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Chapter One

by Michelle M Pillow & Mandy M Roth

Interview with: Ellen Fisher author of *Isn't It Romantic?*

When Mandy caught up to Michelle, she was near the large dance floor. She was sure Michelle would be good and mad at Dmitri's overbold comments. She grinned. Foolish Lycan. If he thought he was going to get Michelle into bed, he'd have to try harder than that—a lot, lot harder.

Instead of the tirade she expected, Mandy heard Michelle ask, “Is that Ellen Fisher on the floor with...oh my, is that Kipling Stanton?”

“The Kipling Stanton? The most gorgeous to-die-for actor in the entire universe, Kipling Stanton? America's hottest actor, Kipling Stanton? Where?” asked Mandy, eagerly trying to crane her neck. “You had better not be teasing me, Michelle, or so help me....”

“I'm not, they're right there,” said Michelle, squinting through the rapid movements of the dancing couples. “Do you see—?”

“No,” cried Mandy, desperately. She began to climb up onto a chair and Michelle pulled her back.

“Look, right there,” said Michelle, pointing. “See Ellen in the red dress?”

“No,” said Mandy with an excited giggle. “Where is he? Do you know how long I've daydreamed about him? Sure, he's human, but for him I'd make an exception. Do you know how long it's been since I had a hu—?”

“Too much sharing,” stated Michelle.

Mandy laughed harder. “Ellen Fisher? Didn't she write *Love Remembered?*”

“Yeah,” said Michelle. “We just got her new comedy in last week for review. The girls were fighting over it. I think it's called *Isn't it Romantic?* I haven't read it but I'm told it's a hilarious romantic comedy.”

“How can a girl with so little adventure in life have such an adventurous reading habit?” asked Mandy. She leaned her head on Michelle's shoulder and made a move to snap playfully at her jaw while making a mischievous growling noise.

Michelle flinched, pushing Mandy off. If not for Mandy, she'd be at home curled up in a warm blanket watching an old horror flick. Mandy laughed harder. Dryly, Michelle said, "Sex is safer when you have it in books. And at least they don't try to eat me right after."

Mandy's mouth opened. Michelle held up her hand and shook her head.

"You dragged me out of the house," said Michelle, "the least we can do is make a contact for work. Look, here Ellen comes, let's see if we can't get a quick interview lined up for next week's edition."

"You get the interview," purred Mandy, eyeing the famous actor as if he was popsicle and she was suddenly standing on the sun. He stood over six feet tall, all muscle, with the most lusciously soft shoulder-length hair of dark gold. If seeing his picture made a girl weak, the real life version could make you nearly swoon. "I'll get an autograph."

As Ellen neared, she began to smile. A Lycan stumbled drunkenly out from the crowd, nearly knocking her over. Kipling gently swept her out of harm's way. Mandy sighed, loudly and dreamily. The Lycan lifted his hands and backed off.

"Hey," called Michelle, "aren't you...?"

Kipling looked over nervously, expecting to get mobbed by rabid fans—again.

"...Ellen the author?" finished Michelle.

Ellen turned her attention and smiled. She walked easily over the dance floor. Kipling lifted his hand, unconsciously guiding her as she moved. "Yes."

"I thought that was you," said Michelle. "I'm a writer for the Nocturnal Journal. We just got your latest release in for review and I recognized you from the bio. We've been trying to get a hold of you for an interview."

"Oh, that would be great," said Ellen, smiling. Her chin length brown hair swung lightly as she moved and her blue eyes shone brilliantly. Suppressing a chuckle as Mandy practically drooled over her good friend, Ellen said, "I haven't been in the office as much as I would've liked. Kipling here has been in town for the week visiting, and we've been sight seeing. He leaves to shoot a movie tomorrow."

Kipling gave a bold grin and bowed his head. His captivating amber-green eyes glimmered sexily, as if he couldn't help himself. Michelle reached and quickly shook his hand. Mandy smiled dreamily up at him and didn't let him go so easily. Kipling frowned at her and sharply drew his hand back, stating he wasn't interested. Mandy frowned and made a 'your loss, buddy' face.

“We go way back. Actually he’s been my inspiration for my latest novel,” said Ellen, chuckling at Mandy’s infatuation. “Well, him, and my friend Cody. She runs a bookstore for children.”

“Oh, how interesting!” Michelle exclaimed. “And are you two dating in real life?”

Before he could answer, a loud song sounded on the jukebox. Michelle and Ellen both flinched. Kipling leaned over and whispered into Ellen’s ear. She nodded at him in return.

“We were just on our way out,” said Ellen. “It was great to meet you and your...” Ellen looked around and shrugged, “your friend.”

Thinking of her friend, Michelle noticed it was a little too quiet. She turned, only to see that Mandy had struck out with Kipling and had turned her attention elsewhere—to a table full of beautiful, albeit pale, creatures. For some reason she was compelled to glance over to the bar. Armando stood there with the rude Lycan, Dmitri.

Armando’s eyes stared pointedly at Mandy’s back. If she didn’t know better, Michelle would have thought him jealous. Then, seeing the grey eyes of his wolfish friend on her, she grimaced and quickly looked away.

“Well, you guys have fun!” Michelle shouted to Ellen, ready to tell Mandy she wanted to go home. The noise was starting to get to her, not to mention the attention of Dmitri. “Make sure you contact the office for that interview.”

“Oh, I sure will! I love your guys’ work!” said Ellen with a big smile. She threaded her arms into her escort’s and winked.

Michelle smiled politely. When she turned to look for Mandy, she saw her friend was no longer at the same table. Sighing, she looked at the next logical place—the bar.

With a groan, she found Mandy leaning on the bar shooting her teasing glances at Armando. He smiled back at her and handed her a drink. Sighing, she went to tell Mandy she’d booked the interview with Ellen. It would be a great feature for their magazine.

Suddenly, a large chest loomed before her face, blocking her path. Michelle instantly frowned, trying to artfully slide past without looking at who it was. When he stepped in front of her, blocking her path again, she uttered in irritation, “Do you mind?”

When she looked up, Michelle grimaced, for before her stood old lover boy, Dmitri. She should have known. She’d probably injured his enormous ego when she

walked away from him. Flatly, she grumbled, “Oh, you again? Isn’t there someplace else you could— do you mind?”

“No, I don’t mind the view at all. How about a dance?” Dmitri said, glancing down at Michelle.

She rolled her eyes and looked over at Mandy. Armando leaned forward and smiled at her friend, saying, “What a good idea. Would you like to dance?”

Mandy wrinkled her nose and let out a small laugh. “Silly, who’d watch the bar while you’re out cutting a rug?” With that, Mandy gulped the rest of her drink and headed back to the table full of vampires.

Michelle watched as Armando’s brows drew low in irritation. He was jealous, that was plain to see. She made a move towards Mandy and was met with Dmitri’s persistence. “So, how about that dance?”

“I would rather have hot poker rammed through my eyes than dance with you. Now, move!” Michelle let out a grunt as she pushed the overbearing, sexy lycan out of her path and headed straight for the door.

Chapter 2

Interview with: Jaycee Clark author of *Deadly Shadows*

“What’s with the sign on the door?” Mandy asked as she sashayed towards the bar.

Armando smiled and stood slowly from his seat. A grin appeared on his pale face as he tipped his head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, now you’re coy!” Mandy let out a loud laugh. “Seriously, why do you need to hire more help? It’s not like you’re too good to serve a drink or two. It wouldn’t kill you.”

He let out a sexy laugh and took a step towards her. “No, serving a drink won’t kill me. Besides, I’m already dead.”

She let out a groan and plopped down at an empty seat. Armando moved behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. “You look tired, Mandy. Not get much sleep last night?” His tone was harsh.

“No, I had a rough night. I never realized how wild vamps are in bed,” she said, closing her eyes and stretching her neck. Armando’s grip tightened on her. “Ouch, take it easy big boy.”

“What brings you down to the club so early?”

Mandy patted his hands and smiled up at him. “You haven’t seen my purse have you? I can’t remember what I did with it.”

Armando let out a snort. “I’m surprised you remember much of anything you did last night.”

“Giving her a hard time first thing in the door, Armando?”

Mandy leaned back and saw Dmitri approaching. He flashed one of his famous bad boy smiles and picked a bottle of whiskey up from behind the counter.

“Bit early for a drink, isn’t it?” Mandy asked.

“It’s never too early for a drink.” Dmitri shot back with a smile. “So, what’s the deal with your little blonde friend?”

Mandy glanced at Armando. He gave a Gallic shrug and continued rubbing her shoulders. “Who, Michelle? Please tell me that you’re not interested in Michelle.”

“Well, yeah, I am interested. Why?”

Mandy let out a very unladylike snort. “She is so out of your league. You’re a ladies man and she’s not into those.”

Dmitri filled his glass and did another shot of whiskey. “No woman can resist the loving of the lycan,” he said in a low sultry tone.

“He’s kidding, right?” Mandy asked, looking up at Armando. The vampire just smiled. “Are you going to break out in the Thriller dance now?” Dmitri burst out into laughter. Armando just looked at Mandy with a look of confusion. She stroked his hand gently. “It’s okay, you’ve been dead a long time. It’s excusable.”

“So, you really think I’ve got no chance with Michelle?” Dmitri asked.

“Oh, sweetie, you’d stand a chance in hell with her.”

He tossed his hands in the air and spun in a circle. A phone started to ring and Dmitri bent down behind the bar. He came up with a small silver handbag. “Why do we have a purse back here that’s ringing?”

Armando's caresses came harder now, and Mandy felt too good to move. "It's mine, answer it please."

"Sure," Dimtri said, fishing the phone out of her handbag. "Hello, this is the man who is going to shag Mandy's friend Michelle tonight. Who is this?"

Dimtri cleared his throat and shot Mandy a horrified look. He ran his hands through his light brown hair and bit at his corner lip as he brought the phone over to Mandy. "Here," he said, extending his hand outwards. "It's Michelle."

Mandy burst into laughter and took the phone from him. "What's up, babes?"

"What's up?" Michelle screamed in Mandy's ear. "What's up is I've been trying to get a hold of you all damn night. I've been worried sick about you. What have you been doing?"

"I think you mean who." Mandy said, a smile forming on her face. "Actually, what might work too—now that I think about it. I went home with those vamps from last night." Armando's hands squeezed her shoulders tight. She let out a small gasp and tapped on his cool hands to indicate he was rubbing too hard.

"Did you get your article done?" Michelle asked.

Mandy held the phone away from her ear before saying no. She didn't feel like listening to Michelle yell. When the screaming in the phone stopped, Mandy put it back to her ear. "So, you're coming down to the club tonight, right?"

"Did you hear a word I said?" Michelle asked.

"Nope. And you took my car so I need a ride. I'll see you in a bit. Thanks babes, owe ya one!" Mandy shut her phone off and put it back in her purse.

"I think I pissed her off," Dmitri said.

Mandy nodded. "Yep, you did, but she'll still come down here."

"How do you know?" asked Dmitri, looking hopeful.

"She's not done yelling at me and I'm sure she's got a few choice things to say to you too!"

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"Oh, I know you!"

Michelle glanced up, sure the woman had the wrong person. But her purple eyes seemed to be looking right at her. Michelle looked over her shoulder. No, they were the only two in the parking lot along with a handful of cars. "I'm sorry?"

"You're a writer, right? The Mists of Midnight? And you work for the Nocturnal Journal," said the woman.

"Ah, yeah, yeah that's me," Michelle answered, giving a light smile.

"I'm Jaycee Clark," the woman said, holding out her hand. Jaycee was dressed comfortably in blue jeans and leather boots. She didn't look like a typical Raven patron. Michelle chuckled, of course, neither did she. "I write too."

Michelle took the woman's hand briefly. She didn't want to ignore her, but she was livid with Mandy. And where was that jerk who'd answered Mandy's phone? So help him if Mandy didn't put him up to it!

"You're upset aren't you?" asked Jaycee.

Michelle blinked. Artfully getting out of the direct question, she asked, "You say you write? Anything I might have heard of?"

"Ah, my first just came out. *Deadly Shadows*," said Jaycee. "It's a murder suspense romance. Actually, that's why I'm here. I'm researching my next book, or at least an idea for a next book. Besides, it's nice to get away from the computer and out into the world every once and awhile—if only to watch what's going on."

Michelle grinned, forgetting her momentary wrath. She genuinely liked the laid back woman.

"Do you work here?" asked Jaycee.

"No," Michelle frowned, remembering why she was there. "I have to pick up a friend of mine, Mandy Roth."

"Daughter of Darkness, Mandy Roth?" asked Jaycee getting excited. "She's here too? Do you think...?"

"What?" Michelle began walking in the front door. The large doorman hadn't arrived yet and she was glad she didn't have to shove past him.

"Well, I know you are always looking for new authors to interview. I'd love to come down and talk to you sometime about my work."

Michelle grabbed a business card out of her purse and handed it to Jaycee. "Sure, give me a call. I'll be in my office tomorrow."

“Great,” Jaycee said as she grabbed the help wanted sign off The Raven’s door. Michelle gave her a questioning look. “Research. Besides, I could use the extra cash.”

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“Hey, where’s Mr. Howl at the Moon Cocky Boy?” Michelle asked, walking up to Mandy and dropping her purse down on the table.

Mandy laughed and nodded her head towards the bar. “He’s waiting for the new hire to show up.”

“Oh, he’ll be trying to make the moves on her next.”

“On who?” Mandy asked.

Michelle began to answer her, but was cut off by a dark blonde with an apron on. “Oh, hi, you must be Mandy.” She thrust her hand out. “I’m Jaycee. I’m doing an interview with Michelle at the Nocturnal Journal. My first book just came out, it’s called...”

“Deadly Shadows,” Mandy said, answering for her.

Jaycee’s purple eyes bulged. “Yes, oh my gosh, I can’t believe....”

“Hey, lady, how about some drinks over here?” a husky voice shouted from the other side of the bar.

Jaycee rolled her eyes and smiled politely as she headed off to handle her customers. Mandy leaned over and smiled at Michelle. “I wonder why they hired more help.”

Armando suddenly appeared next to them. Both women jumped. “Can’t you give a shout out before you materialize next to us?” Michelle asked, dryly.

“My apologies,” Armando said with a slight bow of his head. “Mandy, would you like to dance?”

“You can’t leave the bar unattended,” she said turning her attentions back to Michelle.

Michelle let out a sigh and looked up at Armando. For a vampire, he wasn’t turning out to be such a bad guy. She almost felt bad for him. It was obvious that he was

trying to impress Mandy, but she was oblivious to it. "I think that Armando hired more help so he'd be free to visit with the patrons," Michelle said, pushing Mandy's hand.

"Oh, okay...but, I don't want to leave you here by yourself."

"I'll keep her company," Dmitri said, gliding into the empty chair next to Michelle.

Mandy smiled brightly and put her hand in Armando's. Michelle watched in horror as the two of them left her sitting with Dmitri, the stud who thought he was going to shag her tonight. She inched her seat away from him and rolled her eyes.

"What? I don't bite," he said with a smile.

Michelle huffed. Grumbling under her breath, she uttered, "I thought all werewolves were supposed to bite."

"Is that a request?" Dmitri gave a cocky grin, his grey eyes hopeful.

"Oh, please." Michelle stood to walk away from him. She was suddenly sorry she'd encouraged Mandy to dance with Armando. What did she care if the vampire got his feeling hurt?

"I can't believe Mandy knew my book!" said Jaycee as soon as Michelle sat down at the bar.

"Mandy has all the spicy and erotic novels brought straight to her desk when they come in the door," Michelle laughed. "Can I get a coffee?"

"Ah, yeah, sure. What do you want in it?"

"Just the coffee."

Chapter 3

Interview with: Shiloh Walker author of *a Touch of Gypsy Fire*

The music slowed and Armando stepped closer to Mandy, sliding his hands down and around her waist. She looked up at him and tipped her head to the side. Her breasts pressed against his firm chest and his body stiffened.

“Tell me what you’re thinking about.” He pulled Mandy closer to him.

“I’m thinking about how nice this is...” Mandy stopped in midstream and let out a squeal. She thrust herself away from Armando’s tall figure and ran across the dance floor. Loudly, she shouted, “Shiloh!”

Michelle heard Mandy’s voice above the club noise and looked out to see what she was doing. She watched as her friend left Armando alone on the dance floor. Mandy pushed through the crowd and made her way to a redhead woman who was holding her black heels in her hand as she danced with an onyx-haired hunk.

It didn’t surprise Michelle that Mandy had found someone else in the bar she knew. What did surprise Michelle was that Mandy had abandoned Armando so easily. She started to make her way out to keep the dumped vamp company, but stopped when a warm hand moved over her shoulder.

“Rethink my offer to dance yet?” Dmitri asked.

“Yes, I’ve decided that not only would I rather have hot pokers jabbed in my eyes than dance with you, I’d rather be boiled alive too! Move. I’m afraid that you’ll try and hump my leg!”

“Hey,” his voice dipped and wavered, “the werewolf jokes are starting to sting.”

Michelle let out a snort. “Not nearly as much as having to listen to your lame come-on lines. Isn’t there some dimwitted female around here you can sniff out and harass? Hey, right there, by the pool tables. She looks to be your type.”

Dmitri followed Michelle’s finger to the blonde bimbo with high hair, high heels and way too much makeup. She was giggling, a whiny ear-grating sound.

“Ouch, that hurts,” he grumbled.

“Truth usually does.”

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“Shiloh Walker, as I live and breathe!” Mandy shouted as she pulled on the woman’s arm. The tall vampire with her didn’t look pleased to have someone yanking on his dancing partner, but Mandy just smiled at him. “Let me guess, a hunter.”

“Mandy!” Shiloh said, spinning around and embracing her friend. “I didn’t know that you were in town, too.”

“I live here now. I relocated about a year ago. I’m working for the Nocturnal Journal.”

“Writing the sex column?” Shiloh asked, her brown eyes twinkling with a hint of humor.

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

Shiloh reached back and touched her escort’s arm. “Byron, this is Mandy. Her mind rarely leaves the gutter.”

“Guilty as charged. So, Byron, I’ve heard of you. I called Eli a few weeks back to check in on the gang and he mentioned you. Come to think of it, so did Sarel.” Mandy said with a wink.

Byron’s blue eyes widened and he ran a hand through his black hair. If Mandy didn’t know better, she’d have said he looked uncomfortable. Shiloh noticed it too, and stepped forward. “Well, now it’s all just Mythe & Magick until you’re told different right?”

“Mandy?” Michelle called out.

“Over here!” Mandy answered, reaching out and taking Shiloh’s hands in her own. “You’ve got to do an interview with my friend Michelle. She handles the author interviews for NJ and would love to talk with you.”

Michelle frowned, weaving and ducking her way through the dancing throng. Armando had moved back behind the bar, so she abandoned her plan to save the poor vampire from Mandy’s rejection. Finally reaching Mandy and her friends, she sighed. “How is it we keep ending up in this place?”

Mandy just giggled. If she had her way, Michelle would be coming with her every night until she was addicted to the warehouse club. “I want you to meet an old friend of mine, Shiloh. She’s another writer.”

“There seems to be a lot of us hanging here lately,” laughed Michelle, grimacing as an overzealous lycan danced an elbow into her back.

“And this fine specimen is Byron.” Mandy winked at him. Michelle merely nodded in greeting.

“So you’re Shiloh, Mandy’s old school friend. She’s practically thrust all your books at me, not that I mind. They’re all wonderful! I just finished *Her Wildest Dreams* last week.”

“Thanks,” answered Shiloh smiling. “Mandy tells me you do interviews for NJ.”

“Got a card right here.” Michelle handed her a card from her back pocket. “If you’re interested, just give us a call and we’ll make an appointment to have you come in and do some photos for a feature.”

“Oh, I’m only in town for tonight,” said Shiloh, frowning slightly.

“One night!” said Mandy, as she pulled Shiloh’s arm. “Then, come on, we’ve got some partying to do! You guys can do a phone interview later and I have some old photos of Shiloh I can give you.”

“Mandy,” said Michelle, laughing. “I’ve seen some of your old photos and if they are anything like that, I don’t want to see them.”

“Ha. Ha.” Mandy chuckled, grinning. “Maybe you should send her some of yours, Shi!”

Michelle began to lead the way through the crowded dance floor. Suddenly, she stopped and grimaced. Over her shoulder, she called, “Do we have to go up to the bar? Can’t we just wave Jaycee over to a table?”

Mandy used Michelle’s shoulder for leverage to look at the bar. Seeing Dmitri and Armando, she laughed. “What? Didn’t he apologize to you prettily enough?”

“Wolfboy didn’t apologize at all. He asked me to dance. I think he just wanted an excuse to hump my leg in public.”

“Oh!” laughed Mandy wickedly, giving Michelle a push. “That doesn’t sound half bad, besides I already told you he doesn’t bite.”

“Uh-huh, yeah, and I don’t breathe.”

Shiloh leaned into Byron and whispered in his ear. He smiled slightly and nodded. Fingers tapped Shiloh’s shoulder. A smarmy man with dark hair and eyes was looking her over as if she were the centerfold of a porn magazine.

“Dance with me,” he demanded, his eyes traveling over her skin.

Shiloh lifted her finger to show her wedding band. “Happily married. No thanks.”

The man tried to grab her. Byron tensed, ready to defend her. Suddenly, a hand tipped with long pink fingernails darted out from the crowd and grabbed onto Shiloh’s black chemise styled dress.

“What you doin’ with my man, bitch?”

Shiloh's arm shot up and she deflected the girl's fingers from her with ease. In a matter of seconds, lycans were crawling all around them. Shiloh backed up towards Mandy and let out a small laugh. "Still staying entertained I see."

"Oh, you wouldn't want me any other...way...." Mandy spit out as she ducked, pulling Michelle with her to avoid being hit with a runaway chair.

Byron spun around and instantly engaged several unhappy lycan gang members. Shiloh grabbed the lanky blonde who had pushed her by her hair and propelled her across the dance floor.

A tall brunette made her way to Mandy and caught her cheek with her nail. Mandy kicked out hard and planted her heel into the vixen's stomach. She glanced at Michelle and noticed her reaching into her purse.

Shiloh gasped and Mandy spun around to find Byron picking Shiloh up and moving her to safety. "I need one of those," Mandy said, half under her breath as she dodged another blow from the busty brunette.

Cool hands swept around her and her body tensed. "You rang, kitten?" said Armando, putting Mandy behind him as he stood to face the rowdy crowd. She turned to Michelle, seeing her friend was trapped in a pit of drunken lycans. They were all eyeing her, ready to strike. Dmitri growled as he ran past them on his way to Michelle.

"No!" Mandy screamed as she saw Michelle turn with her pepper spray aimed and ready.

Everything happened in an instant. Dmitri roughly pushed the lycans aside and they scampered away, seeing his anger. Michelle, terrified, sprayed at the first thing that moved. Dmitri grabbed his eyes with a howl and dropped to the floor. Michelle looked down at the cocky lycan and then to her hand. She dropped the pepper spray and backed away from Dmitri slowly, her eyes wide with shock.

Armando, Byron, and The Raven's head bouncer, Makonnen cleared the crowd out. Jaycee ran from behind the bar with a bat, waving it around like a mad woman. "Gee, a gal takes a fifteen minute break and returns to full-blown bar brawl!"

Mandy laughed and Michelle's face hardened. "This isn't funny!"

Shiloh appeared next to Dmitri with damp paper towels and tried to help him to his feet. Mandy stopped laughing long enough to take in the scene of a barefoot, five foot-six inch tall woman helping a temporarily blind, six foot tall lycan to his feet. "You're right, Michelle. It's not funny, it's hilarious!"

Dmitri growled in irritation, a low animalistic sound that made Michelle shiver. She gulped, knowing he was mad and not blaming him. Mandy couldn't stop laughing. Dmitri, unable to see who helped him, shrugged away from Shiloh.

“Shiloh, come on, let's get out of here.”

Everyone turned to Byron. He was livid. With a growl, he didn't give Shiloh a choice. Lifting her from the floor, he tossed her easily over one shoulder and strode for the door. Tense and ready to face whatever danger still lurked in the parking lot.

Shiloh pushed up off Bryon's back, grinned, and waved at Mandy and Michelle. “Call you next week for that interview!”

Chapter 4

Interview with: Elaine Corvidae -- Author of WOLFKIN

“Hey, kitten!” Armando called out to Mandy as she entered The Raven. Her heel twisted and she lost her balance. Makonnen's big arms caught her and she clung to the bouncer until she was able to regain her footing. Armando appeared next to her and snarled at Makonnen as he took Mandy's arm.

“Sorry, boss. I know that she's your girl. I was just helping her out,” Makonnen said with a slight bow of his head.

It infuriated Mandy to see a seven-foot man reduced to groveling. She twisted her head up to look into Armando's dark eyes. “I'm sorry, but did he just call me your girl, because last time I checked we weren't dating. I've never even kissed you.”

“You do not need to remind me. Come,” Armando said, as he pulled Mandy from the doorway.

She jerked her arm away from him and huffed. “What the hell's gotten into you? Wake up on the wrong side of the coffin?”

Armando shot her a nasty look. “At least I know whose coffin I woke up in.”

She bit the corner of her lip and tried her best to look innocent. “Oh, you heard about me and Jones.”

He flung her around and pulled her closer to him. "James. The vampire you were with last night is named James, not Jones. How you can forget his name is beyond me. Come on, Mandy, he has bleached out white blonde hair, with pink tips."

"That wasn't the tip I was concentrating on, although, that was pink too...."

"ENOUGH!" Armando yelled.

Mandy's mouth dropped open and she started to rebuke him, but was interrupted by a commotion at the door. Makonnen was there arguing with a man almost as tall as he, but with the reddest hair Mandy had ever seen. The man's grey eyes locked on her and her mind raced with the nagging feeling that she knew him from somewhere.

"Mandy," he said, his voice deep. "Kindly tell this man to let me in."

Armando stepped in front of Mandy protectively. "What seems to be the problem?"

The man bared his teeth and his jaw tightened. "The problem is that your bouncer will not let me enter."

"Makonnen?" Armando asked.

"Boss, I told him that he and his little lady are welcome to come in, but his sword isn't."

Armando waved his hand in the air, dismissing the situation as foolish. "Turn your weapons in to Makonnen and you may enter."

Mandy looked again at the stranger's blood red hair. "Yozerf!" she shouted as she pushed past Armando. "Is Elaine with you?"

Armando grabbed her arm and stopped her in mid stride. "Tell me that you haven't slept with him, too."

Mandy laughed and patted Armando arm lightly. "No, silly! He's my friend, Elaine Corvidae's, man."

As if on cue, a tiny blonde poked her head out from behind Yozerf. She adjusted her tiny black pleather dress and smiled at Mandy. "Hey, I thought I recognized your voice."

"Elaine!" Mandy screeched and ran to meet her friend.

"You know everyone," Armando called out dryly behind her.

“Not everyone,” Mandy shot back as she ran towards Elaine. “Only the important people. Come here!” She embraced Elaine, and Makonnen stepped back, allowing them room to maneuver.

Mandy glanced at Yozerf and laughed slightly as he stood there unloading a never-ending arsenal from his person. “I see that he still has a Rambo complex.”

Elaine covered her mouth as she laughed and nodded her head. “Let’s hope he behaves himself tonight. I heard that there was quite the bar fight here the other night.”

“You can say that again,” Dmitri said, suddenly appearing behind the women.

Mandy’s eyes widened when she saw that Dmitri now wore eye patches over both eyes. Armando moved in next to his friend and guided him to a chair. He glanced at Mandy and shook his head. “Michelle did quite a number on him. She used enough pepper spray to bring down twenty men.”

“Yeah, or one lycan,” said Dmitri sardonically.

Yozerf appeared next to Elaine and put his arm around her. “Come, let us find a table.” Elaine rolled her eyes a bit, but let the very alpha male lead her away.

Mandy reached into her handbag and grabbed her cell phone. She dialed Michelle and waited for her to pick up. “Hey, it’s me. Oh, my gosh! You need to get your butt down here. You blinded Dmitri...no, totally blind...I’m not exaggerating...no I don’t have a tendency to do that...Michelle!”

~*****~

Michelle grabbed the side of the table to keep from passing out. The second she saw Dmitri’s bandaged eyes, she felt a wave of nausea come over her. After Mandy’s call she’d read the warning on the bottle and rushed over when she saw that it could indeed cause blindness.

Dmitri hadn’t said much to her since her arrival, and that in itself was unusual. The playboy generally had a mouthful of comments ready and waiting for her. She slid into the empty chair next to him and waited for Mandy to return with her drink. Michelle normally didn’t drink alcohol, but for this, she was willing to make an exception.

Armando approached with a cool compress for Dmitri. He put his hands in the air and smiled at her. “I mean you no harm, please do not hurt me.” He was trying to be funny, but he only succeeded in making Michelle feel worse.

Mandy came back with their drinks and touched Michelle's shoulder gently. "Well, it's probably not as bad as it looks."

"Humph," Dmitri said, shifting slightly in his seat to tilt his head back so the compress laid over his head. "You should try being on this end of it."

"I, umm.... I didn't mean to," Michelle mumbled the words, unable to think of anything to say that would rectify the problem.

Mandy leaned down and whispered in her ear. "The least you could do is go out with the poor guy. You did blind him."

Armando let out a noise that sounded a bit like a laugh. Michelle shot him a nasty look, and the vampire grinned devilishly. "Oh, I agree with her, you should really spend an evening with Dmitri. Like Mandy said, it's the least you could do for him. It's not like he can see his way around by himself."

"Just think of him all alone, by himself," said Mandy mournfully. She shook her head sadly and her eyes seemed to say, 'all because of you'.

Michelle looked at Dmitri and nodded her head. It wasn't like he would really pose a threat in his current state. Mandy tapped her shoulder again and gave a pointed look at the bandages. It hit Michelle that Dmitri couldn't see her nod her head. "Yes," she stammered over the word. "Yes, I'll go out with you if you still want to."

Dmitri flashed a wide smile. "Great, tomorrow night, eight pm."

"Ow!" Michelle yelped as Mandy kicked the side of her chair. "Yes, sorry, yes tomorrow's perfect."

Chapter 5

Holy Toledo, Vampman!

"I can't go alone, please come with me," Michelle cried into the cell phone.

She listened as Mandy let out a long sigh. "I can't come. It's tonight, and I don't have a date lined up. As much as I love ya babes, I'm not willing to be the third wheel. Besides, I'm spending the evening with a pint of ice cream and a sappy movie."

Michelle clutched her phone tighter and nearly swerved off the road. "Please, I can't go alone with him."

This comment made Mandy laugh even harder. "He's blind and harmless."

"Yeah, right! Dmitri could be headless and still not be harmless. Please, Mandy, please, I'll find you a date I promise and the ice cream will keep."

"UNCLE!" Mandy shouted. "I'll go. Not because I don't trust Dmitri with you, only because I can't stand to hear you beg anymore."

"Thank you," Michelle said, taking a left hand turn and heading towards Mandy's house. "I should be there within fifteen minutes."

"No, change of plans. My laptop cord broke. It's the strangest thing...oh, never mind. Point being that my computer is dead. I called Armando and he was more than willing to let us use his office to go over book notes."

"You really trust that he's got a set up for us to use? He probably has an old typewriter from the eighteenth century, or better yet a quill and parchment. He just wants to lure you down to spend time with him."

"Nope, not true," Mandy said sternly.

"How can you be so sure?" Michelle asked, ready and willing to go to bat with her friend if no other reason then to save her from herself.

Mandy snorted. "Well, I'm sitting in his office right now, gabbing to you while I type on one of his four top of the line computers."

"Oh," said Michelle, grimacing. So much for faking sick later and getting out of meeting Dmitri at the bar. He'd wanted to pick her up at her house, but she'd gladly told him it was stupid since he couldn't see. Truth was, she didn't want him knowing where she lived. Mandy's breath hissed heavily into the phone, impatient. Grumbling under her breath, she uttered, "Fine. I'll be there in a few minutes."

~*****~

Michelle sighed in frustration. Armando's office was spacious, with a black leather couch, wide desk and, as Mandy had promised, four really kick-ass computers. If she wasn't so uncomfortable with the thought of her impending date from hell, she'd have been in writer heaven.

“Gawd, it’d be nice to have this set up at home. I could really get a lot of writing done here,” said Michelle, trying to take her mind off of proofing the first Tribes of the Vampire novel. Though, it was hard to write about vampires when she had lycans—well, a certain lycan—on the brain.

“You may come here any day you like,” said Armando, standing in the doorway. A lazy smile tilted his face as he looked at Mandy. “Both of you are welcome anytime.”

“Kewl!” said Mandy, jumping up from her chair and tossing her arms around Armando’s slim waist. She let go of him quickly and smiled. “Sorry, umm, got a little excited there. I think I’ll just make this my new office. It’s not like we have to go into the Nocturnal Journal but once or twice a week anyway.”

“Hey, what’s a vampire need all this stuff for anyway?” asked Michelle.

Armando started to speak. Mandy plopped back in the chair and pointed at Michelle. “Hey, what did I tell you? Get to work on proofing *The Dragon Lords*... Perfect... Warrior.... Dark.... whichever of the four shapeshifting Prince things it is you’re working on now.”

“The Barbarian Prince and it’s done already,” grumbled Michelle, shooting Armando an amused look behind Mandy’s back. “I’m on the first Tribes book, *Redeemer of Shadows*.”

“Don’t think I can’t see you making faces at me,” said Mandy without turning around. “I have eyes on the back of my head.”

“So do half your characters—freak,” Michelle shot back. She couldn’t help it. She was starting to feel cooped up.

“Hey, don’t think ‘cause you got awesome reviews for *The Mists of Midnight* you can get lippy,” began Mandy, swirling around in the comfy leather chair and shooting her an ‘I don’t think so girlfriend’ look.

“Oh, your reviews were just as good as mine for *Daughter of Darkness*,” countered Michelle, pushing the keyboard off her lap and sitting forward on the couch. “I think if anyone is getting high and mighty it’s you, Miss I-have-a-book-coming-out-each-month, Mandy Roth!”

“Ah, ladies,” began Armando, worried that they were going to get into a full blown fight.

Mandy waved at him to be quiet. She stood from her chair. Her green eyes flashed. “Oh, yeah? I think you’re jealous!”

“I have just as much coming out as you!” Michelle stood and thrust her face into Mandy’s. They glared at each other for a long moment. Suddenly, Mandy’s tongue darted out and licked Michelle’s cheek. Michelle didn’t even flinch. “You better now?”

“Yes, thank you,” said Mandy, turning her back on Michelle.

Armando’s mouth fell open. He stood there gaping at them, as they both returned to their seats and began typing with renewed force.

“So how is the Vampyre Productions series coming anyway?” asked Michelle absently, like nothing had happened.

“Finished with Valkyrie,” stated Mandy simply, still typing away. “On Immortal Ops right now, almost finished and will start proofing Peace Offerings next, then Misfits in America and then I will be done...well, until the next one anyway.”

“Cool,” Michelle answered. “I’ve got all four Dragon Lords done, then working on Tribes of the Vampire book three and then will start proofing this little story I wrote about a very naughty....”

“Lycan?”

Michelle froze, hearing Dmitri’s smooth voice. She couldn’t look at him. She actually was writing the novel about lycans, though she wasn’t going to say that. She was going to say troll, because there was one in the book. Hell, she would have agreed to say anything to keep from admitting that she had lycan on the brain lately.

“Oh, just admit that you’re writing about naughty lycans and then you can admit that you were writing about me,” he said with an overconfident grin. Michelle grumbled and tried to turn her chair from him, but he put his hands behind her and kept her chair held firmly in place.

“Tell me, Michelle, do any of your heroines ever get mounted by their lycan lover?”

Her breath caught in her throat, and for a minute she couldn’t remember how to breathe, to think, to respond. Mandy’s giggle brought her back from the edge of making a fool of herself and she turned the chair quick and hard, rolling over Dmitri’s foot in the process. He made a small grunting noise and Michelle glared at him. “I’ll tell you if they get mounted if you tell me what flea collar you recommend most.”

Dmitri’s mouth opened and his eyes narrowed in on her. It hit Michelle then that Dmitri wasn’t wearing his eye patches and that his grey eyes were clearly focused on her. She shot up and out of the chair. “You’re not blind! Damn you, you tricked me into a pity date and there isn’t a thing wrong with you.” She turned and looked down at Mandy. “Did you know about this?”

Mandy shook her head and gave Dmitri a 'you're so very screwed' look before turning to type again.

Dmitri took a step towards Michelle and gave her a good glance over. "Humph, it doesn't matter if you thought it was a pity date or not, you didn't even bother to get dressed up for it. Yeah, you look like you're ready and willing to make up for almost blinding me," he said, looking at her faded jeans and old sweatshirt.

Michelle refused to back down. "Oh, what did you expect me to come in here decked out in heels and a thousand dollar dress?" She looked at Dmitri's black suit and for the first time noticed that he was wearing a tie as well. "Oh, gawd, you did expect that."

He pulled at his tie and glared at her. "As a matter of fact I just came from a meeting. I haven't had a chance to change my clothes yet!"

"Oh, whatever!" Michelle yelled as she stormed past him, heading towards the ladies room.

~*****~

Mandy spun her chair around and watched as Armando gave Dmitri a quizzical look. "Business meeting? I wasn't aware that we had any meetings tonight," he said with a mocking smile.

"Not a word, not one damn word," Dmitri said, marching out of the office.

Mandy glanced up at Armando and wondered what was going on. He shook his head no, to indicate that he wasn't willing to discuss it with her. Not being one to take no for an answer, Mandy stood up and quickly covered the distance between she and Armando. She wanted to touch him, she always wanted to touch him, but he was so far out of her league that it wasn't funny. Smart, sexy, successful men didn't fall for her. Out of work, losers, with the personality of a paperweight, now, those were the type of men she seemed to attract.

Armando looked down at Mandy and his rose-colored lips curved into a half smile. "Dmitri's business with Michelle is his business. I'll not tell you a thing."

"Oh, that sounds like a dare to me." She ran her hands over his lower abdomen and leaned up and into him. She let her voice drop a bit, and spoke with an air of breathiness. "Are you sure that you can't tell me what's going on?"

Armando tipped his head back and he knocked his head against doorframe twice before speaking to her. "Mandy, I cannot tell you!"

She batted her eyelashes and moved her body closer to his. Flirting came naturally to her, a little too naturally, but she'd never tried it on a man she seriously liked before and doubted very much that he'd fall for it. Armando's arms moved around her and he pulled her closer to him.

Holy Toledo, Vampman, it really worked!

"Dmitri was looking forward to this evening. He spent the entire day planning it. He gave up his tickets for the Supernatural Bowl and he lives to cheer for the Jack-In-Irons. You know what a sports fanatic he is. He gave that all up when Michelle agreed to go out with him. He even enlisted my help when he found out that you and I were going as well. He...."

Mandy cut him off. "What do you mean? You and I were going, too? Michelle asked me to go and said that she'd find a date for me." It hit her then that Armando was the one who'd been roped into going. "Oh, sorry, you drew the short straw."

"Nonsense, Mandy I really...."

She didn't need or want to hear Armando's reasons for taking pity on her and subjecting himself to her for the evening so she interrupted him again. "So, how huge was this date going to be?"

