life mate, but now the reality of it was smacking her right in the face. What was she supposed to do? She didn't know if she believed him when he said he'd be faithful. Had Liv really lied? She definitely wouldn't put it past the woman. Her mind was a jumbled, confused mess. She backed up farther and turned her back to him. If she allowed him to touch her, she'd cave. There was no resisting him once he put his hands, his mouth on her.

"Aiston, I just don't know. I need some time to think about this."

"You're killing me here." He closed the gap between them and hugged her back to his chest. He put his mouth close to her ear. "I will try to be patient, give you some time, but I will be honest and tell you that I don't know how much longer I can stay away from you. I want you so much. You're all I think about."

He was all she thought about too, but she didn't want to tell him that just yet, if ever. His hot breath against her ear heated her body, and wetness seeped between her legs, readying her, begging for his invasion. And invasion was the best way she could describe it, because he would not just take her, he would own her, conquer her. She wanted him so badly she ached for him. She couldn't give in until she trusted him. She was beginning to, but she wasn't there one hundred percent yet. "Please."

"I'll go now, but you have to think about something else." He waited until she turned to face him. "I've already taken your blood twice with your consent. If I take it one more time with your permission, and you take mine, you will become like me. I want that more than anything. I want to spend forever with you."

She wanted it more than anything too. She was just so damned scared of being hurt again. "I'll think about it. Please go now."

He bent and placed his mouth on hers, barely grazing her lips with his. He breathed deep, taking her deep into his lungs, and explored her mouth a little further. "I can't leave without tasting you, Avril." She relaxed into him against her mind's better judgment, and she sighed when his tongue slipped inside, tangled with her own, their essence mingling.

This was one thing she would never doubt. The passion they shared. When Aiston touched her, she lost all coherent thought. She tried to resist him, but it was a futile attempt. She moaned at the spicy taste of him and went limp in his embrace. His mouth was sinful, and he kissed better than any man should. She arched into him and almost cried out in protest when he broke the kiss and took a step back.

"I know if I pushed, this would happen between us. I can feel that you want me as badly as I want you, but I'm not going to take you like this. I want you to trust me and know that I will never hurt you."

She placed her fingers on her lips where his mouth had been seconds before. They still tingled from his touch. "I need some time, Aiston."

He nodded. "I'll contact Aldin and tell him to come back."

She didn't say a word to him, just turned and went back to her bedroom. She had a lot to think about, and she was going to make a decision come hell or high water by morning.

* * * *

When Aiston returned to the mansion, he found Ebony frantically pacing the den. "What's wrong?"

Ebony spun in surprise, so obviously lost in thought she hadn't noticed his arrival. "Oh, Aiston! Dominic and Ashe heard about some supposed meeting of drifters and went to check it out. That was hours ago. I'm so worried."

"Why the hell didn't Ashe call me?"

"We knew you were going to see Avril."

That meant that his brother wouldn't interrupt for any reason. "*Ashe! Where the fuck are you?*"

"Dominic and I are at the corner pub downtown on Tenth. We're in the alley beside it and are fighting about a dozen drifters. They set a trap for us."

"*I'm on my way.*" Aiston knew that part of the city was notoriously seedy, especially at three in the morning. "*Aldin, you need to come to the pub on Tenth right now.*"

When Aiston shimmered in, he was shocked at the scene that greeted him. There were ten drifters, all had Dominic and Ashe surrounded, and were taking turns trying to pick off parts of them. Aldin popped in behind him within seconds.

“Holy shit! Why didn’t they call us sooner?”

“I think they were set up, then ambushed. Let’s cut the bastards down.”

Aiston and Aldin’s swords hissed in unison when they pulled them from the scabbards. With one, swift leap, they were standing in the middle of the circle with Ashe and Dominic.

“How you fairing, bro?”

Ashe sneered at Aiston. “Wonderful. Glad you two decided to show up.”

“Hey, we can’t show up if you don’t tell us where you’re going. You can thank your wife for that one.”

“Yeah. I’ll be sure to do that.”

“Whatever, we’re here to save you’re asses now so let’s say we kick these bastards back to Satan?”

All hell broke loose at that point. Aldin, Aiston, Ashe, and Dominic all began slicing through drifters one by one, dodging poisoned talons and cringing at ear-splitting screams of anger and agony. Dominic and Ashe both had various cuts on their bodies, but nothing threatening. Within moments of Aiston and Aldin’s arrival, the hunters easily picked the drifters off. The gurgling black goo on the ground spewed a stench that was nearly suffocating.

Aiston looked at the other hunters. “Well, maybe they’ll think twice about another ambush, huh?”

Ashe’s concern was palpable. “I don’t know. I think this was just a little test. I think the ambushes will start to come more frequently. I have a feeling they have someone watching us and reporting our every move. They are definitely being trained by someone.”

Dominic laughed. “Well, the training is coming along slowly. Even though their techniques are improving, if they hadn’t sent so many, they wouldn’t have inflicted the small amount damage they did to us.”

“Yeah, I agree. They’re obtaining information, trying to find out our weaknesses and our fighting techniques.”

A gurgling noise suddenly filled the alley, and Aldin, Ashe, and Dominic all turned in surprise to see a sword tip protruding from Aiston’s chest. A drifter had appeared behind him and was running him through with a sword. Blood began leaking from the corner of Aiston’s mouth.

“Tell your king we will be coming for him, but first we will take all he loves.” The drifter’s words came in a scratchy, whispered, menacing tone. The drifter yanked his sword from Aiston’s back and disappeared before the hunters could get to him.

Aiston sank to his knees. “Son of a bitch! Not again.”

* * * *

The hunters grabbed Aiston before he collapsed fully to the ground.

“He needs blood!” Ashe knew his brother’s wound was potentially fatal. His life force was running out of his body at an alarming rate.

“Take him back to the mansion, and I’ll find a source for him.” Dominic disappeared seconds before Aldin, Ashe, and Aiston.

Chapter Sixteen

Ashe and Aldin placed Aiston on the bed in his room. Ashe called for Ebony.

"Oh my God! What happened?" Ebony ran to her husband's side.

"A drifter ran him through with a sword. Dominic is getting a source for him." Avril moved from behind Ebony. "I thought she went home." He nodded in Avril's direction. "How did she get back here?"

Ebony bit her bottom lip and grimaced. "I'm getting the shimmering down pat a little better. I was worried about her being by herself, so I went to her apartment and brought her here."

Avril had been happy to see Ebony. She had already decided she was going to give Aiston the benefit of the doubt about Liv and trust him. She wanted to be with him, and the only way they'd have a shot is if she believed in him. After thinking more about what Liv had said to her, she knew the woman had been lying. Aiston hadn't been anywhere near her that night. Well, nowhere near her bed anyway. She should have known the bitch was lying right off. Her cursed past experiences with men had temporarily blinded her to Aiston's sincerity.