His fingers caressed her back and she tensed up. She didn't want to be an easy lay for him, a one-night stand. Those were a dime a dozen and she wasn't in the market for that. Problem was, no one else had gotten that memo. Mandy took a step back and waited for Armando to continue. Let him think what he wanted to about her, he was good at assuming she slept with anything that would crawl out of the bar with her. Well, maybe the assumption was her fault to. It's not like she ever corrected the mistake.

"Dmitri was able to get box seats at the playhouse tonight and even managed to call in a few favors and got Rothfield Park lined up for a moonlight picnic and a weekend stay."

"Isn't that in England?"

Armando moved towards her and ran his pale hand over her bare arm. "Yes, but with the jet it wouldn't take us long to get there."

Mandy looked down at his hand and was instantly sick to her stomach. Men with access to jets didn't want women like her and if they did, it was only for sex. "I see."

"You see what?" Michelle asked, appearing next to Mandy.

Armando shot Mandy a warning look and shook his head slightly. She wouldn't betray Dmitri's secret. No, she knew what it was like to want someone so bad that you'd do anything for them, but each time it was close, something ruined it. If , and , or when Dmitri wanted Michelle to know that he'd taken the date extremely seriously then he could tell her, she wouldn't.

~*****~

Something was up. Michelle just couldn't figure out what it was. Mandy looked at her and smiled. "You know, I have an extra dress in my car."

"It won't fit me," Michelle said, unwilling to give in to the idea of taking the date seriously.

"Sure it will, come on," Mandy said, grabbing her arm and pulling her towards the door.

"I haven't shaved my legs today," Michelle said under her breath. They both came to a grinding halt and Mandy looked at her with understanding in her eyes.

"Right, then, so no dress," Mandy said. "Well, at least your jeans don't have holes in the knees."

Michelle did a double take to be sure. Most of her jeans had sprouted holes over the years and that never once stopped her from wearing them. Thankfully, she was safe. She ran her fingers through her hair and wondered how she looked.

"You look great, come on, I've got some make up in my bag." Mandy seemed to read her mind.

"This wasn't supposed to matter, Mandy. The guy wasn't supposed to be able to see me." Michelle would have frowned, but the idea of Mandy helping her apply make-up lightened her mood and made her laugh. She put her hand up and shook her head. "Uh, besides, I'll have to pass. I've seen your black lipstick. It's a date not a funeral."

"Har- har! "

Chapter 6

Die Mutant, Die!

“What happened to the limo?”

Dmitri turned to face Armando and shook his head. “I told the driver to go and I canceled all the plans.” He knew that he sounded childish, but he didn’t care. He also knew that Armando would never call him on his behavior. He would stand by and let him make a fool of himself. That’s what friends did and Armando, without a doubt, was one of his closest friends.

“Are you calling the evening off?” Armando asked, sounding a bit disappointed.

“Yes.” His nostrils flared and his fingers dug at the palms of his hands. The worst part of it all was that he had thought that Michelle had feelings for him, even if they were just small. Seeing her in her jeans and sweatshirt told him otherwise. He was a fool.

“No, you are no fool, old friend,” Armando said with a smile. “I can tell you that there is something there.”

“What? Between Michelle and I?” He let out a snort. “Oh, yeah, if you count the fact that she thinks of me as a dog that walks on two legs, then yeah, there’s something there.”

“Nonsense, she does not view you as this and you know it. She is human. Allow her to make human mistakes. Give her time and all will work out.”

Dmitri cast him a questioning look. “You read her! You read Michelle, didn’t you?”

“Let me just say that one does not need to possess the power to read minds to see how Michelle feels for you,” said Armando, with a blatant attempt to change the subject.

“Hey, Great Armdini, we don’t all have your nifty little abilities, so can you help a guy out here?”

Armando laughed and nodded his head. “Fine then, don’t cancel the date. Is that helping enough for you?”

Dmitri closed his eyes and felt the tension from the day creeping into his shoulders. “I canceled all the plans.”

“ALL the plans?” sounding stunned, Armando asked.

It wasn’t often that Dmitri could get a rise out of Armando, and he knew that it had something to do with Mandy coming along. “I guess I could still pull something a little more ‘jeans appropriate’ out of my ass.”

“I’d rather you not pull anything out of your ass, thank you though,” Armando said with a touch of laughter. “I do have one question for you. Do you think that Mandy is upset that I am her date for the evening?”

Dmitri looked over at his tall friend and wondered why he hadn’t bothered to read Mandy. He was a vampire for crying out loud; it’s what they did.

Armando turned his brown eyes on him and let them shift to black. “No, my friend, not this time...no tricks. With her, I am going to do it right.”

~*****~

“Trolley Cheese?” Michelle said in disgust. “This was the fabulous evening he had planned for us all?” She looked around at the crowded pizzeria and then at Mandy.

Mandy forced a smile to her face. “It’s not that bad.” She barely got the words out of her mouth before a five year old with a fake ray gun came running past her screaming, “Die mutants, die!”

“Right,” Michelle said wryly. She chanced a glimpse over in Dmitri’s direction and found him glaring at her. “What?”

He growled and started towards her. Armando stepped in his path and Michelle had the overwhelming urge to stick out her tongue. She didn’t, but wanted to. She was hurt that he’d made such a big deal out of the fact that she’d worn jeans when all he had in mind was a night with troll waiters and pizza greasy enough to lube a spark plug.

“I’m sorry that I made you come along,” Dmitri snarled at Armando.

Mandy made a small noise and Michelle turned to her. “You okay?”

Mandy nodded, but her eyes went to the floor. She hadn’t been acting much like herself and Michelle was concerned that she wasn’t happy with her choice of dates. She’d really thought that Armando would be a perfect date for Mandy for the evening. When she’d asked him, he’d seemed all too eager to join them.

They walked quietly to their booth and Michelle was shocked when Mandy refused to sit next to Armando. She practically crawled over Michelle to get away from him. Michelle didn’t mind her friend wanting to sit next to her. However, she’d been secretly looking forward to sitting near Dmitri, even if they were technically mad at each other.

There was something about Dmitri that got under her skin and made her heart race. His cocky demeanor only added to it. She knew that if she let herself fall for him, he'd only hurt her in the long run. Besides, she had the career she'd worked so hard for and her first book had finally come out. She didn't need to complicate her life with a man right now, especially one who only thought her worthy of Trolly Cheese. She wasn't high maintenance, but come on! The place had smelly trolls slobbering in the food!

Dmitri left to go order the food and Armando locked eyes with Michelle. He nodded his head towards Mandy and she knew that he wanted to know what was wrong with her. Michelle shrugged and glanced at her friend. She was abnormally quiet and lacked her normal spunk.

“Mandy?” she asked, softly.

“I'm not feeling so well. I think I'm going to call it a night. I'll call you in the morning,” Mandy said. She stood and headed towards the door before Michelle could even think to protest.

Michelle started to go after her, but Armando touched her arm lightly. “Let me go, please?”

The look in his dark eyes told her more than words ever could. He had a thing for Mandy and he needed to make this right. She nodded her head and sat back down in her seat.

“Where the hell is everyone running off to?”

Michelle cringed at the sound of Dmitri's husky voice. She'd foolishly allowed Armando to run off after Mandy and, in the process, left herself alone with the handsome lycan. “Mandy's not feeling well and Armando is taking her home.”

Dmitri sat down next to her on the bench. He gave one good thrust with his hip and she found herself sandwiched between Dmitri and the wall. “Do you mind?”

“Nope, not a bit,” he said with a bad boy grin. He'd taken off his jacket and tie, but he still looked damned good in just a grey silk shirt. “And I don't think you mind it either.” He lifted a piece of pizza up and dropped it fast on his plate. “Ouch!”

“Hmm, I wouldn't have thought anything would be too hot for the almighty Dmitri,” Michelle said, letting her lip curl upwards. It wasn't quite a smile, but it was enough. She felt drab compared to him and wished for the thousandth time she'd made some effort to dress up—if only to make him look at her the way she wanted to look at him.

Dmitri reached across her to retrieve a napkin. His muscular arm brushed past Michelle's cheek, taking her by surprise as she was engulfed in his intoxicating smell. Her eyelids fluttered closed and a slight gasp of instant pleasure left her lips.

Dmitri easily heard the raspy dip of her breath and dropped the napkin on the floor. They both grabbed for it at the same time and only succeeded in cracking their foreheads together.

"Ow, sorry!" said Michelle, gingerly rubbing her forehead.

He laughed, touching his head lightly. "Hey, I thought I had the pain angle covered for the night, with the pizza burn and all, you know?"

"No way, buddy! I like pain as much as the next gal," Michelle said, laughing hard as she unconsciously leaned into him. She was more than a bit embarrassed by her clumsiness.

Dmitri's face softened and his grey eyes locked on hers. Her breath caught in her throat as he moved in towards her. His hand began to lift for another napkin. Her laughter faded, along with her smile. Something inside her wavered, and her hard fought for self-control snapped. It was now or never and Michelle knew that. She had to know how she really felt about him. She had to know if there was anything to her attraction to him, or if it was just animal lust.

A weak moan escaped her lips as she leaned up and into him. Her hand moved forward, pressing into his thigh for support. Dmitri's leg stiffened beneath her hand, and he didn't move his mouth, as if he were afraid she'd come to her senses. She pressed her lips to his so fast that it startled them both. Her eyes opened wide at the pleasant shock of that first warm contact. She'd thought about kissing him, more than she cared to admit, and the firm texture of his mouth was so much better than she'd imagined. Her eyes drifted closed, unable to stay open. Without stopping to think, Michelle instinctively edged her tongue into his warm mouth. She moaned again, forgetting that they were in a booth at a second rate pizzeria, surrounded by screaming, sugar-high children.

Dmitri couldn't hold back any longer. His hand lifted, cupping her jaw in his warm palm, drawing her closer. He took over, controlling the thrust of her tongue along his, sucking her bottom lip into his mouth and biting it gently just to hear her moan again—so light and feminine it make his whole body ache.

Michelle's hand moved tentatively up his leg, over his hip, to rest along his muscled waist as she drew into his warmth. A light sound left Dmitri's throat and he sought to deepen a kiss that could get no deeper. He consumed her with his mouth. His hand moved to pull her closer, reaching around to the small of her back.

"DIE MUTANT, DIE!" came a loud yell, followed by the blast of a fake ray gun and a high-pitched scream. Michelle jolted in surprise, pulling back. The little

monstrous child stuck her tongue out at the couple before leaving to terrorize more innocent diners.

Dmitri felt her stiffen and let her go. His grey eyes searched hers, eager to see her reaction. Part of him waited for her to scream, to slap him hard across the face in affront. He could hear her heart beating wildly in her chest and his lycan senses could easily smell how much she'd liked it.

Michelle panted heavily, trying to regain her composure. Her lips were swollen from his touch. She opened her mouth to speak, but the only sound that would come out was, "oh."

~*****~

Mandy's pace quickened as she approached the corner. She wanted to break into a full-blown run, but her heels wouldn't allow that. "Damn, shoes," she said, reaching down to grab them. She took one in her hand and went to throw it away from her.

A cool hand grabbed her wrist. "Throwing two hundred dollar shoes away seems a bit extreme, don't you think?" Armando said, moving his body before hers.

She looked up into his dark eyes and shook her head no. His rose lips curved into a smile and he glanced downward. "Then, by all means, throw them." He swept his hand out, gesturing towards the street.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, no longer directing her anger at her shoes.

"I rather thought that was obvious. I came to find you." His tone was even, void of emotion.

Mandy bit at her inner cheek to keep from crying. She refused to break down in front of him. She'd worked hard at creating a rough, take no prisoners exterior, and she wasn't about to let a four hundred year old vampire change that. She blinked back any sign of emotion and stared up into his soft face. "I wanted to know what you were doing on this 'date'."

"Oh," Armando said, softly. He shifted a little, uncomfortable. "I am here because...."

Patience wasn't one of her strong points. Mandy cut him off quickly. "You're here because Dmitri made you come. I heard the comment he made to you. I'm sorry

that you were dragged into this. I told Michelle that I didn't want to come. I had my evening planned out and it didn't involve having a vampire be forced to escort me."

Armando's eyes swirled. Mandy was used to vampires, she'd grown up in a neighborhood full of them. She turned her attention to her shoe and went to slide it back on. Armando grabbed hold of her chin and held it tight, forcing her attention on him. "I am sure that you had other things, or should I say people, to do this evening, but, do not think for a moment that I was forced to come along. I am sorry that you had to spend the night with me instead of James."

Mandy's temper flared. "How dare you...wait, who?"

Armando rolled his eyes. "James, the one you thought was named Jones."

She growled and tried to pull her face away from his grasp. She failed. "Let go of me!" He did. Minus a shoe and suddenly free, Mandy staggered. His hand was there in an instant to steady her. She didn't want his help. "Don't touch me. You have some nerve assuming that my other plans were with a man."

"Not just any man—James. You would pick the one vampire that has gotten on my last nerve for over a hundred years, that arrogant, cocky little Brit. How can you go to him...?"

"What the hell are you talking about? I hardly know him. I met him at the club a few times, he got piss ass drunk and I..."

Armando pulled her close to him and stared down at her. She could have sworn that he was about to read her, but she had enough vampire friends to know what that felt like, and he wasn't doing it. "You told me that you had sex with him."

"No, you accused me of waking up in his 'coffin'. I just didn't feel the need to correct you." Mandy narrowed her eyes and let her face go hard. She wasn't about to back down from him, deadly vampire or not. "I'm not an angel, and I'm not claiming to be one, but you always assume the absolute worst about me."

Armando let go of her, confused and wanting desperately to read her. He brought his power up, it was second nature to him, but he didn't use it. If Mandy said she hadn't slept with James, then he would take her on her word. One thing nagged at him. "You said that you saw his..." he refrained from saying what he wanted to say.

Mandy giggled and he found that a bit uncalled for. "I did see ALL that he had to offer. He was so drunk that I found him taking a leak outside the club. His leather pants were around his ankles and he almost passed out in his own piss. I could have left him there, but I didn't. I was nice and helped him get home."

Armando's head snapped up. He looked at her with a mix of shock and horror. "Mandy that was incredibly foolish. James is a vampire and he could have...he could have hurt you."

She snorted. "Jones, I mean James? We're talking about the same guy who sings Journey songs at the end of the bar when he's had too much Scotch?"

Armando stopped giving her the evil eye and started laughing. "Yes, that has always bothered me. I actually had someone come in and remove any of their songs from the jukebox. I've also forbid any DJ's from bringing their material."

"Oh, can you PLEASE have them take that song by Patrick Swayze out, too? That's his new favorite one," Mandy said, laughing so hard that the tears she'd been holding back, started to flow.

Armando touched her cheek and wiped them away. He smiled down at her. "Maybe it would be easier if I just had him removed."

"You're not that kind of guy."

"Really? So, enlighten me, what type of man am I?" he asked, dangerously close to her.

Mandy accepted the challenge with a smile. "You're the type of guy who agrees to go on a date at the last minute, with a girl he thinks the worst of, just to make his best friend happy."

"It appears that you have no idea what kind of guy I am, Mandy."

She knew that he thought the worst of her. He'd proven that every time she'd seen him. "Wait, I thought that you and Dmitri were best friends?"

"As close as two in our situation can be, yes," Armando said, taking a step closer, pushing her back towards the building." She was confused and he liked that. He also liked the way her cheeks reddened every time her emotions changed. He lifted his hand and let his fingers run over her face.

"Don't do that," said Mandy, her voice tiny.

Armando let his eyes flutter closed and he nodded his head. "I am sorry. I just thought that..."

"You just thought that I'd be an easy lay for you," Mandy spat out as she pushed on his chest, trying to move him. Armando kept his eyes closed and didn't move. She could push all night and it wouldn't faze him. His mouth came down on hers, and her eyes widened.

What the hell is he doing?

She pushed on his chest, hard at first. When his tongue darted expertly forward to trace a light line around her trembling lips, it was all Mandy could do not to give in. She fought the desire in her, but her attraction to him was just too strong. Suddenly, she didn't care that she could never be good enough for him, didn't care that he'd lived so long, seen so much that she would surely only end up a notch on his immortal bedpost. She wanted him, always wanted him.

A light, weak moan left Mandy's lips. Armando growled in masculine surprise. What had happened to his in-control, take no prisoners temptress? The woman trembling delicately before him was a Mandy he had never seen. Her guard was down and she was vulnerable.

Armando couldn't hold back. His lips pressed tighter into hers. His tongue surged forward, staking claim to her mouth with a desperation that left Mandy breathless and panting. His velvet tongue explored the depths of her, massaging firmly, yet gently into her, mimicking the slow thrusts his body wanted to give her.

So far, only his lips moved against her. But his kiss alone was enough to weaken her knees. She was engulfed in a world that consisted of only her and Armando. A fang nicked her mouth, drawing the barest taste of blood from her lips. Armando moaned lightly to taste it flavoring their kiss.

His hands roamed over her arms, light in their discovery. Mandy's fingers lifted to him, drawn by passion, by need, by something else she was too afraid to admit. This is what she'd wanted for so long—he was what she'd wanted. But, she never thought herself worthy of him. How could she be? He was handsome, charming, perfect, and undead. What could she have to offer a man who'd seen everything the world had to offer—places, people, and a history so long it made her head spin to think on it? A man who'd been with countless women over the centuries, pretty women, confident women?

Mandy drew her swollen lips back. His breath did not pant, but hers echoed noisily over them, another reminder of how different they were. But, he'd broken a control in her body that she couldn't fight. She wanted him. Almost shyly, she moved her kisses over his jaw. Armando's head fell back, allowing her access to his neck. His strong hands pulled her closer into his chest.

Mandy chuckled softly, almost completely content. Her lips parted and she nipped playfully at his neck.

"Kitten," Armando drew back to look into her eyes. Their gazes met and locked. A smile twitched on his firm lips. "Did you just bite me?"

Mandy bit her lip and nodded slowly.

Armando growled in pleasure, drawing her once more hard against him so she could feel the entire length of his desire. "Do it again."

Chapter 7

Interview with Jaci Burton

Michelle picked at the edge of her T-shirt, wishing for the thousandth time that evening that she had worn a dress. And, after their kiss, she suddenly wished she had shaved her legs. Not that she would ever let things get too far.

As Dmitri pulled his jeep out of the Trolly Cheese parking lot, she felt his grey eyes glance over at her and did her best not to blush. She could still taste and feel him on her mouth, even after the mediocre pizza. His suit jacket smelled of him. She'd been chilled and he'd lifted it from the backseat for her to use as the jeep heated up. Being a lycan, Michelle guessed Dmitri was never cold. Every time he touched her, his body seemed to be on fire.

"You're quiet tonight," said Dmitri.

"I'm always quiet. But, usually Mandy's around to distract people from that fact," answered Michelle. She pulled his jacket nervously closer. She glanced at Dmitri. His eyes were on the road. It had not escaped her attention that they were still a little red from the pepper spray. "Look, I don't think I ever really apologized for nearly blinding you."

"No," he said, turning the wheel as he entered heavy traffic, "you didn't."

Michelle paled. Dmitri shot her a quick smile that made her heart flutter. "Well, I am sorry. I guess I panicked. I've never been in a bar fight before. Although, I've never been surrounded by a pack of snarling lycans before either."

Dmitri's hand gripped the wheel tighter. A slight frown marred his brow as he turned onto the freeway. "That really bothers you, doesn't it? The fact that I'm a lycan."

Michelle opened her mouth to protest but a loud musical ring cut her off. She looked at Dmitri's jacket and pulled out his cell phone. She moved to hand it to him.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Ah, says the Raven."

“Could you get it?” asked Dmitri. “Traffic’s pretty bad.”

“Sure.” Michelle flipped open the phone and said tentatively, “Hello? Dmitri’s phone.”

“Oh my...thank God I got a hold of someone!”

“Jaycee? It’s Michelle,” she said frowning. “What’s wrong? Are you all right?”

“Oh my...oh, hey, Michelle, how’s the date going?”

Michelle glanced over at Dmitri. He was frowning at traffic. She didn’t know how to answer that. Luckily, she was saved with Jaycee again talking in a frantic rush.

“I am so sorry to interrupt your date, but I can’t get a hold of Armando and this place is going...oh, I know there is going to be a fight! A huge group of lycans just came in and they look like trouble. I think they’re about to start a fight. They don’t look happy. Anyway, I ran into the office to call for backup as soon as I saw them come in. The guys Armando left to help me tend bar are useless....”

Jaycee kept going, her voice growing with panic after each sentence. Michelle pulled the phone slightly away from her ear. “It’s Jaycee Clark. She needs you back at the bar. Something about there being some trouble with a group of lycans.”

“Tell her I’m busy. Have her call Armando,” said Dmitri. His grey eyes glanced over at her. For a moment they softened. Only the panicked sound of Jaycee yelling into the phone stopped her from getting lost in Dmitri’s seductive gaze.

“She says she can’t get a hold of him,” said Michelle. “It sounds pretty bad. I really don’t mind. I know how important work is. Besides, my car’s there and I can see myself home later if it’s bad.”

Dmitri growled under his breath. Picking up his speed, he artfully maneuvered over the freeway. “Fine, tell her we’ll be there in five minutes.”

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“That dark, brooding lycan in the middle is Senator Jason Devlin,” said Dmitri wryly, looking at the large group of lycans sitting peacefully at one of the private back tables. They all wore expensive suits and were laughing lightly at some joke a tall blonde

was telling. “The lighter guy next to him is his cousin Brandon and the other three are the senator’s brothers. Not exactly dire threats for a bar fight.”

Dmitri turned to Jaycee and frowned, irritated about being called in for a false alarm. She looked sheepishly at the floor and was glad when someone came up to the bar demanding a drink.

Michelle watched Jaycee walk off and tried to smile. It was pretty clear that the date was most likely over.

“I’m sorry about this distraction,” said Dmitri, turning to her. “I didn’t intend for us to end up back here.”

Oh, and Trolly Cheese was so much better, thought Michelle before she could help it. Being back at the Raven with Dmitri just reminded her who he really was. He was the handsome, flirty, part club-owner who boldly claimed he was going to ‘shag’ Mandy’s friend Michelle. She’d of have to have been deaf not to hear the way the other male staff spoke to him and about him. Dmitri was a player with a legendary track record a lot longer than her short human life.

“Ah, don’t worry about it,” said Michelle with a shrug. “We were bound to come back here anyway for my car.”

Dmitri couldn’t help his small mischievous grin. “What? Are you saying you’re not coming home with me tonight?”

Considering she’d just been thinking of Dmitri’s legendary prowess with women, Michelle turned red.

Dmitri chuckled softly, a low sound that sent chills all the way over her body. He slid closer to where she leaned against the bar. His finger lifted to lightly touch her arm. His eyes moved down to her lips, beckoning her to initiate another kiss. “Or maybe you’ll invite me back to your place so we can be alone.”

“Hey, Dmitri, I thought that was you!” said Brandon, coming from the senator’s table.

Michelle blinked in surprise, glad to have her date’s attention off of her as she quickly tried to recover from the shock of his bold stare.

“Who’s this?”

The question broke into her frantic thoughts and she turned to the handsome lycan.

“This is my—”

“Michelle,” she hastened, interrupting Dmitri before he could finish. “I’m a novelist and a writer for the art section of the Nocturnal Journal.”

“You don’t say,” laughed Brandon. “Then we were just talking about you.”

Michelle paled, worried. She glanced at Dmitri, who was looking at her with a blank expression on his hard face. “You were?”

“Yeah, a mutual friend of ours, Jaci Burton said she was going to try and call you tomorrow before she left town.”

“Wait, Jaci’s here? I haven’t seen her in ages!”

“Yeah,” Brandon flashed Michelle a sexy smile of appreciation. His eyes dipped over her slender frame. His hand began to lift for her, as if he would take up her arm.

Dmitri frowned, a low growl sounding in warning in the back of his throat as he laid his hand on the bar behind Michelle’s back. Brandon couldn’t miss the amber glow of possessiveness shining in Dmitri’s gaze.

Michelle blinked, confused. Feeling Dmitri move closer, she glanced up and back at him. His gaze was a cool grey and he said nothing, didn’t even smile.

“Jaci is one hot writer,” said Michelle conversationally, stepping away from Dmitri, who was suddenly acting very odd. “I loved the advance copy I got of her new book, *Running Mate*. I know it’s going to do great for her.”

“Wonderful,” said Brandon, offering his elbow with a challenging smirk at Dmitri. “Come on, I’ll introduce you to my cousin, Jason. She claims he was the inspiration for the book. I told her that if she wanted to be inspired she should write about me.”

Michelle began to laugh as Brandon audaciously winked with meaning. The sound was cut off before it even left her lips, as Dmitri hooked his bicep onto her arm.

Before she could protest, he said to her, “Yeah, Zaychik moy, let’s go over. I want to say hi anyway.”

Brandon smirked again, his eyes full of mischief and humor. He turned, leading the way to the table.

Jaci Burton was a tall red head surrounded by a pack of handsome lycan companions. She didn’t look to be at all ill at ease around the formidable men. Seeing Michelle, she grinned in excitement.

“Hey! We were just talking about you!” cried Jaci, jumping to her feet. Michelle grinned to see the tight black corset with white fur poking out of the top along the cleavage.

“So I’ve heard,” answered Michelle. “You look great!”

“Don’t I know it!” laughed Jaci. “I told these guys that we were going to a club and they showed up wearing suits and ties. Gawd! When I say club, I mean a party! I think they were expecting a dinner club at a five star!”

Michelle laughed, “Where’s Charlie? Is he with you?”

“No, he’s with his playmates.”

“You don’t care?” laughed Michelle.

“Honey, would you care what your husband was doing if you were being escorted around by this sexy, oh-I-want-to-take-them-all-to-bed-at-once lot of hot male flesh? No, I don’t think so! Speaking of hot male flesh,” said Jaci, turning her attention over Michelle’s shoulder to Dmitri. “Who’s your boyfriend? And when did you start dating supernatural?”

“Oh,” Michelle hid her flush as she turned to glance over her shoulder to where Dmitri leaned over the table to shake the senator’s hand. A wide smile crossed his handsome features, making her feel faint. She wished he would look at her like that more. “Who? Dmitri?”

“You had to be so stoked the Jack-In-Irons beat out the Pouk-leddens tonight,” the senator was saying.

“This man,” added Brandon to the table at large, lifting his beer glass high in a one-man toast towards Dmitri, “lives for the Jack-In-Irons! Die hard fan!”

“Ah, could you believe that last play!” said Jason. The entire table began laughing and talking at once in manly excitement.

Michelle didn’t understand the sport, so didn’t understand half of what they were saying as they called out the plays.

“Oh, man,” growled Brandon. “I would have given my left testicle to have those box seats you got for tonight’s supernatural bowl!” The lycan turned to the table and clarified, “Dmitri here had to camp outside the ticket office for three days before they went on sale. Ever since they established the fair-gaming ticket sale policy you can’t just throw money at the agency anymore, you have to actually wait in line like everyone else! Hey, didn’t it snow on you?”

“Yeah,” answered Dmitri with a small grin.

Michelle’s heart fluttered again. Man, he was handsome! And that dark grey shirt really brought out his eyes. And when he smiled...oh, she wanted to melt. Feeling the heat in her stomach, she thought that maybe she was melting.

“So was it great? You have to tell us!” said one of Jason’s brothers.

“Actually, I didn’t get to go,” said Dmitri, quietly. “Something else came up.”

The table exploded into manly curses and exclamations of disbelief. Someone shouted, “It was the game of the century—better than 1912, so much better than the legendary 1876 massacre! You’ll never see a game like that again—not for the rest of your eternity!”

Michelle felt sick. She was the something else that had come up. He’d given up the lycan chance of an eternity, all because he was roped into taking her to Trolly Cheese. No wonder he’d looked so put out when they’d left. Her heart sank into her stomach and she was sure she was going to cry. She blinked back the tears just as Dmitri’s steady gaze met hers. His eyes were hard, staring at her briefly before having his attention called back by one of the men. His expression gave away nothing.

“Dmitri who, indeed,” said Jaci, with a good-natured chuckle when Michelle didn’t immediately turn back around. “Uh, come on. I just got them to shut up about the supernatural what-have-you and I don’t have the strength to do it again. Let’s go out and dance, the floor is hoppin’ tonight!”

“I don’t really feel like dancing,” said Michelle. “How ‘bout I buy you a drink?”

“Ah, even better!” Jaci linked her arm through Michelle’s and walked her over to the bar. Seeing the bartender, she yelled, “Two rum and cokes and two shots of tequila!”

“Make those one!” called Michelle.

“Make them two!” Jaci chuckled, “I wasn’t ordering for you, honey! Those lycans have been drinking all evening watching that stupid game. I’m about to play catch up!”

“So,” said Michelle, as they waited for the bartender to come back. “Brandon tells me he’s the inspiration for your next book.”

“He’s been hinting every since he found out I wrote one about Jason,” said Jaci, with a toss of her flaming red hair. Her green eyes sparkled in merriment. “I keep telling him that he doesn’t inspire me—he’s such the lady’s man, you know. And oh, what an ego! But, truth is, I’ve already written half his damned book. Just flowed out of me like a madwoman one night. I haven’t told him yet. Don’t want him getting a big head—

well, bigger head. Don't get me wrong though, Brandon is a sweetheart—deep, deep inside, once you get past his to-die-for charm. Now, Jason's brothers want their own stories, too. I love writing the paranormal stuff. It gives me the chance to really free my mind. I think I am going to turn the Running Mate into the first of a new series.”

“Oh, you so have to!” said Michelle. “That first one was so good. I was almost embarrassed to see Jason in the flesh, so to speak. I wanted to gush at him and ask him for an autograph.”

“Yeah, I imagine he'll get that a lot once the book is released. Though, I am glad Jason doesn't have to hide the fact that he's a lycan in real life like in the book.” Jaci chuckled with a knowing wink. She took the first shot of tequila and gasped. “I tell you, there is just something about those lycans that gets my blood to boiling! I think it's their animalistic nature, or maybe it's their strong, sexy bodies. I have yet to meet a fat lycan. They're metabolism is so high...mm. Has Dmitri shown you what he can do yet? I mean, have you seen him shift?”

“No.” Michelle's eyes were drawn across the floor to where Dmitri now sat with his friends. She swore she still heard them teasing him about missing his game. There was no way she could have felt worse.

“So are you two serious?” asked Jaci, studying her glass of rum and coke.

“We're not dating,” said Michelle quickly. “We're just friends.”

“Mmmm,” Jaci said into her drink a little too knowingly. “Well, if you ever have the opportunity to take that friendship to the next level, make sure to jump on the chance—or more correctly to jump on him. Lycans are a very dominant species and you'll have to conquer them first if you want them to behave. They like their sex wild and fierce. It must be the wolf in them that does it. But, let me tell you, they are the absolute best lay you will ever find! Nothing, and I do mean nothing, is considered forbidden with them. If you ever wanted to try anything kinky, or different, you'll never find a better volunteer than a lycan male. If I wasn't already married—oh baby! You could ask them to do anything to you in bed and they wouldn't even flinch. Hell, most of them would probably be fulfilling the request before it ever got out of your mouth.”

Michelle paled even more. That would explain Dmitri's over-confidence. She knew Jaci was just making conversation, but her words unnerved her. Now, more than ever, the idea of Dmitri being interested in her was a laughable joke. Even if he were the tiniest bit interested, he'd only be disappointed when the time came.

“I just assumed you wrote your lycans like that for your books,” said Michelle, trying to remain calm, though her heart pounded in her chest at a frantic beat. Dmitri's eyes lifted instantly to her as the organ sped up. She thought his gaze narrowed, but she couldn't be sure. She turned her back, facing the bar. “Jaycee, can I get some water please?”

“Come’n right up!”

“Nope, it’s all true. I’ve been friends with these boys long enough to know it for a fact. We’ve got no secrets. Besides, if you haven’t noticed, their kind tends to be bold outside the bedroom too. It’s only natural that they would be bolder in private. And I’ve had a lot of girlfriends who have dated lycans.” Jaci finished her first rum and coke and leaned over to take her last shot. She gasped and smiled. Jaycee came back with the water and quickly went back to work. The bar was filling up fast.

Michelle picked up her water. “Well, I should go. I have some work in the back office I want to finish up first, and then I should probably head home.”

“Oh, okay! Well, it was so good to see you!” said Jaci.

“Yeah, it was great seeing you too. Definitely, give me a call tomorrow if you can get away. We can go have dinner.”

“Let’s make it for six. I’ll get with you tomorrow with the details.” Jaci took her rum and coke and shot a mischievous smile at Michelle. “Bring the lycan...friend...if you want.”

Michelle was saved from answering by the loud wave of music. Grabbing her water, she went into the back office where her laptop waited. She’d be able to get a few hours of writing done before she should leave. After kissing Dmitri, a scene she had written between her heroine and her lycan captor had been bugging her and she just had to get her thoughts down before they left her. Frowning at herself, she knew she also waited around in hope of Dmitri coming to end their date properly—with one more goodnight kiss.

Chapter 8

Graphic Language & Sexual Content

Interview with Janet Walters

“I thought you ran away. I didn’t see you in the bar,” Dmitri said from the office doorway. He smiled when Michelle jolted in surprise. She blinked, looking up from her laptop. With a small gasp of alarm, she flipped down the screen. His half-smile faded, as he said, “You’re always so jumpy when we’re alone.”

“No,” she denied weakly. “I was working. You startled me.”

“What are you working on?”

“Just rewrites—boring stuff, nothing interesting,” said Michelle. She busied herself putting her laptop away and stuffing discs in her bag. “I was just getting some notes done before I drove home.”

“So, I’m curious, were you going to tell me you were leaving? Or were you just going to disappear?” asked Dmitri. His grey eyes bore into her, not giving anything away. When she blushed guilty, he had his answer. “What was Jaci saying to you at the bar?”

“Just talking about her books, why?” asked Michelle. Her heart started racing again to remember Jaci’s words. She gulped and couldn’t look at him.

“Because your heart leapt, just like it did now,” he murmured.

Michelle jumped up in surprise to hear him right behind her. He grabbed her wrist and immediately pulled her back down to the couch.

“There is nothing wrong with my heart,” she denied, whispering. She couldn’t look at him, but could feel the intense heat of his body looming close.

“I agree,” he said, his voice low and seductive.

“No, I mean it’s not leaping. You must be confused. There is no way you could see such a thing from across the bar.” Michelle knew she was babbling, but she couldn’t help it. She’d been typing and staring at the screen, reliving each stroke of Dmitri’s tongue when he walked in. She tried again to stand, and again his hand darted out to stop her. This time, he did not let her wrist go.

“See it? No. But, hear it? Yes.” He looked at her face, devouring her with his liquid grey eyes flecked with amber gold. Her pulse raced along his fingers where he touched her. “Tell me, why are you so afraid of me?”

“I’m sorry you had to take me to Trolley Cheese tonight,” said Michelle, unable to look at him, as she tried none too gracefully to change the subject. “If you would have just said no when Mandy mentioned we go out, I would have been fine with it.”

Dmitri let her go. His gaze flicked over her outfit, before he settled back on the couch. “Undoubtedly.”

Michelle felt horrible. “I thought you were blind. I didn’t think it would matter since you couldn’t see me. I didn’t actually plan on this....”

“You think a night at Trolley Cheese is what I had planned for tonight?” he broke in, a little harsh.

“I know it’s not! That is what I am saying! You should have just gone to your game like you wanted to. I’m sorry your joke with me got carried too far and you were forced to give away your tickets and actually take me out on a date.” Michelle nervously twisted her hands, frowning.

“Joke?” he shot back in disbelief. His eyes flashed with liquid fire. “You think everything I have said to you has been for my own personal amusement?!”

“Well, hasn’t it?”

Dmitri shot forward. His hand snaked around her back and he pulled her hard into his chest. His face came close to hers.

Michelle gasped, feeling the hard folds of his body along hers. She trembled, instantly growing hot with desire and need. Jaci’s words about lycans and their sexual appetites came back to her in a rush. Her lips parted. Her blue eyes grew wide in fear, but also with a thread of excitement.

“If you thought it a joke....” he began, only to demand instead, “If this is just a joke to you, then why did you come?”

“I blinded you,” she uttered, so lost, now that he held her close to him. She was surrounded by the masculine scent of him. Instantly, she weakened in her resolve. “How could I not go?”

“Fine, but then why did you kiss me tonight, Michelle? Why, if this is nothing but a pity date?”

“I...I don’t know,” she whispered, trying to pull her gaze away and unable to. “I shouldn’t have. I’m sorr—mm.”

This time Dmitri kissed her, taking advantage of her parted mouth as she spoke. His arms maneuvered her around with skill, pulling her along his lap so she lay in the crook of his arm as he held her against him.

Michelle moaned in surprise, feeling the hot onslaught of his tongue prying into her willing mouth, exploring, tasting, claiming. Nothing else mattered at that moment but the feel of Dmitri. She shivered. Her hands wound up into the short hair at the nape of his neck. His hands moved possessively over her sides and she could feel the heavy length of his arousal beneath his slacks, pressing hot and firm against her hip. There was no mistaking that he wanted her.

Dmitri pulled back, panting heavily, his breath ragged and hard. His eyes swirled with golden passion and she could feel the barely contained beast in him held back by only his will.

“Does this feel like a joke to you?” he growled, low and primitive.

“No,” she panted weakly, her eyes hazy to anything but him. Her heart beat so fast she thought it would explode. Her lips were swollen from his kiss and every nerve in her body stung with the sensation of him. She felt branded by him.

“Good,” he stated, a small look of domination and pleasure coming to his handsome face. His hands gripped her tighter, kneading possessively into her skin. His mouth swooped down to hers.

Suddenly, the door burst open. “Hey, Dmitri, we’re out of...blood.”

Michelle pushed off Dmitri’s lap at Jaycee’s words. The woman chuckled in embarrassed amusement. Michelle grabbed her purse and keys from the floor.

“I didn’t mean to break anything up,” said Jaycee.

“You didn’t, I had something in my eye and he was helping me get it out,” mumbled Michelle, mortified. She made a run for the office door without a backwards glance.

Jaycee turned to Dmitri and laughed. “If I’m ever hurt, remind me to go to a real doctor, ‘cause that wasn’t her eye you were searching around in.”

“You need to learn how to knock,” growled Dmitri, standing. He grabbed his jacket off the couch and slipped it over his shoulders, letting it fall forward to hide the all too obvious effect Michelle had on his body. A small smile came to his face as he thought about it. Her smell still lingered in his head, her taste in her mouth. There was no mistaking it. She had wanted him too.

“In case you forgot,” said Jaycee defensively, “you got a club to run out here and we just got a group of about twenty six vamps clamoring for O positive.”

“Armando keeps it hidden away from the alcohol. Some moron once poured it into a human’s bloody Mary, instead of tomato juice. I’ll go downstairs and get it.”

Jaycee shivered, gagging slightly.

Dmitri didn’t notice, as he saw Michelle’s laptop and smiled. She had forgotten it in her haste. Licking his lips still laden with her taste, he pressed the stone of the office wall leading down to the hidden cellar and grinned. She had definitely wanted him.