Now, he was lying in the bed they had almost made love in, possibly dying. No! He couldn't die. She wanted to be with him, and she wasn't going to let him die. Before she could get to his side, Dominic popped in the room with a small blonde woman. Avril watched, mesmerized, as the woman walked to Aiston, arm outstretched. He grabbed the woman's arm and sank his teeth in the delicate skin. The woman never so much as flinched and looked dazed, like she didn't know what was happening.

The woman was obviously under compulsion. The sight was terrifying, mesmerizing, and amazing. Ebony had told her about it, but she had never actually seen anyone under it. After a few moments, Ashe and Aldin pulled Aiston off the woman. Dominic disappeared with her, and Avril walked to the bed and sat on the side of the mattress.

Her stomach was in knots of worry and she had a lump the size of a basketball in her throat. "Is he going to be okay?"

"Hon, he'll be fine. Our men are tough and the Aleksandrovs don't get taken down easy." Ebony squeezed Avril's shoulders. "Come on, let Ashe and Aldin help him get cleaned up, okay?"

Avril let Ebony drag her from Aiston's bedside, still focused on the paleness of his skin. He looked horrible, almost gray, in fact. There was so much blood, even on the side of his mouth. His eyes were closed, and his blond lashes looked dark against his skin.

"Come on, let's go down and get some coffee."

Avril stopped before Ebony could drag her down the stairs. "No. I'll wait here until they are done. I want to go back in and see him."

"You're looking a little, um, green, Avril. I'm a little worried you might pass out." Ebony tugged on her hand again, but she refused to move. "Okay. It'll only take them a couple of minutes. I'll wait here with you."

The door swung open just as Ebony had promised a couple minutes later. "Is he okay?"

Aldin walked past her without saying a word, and Ashe nodded. "He's still weak, but in a couple days, he should be fine. He's taking a shower."

"Oh." Avril didn't know if she should go in his room and wait for him or what.

Ebony smiled. "Why don't you go to your room and lay down for a bit? It doesn't look like you've gotten much sleep lately."

Avril yawned. "Yeah, you're right about that." She didn't want to leave him, but if he wanted to see her that badly, wouldn't he have asked Ashe or Aldin to tell her so? Maybe he had changed his mind about her. Maybe he had decided that he couldn't love only her after all. Suddenly, she got a huge case of cold feet. "Um, Ebony, will you take me back to my apartment?"

"Avril, I don't think that's a good idea." Ebony's brows turned down in obvious worry. "I thought you were concerned about Aiston?"

"I know. I am, but I need to go back." She'd come here to tell Aiston she loved him, that she wanted to be with him, but suddenly, the fear of past betrayals made her doubt everything once again.

"Avril, I really don't think it's safe." Ashe stared at her.

Avril looked back at Ebony. "I'm really stressed, Ebony. I need to go back and at least get my painting supplies."

Ebony sighed, and Avril knew her friend wouldn't deny her something that meant so much to her.

"Ashe, will you take her back for them? I'd feel better if you were with her."

Ashe hugged Ebony to him. "Of course I will." Avril turned her back to them to give them a little privacy.

* * * *

"Ashe, I've never seen Avril like this."

Ashe rubbed his wife's shoulders. *"I know, baby, but it will all be okay."*

"Do you know something I don't?"

"No, but I do know my brother, and I'm sure he's going to make everything good between him and Avril, no matter what it takes."

"He won't hurt her, will he?"

"Baby, you know as well as I do that, if Avril is in fact his life mate—which I think we have both had that one figured out for a while—he will have no choice but to make her happy."

"Yeah, I just worry about her."

Ashe kissed her forehead. *It'll be okay.* He walked toward Avril.

"Shall we go?"

"Be careful, and I'll see you back here soon," Ebony called out as her husband and best friend disappeared.

* * * *

Avril stood in her living room with Ashe. "I'll just be a couple minutes." He nodded, and she headed for her bedroom. She was going to need her paint supplies as she was going to be under a lot of stress in the near future. She was sure she was going to end up losing her job at the Record's Department and wasn't sure she wanted to keep the one at the bar any longer. She had to do something for money, though.

She grabbed the case for her art supplies and began packing canvases, brushes, and paints in it. She was just about finished when a strange tickling of foreboding settled deep in her stomach. She turned slowly around to find the one person she never thought she'd lay eyes on again. The one person

she hoped to never lay eyes on again. Brad Connelly. She started to scream for Ashe, but Brad clamped his hand over her mouth before any sound tumbled out. She struggled, and he backhanded her hard across the cheek. The scene from the alley replayed in her mind.

This time was different. Brad was different. She couldn't quite pinpoint exactly how, but he was more intense, calmer, more sinister. He threw her onto the bed so hard she bounced two feet off the mattress before coming to rest on it. The breath whooshed out of her mouth, and she sucked in a lungful just in time to scream for Ashe before Brad's hands were around her throat.

"What the hell?" Ashe stood staring at Brad.

"Come any closer, Aleksandrov, and I'll snap her neck like a twig."

Ashe stood silent, unmoving. "Who the hell are you, and what do you want?"

Brad smiled. "Well, I could have been the best thing that ever happened to Avril here, but instead, she decided to discard me like trash. But now I have a new outlook on life." Brad flashed the half moon scar on the back of his hand at Ashe, and Avril barely caught a glimpse of it. "I have a master now who has given me everything I've ever wanted—immortality and the power to take whatever I want. And the best thing is he wants me to take exactly what I want."

Brad's eyes raked over Avril and she shivered. She knew what that moon shape meant. Brad was now a drudge, an undead slave of a vampire, or possibly shadowdrifter. "Brad, why are you doing this? I've never done anything to you. Please, just let me go."

Brad hissed. "Never done anything to me? You rejected me time and again. You made me look like a sniveling fool in front of everyone. Well, guess what? My master sent me here for you. Told me to do whatever I wanted with you, and to make sure your little boy toy, Aiston, watched every minute of it."

"Well, sorry to put a wrench in your plans, but that isn't Aiston."

"You think I'm so stupid as to not know that, you little bitch?"

Brad slapped her hard across the face again. She gasped and forced back the tears threatening to spill down her cheeks. She didn't want to give the jerk the satisfaction.

"He's the one who interfered the other night in front of The Fountain. I know who all the Aleksandrovs are, and so does my master. He's going to make every one of them pay, you know."

Now it all made sense. She hadn't been able to figure out who the little man had been calling out to the other night in front of the club. Now she realized, had Ashe not shown up when he had, this little charade Brad had planned would have played out a whole lot sooner.

"Who the hell is your master?"

Brad turned back to Ashe. "Wouldn't you like to know? Well, let me just say this. He's come back for revenge, and he's starting with your family. Now, run along and get your brother. I'll give you exactly two minutes to have him back here. And he better be alone."

"Ashe, please don't do it. He's going to kill me anyway. Please, I don't want Aiston to see what he's going to do to me. Tell him I love him."

Ashe disappeared, and Avril's heart dropped. She knew Ashe would bring Aiston here. She was going to be humiliated in front of the man she loved. Brad's smile clenched her gut in terror. "Now let's get you ready for when your boyfriend gets here."

"Just kill me and get it over with, Brad. Aiston's not coming." He was so coming. She just hoped she lived long enough to watch him tear this scumbag apart.

"You must really think I'm stupid. He nearly killed me in the alley that night, Avril. No man gets that worked up over some petty little piece of ass." He eyed her, and chills ran her spine. "No. He'll be here."

* * * *

Aiston had just finished dressing when his brothers popped into his room. The way their mouths were pulled in tight lines told him something was wrong. He was still weak, needed more blood, but felt a hell of a lot better than he had an hour ago. He wanted to see Avril, and he didn't want to deal with any other bullshit right at the minute. "What do you two want?"

"I don't know how to tell you this, but Brad has Avril."

Aiston's stomach clenched in rage. "What?"

"Settle down, Aiston."

"Settle down? Settle down? Yeah, I remember how *settled* down you were when Ebony was kidnapped, Ashe." His heart thumped so hard that his chest hurt. "How in the hell did this happen?" He grabbed his sword from the dresser and strapped it in on before pulling his leather duster on over it. "Where is she?"

Ashe filled Aiston in on the situation and Aiston's anger intensified. Flames danced at his fingertips. "I'm going to fry the little fucker."

"Aiston, you have to be careful or he'll kill her. You have to be calm and wait for the right opportunity or she'll die."

"Don't you think I fucking get that? I have to go."

"We'll go with you and wait outside in the hallway. If you need us, just call."

Aiston nodded and all three of them disappeared.

Aiston nearly dropped to his knees when he appeared in Avril's bedroom. Brad had her naked and trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey. Her ankles and wrists were strapped to each bedpost. Her eyes were wide, and he could tell she was trying hard not to cry. He was going to kill the bastard.

"So, you decided to show up after all."

Brad sat beside Avril and stroked a finger down her ribcage. She shrank as far as she could away from his touch. "I have a front row seat just for you." Brad jerked his head toward the corner of the room where a chair sat. "Have a seat and we'll begin."

"I'm going to kill you for this."

"Oh, I don't think so. My master has given me a few powers to use if need be."

Aiston watched Brad, waiting for him to make one wrong move, and when he did, he was a dead man. Again. This time, he'd stay that way. "Who the hell is this master who is so powerful he has to hide behind drudges and drifters?"

Brad hissed. "He's going to kill all of you."

"Why?"

Brad laughed. "That's for you to find out. Now, enough talk. Let's get down to business." He leaned forward and ran his tongue over one of Avril's nipples. Aiston thought he'd explode from the rage boiling in him. His gut clenched when Avril squeezed her eyes shut, and a tear escaped down her cheek. Aiston clenched the arms of the chair so hard they cracked.

Brad eyed Aiston and laughed. "See how she responds to my touch, Aleksandrov?"

"The only thing she does to your touch is get repulsed by it."

Brad doubled his fist and punched Avril in the stomach. Her eyes flew wide and she gasped. "Every time you disrespect me, she's going to pay."

Aiston nearly flew off the chair, but Brad kept one hand around Avril's throat and Aiston knew he'd snap it with little effort if he moved.

"Now, let's get on with it, shall we?" Brad reached down and undid his jeans. Avril's eyes found Aiston's and held them, pleaded with him.

"I'm so sorry, baby. Please be brave. I swear, it will be okay."

"Aiston. I don't want you to watch this. I can't bear it."

"I have to stay, baby. I won't let him do what he's planning. I know you don't trust me, but you have to on this."

She hadn't been able to trust him completely up to this point. And her next words brought swift relief to his soul.

"I'm so sorry about that. I do trust you, honestly. But please do something fast. I can't take much more."

He would not let her down. Aiston controlled his breathing. He knew exactly what he was going to do, but needed an opening. Then, an idea came to him. *"Avril. I need you to do something."*

"Wh-what?"

"I need you to distract him. I need you to act like you are enjoying what he's doing."

"I don't know if I can."

"You can do it. I know you can."

He watched as she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and opened them. Determination shined in them. She looked directly at Brad, and he stopped fumbling with his jeans. "What the hell are you looking at, bitch?"

She didn't flinch, just kept a steady gaze on Brad, and gave him a smile that lit the whole room. Aiston's heart nearly stopped. "I think I made a mistake about you, Brad."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, I mean, you are obviously a more powerful man than I originally thought. Hell, you have Aiston over there practically on his knees. I think I might have chosen the wrong man." She licked her lips, and Brad's eyes widened before his brows drew down in obvious skepticism.

"Stop playing with me you little bitch." He raised his hand to strike her again.

"Wait!" His hand stopped in mid air. "I'm not lying. I swear it. If you just untie my hands I'll show you how sorry I am for not seeing what a strong and appealing man you are."

"You're just saying that to get free."

"No. You can leave my feet tied, or just untie one hand. I want to touch you."

Aiston thought he might throw up. The fire fought to be freed, but he kept it tamped down just under the surface, every muscle tense, waiting.

"Come on, Brad. Just one hand. What could I possibly do?"

Brad looked at Aiston and back at Avril. "You better not be playing with me, or I'll kill you."

"I could never play with you like that, Brad." She smiled and licked her lips.

Brad assessed her with cool eyes. Then, a smile broke his lips. "So, Aleksandrov, looks like your lady prefers a real man."

Aiston watched him and knew the time was nearing. He quietly laughed inside at Brad's stupidity. How in the hell could he think a woman like Avril would ever be interested in him?

Brad untied Avril's right hand, and she brought it to his face. She stroked his cheek, and he leaned in to her touch. Aiston watched as the man's hold on her throat loosened. *"Almost there, baby."*

"I want you to touch me, Avril. Touch my cock."

She shivered. Brad probably thought it was in anticipation, but Aiston knew it was in revulsion.

"Oh, I'll touch you, Brad. I just want to savor it a little." She ran her hand along his shoulder, and his eyes closed briefly before popping back open and resting on Aiston. She licked her lips and continued her journey to his arm and chest.

"I can't touch him like he wants me to, Aiston. I just can't."

"You won't have to. Just keep doing what you're doing." He'd never felt such rage, such jealousy. It invaded every part of him. He knew his eyes were black as night, and an eerie calm snaked through him in anticipation of the upcoming kill.

"Brad. Can I sit up a little so I can reach you better?"

He nodded and gave Aiston the opening he was waiting for. When his hand slid from her neck, he gave her a command that he hoped she'd obey without question. *"Close your eyes now, Avril!"*

She did so without hesitation. Aiston raised his hands and flames shot from his fingers and hit Brad, engulfing him in fire. He screamed and started to fall on top of Avril, but Aiston was beside her in an instant, pushing Brad's scorched body to the floor. *Ashe, Aldin, I need you to get Brad's body out of here before he burns the place to the ground.*

His brothers shimmered in, grabbed Brad, and disappeared again. Aiston untied Avril. She launched herself in his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck. Her tears were unstoppable. He simply held her, and stroked the back of her soft, black hair. He pulled the comforter from the bed and wrapped it around her shivering body.