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“I should call for a car to pick us up. Walking in your bare feet is not a smart thing to do in the city,” Armando said softly.

Mandy laughed and looked at their surroundings. “We’re walking through the park. I’m in the grass. Relax.” She waved her shoes in the air at him, daring him to say something else to her. “Yeah, that’s what I thought, tough-vamp boy!”

Armando’s eyebrow rose slightly. “Kitten, is that a dare? You are so very fond of those.”

“Oh, yeah, it’s a dare. Whatcha....” She didn’t have a chance to finish her sentence. Armando was on her in an instant. Her breath caught in her throat as he spun her around, lifted her off her feet, and pulled her close to him.

His lips came down on hers, gentle at first, then hard and demanding. Their tongues mated and it was bittersweet anguish. Mandy gripped her shoes, hugging her hands along his back, trying to find anything solid in a world suddenly raging with wondrously confusing emotions. Each caress left her wanting more, longing to have more than she could ever hope for from him. She’d never stack up against his years of countless lovers and she knew it. And yet, somehow, Armando’s touch made her forget everything. She couldn’t think beyond living for the moment, living to feel him.

A low ringing noise interrupted their brief moment of overwhelming passion. The sound was just the thing Mandy needed to come back to reality. She tried to pull back, but Armando slid his hand behind her head and ravished her mouth. She pushed on his chest in a feeble attempt to stop what she hoped would last forever. His phone rang again and he groaned, setting her down, and reaching into his jacket pocket.

“It’s the club,” he said. “Damn it all!”

Mandy touched her swollen lips gently. They felt bruised. She trembled slightly, swaying on her feet as she nodded her head. “I understand, go ahead. My place isn’t far from here. This was fun, thanks.” It wasn’t what she really wanted to say. She wanted to tell him that she’d waited months to have an evening like this with him, even if that evening consisted of a failed date attempt at Trolley Cheese.

Armando’s dark eyes widened. Earnestly, he asked, “Am I being dismissed?”

“No, you said it was the club and I know how you feel about the place. I just thought that....” She left off the part about knowing the club was more important to him than she ever would be.

He switched his phone off and returned it to his pocket, not bothering to see what they needed. His hand came out and he laced his fingers in hers. Her skin was scalding hot in comparison to his cool flesh. It was one more reminder of how very wrong she was for him. Mandy took a small step back and cried out as pain shot through her foot. Armando grabbed her arm and held her steady as she lifted her foot for further inspection.

“Damn, stepped on a sharp rock,” said Mandy.

“Yes, put your shoes on before you slice your foot open please.”

She blinked, taken aback by his stern voice. “Oh, what, you wouldn’t want to have to say I told you so or anything?”

“No, that is not it all. I am not sure that I’d be able to control myself if your blood was to come into play.” His gaze fell to the ground, almost guilty.

It was evident that Armando was embarrassed by this truth. Why, she wasn’t sure. She slid her heels back on, holding onto his arm for balance. “There, all better. And, just so you know, you are a vampire. There’s nothing wrong with having control issues when it comes to blood.”

“Not just any blood, Mandy,” he said, soft, so soft she could barely hear the words. “Your blood.”

She swallowed down the lump forming in her throat. His eyes swirled, almost darkening to black. They cleared immediately, but not soon enough. She had seen the struggle in him. Armando had never seemed threatening to her before, but this one statement sent chills through her body. She knew she should send him away or, even better, make a run to her house where he couldn’t enter without her permission.

Mandy didn’t move. Her eyes dipped down shyly. “If you have a need for blood...I—”

“No, kitten, don’t even offer it,” he whispered. “I would not be able to stop at just a sip and I would not do that to you. If I so much as tasted a drop, I would not be able to stop myself from taking you completely.”

Mandy instantly understood his meaning. He’d not only drain her dry, he’d fuck her while he did it. “I was thinking of taking you past the blood bank, not playing donor. But, since you put it that way, am I so horrible that you don’t want me? Way to give a girl a complex.”

“I do not want to be a monster with you,” he murmured, tortured. “You deserve more than that. You deserve better.”

Mandy shivered. Her mouth was dry and she couldn't have moved from her spot if she'd tried. His hand was still pressed into hers, his fingers laced, holding tight though she did not try to pull away.

“Armando, I...” Her mouth fell open. For the first time in her life, Mandy was at a loss for words. She turned and headed for her apartment, pulling the very quiet Armando behind her.

The short distance to her apartment suddenly seemed like an eternity. No words had passed between them since Armando's revelation. Mandy was afraid that if she spoke it would be to beg him to reconsider. She wasn't sure why he was so quiet.

“Well, we're here,” Mandy said, quietly.

Armando positioned himself in front of her, bending down slightly. “You are upset with my forwardness.”

She wasn't sure how to respond to that. Normally, she was the forward one. Having a man she desperately wanted, come out and confess that he wanted her too, took her a bit off guard. “I'm not upset. Just a little surprised that's all.”

He groaned, tipped his head back, and pulled her closer to him. “Everything about this has been a surprise.”

“I'm not sure if I should be flattered or pissed by that comment,” Mandy said, taking a small step back from him. His hand brushed her side and her breath caught in her throat. She knew that her pulse sped and she knew that Armando sensed it. The raw look in his eyes bordered on frightening.

Mandy panted, “I think we should go inside.”

Armando let out a low, sultry laugh, “My dear, Mandy. I do not wish our first time together to be like this. You deserve more than an evening at a pizzeria. I could not in good conscience let it be this way.”

Her brow creased as she tried to make sense of what he was saying. It hit her then, that he thought she wanted to have sex. He wasn't far off the mark, but that wasn't her goal for wanting to go inside. No, she was convinced that she was about to pass out if he continued touching her, and she wanted somewhere soft to land.

“You may be the last gentleman left alive,” she said, with a heavy heart.

“Ah, that is where you are wrong. I may be a gentleman, but I am far from alive.”

~*****~

“Late night with Dmitri?”

“Hardly!” Michelle said, rolling her eyes at her friend. She knew that Mandy was baiting her, teasing her, trying to get her to admit that she was completely into Dmitri. She was, but she wasn’t about to admit it to Mandy. At least not yet, anyway.

Michelle caught a glimpse of Mandy skimming the whipped cream from the top of her Iced Coffee and laughed. “Hey, I thought you were all about the cream.”

Mandy licked her finger and continued walking down the quiet side street. The old district of town was their favorite mid-morning meeting place. She gave Michelle a wide grin. “I am, in the bedroom. I don’t want it near my coffee, though. Oh, hey, look! That’s new!” Mandy pointed at the storefront window.

“Shady Lady’s Astral Readings?” Michelle said, sipping her coffee. “Oh, no. Last time I had a reading done was at a Renn Fair. The lady said I would meet someone tall, blonde, and handsome. Can we say generic?”

“Dmitri—”

“Ah, don’t you dare say it!” growled Michelle.

“Hey, maybe she does fortunes too,” said Mandy. “Come on, it’ll be fun!”

Fun wasn’t the word Michelle was thinking, but she followed Mandy in all the same. The new age music, pumping the sounds of the ocean through the tiny shop almost made her run the other way. She knew that there were some genuine articles out there, but she also knew there were even more fakes.

A woman appeared from the back room. Her green silk slacks, and matching silk shell, drew attention to her hazel eyes. She looked at Michelle and smiled. It wasn’t until she looked at Mandy that she spoke. “Mandy, good to see you again!”

“Janet! Ohmygosh! I haven’t seen you since last years RT convention.”

“She’s a writer?” Michelle asked, leaning in close to Mandy.

“She sure is. Janet Walters met Michelle Pillow, she writes the book column for the Nocturnal Journal.” Mandy turned her attention to the many pictures that graced the walls. “Oh, who is the hunk with Magda?”

“Magda?” Michelle asked, a bit lost in the change of topic.

“Magda is Janet’s daughter.”

Michelle glanced at the photo of the girl and could instantly see similarities. Beautiful genes run rampant through this family. The well-built, blue-eyed hunk with dark hair standing next to her wasn’t too bad either.

Janet walked over and touched the photo gently. “Oh, that’s Magda’s beau, Eric Duncan Blaire, or as we like to call him, Damon. She tells me that he’s quite the lover. I’ll have to take her word for it, although, with a tight rump like that, I can’t see why he wouldn’t be.”

Michelle’s eyes widened. This was the girl’s mother? “I, umm, yeah, I can see your point.”

Mandy just giggled and moved to take a seat at the tiny round table in the center of the room. “Janet, would you mind doing our reading?” Mandy moved to whisper to Michelle, “She’s the real deal.”

“Oh, heavens no. I’d love to do it,” she said, sitting down across from Mandy. She motioned to the empty chair across the tiny circular table.

Michelle, unsure if Janet was about to start a game of gin or read her fortune, hesitated. Mandy turned and smiled, pulling out the chair next to her for Michelle to sit in. “Sit down, it’s called Cartomancy. They can predict your health, how wealthy you’ll be, and even your love life, so have a seat Pete.”

She sat down, slowly, not sure about the whole reading thing. Did she really want to know what was in store for her? Could this woman even tell her? She shook her head and decided to break the ice. “So, Janet, have anything new coming out?”

“Oh, yes I do. Heart Throbs will be out soon. It’s about a woman that put her husband through medical school only to have him leave her in the end. She’s got a bad taste in her mouth when it comes to doctors, so when she finds out that her new love interest is one, she runs!”

Michelle nodded, interested in what Janet was saying, but caught up in the woman’s odd handling of the cards. She shuffled them and made a three card spread. Janet glanced up at her and smiled. “Past, present, future.”

Michelle glanced at Mandy. Mandy grinned and nodded at the cards. Janet bit her lip, looking them over and then at Michelle.

“Your past has been riddled with heartache and pain, but mostly disappointment,” said Janet.

“Isn’t everyone’s?” laughed Michelle. Mandy frowned and nudged her. Janet merely chuckled.

“You have never found anyone worthy of you and have often been disappointed. Your expectations of others, and of yourself, tend to be fairly high. Be careful that you don’t judge too quickly, lest you pass up many opportunities.”

“What kind of opportunities?” asked Mandy, completely enthralled. Michelle wiggled uncomfortably in her chair.

“Wealth, happiness, love,” said Janet. “I see your career as being solid, long. You will go far. However, you close yourself off, burying yourself in work so you don’t have to face those things that would lead to danger.”

“Not getting into danger is a good thing,” said Michelle.

“Speak for yourself,” laughed Mandy.

“The danger I speak of is emotional,” said Janet. “You hide yourself in work so you don’t have to connect and feel. You’re very afraid of letting anyone close. I also see you as being insecure about your sexuality.”

“Told you, you’re a prude.” Mandy chuckled, nudging Michelle’s arm.

“Just because I like to take things slow and don’t bring whips into my bedroom, does not make me a prude,” defended Michelle with a playful grimace.

Janet smiled at both women, admiring their closeness. She curled her finger in her short red hair.

“What about her future?” asked Mandy. Then, to Michelle, she said, “This is my favorite part!”

“Ah, the future is always uncertain and ever changing,” Janet winked at Mandy. “Ah, Michelle, I see a new pet in your life.”

Michelle frowned. That was the last thing she suspected. “A pet? You’re kidding right? I barely have time for my cat as it is.”

“I think...a dog?” mused Janet, confused. “A large dog?”

“Nope, sorry,” said Michelle, laughing. The tension of the reading eased out of her. “I’m a cat person. I don’t think I could handle a dog. Besides, I have visions of a wrecked house just thinking of it. Are you sure it’s not another cat?”

“No, this is definitely more like a dog. A wild dog, a wolf perhaps. It’s a little fuzzy, but I see you...really loving this pet.” Janet sighed and bit her lip, looking a bit embarrassed.

Mandy covered her mouth and laughed. “Oh my Gawd! I can’t believe you haven’t figured it out. New pet—wolf—Dmitri!”

“Dmitri?” asked Janet.

“He’s a lycan who owns part of that supernatural club, The Raven,” said Mandy. “He’s hot for Michelle and I think she’s damned ho—”

“Ok, Mandy,” said Michelle, uncomfortable again. She didn’t want to discuss any feelings she might have for Dmitri with a stranger—not when she wasn’t sure herself what those feelings were.

“Oh,” sighed Janet, looking relieved. “That makes a lot more sense. For a second I thought you were into animals and I was trying to be delicate.”

Michelle paled. Mandy’s jaw dropped for a long moment before she began laughing harder.

“That’s just wrong,” said Michelle, weakly. She tried to smile and stood up.

“So, that means she and Dmitri are going to finally screw?” asked Mandy.

“If she can open up,” answered Janet.

Mandy grinned from ear to ear as she spoke, “Well, let us hope the old rusty gal can ‘open up’!”

“If she can open up emotionally,” said Janet, stifling a laugh. “There will be many risks, but the rewards could be great.”

“That’s great,” Michelle broke in, seeing Mandy’s mouth opening again. She swallowed nervously. Her heart beat wildly in her chest. And something choked her. She was pretty sure it was cold, unadulterated fear. “That’s enough for me. Mandy, it’s your turn. Let’s see how funny you think your future is, babe.”

~*****~

Mandy beamed as she moved closer to Janet. She loved having her fortune told and today was no exception. Janet told her of her past, how it involved pain, triumph,

and had given her a drive to succeed. She mentioned that this drive carried over to her present and would take her far.

She smiled and nodded, engrossed in every detail Janet had to offer. When Janet got to her future, she stiffened at the mention of a dead lover. "I'm sorry. You're telling me that the love of my life will die?"

Janet shook her head and looked a bit miffed at the cards laid out before her. "No, not exactly. I'm seeing sorrow, infidelity, betrayal, but in the end happiness in domestic matters."

"Well, this has to be the most depressing reading I've ever gotten," Mandy said, trying to make it sound light hearted.

"Don't fret, dear. You'll find happiness, but not before you almost lose it with foolish choices. You're petrified to let on that you have feelings too and that you want the American Dream. You're self-destructive when it comes to this. Use caution."

"Oh," Mandy said, slowly. "I'm the one who cheats then, huh?"

"That's a shocker!" Michelle said, wryly.

Janet leaned forward and touched Mandy's hand lightly. "You tend to jump the gun, you always have. Hear him out before you do anything rash."

"Hear who out? The lover that will be dead?" Mandy shrugged and then stood, slowly. "I guess I could come in for a séance or something. Thanks, Janet, you're the best."

Michelle touched her shoulder gently. "Umm, not that I'm buying any of this, but would a vampire count as the dead lover?"

Janet laughed and stood to hug Mandy. "Yes, that makes sense now. Boy, you two had me worried for a minute. I thought one was about to mount a dog and the other a corpse. They have names for that you know."

"Well, that's not too far off," Mandy said, laughing hard.

Chapter 9

Graphic Language & Sexual Content

Girl's Just Want To Have Fun

“It’s now or never,” Michelle said, opening the door to the club slowly.

Mandy shrugged and seemed even less enthused with the idea of being at the Raven than she did. Michelle found that odd and gave her a questioning look. “I forgot to ask how things ended with your date with Armando.”

“Humph,” Mandy said. “There’s not much to tell.”

“You mean you didn’t screw him!” Michelle didn’t mean for it to come out with as much surprise as it did.

“Hardly,” said Mandy, rolling her eyes a bit. “Armando is such a gentleman that he bailed before even setting foot in my place.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Michelle said, holding the door open as a crying redhead ran past. The girl came to a grinding halt before them and looked up. “Sarah?”

Michelle jumped when the girl broke out in an ear-piercing scream. “Marcus is a were-rat!” she bellowed.

“Cha!” Mandy said, not helping the situation.

It was evident by Sarah’s behavior, that she had no clue that her fiancé was a shifter, let alone half-rat. Michelle had always assumed that Sarah knew, heck everyone else at the Nocturnal Journal did. She watched the young editor storm down the street in a dither and looked at Mandy. “Was her bachelorette party tonight?”

Mandy’s eyes widened. “Oh, crap, yes! I totally forgot about it.”

Michelle nodded. “Yeah, me too. Good thing she’s not going through with it!”

“Like heck we’re not!” shouted a loud voice. “Get your late behinds in here!”

Mandy and Michelle looked at each other and chuckled. At the same time, they said, “Kelley.”

Michelle peeked in the club door and found Sarah’s bridesmaids waiting for a table. Kelley stood above the rest of the group. Her short red-blonde was hard to miss, as was the smile of giddy excitement on her face. Just below her in height, was Pennie, another strawberry blonde. Pennie was one of those women with curves in all the right places. She had a habit of attracting notice.

Angie, the third bridesmaid, was about Mandy and Michelle's height, if not an inch shorter. Angie, a blue belt in Tae Kwon Do, was always ready to kick a little ass if the need arose. Mandy had seen her in action once. It was enough to want to stay on her good side.

The last bridesmaid, Susan, had chocolate brown hair with red highlights cut into a very sexy bob. And, by the looks of her Dolly Parton figure, she was ready to dance. Susan grinned, waving Michelle over.

Michelle glanced back, seeing Mandy hadn't moved anywhere closer to the door. She looked like a deer froze in headlights. She frowned and reached back to grab Mandy's arm, pulling her forward. "They've already seen us and since when do you ever hesitate when going to a bachelorette party?"

"Is...is Armando in there?" asked Mandy quietly.

Michelle poked her head in. Her heart beat just as nervously to see Dmitri. He'd tried calling her a few times, but she'd refused to pick up, and she wasn't answering her messages at work. She knew it was childish, but she wasn't sure how she was supposed to react after what had happened. Truth be told, she hoped Jaycee wouldn't be working tonight, just so she didn't have to face the woman's knowing looks.

Yep, thought Michelle, Mandy and I are both first rate cowards.

"Hey, guys," yelled Michelle to the group. "You go ahead, we'll find you later! We've got work to do first!"

The bridesmaids nodded and began filtering towards the back of the club. When the coast was clear, she turned back to Mandy.

"Come on," said Michelle. "I don't see them. It's still early yet and maybe we'll get lucky and they won't be here. I don't even see Jaycee at the bar. It's some new guy."

Mandy and Michelle relaxed, took a deep breath, and walked boldly in.

"You're not still going on about that psychic thing are you?" asked Michelle, as they made their way to the bar. She knew it would be best to introduce themselves to the new guy before barging into the office to grab her computer. The last thing they needed was some newbie drawing attention to their presence to the club owners.

The tall blonde behind the counter turned slowly around and greeted Michelle with a white smile. "Hi, what can I do you for tonight?"

If she didn't know better, she would have thought that was a proposition. She put her hand out and did her best to avoid saying anything snide. "I'm Michelle, who are you?"

Blondie's smile faded a bit. He took her hand in his. "Umm, I'm Mike."

"Are you sure?" Michelle asked.

Mike blinked and then looked around the bar. She'd never seen a six foot three inch man look scared out of his mind and she didn't like it. "You wouldn't happen to be Michelle Pillow would you?"

"She's one and the same, why?" Mandy said, taking a seat at the bar.

Mike looked a bit green as he looked at the two of them. "You must be Mandy Roth."

Michelle locked eyes with Mandy and did the 'is this guy for real' look. Mandy shrugged, making Michelle nervous. "Alrighty then, yep, that's us, the terrible twosome. Feel better now?"

Mike cleared his throat and fixated on a ring of water on the bar. He rubbed it over and over again with his towel. Mandy touched his arm and he let out a yelp. She laughed and patted him gently. "Well, that's a first for me. I've never made a lycan nervous before."

"Hey, how'd you know I'm a lycan?" Mike asked.

Michelle perked up. She was curious as to how Mandy knew that, too. "Did I forget to tell you that I'm physic too?" she asked, laughing. "No, seriously, Dmitri mentioned that his cousin Mike was coming to town and would be helping out at the bar. You're here, blonde like Dmitri, helping at the bar, and named Mike...what else was I supposed to think?"

Dimtri's cousin? Michelle paled as she thought about another lycan with Dmitri's genes being within a ten-foot radius of her. She already had enough issues with fighting her attraction to him. She didn't need it doubled.

"OH!" shouted Mandy.

Michelle and Mike jumped.

"What?" Michelle asked.

Mandy's eyes widened as she looked at Mike. "You keep telling me how much you 'don't like' Dmitri and the physic did say you'd be mounting a wolf soon." Mandy gave a meaningful look at Mike. Michelle's stomach went to her throat and she felt like she was going to be sick. "Maybe, you'll be riding him by the end of the week. That is, if you really don't like Dmitri."

Michelle looked at Mike in horror. The lycan bartender chuckled mischievously and winked at her. “I...I already told you, I don’t believe in psychics.”

Mandy and Mike’s laughter followed her as she went back to the office. What in the hell was Mandy thinking? Didn’t she realize Mike would more than likely tell his cousin about it? The last thing she needed was Dmitri with more ammo to use against her already ragged senses.

She hesitated at the office door and was relieved to find it was empty. Finding her laptop sitting on a desk, she froze. What was it doing out and on a charger? Hadn’t she been writing about a lycan and.... “Oh no.”

Michelle felt the blood draining from her face. What if Dmitri opened her files? He was the last person she wanted to read her books—especially this last book. She’d named the Russian lycan Dominik, and he looked suspiciously like a certain lycan she knew. The character even kissed like that certain lycan.

“Oh, please, no. Don’t let him have read it,” whispered Michelle to herself. She hurried forward, opened it up, and turned the computer on. Her book instantly flashed up on the screen, right where she had left off. Michelle paled. It would seem she was so caught up in the writing, she had accidentally written the name Dmitri several times where it should have said Dominik. “Oh, please, no.”

Michelle hurriedly clicked to replace Dmitri’s name with the right one. If he did read it, she’d be able to at least lie and say he imagined his name on the screen. She tapped her fingers impatiently waiting as the computer worked. In agitation, she began to pace.

“Oh, glad to see it’s working. One of the guys kicked it and I charged it up so you could get in and check it. What you working on anyway?”

Michelle paled, turning to look at Dmitri. He looked really handsome in his dark slacks and black silk shirt. She was stunned to silence.

Dmitri crossed over to the computer to check on it. “Is it working?”

Michelle came to her senses and ran forward to close the screen. “Yeah, its fine...I was just—”

“What’s this?” Dmitri sounded surprised. He let loose a low chuckle. “Who’s this Dominik you’re replacing me with?”

Michelle made a weak noise and tried to push past Dmitri’s shoulder to get to the computer. He caught her in his arms and pulled her into his hard chest. A slight smile curled his lips.

“I see you’ve been thinking about me,” he whispered down to her. Then, glancing at the computer screen that seemed to be frozen on a particularly hot sex scene, he let a grin spread over his features. Her heart skipped at the purely sexual look. “By the looks of it, you’ve been thinking about me a lot.”

“No, I...no,” said Michelle. Weakly, she lied, “I wrote that before I knew you and it didn’t seem appropriate to leave it like it was. I didn’t want a misunderstanding. It’s just a book.”

Her excuses sounded lame even to her.

“How come you haven’t returned my calls?” he asked, instead of calling her on it. He leaned his forehead close to hers, not touching, but blocking everything but his eyes from view.

“I’ve been busy,” she whispered. It felt so good to be in his arms. She shivered slightly. “Ah...work.”

“Your work’s been here,” said Dmitri.

“Well, there is research,” she uttered. “I’ve been doing research.”

“For your book.”

“Yes. For my book.”

“Hum, well if you really want to know my opinion, you’ve got it all wrong,” said Dmitri.

Michelle was weak from his nearness. He smelled so good. His lips were so close. She wished he would just kiss her. “I do?”

Dmitri smiled and said, with a nod to the screen, “That is not a lycan’s favorite position and those are not the sounds we make in bed and that is definitely not what my body looks like naked. If you like, I’ll show you the correct way to rewrite all three points right now.”

Michelle gasped in horror. She’d been hoping that he hadn’t seen what was there, as he only glanced briefly at the screen. But, by the look in his eyes, he had been able to read the whole page in that brief second. He leaned down to kiss her. Michelle panicked and slammed the screen down, nearly breaking her laptop. She didn’t care.

“Hey, Dmitri! We need some A-neg up here!” called Mike from the bar.

“I’ve got to go,” said Michelle, beyond mortification. “And you have to get to work. It was nice seeing you again. Maybe I’ll see you around.”

She pushed from his chest so hard that he was forced to let her go. Ok, so her parting comments were really lame. But, what else was she going to say to him? Please throw me down on the floor and do me doggie style in the name of research?

Coming to the bar, flushed and panting, she commanded Mike. “Five shots of tequila!”

“What? Did I interrupted something?” laughed Mike. He didn’t move fast enough for Michelle’s liking.

“Now!” she growled.

“Easy, baby, easy,” said Mike, grinning widely. “If my cousin didn’t fulfill your prophecy, I’ll be happy to step in.”

“What is it with you...wolves?” she muttered. Then, leaning up, she reached over the bar, grabbed a bottle of the first liquor she could reach and a shot glass. Pouring a shot, she downed it and began to cough. Her throat burned so badly that her eyes teared.

“Oh, love, no. That’s Old Crow. Here, let me get you some tequila.” Mike took the bottle from her and put it back behind the bar. Then, grabbing a clean glass, he winked at her. “In fact, let me make you something special.”

~*****~

Mandy watched Michelle run off and looked at Mike. He stood there giving her a questioning look. “Do you often put her on the spot?” he asked.

“Every damn chance I get. It’s the only way to get through to her. She’s into Dmitri, but won’t admit it, throwing you into the mix is enough to shock Michelle into admission.”

Mike leaned down on the bar, coming face to face with Mandy. “Yeah, shock her into admission or get me killed.”

“Oh, gawd you got the drama genes in the family, didn’t you?” She put her hand up. “Wait, don’t answer, you scream overdramatic...well, that and sexy. What is it with immortals? Do they only select the finest from the pool?”

“You’re losing me,” Mike said in a low voice.

“Why am I thinking that’s not hard to do?” Mandy said with a smile. “Do you stand around looking sexy all night, or do you actually serve drinks too? I want a vodka-sprite.”

He smiled and fixed her drink. Mike moved closer, but Mandy refused to move. If he thought that invading her personal space would make her back down, he was sorely mistaken. She met his grey-eyed gaze with a look of determination.

“Word has it that you’re Armando’s girl,” Mike said, so close that his hot breath moved her hair. He pushed her drink towards her, leaving his hand on the glass.

Mandy’s eyes widened. “I’m sorry, but did you just say I’m someone’s girl?”

He glanced down at the drink before him. “So, you’re saying that you’re not Armando’s?”

She moved her hand over his and pulled the glass to her, bringing Mike even closer. “I’m not his anything. He’s seen to that.”

“Are you free game them?”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m no man’s game, especially not Armando’s.”

Mike stood up quickly. Cool hands moved over her shoulders and she felt the static energy of a vampire behind her. “Is that so?” Armando asked, sounding amused.

Mandy didn’t turn around. She locked eyes with the very scared Mike, but spoke to Armando. “Come out of your crypt long enough to chastise me? I’m surprised that you came out at all. You haven’t bothered to speak to me since your little revelation.” She knew that she was being hard on him, but not calling or speaking to her since their supposed date was not acceptable behavior.

He moved his arms around her more. “I thought you needed some time.”

“Time for what? To digest the fact that...” Mandy was cut off by a loud shrieking sound.

“Ohmygawd girl, get your butt out on the dance floor!” Kelley shouted.

Mandy turned and looked into Armando’s dark eyes. She let her gaze go hard, letting him know that she wasn’t happy with him. He tipped his head down in acknowledgement of her displeasure.

Pennie pushed past on her way to the bar, and let out a whistle when she saw the hunky new bartender. She ordered drinks, with a side of Mike, for the group. Mandy

couldn't help but laugh as they headed out to the dance floor. "Hey, check out the blonde over there!" Pennie said motioning to the end of the bar. "He's been singing Journey songs and praising the Queen since we got here. I think his name is James. What a hunk, but my gosh, is he always so...."

"Eccentric?" Mandy said laughing. "You haven't seen anything yet. Where did Angie go?"

"Oh, she and Susan are requesting some songs. The DJ they have in tonight really needs to liven it up a bit."

"Doing the Butt," pumped through the sound system loudly. Mandy and Pennie giggled as they met up with Angie and Susan on the dance floor.

"I haven't heard this in years!" Mandy shouted. Someone gripped her butt firmly and she turned slowly, expecting to see Armando. She died laughing when she saw that it was Kelley.

"Well, shake what your momma gave you girl!" Kelley yelled over the music.

"Don't you have something to review?" Mandy asked, trying to get out of dancing. All the girls surrounded her, drinks in hand, and she found herself caught up in the moment. It felt good to let loose and have fun.

~*****~

"Can you stop trying to make small talk, please? I'd like another drink and that's all from you," Michelle said, trying to fend off what felt like the four hundredth advance by Mike.

"What, you going to go complain to the management?" laughed Mike with an unconcerned wink.

Michelle scowled at him as he went to attend to other customers. She wasn't one who normally drank, but she wanted to forget tonight ever happened. She could never look Dmitri in the eyes again. Not after he read her...fantasy. Not that she'd ever consider doing what she wrote, but it's not like he'd believe it.

"Hey, there you are!" Mandy shouted, grabbing hold of her arm. "Come on!"

Michelle eagerly followed, but not before taking her last shot of tequila. Anything was better than stewing over the office incident. Mandy's plan most likely ended with drinking and men. As she stumbled drunkenly, Michelle realized she didn't care at the moment. Besides, most of Mandy's ideas ended that way.

As they walked past the crowd, Michelle saw that she wasn't off the mark at all. At least twelve men surrounded the bridesmaids. They cleared a path and let the two of them through. It was oddly comforting to be surrounded by strange men. She felt a dark beast trying to dance close to her and artfully danced away from him. The last thing she needed was another man trying to get down her pants.

"Lycan's are the best!" Susan shouted.

Michelle cringed when she heard that they were werewolves too. Of course they are! Every freaking man in the tri-state area is! What am I, a wolf magnet?

Seeing a big, blonde giant of a man in some very medieval-like attire, she instinctively knew he wasn't half wolf. Making a beeline straight for him, she said boldly, just to be sure, "Are you a werewolf?"

"No, I am Prince Ualan visiting here from Qurilixen," he answered, his voice deeply rich with a strange accent.

"Which country is that in? Russia?" asked Michelle, confused.

He leaned in and whispered, "Qurilixen is my planet."

"Oh, ok then, very good," said Michelle, drunkenly thinking an alien was definitely better than a werewolf. "I will dance with you."

A half smile came to the man's lips and he shrugged as he pulled her into his arms. His movements were strange, but he definitely felt all warrior human male beneath his clothes. He was handsome, a wonderful dancer, and when he spoke he oozed sophistication and charm.

Then why am I still thinking of Dmitri?

Angie ran across the dance floor waving her hands in the air. The song changed to Walk Like An Egyptian and Michelle knew who responsible for that. "I refuse to walk like...."

"Here," Mandy said, eyeing the blonde giant with a smile. The Prince bowed and let his dance partner go. Mandy thrust another drink into Michelle's hand, grabbed her arm, and pulled her to the nearby table. From the way Mandy staggered on the dance floor, she'd had enough for the both of them. Normally, Michelle would have taken the high road and held back. Tonight, she handed her keys to Kelley and seized hold of the drink, gulping it back. Liquor curled in her stomach, but it didn't completely kill her mortification.

“Someone should write the number to the cab place on our foreheads,” Mandy said laughing. “I would, but I used the last of my marker writing your number on the men’s room wall.”

Michelle hoped that she was kidding. Knowing Mandy, she wasn’t. Susan walked out with a gift bag. “Since Sarah took off, does this mean we keep our gifts?”

Mandy leaned forward and peered into the bag. “Depends, whatcha got here?”

Susan laughed and handed the bag to Michelle. “Here, you open it. Mandy already has one!”

Michelle balked as she took the gift bag. They always labeled her the prude. Granted, she wasn’t Ms. Adventurous in the bedroom, but it wasn’t like she was a virgin either. Frankly, some of Mandy’s bedroom stories just scared her. She wasn’t sure she bent that way.

She reached her hand in and pulled out the strangest, most elaborate gag gift she’d ever seen. Purple, veiny, and ten inches long made her eyes wide. “Where’d you get this novelty at?”

“That isn’t a novelty,” laughed Angie.

“Well, I guess it depends how you’re using it,” said Kelley, dancing close to a handsome lycan.

“This can’t be right,” said Michelle, blinking in awe through the fog in her brain. “I didn’t know they came in this size!”

“Oh, sweetie, you’ve been with the wrong men if they don’t compare to that. See, that’s not even the largest you can buy.” Pennie pointed at the back of the packing. Michelle flipped it over, and her eyes got really wide. She was amazed to see all the shapes they came in.

“Open it up. It can be my new sphincter...scepter!” Michelle said, her speech slightly slurred. “I proclaim myself, Leader of the Sexually Fed Up!”

Pennie opened the package and handed the veiny dildo back to Michelle, laughing so hard that she almost dropped it.

“Why does it have a hook on the bottom? Does it double as a fishing lure?”

Mandy grabbed her arm and stood her up. “Okay, that’s enough play time. Hand it over now,” she said with her hand out.

“No,” Michelle said clutching the toy tight to her chest. “Not until I figure out what the hook on the bottom is. I may not have been with as many men as you, but NONE were shaped like that.”

Mandy seemed preoccupied with something behind Michelle, but she didn't turn around to look. This was the first time in a long time that she'd allowed herself to be so free. Mandy touched her arm and laughed. “It's a butt plug, Michelle, now relinquish the dildo.”

“I'm keeping the Dmitri, its mine now,” she said, trying to sound stern, but failing miserably.

“Hmm, interesting slip.... Freud would have a thing or two to say about that,” Dmitri's deep voice said from behind her.

She froze, still clutching the dildo to her chest. She locked eyes with Mandy and silently pleaded with her to confirm if Dmitri had been standing there the entire time. Mandy nodded and took the large toy from her.

Angie grabbed it from her and turned it on. Even with the horrible 80's music blaring, the distinct sound of the vibrator could be heard. All the girls, except for Michelle, laughed.

“Two slips in one night,” said Dmitri. “I'm beginning to think you care.”

Michelle was too drunk to respond.

“Come dance with me,” he whispered in her ear, sending chills over her neck. She didn't dare turn and look at him.

“I don't dance,” she lied.

“I saw you. Come on, just one dance,” said Dmitri.

“I don't dance with lycans,” she uttered darkly. Her voice was sharp from embarrassment and the only plan she could come up with was to put Dmitri off so much he never wanted to talk to her again.

“Really,” he growled, spinning her around to face him. “Then what were you doing out there with them?”

Michelle followed his fingers to the floor where the pack of wolves still got down.

“What were you doing all cuddled up to that shapeshifter?” continued Dmitri.

Michelle blinked heavily. She looked up into his grey eyes. If she wasn't mistaken, he looked jealous.

"I," began Michelle weakly. Her head spun. The music suddenly seemed too loud. "I should call a cab. I think I need to go home."

~*****~

"Come on," Kelly said, pushing Mandy towards the very drunk, and very underdressed James.

James moved on the bar and began unbuttoning his black jeans. Susan, Pennie, and Angie were on him in an instant, stuffing money down the waistband of his bikini briefs. Mandy still wasn't clear on how James had ended up on the bar, stripping for the party, but there he was in all his glory.

Kelley thrust money into her hand and gave her one good shove towards James. Mandy tried to stand her ground, but her heels weren't helping. She tumbled into James and ended up grabbing hold of his legs to keep from falling over the bar.

He laughed and bent down. "Nice of you to join us, love," he said with a wink. "I knew you wouldn't be able to stay away."

"Please," Mandy said, sarcastically.

James touched her cheek and let his tongue roll out and over his bottom lip. "I'm irresistible."

"I'm afraid that you've mistaken me with a girl who is drunk enough to buy your bullshit!" Mandy said, pulling back slowly. "Give me a few more shots and I'll be there!"

"Where's the toy that you and Michelle were playing with?" he asked, looking hopeful.

"Oh, I shoved it in Michelle's bag. I've already got three of my own."

"Hmm," James said, inching towards her. "Sounds like fun. Can I play too?"

Mandy cringed at the thought of James sharing her favorite toys. "Thanks, but I'll pass."

James clutched his chest, stood tall, and sang, “Oh, Mandy, you came and you gave....”

“STOP!” Mandy shouted, not wanting to hear him belt out any more tunes. “If I stuff money down your pants will you promise to never sing to me again?”

“Nope,” James said, with a laugh. “But I’ll promise to stop doing it tonight.”

“Fair enough,” she said, reaching up to stuff the money down the side of his pants. He turned quickly and pushed his hand over hers. In an instant, Mandy’s hand was nestled in the patch of curls, and brushing against his cool erection.

“MANDY!” Armando shouted.

She jumped, accidentally pulling James face first off the bar. They toppled backwards. Her skirt rode up as her legs flew high in the air. James landed on top of her, his head buried between her legs.

James said something muffled, before lifting his head slowly, his blue eyes locking on her. “I knew you’d be a Brazilian fan!”

“Get off,” she said, shoving at him. He rolled over on his side and she sprang to her feet. She looked up to find Armando standing there, staring at her. He looked hurt beyond words and that broke her heart. He spun around and stormed away.

Mandy stepped on James in her attempt to get to Armando. She didn’t turn around when James groaned. It would serve him right to be impaled by her heel.

“Armando, wait!” she cried out, catching a glimpse of his long hair as he walked out the front door.

She tried to follow him, but he tossed his hand in the air, and the door to the Raven slammed shut in her face. It took Mandy less than a second to go from worried to pissed.

“Fine! If that’s the way you want to be about it, then fine!” She headed towards the bar to get another drink and to find James. If Armando didn’t want her, she knew who did.

Chapter 10

Graphic Language & Sexual Content

Interview with Stephanie Burke

Mandy opened her eyes and stared at a foreign ceiling. She took a deep breath in, and tried to remember where she was. The last real memory she had was from the Raven. She'd been angry with Armando's rejection and hell bent on going home with anyone else.

"James," she whispered as a lump formed in her throat. "Oh, God, I went home with James."

She rolled her eyes slightly as she reached down and found herself naked, her lower regions sore, and her body stiff. Yep, she knew when she'd been rode hard and, apparently, James had been the one that mounted her.

The white Egyptian cotton sheets were so soft against her skin that she didn't want to move. It surprised her that James' room was so classy. She pictured him living in an ultra modern bachelor pad or in an apartment full of clutter, like the frat boy he pretended to be.

She sat up slowly, looking for her clothes. She spotted a pair of Italian loafers and a black sports coat, but that was it.

Where does he keep all his leather?

Mandy crawled out of the bed, taking the sheet with her. She ran across the white carpeting and to the slightly opened bathroom door. She could barely contain her excitement when she spotted her purse and dress on the floor, near the tub.

The bathroom wasn't what she expected James to have either. It was so large, so white, and so clean. The whirlpool tub was still full with water. Rose pedals floated along the edges of it, and it was clear that someone had let the rows of candles burn out.

She touched her inner thighs gently and wondered how many times she and James had had sex in the tub. A hell of a lot from the way her body felt.

She reached down and snatched her purse off the floor. Her goal was to grab her phone and call Michelle. Looking inside her purse, she stopped dead in her tracks. She fumbled around and pulled out an unopened box of condoms. Her mind raced and her pulse sped. She'd stop taking the pill months ago, around the same time that she'd stopped dating.