"It's okay now." He wanted to kill the bastard all over again.

Chapter Seventeen

Her face and stomach hurt like hell. She was exhausted and the tears wouldn't stop falling. She hiccupped and sucked in a big gulp of air. "I didn't want you to see what he was doing to me."

He rocked her gently. "It doesn't matter. It's over now."

If Brad had succeeded in raping her in front of Aiston, she would have welcomed death. He'd only touched her, and she felt like she'd never be clean again. The fact that Aiston had witnessed it was humiliating. She shivered. "I'm sorry."

He sat back and framed her face gently with his hands. "Sorry? Sorry for what?"

"For crying all over you."

He tipped her chin up. "Look at me."

Shame filled her even though she'd done nothing wrong. She hated Brad for making her feel dirty and cheap. She was glad he was dead. Aiston pushed her chin up farther until she had no choice but to meet his eyes. She saw nothing but concern in them, and relief washed through her. She was sure she'd see disgust in them, but there wasn't even a tiny hint of anything other than . . . love?

"You have nothing to be sorry for. You can cry all over me any time you want." He brushed the tears from her cheeks with his thumb, then licked his finger. "Mmm. Salty."

Fire ignited low in her still-aching belly. Was there nothing that could stop this man from turning her on? She'd been beaten, nearly raped, and here she sat, burning for Aiston's touch. Suddenly, she remembered his injuries from earlier. "Oh my God! Are you okay?"

He chuckled and hugged her to him. "Don't worry about me. I'm fine. Just a little weak, but I'm nearly as good as new." She doubted he was telling the whole truth because he looked more than just a little tired. His cheeks were slightly sunken and his eyes, hollow.

"Take me back to the mansion, please. I can't be here right now." She glanced at the bed and knew she'd never be able to sleep in it again.

"Close your eyes."

She did so and remembered nothing afterwards as sleep claimed her.

* * * *

She didn't know how long she'd been asleep, but her eyes felt heavy and took nearly too much effort to open. When she did finally pry them open, she found herself in the dark. Memories of Brad rushed her and her heart thumped anxiously. She took several deep breaths and calmed her nerves the best she could. *It's over, damn it. Don't let him do this to you.*

Her face ached, her stomach felt bruised, and she wanted to be wrapped in Aiston's arms. An overwhelming urge to see him crawled through her. She sat up, rubbed the sleep from her eyes, and flipped the bedside lamp on. She was in Aiston's room, in his bed, but he was nowhere to be found. She slipped off the bed and shivered. She was still nude, and the floor was a little cold on her feet. She saw his leather duster lying over a chair in the corner, and made her way over to it. She picked it up and slipped her arms in the long sleeves. It was at least three or four sizes too big for her, but it was warm and smelled like him.

She hugged the material around her and buried her nose in the fabric. Leather and spicy vanilla danced through her nose and her blood sang. His scent calmed her nerves as effectively as painting did. She opened her eyes and nearly screamed when Aiston appeared right in front of her. "Damn it! I told you to stop doing that. You are going to give me a heart attack! What are you doing in here?"

His lips turned down slightly and he reached out to push a riotous curl of hair behind her ear. "I didn't mean to scare you. I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I'm okay. Just a little sore. Actually, not nearly as sore as I thought I'd be." And horny as hell. And completely head-over-heels in love.

"That's because I helped your healing along a little."

"What?"

"When I brought you back earlier, you were already asleep. When I tucked you in, I couldn't help myself. Your face was so bruised and swollen. I knew your stomach had to hurt like hell. I was a complete gentleman, Avril, even though I didn't want to be."

His mouth had been on her while she had been sleeping? The thought sent erotic butterflies dancing through her. She wished that she'd been awake for his healing ritual on her, but nonetheless, she was thankful because she had no doubt her eyes would probably be swollen shut at this very moment had he not done it. "Thank you."

"Anytime." He frowned. "Avril, why did you leave earlier?"

"I needed to get my paint supplies." She knew by the way his brows furrowed that he was aware that she was only telling half of the truth. She couldn't take it any longer. She had to tell him how she felt about him. "That's not the only reason." Human ears would have probably missed the whispered words, but she knew that he had heard them perfectly.

His gaze snapped to hers. "What's the other reason?"

"I thought a lot after you left and I decided that I-I don't want to be without you. I don't even care if you can't stay faithful to me. Well, that's a lie. I do care. In fact, it would probably kill me to know you were with other women, but it would definitely be hell living without you. Anyway, I came to tell you, but that's when you were brought back injured. I waited in the hallway, but when your brothers came out of your room and didn't indicate that you wanted to see me, I thought you'd changed your mind about us."

"I told you I don't want other women. I only want you. And I'd never change my mind about us."

She smiled. "I believe you. I just wanted to hear you say it again." She watched as his lips turned up into a smile, showing his white teeth. His eyes sparked fire at her, and she was instantly aroused. Her skin turned hot and flushed.

"Do you really mean it? Because if you are joking with me, I might very well become the first vampire to die of a broken heart." He put his forehead against hers.

"I mean it, Aiston."

He pulled her into his arms and nearly squeezed the breath from her. "I love you, Avril. I love you more than anything. I swear I will make you happy."

She looked up into the blue eyes she knew she'd see love for only her in them for the rest of her life. "Good, because I love you too, and I intend to make you very happy also."

"I've dreamed about you saying those words to me, Avril. Have you thought about everything else?"

"Yes. And, yes, I want to be with you . . . forever."

"I'm going to make love to you now and nothing is going to stop me this time."

"God, I hope so."

His pressed his lips to her ear. "Avril?"

"Yes?"

"I'm never going to be able to wear my duster again without getting a hard-on. You look so damn sexy in it. I thought I was going to pass out from the blood leaving my brain when I first saw you."

She let out a sigh. "Well, I sure hope the blood that left your brain is still occupying, um, another place."

He pulled back from her and framed her face with his hands. "Trust me. It is, and I'm about to prove it."

His mouth came down on hers in a deep kiss. There was no gentleness. The kiss was all about possessiveness and claiming. Her tongue tangled with his, and his hands found her waist under the leather, spanned it, and pulled her to him. His hardness nudged her through his clothes, and she wrapped one leg around him and rubbed the bottom of her bare foot along his calf while rubbing her hands up his wide back. He growled, yanked the leather from her, and dropped it in a pool on the floor at her feet. He pushed her back until she fell across the bed, and tumbled gently on top of her, taking care not to put his full weight on her smaller frame.

He trailed kisses along her jaw all the way to her neck where it met her shoulder and buried his mouth in the soft hollow. He licked and nibbled and sucked at her delicate skin. She never realized how sensitive that spot was. Or maybe it was only sensitive to the man who now laved it with attention. She ached with need, and the wetness between her legs signaled her body's readiness for his possession. She cried out when his mouth closed over one hard nipple.

Her breaths came in short, excited pants, and she moved her legs restlessly, longing for relief from the tightness coiling deep in her belly. She sat up, pulled at the buttons of his shirt, shoved it off his shoulders, and let it fall to the floor. She licked her lips at the magnificent sight of his chest. She would never get tired of looking at it, and now she couldn't wait to see the rest of him. She reached for the buttons on his jeans. He covered her hand with his larger one and helped her unbutton the opening faster.

She gasped when he sprang free of the denim. He was absolutely beautiful. His eyes never left hers as he guided her hand to his hardness. "Touch me, Avril. Please touch me."

When she curled her hand around his arousal, he growled. The primitive sound shot sparks through her skin and primed it with static electricity, encouraging every hair to stand at attention. He felt like steel covered in soft velvet. She stroked him with a steady, slow rhythm, and he pushed against each pull of her hand. After a couple moments, he tumbled her back down on the bed and seated himself between her legs, the tip of his cock nudging her entrance.

"I'm sorry I can't take it slow this time, Avril. I have to have you now."

She strained toward him and took the tip of him inside her. He gripped her waist tight and pulled her toward him with one, swift jerk while he simultaneously flexed his hips and buried himself in her. They both cried out. The sound of pleasure echoed in the room.

"My God. I've never felt anything like you. You're so tight and your muscles are clamped so damned hard around me, I'm about to lose it."

He filled her to the point of pain, but she had never felt anything close to the pleasure she felt with him buried in her. They fit together perfectly. She let out a moan of pure bliss.

He stilled for a moment, taking in gulps of air. "Did I hurt you?"

She smiled, reached for his shoulders, and tugged him toward her while raising her hips to him. "No, but you're going to hurt me real bad if you don't move."

She got her wish when his mouth fastened back on hers, and his hips began a rhythm as old as time. He drove her crazy, thrusting deep with long, slow strokes, giving her a glimpse of what was to come, but holding her from tumbling into the abyss of pleasure. Her body clenched around him, and he threw his head back and let out a cry that curled her toes. He pounded into her faster and faster. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and he plunged deeper and deeper.

"So. Damn. Tight." His teeth clenched with each stroke. "You're like heaven wrapped around me."

She was so close that her blood sang and sweat misted their bodies. Suddenly, his mouth was at her neck, and his fangs slid deep into her vein. Her body flamed, and she raced over the finish line to her release. His mouth pulled at her essence while her body gripped him mercilessly, clenching tight with each spasm of her orgasm. He released his teeth from her skin and continued pumping into her. She urged him on with her cries of pleasure. . He flipped onto his back, and pulled her over him until she straddled him, never breaking the contact of their bodies.

She rode him hard, and felt his body ready to climax when he suddenly swelled even harder, bigger inside her. He pushed his fingers through her hair and pulled her head down. "It's time, Avril. Do it."

* * * *

Her lips touched his chest, and he felt the slide of her small teeth pierce his skin. Heaven, it was pure heaven. The instant her sweet mouth began taking his blood, his body tightened, and he came over and over. He never thought he'd stop, and knew that if he ever did end up dying some day, this is exactly how he wanted to go.

He tangled his fingers in the short, black waves of hair and held her against him while her lips suckled at his chest. When she pulled her teeth from him, he nearly came again. He turned on his side and tucked her against his chest. "You are going to marry me now, right?"

Her sleepy laugh made his cock jump again. "I don't know. Are you going to ask me?"

He rolled her to her back and pinned her to the mattress with his body. Her brown, passion glazed eyes half-open seared him. "Avril Taylor. Will you marry me?"

She smiled and his cock twitched again. "Well, if you put it that way. Yes."

He took her mouth again, slowly this time, and explored every inch of her. He kissed and nipped every sensitive part of her soft skin he could find, and when he finally entered her again, she tumbled over the edge almost immediately. He rode her deep and slow. When his body demanded release, he increased the rhythm, his hips thrust fast and hard, until he came so hard he thought his head might explode. He kissed her neck, then snuggled her back up against his chest, spooning her, listening to her breaths grow slower, longer as she slid into sleep.

* * * *

A couple hours later, Avril woke with a warm, male body wrapped around her. She smiled and imagined how wonderful it was going to be to wake up to this every morning, or maybe not. She forgot that she was a vampire now. She sat up slowly, and Aiston stroked her back.

"What's wrong?"

"Um, nothing." She sighed when he continued rubbing her back. The man's hands were magical. "I don't feel any different."

Aiston sat up and pulled her onto his lap. She brushed her fingers lazily back and forth over the tops of his thighs. "You won't really feel any different." He kissed the top of her head.

"But, I just . . . I thought, well, I don't know."

He kissed her again. "Avril, you're still you. The only things that have changed is you're stronger, you can hear and see much better, your sense of smell and taste are enhanced and you will slowly be able to do other things as well. Like shimmer and read minds and shield yourself and—"

She put her fingers on his lips. "Oh. Is that all?" She giggled.

He chuckled and kissed her fingers lightly before sucking the tip of one into his mouth. "It's really not that bad. I'll be with you every step of the way and teach you everything."

"Everything? Will you teach me how to fight to like Ashe is teaching Ebony?"

He groaned. "Yeah, I'll teach you how to defend yourself, but I don't ever want you to fight unless there's no other option." He tangled his fingers in her curls and angled her mouth for a long, deep

kiss that curled her toes. He rested his forehead against hers. "I would die if something happened to you, Avril."

"Nothing's going to happen to me. I've waited too long for you to lose you." Now it was her turn to kiss him. She savored his spicy, vanilla taste and moaned when her nipples brushed against the crisp hairs on his chest. She looked down to see the golden dusting and let her gaze explore his hard body. "You have a bruise on your hip."

He chuckled again, but she was having a hard time understanding why his being hurt was funny. She bent to inspect the bruise closer and gasped. "You have a damn tattoo!"

"It's not a tattoo, Avril."

"It most certainly is. It's a black rose. When did you get that, and why?"

He repositioned her on his lap and tapped her hip. "Look."

She looked down and gasped. "I have one too. Aiston, is this one of your pranks? Did you tattoo me while I was sleeping? Wait. It's one of those stick on ones, isn't it?" She licked her fingers and began rubbing furiously at the black rose nestled on her hip.

Aiston circled her wrist with his fingers, brought her hand to his mouth, and kissed the back of it. "It's not a prank, and it's not a tattoo. It's a mated mark. You might as well get used to it because it won't disappear unless something happens to one of us. Since I don't plan on letting anything happen to you, and I certainly don't plan on letting anything take me from you, it's going to be there a very, very long time." Her heart melted at his words. "Didn't Ebony tell you about it? I thought you girls talked about everything."