Mandy ran to the tiny stainless steel trashcan, tripping over the sheet in the process. After a rather ungraceful slide on her knees, she came to a stop in front of the trashcan and took the lid off. It was empty. A wave of nausea hit her. It was bad enough

that she'd let her temper get the better of her and slept with James, not using protection was begging for trouble.

Armando would hate her enough already for what she'd done. Having a child by James would only add to that.

The urge to run was overwhelming. She had to get away. There was no way she wanted to run into James this morning. It was best to hightail it out before he climbed out of whatever hole it was he retreated to everyday.

Mandy tried the bathroom window at first. It was too small to climb out of, and seeing that she was at least six stories up, she thought it best not to try too hard with that one. She tucked the sheet around her body, grabbed her purse, and decided to make a run for the front door.

She bolted out of the bathroom, spilling the contents of her purse in the process. She didn't care. She grabbed her wallet and her phone. Running with a king sized sheet wrapped around her wasn't easy, but she continued onward. His place was a hell of a lot bigger than she'd expected it to be. Finally, she reached the front door and turned the handle.

Cool arms snatched her up and off her feet. Startled, she screamed out. "Kitten?"

Mandy froze. James sounded an awful lot like Armando. She glanced around the spacious living room, taking in the fact that the oversized furniture was all golden leather. It wasn't until she noticed one of Georges Seurat's prints that she acknowledged the man holding her was indeed Armando.

"I love that painting," she said, softly. No, it wasn't the best way to break the ice, but it was all she had.

"I know," he said, nestling his face down on her shoulder. "The first time I met you, you were looking through art books, trying to find a piece for your new apartment. You seemed drawn to his work, so I picked one up two years ago."

It took her a minute to register what he was telling her. They'd met less than a year ago and she'd never taken art books into the Raven. "What? I don't remember...."

Armando laughed softly. "Ah, I really thought that you remembered the first time we met. You were new here and fresh out of college. You were also very naive and had no concerns about wandering about after dark." He sounded a bit peeved, but continued. "You were sitting outside the coffee shop down the street from your home, mulling over the books. I stopped and introduced myself to you. Remember now?"

It took Mandy a minute, but she could vaguely remember the handsome man who had stopped when she dumped coffee on one of the books she'd been skimming through.

He bought her another cup, commented on her choice of art, and headed off. She turned her head slowly and looked into Armando's dark eyes. "How did I forget that? Better yet, how did you remember it? It was all of what, two minutes?"

"Mmm, not long enough if you ask me," he said, kissing her neck softly.

She stiffened. "Why am I at your house?"

"Kitten, you were in no condition to drive home and since you have never invited me into your home, I could not take you there. I did the next best thing. I brought you home with me," he said, running his hands down the length of the sheet. "Ah, you look gorgeous in my bedding."

Mandy laughed softly as he kissed her ear. She let out a long sigh of relief and turned around slowly, gripping the sheet tight to keep it up. She'd never seen Armando without a shirt on and the sight of his muscular torso almost made her lose her train of thought. "You have no idea how happy I am to find out that this is your place."

Armando smiled, and then tipped his head to the side. "I am afraid that you are losing me. What do you mean—happy to find out that this is my place?"

"Well, I woke up a bit...umm, stiff, and none of the," she looked at Armando, turned red, and then shrugged, "condoms that I had in my purse had been touched. I'm not on any sort of birth control and, for a minute, I thought I actually had sex last night. God, am I glad that I ended up here and with you."

"Mandy, what is the last thing you remember about last night?" Armando asked, adjusting his waistband slightly.

She closed her eyes and thought about the night's events. "The last thing I remember is you using your vampire magic to slam the door to the Raven in my face and me going to find James to..." She stopped.

Armando glanced at her and nodded. "That is why you are happy to find me here. You thought that perhaps you slept with James."

"Yes," Mandy said, sighing. "That's why I was sneaking out. I just wanted to get away and pretend it never happened." She took a step towards him and yanked the sheet up more to keep from tripping on it. "I mean, I woke up sore, naked and in someone else's bed. Why wouldn't I think I just had sex?"

Armando's eyebrows rose slightly. "You remember nothing else from last night?"

"No," she said, bending down to pick up her phone and wallet. "Let me guess, I drank too much and got sick all over myself. That's why the tub is filled and why I'm

naked. Not that I'm not grateful. It's a good thing that you're such a gentleman," Mandy said laughing nervously. "I would have been disappointed to wake up and not remember sex with you, but you made it perfectly clear that you would never allow anything to happen between us."

Armando's head jerked up. "I do not recall saying that. My reason for not coming into your home after our date with Michelle and Dmitri had more to do with not wanting our first night together to be forever linked to Trolly Cheese, than not wanting to be with you, Mandy."

"Hmm, do you think I could borrow something to wear home?" Mandy asked, desperate to change the topic. Having Armando talk about caring for her made her squeamish.

"I rather hoped you would stay with me."

Her brow creased as she looked around. "Stay for the day?"

Armando let out another long sigh. "I had hoped for more, but if that is all you wish then...."

Mandy cut him off and grabbed her stomach. "It would be nice to spend the day with you. But I'm famished and since I don't live on a liquid diet of O-neg, I'm guessing that you don't have anything in here for me to eat."

"Kitten, you do enjoy underestimating me, don't you?" He took a step back, extending his hand outward for her to see the dining room table. It was filled with fruit and bagels. Mandy gave him an odd look and he laughed. "Say that you'll stay here with me."

"What about work?" Mandy asked, grasping at a reason to tell him no, even though no part of her wanted to.

"Miss a day. Call in sick. Call Michelle, she will cover for you," Armando said, moving forward and pulling her to him.

It felt good to be held by him and she wasn't about to push him away. One thing was odd with him though. The last she knew he was mad at her and now he was acting like they were a couple. "I'm sorry, but did I miss something?"

"Miss something?"

"Yeah, last night you're mad at me and this morning you're acting like we're going steady or something."

"Going steady?" he asked, with a smile.

Mandy blushed. “You know what I mean.” She glanced down at herself and then back to Armando. “It’s weird...are you sure that I came straight home with you? I didn’t stop off in a back room or disappear for a few hours, did I?”

“No, after my little outburst I returned to find you dancing with our bleach-blond friend. I picked you up and brought you here. Why do you ask?”

As if her face wasn’t red enough, it got worse. “If I was standing here with anyone but you, I would think that I had a night of crazy wild sex.” She giggled and ran her hand over his smooth chest. “Thanks for being you.”

Armando went rigid beneath her fingertips. “Do not thank me.”

“How have you managed to live so long and stay so modest?”

“Mandy,” he said, pushing on her shoulders. “Do not put me on a pedestal.”

She turned her head and nipped at his hands, playfully. “Hey, buddy, you put yourself on a pedestal when you took the let’s wait approach. I was ready to ‘climb on board’, you took the highroad.”

“If that were only true,” Armando whispered.

“What?”

“Call Michelle and tell her that you’re spending the day here.”

“Sure,” Mandy said, trying to figure out what Armando had mumbled under his breath.

~*****~

Michelle opened her eyes slightly, trying to gauge where the ringing noise was coming from. She groaned as she leaned over, smacking her hand out to turn off her alarm. It wasn’t there, nothing was there.

“What the hell?”

Panicked and a bit disoriented, Michelle glanced down on the floor and found her purse. My phone, she thought, as she leaned down to retrieve it. The grey silk sheets pulled back and the cool air from the room hit her bare skin. She froze, realizing that she was naked. She never slept naked.

The phone stopped ringing. Michelle growled in tired frustration, snatched up her purse, and grabbed her phone out of the front pocket. Mandy's number was lit as a missed call. She dialed her back and waited.

"Hum?" came Mandy's amused voice.

"Ohmygawd, Mandy, I think I've been abducted," Michelle said, in low hushed voice. She glanced nervously around the room and cringed.

"I'm sorry, but did you just say that you think you've been abducted?" Mandy asked, giggling softly.

"This is NOT funny!" Michelle's eyes widened as she noticed the bed she was in was perfectly round. "The whole damn place looks like the inside of a spaceship! The last thing I remember was dancing with that Barbarian Prince Ualan guy who claimed he was from another planet. Maybe, I'm with him," Michelle said earnestly.

"What Prince?" Mandy asked, falling into a full out laugh.

"That—" Michelle heard someone moving around in the room next to her and pulled the covers up tight. "Someone's here."

"Where, in space with you?"

"You're not helping."

"Sorry, right. Well, not to be a skeptic, but we are talking on cell phones and I don't know about your provider, but mine has issues when I cross the damn street. I highly doubt that it would work in space, but you can hear me now right?"

Michelle had to pull the phone away from her ear as Mandy cackled. She saw a shadow under the door and gasped. "Mandy, this is serious. Ohmygawd! I think...."

The door flew open and Michelle screamed. She could hear Mandy calling her name, but couldn't move. She wasn't frozen from fear. She was frozen from embarrassment. There, in the doorway, stood Dmitri, wearing a pair of loose pajama bottoms and nothing else. He smiled wide at her, his grey eyes sparkling. "Want some breakfast?" he asked, holding a tray of food in his hands.

"GET OUT!" Michelle screamed. He didn't stop to ask questions. He laughed and backed out of the room.

"You've got ten minutes and then I'm coming back in!" he called.

Michelle lifted the phone to her ear. "I'm with Dmitri!"

“On the spaceship,” Mandy said, wryly.

“This is serious! I’m naked and I think I’m in Dmitri’s bed,” Michelle said, irrationally glancing around for a water dish or any sign that a wolf lived there. “I think I had sex with him! Ohmygawd, Mandy! I slept with Dmitri!”

“Was it good?” Mandy asked. “Oh, I bet it was. Did he prefer doggie style? I’m guessing that he likes it doggie style.”

“MANDY, shut up!” Michelle hissed, frantic and not in the mood to hear Mandy ramble on. Keeping her voice low so Dmitri couldn’t hear her with his super senses, she asked, “What should I do?”

“You need me to tell you what to do, when you’re naked in a man’s bed? Michelle, I know that you’re reserved, but a virgin too?”

“I’m not a virgin and you know what I mean. Help me, please?”

Mandy let out a sigh. “Okay, for starters, get dressed. You’ll feel a thousand times better if you’re covered. Secondly, ask Dmitri if you were any good in bed. If he says yes, then offer—”

“Mandy!” Michelle climbed out of the bed to start looking for her clothes. There was no sign of them anywhere. “My clothes are missing!”

“Hey, don’t feel bad, so are mine.”

Michelle stopped dead in her tracks. “What?”

“Hold on, I’m draining the tub now.” Mandy shuffled around on the other end for a minute. “Sorry, I want to take a bath. I’m stiff beyond belief. They didn’t bring that mechanical bull back into the Raven last night, did they?”

Michelle was used to following Mandy’s odd conversational pattern, but this time she was losing her. “What? No, there was no mechanical bull last night, why?”

Mandy whispered, “I’m so sore. I feel like I rode something or someone all night, but that’s not possible. I’m with the gentleman Armando.” Her tone at the end suggested that she was not pleased with Armando’s plan on not using her.

Michelle began to answer her and heard footsteps in the hall. “One, two, three... here I come,” Dmitri called out as he walked into the room.

She stood there like a statue. Unable to move, unable to cover her naked body, Michelle grew redder by the minute. “I have to go,” she said weakly into the phone, pushing it shut.

Dmitri's eyes were wide as he stood there, staring at her. Finally, he moved and grabbed the sheet from the bed. "Here," he said thrusting it out towards her.

She tried to lift her hand to take it. She wanted it more than life itself, but her body wasn't cooperating. It stayed locked in place, staring at the incredibly sexy lycan before her.

Dmitri's jaw tightened. "Please take it, Michelle. I can smell your desire for me and if you stand there naked much longer, I'm likely to take you. I made it through the entire night and never laid a finger on you, but if you taunt me...well, let's just say I'm a man and I can only take so much."

Michelle grabbed the sheet and pulled it to her body. She looked Dmitri over and his words sunk in. "Wait, you mean we didn't have sex?"

He ran his hand through his tousled blonde locks and shook his head. "No, we slept in the same bed, that's all." Michelle started to protest, but he brought his hand up quick to stop her. "Nothing happen, I swear. I couldn't let you leave the Raven in the condition you were in, you refused to give me your address, and Armando took Mandy with him, so here we are."

"We slept in the same bed while I was naked?"

"No, we slept in the same bed while we were both naked. It is the only bed in my house so there was little choice," Dmitri said with a bad boy grin he just couldn't help, taking one-step back.

Michelle glared at him as heat rushed over her entire body. "And you expect me to believe that you didn't take advantage of the situation?"

"I'm a lot of things, Michelle, but a sexual opportunist isn't one of them," he said, harshly.

Michelle glanced down at the floor and her eyes bulged when she saw a gigantic dildo lying there. The purple-veined monstrosity lay at her feet, mocking her. "Oh, you are one sick puppy or whatever the term they use for a wolf!"

Dmitri narrowed his eyes and took a step towards her. He glanced down at the floor. "That is NOT mine. It is yours!"

Michelle baulked, "Oh, yeah right! I do not own a vibrator thank you very much."

"Funny, for a girl who never owned a vibrator before you sure begged enough for me to use it on you."

Her jaw dropped. “Get out!” she screamed, pointing at the door.

“No.”

“What?” she asked, sure that she’d misunderstood him.

“I’m not leaving. This is my house and I haven’t done a damn thing wrong,” he said, folding his arms over his massive chest.

Michelle wanted to argue with him, but had nothing snappy to come back with. She spun on her heels, unsure of where she was about to storm off to and stopped when she felt a draft on her backside. Dmitri let out a small chuckle and Michelle thought she would die from the embarrassment of having flashed him yet again.

~*****~

Dmitri waited in the car for Michelle. He clutched the wheel and had to make an effort not to rip it from the dash.

How dare she suggest that I took advantage of her?

He pulled his phone out and called Armando’s, needing to vent to someone and soon. It rang twice before Armando picked it up. He answered so softly that Dmitri thought he might have woke him up. “Sorry, bud, I thought you’d be up by now.”

“Yes, well, we were just taking a bit of a nap,” Armando said, sleepily.

“We?”

“Mandy’s here, we dozed off on the sofa. We had every intention of watching a movie, but....”

“Ha, it’s a good thing you’re Mr. Morals or I might think you were up to no good there,” Dmitri said, waiting for his oldest friend to laugh. Armando sighed and Dmitri shifted in his seat slightly. “You didn’t, did you?”

“You know my views on discussing this matter.”

Dmitri smacked the wheel. “Hot damn, you did! How was it?”

“Dmitri!” Armando said sternly. “I will not discuss this with you further.”

“Oh, it was good. Remember that time in France, 1906 when you and that....”

“DMITRI!” Armando sighed. “Fine, if you must know, yes we did. We did it five times to be exact.”

“Five times?” Dmitri ached just hearing him say it. “Why the hell do you sound like someone chipped your fang? No, I can’t believe that you had sex five times if it sucked.”

“It was all I had hoped it would be and more. The problem is, Mandy has no memory of the night. She is relieved that she woke up here, in my home, because she believes me to be honorable.”

Dmitri felt for his friend. He knew deep Armando’s feelings for Mandy ran and this had to be devastating. “Are you going to tell her what happened?”

“Ah, I am afraid that my window of opportunity has now passed,” Armando said, with a heavy voice. “Now, tell me of your night with Michelle.”

“Michelle thinks we had mad, crazy sex. We didn’t. After she tossed her cookies twice, I had to help her out of her clothes and get her cleaned up. On my honor I never once touched her inappropriately.”

“But, you wanted to.”

“Of course I wanted to. She begged me to touch her, take her, but I held strong,” Dmitri said, gripping the wheel tighter.

“Then you have proven yourself to be more of a man than I, my friend.”

“I’m not so sure about that. If I would have known last night that Michelle would accuse me of taking advantage of her, I would have reconsidered,” Dmitri said, looking up and seeing Michelle heading out of the door. “Listen, I’ve got to go. We’re heading back down to the club so she can grab her car and meet an author, Stephanie Burke. She had been scheduled to meet the girls down at the Nocturnal Journal, but when Mandy called back to say she wasn’t going in today, Michelle thought it best not to cancel the interview. Are you two going to make it down to the club?”

“I am not sure. Mandy is out cold and I’m a bit tired myself.”

“Ha, Kitten wore you out, huh?” Dmitri whispered as Michelle climbed in.

“That she did, that she did,” Armando said, laughing softly. “Do not let Michelle’s mistrust detour you. She cares for you. I told you that already and we both know that you care for her.”

“Yes. I’ll talk to you later,” said Dmitri. He closed his phone and nodded silently at Michelle as she climbed into his truck.

~*****~

Michelle looked around the Raven. It was strange to her each time she saw the club during the daylight hours. It looked nothing like the wild party the night before.

Michelle cringed. She didn’t want to think about the night before. She looked at where Dmitri stormed into his office. He’d not said two words to her on the drive over. Looking down at her clothes in amazement, she sighed. He had washed them before she even woke up. And he had made her breakfast in bed—or at least he had tried. Both were indisputably intimate facts that only pointed to one thing. She finally fulfilled her fantasy by sleeping with Dmitri, and she couldn’t remember a damned thing.

Seeing a tall woman with beautiful ebony skin, Michelle pasted on a smile. She was very familiar with Stephanie Burke’s work, and had especially enjoyed *The Slayer*. She knew this interview was an important one, and she couldn’t let her insecurities about Dmitri get in her way of work. Mandy’s words chose that moment to come back to her.

Ask him if you were any good....

Michelle grimaced, refusing to think about it until she was alone, in the dark with a box of tissues, a five gallon tub of Butter Pecan ice cream, and a towering tray of fudge brownies.

“Stephanie! It’s good to see you again!”

“Michelle!” Stephanie’s chocolate brown eyes glimmered as she smiled. She smoothed her reddish brown hair. “Thanks for meeting me here instead of at the office. I own a supernatural employment agency and needed to come in and speak to the owners. Figured I could kill two birds with one stone.”

“I don’t mind,” said Michelle.

“This place is great! I can’t wait to come back here at night. Is this your first time here?” asked Stephanie.

“Ah, no, actually the owners are...they’re friends of mine.”

“Great! Would you mind giving the introduction? I’ve heard that they go through help like its water. I guess that might have something to do with clientele they keep, but one never knows when the urge to feed will strike. It’s amazing that they keep

help here at all.” Stephanie reached over and took a sip of her pop. Then, grabbing a sleek black leather briefcase, she set it on the table. “I hope you don’t mind me asking you to get me an in.”

“Not at all,” answered Michelle. She cringed, knowing she would be forced to talk to Dmitri again, even if for a little bit. Just being in his presence had been uncomfortable. She just knew she must have been a horrible lay the night before. How good could it have been with her slobbering drunk, begging Dmitri to use...a...large.... Michelle shook her thoughts and concentrated on what Stephanie was saying.

“Torn in about six foot six and is considered short for his people—the warriors of the Warrior Realm. He’s gracious and very generous. But, he does have an alter ego living deep within him called The Reiver who is more bloodthirsty and practical in nature. The Reiver is a huge, solid black, red-eyed demon with an almost feline visage and a long sleek tail. It is the Reiver’s job to take the evil of others unto himself, but if the evil is too much he is forced to kill the person.”

Michelle smiled, intrigued, forgetting her own troubles. “And this is your next release coming in spring?”

“Yeah, I brought you a copy of it for review,” said Stephanie, handing it over.

“Oh, The Reiver of Souls. It looks wonderful. I love reviewing. I get to see everything first. I just read ‘Lucavarious’. I couldn’t put it down. I mean, who can resist a guy who wears tunics and drawstring pants, has a deep, gravelly voice and a major arrogance and attitude. He was just too loveable.”

Michelle stopped. Why was she thinking of Dmitri—AGAIN? And why did she suddenly have chills like he was breathing down the back of her neck?

“We need to talk.”

Michelle gasped, turning to see Dmitri’s lips close to her cheek. Stephanie smiled. “Ah, Dmitri...I’d like to introduce you to a friend of mine, Stephanie Burke. She runs a supernatural employment agency, when she’s not busy being a multi-published author, and would love to talk to you about the employment turnover you’ve had here recently. She heard that you were looking for help and thought she might be able to assist you and Armando.”

Dmitri nodded at Stephanie. Stephanie stood, leaning on a sleek cane as she held out her hand. They made polite introductions and seemed to launch right into what the club needed and how Stephanie could help. It seemed like an eternity before Dmitri and Stephanie were done talking, but it was clear that she possessed the kind of talent he was looking for, so Michelle didn’t interrupt them.

She waited quietly as they finished the last of their arrangements. Mike, Dmitri's cousin, would be staying on as a permanent bartender, but the kitchen always needed help. Two lycan chefs had been drained dry by hungry vamp patrons just last month. Armando and Dmitri had been forced to stake them, but were more concerned with losing good help.

"Stephanie," said Michelle, grabbing a press pack off the table. "Thanks so much for all of this. I'll contact you as soon as the article's done. I'm thinking I can get it squeezed in this month's issue if I hurry."

"Perfect! I'll be back later tonight. I've got a hot date and I'm thinking the Raven is the perfect place to stop by."

Michelle smiled and waved good-bye to Stephanie. Dmitri's eyes narrowed as she turned to him. She knew he wanted to speak with her, but she couldn't—not yet. She needed to collect her thoughts first. She needed to talk to Mandy and reason it out. And, it would be quite possible after she did that, that she would need to relocate completely and never face her lycan lover again.

Chapter 11

Graphic Language & Sexual Content

Interview with Jaide Fox

Mandy spotted Michelle at a table near the bar and headed towards her. She'd nearly passed out when she'd received her friend's frantic call first thing this morning. For a minute, Mandy thought she'd overslept and missed work, until it hit her that it was Saturday. She'd been spending so much time with Armando for the past two weeks that she'd lost track of her days and nights.

It was odd having him around all the time. The Nocturnal Journal had been swamped since it expanded its market and went nationwide. Mandy was hard pressed to get out of work before nightfall and Armando made no bones about not wanting her wandering around the city after dark. He'd picked her up after work every night this week. The first few nights, he just dropped her at her front door, never bothering to come into her home. Mid-week he took her home with him and surprised her by cooking dinner for her.

After the initial strangeness of eating while a vampire watched her, Mandy enjoyed spending time with him. Normally, she would have slept with a man at this stage

of the game. She wasn't proud of that fact, but it was part of who she was and how she operated. Armando still held true to being a perfect gentleman. Although, after she woke up in his home two weeks earlier, after the drunken bachelorette party, he'd been a bit more affectionate than she'd expected him to be. She wasn't complaining, but all his chaste kisses and gentle backrubs were just leaving her a horny mess. If Armando didn't fuck her soon she'd burst or bolt to find the nearest able bodied man.

Michelle looked up from her laptop and gave a weak smile. Mandy's heart broke. She knew that she'd been putting Michelle on the back burner to spend time with Armando and she felt horrible about it. The only piece of mind she had was that Michelle seemed to be distancing herself from everyone. The more Mandy thought about it, the less comforting that sounded.

"Hey, babes," Mandy said, plopping down in the chair next to her. "Whatcha working on?"

"My column on Jaide Fox," Michelle said softly.

Mandy touched her friend's hand. "Are you okay?"

"Kitten, I thought I sensed you near," Armando said, strolling out from his office. Thankfully, Mandy was used to his creepy talk. He did have a way of sensing her. It was odd, but then again, so was Armando.

Mandy glanced at Michelle and noted that she pulled her hand back. "Armando, could I have some time to chat. Girl talk, you know." She winked at him and he nodded.

"I will be at the bar if either of you need anything."

"Thanks," said Mandy, watching his tight ass as he walked away. She shook her head and focused on Michelle. "Okay, spill it...what's wrong?"

"I think I'm pregnant," Michelle said, soberly.

Mandy's jaw dropped. Armando dropped a glass and Mandy knew that he'd overheard what Michelle had said. It wasn't intentional. He, like most supernaturals, had amazing hearing. He glanced over and his dark eyes locked on hers. He gave her an apologetic look and she nodded.

"Michelle, why do you think you're pregnant? Did you take a test?"

"No, not yet," Michelle said, weakly. "I'm three days late, cranky, and my stomach as been in a knot for days."

"Oh, sweetie, today makes day number six since my period should have showed its ugly face, and I'm not freaking out."

Armando dropped an entire tray of glasses. Michelle and Mandy both jumped in their seats. Mandy cast him an angry look and found him staring at her wide-eyed. She shrugged her shoulders and concentrated on Michelle. "Dmitri said that you two didn't have sex, right?"

"That's what he says, yeah," Michelle said, wryly.

"I take it from your tone that you don't believe him."

Michelle laughed wildly. "Would you? You know how he is. He's not like Armando. His morals are a bit bent. And when he says we didn't have sex, well maybe that's because he thinks we just fucked...or 'made love' or...who the hell knows what justification his morbid mind gives it."

"Come on," Mandy said, moving closer to her, embracing her with one arm. "Dmitri's a good guy and you know it. I think that you'd be a hell of a lot more devastated if it was anyone else we were talking about possibly knocking you up."

Michelle rolled her eyes. "Thanks for putting it so delicately."

"Sorry, but you know what I meant." She tapped Michelle shoulder. "Come on. Let's go pick up a test and that will help put your mind at ease. Sound good?"

"I can't. Jaide's meeting me down here in about an hour."

Mandy looked over at Armando who had not moved from his position of gawking at her. "I'm sure that we won't be gone that long and I'm betting that Armando will keep her occupied until we get back." Armando beckoned her with his hand.

Michelle stood up slowly. She looked a bit shaken, but Mandy knew how strong she was. She'd get through this, regardless what the outcome was.

"I'll go get my car," Michelle said, walking towards the door. She stopped and looked back. "Thanks."

Mandy smiled as she shut Michelle's computer down. Cool arms wrapped around her. She laughed a bit as Armando lifted her off the floor and kissed her neck. "Okay, put me down. I need to put her stuff in your office. I don't want to come back and find a ghoul pecking away at her column."

Armando put her down, but did not move away. Instead, he turned her to him. "You did not tell me that you were running behind in your female workings."

She looked at him, puzzled for a moment before it dawned on her what he was taking about. "Oh, you mean menstrual cycle." Armando nodded slightly. "Why, I didn't think anything of it."

"You have always been consistent in the time in which this occurs."

"Umm, how exactly do you know that I bleed like clockwork?" As soon as she said it, Mandy knew the answer. Armando was a vampire and vampires could smell blood. She turned to run from the room. Her cheeks were flushed and she wasn't sure that she'd ever felt more humiliated in her life.

"Mandy, I am sorry. I did not mean to..."

She tossed her hand in the air. "Forget it. I'm going to pretend like that's not creepy. And, to answer your question, no, it's not normal for me to be late."

"Perhaps you should pick up a test as well. If you wait until the sun goes down, I will accompany you."

Mandy let out a nervous laugh. "Honey, I haven't had sex in ages. I would if someone I knew wasn't such a damn gentleman." She reached up and stroked his cheek gently. He looked a little hurt by her comments, but she wasn't sure why.

"Take the test, please, Mandy."

She tried to back away, but he held her to him. "There's no reason for me to take a pregnancy test. I can't be pregnant, it's impossible!"

"You ready?" Michelle called from the door.

Mandy glanced over at her and smiled. "Yep, give me one sec."

"Take a test, I beg you," Armando said, giving her a firm hug.

"Take what test?" Dmitri asked, appearing next to them with a crate full of liquor.

"Tall dark and dead here thinks I should take a pregnancy test for giggle," Mandy said, leaning up to kiss Armando's tight jaw. She tried to kiss away the tension in his body, but it didn't work.

"Umm," Dmitri stammered, looking directly at Armando. He tipped his head to the side and Armando shook his head no. Mandy didn't want in on their inside conversation, she just wanted to go help Michelle.

She pulled back from Armando and he looked down at her. "Please, Mandy. You are going to get one for Michelle anyways, just pick one up for yourself as well."

Dmitri turned deathly pale, dropped the crate of liquor, and cursed. Mandy headed towards the door, promising to think about taking a test.

~*****~

Dmitri kicked the chair nearest him and sent it flying across the bar. “How the hell could she do this?”

“Do what?” Armando asked.

“You said that Michelle has feelings for me. You read her. How could she screw another guy when she supposedly cares for me?”

“Yes, I did read her, and yes she does care for you, deeply. I do not know why she would do such a thing. If she is expecting, the child cannot be yours. So I do not know why,” Armando said, his heart heavy for his friend.

Dmitri let out an ear-piercing growl and then stopped. He stretched his shoulders and looked up at Armando. “Are you planning on telling Mandy that the two of you had sex, or are you going to wait until she’s about to deliver to drop that bombshell on her?”

“I will lose her,” Armando said, sadly.

Dmitri let out a small laugh. “You don’t have her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Listen, I didn’t want to be the one to tell you this, but I overheard Mike talking to James last night. Apparently, Mandy has agreed to go on a date with him.”

Armando’s temper flared. His fangs extended and the urge to rip James’ throat hit him hard. “Where is he?”

“Clam down there, buddy,” Dmitri said, walking tentatively over to him. “I don’t know all the details. I only overheard the last part of the conversation.”

Armando stormed towards the front door. Dmitri was on him in an instance, pummeling him into the wall.

“Are you trying to kill yourself? It’s broad daylight out there!” Dmitri panted. “Wait until the sun sets and we’ll both go hunting. I’d like to get my hands on the man Michelle let touch her.”

~*****~

Michelle’s hands shook as she tried to set the stick down. Mandy moved up next to her and she held it out to her.

“You’re joking, right?” Mandy asked.

“I’m a nervous wreck.” Michelle said, thrusting the pregnancy stick towards her friend again.

Mandy took it. “Okay, but just so you know, this is crossing the line for my required duties as your friend.”

Michelle washed her hands and snatched the box up. “It should tell me in...”

“It’s done,” Mandy said, smiling.

“Already?” Michelle asked, suddenly unsure if she wanted to hear her fate. “You’re smiling, that’s good right?”

“That’s real good! It’s negative!”

Michelle went to hug Mandy, but stopped when she realized that she was still holding the stick. “Maybe you should wash up now.”

“Ya think?” Mandy asked, sarcastically.

Michelle waited outside the ladies room for Mandy to get cleaned up. She should have felt relieved. She wasn’t about to be a single mother. Why the hell did she still have a nagging feeling in her gut?

Mandy opened the door and smile at her as she walked out. “We should get back, Jaide might be there.”

“Crap,” said Michelle, heading back into the bathroom. “George just showed up for a visit.”

She heard Mandy cackling long after the door closed behind her.

~*****~

Michelle pushed open the door to the club and stopped when she realized that it was quieter than normal. The place was normally booming by now and tonight everyone seemed preoccupied. They all were focused on the bar. She followed their gaze and found four barely dressed women gyrating on the bar. Two were rubbing themselves against bar patrons, one had Armando backed into the corner, and the other was straddling Dmitri in what was definitely more than a simple lap dance.

Michelle froze in horror for about five seconds. Her heart stopped beating in her chest. She could barely contain her rage. Her hands balled into tight fists and she glared at Dmitri. His grey eyes moved to her and grew to the size of half dollars. He pushed at the shapely redhead gyrating against him. The redhead merely licked his hand and kept on dancing. Michelle spun on her heels to leave and ran smack dab into Mandy, who was just walking in.

“What’s up?” Mandy asked, looking past Michelle. Her jaw dropped and Michelle knew that she saw what the boys had been up to.

“Let’s go,” Michelle said, seeing Mandy’s face and knowing that she was on the verge of having a throw down.

“Hey, where the heck are you two going? The fun just started.”

They both turned to see a tall, leggy, brunette standing behind them. The red leather corset she wore did distract from the fact that she was only wearing lace undies, but did little else to tone her down. She smiled and pits appeared on the side of her face. Michelle shook her head and laughed. “Jaide Fox, I’d know those dimples anywhere!”

Jaide laughed and ran over to hug them. Michelle noted that she had to set her top hat and wipe down. “Do I even want to know what you’re doing dolled up like this?” Michelle asked, trying to keep her mind off the cheating lycan.

It can’t be cheating if you’re not dating, Michelle reminded herself bitterly.

A tall man moved up along side Jaide and put his arm around her, handing her a glass of orange juice. “Thanks, Vachel. Now, go see if you can get the girls under control.”

“Wait, those girls are with you?” Mandy asked.

Jaide smiled sheepishly, “Actually, they’re not just with me, they’re mine. I bought a bordello the other day. Got it for a steal and they came with it.”

Michelle bit back her laughter. Buying a bordello on a whim was a very Jaide thing to do. She glanced in the direction that she'd seen Dmitri being pawed a moment before, but didn't see him.

"Jaide, do you mind if I have a word with a couple of your girls?" Mandy asked, hiking her sleeve up.

Jaide looked at Michelle and smiled. "I see she hasn't changed a bit." She took a sip of her OJ and nodded in the direction of the bar. "Sure, be sure to rough them all up, they've been getting on my nerves."

"Not a problem," Mandy said, heading towards the bar.

"Who is the hunk your with?" Michelle asked.

"Oh, that's Vachel, Raphael's brother."

Michelle was impressed. She knew that Raphael was the inspiration for one of Jaide's books, *Seduced by Darkness*, but she didn't know that the brothers were as handsome in real life as she'd made them in the book. "You should bring your men in more often. I don't think that I've read one of your books and haven't drooled. Where's an intergalactic bad boy when you need one? You know I'm waiting for my book with the brothers. You promised them to me a couple months ago."

"Off getting into trouble, I'm sure," Jaide said with a grin.

"Could you stop by my office tomorrow? I've been dying to talk to you about your upcoming release *His Wicked Ways*," said Michelle, doing her best to stay focused on her good friend Jaide.

"OUCH!" someone yelled.

Michelle turned to see the brunette who had been all over Armando staggering towards them, holding her face. She brought her hand away revealing a bloody nose. Michelle didn't bother to hide her laughter.

Jaide stayed very still until the brunette was within a foot of her. She then lashed out, punching the girl in the jaw. Jaide rubbed her hand and winked at Michelle. "Oh, that one has been under my skin for days." She glanced up towards the bar. A blonde with the biggest pair of ta-ta's in the world held her eye moaning softly. "That bitch hit me!"

"Should we go help Mandy?" Jaide asked, giggling.

"Sure," said Michelle, scowling. "I've got dibs on the redhead."

~*****~

Armando stood still, with his arms out, looking at her like she was a fragile child. Mandy wanted to gauge his gorgeous dark eyes from his head. “Thanks a hell of a lot. I love walking in and finding you getting felt up by a girl in the corner.”

“Excuse me, but am I allowed a chance to defend myself?” he asked, taking a small step forward.

“What’s to defend? I saw her all over you!”

“Precisely.”

Mandy resisted knocking him on his backside. It was tough, but she managed. “What? Is that your defense? God, I’m so stupid. I knew better than to fall for you. I knew that someone like you would do this. Of course you’d want a freakishly tall woman with enough work to make Joan Rivers look real.”

“Kitten,” Armando said, trying to touch her.

She batted his hand away. “Don’t Kitten me!”

“Tell me then, when is your date with James? Tonight, tomorrow? When were you planning on sneaking away to be with him?” asked Armando, his face void of emotion.

Mandy stood there, too stunned to move. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Do not play coy with me, Mandy. I know that you agreed to go out with him. How could you? Even if the fact that this hurts our relationship isn’t enough, your current state should be.”

She tried her best to absorb what he was saying. “Wait, we have a relationship?”

“I thought that was obvious.”

“So, tell me why you let the tramp hang all over you,” Mandy said, matter-of-factly.

“Oh, I’ve got this one,” Jaide said. She put her hand on Mandy’s shoulder and gave her a weak smile.

“Cinnamon has a vampire fetish. She’s always slitting her wrists to try and lure them out,” Jaide said, pushing her curly locks back from her face.

“Cinnamon? Her name is Cinnamon?” Mandy glared at Armando. “You cheated on me with a spice!”

“Oh, sugs,” Jaide said, pulling her back from Armando. “He’d been trying to keep her at arms length since we got here. He even offered some bleached blonde British vamp to her for the taking. I’m not sure why he ran off. Might have had something to do with vamp-boy here threatening to rip his heart from his chest.”

Mandy looked up at Armando. “You scared James off?”

“Yes and I would do it again.” He reached out and took her hand. “This will be bruised come morning. Was hitting the other girls truly worth it?”

“It felt damn good and I’d do it again.”

Armando pulled Mandy closer to him and she didn’t fight him when he embraced her.

“JAIDE!”

Mandy turned to see the redhead who had been giving Dmitri his own private dance getting the crap beat out of her by Michelle. Armando took a deep breath in and looked sad. “What’s wrong?”

“Your female workings arrived,” he said, softly.

It took Mandy only a second to get what he meant. She cringed at the thought of her boyfriend’s gift for smelling blood. “It’s not me, it’s Michelle. Mine must be taking the month off. It’s about time. I could stand a small break.”

“You took a test then, so you are not...?”

Mandy stepped back as the redhead slid past her on the floor. She smiled down at her before pushing her back towards Michelle with her foot. “I love how easy things slide on your floor.” She put a lot of emphasis on the word easy.

“Mandy, you did take a test, right?”

“What?” she asked, still watching Michelle pound on the supermodel hussy. “No, I already told you that there’s no need. I highly doubt that I’ll be selected for an Immaculate Conception, and since you’re into withholding the goods, I’m settling in for a dry spell. Oh, have you reconsidered? We are in a relationship now.”

Michelle wanted to hit the slut one more time, but someone grabbed her around her waist and spun her around. She narrowed her eyes to thin slits when she saw that it was Dmitri.

“Put me down!”

“No.”

Michelle gasped. “Why, the nerve of you! I’m beside myself with worry thinking that I’m...” she let the part about being pregnant slide. “I come back here and find you getting a lap dance.”

“So,” Dmitri said, coldly.

“So?” Michelle echoed.

“Yeah, so!” Dmitri dropped her down and she kicked out, catching his shin. “Ouch, damn it! You’ve got a lot of nerve coming in here with that kind of attitude. What will your boyfriend say when he finds out you’re participating in bar fights in your ‘delicate condition’?”

Michelle’s temper hit a whole new level. “I didn’t know that menstruating was referred to as a condition nowadays. Not that your archaic speech patterns surprise me, you...ancient relic! And, what boyfriend?”

Dmitri grabbed her arm. “You’re not expecting a child?”

“No and I don’t have a boyfriend.” She refused to say that she desperately wanted him to fill that position.

“Then why did you think you might be pregnant?” Dmitri asked, loosening his grip on her slightly.

Michelle blushed, not wanting to bring up what they’d been so delicately skating around for the past two weeks. “That night, after the bachelorette party, I woke up naked in your bed, and I was late, so I...”

“You thought that I lied about not taking advantage of you,” Dmitri said, pulling her close to him. His hug was strong and much needed. Michelle slipped her arms around him and returned the affection. “I’m happy that there’s no one else, but it hurts that you don’t trust me.”

“You were getting a lap dance when I walked in. Does that seem trustworthy to you?” she asked, her voice slightly muffled from his massive chest pushing against her face.

“I thought you were sleeping with someone else.”