Avril's brow drew down, and she thought about everything Ebony had told her about vampires. "No. She did say something about black roses being very significant, but she only told me I'd understand one day." Her brows flew up. "Oh my God! She knew all along we were meant for each other, even before I knew it."

Aiston hugged her again. "Yeah, I think everyone knew it but us. Too bad, because we wasted too much time apart."

"Yeah. I'm so sorry." She bit her lower lip. "It's just, I haven't had very good luck with men, and even though I knew deep down that you wouldn't hurt me, I was too scared to trust you."

"Don't apologize. I didn't exactly give you very good reasons to trust me. I mean, I know my track record with women isn't great. I'm sorry I couldn't convince you earlier that I love you. Honestly, I just didn't know how. I've never felt this way about a woman."

"I think we both had things to work through. I'm glad you've never felt this way about another woman, because I think I might have to hurt her, or you, or both."

He chuckled again and kissed her cheek. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

She bent so she could inspect her new rose tattoo, um, mated mark, closer. "It is kind of cute. But not nearly as cute as it is on you." She laughed, he grabbed her, and tickled her until she cried.

"Are you making fun of my masculinity?"

Her laughter ceased immediately when his cock grew hard against her thigh. "If there is one thing that I would never do, it would be make fun of, or doubt, your masculinity. I was just kidding. In fact, I think that black rose is pretty damn sexy on you."

He took her mouth in another searing kiss that heated her. "Nothing is as damn sexy as me on you." He rolled her under him and loved her long and slow.

Chapter Eighteen

Avril watched her fiancé—she'd never get used to saying that, fiancé—get dressed. He pulled on a pair of snug, black jeans and left the top button open just like she liked, allowing the line of hair at his navel, which she referred to as the *happy trail*, peek out. She knew exactly where that trail ended and licked her lips—and it did, indeed, make her very happy.

“Stop looking at me that way, woman, or we'll never get downstairs.”

She flashed a smile at him. “Maybe I don't want to go downstairs.” She really just wanted him to climb back into bed with her, and ride her with that gorgeous body of his.

“Don't tempt me.” He perused her scantily sheet-covered body, and her belly throbbed down deep with need when his eyes began to darken. “Get out of that bed right now. Everyone will be downstairs shortly. And I want to tell them all the news.”

She huffed. “I never thought you'd be one to turn down sex.” Before she could swing her legs off the bed, she squeaked when a hard body suddenly pinned her to the mattress. His nose was a mere breath from her own, and his breath fanned her cheek.

“Don't ever make the mistake of thinking I'd ever *turn* down sex with you. Don't doubt it for one second when I tell you all I have to do is look at you and I'm hard.” He nudged against her leg, proving his point.

Before she could respond, his mouth came down on hers. His tongue teased her bottom lip, then pushed inside, tangling with hers. She wrapped her arms around his neck, demanding more. By the time his mouth left hers, she was a bundle of aroused, hot nerves pulsing in anticipation of his touch. “My god, you are good at that.” His lopsided grin made her tummy flip-flop.

“Thank you very much. You're not so bad yourself.”

She playfully swatted him. “Not so bad? Not so bad?” She giggled when he chuckled.

“Come on, baby. Let's go get breakfast over with so I can get you back in bed.”

She sighed. She knew everyone would be expecting them. "Okay. If we must." He slid off her and continued dressing. "Um, Aiston, I'm not wearing your duster down to breakfast. I need some clothes."

His hot gaze traveled from her toes to her neck, stopping briefly to admire parts in between he claimed particularly interested him. "I like you in my duster."

"Aiston!"

He grinned and nodded his head toward the chair in the corner of the room. "I got some clothes for you when you were sleeping and put them over there."

She walked over to the chair and found a pair of her favorite jeans and a black sweater along with underwear, socks, and shoes. "There's no bra."

"Aw. Did I forget a bra?" He wiggled his eyebrows at her.

"You are a such a—"

"Man?"

She sighed. "Yeah." When she was finished dressing, he held his hand out to her, and she took it without hesitation. He stopped on the way out of the bedroom and opened a drawer to pull something out.

He led her down the hallway while whispering in her ear. "No freaking way!" Avril giggled. "I'm not going to be any part of this. Ebony will kill us both."

"Shh. Come on. It'll be the best prank I've ever pulled. And you're my inspiration." Aiston beckoned her toward Marcus's door with his bent finger.

"Don't you dare even think about blaming me as your inspiration for this," she whispered, and looked from one end of the hall to the other. "Aiston, no! I'm not doing this." Holy hell, it would be hilarious, though.

"Fine. You stand right here, and I'll be back in a second."

"But—"

He disappeared through their nephew's door before she could stop him. Well, no way was she going in there and becoming an accessory to this crime. Something ornery deep inside her wanted to take part in it, though, but common sense told her she didn't want to suffer the end result, which would probably be an ass-kicking. She held her breath, hoping like hell no one, particularly Ashe or Ebony, showed up.

Within a minute, Aiston came back holding the clippers and a hunk of dark, wavy hair in his hand. He had a smirk on his face that reminded her of the fox who'd just been let into the chicken house.

"I can't believe you did it." Avril's stomach rolled with anxiety and amusement. She should so be ashamed of herself for thinking this was funny at all. If that were her baby, she'd kill Aiston.

"Come on. Let's go down to breakfast."

He ushered her down the steps quickly, threw the hair in the trash and the clippers in a drawer before grabbing a plate and piling it high with food. She did the same and they both sat at the table. She was about to take her first bite when she heard a scream from upstairs.

"I'm going to kill him! I swear to God, I'm going to kill that crazy ass brother of yours."

Aiston wiggled his brows at her and dove into his food like a starved man. "Just remember what Tammy Wynette said, babe. 'Stand by your man.'"

"I don't think she meant in situations like this." Avril found it hard to suppress a giggle when his eyes sparked with mischievousness.

Within moments, Ashe and Ebony entered the kitchen. Marcus was perched on Ebony's hip and sported a mohawk. It was quite a funny sight, and if Avril didn't know the baby's hair would grow back out within a few days, she'd be horrified instead of entertained. She nearly choked when Ebony shot Aiston a murderous glare. "

Aiston, I cannot believe you did this to your nephew." Ashe stood quietly by Ebony's side, and if Avril wasn't mistaken, she could swear a grin tugged at his lips. Oh, this was going to get good.

"Oh come on, Ebony. I haven't played one prank on you since you've been here. Consider this my official welcome to the family. I mean, you have to admit, this is a very good one."

"A good one? You gave Marcus a freaking mohawk!"

Marcus giggled, reached up to rub his hand along the bald sides of his head, and laughed louder.

Avril looked from Ebony to Aiston to Ashe and back again. It was taking every bit of her strength to keep from laughing. "Oh, come on, Ebony. It'll be good as new in a couple days."

Ebony sighed and trained her sight on Avril. "Don't tell me you had anything to do with this? I can't handle two pranksters in this house."

"Nope. All I did was stand watch in the hallway. I refused to help him cut Marcus's hair."