“Did it occur to you to just ask me?”

Dmitri sighed. “Did it occur to you to believe me when I told you nothing happened between us?” Michelle didn’t answer and he pulled back to give her a wolfish grin, “At least not yet, anyway.”

Chapter 12

Graphic Language & Sexual Content

Interview with Celeste Anwar

“Mandy?” Michelle asked, worried that her friend still seemed to be zoning out on her.

Mandy glanced up from her desk and smiled. “I’m sorry, what?”

“It’s late and you hate working over. What gives?” Michelle knew something had been on Mandy’s mind all day. They were supposed to go to lunch together, but Mandy had cancelled at the last minute. She didn’t give Michelle a reason. She just said that she’d catch up with her after work.

“Nothing, I’m fine. Just need to handle a few things.”

“Anything I can help with?”

Mandy shook her head and looked at her computer screen. “No, I’m good. I’ll meet you at the club later, promise.”

Michelle nodded and turned from the door. She dreaded what she had to do now. She’d made up her mind this morning that she would iron out her feelings for Dmitri if it was the last thing she ever did. Quite possibly it would be. She was sure the humiliation of coming clean was going to kill her. What if he didn’t feel the same way? Or even close to the same way? Was she being too serious about it? Did she just need to loosen up a bit and...?

“No,” Michelle said to herself. “You are NOT going to talk yourself out of this again. You’re going to quit being a little coward. You’re going to be brave. You’re going to march right up to him and say...say.... Well, whatever it is, it will be brilliant.”

Michelle’s whole body shook with nerves, as she walked down the hall to her office. She really hoped that Dmitri felt the same way about her as she did him. He seemed to care for her, but her distrust of him had driven a wedge between them.

It had been two days since she’d last seen him. She’d all but called him a liar to his face. Walking in and seeing him getting the lap dance of a lifetime had pushed her over the edge. Not that she had a right to be jealous. She’d never let him get close to her. She’d never heard him out about his feelings, never gave him a chance. After careful consideration, she realized it was foolish of her to think Dmitri did anything with her the night of the dreaded bachelorette party. When she drank, she got sick. If she was sick, she wasn’t exactly on anyone’s ‘must screw’ list.

She’d tried to call him several times since then, but each time she hung up like a coward before dialing the last digit. What she had to say couldn’t be done over the phone. It needed to be done face to face.

Michelle grabbed her keys and locked her office up before going to get her car. The drive to Dmitri’s house didn’t seem long enough. She’d spent the greater part of the day attempting to come up with some profound thing to say to him when she saw him, but was still empty-handed.

She parked her car outside his house and sat there for a minute. “You can do this, Michelle. Get a grip and, for God’s sake, stop talking to yourself. He’ll see you and think you’re crazy. Oh, God, you probably are crazy. Great, Michelle, now you’re actually answering back.”

Getting out of the car was the hardest thing she’d ever done. Every ounce of her wanted to turn around and head home. She’d see Dmitri later at the bar, she was sure of it. But if she continued on that path, she’d never find out how he really felt about her and if anything could ever come of it.

She knocked softly on the door and waited. The door flew open and it took her a minute to focus. He stood there in a pair of jeans and nothing else.

“Michelle, what’s wrong? Has something happened?” Dmitri asked, filling the gap between them.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m fine, everyone’s fine. I just wanted to talk to you for a second.”

“I have a phone.”

What the hell am I doing here? He doesn't want me here.

"You're right. I should have called. You must be busy. It doesn't matter. It's not important." Michelle's mouth snapped shut. She was babbling. Weakly, she said, "I'll see you around." She spun on her heels to leave, rolling her eyes in her head as she tried not to run away in horror.

Dmitri caught her by her elbow and tried to turn her gently into his arms. She was stiff. "I didn't mean it like that. You don't have to go. I just don't like the idea of you driving all around town by yourself."

"Uh, okay," she said, unsure how to respond to his concern. She chanced a peek up at his handsome face and felt her knees go weak when his grey eyes locked on her. Her pulse sped and her breathing changed. If she didn't spill it all soon, she'd either pass out or throw-up. Knowing she was going to babble again, she started speaking anyway, "Dmitri, I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I didn't believe you about nothing happening between us that night. It was wrong of me to assume the worst in you. You have been very honorable and I needed...to get that out...in the open...before I..."

She panted, ringing her hands until her knuckles turned white.

"Michelle?" he said, glancing nervously over his shoulder. "Is something wrong?"

She put her hand up. "No, I'm on a roll and this doesn't happen often so, please, let me finish." She didn't wait for his approval. "I know I'm going to regret saying this. In fact, I already kind of regret it—"

"Michelle?"

"I like you. I mean I do have feelings for you and I...oh, hell! This is all wrong." She made a weak noise of embarrassment. "I need to know how you really feel about me." Her face was beat red when she finished. She'd never put her emotions on the line before and never wanted to do it again. Thinking she might be pregnant had devastated her. Finding out that she wasn't hurt worse. She wasn't sure what that meant.

Dmitri stood there with his mouth open. He'd never been at a loss for words before with her. Her gut tightened as she waited, sure the seconds were going to kill her. He put his hand out and touched her shoulder. "Really?"

Really? That was his profound response? Really? She'd braced herself for no, not interested, or sure let's hop in bed and I'll give you the ride of your life, but really wasn't one she'd considered.

"Really, what?" a sexy female voice asked from the other side of the door, full of a slow Louisiana drawl.

Michelle's heart leapt into her throat. The facts hit her like a slap in the face. She'd been too nervous to see it before—the way he looked over his shoulder, him wanting her to call first, the fact that he was only half dressed in the middle of the day. He wasn't alone. Her eyes widened and she took two steps back, shaking her head in shock.

Dmitri's mouth opened to speak and he reached for her. He was stopped by a thin arm moving up and around his torso. Michelle watched in horror as a woman appeared behind Dmitri. She ran her hand over his chest, stopping on his nipple, and looked over his shoulder. She smiled at Michelle and leaned into Dmitri.

“Baby, if you want to do this, you need to hurry up. I've got other clients waiting on me,” she said, with the slight hint of a drawl. She tweaked his nipple and he jumped, his eyes darting to Michelle's.

Michelle barely saw the woman in back of him. All she could see was his round eyes—eyes that looked pained at being caught with what could only be a prostitute. Well, better she knew now, she told herself. The words were little comfort.

“I just remembered I have to meet Mandy for work,” she whispered. It was the lamest excuse in the world, but she didn't care. Turning, she rushed to her car and hopped in. She only glanced back once. It was to see Dmitri, standing in the doorway, looking after her as the woman pulled insistently on his arm to get him inside.

~*****~

Mandy stared at her computer screen, reading the email again, for the hundredth time that day. When she'd arrived at work she'd found it in her inbox. She hadn't thought much of it. Angelica, the senior editor of the *Nocturnal Journal*, had been setting up an office in Chicago for weeks now. The *Journal* had gone national and now, there was talk of it going global. Seeing the job offer of a lifetime should have made her happy. Instead, she'd spent the majority of the day in a state of numbness.

Angelica was offering her a chance to run the marketing department, which would be located out of the Chicago branch. The pay increase would be nice, and it's what she loved to do, but the nagging feeling in her gut wouldn't go away.

She thought about talking to Michelle about it, but she knew Michelle's take on careers—do whatever is necessary to succeed. She'd shared that outlook until a few short weeks ago. Armando had changed her somehow. She felt drawn to him, and the thought of leaving him to chase her dreams had been eating at her all day. She couldn't be in love with him. She made it a point to never fall in love. So why the hell was she so afraid to tell him?

Mandy weighed her options and dialed a couple of numbers. Ellen wasn't home, Elaine was gone on business, and Shiloh was nowhere to be found. She'd run out of alternatives. She dug through her purse and sighed when she held the napkin in her hand. She punched the numbers in her phone and held her breath.

"Hullo?"

"James, hi it's...."

"Mandy?" The fact that he knew her voice made her smile. She wasn't sure why. "You okay, love?"

"I need to talk to someone and well, you're all I could come up with." It wasn't pretty, but it was the truth and if she knew James, he wouldn't care.

"Right, you down at the Raven then?"

"NO! No, we can't talk down at the club. We need to meet somewhere else."

"Probably best," James said, his voice a bit shaky. "Armando fancies you, and I'd rather not end up on the wrong side of a stake tonight. You're welcome to come here."

"To your house? Umm, thanks, but no." She let out a nervous laugh. "How about my place, and before you get all cute and cocky, James, this is just to talk. I need a friend right now, not a lover." She lied. She needed a lover too, but Armando was the only one who would fit the bill.

"No problem, but if you tell anyone that I've a got a sappy side, I'll...I'll...hell, I don't know what I'll do, but it'll be bad, I can promise you that."

Mandy gave him directions to her house between giggles. "Give me a bit. I need to stop off at the club and touch base with Michelle."

~*****~

Michelle pulled into the Raven's long parking lot. The drive had taken a lot longer than it should have. She'd taken five wrong turns in her anger. Okay, so she wasn't angry so much as hurt. She didn't want to be at the club—didn't want to come here ever again. Only the fact that she promised Mandy she would meet her got her across the parking lot and through the front door. Mandy had really seemed distracted earlier at the office.

A prostitute! She fumed, nearing tears. She'd promised herself she wouldn't cry over this. It's not like Dmitri ever made her any promises. It's not like he was her boyfriend. She had no right to be jealous. Oh, but she was. The thought pissed her off. Anger was so much easier to feel than pain. That bastard! He's actually paying for a prostitute when I...when he could have me? Great. He'd rather spend money instead of being with... Gawd! I've been passed over for a whore. This is a new low, even for me. I mean, why didn't he try and sleep with me? Was I so repulsive that he could spend the WHOLE night naked by my side and not even try to cop a feel? It's not like he's the gentleman Armando is.

Michelle stopped and looked around for Mandy. It looked as if she wasn't here yet. Seeing Mike at the bar, she grimaced. The last thing she wanted right now was another insincere lycan flirting with her. Hell, maybe that's exactly what she needed. It's not like Dmitri would care what she did.

"Give me a shot," Michelle said, strolling up to Mike. She sat down and stared at him. Despite her resolve to flirt with him, she couldn't bring herself to do it. She felt too low.

"I...I can't," Mike said, looking pained.

"What, you run out of liquor?" Michelle asked wryly. She placed her hands on the bar and stood. Pointing over his shoulder, she demanded, "I want a shot of tequila. Now."

Mike turned and worked for a moment. When he came back, he set a cup of coffee on the bartop and gave a sorry grin.

"What the hell is this crap?" Michelle demanded, her eyes narrowing in on him. Well, if she couldn't annihilate Dmitri, she'd have to settle for his cousin.

"It's coffee. And I'll have you know it's not crap. It was ordered special, just for you," said Mike.

Michelle grimaced. He had to be joking. "I want tequila."

"I can't give you tequila."

"Alright, then give me whiskey. Give me Everclear. I don't care. Just make sure it's liquor and put it in a glass."

"Listen, baby, I would if I could. But, my orders are clear. I am not to let you drink unless...." Mike had the good grace to look embarrassed.

"Unless?" Michelle prodded.

“Unless Dmitri is here to make sure you’re watched after. He doesn’t want you getting into trouble.”

Michelle froze, staring at Mike, barely able to breathe.

“Here, have the coffee. Dmitri ordered it from overseas for you. He knows you love coffee. It’s really good. He even ordered some of that girlie vanilla French creamer you like.”

Michelle couldn’t move. Mike was looking at her like she should melt into a heap of pure feminine pleasure. To his horror, she burst into tears and ran to the bathroom to hide.

Frowning, Mike lifted the cup and sniffed. Then, with a worried look, he dumped it down the drain, moving to make a fresh pot.

~****~

Dmitri strode through the door of the Raven, frowning. He looked all over the club. Then, seeing his cousin at the bar, he growled, “Where is she?”

Mike looked up from where he was absently wiping the already clean counter and jerked his thumb towards the ladies restroom. “I wouldn’t go in there right now. I think she’s sick or something.”

“What’s going on Dmitri? You trying to lose us on the way here or what? Not that I mind speeding, but you drive like an animal.”

“I am an animal,” Dmitri answered absently. The woman who’d been at his house chuckled in appreciation at the obvious joke. Dmitri turned to her and sighed. “It’s nothing, Celeste. Why don’t you and the guys go set up in the private booth in the corner? I’ll have Mike come over to take your order. You should eat before you get started. Go ahead and put the suspension gear out on the floor. Have Makonnen help if you need him.”

Celeste Anwar shrugged a delicate shoulder before turning around to the three Cajun lycans carrying what looked to be a couple of tool boxes and some wire. She pointed towards the private booth. “Raoul, Gabriel, Navarre—private showing’s goin’ be over there boys. Hey, where’s Frost?”

“You mean the all knowing fay Prince Tamann,” laughed Navarre. “He’s on his cell phone planning some sort of Mystery Ball.”

The other lycans snickered.

“Yeah, he’s looking for his chosen,” said Gabriel, oozing lethal charm and causing the others to laugh harder. “He’s going to soul share. Hey, Navarre, why don’t you go give him some of your Carnal Knowledge?”

“Ah, I can’t take you guys anywhere.” Celeste rolled her eyes. When she turned back around, Dmitri was at the bar talking to the bartender. “Let’s set up! And no fighting tonight! I mean it!”

~****~

So much for not crying. Michelle sniffed, dabbing at her red eyes. Looking in the mirror, she quickly fixed her makeup so that her emotional outburst wasn’t so evident. With a sigh, she turned to the door and began to head out.

“Michelle?”

Michelle froze. Dmitri! What was he doing here? He was supposed to be home screwing his little prostitute! Her eyes darted around looking for a quiet escape. The only window was sealed shut.

“I know you’re in there!” called Dmitri, sounding irritated. “Either answer me or I’m coming in there after you!”

Michelle grimaced, again looking for an escape. Weakly, she said, “I’m busy.” Michelle rolled her eyes, knowing how bad that sounded. “Go away. You can’t come in. This...this is the ladies room!”

“It’s my bar and we aren’t in grade school,” came his laughing answer.

“What do you want?” asked Michelle, carefully creeping closer to the bathroom door.

“I...ugh...you have five seconds to get decent and then I’m coming in.”

Michelle made a weak sound. Ah, to hell with it! She ran and tried to pull at the tiny, painted shut window.

“What are you doing?” asked Dmitri, amused.

Michelle turned to give him a hard stare. When she looked at him, his dark expression didn’t match his lighter voice. He looked livid.

“What are you doing?” she countered. “I’m a lady, I belong here.”

Michelle heard him mumble something under his breath about ladies and thought it best not to ask him to clarify. He shut the bathroom door, took a key from his pocket, and locked it. Setting the key on the edge of the sink, he said, “There, now we can talk in private.”

“Open the door. We have nothing to talk about.”

“Really? It didn’t seem that way to me earlier when you came to my house.”

“I said what I needed to,” she answered weakly, backing away to put distance between them. Man, he was just too handsome for his own good. “I’m sorry for jumping down your throat about the night I got drunk, and I’m sorry I assumed the worst in you. That was all I had to say.”

“What about the other?” he demanded.

“What other?” she asked weakly, playing dumb.

“You said you had feelings for me,” he answered, not taking his grey eyes from her face. She swallowed nervously and took another step back.

“Oh, that. Well, don’t read too much into it. I just meant that I liked you as a friend. I was trying to tell you that but, well, your...your...”

“My?”

“Fine, your whore interrupted me. Listen, I really don’t care what or who you do. I am sorry I interrupted your little—”

“If you don’t care what I do, why did Mike say you were upset?” Dmitri took a step closer, coming forward until he stood only a foot away from her.

“Not everything revolves around you. Gawd, you’re so vain!” Michelle couldn’t move. He smelled so good. Like vanilla and mint. Her legs trembled.

Dmitri let a slow, curling smile alight on his devilishly handsome features. His voice a low rumble, he reached to touch her shoulder. “Then, what was bothering you?”

“It’s...” Michelle jerked back. Blinking hard, she couldn’t meet his eyes. Her pulse jumped, hitting hard against her throat. “Well, if you must know, it’s this guy I’m seeing.”

“A guy?” asked Dmitri, unconvinced. “That you’re seeing?”

“Mmm, yeah,” said Michelle, praying that this one time she could be a convincing liar. She really didn’t want him thinking she was pining away for him. It was bad enough that she really was pining away for him.

“Does this guy have a name?”

“You don’t know him,” said Michelle. “It’s not important.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No,” she answered, her voice growing faint with each of her words. With each of his words, Dmitri moved closer.

“I thought you liked me as a friend,” he whispered. “Why don’t you share your problems with this...guy. Maybe I could help.”

“Hey, weren’t you mad about something when you came in here?” she demanded, finding the strength to push past him. “I’m sorry I made you mad ‘cause I interrupted your paid time with your...woman. However, my dating life really is none of your business.”

Michelle managed to slip the key from the sink before he turned around to look at her. She edged closer to the door.

“Argh!” Dmitri howled, glaring. “I really don’t understand you sometimes! Why are you always so ready to think the worst of me! I can’t win with you!”

“Hey, I’m not the one getting lap dances and sleeping with prostitutes,” Michelle yelled back. She gasped and covered her mouth. With a small moan of horror, she turned, unlocking the bathroom door with amazing speed.

Dmitri’s hand slammed down on it before she could get it opened. His body was close to hers, radiating an intense heat that made her shiver. She gasped for air, feeling breathless and trapped. His face came close to her neck, as he whispered, “I thought you were seeing someone else. What do you care if I get a few lap dances? It’s not like we’re dating or anything.”

“Exactly,” said Michelle, her heart breaking just a little.

“So what do you care if I sleep with prostitutes?” he whispered, his lips so close she thought she felt them brushing her skin in the lightest of caresses.

“I don’t,” she lied. “I’m just worried you’ll get a disease, that’s all. Do what you want, it’s none of my business.”

“What if I told you I wanted it to be your business,” said Dmitri. “That I wanted—”

“Michelle, what’s going on? Mike said you were upset and that you’d locked yourself in the bathroom.”

There was a push on the door and Dmitri automatically pulled back, running his hands through his hair in frustration at Mandy’s voice. Michelle didn’t turn around. She pulled open the door and hurried out into the bar before Mandy could see Dmitri. Giving Mandy a smile, she said, “Nothing’s wrong. I had to make a call and the reception in the bar was bad, so I went in the bathroom.”

“Who were you talking to?” asked Mandy, suspiciously looking her friend over. Michelle looked tired, stressed.

“Oh, just Charlotte from work. She said we both got some new reviews in. Daughter of Darkness got five angels and The Mists of Midnight got five blue ribbons. She thought we’d want to know right away,” said Michelle.

“Oh, Charlotte,” said Mandy, not looking ecstatic by the news. “She’s new, huh?”

“Yeah, I think the new boss brought her in,” said Michelle, cautiously pulling Mandy towards the main bar area. She glanced over her shoulder to see Dmitri coming from the woman’s bathroom. His eyes narrowed on her in frustration. Mandy started to turn and look. Michelle grabbed her arm and pulled. “Hey, what’s all this stuff? It looks like a circus is setting up.”

Mandy looked over to the suspicion harness that some lycans were erecting. “Oh, they’re going to hang from those later from hooks in their chests. It’s a freaky sideshow type thing. Pretty cool stuff. Yeah, Dmitri even brought in a piercer for the occasion. I think they’re friends of his and are staying with him.”

“Piercings?” said Michelle, looking very interested. “Where?”

Mandy laughed. “It still amazes me that you are into piercings and tattoos. It just doesn’t fit.”

“What? They’re cool.”

“Over there, Celeste Anwar. She’s a writer for NCP. I believe she’s done Carnal Knowledge, Carnal Desire, The Color of Twilight—”

“Born of Night. I’m not an idiot,” laughed Michelle. “I know who she is.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” said Mandy, looking worn out.

“Hey, what’s up with you?” asked Michelle.

“Huh? Oh, nothing. Come on. I think she’s about to pierce Mike’s nipples.”

Michelle froze as she saw Celeste the piercer. A sinking feeling started in the pit of her stomach. The woman wasn’t a prostitute, she was a body piercer. Watching as her gloved hands threaded a captive bead ring through Mike’s nipple, Michelle closed her eyes.

“I bet you anything Dmitri got that done today,” she muttered, feeling like an idiot. The woman had been pinching his nipples. What else was she to think? Watching Mike flinch, she thought, oh yeah, this.

“What did you say?” asked Mandy.

“Ah, Kitten,” came Armando’s voice. He came to chuckle at Mike’s grunting noises of pain as he tried to act brave. “Enjoying the show?”

Mandy grinned. “I would enjoy it even more if you were to get your Prince Albert done.”

Armando grimaced.

Michelle chuckled, despite herself. “Don’t think that’s wise. You have to keep from having sex for awhile.”

“Ah, that doesn’t matter with us, does it Gentleman Armando?” teased Mandy. “It’s not like we use his equipment anyway. Come on, Armando, do it!”

“Ah....” began Armando.

“Excuse us,” said Dmitri. Michelle blinked to hear him. Turning, she started to open her mouth when she was scooped up and thrown over a hard, masculine shoulder. She gasped in surprise as she was carted off to the office.

“Dmitri?” she asked, shocked. “What...?”

He kicked the door shut behind him and set her down. His eyes burned with flecks of gold.

“Dmit—ohmygawd! You’re bleeding!” Michelle pointed at his chest.

“It’s nothing.”

Michelle went to him, “You got pierced didn’t you? She wasn’t a prostitu—”

Dmitri leaned over and grabbed Michelle's face in his hands. He pulled her startled expression towards his face, kissing her hard and deep. Michelle moaned, but soon her eyes closed with a dreamy sigh. Her hands wound up to his neck and into his soft, brownish blonde hair.

"Dmitri...?" she tried to breathe against his lips, confused.

"Shhh." Dmitri grabbed her shoulders and pulled her whole length to him. "Just shut up for once. I'm tired of asking your permission, so I'm just going to kiss you whether you like it or not. Besides, talking only gets us into trouble. We can't seem to get it right with words."

Michelle was about to protest, but his tongue lining the edge of her mouth kept her quiet. She moaned softly, working her body closer to his. She felt the lines of his chest against hers, the hardness of him pressing into her stomach from beneath his slacks.

Dmitri growled in the back of his throat. His hands wrapped around her back, grabbing her butt as he lifted her up. Her legs wound around his waist. He tasted so good. He smelled fresh and clean, invading her senses until she could think of nothing but the feel, taste and smell of Dmitri. Nothing else mattered. She didn't want him to stop, wasn't going to make him this time. She wanted him, this. She wanted it bad and she was tired of denying herself.

Michelle rubbed softly against his body, rocking against him. A soft purr came from her as she allowed him to walk her to the office couch. Dmitri's strong arms supported her easily. He was so big, so strong. She felt so delicate when she was with him, she felt protected. He laid her gently on her back, not parting from the kiss. His tongue danced in her mouth, touching everywhere, exploring, demanding, taking, and she gladly let him.

Michelle moaned and shivered. Dmitri's low, throaty groan answered her in approval. Her hands moved to unbutton his shirt, wanting him desperately. To her amazement, he stopped the kiss and looked at her, panting for air.

Her hands stopped when she saw the possessive look in his eyes. "It's settled then."

"Settled?" she breathed, looking at his swollen lips as she licked hers.

"Yes, you're mine, exclusively and I am yours." Dmitri leaned over and kissed her stunned mouth. Her eyes rounded in surprise as he pulled back. "Go call this other guy you're dating and tell him to get lost. You have a boyfriend."

Michelle swallowed. Weakly, she uttered the only thing she could think of, "There isn't another guy."

Dmitri grinned, kissed her lips lightly and said, "I know."

To Michelle's further amazement, he stood up and strode to the door. As he left her alone, her body on fire for him, so desperate and achy with need, he began to whistle a happy tune. Michelle gulped, unable to move from the unfulfilled desires in her body.

"I have a boyfriend," she said weakly. Her head dropped to the couch in amazement. Damned if Dmitri didn't know how to have a conversation.

Chapter 13

Graphic Language & Sexual Content

Kit-ten

Armando pulled up outside Mandy's house. She hadn't seemed like herself and he wanted to double check that she was well. It was odd that she would have rushed off like she did, especially since she hadn't bothered to tell Michelle she was leaving the club, and she certainly hadn't bothered to tell him. He made his way up to the door to her complex and entered the lower level. The very fact that he could scared him. Who had been letting vampires into Mandy's building? According to Mandy, there were only two other units with hers. One had an elderly woman in it, and the other was currently being renovated.

Armando's heard someone cry out—Mandy. He raced up the stairwell and froze when he heard the cry give way to laughter. "What?"

"Come on, love." He heard James' voice and felt his nostrils flare. "Oh, that feels good. Where'd you learn how to do that?"

"Ah, hold still, I need to...." Mandy let out a small moan. "See, I do have a few tricks up my sleeve."

Armando, no longer able to control the monster within him, let his power flow free. The door to Mandy's apartment burst open. His eyes narrowed to slits when he saw James' back to him, Mandy, sat on the couch before him. Armando's stomach lurched as his rage ripped a scream through his throat.

"MANDY!"

~*****~

Mandy turned James' hand over and looked at it. She felt horrible that one of her glasses had shattered in his hand. He didn't seem to mind bleeding all over her house. She, on the other hand, did. She'd managed to convince him to sit still while she cleaned it out. Amazing, since she was pretty sure that he was hyper.

She looked up at him, as he stood before her, and smiled. "See, I do have a few tricks up my sleeve."

There was a loud bang and followed close by Armando's voice. "MANDY!"

James grabbed her arms and pulled her up to him. She barely had time to protest before James was yanked backwards. "Armando!"

Armando stood there looking down at James, who now lay on the floor. "This was why you would not stay with me?" His foot went back and he landed a kick in the center of James' ribs.

Mandy screamed and ran towards them. "What the hell are you doing? Leave him alone."

James groaned, but rolled to his side, springing to his feet in the process. He snarled at Armando, and Mandy ran towards him. Armando may have lost his mind, but she'd be damned if she let them both go crazy. "James, stop it!"

He cocked his head to the side and looked at her, his eyes wild. He blinked and his blue eyes settled on her. "You all right?"

"Is she all right?" Armando asked, wryly. He cast an evil look at Mandy and drew his lips in.

Mandy looked at James. "Go, I'll be fine, and thank you."

James shook his head slightly. "I'm not about to walk out and leave you with him. Not like this."

"James, I'm fine, please go. I'll call you when I get back."

"So, you're going then?" James asked, his eyebrow rose.

Mandy looked at Armando and a shudder ran through her. He looked like he wanted to kill everything in his line of sight. “Oh, yeah, I’m going. His little freak out just proved my point.”

Armando moved closer to her. “And, what point is that?”

James eyed Armando up, waiting for the okay to strike. Mandy shook her head and pointed towards the door. “It’s fine, James. I need to speak with him privately.” She found it ironic that she’d called James over to discuss her feelings for Armando and how to best pursue a relationship with an immortal, only to see a side of Armando that made her sick.

“Tell you what. I’ll wait in the hall. If you need me....” His words were cut off when Armando snatched him by the neck.

“I will tell you what, little vampire. You will leave now!”

“Armando,” Mandy said, running towards him and touching his arm. He spun around, knocking her backwards in the process. His eyes widened as she stumbled, hitting the table, and sending the lamp crashing to the floor. She hit the floor hard with her knee first, then her side.

Armando was suddenly next to her, trying to lift her to her feet. “I am sorry. I did not mean to harm you in any way.”

“Christ man, she goes on and on about how much she loves you and you knock her on her arse,” James said, moving to Armando’s side.

“You love me?” Armando asked, shock evident on his face.

Mandy’s eyes narrowed and her jaw tightened. “Get out! I’m sick of not being trusted by you, and I’m sick to death of your cryptic talk and weird behavior.” She pushed herself up off the floor, refusing to take either of the hands that they offered.

“Mandy, stop and listen to me. Do you really think I would ever harm you?” Armando asked. James let out a snort and Armando shot him a nasty look.

“I don’t care! I’m actually happy that I saw this side of you. I almost gave up the opportunity of a lifetime to stay here for you.”

James whistled and walked towards the door. “Yeah, on that note, I’ll see myself out. Mandy, if you need me, call and I’ll come.”

“I will, and thanks.”

Armando sighed and Mandy gave him a hard push on his chest. "What in the hell were you thinking, barging in here and throwing people around my house?"

He snorted. "I hardly think of James as a person."

"He's as human as you, or should I say, inhuman." It was a low blow, but she didn't care.

"Is that how you view me, Mandy?"

She wanted to say yes and hit him over his thick skull, but she didn't. "No."

"Why was James here?"

"I asked him over. I needed to bounce a few problems off someone and he was the only person I could think of."

Armando slipped his dark grey jacket off and laid it on the back of her chair. He looked like he was making himself at home. Her cheeks flushed and she felt sick to her stomach at the thought of never seeing him again, but she couldn't continue on this way. She'd fallen for him hard and needed to move on. He wasn't the right man for her, was he?

"Mandy, are you feeling all right?" Armando moved to her side and guided her to the sofa. She sat, not because he wanted her too, but because she felt as though she might pass out. "We should make an appointment with the doctor in the morning."

"Why?" Mandy asked, fearing that his bizarre cryptic talk was about to start again.

He sat next to her and touched her cheek gently. He leaned in and pressed his cool lips to her mouth. His tongue inched its way over her lip, and she fought the urge to open and accept him. She put her hands on his chest and pressed firmly.

Armando pulled back from her and looked hurt. "Kitten?"

Kitten? Why did he have to call her that now? Why couldn't he just stay mad, like he'd been when he stormed in? It would be easier to tell him her decision if he wasn't being himself again.

He stroked her cheek again. "Kitten?"

She held her head up and looked him in the eyes. "I'm going to Chicago to look into a job offer. I'll be gone a week, and if I accept it, I will be moving by the end of the month."

Armando's brow creased. He shook his head slightly. "You cannot leave."

"Why?"

She expected him to say that her life was here, her friends were here, or maybe that he had some feelings for her too. What he said instead, floored her. "I believe that you may be carrying my child."

Mandy tried to talk, tried to say something, anything that would end the awkward silence between them. The best she could come up with was "how?"

Armando let out a small laugh. "I would like to think that you know how one comes to be in that condition."

She looked at him and pleaded with her eyes for him not to make light of the situation. "We've never done anything. You and your damn nice guy routine have kept this relationship strictly PG."

"No," he said, moving his arm around her. He pulled her close to his chest. "You are wrong. I am no nice guy, and we have done many things."

"I think I'd remember us sleeping together, don't you?"

"Yes, I had hoped that you would. But, when you awoke in my home after the bachelorette party, you had no memory of our time together. I was wrong to take you when you were in that condition, but in all honesty, I did not think you were that bad."

Mandy sat there, unable to move. "You lied to me."

Armando exhaled and tried to kiss her. She pushed on his chest to keep him at bay. "Kitten, you assumed that we had done nothing and I was hurt, no stunned, that you did not remember our time together."

"So you what? You decided it was best to keep it from me? We had a moment of passion and you thought it best to lie about it."

Armando shifted on the sofa. He tipped his head to the side and touched her leg gently. "Not just a moment, Kitten, five moments."

Mandy's hand went to her mouth. For a moment, it was hard to draw in air. She stood quickly, deflecting his hand off her leg.

"Kitten?"

"Don't call me that. Don't ever call me that again!" She glared at him, before striking out hard, and smacking his face. "You let me walk around, practically begging

you to touch me, when all along you've had it, FIVE times had it!" Mandy paced the room. "How many other people know? Have you all had a good laugh?"

Armando appeared behind her, trying to hug her. She pushed him away. "Mandy, you have every right to be upset with me. I took advantage of you and for that I am sorry. You said you were fine, that you knew what you were doing. I...I should have known you were too drunk to think straight."

"Son of a...you think that I'm mad about having sex with you? I've been trying to get you to do that for ages. I'm hurt that you lied to me, Armando. If you'll lie to me about something as big as this, you'll lie about anything."

"No," he said, trying yet again to touch her. "Please understand that I did not intend to lie to you. For the first time in centuries, I did not know what to say or do. You do that to me."

Mandy gasped. "Oh, this is my fault now, huh? Forget it. Just get out! I have to pack."

"Do not do this. You care for me. I can sense it. You do mean what you say. You are hurt, that is understandable, but to leave now would be wrong." Armando said, not budging from his spot.

"What happens if I revoke my invitation?" Mandy asked.

"You will cause me great pain."

"Figuratively or literally?" she asked, taking a step towards him.

"Both," Armando said.

"I revoke my invitations for vampires to be allowed into my home," Mandy said. Her voice sounded flat and foreign, even to her.

"Kit-ten!" Armando screamed out as his body was pulled through the doorway by an unseen force.

Mandy ran to the door, part of her wanted to slam it in his face. The other part wanted to be sure that he was all right. As much as she hated to admit it, she cared for him more than she'd ever cared for anyone in her life.

~*****~

Michelle sat at the airport staring at her shoe. Mandy leafed through a magazine next to her. They hadn't really spoken a word since they'd arrived. Michelle had overheard Mandy confirming her flight schedule and had cornered her about it. It hurt her that Mandy had felt the need to hide this from her. That wasn't the worst part. The worst part of it all was that Mandy had been going through a ton of stuff on her own, too concerned about worrying Michelle to let her help.

"So, are you going to take a pregnancy test?" Michelle asked, thinking about the fact that Armando had lied to Mandy about having sex with her. She shuddered when she thought of how alone she felt when she thought that Dmitri had lied to her and that she might be pregnant.

"No," Mandy said, still thumbing through the magazine.

"It would be a good idea."

"If my period doesn't show up by the time I get back, I'll call a doctor. I don't need to know right now."

Michelle nodded her head slightly and took the magazine from Mandy's hand. "You mean you don't want to know right now."

"It's not like I can do anything about it if I am," said Mandy. Both women knew that abortion was out of the question. And Mandy would never be able to give the baby up for adoption.

"What did Armando say about it?" asked Michelle. "Did he say he wanted it? Does he want to be a father?"

Mandy suddenly burst into tears. A man across the aisle looked up and chuckled at the sound. Michelle glared at him, shooting him dangers as she made an aggressive move to stand. The man gulped at her dark look and hurriedly moved to a different seat, far away from them.

Putting an arm around Mandy's shoulder, Michelle said, "We don't need him anyway. I figure the two of us can raise a baby just as well as any married couple, probably even better."

Mandy sniffed, swiping at her eyes. "What about this job? If I am, I'll really need the bigger paycheck."

"Ah, well, I guess we'll just have to go to Chicago together. We'll get a place, be roomies—all three of us."

"But, your job..." began Mandy.

“...will transfer to Chicago. They already offered me the promotion,” said Michelle.

“You didn’t tell me that.”

Michelle looked at the floor and said weakly, “I was going to turn it down. The good news is that everything happens for a reason and the mail delivery boy didn’t show up to the office today. The letter is still in my desk drawer. I don’t have to answer right away. Seems no one wants the Art Department there. I’ll nearly double my salary. Don’t worry. If there is a baby, she’ll be just fine.”

“But, what about Dmitri?” asked Mandy.

“What about him?” Michelle shrugged. Mandy knew Michelle long enough to know when she was hiding her feelings. “You’re more important to me than he is.”

“I know, thank you,” said Mandy. She dried her eyes, glad that the emotional outburst was out of the way. She really felt better knowing she wouldn’t be alone. She’d prefer the baby to have an around-the-clock father, but a girl couldn’t have everything. “But, I can’t ask you to go.”

“And you can’t expect me to stay.”

The boarding call came over the loud speaker. Michelle stood to give Mandy a hug. Mandy started to turn before stopping. Walking back to Michelle, she said, “Thank you. I want you to know that I understand what you’re willing to give up for me.”

Michelle said nothing.

“You love Dmitri and yet you’re willing to leave him to help me. I will never forget this.” Mandy lifted her ticket and touched her friend lightly on the shoulder.

“Only as much as you love Armando.” Michelle felt tears coming to her eyes. She didn’t want to move and leave Dmitri. She did love him. She was crazy about him, though she wasn’t anywhere ready to tell him as much. Some things were just better kept quiet. But Mandy was like a sister to her and family came before friends.

Mandy started backing up as the final call was made. “Then we are both doomed.”

“What a fine pair we’ll make in Chicago, wallowing in ice cream tubs and pity.” Michelle returned Mandy’s sad smile and stood there watching until she was out of sight. Then, picking up her coffee, she walked down the aisle, tripping as she passed the jerk who dared to laugh when Mandy was upset. Tripping on purpose, she spilled her coffee

right on the man's new laptop. Sparks flew and the man cursed in outrage. She didn't break stride as she glanced at him. "Not so funny now, is it asshole?"

Chapter 14

Graphic Language & Sexual Content

Interview with Veronica Chadwick

Michelle tried not to blush as Dmitri pulled her behind him into the club. She couldn't remember ever being so happy. After Dmitri's declaration that she was his girl, she'd been hard pressed to hide her feelings for him. She didn't need to ruin what was shaping up to be the best relationship of her life by rushing into declarations of love.

Frowning slightly, she thought of Mandy. She had not told Dmitri about her possible move. It was the only blight in an otherwise perfect week. And she still hadn't invited him to her home, though she wasn't sure why. It's not like she thought of him as a stalker or anything. He was her 'boyfriend' after all. She blushed anew.

"What are you thinking when you look at me like that?" he whispered, pulling her into his chest as he walked blindly backwards towards the bar, holding her to his waist. Their steps were small and his body moved wickedly against her.

Aside from some very scorching kisses, he had not tried to sleep with her. Michelle spent almost every night wanting to pull her hair out in frustration. What was wrong with him anyway? One moment, he's claiming she's at the bar looking for a good lycan to ride or boldly stating he's the man going to shag Mandy's friend Michelle...then nothing. He had not even tried to cop a feel. Her nights had been spent, lying in bed, staring at the ceiling in frustration, hearing the song lyrics, I want to fuck you like an animal, in her head over and over and over again. She was pretty sure she was close to going insane.

"Wouldn't you like to know," she murmured up to him.

"Yes, actually, I would," said Dmitri. "We've spent time together this week, and don't get me wrong, it's been a blast, but you never talk about yourself or us."

"I thought you said that talking got us into trouble." Michelle gave him a meaningful look without intending to. She blushed again. He growled and pulled her closer. His back leaned against the bar as he kept her close to him.

“What are you saying?” he asked brushing his lips softly to hers.

I want to throw you down on this bar top and shag your brains out. Michelle, for the life of her, couldn't make the words come out. “That we're having fun, so let's not jinx it.”

Dmitri's eyes narrowed and if she wasn't mistaken, her words had upset him. Before she could ask about it, Jaycee came up to them.

“Well, lookie what we have here! I take a week off and see what I come back too! Love birds!”

“Oh, we're not in love,” said Michelle, a little too quickly. Dmitri stiffened. Michelle wanted the floor to open up. Gulping, she pulled back and said, “How was your trip to Colorado? You get your research taken care of for Deadly Ties?”

“Sure did!” said Jaycee.

“I have to go do some paperwork,” said Dmitri, setting Michelle back. He touched the tip of her nose with his finger, looked like he wanted to say something, but merely shut his mouth and strode away.

“Soooo,” said Jaycee. “What's going on here?”

“Ah, Mike,” said Michelle with a small smile.

“Mike?” asked Jaycee, confused.

“Yeah, you'd better watch out.” Michelle chuckled. She'd seen the look on Dmitri's face and moved to follow him.

“Hey, wait!” yelled Jaycee. “Who's Mike?”

“He's the man who's goin' to show you how things are done around here, baby.”

Jaycee gasped as two hands came around her and set on the bar, trapping her from behind. With a growl, she stepped hard on Mike's foot. He howled in pain. Jaycee hesitated, took a deep breath, and hit his nose with her hand. “Foot, nose, groin,” she said, like she'd learned in self defense.

“Hold on now!” said Mike backing up in pain and protecting his family jewels. “Let's not overreact.”

“Do you always grab strange women in public?” demanded Jaycee, spinning around to glare at the man who'd grabbed her. Her jaw dropped open when she saw the gorgeous lycan.

Mike smiled, rubbing his nose. With a smirk, he answered, “Only ones with as nice a rump as yours, baby.”

“OH!” Jaycee stalked off in disgust of his manners. “I never!”

~*****~

“Dmitri?” asked Michelle, stepping into the office with a light knock. “Is everything...?”

Dmitri glanced up at her. He gave a light smile, though his eyes were guarded. “It’s fine. Here, I have a message from your office. It says your friend Veronica Chadwick is in town.”

“Oh, huh,” said Michelle, thoughtful. She looked at the note. “Mind if I use your phone?”

Go ahead,” said Dmitri. He busied himself with work. Michelle called Veronica’s hotel. A man answered.

“Hi, Veronica please,” she said.

“Ah, she’s in the shower, can I take a message?” asked the voice.

“This is Michelle returning—”

“Oh, hey, Michelle, it’s Draven!”

“Draven? Is Linea there with you?” Michelle asked, excited. Dmitri looked up at her happy voice.

“Sure is!” he laughed. “Never leave home without her.”

“Is she your woman or a credit card?” chuckled Michelle.

There was a long pause and Michelle knew she’d lost him. “Nevermind. How ‘bout Armond and Mason?”

“Sure they are!” came the voice.

Michelle leaned against Dmitri’s desk and started drawing absent circles on his shoulder. He glanced up at her and smiled, covering her fingers with his briefly. Michelle made arrangements for them to come to the club and hung up the phone.

“Wow, I can’t believe Veronica’s in town for the weekend,” said Michelle, glancing to see what Dmitri was working on. It looked like an inventory list. She saw the words ‘French vanilla creamer’ and smiled shyly. She knew she had to be the only one who came to a bar to drink coffee.

“I take it she’s a writer,” said Dmitri quietly, still checking his numbers.

“How’d you know?”

“Because practically everyone you know is a writer or in the business.”

“You’re not,” said Michelle, touching his shoulder, wondering again what had gotten into him.

“No, I’m not,” said Dmitri. Then, grinning, he asked, “I can read, does that get me on your friend list?”

Michelle knew what was coming. He was going to tease her about wanting to read her books. She gulped and bit her lip.

“So, I’m not on the friend list?” he said, a little too hard. He gripped his pen and turned back to the inventory sheet.

Michelle hesitated, and wrapped her hands around to his chest from behind. Leaning over, she set her chin on his shoulder. “Oh, course you’re on the friend list, maybe even towards the top. It’s just every time writing comes up you ask to read one of my books.”

“And you still don’t trust me to?” asked Dmitri.

“Well, they’re personal. Besides, they are girly books and wouldn’t interest you,” said Michelle.

“Really, how do you know? I actually like a good ghost story,” said Dmitri.

Michelle froze, a small sound escaping her lips. He’d read *The Mists of Midnight*? She wanted to die. He didn’t say anything more, though she waited for a critique. Did he think she was stupid, making people fall in love like a hopeless romantic? Oh, God! Was she that transparent? Did he finally realize she wasn’t the carefree woman he’d been dating this last week? That she was overly serious and hopelessly in....

“Towards the top, eh? And who do I have to have whacked to be number one?”

“Mandy,” said Michelle without thinking.

“Have you heard from her? Armando said she hasn’t called, and he’s been trying to track down her hotel,” said Dmitri.

Michelle didn’t tell him she knew exactly where Mandy was staying and she had indeed talked to her almost every night. She would not betray Mandy’s trust. “I...no.”

Dmitri straightened, moving his head around to breathe in her scent. He frowned and pushed her off his shoulders. Michelle stumbled back confused. She blinked as he turned to look at her.

“Dmitri?”

“You’re lying to me again,” he said simply. Dmitri frowned. She’d been lying to him or hiding things all week. “Why?”

“I...I can’t betray Mandy’s trust. I promised I wouldn’t let Armando find out where she was,” said Michelle with a helpless shrug.

“So you think you had to lie to me instead of telling me not to tell Armando?” asked Dmitri. “Is that how little you trust me? What am I to you anyway?”

“I...” Michelle stopped. She took a deep breath. This was getting to be very sensitive territory and she had to tread lightly. Do not say I love you. Do not say I love you. “Armando is your friend.”

“And you’re my—” Dmitri suddenly stopped.

“Can we not do this?” asked Michelle, worried that he was going to break up with her. She couldn’t bear it. She’d spent the entire week working so hard to keep her attitude and feelings light so as not to burden him with them. She didn’t want to ruin what they had by talking serious. She knew Dmitri’s reputation as a bad boy. Bad boys didn’t like to be tethered down with romantic sentiments and serious types like her. They liked to be carefree, wild, and most importantly, free.

Dmitri’s face became blank. In two strides he was across the room to her. His arm pulled around her waist, hugging her close. His finger drew over her cheek in a gentle caress. “We are doing this, Michelle. I won’t let you use Mandy and Armando’s situation to push me away.”

“Hey, Michelle! There’s some guy here to see you!” said Jaycee, knocking on the door and cracking it open. “Oh, are you two busy? Want me to tell him to go away?”

“No, we are done here,” said Dmitri. Michelle blinked, a worried expression coming to her wide blue eyes. Dmitri brushed a kiss on her nose. “You go say hi to your friends. I’ll finish up here and then we’ll go get some dinner.”

What just happened? Michelle had been so sure he was about to break up with her, but here he was making dinner plans. She smiled weakly and nodded. Leaving the office, she grinned to see a 6'4" handsome man with a goatee. "Draven!"

"Ah, there you are!" said Draven. "Veronica went to the bathroom to see if you were in there. Linea couldn't come, but she sends her regards. Hey, what's wrong with you? I've never felt you this insecure and frightened before? What happened to—?"

"Ah, please, you just got here, don't go all empathic on me, okay?" laughed Michelle, trying to cover up her feelings.

"Michelle!"

"Oh, good, Roni!" said Michelle to Veronica. She turned to smile at the brown haired woman coming from the direction of the bathrooms and gave her a hug. "You have to protect me from Draven. He's doing it again."

Veronica hit him lightly on the arm. "I told you people don't like it when you read them right away. Can't you keep your mouth shut?" Then turning back to Michelle, she said, "Who you really have to watch out for is Mason. I swear his ego grows daily."

"Hey, I resent that!" said Mason, an aggressively handsome man. He grinned, a devilishly teasing smile that drove the women wild. Armand, the quiet one of the bunch, stepped up behind him and nodded, scratching absently at the scar on his chin.

"Quite the place here," said Veronica. "A supernatural club. I never thought I'd be in one of these. Why are you here? I thought you didn't care for the supernatural."

"Ah, things change, don't they darling?"

Michelle stiffened at the sound of Dmitri's voice. She felt his hand clamp down possessively on her shoulder. Draven's lip twitched up in a small smile. Michelle knew the man was sensing her. She only prayed he'd keep it to himself this time. Seeing her worried look, Draven nodded at her in understanding.

"Hi, I'm Dmitri," said Dmitri, holding out his hand to the group. They smiled back at him. "Michelle's supernatural boyfriend."

~*****~

Mandy sat in the passenger seat of Michelle's car, unsure what to say. She was angry that Michelle had insisted on stopping by the club, but since she was basically her hostage there was little she could say in the form of a protest.

“So,” Michelle said, glancing over at her.

“So, what?”

“Are you okay with not being pregnant?” Michelle asked.

Mandy nodded. She'd gotten her period the day after she'd arrived in Chicago. It had been bittersweet. Prior to Armando's confession, she'd never entertained having a little one. Now, nearing thirty, she wondered if she ever would. It was for the best. “Yeah, I'm fine with it. It's for the best anyway. I got offered the job.”

Michelle tightened her grip on the steering wheel as she drove. “I see. Are you planning on accepting it?”

“I think so. It's the opportunity of a lifetime. I'll miss you, but there's always email and the phone.”

“I guess, but it won't be the same, not having you around to talk to all the time. I kind of like walking two doors down at work and finding you,” Michelle said, with a half smile.

“Change of subject. What's going on with you and Dmitri? Any juicy sex details I need to know about?”

“Don't I wish. He hasn't so much as neared my pants. Dmitri's been nothing but honorable,” Michelle said sardonically.

Mandy cringed at the mention of honorable. She forced a smile onto her face. “Look at the bright side, normally it's you forcing others to take a cold shower. Nice to take the week off from being such a prude?”

“Ha, ha,” Michelle said, laughing softly. “I do really like him. I'm not sure that I've ever felt this way before.”

“It's called being in love,” Mandy said, happy for the first time in over a week. Michelle laughed again, and Mandy knew that it was a sign that she was right. Michelle had it bad for Dmitri and if he did her wrong she'd break his legs.

“So, you going to tell me what all went on in Chicago?” Michelle asked, arching an eyebrow as she turned the corner.

Mandy shifted, a bit uncomfortable with where Michelle was going with this. “Not much to tell. Had interview, had second interview, sat at hotel, got my period, had a few drinks....”

“Mmm-huh,” Michelle said.

“Uncle,” Mandy said, giving in. “I had drinks with Dillon. He’s in Chicago for a paranormal conference and since our schedules allowed, we stopped off and talked for awhile.” Mandy hated bringing Dillon into this, but Michelle had a sixth sense about her. She could smell when Mandy was lying, and she knew full-well that Dillon was in Chicago as well.

“Nothing happened then?” Michelle asked. “I mean, he is a professor of demonology. Seems like he’s your type.”

Mandy balked. “My type is tall, dark, dead, and a liar. As much as I wanted to let something happen with Dillon, I didn’t.”

Michelle pulled the car up outside the Raven and opened her car door. “You’re coming in, right?”

“I think I’ll wait out here,” Mandy said, not wanting to face Armando.

“He’s not here. I phoned Dmitri before your flight came in and he got rid of him for a while,” Michelle said, smiling softly.

Mandy exhaled and followed her friend into the club. She’d been convinced that Michelle had been trying to get her to talk to Armando since the airport. It was good to hear she was wrong. She pushed the door to the club open and was immediately swept off her feet. She screamed out and looked into Armando’s face, before glancing over his shoulder at Michelle.

Michelle shrugged and waved to her. “Sorry, but you two need to talk.”

“Put me down!” she screamed at Armando.

He ignored her and strolled through the office door. He slammed it shut with his foot before setting her down on the floor. She tried to strike out at him, but he caught her hand in his and kissed it gently. He dropped down on one knee and reached into his jacket pocket.

Mandy’s heart went into her throat as Armando pulled out a tiny black box. She shook her head, trying to clear the barrage of thoughts running through it. He looked up at her, his long hair hung in his face. She reached up, brushed it out of his beautiful dark eyes, and continued to shake her head.

“Kitten,” Armando said, with a faint smile. He cleared his throat, took her hand in his, and started again. “Gioia mia, will you marry me?”

Mandy tried to pull her hand back. Armando wouldn’t let go of it. “Get up! I’m not pregnant.”

He kissed her hand, and smiled up at her. "I know. Michelle told me. Now, I will ask you this again." He pulled her down towards him. "Mandy, will you marry me?"

Chapter 15

Graphic Language & Sexual Content

Interview with Bonnie Sue Bradshaw,

"Did you get Mandy to come with you from the airport?"

Michelle glanced at Dmitri and then to the back office door where Mandy and Armando disappeared. She didn't hear Mandy screaming yet, so she assumed it was going well. "Yeah, I had to trick her. I'm not sure about this. Maybe he should have waited."

"The man's been alive longer than the two of us put together. There's no changing his mind once it's made up. Besides, it'll be good to see him happy again."

"Again?" Michelle asked, wondering what Dmitri wasn't telling her. He ignored her and strolled over to the bar.

"So, you want to see the plans for the second club?" Dmitri asked, pushing a bunch of blueprints across the bar towards her.

He'd mentioned that he and his partners were looking into purchasing another club, but Michelle didn't really want to think about it. It was bad enough that she might lose Mandy to Chicago, but losing Dmitri too would prove to be too much. He didn't seem to think opening a club overseas would interfere with their relationship.

"Want a cup of coffee?" he asked.

"No, I'm good. Thanks though." She glanced at the office door and began to chew on her thumbnail. "What do you think she'll say?"

Dmitri laughed. "You're her best friend. If you don't know, how the hell am I supposed to guess?"

Michelle detected an odd ring to his tone, and said as nonchalantly as she could muster, "I don't see what the big deal is."

“With what?” he asked, pouring her a cup of coffee anyway.

Michelle made her way to the bar and tried to ignore the plans for a new club—not that she understood what half of the architectural notations meant anyway. “With getting married. I’ve never seen the point in it. Who wants to be tied down to one person for the rest of their life?” Her insides churned as she said this. She, more than anyone, wanted a commitment from Dmitri, but his bad boy ways told her not to push it. He hadn’t so much as tried to touch her intimately since they started dating, which was proof enough that he might already be regretting the exclusiveness of their relationship. Marriage would be the furthest thing from his mind and it should be the furthest from hers as well.

“You’re awfully young to be so jaded. Care to share?” His eyes were shaded as he studied her.

“I just don’t buy into happily ever after. That’s all.” Michelle almost choked on the words. She took the cup he offered her and warmed her hands around it, too afraid to lift it in her shaky hands. She couldn’t meet his eyes, as she prayed he wouldn’t smell the lie on her. She was a bad enough liar to begin with. With a lycan boyfriend, she barely stood a chance.

“This from a woman who writes romance,” said Dmitri, looking very serious.

“Correction,” she defended, “I write horror, too.”

“Romantic horror,” chuckled Dmitri. “Tell me, do any of your stories end with an unhappily ever after?”

Michelle refused to answer, saying instead, “What’s it matter? It’s all fiction. Fiction has nothing to do with reality.”

She turned to go to the bathroom, hoping that she could avoid delving any deeper into this particular conversation with him. One more second and she’d be declaring her love and proposing to him on bended knee. That would just be wonderful. She could practically see the backs of his heels as he ran away from her screaming in horror. They hadn’t even slept together and here she was thinking of the future. Her eyes trailed to the office door and she wondered why she was suddenly jealous of Mandy.

“Michelle...?” began Dmitri behind her, as she paused. His words were cut off when the door to the club burst open.

Michelle turned to the door. A woman stood there smiling at her. “Hello there, you must be my bride and groom! Good to see you both. I know that I’m early, but I was in town and my last client found out that his soon-to-be bride was pregnant with

triplets from an Ellmorea Demon.” She waved her hand in the air. “Oh, never mind. Needless to say, I’m free. So, what do we have here?”

She strolled up to Michelle and circled her twice. “You could stand some sunlight. Do you glow in the dark? Hum, I think you might have to invest in a tanning bed. White dresses look so much better when you have a tan.”

Michelle’s mouth dropped open and Dmitri laughed, catching the woman’s attention. “You there, handsome fellow, come on out here and let me have a look at you.”

“I think there’s been a mistake Ms....”

She cut Dmitri off. “Mrs. Bonnie-Sue Bradshaw wedding planner extraordinaire. Now that that’s out of the way, let’s get down to business.” She grabbed hold of Dmitri’s backside and cupped him tight. Michelle’s eyes widened as Dmitri turned red. “Oh, handsome, hard, and shy. I’ll have lots of fun working with you. This isn’t by chance a nudist wedding is it?”

He spun away from Bonnie-Sue and looked like he was ready to fight her off. “I’m Dmitri and this is Michelle.”

Bonnie-Sue shrugged. “Hmm, could have sworn you were Armando and Mandy. I usually don’t mistake a couple in love and about to be wed.”

Michelle snorted, unable to meet Dmitri’s eyes. “We are not in love and are not about to get married.”

“Methinks the woman doth protest too freaking much,” Dmitri said, softly.

When she glanced at him, his face was blank. Michelle gulped, scared he’d found her out already. No, no, no! Things had been just great. Why’d she have to go and ruin them with her feelings for him? Be light and fun, she told herself. No commitment, no commitment. Give him space.

Bonnie-Sue let out a giggle and looked around the club. Her hands rose into the air to encompass the entire dance floor with her vision. “Oh, this will be perfect for a reception. I can see it now....”

Michelle turned to leave. She’d had enough of the wedding planner. “Stop right there!” Bonnie-Sue commanded. Michelle froze, afraid that if she moved she’d be a cake topper by the end of the night.

“What role are the two of you playing in the wedding?”

“I’m assuming best man and maid of honor,” Dmitri answered, from a safe distance.

“Actually,” Michelle broke in, “we’re not even sure that there is a wedding. He’s back there asking her now.” She jerked a thumb towards the office door.

Bonnie-Sue made a b-line straight for the door. Dmitri tried to stop her, but she put her hand right on his crotch and turned to Michelle. “Oh, he is a big one, isn’t he?”

Michelle turned three shades of red and accidentally knocked her coffee over. Dmitri looked at it and ran towards her. “Here, let me get that for you,” he said, desperate to get away from Bonnie-Sue.

~*****~

Mandy looked down into Armando’s dark eyes and tried to rip her hand free from his grasp. “I can’t....”

Armando pulled her down to him and planted his lips on hers. He gave her no time to protest as he plunged his cool tongue into her mouth. She wanted to push him away, and to get as much distance between them as possible. Instead, she sucked on his long tongue, and caressed it with her own. Tears formed in the edges of her eyes and she pulled back as a sob escaped her throat.

He wiped her cheeks, gently holding her face in his hands. “Marry me.”

Mandy’s gaze met his and for a moment, she could not think, breathe, move. “Stop. Don’t use your powers on me,” she said, softly.

Armando let out a tiny laugh and straightened her face, forcing her to look at him. “I am not using anything on you. The pull that you feel is all your own. It is not my doing.”

“I can’t marry you,” Mandy said, her eyes darting to the floor. She expected Armando to release her and storm away. He was good at brooding. He made it an art form. But he never moved.

“Tell me why.”

“We’re too different, complete opposite to be exact. I don’t think I’m cut out to be someone’s wife. I can’t even take care of a houseplant let alone a husband, and I’m not sure how I feel about you, and you don’t want to marry me.” She took a breath from her rant before continuing. “You only went to the trouble of this because you thought I

was pregnant.” She arched an eyebrow at him. “I’m still not over being lied to.” She tried to wiggle free, but Armando held her tight. “You don’t want this.”

“Do not tell me what I do and do not want.”

Mandy felt another swarm of tears move down her cheeks. She tried to look away, so he would not see, but he held her tight. He leaned forward and kissed her face softly, stopping the tears in mid-flow.

“The thought of spending eternity with me saddens you,” Armando said, his voice full of regret.

“It’s not that and I don’t have eternity.” Mandy didn’t want to bring up the very real fact that she would die long before Armando—growing old while he stayed forever thirty.

“Mandy, you have as long as you will let me give you.”

She looked at him and tried to shake her head no. “You’re not seriously thinking I’ll let you turn me are you?”

Armando laughed and kissed her lips quickly. “Ah, Kitten, I would accept nothing less than a fight from you on all aspects of our relationship.”

“I’m not that bad.”

“Then say that you will marry me.” Armando made a move to kiss her again and she blinked back tears. “Let me love you forever.”

His last comment drove it home for her. She couldn’t remember Armando ever telling her that he loved her. He couldn’t be in love with her. She wasn’t in love with him, she couldn’t be. She made it a point to never do that.

She opened her mouth to answer him and the door to the office burst open, sending Armando tumbling onto her. Mandy laid, pinned beneath him, and laughed. “In a bit of a hurry to get on with the honeymoon?”

His dark eyes widened. “Is that a yes?”

“Sorry to interrupt folks, but we’ve got a wedding to plan. Let’s get moving! These things just don’t happen overnight!” said a female voice with a bit of a twang from behind them. Mandy peeked over Armando’s shoulder. The woman smiled at her and said, “Bonnie-Sue Bradshaw! I’ll be planning your wedding. Hum, I can see I’m going to like this job! I write steamy romances geared towards the more mature, selective crowd and I must say there is enough inspiration around here to make my book sizzle—OW!”

Mandy blinked, nearly choking as the woman wiggled and did a little dance in the doorway. Her stunned gaze moved from Bonnie to Armando and then back again.

“In fact,” continued Bonnie thoughtfully, “that lycan out there wasn’t half bad. Do you know if he and blondie are really that close? They looked it, but she seemed unsure—or talked unsure anyway. I might just have to use him for some inspiration. My book, *Time in a Bottle*, volume two of the Polly’s Heartsongs Trilogy just came out. I could have used him for my quarterback. He’s got those football player shoulders—if you know what I mean. But, from what I felt down beneath, he’s packin’ a lot more than—”

“Excuse me?” gulped Mandy. Was she talking about Dmitri? She shook her head in confusion. “Who are you again?”

Bonnie sighed. “I’m your wedding planner.”

“You hired a wedding planner and you don’t even know my answer?” Mandy looked up at him, her eyes wide.

“She is early. I did not expect her to come until the end of the week,” Armando said with an earnest grin.

Mandy laughed. “What? Were you so sure that I’d say yes?”

“No,” Armando said, planting a kiss on the tip of her nose, “I am just very sure of my powers of persuasion.”

“That’s real nice there boy. Now, kindly get up and let me have a look at the happy couple. Not that this vantage point is bad,” Bonnie-Sue said suggestively, leaning over with a wiggle of her eyebrows.

Armando rose to his feet in one fluid movement and put his hand out to Mandy. She took it and let him pull her close to him. It felt so right to be snuggled against his body that she wasn’t sure she ever wanted to move from that spot.

Bonnie-Sue walked up to them and smacked Armando’s butt. He looked down at Mandy and she couldn’t help but giggle. “Oh, you’ll make a fine husband. A bit on the pale side for my liking, but I’m sure you make up for that in other areas.” Armando stiffened at Bonnie-Sue’s suggestion. “Now, when we talked on the phone you said that you’ll be handling all the expenses. Any more thoughts on what church you’d like to have it in? I’ll need to touch base with the clergymen. I’m a preacher’s wife so I’ve got some pull if you want to get this done quick.”

“Mrs. Bradshaw, I’ve already explained that this will have to be done on grounds that are not holy. I am...”

Bonnie-Sue cut Armando off before he could finish. “Oh, that’s right, you’re my vampire groom. Almost forgot.” She looked at Mandy and shrugged. “To each his own, I prefer lycans but who am I to judge. Speaking of which, I’d be willing to take a little off the bill if you let me have a roll in the sack with wolf-boy out there.”

Mandy heard Michelle gasp and looked at the doorway. She fought back a laugh when she saw Michelle trying to hold Dmitri back. He looked like he wanted to strangle the wedding planner.

Mandy smiled and touched Armando’s chest. “I’m afraid there’s been some misunderstanding, Mrs. Bradshaw. I’m not accepting his proposal.”

Armando’s arms wrapped around her tightly and she found herself clinging to him when she should have been pushing him away.

Bonnie-Sue waved her hand in the air dismissing Mandy’s claim. “For someone who’s not accepting, you sure are holding onto the boy for dear life. Now, are you coming out here to discuss a timeframe or are we all going to stand in the doorway and play the you don’t really love him game?”

Mandy opened her mouth to protest, but came up empty handed. Armando ran his hand over her back. “Say yes,” he whispered in her ear.

“This is all too fast. I can’t think right now.”

“Then do not think. Just say yes,” Armando said, swaying her body with his.

Mandy closed her eyes and tried to concentrate. She gave up and went with her gut. “Yes.”

“Great, now that that’s settled, get that ring on her finger and let’s get started,” Bonnie-Sue said, pushing Armando slightly.

“Yes, that would be my pleasure,” Armando said, pulling Mandy’s hand up. He opened the tiny black box and took the square-cut diamond out. Mandy drew in a sharp breath and tried to pull away. He’d spent too much money on her and she was not about to accept that.

Armando shook his head and seemed to be reading her mind when he spoke. “It would make me a very happy man if you would wear this. I tried to buy a bigger one, but Michelle said that you would not accept it.” He slid the ring on her finger and brought his mouth down on hers. His tongue brushed over hers and her heart fluttered.

“There’ll be plenty of time for that later. Let’s get going on these plans,” Bonnie-Sue said, tapping Mandy’s shoulder insistently. She turned to see Michelle still holding

Dmitri back. She grinned wickedly at him. “Hey, you there girlie, grab that handsome wolf and follow me. We got us a wedding to plan!”

~*****~

Michelle held Dmitri’s hand and let him guide her down the sidewalk. He’d practically hauled her from the Raven the minute Bonnie-Sue’s back was turned. She was so relieved that he’d gotten her out of organizing the wedding that she didn’t care that he was leading her aimlessly around the city, after dark, carrying a box with him.

He turned into the entrance of the park and stopped. He leaned down and gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

“What was that for?” she asked, secretly hoping he’d do it again.

“For being you.”

Michelle trembled, sure she’d melt. He pulled her over towards a tree and set the box he’d been carrying down on the ground. He opened it up and pulled out a large green blanket. Michelle stood in awe as Dmitri continued to pull items out of the box, setting up a moonlight picnic before her very eyes.

“What’s all this for?” she asked, hesitant. Her breath caught as he turned to smile up at her. Part of her wanted to run away—a very nervous, cowardly part. Her breath caught and for a moment, she couldn’t even think.

“For you,” he whispered softly. He looked like he wanted to say more, but instead, he merely reached for her and said, “Come here.”

Michelle obeyed. How could she not? His handsome grey eyes were looking up at her so warmly. She shivered at his touch, feeling it shooting through her system like a meteorite.

“Are you cold?” he asked. “You’re trembling.”

“No, I...well, maybe just a little.”

“Here, let me warm you.” Dmitri draped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her into his chest.

Oh, yeah. She was definitely warm now.

“Where’d you get the take out? It looks delicious,” said Michelle.

“Take out?” he chuckled. “I cooked.”

The idea of cooking an actual meal was so foreign to Michelle that she blinked in confusion. “You cooked this?”

“Mmm, yeah,” said Dmitri, leaning over to hand feed her a piece of an apple tart. “Impressed?”

Michelle sighed, swallowing, looking up into his eyes. She wanted to kiss him so badly. Her hand worked up to his throat, tenderly caressing the side of his face. His skin was so warm. He smelled so good, like vanilla and mint. She wished she could freeze time and forever live in the perfect moment. “You have no idea.”

Chapter 16

Graphic Language & Sexual Content

Eliza-bitch

“Wake up, Kitten.”

Mandy opened her eyes slowly and turned towards the sound of Armando’s voice. “Hey, you.”

He stroked her hair back from her face and kissed her forehead softly. “You do remember what happened last night, right?”

Mandy chuckled softly as she nuzzled her face in his chest. “Mmm, I’m not likely to forget that for some time.”

Armando slid over her and kissed her neck. She stiffened. He hadn’t fed since their meeting with Bonnie-Sue. It had run late into the night and Armando had been left drinking glasses of wine at the club, rubbing his temples from the stress of the wedding planner. Mandy had little desire to be his morning, or actually mid-day snack if her calculations were right. She glanced around her bedroom, trying to decide what would be the fastest exit route.

“Do not fear me,” he said, dropping his head down and touching hers lightly. “I would never harm you, Mandy.”

She kissed his lips lightly and tried to put on her best convincing face. “I didn’t think that you would.”

“I can smell your fear and sense your lie. Please stop while you are ahead. I will learn to live with your doubts about us and you will need to learn to trust me.”

“I don’t have doubts about us,” Mandy said, stroking the backs of his cool arms lightly.

Armando let out a tiny laugh. “Really? You changed your mind about marrying me three times before our meeting with the wedding planner was over.”

Mandy’s face reddened. “Okay, maybe I did, but it ended well, didn’t it?”

He kissed along her collarbone. “It ended perfectly. No more second thoughts?”

“I’m just wondering how we’re going to iron out our sleeping schedule. You had me up all night...not that I’m complaining,” she said, biting at his ear. “I’m already three hours late for work. I’m surprised that Michelle hasn’t called to check on me.”

“She may very well have.” He pushed his hips against hers as he spoke.

“What do you mean?”

Armando groaned and looked over at the bedside table. “I shut your ringer off after you feel asleep. I left word with Dmitri that you would not be in today. He will pass it on to Michelle.”

“You did what?” Mandy reached over and snatched her cordless phone up. “Armando, I’ve got a lot going on at work right now and you can’t just....” He covered her mouth with his, effectively silencing her protests.

He drew back slowly, smiling at her as he went. “Still mad at me?”

“No,” she said, accessing her voice mail, while she pretended to give him the evil eye. He laughed. She punched in her pass code and waited for her messages. There was one from Michelle wishing her well. One from Dillon telling her that he was back in town, and that he had enjoyed their time together in Chicago. The last message was from Angelica wanting her answer on the job offer by the end of the week.

Mandy clicked the phone off and let it drop down on the bed. She made a move to kiss Armando, but he pulled away, glancing at the phone as he went.

“Who is Dillon?” he asked, his voice low.

“A friend of mine.... he’s a professor and....” Armando put his finger on her lips.

“No, do not give me his history. Tell me why you were with him in Chicago when you would not even tell me where you were going and why you were leaving.”

Mandy touched his arm and ran her fingers down his skin. “I met up with him for a drink and we talked about you mostly.”

“Me? Why?”

“Dillon is a professor of demonology. He seemed like the perfect person to ask questions about vampires.” Mandy tried to hold Armando’s hand, but he wouldn’t let her.

“No, Mandy, I am the perfect person to ask vampire questions of.”

Mandy sat up and pulled the sheet around her. She’d never been one to let a man win in any situation and she wasn’t about to start now. “Yeah, well at the moment you weren’t on my list of honest sources.” She knew that her stab at him was more than was called for, but she didn’t care.

Armando’s jaw tightened and he nodded his head slightly. “I see. So, what is this job offer from Angelica?”

“Gawd, can you turn your supersonic hearing down a notch or two around me? Not everything in my life is your business,” Mandy said, turning to climb out of the bed.

Armando grabbed her around the waist and deposited her on her back on the bed. “That is where you are wrong, Kitten.” He ran his hand down the length of her arm and touched the engagement ring on her finger. “This makes it my business. Now, if you would be so kind as to tell me about this job offer.”

Mandy exhaled and let her eyelids flutter closed. “I went to Chicago for an interview. They’re looking for a marketing director and offered me the position. It’s a substantial pay increase, the opportunity of a lifetime, and what I went to school for.”

It seemed like an eternity went by before Armando spoke. “Have you already decided to take it?”

“I thought I did until all of this happened,” she said, referring to their engagement. “To tell you the truth, now I’m not sure what I’m going to do.”

He pushed his knee between her legs, spreading them slowly. “Let me see if I can help you make your decision.”

~*****~

“Long night?” Mike chuckled, his tone insolent.

Dmitri glared at his cousin, pretending not to hear him. “Hand me that sheet would you?”

“What? Still not getting any? I thought for sure she’d cave with that little dinner party you had planned.” Mike reached down the bar and grabbed the paper Dmitri pointed at then set it in front of him. “Every time she comes in here, I know her smell drives me—”

Dmitri’s hand shot up and wound around Mike’s wrist. He squeezed hard, his eyes glittering with a possessive gold Mike understood well. “You will not ever speak of her like that. Do you understand?”

Mike gulped, backing down. “Hey, easy cousin. How many lifetimes have we known each other? You know I only speak in jest. Michelle is yours. Any lycan would be an imbecile not to smell your mark on her. I’m just saying that she’s...in heat. There is no reason for you to deny yourself when she is willing. It’s foolishness.”

“You couldn’t understand it,” said Dmitri. Letting go of Mike, he looked down at the paper.

“Try me,” said Mike, stretching his hands over the countertop in a definite bartender pose. “I might surprise you.”

Dmitri knew he could, and often had trusted Mike with his life and his secrets. He sighed heavily. “She has always smelled like that around me. Ever since the very first night I boldly, and quite idiotically, blundered into her life. You can well understand why I came onto her like I did. Damn, that smell makes you think she’s ready to get right to it.”

Mike nodded. “Yeah, you can’t help but come onto her.”

“But, it’s not only that. Yes, instantly, the moment I saw her, I knew I wanted her. It’s not just her smell, although it’s great. It’s her eyes, her smile, her laugh. The way her cheeks dimple ever so slightly, or the way she chews on her thumbnail when she’s nervous or concentrating too hard. The way she always seems surprised when I compliment her and it takes her a second to respond—usually with some sort of dismissal. It took her nearly blinding me and a guilt trip before she’d even agree to go out with me. You don’t know how many times I’ve gone to intimately touch her, only to feel her tense up. Hell, I had to force her to be my girlfriend, not giving her a chance to say no to me. All I ever think about is grabbing her and marking her as my woman completely so no man would ever dare to touch her.”

“But, if she wants you, don’t you just keep going?” asked Mike.

Dmitri laughed softly. “I thought that’s what she wanted too, so I did keep trying—every damned pickup line and every smooth trick I know. The only thing I can figure is that it was our kind’s natural sexual aggressiveness that caused her to keep pushing me away. Now that I’ve got a small hold on her, I’m not going to make that mistake again. I’ll just have to wait until she comes to me first.”

“The lycan nature is not so easy to tame,” said Mike softly. “You know that. You’ll drive yourself mad with this type of denial. It is not in our nature to so stubbornly control ourselves, especially when the woman appears willing.”

“But, I must try.” Dmitri growled in frustration. He reached over the bar and took a bottle of whiskey, helping himself to a shot.

“She doesn’t seem to mind being your woman.”

“I keep waiting for her to break it off,” growled Dmitri, letting the worry settle into his eyes for a brief moment. He had been so happy when he was with her, but she didn’t exactly make confessing how he felt easy. “Every other sentence out of her mouth seems to be something like, ‘oh we’re not in love, oh I hate commitment and marriage, I don’t want a serious relationship, there’s no reason for us to talk about us. Let’s just have fun, take it easy, play it day by day’. ARGH!”

“Hell,” laughed Mike, “I’ll take her! Sounds like the perfect woman. All the fun, none of the commitment. What’s the problem? Why don’t you just shag her then if that’s all she’s askin’ for?”

“I can’t. I’ve tried to just shag her, believe me. She won’t have any of it. I have no other choice, but to find a way to wait until she’s ready to come for me. At this rate, I’m afraid I’ll be waiting forever. But, it’s worth it. She makes me happy—happier than I have ever been. I just wish—”

“Ah, Michelle!” exclaimed Mike, pulling back. Dmitri stopped talking. Mike shot him a meaningful look, saying she hadn’t heard a word he said.

Dmitri turned around, pasting a smile on his face. “Hey, you’re early. Just let me grab my jacket.”

~*****~

Michelle watched Dmitri head to the office. Mike grinned at her and wiggled his eyebrows as she came up to the bar to wait.

“Ah,” said Mike with a wolfish grin. “Finally, we’re all alone.”

“Do your come-ons ever get you laid?” asked Michelle with a grimace. “I seem to doubt it. You must be one sad, frustrated man.”

Mike looked a little hurt. “Hey, I see plenty of action. Besides, you’re one to talk about frustrated men.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Michelle frowned.

“Ready?” asked Dmitri, smiling as he came to her. He leaned over and kissed her forehead. Michelle sighed, knowing that was going to be the best she got.

~*****~

“Smells delicious.”

Mandy looked over her shoulder at Armando and couldn’t help but smile at the sight of him standing in her kitchen wearing only a towel. “I never realized that you could eat food. I just thought that you...” She stopped, not wanting to draw any more attention to the fact that he was a vampire.

Armando let out a throaty laugh. “It appears that we have much to learn about each other.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked, chopping the remainder of the green pepper before her.

“I never realized that you were so full of spirit.”

Mandy glanced back at him and sliced down hard with the knife when she saw that Armando held a picture of her in her cheerleader outfit. “Ouch!” she cried out, grabbing her hand to her.

“Mandy?” Armando asked, suddenly next to her.

“It’s nothing,” she said, turning the cold water on in the sink. She placed her hand under it and watched as the blood continued to pour from her fingers. “I can’t believe I did that. I’m normally really good in the kitchen. You just surprised me with that...hey, where did you find that?”

She turned expecting to find Armando standing behind her. He wasn't. "Armando?" She wrapped a paper towel around her hand and turned the stovetop down. "Armando?" Panic swept through her. She knew that he couldn't have left yet. The sun was still up. It'd taken her a half hour to drape blankets over her windows to keep the light out, just so he could roam freely around her house.

Mandy ran into the living room and continued down the hall calling for him. She stopped when she noticed the bathroom door was shut tight. "Armando, are you okay?"

"I am...fine." His voice sounded labored and a hell of a lot deeper than normal.

"Baby?" She tapped on the door lightly, worried about him. Something was off and she knew it.

Armando let out a growl and she screamed. It took her a minute to compose herself before knocking lightly on the door again. "GO AWAY!" he screamed out, his voice booming so loud that she felt the door shake.

She backed up, unsure what to do next. She took two more steps before stopping abruptly. "NO! I'm not going to go away. You want honesty, then tell me what's wrong."

The bathroom door opened, but Armando did not come through it. The light was off and with the windows all covered, Mandy could not see into the room. She inched forward, her bare feet reluctant to move across the wood floor. "Armando?" she asked, entering the bathroom.

He seized her from behind and slammed the bathroom door shut. She screamed out, but did not fight him. He held her tight and put his face down on her shoulder. "You are right. Honesty is best, but I do not wish to scare you."

Mandy let out a nervous laugh. "Umm, too late."

Armando ran his hands down the length of her arms and stopped when he got to her hands. He lifted her cut hand up and took a deep breath in. Mandy froze, realizing what the problem was. "It's the blood, isn't it?" she asked, weakly.

"My control is strong, stronger than most, but with you it is always down. I have not fed today and...."

"Shh," she whispered, turning in his arms. She put her hand by his face and laid her cheek on his smooth chest. "It's okay. I love you no matter what and the blood's just wasting away, so you might as well use it."

Armando's tongue flickered over her hand and she had to fight not to squirm away. "This will take some getting used to," she said, trying to sound as light as possible.

"I do not wish to make this a habit," Armando said, putting her hand to his lips. "I shall see to it that both homes are equipped with what we need by the end of the day."

"You've got an answer for everything, don't you?" She leaned up and planted kisses on his neck. "Well, since we're in the bathroom and you're not dressed, umm..."

Armando laughed and picked her up. "I would love to."

~*****~

Michelle looked at the movie poster of the two lovers in a typical Hollywood sappy girl movie embrace and rolled her eyes. Then, seeing a poster of the latest action thriller next to it, she sighed.