"You stood watch in the hallway! You are such a traitor."

Avril couldn't hold it in any longer, and laughter bubbled from her lips. Once it started, she couldn't stop it. Within moments, one by one, everyone joined in. First Aiston, then Ashe, even Aldin, who'd come in a few seconds after the show began, chuckled. Finally, once Ebony saw her husband laughing, she even giggled.

"Okay. It was a good one. But if you ever do something like this again, Aiston, I swear I will shave you bald. And don't think I won't get you back for this. Someday, somehow yours is coming, mister."

Avril wiped the tears of laughter from her eyes.

"It will be my pleasure to be gotten by my gorgeous sister-in-law. Now, I have something important to say." Everyone looked at Aiston expectantly and Avril smiled at him in encouragement.

"Avril and I—"

"Who the hell did that to my grandson?"

Everyone gasped when Marilena Aleksandrov walked into the room.

"Mom!" All three Aleksandrov brothers spoke at the same time.

"Well, I'm glad to see you all remember who I am."

Avril watched the woman as she hugged each of her sons. She was a beautiful woman. Her black hair fell around her pixie face in gentle waves, and her eyes . . . well, Avril had never seen eyes like that. Ashe, Aldin, and Aiston had the trademark blue eyes of the Aleksandrov line. But, where Ashe's hinted at turquoise, Aldin's at green, and Aiston's at blue, Marilena's eyes were an eerie mixture of all, a unique color that could not be mistaken or named. Her skin was flawless, and her tiny frame gave her an appearance of delicacy.

Avril was sure the woman was not delicate and could probably kick some major ass. There was a certain air of power about her that Avril couldn't quite put her finger on. The same air of power that clung to the siblings only somehow different . . . stronger. Avril sighed. Everyone in the Aleksandrov family was absolutely gorgeous.

"So are you."

Avril's eyes turned to meet Aiston's, and her heart skipped a beat. It was a good thing she was a vampire now, because she would have probably ended up dying young of a heart attack from all the flopping around her ticker did around him. *"Thank you."*

"Don't need to thank me. It's the simple truth."

* * * *

After Marilena hugged her sons, she turned to Ashe's new wife, Ebony. "So, we finally get to meet. I never thought I'd see the day when Ashe would find another life mate." Nor did she hope that day would ever come, yet it had. Ebony stood and held her hand out to Marilena.

"It's wonderful to meet you, Marilena."

Marilena brushed Ebony's hand to the side and hugged her. She pulled back to eye her closer. She was a beautiful girl, tiny, but beautiful. Her son had met his perfect match. While she was happy that Ashe was finally with his life mate, deep down she secretly wished they'd never found each other. And now it appeared another of her sons had found his *viata amant*, as well. She glanced at Aiston and Avril and assessed the woman. She was beautiful also, but in a different way than Ebony. Where Ebony was short, blonde and light-skinned, Avril was tall, black-haired, and dark-skinned. They were complete opposites, but both were stunning.

"It is wonderful to meet you as well, Ebony. Welcome to the family. And I will add that my grandson is the most beautiful baby I've ever laid eyes on. Although, I can't say I care for the haircut all that much."

"You can thank your son for that one."

"Oh yes. I'm sure I can. I have no need to ask which one as I know perfectly well who the culprit is." She raised a brow in Aiston's direction and he glanced back, amusement dancing in his eyes. He always had been her little joker. "Nonetheless, Marcus is gorgeous."

Marcus giggled as if he knew his grandma was talking about him. He reached for her, and she picked him up and cuddled him close.

"I hope you don't mind, but I've been here a couple days, and Marcus and I have already gotten acquainted."

"You've been here a couple of days? Why didn't you tell us?" Aiston asked his mother.

"I think you all have been a bit preoccupied with certain things lately, and I wanted to wait until things settled down."

Who was she kidding? Things would only become more complicated and continue to get worse.

Once all of her children found their *viata amants*, fate would set the future in motion. There would be no more stopping it, and they could all die. While the odds were against Aldin and Estril ever finding their life mates—especially Aldin since he scared the hell out of most women—the odds of Ashe ever finding a second *viata amant* had been near to zero. Marilena's stomach danced with butterflies.

The impending day she would be forced to tell them of the danger they faced loomed over her like a funnel cloud, waiting for that perfect moment to touch down.

For now, she'd enjoy what time she had with her family and not worry about the future. A future when she'd have to tell them of her deceit and lies, a future with the possibility of life without her children.

* * * *

"I was about to make an announcement before Mom came in." Aiston stood and tugged Avril to his side. "We're getting married."

Everyone seemed happy for them, everyone except Marilena. Avril assessed the woman and knew she was hiding something. She didn't get the feeling that Marilena didn't like her, but that something else about her relationship with Aiston was bothering her, something deep, foreboding. Chills ran down her spine, but she tamped down her fear and leaned closer to Aiston. Whatever Marilena's secrets were, Avril would not allow them to interfere with her and Aiston. Nothing would ever take him from her again, and she had no idea why she felt like someone or something was trying to do exactly that.

"Congratulations!"

Ebony walked around the table, hugged Avril, and smacked Aiston on the arm. Avril was so happy she'd be living here from now on and could see her friend anytime she wanted. Aiston insisted she would not return to either one of her jobs, and truth be told, she was fine with that. She'd argued when he told her he would have one of the rooms in the mansion converted to an art studio where she could paint, but he wouldn't take no for an answer. He insisted it would be his wedding present to her.

"Ouch!" Aiston smiled and rubbed his arm.

"That was for Marcus's hair." After inflicting a little payback, she grabbed him and hugged him. "And that's for making my best friend happy. And, Aiston, if you hurt her, I'll make you pay."

Ashe and Aldin laughed until Ebony glared at them. Ashe cleared his throat. "Congrats, bro."

Aldin shook his head. "Another one bites the dust. No offense, Avril."

"None taken."

They all laughed again and sat down to their traditional morning breakfast. The men talked about the drifter problem and the women talked about wedding plans. Avril looked around at her family. She loved them all and was happy that she was going to officially be a part of it now.

Epilogue

Their wedding had been small, but beautiful. Aiston had offered to give her the most elaborate, huge wedding of the decade, but she refused. She only wanted her friends and family to attend. Her simple, but elegant white dress was nothing short of what she'd dreamed of. She almost giggled when she thought of her mother. When Avril had told her that she was getting married, she thought Caren might have a heart attack spurred by elation.

Her father was happy for her too, of course, but in his usual, laid-back manner. Caren had practically planned the whole wedding, all except picking Avril's dress and the flower arrangements. It was a tradition to have black roses at a vampire wedding. Since the mated mark was a black rose, they were considered a symbol of true love, luck, loyalty, and happiness. Her mother had fought her, insisting it was not proper to have black at a wedding, but Avril refused to give in. She had chosen not to tell her parents what she had become or about what the Aleksandrovs were.