"What?" asked Dmitri, moving forward in the ticket line.

"What are we doing?" asked Michelle.

Dmitri froze.

"I mean, do you really want to watch this fluff or are you just taking me 'cause you think I'd like it?"

Dmitri relaxed. "Well, I...you write...."

"Ah, don't say it. Yes, I write romance," said Michelle, stepping up to the ticket counter. "But I like a little action. Two for the senseless action movie please."

Dmitri looked to the poster she pointed at and grinned. There were two men and a woman all holding machine guns, covered in mud, and looking like they were about to kick some serious ass.

"You got a problem with that?" asked Michelle in her best mafia voice. She grabbed his shirt playfully and gave him a threatening shake.

Dmitri grinned and wrapped his arms around her. "Nope, no problem at all."

"I didn't think so." Michelle did her best to look intimidating. For a moment, they were lost in each other's eyes.

“Ah, sir...your tickets?”

~*****~

Mandy put her head down on the bar top and let out a low growl when Mike tapped her on the head. “Want some coffee?” he asked.

“No,” Mandy said, keeping her head down, “I want a vodka-sprite.”

“Boss?”

Mandy knew that Armando was right behind her. “He’s not my keeper,” she said.

Armando touched her back and let his hand slide down until it was planted firmly on her butt. “Keeper, no. Soon-to-be husband, yes.”

“NO WAY!” Mike exclaimed, a little too loud.

Mandy looked up at him and gave him a dirty look. “Quiet, somebody here kept me up all night and most of the day. My head hurts.”

“Is that all that hurts?” Armando whispered in her ear.

His newfound public show of affection caught Mandy a bit off guard and she blushed, looking at Mike to see if he’d overheard. Mike’s ears were beat red and with his lycan hearing she knew that he had. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat and wondered why sexual innuendos would suddenly bother her. Normally, it was her making comments and having men blush.

“Are you well?” Armando asked, wrapping his arms around her.

“I’m fine. Go ahead. You’re going to be late for your meeting,” she said, tapping his arm lightly. “Isn’t Dmitri supposed to go too?”

“No, Dmitri no longer attends meetings with the city board. The last time he did he threatened to eat the fire marshal.” Mandy laughed as Armando kissed her cheek. “I will be back soon. Will you wait here for me?” he asked, moving to face her.

“I’ll wait if you tell Mike that I’m free to do as I wish and that I do not require a babysitter.”

Armando glanced at Mike and nodded his head. "Very well, I will be back soon." He headed for the door and turned around quickly, drawing the attention of the early crowd. "I love you."

Mandy smiled and shrugged her shoulders. She suddenly felt like she was in junior high again, but wouldn't dare change a thing. She turned back to the bar and noticed Mike's stunned expression. "What?"

Mike looked at her and let a smile form on his face. "I've known him for hell of a long time and I've never seen him act like this."

Mandy glanced back at the door. "Act like what?"

"Like a lovesick puppy dog."

"This is where I insert a lycan joke, right?" she asked, flicking ice from her drink at him. He laughed, ducking down to avoid being pelted.

Mandy fished another ice cube out and threw it at Mike. He laughed and dodged out of the way.

"Not to interrupt the fun, but I am looking for someone and I believe that Michael may know where he is," a stern, female voice said from behind Mandy.

She turned and found a tall leggy blonde standing at the end of the bar. Black leather covered her skinny legs, and Mandy couldn't tell where her boots started and her pants stopped. The tiny leather bra she wore contained an abnormally large pair of breasts. She looked a little like a dominatrix and considering the clientele that the Raven often catered to, it wouldn't surprise Mandy in the least.

"Elizabeth?" Mike sounded like he was about to pass out. Mandy glanced at him to make sure he wasn't.

She looked back at the leather-clad vixen and smiled. "Sorry, Mike's a bit tongue tied. Maybe, I can help you."

Elizabeth looked at her and shrugged. "Doubtful, but I am willing to give it a try." Mandy held back from calling her a bitch and waited for her to speak. "I am searching for my husband."

Mandy looked around the club. Friday night at the Raven, equaled a heck of a lot of husbands roaming around. "Care to be a bit more specific?"

Elizabeth let out a sultry laugh. "Trust a human to need it spelled out for them. I-am-looking-for-my-husband—Armando."

~*****~

“That’s it!” announced Michelle. “I want to be a spy!”

Dmitri grinned. “I was a good movie, huh?”

“I loved it. I’m serious when I said I want to be an intergalactic spy. Though, I absolutely loved Indiana Jones when it came out and wanted to be an archeologist after watching it. Then there was that pirate movie—I had the urge to sail the seven seas. Not sure what that says about me. I think I’m highly impressionable.”

Dmitri’s chuckle joined hers as he pressed the button on his keypad to unlock the car door. He leaned over, opening up the passenger side for her. “Never would have taken you for an action-adventure girl, though.”

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t assume so much about me,” said Michelle, looking up into his grey eyes. Her hand began to lift to his chest. She couldn’t help it. She wanted him. “Sometimes a girl just wants—oh, just a second.”

Michelle reached into her pocket and grabbed her phone. Absently, she got into the car, looking at the caller ID. She missed Dmitri’s sigh of frustration as he walked around to get in the driver’s side.

“It’s just Mandy. I can talk to her at the club,” said Michelle, dropping the phone in her purse, which she pulled from beneath the car seat.

“Come here,” said Dmitri.

Michelle blinked, looking over at him. A small flutter came to her heart as she saw his lids dipping over his handsome eyes. She held her breath. “Hum?”

“What were you going to say? Sometimes a girl just needs...what?”

“Oh.” Michelle realized she’d been babbling again. He seemed to have that affect on her. Thank goodness for Mandy’s timing or she really might have said something idiotic. “Nothing important. Sometimes a girl just needs a good action movie.”

“Hum, if you say so.” Dmitri let a small grin settle on his features.

~*****~

“Oh, man! Where have you guys been?”

Michelle glanced over to Mike, letting go of Dmitri’s hand as she witnessed his panicked face. “What is it? What’s happened?”

“We got problems. Big problems,” said Mike, stressing his last words to Dmitri with an under-the-breath, meaningful look.

“What are you talking about?” demanded Michelle.

Dmitri frowned. “What is it?”

“Eliz—” Mike began.

“Dmitri,” purred a voice Michelle didn’t recognize, “I had no idea you and Armando still played together. How sweet.”

The vampiress crossed leisurely over the floor to Dmitri and draped her arm over his shoulder, stroking him. Michelle frowned, confused.

“Elizabeth,” said Dmitri, trying to shrug her off.

The woman pouted, turning to Michelle. “What’s this?”

“This is Michelle,” said Dmitri.

“His girlfriend,” stated Michelle, her hands on her hips as she challenged the woman. Dmitri blinked in surprise, and she paled, aware of how possessive she sounded.

Elizabeth tossed back her head and laughed. “Oh, Dmitri, please tell me this little wallflower isn’t...its too cute. I had no idea you were into charity work.”

Michelle paled. Her lips trembled. Dmitri was looking at her, almost apologetic.

“Back off, Elizabeth,” said Dmitri.

“Or what?” She feigned a pout. “You’ll un-invite me? You can’t. This is public ground. So, tell me. Where is Armando hiding? Hum, Dmitri? You know I’ll find him. So why don’t you be a good little puppy and help me out?”

“He wants nothing to do with you, Elizabeth,” said Dmitri.

“Ah, but I so want something to do with him,” she laughed. “I’m bored.”

“Then get a hobby,” said Dmitri.

The vampiress face contorted in anger. Mike grabbed Michelle’s arm. “Come on, Michelle, let’s go.”

Michelle let Mike pull her. She’d been watching the interplay between the two of them. It was as if they didn’t see her. And, Gawd! Had she really sounded that possessive of him!

“What’s going on?” she asked, watching Dmitri argue with the woman. Elizabeth reached up to slap him and his hand shot up to grab her wrist, throwing her off with a growl. “Who is that woman?”

“That,” said Mike, pouring himself a drink, “is Armando’s sire.”

Chapter 17

Graphic Language & Sexual Content

Interview with Master Nage

Armando took a deep breath of fresh air and laughed. Makonnen looked over from the club door and gave him an odd look. The large bouncer eyed his boss suspiciously before shaking his head.

“Something on your mind, Makonnen?”

“No, boss, just don’t recall ever seeing you so...happy.”

Armando let out another laugh and turned in a circle with his palms up. “I have not felt this alive in centuries! Where is she?” he asked, wanting to find Mandy.

Makonnen shifted slightly, looking uneasy. Armando knew his vampires well. Makonnen was one of his children, his chosen ones. The large man rarely looked out of sorts and when he did, it was bad. “Tell me what has happened.”

“I never sensed her coming, boss, really! I didn’t know she was in the club until Mandy ran out crying.”

Armando grabbed hold of Makonnen’s collar and lifted the large man off his feet. “What has happened to Mandy?”

“Oh, that’s the little human wench’s name.”

He cringed at the sound of that voice. He knew it well. He’d lived with it for close to thirty years. He looked past Makonnen to Elizabeth and his moment of true bliss died instantly. “What are you doing here?”

She tipped her head back, spilling waves of white-blond hair down her tiny shoulders. “Oh, is that anyway to greet your wife?”

Armando clenched his fists tight, wanting to strike her. “You are not my wife. You always did have a hard time separating truth from fiction.”

Elizabeth gave him one of her evil smiles and strolled out towards him. “You would have been my husband if I hadn’t have gotten hungry prior to the ceremony.” She laughed and clutched her stomach. “Oh, I can still remember the look of horror on your face when you realized that your bride-to-be was a vampire.” She waved her hand in the air as she laughed. “No matter, one little piece of paper hardly matters. I own you. I created you. And you shared my bed for close to a hundred years.”

“We were only together for thirty years. That is when you decided to replace me with something a little more French. How is Jacques?”

“Still bitter about that? Hmm, I would have thought you would be over it. According to Michael, you’ve moved on.” Her eyes narrowed and she licked the edge of her thin lips. “Do not tell me that you have resorted to slumming with human whores now. Oh, how the mighty fall.”

Armando went at her and Makonnen stepped in his path. “She’s not worth it, boss. You should probably find Mandy. Mike and I tried to stop her. She was upset and in no condition to be driving.”

“What did you do to her?” Armando demanded, glaring at Elizabeth.

She shrugged. “I simply told her that you belonged to me, that it was my bed you begged to stay in all those years ago, and I told her of things you used to do in our bed. I may have mentioned a few other things and that...”

“And what?” Armando asked, clenching Makonnen’s arm to avoid strangling Elizabeth.

“And, I might have mentioned that we were still married.”

Armando pushed Makonnen away from him and seized Elizabeth’s shoulders. She was taller than Mandy and he could meet her eye to eye. “To still be married would require that we were married to begin with. I do not call turning me into a demon a marriage.” Armando’s hands burned. He wanted to tear Elizabeth’s throat out. To do so could mean his own death. He’d left her side centuries ago because he could no longer

bear the pain of seeing her bed every man but him. He had thought that he loved her deeply once, and finding out she was a vampire didn't change that. Finding out that she was a whore incapable of returning his love did.

Now, being with Mandy had made him see that what he'd felt for Elizabeth was nothing more than foolish lust. She had been the first woman he'd ever bedded and he was not able to separate love from sex then. She'd been in love with his money. He was heir to a fortune and Elizabeth knew that. What she did not know was that he would refuse to allow her to harm his father. She never saw a penny of his family's money. He left her the same night his father passed away. He had only stayed with her that long to assure that she did not harm him.

Armando had always feared that he would fall victim to Elizabeth's seductive powers if he were to see her again. She had held him captive with her allure for so long that he worried she'd be able to do it again with just a look. But now, looking at her, he felt nothing except rage. "How dare you come here and try to interfere in my life."

"You mean your death," Elizabeth said with a playful pout, touching his cheek lightly. "You always did like to pretend you were still alive."

He thrust her away from him and stormed off to his car, listening to her laugh wickedly at him all the way. He didn't care. He needed to find Mandy and make sure she was safe. Elizabeth liked to leave a trail of dead bodies in her wake. If he found that Mandy was harmed in anyway, there would be hell to pay.

~*****~

Michelle grabbed her cell phone and dialed Mandy's number. Elizabeth had unnerved her. She couldn't imagine what she'd done to Mandy. She glanced over at the vampire bitch to make sure that she wasn't putting the moves on Dmitri again and waited for Mandy to pick up her cell phone.

"Any luck?" Dmitri asked, appearing behind her. Her wrapped his arms around her waist and put his ear close to her phone to listen. Her body jumped in instant awareness and she trembled.

"No," Michelle said, drawing a sharp breath from Dmitri's close proximity. "She's not answering. Maybe I should head over to her house."

"Armando's already on his way there. If he can't calm Mandy down, than no one can."

“He just better hope she doesn’t stake him on first sight.”

Dmitri pulled back slightly. “What’s that mean? The guy’s innocent.”

Michelle snorted. “Yeah, conveniently forgetting to tell someone that you’re already married isn’t innocent. Not in my book anyway and I’m sure not in Mandy’s either. What a jerk.”

“Hey,” Dmitri said, spinning her around to face him, “lay off Armando.”

“Don’t tell me that you’re about to defend someone who would cheat on his spouse and break Mandy’s heart.”

Dmitri ran a hand through his hair and let out a small groan. “Eliza-bitch and Armando have never been married. She sired him. She attacked the man a week before they were to be married and turned him into what he is now.”

Michelle nervously glanced at the floor, pulling back so he couldn’t touch her. She hadn’t meant to jump the gun and condemn Armando so fast. But, she knew that if she were in Mandy’s shoes, she’d be devastated. “So, they never got married?”

“No, they didn’t. I probably shouldn’t be telling you this, but Armando only stayed with her to make sure she didn’t harm his father. Elizabeth had threatened to kill the man if Armando didn’t do as she wished.” Dmitri reached a hand for her, giving a cocky little smile. “Hey, come here for a second. I want to ask you something.”

“What?” Michelle took a hesitant step forward, giving her hand to his.

Dmitri jerked her forward so she fell against his chest. Michelle gasped, giggling lightly as his arms wrapped around her back and held her close. She could feel the full length of him against her. His hips shifted and she thought she felt a hint of interest brush her stomach, but she couldn’t be sure because he’d turned slightly to the side. Her body flushed with instant disappointment.

“So, was that a hint of jealousy I detected?” asked Dmitri.

“Jealousy?” squeaked Michelle with a delicate shrug, pretending not to know what he was talking about.

“Yeah, when old Vampira was comin’ on to me,” he said softly.

“Me, jealous?” Michelle forced a laugh she didn’t feel. Hell, yes she was jealous. Just thinking about it made her want to rip the ancient bitch’s eyes from her head, tear out her bloody heart with her bare hands and stomp on it. To bad Mandy wasn’t there, they could’ve made a night of it. “No, of course not. Why would I be jealous?”

“Why indeed.” Dmitri’s face fell in what could have been disappointment, but she wasn’t certain. If it was, Michelle was sure it was just his male ego that took a small beating, not because he wanted her to really care. He opened his mouth to say more, but Mike’s voice boomed over them, interrupting.

“Excuse me sir, but can I help you with something?”

Michelle and Dmitri glanced over at Mike. He was blocking the office door with his body. A tall man tried to push past him. Mike’s lycan strength should have made him a shoe-in for a fight, but he looked to Dmitri for help.

Dmitri’s arms slid from her body. Michelle saw the hard set to his jaw, the liquid gold fire threatening his eyes. She knew the dark look should have scared her, but she found it actually turned her on—way on.

Great, thought Michelle. Now I’ll never get to sleep tonight. And I’ll be spending eternity in a cold shower.

“What’s going on?” Michelle asked as Dmitri growled.

“It’s the fire marshal.” Dmitri headed towards Mike, shaking his head the entire way. “Nage, what I can do for you this fine evening?” His voice was so laced with artificial sweetness that Michelle cringed.

Michelle watched as the tall, muscular man with the shaved head turned to face Dmitri. He wasn’t bad on the eyes by any stretch, but Michelle thought it best not to ogle. The man gave Dmitri a cold once over, before glancing around the bar. “Where is Armando?”

“He’s not here,” Dmitri said, sounding short.

“I gathered as much.” Nage made a move to head into the back office, but Mike stood his ground. “Armando agreed to meet me back at the club so I could take a look at the proposed expansion plans. I thought I’d get my inspection out of the way while I was down here.”

Dmitri stepped to the side and put his hand out. “By all means, inspect away. I could save you a lot of time and just fine myself before you leave.”

“If you’re up to code then you have nothing to worry about,” said Nage, coldly.

There was something familiar about Nage, but Michelle couldn’t put her finger on it. She watched as he slowly worked his way around the bar, stopping every so often to be sure that they had all the paperwork they needed to have displayed. Dmitri headed back into the office to fetch something for him and Nage stopped in front of Michelle.

“Do I know you from somewhere?” he asked, sounding two hundred times nicer than he had with Dmitri.

Michelle would have normally taken this as a bad pick up line, but there truly was something familiar about him. She put her hand out to him. “Michelle Pillow, I work down at the Nocturnal Journal. Have you been down there before...doing inspections I mean?”

Nage shifted a bit and looked over his shoulder. “I thought I recognized you. I submitted my information to you for an interview not long back.” He took her hand in his. “Master Nage...erotica author who just completed my very first erotic romance, Scorch.”

Michelle’s eyes widened. “You wrote Scorch? That got some great reviews. Hey, didn’t JERR give it 5 stars?”

Nage smiled. “Yeah, they did.”

“Now, someone told me that the erotic in your life isn’t all fiction,” Michelle said, suddenly feeling as though she was donning her interview cap.

Nage grinned, and an inviting warmth entered his eyes. Michelle put on her most professional face to stop any advance. Well, what did she expect asking such a forward question? Truth was, she couldn’t think. She was about ready to follow Dmitri into the office to do a little scorching of her own.

“You sent a request in for an interview?” Michelle asked, kicking herself for not going through her faxes before she left work. If it didn’t come in an email than odds were that she wouldn’t get it for at least two weeks. That’s about the time Mandy would poke her head in and demand she clean her desk. “You want to hit the high points with me now?”

Nage did another nervous glance around the bar and nodded his head. “As you’ll see from my interview I’m a real life Dominant into BDSM, 24/7. My wife is my willing slave. I write erotic BDSM stories in my erotica guise.”

Michelle didn’t move a muscle as he continued. If ever she needed Mandy near her, it was now. Mandy would have not only had a smile on her face, but would have understood what Nage was talking about. Michelle focused on him and tried to listen, all the time scolding herself for her wandering thoughts. Though, seeing Dmitri in chains did have merits.

“I really dislike the whips and chains thing, cause that’s a stereotype....” continued Nage.

Oh. Michelle tried not to blush, as she thought, My bad. No stereotypes here.

“...I try to educated people against this with my erotica. I am, in fact, into psychological domination and my books tend to be less about kink and more about how characters think and feel.”

“Did you find anything or are we clear?” Dmitri asked, pushing in between Michelle and Nage. Dmitri put his arm around Michelle, clearly claiming her.

Nage looked a bit uncomfortable as he stared at Dmitri’s arm. “You two know each other?”

“Yes,” Dmitri said, in a low voice, “Michelle is my girlfriend.”

“DMITRI!” Mike shouted from the doorway to the men’s room. “A pipe burst, get in here!”

“Shit!” Dmitri said, sprinting in the direction of the bathroom.

Nage stepped forward and bent his head down. “I’d appreciate it if you’d keep the fact that I write erotic fiction to yourself.”

“You don’t want me to tell Dmitri, right?” she asked, laughing. Nage nodded and she glanced towards the men’s room door. “What’s with you two? Old lycan feud?”

“No, we had a small disagreement during a fundraiser and he threatened to eat me.”

Michelle coughed, and had to take a step back due to the sudden onslaught of laughs and coughs that seized hold of her.

“You okay?” Nage asked, pounding her back lightly.

She nodded her head yes and wiped the tears from her eyes. “Oh...I’ll get...in touch...with you when...I get back into the office...Monday.”

“You sure you’re okay?” Nage asked with a smile.

“Yep, sure am.” Michelle took a deep breath and held it as she calmed herself. It wasn’t lost on her that when she first met Dmitri, the fact that he threatened to eat someone wouldn’t have been funny.

“Ah, listen,” said Nage, pausing for a moment to glance around the bar. “I’m pretty much done here. Would you mind giving this to Dmitri and tell him I’ll stop by later this week to talk to Armando about the plans?”

“Sure,” said Michelle taking the sheet. “So did they pass?”

Nage gave a small grin. “Uh, yeah, with flying colors.”

Michelle watched him go with a small smile. Turning to the sheet, she wondered if her status as Dmitri’s girlfriend had gotten them off easy. Then, with a shrug, she went to go see what all the sudden cursing from the back room was about.

~*****~

Mandy fell across her bed. She fought hard not to cry, refusing to let that bitch win. If she wanted Armando so bad, she could have him. She had no use for a lying cheater anyways. It was better she found out about all of this before she got too attached. Or was she already too attached? She didn’t know or care.

Her cell phone rang several times, but she ignored it. She did the same when her home phone began to ring as well. She’d already called who she needed to and now she had to check out apartments in Chicago. She rolled onto her side and climbed off the bed slowly.

She waited as her laptop booted up. The tension of the day filled her neck and shoulders and she bent her head down, trying again not to cry. She opened her browser and googled real estate in Chicago. Surprisingly, with what Angelica had offered for pay, she could afford a decent sized place.

The stiffness in her shoulders intensified and moaned slightly as she tried to bend her head all the way down. Cool hands touched her neck and she jolted upright in the chair.

“Shhh, it is I.” Armando’s smooth voice whispered in her ear.

Mandy’s temper flared and she bucked her head back, catching his chin hard. He let out a soft groan, but didn’t move. Her head now felt ten times worse.

That’ll teach me for trying to inflict pain on a frickin’ superhero. She thought to herself.

Armando laughed and tried to turn her to face him. She held her ground, and the table, trying not to move, but his strength won out. “Kitten, look at me. We need to talk.” Mandy kept her eyes down as he held her chin. “Look at me!”

She glared at him and he pulled his head back from her. There wasn’t a time in her life when she’d hated anyone more. Even Elizabeth was better than Armando to her

at the moment. He'd done the unthinkable to her. He'd made her fall in love with him and then ripped her heart from her chest. It ached and being near him only added to it.

Mandy reached up and touched her chest lightly. Armando tried to take her hand, but she twisted away from him.

"I did not mean to cause you pain and I am honored to be the first man that you have ever given your heart to. I need you...."

Mandy stood fast and pushed away from Armando. "You fucking read me! You hopped in my head and invaded my private thoughts!"

He made a move to come to her and stopped when he gaze fell on her laptop. "Chicago?" he said, his dark eyebrows rising slightly. "You have made up your mind then?"

She let out a half-laugh, half-sob and stormed towards her front door. Armando caught her arm and held her still. She looked at his pale hand and then up into his dark eyes. "Take your hand off me! I think your wife might have a thing or two to say about you touching other women."

"Mandy, she is not...."

A knock at the door interrupted them. "Who is here at this hour?" Armando asked, his eyes narrowing in on her.

"Let go of my arm and I'll find out," Mandy said, angrily

Armando put his hands in the air and backed away. She wanted to kick him in the stomach on her way past, but she held back. She opened the door slowly and felt her stomach tie in a knot when she saw the spiked bleach blonde hair. "Now is not a good time."

"Like hell it's not. I stopped down to the club to have me a drink and hear em' all talking about the big bad bitch showin' up to spoil your fun," James said, pushing on the door. "I think now's as good a time as any, don't you?"

Mandy stepped back and let the door open. She could feel Armando's eyes burning holes into the back of her head. She could also feel him reading her, probing her mind for her thoughts. She concentrated on slamming his head into a brick wall and then felt nothing. She wasn't sure if it was visualizing a wall that did it, or if Armando didn't care for her rather graphic vision on harming him. The problem was, she didn't care how he left her head, only that he did, and now she wanted him to leave her home as well. She turned towards him and looked at the door. "Please leave."

"Mandy, hear me out. I...."

“I think the Kitten asked you nice to go,” James said, mimicking the way Armando always said her name.

“Do not provoke me this evening Jameson. You will not like what....”

Mandy put her hand up and screamed out at Armando, cutting him off. “Get out of my damn house and don’t ever come back! There is nothing you have to say that I want to hear, except goodbye!”

James laughed and Mandy shot him a nasty look. He shut up, but didn’t stop smiling. He raised his hand in air and waited for Mandy to call on him like he was in grade school. “Right then, I was supposed to tell Armando, if I saw him, that Dmitri said to get his ass down to the club and take care of Elizabeth, she’s bitten two people and threatened at least a half dozen or so.” He looked over at Armando and laughed softly. “That’s a wild one you got there, surprised she let you out of her sight long enough to shag another.”

Armando flew at him, but Mandy beat him to the punch. She’d wanted to hit something since the club and James was as good a punching bag as any, so she did. She punched James in the gut and he did her the courtesy of pretending it hurt before taking her hand in his and massaging it. It was a good thing that he did; the pain shooting through her hand put her on the brink of tears. “It’ll be okay, love, I promise.”

“She is not your....” Armando started to say, but Mandy twisted around and glared at him.

“No, I’m not your anything. Now go do your husbandly duties and get your wife to stop eating the clientele.”

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Michelle looked on as Dmitri struggled with Elizabeth. She’d already sent him and Mike hurdling over the bar twice, but they kept going back for more. Michelle was guessing that by her strength, Elizabeth was old. Too bad they didn’t have a vampire slayer on call or she would have paid just to see that woman burst into flames. She’d even snap a few photos to share with Mandy over a glass of wine later.

Dmitri slid past her on the floor and glanced up at her and she leapt to her feet. The cocky, bad boy smile curved his lips, as he asked, “You doing all right?”

“Umm, I’m not the one getting my ass kicked by a slutty corpse,” Michelle said, smirking at him. She sat back down. “A slutty girl corpse.”

He stood and wiped his pants off. “I’d hardly call this getting my ass kicked...I...umm, don’t want to hurt her, she’s a....”

“A bitch. Yeah, we know, go ahead and say it,” Mike said, as he tumbled past Dmitri. A low grunt escaped him as he knocked his head. Michelle heard Jaycee muttering behind them about stupid bartending lycans as she tried to tend bar over the racket of the fight.

Michelle shook her head and took another sip of her water. They’d been trying to restrain Elizabeth for the greater part of twenty minutes and so far had only managed to break four chairs and chase off half the patrons.

Elizabeth laughed from the other side of the bar and Mike glanced down at Michelle. “Tell me that’s vodka.”

“Why, need a shot?” she asked, laughing at him as she finished her drink off.

“No, I need the bottle to club that...”

“Mike,” Dmitri said, sternly.

Mike shrugged and headed back towards Elizabeth. Michelle slowly stood and touched Dmitri’s bruised cheek. “Why don’t you just rip her throat out? You can do that right?”

“Yeah, but how the...what...why are you suddenly so violent?”

She gently touched his cheek again before planting a tiny kiss on it. “I make exceptions when need be.”

He turned and caught her lips with his and let out a throaty growl. “And you think now is a time that exceptions should be made.”

“Uh-huh,” Michelle said, running her hand over his broad chest. “I think you should kill the bitch.”

“I wish it was that easy. To do so could mean killing Armando too. We’ve no idea how linked he still may be to her. She’s his sire and the risk of killing him too is too great and I’m not willing to chance it.”

The realization of what he was saying sunk in. “That’s why the two of you look like she’s kicking your backsides. You don’t want to kill her; you just want to keep her busy until....”

“ELIZABETH!” Armando shouted from the entrance of the club.

“The Calvary has arrived,” Dmitri said. He stroked her cheek and planted a quick kiss on her lips, before walking towards Armando.

Michelle saw a flash of dark hair behind Armando and did a double take when she saw that he dragged Mandy by the arm behind him. She looked like she wanted to rip his head off. Michelle sighed, not sure she could blame her.

Chapter 18

Interview with Lena Austin

Mandy watched as Elizabeth turned her cold blue eyes on Armando. A chill ran down her spine and Armando tried to pull her closer to him. She pushed at him to keep him at arms length.

Elizabeth’s laugh made her blood run cold. “Trouble in paradise, my love?”

“Tell her the truth,” Armando said, pushing Mandy towards the crazy vampire. Mandy yanked on his arm to get him to stop, but he ignored her. “TELL HER!”

Elizabeth licked her thin lips as she walked towards Mandy. Armando tightened his hold on her arm. Elizabeth noticed his grip and let a wicked smile cover her face.

“Shall I tell her how you enjoyed fucking me so much so that you wept when you found me with another?” asked Elizabeth.

Armando stiffened and tried to pull Mandy back to him. She held her ground, not wanting to be near either of the crazy corpses that surrounded her.

“Or,” Elizabeth persisted. “Should I tell her of the time that I gave you the Dorson triplets as a gift? Oh, Armando, the things you did with them....”

Mandy fought the wave of nausea that threatened to overtake her and put her hand on the table next to her to steady herself. Armando put his hand on her shoulder and she cringed at the feel of his cool touch.

“Mandy,” Armando said her name softly, and Elizabeth let out a screech.

“Oh, that’s it...coddle the poor, defenseless human girl. She’ll never be the lover I was to you, Armando. She’ll always just be...”

“Alive?” Michelle said, appearing next to Mandy. She reached down and took Mandy’s hand in hers and gave her a little nudge. “Thought you could use some moral support from someone with a heartbeat.”

Mandy chuckled weakly and nodded her head.

“Maybe you’ll find it funny to know that your dear Armando lost his virginity to me. It was me that he spent the greater part of thirty years buried in. It was me that...”

Mandy rolled her eyes and cut Elizabeth off. “Yeah, yeah, yeah, we get it already. You were the queen seductress. All hail Elizabeth, taker of Italian virgins. Whoohoo,” she mocked, twirling her finger in the air. Armando grunted and she turned her head to him. “Don’t think for one minute that I’m done being pissed at you. As far as I’m concerned you can take that three decade boner of yours and stick it...”

“Mandy,” Michelle began, pulling to get her attention.

Mandy ignored her as she glared at Elizabeth. She wanted nothing more than to toss holy water in her perfect little face. “I’ve had enough drama in my life lately. I’m done with all of it. If I never lay eyes on another vampire, it’ll be too soon.”

~*****~

Michelle watched Mandy stand up and walk, with much dignity, to the back office. She knew better. Mandy was hurt and trying to bury herself under her brave front. It had taken a long time for Mandy to let the wall down around her heart and Michelle didn’t want to see her build it up again. With determination, she knew it was time to hit Mandy with a little tough love. She moved to follow Mandy to the back office.

“Do you want me to give you a lift home?” asked Michelle when she reached Mandy. Mandy was closing her cell phone.

“No, don’t worry about it,” Mandy closed her eyes tight and Michelle knew it was to keep from crying.

“They aren’t married, Mandy,” stated Michelle. “Never were. She’s a liar.”

Michelle waited for a sign that Mandy was relieved. It never came. Her cell phone rang, but Mandy refused to answer, she said instead, "I just called James. He's on his way down to take me home."

Michelle bit her lip, but didn't comment. Mandy looked over at her and stopped dead in her tracks.

"Say it," Mandy demanded, her face going hard at the look Michelle gave her.

"Okay," Michelle answered, matching the hard look with one of her own. "You're using James as a crutch."

"I'm afraid to ask what that means," Mandy said, glancing back to the front of the club. Michelle looked too and noticed Armando, Dmitri, and Mike corralling Elizabeth in the corner. "I hope she falls on a broken chair and impales herself."

"Armando could die too. She sired him," Michelle said, quickly. "That's why they don't—"

"Again, I hope she falls on—"

"Mandy! Come on!" Michelle growled in irritation. "You're putting up your famous 'don't care' walls again, and I didn't spend the last two years breaking through them to watch the queen vamp build them back up. As for James, I know what you're doing. You were doing it before this fiasco ever happened. You're using him to test Armando."

"I'll admit that it may seem that way, but James isn't a crutch, he's a friend. That's all."

"Yeah, if that's what you need to tell yourself," Michelle said, giving her a 'whatever' look. "I know what you're doing. You want James to come between you and Armando. No matter how he reacts, you'll end up sleeping with James to push Armando away. You want Armando to fail you. You want him to leave you. Even if he forgave you for sleeping with James, you'd never respect him for it. You've been looking for him to mess up...misreading every little detail with your warped reasoning. Well, I for one am not going to stand around and continue to watch you be a stupid ass."

Mandy's mouth dropped open. Michelle rushed on before she could scream at her.

"Listen, you're about to screw up the most important thing in your life and if you want to throw it all away for bleach-blond dead boy then fine, go ahead, but don't expect me to stand by and support your decision."

"That's not—" began Mandy, lifting a finger and ready for a fight.

“No!” ordered Michelle, shutting her up. “I want you to sit in this office and think about what you’re doing. You may not like me right now, but I’m the bestest friend you have and by God if I have to—”

“Bestest?” inquired Mandy with an arched brow.

“You know—er, just stay in this office and think, damn you!” Michelle pointed at the couch and stormed out, slamming the door behind her.

Michelle took a deep, angry breath. AH! Mandy made her so mad sometimes. Instantly, she was sorry for her harsh words and the pain that had flickered over Mandy’s face. But, Michelle knew she couldn’t take them back. Mandy needed to hear the truth. It was long overdue.

Stalking to the bar, she saw Mike and smiled weakly. “Hey, can I get a coffee?”

Mike smiled at her. “Anything for you baby.”

Michelle grimaced as Mike laughed. She glanced over the bar and saw Dmitri and Armando were still dealing with psycho vamp, though Elizabeth looked to be subdued. They all sat at a table talking.

“Good thing Mandy can’t see that,” grumbled Michelle. “Then she’d really call off the wedding.”

“Mandy your fiancée?”

Michelle had reached the bar and blinked in surprise to hear the strange question.

“She mad ‘cause you have a thing for men, too?”

Michelle gasped, realizing the questions were indeed directed at her. She looked at the tall woman next to her sipping on a drink. The woman was at least 5’7” if not taller. She looked like the child of an Amazon warrior and a librarian. She wore a black suede cowboy hat with a silver band, suede half-boots, a black silk shirt, leather pants, and a loosely knotted, blood red tie. Inch-long nails that were unpainted and natural, twisted around her drink. She looked like an exotic dancer.

“Ah...?” Michelle began weakly, at a loss.

“Hi, I’m Lena Austin.”

Michelle took the woman’s hand for lack of anything better to do. She was truly at a loss. With all that had happened, she really couldn’t process the fact that this Lena woman thought Mandy was her lover. It was just too much.

“This here is BDSM Mistress, well, I’ll just call her the Black Widow—everyone else does.” Lena laughed as she looked over at her friend. Michelle nodded weakly. The friend was shorter, but wore a black T-shirt that said BITCH in curvy red letters. Whoever Mistress Black Widow was, she was all attitude and mischief. “She’s about to marry her Demon Lord and I just had to drag her out for a good time.”

“Ah,” said Michelle. Where was Mike with the coffee? She leaned over, trying to see him. He was fumbling with a new filter.

“So, you didn’t answer,” said Lena. “You fighting with your lover?”

“Excuse me?” asked Michelle

Lena let loose a sultry laugh. “I can tell by your look—the way you’re eyeing the fine piece of lycan bartender over there. You need to get laid and bad. Not that I blame you—hey, have you ever heard of a Seattle Swing Kit? I sell them. I got one in my car in case of emergencies. If you like, I can go get it. They’re easy and a lot of fun.”

“I’m sorry?” asked Michelle not following. “A Seattle what?”

“Well, you see, you take some—”

“Coffee. Here you go, sweetness,” said Mike setting the cup before Michelle with a wink.

“Hey, lycan,” said Lena with a purr. “This girl here needs some hot lycan lovin’. You up for it? Her lady lover might get a little upset, but I saw this, ah there,” Lena paused and Michelle and Mike followed her finger to Dmitri’s back, “I saw that lycan and I bet you three could have a high old time of it. In fact, I wrote this book called *Room to Play*. It is my most current release. It’s a ménage a trois, with two men and one woman. Andre is desperate to help his wife Claudia after an accident leaves her depressed. Then Dante appears. He needs a place to live, and....”

Michelle barely heard the woman as she looked at Mike. For once, the lycan seemed stunned beyond words.

“...she confesses she wants them both in her bed—at once. Andre can accept sharing Claudia with Dante—”

“Ah, no,” broke in Michelle weakly. Lena blinked, confused. “I mean...Mandy is not my...lover.”

Mike burst into laughter. “That, I would pay good money to watch.”

“You’re not helping,” hissed Michelle. Never had she felt so conservative or confused in her life. A Seattle what?

“Oh,” said Lena. “Then, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Just then, Mandy came out of the office, dry eyed and very somber. Michelle watched as she walked over to the bar to join her. Never had she been so glad to see Mandy in all her life. Surely, if anyone, Mandy would make sense out of what Lena said. She waited, thinking Mandy might scream at her. Mandy just nodded her head and looked towards the door.

“Who’s the blonde chick?” asked Mandy, as if the fight hadn’t occurred—though it was evident she was still hurt and sad. “I bet she’s here with the Eliza-bitch.”

Michelle peeked back to see who Mandy was talking about.

“Oh, damn honey! I’m sorry. It looks like that lycan is already taken,” said Lena. Michelle felt the woman pat her thigh. “Don’t worry, we’ll find someone else. Too bad though, he’s a handsome one, isn’t he. Damn, I just bet he could ride a woman hard until sunrise.”

“I wouldn’t know,” whispered Michelle, feeling tears trying to form in the back of her eyes. She was stunned. The blonde Barbie doll Mandy had pointed out threw her arms around Dmitri with a loud squeal.

“OH BABY!” the blonde bombshell fairly screamed in excitement as she hopped onto Dmitri’s neck and pulled him down to her lips. She kissed him soundly.

“Oh, no,” breathed Mandy.

Michelle couldn’t move. Her eyes roamed over the outfit of black lace that barely covered the bimbo—thigh high stockings, a flimsy robe-like jacket, a black leather bra and panty combo. She wasn’t wearing clothes. She was wearing lingerie.

“I missed you last night,” the woman said. Michelle realized she had stepped away from the bar and was walking towards Dmitri. She stopped in the middle of the bar, staring, numb. The woman continued in her loud pout. “Where were you? I waited up for you and you never showed. You weren’t cheating on me with another woman, were you?”

Michelle felt Mandy’s hand on her shoulder. She instantly turned, knowing she was going to be sick. In horror, she ran to the bathroom and threw up. Sliding down the stall wall to the floor, she sat on the floor. Miserably, her heart pounded, mimicking the thundering in her head. What a fool she was!

Of course a man like Dmitri was getting sex somewhere, if not with her. She felt like an idiot. She should have known. She’d done enough research about lycans to know they had barely contained appetites—especially when it came to food, drink and women.

She'd seen Dmitri pound back enough liquor to floor twenty men without even blinking. She'd seen him down nearly a whole large pizza in one sitting. It was because of their high metabolisms they ate so much. So, if he was typical lycan in those things, it only stood to reason he was typical lycan in the bedroom too.