Her parents were getting up in age since they'd had her when they were older. She didn't want to expose them to the stress of that knowledge. There was no reason to tell them at this point in time anyway. Aiston and everyone in the family supported her decision, which made her feel a tad bit less guilty for lying by omission to her parents. Aiston promised to have a bodyguard watch them discreetly from now on, as it would be a known fact that they were associated with the Aleksandrovs. Avril had the utmost confidence in her husband that he would keep her family safe.

"I thought we'd never get away from them to be alone. Ashe and Ebony had less trouble on their wedding night than this and they had hundreds more guests." Aiston kicked the door to their bedroom open and nudged it shut after they entered. "I can't believe we're married." He carried his wife to their bed and let her slowly slide down the full length of his impressive body to the floor. He began unbuttoning her dress.

"I can't either. I never thought I'd find the right man. I thought I was cursed or something." Avril stroked the back of Aiston's hand and admired the huge black diamond surrounded by white ones sparkling back at her from her ring finger while he undressed her. It was the most beautiful ring she'd ever seen. Aiston had given it to her the same night he'd proposed, and she'd been speechless that he'd gone to the trouble to find her such a unique engagement ring. The gold band nestled next to it was no less impressive, crammed full with over two carats of matching, channeled black diamonds.

"What do you mean cursed?"

"I always attracted such jerks." He gave her a heart stopping grin.

"Yeah, well you thought I was a jerk, too."

She smiled at him. She loved him so much. When she thought of how her insecurities had nearly gotten the best of her, her stomach somersaulted. She couldn't imagine losing Aiston. "I'm sorry. I was just—"

"Shh. We were both to blame, remember? I'm just glad we finally figured it out." He pushed her dress down past her hips and let it drop to the floor.

She reached for his suit and pulled at the buttons like a mad woman. She wanted to see him naked, and fast. He laughed at her enthusiasm and helped her by kicking off his shoes and undoing the top button of his pants. Within moments, he stood gloriously nude in front of her. She ran her finger down his chest and he caught her hand. He brought it to his lips for a kiss before it reached its downward destination.

He groaned and practically ripped her lacy bra and panties from her. "I have to be inside you now, Avril."

"What are you waiting for, husband?" She lay back on the bed and slid her knees apart in invitation.

He climbed over her and entered her slick wetness with ease. "I like the sound of that . . . husband. What about you, wife?"

"Mmm, I'm liking a whole lot of things right now." She arched to meet his thrusts, and her skin burned with pleasure. She was still getting used to her extra sensitive senses, and each time they made love, she thought she might faint from the mind-blowing orgasms he gave her. His cock dragged along every nerve ending, coaxing them to life. Her inner muscles grasped him, demanding, pulling him deeper. Suddenly, he slipped free of her body and flipped her on her stomach.

She squeaked in surprise when he placed his hands on her hips, tugged her back, and filled her again from behind. His arms wrapped around her and his chest touched her back, cocooning her in warmth while the crisp hairs grazed her sensitive skin. She reached behind her and gripped his thighs while he rode her like a stallion rode a mare. Right before she tumbled over the edge, his fingers tangled in her hair and pulled her head back. His fangs sank deep into her neck, and her eyes rolled into the back from the erotic sensation of him drinking her blood. When he was finished, he licked the punctures and pulled her mouth to his chest.

She needed no more encouragement and sank her teeth into him. He bucked his hips once hard, and stilled as he cried out in release. She moaned as his hot, spicy life force flowed down her throat and his pulsing seed filled her womb.

Later, they lay wrapped in each other's arms, spent and satiated.

"I love you." Avril sighed in contentment against his chest. There was no place in the world she'd rather be.

"I love you too, baby."

* * * *

"Ragnor! You have to stop this right now."

"Ah, so my little Marilena finally decides to speak to me again after all these years."

"You know why I've stayed away from you, Ragnor. Now fix this."

"Marilena, I will tell you now what I told you then. You cannot change what is fated. Slow it down? Postpone it a while? Yes. Stop it? No."

"Please. I don't want my children to die."

"I don't want that either. You know I love them as much as you do. But I have no power over the situation."

"You are half god! One of only a handful of true bloods left. Of course you can do something."

"If I had the power to change what has been fated, I would. But you are forgetting one important thing, Marilena. Yes, the vision showed that your children could be killed in the coming uprising, but that was only one possible outcome. It was not conclusively a death sentence."

"I can't take that chance."

"Damn it, Marilena! You have ruined so much just because you think you know what will happen. Yet you have no idea what the outcome will be anymore than I do. For all we know, you could be the one aiding their future deaths by not telling them the truth."

"No! I won't tell them unless I'm left with no choice. They will hate me, Ragnor. I'd rather be dead than have my children hate me. Besides, I still have one card left in my hand."

"I will never forgive you for it either, Marilena, nor will he. You know you can't hang on to that card forever, and when the time comes where you no longer hold it, I fear you will be in for a more fierce battle, which will ultimately end in a worse outcome than what is already fated."

"You know I had no choice. He will see that too."

"Speaking as a man, I cannot say that I agree. The wheel of fate is spinning fast. You must tell them. If you don't, I will."

"No! No! Please Ragnor. I've never asked you for anything other than the children's safety. Give me some time. Besides, it could be years before Aldin or Estril find their viata amants, and even if they do, one more chip will still need to fall into place. I never intend that to happen."

"I cannot believe a mother would choose to take away her children's only possibility of life-long peace and happiness. Yet, knowing you, what else could I expect."

"Everything I've done has been out of love for them."

Ragnor sighed. *"You know, I do honestly think you believe that. But what you are doing is wrong. Somewhere, deep inside, you know that."*

"Please. I'm begging you. Just let me handle this."

"Very well, for now. But know this. I will tell them when the time proves necessary if you have not. You are not giving them the benefit of the doubt. They love you. Yes, they will be angry, but they will also know that you lied to protect them. At this point in time, I still believe they can forgive you for . . . everything. If you don't tell them soon, though, I don't know if the damage will be repairable. Don't let them go into this unprepared."

"I ju-just need more time."

"Don't forget my warning, Marilena. The time is nearing for my return. If you haven't told them when that time comes, I will tell them everything."

The link to Ragnor was gone. Marilena's chest ached. She couldn't lose her children. She knew Ragnor could stop this, but also knew he never would. She hated him more now than she did when she'd left him. *Liar*. She straightened her shoulders. She'd figure something out. She had no other choice. She would not allow fate to win this time even if it killed her.

The End

About the Author

S. K. Yule lives in a tiny Midwestern town with her husband and dogs. She is the author of *Darkest Hours*, a bestselling Paranormal Romance Novel and *Jericho's Revenge*, a Paranormal Romance Novella, and has written several other contemporary, paranormal and erotica pieces.

She became a fan of monster movies at a very young age and after reading her first paranormal romance several years ago, she fell instantly and irrevocably in love with the genre. The genre immediately sparked a desire to write about two of her favorite things; love and scary things that go bump in the night.