Michelle stood, feeling dejected as she looked at herself in the mirror. Her lips trembled. Her face was pale. Her hair pulled back, very Plain Jane—like always. Never had she felt so undesirable in her life. She looked down at her T-shirt and jeans. She looked nothing like the playmate walking around in stilettos and lace. How could a man like Dmitri want her?

“You fucking idiot,” Michelle spat at her reflection. She took a deep breath. “You fucking, fucking, stupid idiot. How could he want you? Look at him. He's too handsome for you.”

Michelle eyed the narrow window, knowing from experience she'd never make it out of it. Besides, her purse was in the office. She'd have to grab her purse and then she'd have to quietly and very quickly sneak out the front door.

~*****~

Mandy watched Michelle run to the bathroom, before turning back to Dmitri. He was pushing the blonde Barbie doll away from him and wiping his mouth. Mandy frowned, knowing that all was not as it seemed. She debated on whether or not to go to Michelle. She was still a little hurt by what Michelle said to her in the office, regardless of whether or not there was some truth in it. In the end, she knew Michelle was only trying to be a friend.

Walking to the bathroom, she listened before opening the door. Michelle stood before the sink, staring into a mirror. Slowly, she went to her and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“I didn't know plastic could walk,” said Mandy. “I wish we had a camera. Those tabloids would pay good money for that one. Do you think the toy manufacturer knows that one got away...if I only had a brain.” Mandy did a tiny dance motion and made a goofy face at Michelle.

Michelle began to laugh, despite herself. She sniffed. “I thought the same thing. She is such a Barbie doll.”

“Want to light a fire and watch her melt?” asked Mandy, smiling. “Hope springs eternal.”

“Nah. It doesn't matter. It was bound to happen sooner or later. Dmitri isn't interested in me that way. He hasn't even tried to come on to me.”

“Then what's he doing with you?”

“Pity dates,” offered Michelle. Mandy frowned. “I don't know. I think it's just a casual friend thing. I was stupid to think it was more.”

“You're not stupid. I know you, don't beat yourself up over this,” said Mandy. “I am sure there is a logical explanation, if you'll only listen.”

“Like you listen to Armando,” said Michelle, a little too hard.

“Fine, truce,” said Mandy, not wanting to fight with her best friend. “This is one thing we can't agree on right now so we won't even try. For the sake of our friendship, beyond making fun of Barbie and Elizabeth, we'll agree to disagree. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” whispered Michelle. “Get my purse out of the office?”

“Sure,” said Mandy. She left Michelle in the bathroom and noticed Eilza-bitch and bim-Barbie were no longer in the bar. Neither were Armando and Dmitri. With a sigh she went to the office. Dmitri was there.

“Oh, hey, Mandy, Armando had to take—” said Dmitri.

“I really don't want to hear it,” said Mandy, her chest tightening at the thought of Armando with Elizabeth.

“All right,” Dmitri allowed. “Have you seen Michelle?”

Mandy saw a wave of fear pass over Dmitri's eyes.

“Yeah, I've seen her. I'm getting her purse so she can go home. I know her. You don't want to talk to her right now if you value anything you have with her. She's a little upset.”

“Did...?”

“Yeah, slick, she saw you and Barbie.”

“You mean Barbara?” asked Dmitri.

“You've got to be kidding me. It's official...you got me! Barbie it is then.” Mandy walked to the door. “I know that Michelle might just be a casual fling to you and honestly, it's really none of my business. But, I want you to understand something. Michelle doesn't have casual flings.”

“She could have fooled me,” said Dmitri. “She’s made it clear that’s all I am to her.”

Mandy had to bite her tongue to keep from answering. She closed her eyes. It would be so easy to fix the gap between the two of them. It would only take a few simple words. Dmitri, Michelle is madly in love with you but is too scared to tell you for fear you’ll reject her. I know because I know her. Now, get off your ass and tell her how you feel before you drive her away with her own insecurities—and for God’s sake shag her already.

Mandy held quiet. In order to help Dmitri, she’d have to betray Michelle’s trust. She couldn’t do that.

“I wish I could help you, buddy, I really do,” said Mandy. “But I am afraid this one you’ll have to figure out on your own.”

“What about you, kid?” asked Dmitri, crossing over to her and laying a hand on her shoulder. “Want to get a drink and talk about it?”

Mandy nodded, despite her better judgment. “Yeah, I could really use a drink. Just let me give Michelle her purse.”

Chapter 19

Delectable Dates

Michelle smiled as she hung up the phone. It’d been a week since she’d last laughed and the fact that she was doing it now wasn’t lost on her. She was just in shock over who had made her laugh. Karl Wakeman of all people.

Michelle had met Karl the day after Barbie came in the picture. She’d been avoiding the Raven for obvious reasons and she and Mandy weren’t on the best of terms yet. She’d hoped things would blow over after their little heart-to-heart, but Mandy had refused to leave the club with her that night and had barely spoken two words to her all week. Michelle knew that they were both being stubborn, or at least she hoped that was it. The thought of irreparable damage to the friendship was almost too much for her to bear.

Her cell phone rang and she laughed when she saw Karl’s number flicker across it. He was handsome, successful, and beyond interested in her, but he was no Dmitri. Now, figuring out if that was a good or a bad thing was all that Michelle had left to do. She knew that Mandy didn’t care much for him, so she was iffy on what to do.

“I just hung up with you. This better be important,” she said into her phone.

Karl laughed. “Of course it is. I’ll pick you up tonight at eight.”

“Pick me up for what?”

“Our date.”

“Umm, Karl, we don’t have a date.”

He let out a throaty laugh. “Yes we do. See you at eight. I’ll pick you up in front of that club you mentioned, the Raven.”

She rolled her eyes automatically at the thought of the Raven and Dmitri. “Sounds good, I guess. I needed to pick some things up from there anyways.” She hung the phone up and shrugged her shoulders. At least this would give her the excuse she needed to go down and pick up her notes on her latest Tribes of the Vampire books she’d been working on.

The more she thought about it, the more she wanted to work on it before her date with Karl tonight. She glanced at the clock on her computer and grabbed her keys. Armando would be up by now, he’d let her in to get her stuff.

~*****~

Mandy ran into the back of the club when she heard a loud bang. She’d shown up early because Dmitri had wanted to go over designs for the club expansion with her and needed her art expertise to finalize them. They’d also gotten closer over the last week. She hated to venture out on a limb, but he was what she’d call a friend.

James was a friend with strings. He always seemed to have getting in her pants as a motivation. Dmitri was just Dmitri. Nothing more, nothing less, and since she and Michelle weren’t getting along so great, it was nice to have someone to talk to. Besides, they sulked well together if nothing else.

Something else crashed and Mandy ran past the offices to the tiny bathroom in the back, the one that was for employees only. The door was half-open and she could see water flying everywhere. Dmitri cursed and Mandy peeked in to see what he was doing. He stood there in his boxer shorts holding a piece of pipe in his hand.

“Planning on knocking over a liquor store and using ‘stare at my abs’ as a way to distract from your face?” she asked. He jumped and shook his head when he saw her standing there. “Good hearing lycan-boy.”

“Yeah, I was a bit preoccupied.” He looked at the stand-up shower and shook his head. “Damn thing went crazy when I tried to use it.”

“Can I ask why the hell you’re showering here? Your place is better than this, not to mention cleaner,” she said, pushing his tool box with her foot.

“Hey, it’s a mess because I’ve been in here working on it all damn day.”

“Do you want me to call someone?”

Dmitri’s grey eyes narrowed on her. “I can fix this.”

“So, you’re stubborn on more than just the Michelle front?” she asked. He gave her a dirty look and she winked at him.

“I’ll handle the Michelle problem as soon as I fix this.”

“Yeah, looks like you’re doing a bang up job there buddy. Sure hope Michelle doesn’t want to kiss and make up any time this century! I’ll let you finish and then you can get dressed. As tempting as it is to work with a man in his skivvies, I’ll have to pass. Michelle’s my best friend and I’d rather not know all the details.”

Dmitri let out a chuckle and reached up to double-check the showerhead. He gave it a good twist and then stepped back to try the handle. Mandy turned to leave and tripped over his toolbox. She fell forward and slammed into the door.

“Mandy?” Dmitri yelled right before he let out a yelp.

The sound of water filled Mandy’s head as she got to her feet. She looked over at Dmitri and found him trying to put the knob that was in his hand back on. “What?” He looked over at her. “I was holding it when you fell. I...I...ouch.” He jerked back from the spraying water. Steam encompassed him.

Mandy’s eyes widened. “Way to go He-man, that’s the hot.”

Dmitri made another attempt to reach to put the nozzle on. “Mandy, shut the water off. The turn off is down there.” He pointed towards the wall.

Mandy dropped to her knees and did her best to turn the nozzle. She thought she heard someone outside the door, but continued with her mission. “It’s...too...hard...I can’t...get it...to...”

Dmitri let out another yelp and appeared behind her. “Here,” he said, twisting the nozzle tight. The water stopped spraying everywhere and Dmitri sunk down on the floor. Mandy touched his red stomach and he flinched. “Well, that’s as hot as I’ve been in a while.”

Mandy swatted him and he gasped. “Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean to do it that hard. Will you be okay?”

“Just give me a few minutes and I’ll recover.” He patted his chest. “Lycan-boy heals fast.” He glanced up at the shower and shook his head. “I guess we can have another go at it.”

“We’ve done enough damage,” she said, attempting to stand up. She slipped on the water soaked floor and fell forward.

~*****~

Michelle walked into the club and looked around. Mandy’s car was in the parking lot, but she was nowhere to be found. She turned to head to the office and ran smack into what felt like a brick wall. “Ooph!”

“Michelle?” Armando asked softly.

She looked up and shook her head. “Could you please wear a bell or something? I wouldn’t walk into you if I knew you were there.”

“Sorry, I just arrived and saw that...” He stopped in mid-sentence.

Michelle touched his arm. “Hey, it’s okay to admit that you were hoping to find Mandy standing here. I was sort of hoping for the same thing myself.”

“Oh?” Armando cocked an eyebrow. “Having troubles with her too?”

“Yeah, but mine don’t stem from another woman, they stem from you.” It was harsh, but necessary. “Can I ask you something?”

Armando nodded his head, but didn’t say a word. “When you took Elizabeth home the other night, you do anything with her?” Michelle didn’t want to come out and ask if he’d boned her, so she left it at that.

“No, I did not have sex with Elizabeth. Why? Does someone think otherwise?”

Michelle tossed her hands in the air and let out a low moan. "Let's cut the niceties. I'll stop evading the issue of you sleeping with your sire, if you'll stop avoiding saying Mandy's name. Deal?" she asked, putting her hand out to him.

His cool hand slipped into hers. "Deal."

"Great. Now, to answer your question, I think that Mandy might be under the impression that you did screw Elizabeth. I had some papers to drop off to her at work and sort of overheard her on the phone with James. She flat out told him that she suspected you gave into Elizabeth's advances because you didn't return to the club that night."

"No, I did return, only to find Mandy and Dmitri drinking together in the back office. They seemed to be 'getting along' well, so I left."

Michelle's eyebrows came together. "What? You're not insinuating that Mandy and Dmitri have something going on, are you? She's my best friend. She'd never..." A loud bang came from the back of the club. Michelle looked at Armando and they took off running in that direction. They stopped just outside the employee bathroom when they heard voices.

Michelle heard Mandy's voice first. "It's...too...hard...I can't...get it...to..."

"Here," she heard Dmitri say with a grunt. "Well, that's as hot as I've been in a while."

She heard Dmitri gasp before Mandy said, "Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to do it that hard. Will you be okay?"

"Just give me a few minutes and I'll recover.... Lycan-boy heals fast.... I guess we can have another go at it."

"We've done enough damage," Mandy said.

Michelle looked at Armando and felt the blood drain from her face. His dark eyes narrowed on the door as he thrust it open. Michelle ran in behind him. Her eyes widened as she found Mandy lying on an almost naked Dmitri with her head buried in his abdomen.

"What the...?"

Mandy and Dmitri looked up at them and then at each other. Their eyes grew wide. "Do not try to act innocent Mandy. We all know that you are anything but an angel," Armando said, the hurt evident in his voice. "I expected retaliation on me for you finding about Elizabeth, but I never thought you would hurt Michelle too...and you," he said, pointing at Dmitri. "You call yourself my friend."

“Armando, NO! It’s not what you think. Mandy was just helping me with...” Dmitri started to offer an explanation, but Armando put his hand in the air.

“Do not bother. You have nothing that I wish to hear. I wondered how long it would take you to return to your old habits.”

“Yeah, well I’d sure the hell like to know what’s going on!” Michelle said, on the verge of screaming. She glared at Mandy. “How could you do this to me?”

Mandy pushed up off Dmitri and her feet went out from under her. Dmitri was up and catching her before she could hit the floor. “Michelle...”

Michelle turned and ran from the room. She couldn’t bear to look at the two of them any longer. She pushed through the front door and came to a grinding halt when she saw Karl standing there.

“You all set?” he asked, with a smile on his handsome face.

“Hey, Michelle, my belle.” The sound of James’ voice made her cringe. She glanced at the blonde vamp as he approached the club door and rolled her eyes.

“I’ve never been more ready,” Michelle said to Karl.

~*****~

Mandy moved away from Dmitri to go after Michelle, and was quickly lifted off her feet by Armando. “Put me down!”

“What runs through your head, Mandy? What makes you so bent on being unhappy that you do the things you do?” he asked, pulling her to him in one hard jerk.

“Ouch,” she gasped. “Let go of me. If you’re not going to believe your best friend of over a hundred years, you sure the hell aren’t going to believe me.” She looked into his dark eyes and watched them swirl. “Drain me, or let me go. My life doesn’t concern you anymore.”

“There is where you are wrong,” Armando said, snatching her hand and pulling it to her face. “This makes it my...” He stopped when he realized that she wasn’t wearing his engagement ring. His face was full of emotions, yet void of any telltale sign of exactly how he felt.

Mandy jerked her hand away and reached into her shirt. She pulled a chain out and yanked it off. "Here, I've been meaning to give this back to you," she said, thrusting the chain and ring into his face.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Mandy, please...."

"This is perfect. You can go finish your little thing with Eliza-bitch, I can continue my non-affair with Dmitri, keep using James as a 'crutch', and I don't have to sit around and wait for you to screw-up." She stopped to take a breath before moving on. Armando looked puzzled. "Look, just take it. It was fun while it lasted."

"Elizabeth means nothing to me, and I have not been with her in centuries."

"Oh, lover, walking a thin line of truths there aren't you?" Elizabeth's voice brought their attention to the bathroom door. She gave Mandy a sinister smile and winked at Armando. "You didn't seem too eager to run away from me the other night when you were alone with me at my hotel room, and you never did tell me why you showed back up after you went off to find your pet human, not that I'm complaining."

Armando sighed. "Your plane leaves in an hour. Why are you still here?"

"Oh, lover, how could I not come back for one last romp with you?" Elizabeth said, with a laugh. "I do miss the way you would pin me to the wall face first and fu...."

"Enough, Elizabeth," Dmitri warned.

Mandy felt her cheeks grow hot. She faced Armando and let the ring fall from her hand. He caught it before it hit the ground, without batting an eyelash. She glared at him, willing him to read her thoughts. She wanted him to know exactly what she thought of him. She felt him push through her mind, almost like someone had pulled a curtain back.

Armando looked at Dmitri. "I am sorry to have accused you of wrong doing. It is clear that nothing happened."

Mandy's mouth dropped open. She'd wanted him to get exactly how pissed she was with him, not the truth about what had happened with Dmitri. Armando lifted her hand to him, took the ring from the chain, and placed it back on her finger. He closed her hand in his fist and held it tight. "I will beg if need be."

"Humph, don't make him resort to that. I haven't seen him beg in all the time I've known him and sure the hell don't want to see it now," Dmitri said, replacing the hot water knob on the shower. "Do you want to marry him or not?"

"Dmitri, I do not think you are helping here," Armando said.

“No, I think I am helping. She either wants to marry you or she doesn’t.”

Armando looked down at her and her heart beat fast. She started to shake her head, unsure of what to say. In her own weird way she loved Armando, but wasn’t sure it would be enough.

~*****~

Michelle looked across the restaurant at Karl and tried to smile. It really was nice to be on a date with one of her own kind—a human. Karl was all class and it was nice to be wined and dined. The restaurant he’d chosen was five star and very elegant. It sure wasn’t any Trolly Cheese.

Why was she thinking of Dmitri again? Here she was on a perfectly good date, with a man who treated her like a lady, and she was thinking of that damned arrogant lycan! ARGH!!!

Michelle forced a smile. Determined, she vowed she was going to enjoy Karl’s company no matter what! She wouldn’t allow herself to find one flaw with him, though his smile wasn’t as cute as.... She was hopeless, utterly and completely hopeless.

“You certainly look delicious tonight, my dear,” said Karl with a wide grin. His eyes dipped over her shoulders. “Your skin looks like it would be comfortable to wear.”

Michelle blinked. Surely she heard him wrong. “Excuse me?”

“Your skin, it looks soft,” said Karl with a handsome, seductive smile.

“Uh, thanks,” answered Michelle, confused. What exactly had he been talking about? She really needed to pay attention. “I moisturize.”

Karl chuckled and murmured, “Yes.”

Michelle opened her mouth to respond, but the waiter came to take their order. Instead, she just smiled and nodded her head.

~*****~

“Yes or no, Mandy. It’s as easy as that.”

Mandy glanced at Dmitri nervously as he ushered Elizabeth and her pet Barbie from the overcrowded bathroom. Armando grabbed her chin and forced her to look at him. He looked down at the ring on her finger and cocked an eyebrow. He wanted an answer and now.

“No,” she said, flatly. “I think that I could’ve done this before, but I can’t now.”

Armando didn’t move, and she was suddenly very aware of the fact that he wasn’t human. Fear gripped her and she tried to take a step back. He held tight to her and brought his face down hard and fast.

Mandy thought that Armando was going to bite her, but when his cool lips collided with hers she relaxed a bit and let him slide his tongue in. She pushed on his chest to keep him away, but it was pointless. The harder she tried to let herself go in his kiss, the more she thought about Elizabeth’s words. Armando had gone back to her and had had sex with her. As strong as Mandy thought she was, she knew that she couldn’t get past that. She loved the man before her too much to be able to watch him continue to fall for his sire’s advances for the rest of her life. She knew that she wouldn’t live as long as Armando and the thought of him going back to his eternally beautiful, yet bitchy, sire sickened her.

She felt Armando in her mind again, scanning her thoughts. She didn’t bother to try and hide her concerns. There was really no point. She reached to take his ring from her finger and he pulled her close to him.

“I wish that you could read me as easy I can you. You would see that nothing happened between Elizabeth and I, and you would know that my heart belongs only to you.”

“Why’d you go back to her after you dropped her off?”

Armando took in a deep breath and tightened his hold on her. “I will not lie to you, Mandy. I saw you having drinks with Dmitri, laughing and so happy, that jealousy overtook me. I stormed away with the idea that I would make myself forget you, drown my pain away with sex.” She tried to pull away from him, but he refused to let her go. “I found myself back in Elizabeth’s room and...”

“WHAT THE HELL DO YOU MEAN?” Dmitri’s voice interrupted them.

Mandy pulled back from Armando and they ran to the front of the club. Dmitri stood on the empty dance floor holding James by his collar. Mandy ran to Dmitri and put her hand on his arm. “Dmitri, you’re going to kill him.”

Elizabeth let out a laugh. “Have you taught her nothing Armando? James is already dead.”

“Would you please shut the fu...”

Mandy was cut short by a flash of blonde before her, and then a hard smack backwards. “Don’t touch my man!”

Armando appeared next to her, breaking her fall. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” Mandy said, glaring at the walking play toy. She got her footing and grabbed a chair. Armando tried to take it from her, but she growled at him. Mandy pulled the chair back and swung hard at Barbara’s back. Dmitri saw her coming and dropped James. Mandy struck Barbie between the shoulder blades with the chair and James stuck his foot out. Barbie fell flat on her face.

“Gee, I hope you didn’t pop a breast,” Mandy panted. James laughed, and Barbie snarled.

Dmitri put a foot on her back and looked at Mandy. “Care to explain?”

“Let’s just say that was for Michelle. I owed her one.”

“Michelle!” Dmitri cried out, turning his attention back to James. “You let her leave with Karl the Cannibal?”

“Who?” Mandy asked.

Armando and Elizabeth moved forward. “Michelle is with Karl?”

James nodded his head. “I didn’t think to stop her, she looked pissed.”

Mandy put her hands up in the air, signifying defeat. “Would someone pleeze explain what the hell is going on?”

Elizabeth, the most unlikely candidate stepped forward. “It appears that your little friend has taken to a cannibal.” A wicked grin passed over her face, and she licked her lips. “I did so hope to get to taste that one. I liked her spunk. Too bad Karl got to her first...he’s not known to leave any leftovers. I didn’t expect him to work so fast, and he picked up the wrong girl. I told him to contact you, Mindy. I did so hope he’d make you his next meal.”

Dmitri growled and put his hand up as Armando tried to rush Elizabeth as well. “If anything happens to Michelle I’ll...I’ll...”

Elizabeth smiled. “You’ll what, wolf? You’ll give me an evil look? You will do nothing if you value your friend’s existence. He is mine, after all and to kill me could mean his death.”

Mandy tried to attack her, but Armando seized her around the waist and held her to him. “Calm down. We need to find Michelle. Do you know where he might have taken her?”

Mandy glared at Elizabeth and did her best to calm down. It was important to find Michelle fast. She’d kill Elizabeth later.

~*****~

The date was going well from what Michelle could guess. Karl was an odd man, to say the least, but just because he wasn’t Dmitri didn’t mean he was a bad guy. He seemed to have a thing for food. He kept sucking and savoring every bite. His eyes would dip over her as he did it, as if he wanted to suck on her. Michelle couldn’t say she was incredibly attracted to Karl, but the sexual attention was flattering and she would take it. After weeks of no sexual attention from a certain to-remain-nameless lycan, it was pure heaven to be desired.

“I’ll bet you taste just like chicken.”

Michelle blinked looking at Karl. “I’m sorry, I think the violin’s too loud. What’d you say?”

“Did you enjoy your chicken?”

“Oh, delicious, thank you.”

Karl nodded, smiling his debonair smile. He leaned slightly back as the waiter took their plates. When the man was gone, he lifted his glass of red wine and swirled it thoughtfully.

“Did you know,” asked Karl, musingly, “that when you consume a person’s body, you transfer some of their life’s essence into yourself.”

“WHAT?”

“Oh, I was just telling you about a tribe I studied in the West Indies,” Karl said, running a finger over Michelle’s wrist. She shifted in her seat and forced a nervous smile onto her face. Her cheeks flared red and she tried to look like she’d been following his conversation all along.

Main Course

Michelle did her best to pay attention to Karl as he talked, but it was no use. He just didn't interest her. Usually, when someone had been so intergraded into a different culture, like the West Indies cannibals Karl described, she'd have been taking book notes under the table. But now, looking at him, she didn't even have the urge to write. In fact, she hadn't written a damned thing worth keeping since she broke it off with Dmitri.

"I'm sorry, what?" Michelle forced another smile, one that was getting harder to maintain. Karl was a weird guy, even if he was the only date besides lycan boy she'd had in a long time. "Did you say I would feel like silk against your tongue?"

Karl chuckled, tipping his head back. His eyes lit, but he shook his head. "No, dear girl, I said tell me about your new book, Silk isn't it?"

"Oh, yeah, sorry...you know, this violin." Michelle waved her hand absently, glad for an excuse to pull her hand away. The finger against her wrist was getting rather annoying. She put her hands under the table to itch the spot he'd touched. She gave the same generic answer she gave everyone. "Yeah, Silk. It's part of NCP's new superhero anthology called Ultimate Warriors. I just got the cover. It's pretty great. I'm on there with a couple other authors—Jaide Fox, Brenna Lyons, and Joy Nash."

"Hum, interesting," he murmured. Michelle got the impression he wasn't paying attention. He was staring at her neck again. "Don't you have another one coming out in July? Something about vampires?"

"Tribes of the Vampire." Michelle watched him, answering cautiously and wondering about his look. "It's a Dark Romance series that's starting. Book one is called Redeemer of Shadows."

"Mmmm, and these vampires of yours, do they drink blood?" he asked.

"Uh, yes."

Karl shivered and rolled his eyes in a most orgasmic way. "And do they devour the flesh?"

"Ah," Michelle was at a loss. "After that I have a contemporary coming out, Mountain's Captive. It's about a man who lives in the Montana mountains and he—"

"Has to eat his fellow mountaineers to survive the harsh mountain winters?" asked Karl, almost hopefully. Again he shivered. If his hands weren't on the tabletop, she'd have thought he was up to something nasty. Michelle was half tempted to see if a

waitress had crawled under the table to give him pleasure. She kicked around with her foot and felt nothing.

“No, he accidentally gets drunk and married in Vegas one night. It’s a sexier book and I think—”

“Mmm, pity,” Karl whispered.

Ignore it Michelle, you’re just trying to judge him cause he’s not Dmitri. Change the subject.

“I,” Michelle began, only to hesitate slightly. “I have The Dragon Lords series completely written too. The first one—The Barbarian Prince—has sold extremely well. It’s gotten a ton of five star reviews.”

“Humm, wasn’t Daughter of Darkness yours too?” asked Karl. “I loved what you did to Rick, it was just divine. There is something so very erotic about being eaten alive. And the hellhounds were to die for. Though, I really think you could have used more violence in it. It was pretty tame.”

“Ah, no Daughter of Darkness was Mandy’s book.”

“Oh, what about Valkyrie?” asked Karl.

“Mandy’s.” Michelle swallowed. Ok, he was really starting to stare too much, and asking about Mandy’s creepy books was a bit unnerving. “As is Immortal Ops before you ask.”

“Well, I shall read your Dark Romance, I promise. It’s a pity the series will end though,” said Karl.

“What do you mean? I have no plans to end it,” said Michelle.

“Ah.” Karl’s eyes sparkled sadly like he knew a secret. Michelle squirmed in her seat, growing very uncomfortable. Suddenly, she had the strongest urge just to get up and run. But where could she go? Karl could easily follow her to the abandoned parking lot. She thought of Dmitri. She suddenly really wanted Dmitri to come and save her—though she’d never admit that to him in a million years. Tears came to her eyes. There was something off about Karl that she could no longer ignore. He came across as mild mannered, but still, something was there.

~*****~

“Would you stop staring at me!” Mandy shouted at Armando from the backseat of Dmitri’s SUV.

Armando’s dark eyes ran over James and stayed fixated on him. “Tell me again why he gets to sit next to you.”

Mandy rolled her eyes and let out a growl. “For starters, because Eliza-bitch insisted on coming and there was no way in hell that I was sitting next to her.” She leaned forward, looked over James, and winked at the blonde vampire. Elizabeth gave her a wicked smile, but said nothing. “Secondly, I don’t feel like sitting next to you and Elizabeth. It’s bad enough that you admitted to going back to her to fuck her, but flaunting it in my face is a bit much.”

Armando let out a grunt and looked at Dmitri for help. Dmitri nudged Barbie away from him as he tried to drive and shook his head. “You’re on your own here. I’d be pissed if I was her too.”

“Thanks,” Armando said coolly, looking back at Mandy. “I hardly call attempting to explain myself flaunting. Apparently, we have very different views on the meaning of the word.”

Mandy arched an eyebrow. “What? Now I’m stupid too?”

Armando started to say something but Mandy’s temper was out of control. She turned to James and grabbed his face. His blue eyes widened as she yanked his mouth to hers. He opened his mouth to protest and she used the opportunity to thrust her tongue in. Two tiny fangs greeted her and she artfully avoided piercing her tongue.

“MANDY!” Armando shouted, as Elizabeth and Barbie laughed.

Mandy ignored Armando’s protest and lost herself in the moment with James. He was a fantastic kisser and that caught her off guard. She’d expected him to bungle it. It seemed like a very James thing to do. He didn’t. He moved his cool hand around and cupped the back of her head. His tongue dove deeper into her mouth, and for a moment, she couldn’t breathe. James eased up a bit and Mandy’s inner thighs burned with desire.

“Oh, hold Armando tight, Barbara. I wouldn’t want him to break up the show,” Elizabeth said, laughing hysterically. “If you would like to hop in the back and fuck her, I’d be all for helping you climb over.”

It was James who pulled away first. Mandy went for seconds and caught his swollen bottom lip with her teeth. Their eyes met and James shook his head no. Love, I want this, but not with him lookin’ on. She heard James’ voice in her head and it was as clear as if he’d spoken aloud. She gave him a puzzled look and he kissed her lips gently before pulling back. You just bonded with me. It’s common for vamps to bond through intimate moments. Never had it happen with a human before though, kind of neat.

“Are you finished whoring around?” Armando demanded.

Mandy smiled at him and touched her lips. “I don’t know. Are you?”

He threw his hands in the air and let out a large sigh. “You will be the death of me.”

“Funny, your sire made sure to point out that you were already dead.”

~*****~

Michelle glanced around the park nervously. She still wasn’t sure why she’d allowed Karl to talk her into a walk. Not that he gave her much of a choice. He’d all but insisted she accompany him.

As they walked further into the park, the darker and darker it got. The already uneasy feeling she had with Karl intensified, and she closed her eyes for a moment and wished for Dmitri to come rushing in.

She was being silly. Karl wasn’t a threat. She was just being paranoid and looking for reasons not to like him. He touched her arm and she tensed up. She didn’t mean to, it just sort of happened.

“Are you okay, my dear?” he asked. The words ran off his tongue, but they sounded anything but sweet.

Her cell phone rang and made her jump. Karl moved closer to her and put his hand on her shoulder. “Now, do we really need unnecessary interruptions this evening?”

Yeah, like a million of them would be great right now. Michelle thought to herself. She fished her phone out of her purse and answered it, hoping it was Dmitri or Mandy.

“Hey babes, it’s me Jaci. I just got your message. You’re planning an engagement party for who?” Jaci Burton took a small breath before continuing. “I could have sworn that you said Mandy, but I know that our Mandy isn’t the type for settling down.”

Michelle glanced at Karl, afraid to take her eyes off him for too long. She nodded and realized that Jaci couldn’t see her. “Yeah, it was for Mandy.”

“Was?” Jaci asked, putting a lot of emphasis on was. “What the hell did she do this time?”

Michelle thought of Mandy laying on Dmitri in the bathroom at the Raven and felt her nostrils flare. "My boyfriend."

"Oh, sweet heavens. You going to be all right? You two still talking? Do you need anything? If you need anything give me a call. Hey, how's your Tribes book coming? It's part of a series, right? The next Devlin book was just released. Running Mate was a hit and the readers wanted more so I gave them Fall Fury. It's tied into Summer Heat, so I think people will enjoy it," Jaci continued.

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"Try her again damnit!" Dmitri shouted.

Mandy opened the door and stepped out. They had pulled over when she finally found some cell phone reception and Dmitri had done nothing but scream at her since she started to try to reach Michelle.

He climbed out of the driver's side and ran to her. "Anything?"

She put her hand up and pushed on his chest. "No, and if you keep it up I'll stick this phone right up your..."

"It amazes me how you must fondle every male around you," Armando said wryly.

Mandy and Dmitri turned to see Armando stalking towards them. Dmitri moved closer to Mandy and whispered in her ear. "Try not to provoke him. I'm not sure he's in the right state of mind. Elizabeth makes us all crazy."

"Do not try to protect her," Armando said, reaching for her.

"Oh," Mandy said, looking towards her phone. It connected but only to Michelle's voice mail. "She's either on it or has it shut-off."

"If he harms one hair on her body I'm killing James," Dmitri said, coldly.

"I will do it now and save you the trouble," Armando said, heading back towards the car.

Mandy ran after him and grabbed his arm. "Stop!"

He spun around so fast that she lost her balance. Armando made no attempt to help her. She hit the pavement with a thud, scraping her palms and elbow. Cold, hard eyes looked down at her. "Never put your lips on his again. Are we clear?"

“Mandy?” James asked, appearing next to her suddenly.

She growled at Armando as he tried to beat James in offering her a hand up. “Don’t touch me!”

James helped her to her feet and she looked down at her hands. Pieces of gravel were imbedded in the tiny cuts that covered her palms.

James took her hands into his and glared at Armando. “This make you feel like a man, did it?”

Armando balked. “I never laid a hand on her.”

“Well, you got me there,” James said sarcastically, pulling her hands closer to him. “You okay?”

Mandy nodded. “I’ll be fine. Thanks.”

“Hate to break up the little love fest, but do you smell that?” Elizabeth asked, looking off towards the park entrance.

“Ooo, I smell it too,” Barbie said, her voice full of glee.

Mandy’s forehead wrinkled as she tried to figure out what they were talking about. James took a step towards her. “I smell the fear too.”

“Michelle!” Dmitri said, taking off running into the park.

~*****~

Michelle looked down at her smashed cell phone. Karl stomped on it one final time before he looked up at her with evil in his eyes. He licked his lips and let his gaze roll over her. “You’re going to be so good to eat.”

“Uh, nobody goes there without my permission buddy and there is no way in hell that I’m granting you permission,” She said looking down her body.

Karl let out a wicked laugh and rolled his eyes. “I’m more interested in your flesh. I do so enjoy a good meal. Most of what I eat now is so tainted with evil, and I’ve always wanted to feast on an author.” He took a step towards her and she backed away. “I wonder if I will absorb any of your creativity.”

Michelle took a step back and found her foot twisting out from under her. She fell backwards. Karl covered the distance between them with three strides and reached for her, his eyes wild.

Michelle screamed and kicked out at him. It did little in the way of stopping him. He grabbed hold of her arm and held it steady. He reached his fist back and smiled. "I am going to hate bruising that pretty face, but I need to prep your body for my feast."

There was a growl from her right and then a large blur. Karl's body was propelled backwards with a gust and Michelle was left sitting on her backside, puzzled and scared.

Something touched her arm and she screamed out again. "Are you hurt?" Dmitri asked softly.

Michelle let out her breath and reached for him. His grey eyes, floppy sun-streaked hair, and cocky attitude had never been a more welcome sight. She touched his face timidly, sensing that he was on the edge and not wanting to see him shift into a wolf. She wasn't sure her heart could handle that right now.

"She's MY MEAL! Get your own!" Karl screamed as he lunged at Dmitri.

Dmitri caught the man in mid-motion and whipped him around, slamming him against a tree in the process. Michelle jumped to her feet as she saw Dmitri pummeling Karl's face with a closed fist.

Blood gushed from Karl's mouth and nose. Michelle stopped within a foot of touching Dmitri and said his name softly. He either didn't hear her or ignored her. Either way, he was about to kill Karl and she didn't want to see Dmitri locked away in a supernatural facility for eternity.

"Stop! He's not worth prison!" Michelle yelled.

Dmitri turned to her, his eyes blazing of wolf. He growled at her and continued to punch the now unconscious Karl.

"Pumpkin, no!" A bubbly voice said from behind her. "Don't kill my Karl."

Michelle turned to see Barbie standing there. The rest of the gang was on her heels. She looked back at Dmitri and raised an eyebrow. He'd let Karl fall to the ground and was in the process of taking several deep breaths.

"Oh, sorry," Michelle said wryly. "I didn't realize you only answered to pet names. Makes sense, being part dog and all."

Dmitri's mouth dropped and his eyes widened. "I just saved your life."

“Thank you, Pump-kin,” she said coldly as she turned and stormed off, pushing past a guilty looking Mandy on her way out of the park.

Mandy grabbed hold of her arm, stopping her dead in her tracks. “Michelle, this is bullshit. NOTHING happened.”

“You look awfully guilty for ‘nothing’ happening.”

Mandy rolled her eyes and let out a deep breath. It was shaky and Michelle thought Mandy might cry. That wasn’t a normal Mandy thing to do and it caught her attention. “What’s wrong?”

“What you saw was me falling on Dmitri in the bathroom. I slipped, honest. It wasn’t sexual and nothing has EVER passed between us like that. You are my best friend and I would NEVER do anything to hurt you.”

Michelle moved closer to her and put her hand on her shoulder. “Part of me knows that. I just...I don’t know. When it comes to wolf-boy I get a bit mixed up.” She let out a small laugh. “None of this explains why you’re so upset.”

It was Mandy’s turn to laugh. “Aside from the fact that I thought you might be eaten alive and die with this misunderstanding between us, I sort of pushed Armando over the edge,” she said, lifting her hands to show Michelle how bruised and bloody they were.

“Oh, my gawd!” Michelle cried out. “What the hell happened?”

“I kissed James.”

“Oh,” Michelle said, things suddenly becoming clear. She’d speak with Armando about hurting Mandy later, now she needed to focus on her friend. “Was it just to piss Armando off, or was there more to it?”

Mandy looked at her, shocked. “Why...why, do you ask that?”

“Because the way you said James’ name makes me think you might be closer to him than you realize.”

She watched as Mandy dropped her head down. It was clear that she hadn’t thought on her own. Why would she? She was too close to it all. “Come on, let’s go over to your house and raid your freezer. You’ve always got the best stash of ice cream,” Michelle said laughing.

Interview with Heather Holland - The Drigon's Fall

Mandy sat on the edge of her couch with her head down. She blinked back the tears that tried to flow. James touched her shoulder and she refused to look up. "Come on, love. It's not so bad."

"Not so bad?" Mandy gasped. "You show up here, drop the fact that you're leaving into my lap, and you say it's not so bad. We've got some sort of weird vampire friendship-bond thing going and you cut town?"

"We bonded out of a fluke. I think we both know who your heart belongs to."

"Armando," Mandy said, breathlessly.

"Yep, I may think he's a wanker, but you seem to have taken to him. Besides, Pallo needs me to go to Tuscany for a bit to smooth out some kinks with one of his businesses there. I'll imagine that I'll be gone for a few months."

"Why the hell can't he go?"

James' eyes widened. "Yeah, next time I want my head ripped off I'll ask him that. Besides, Caradoc's being sent to France and Pallo needs to stay behind and oversee Necro World. I'll call you as often as I can and maybe you and Michelle can come visit me."

There was a knock on the door and Mandy looked at the clock. It was pushing ten and she wasn't expecting anyone. From the way James' hand tightened on her leg, he was. He patted her gently and went to the door.

"Thanks for coming," James said, softly.

"Where is Mandy?" She heard Armando's cold voice ask.

She stiffened in her seat and prepared to have more of his harsh words thrown at her. Instead, he followed James into her living room and stood before her. "Mandy?"

When she didn't answer him, he reached down and touched her cheek. "Mandy, what's wrong?"

She looked up then, but not at Armando. Her eyes met James' and he winked. He'd arranged for Armando to come. He wanted things to work out between them and the fact that he'd risked the wrath of Armando spoke volumes. She let a smile creep over her face. James gave her a small wave goodbye and headed out of her apartment.

Armando glanced behind him and then back at her, dropping to his knees before her. “What was all of that about?” The tension in his neck and jaw said that he wanted to be screaming, and that it was taking a good deal of restraint on his part to avoid making a scene.

Mandy leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. He was still for a moment before his arms wrapped around her. The kiss said what each had been meaning to say for some time now—I’m sorry. Her heart sped and she found Armando suddenly over her body, laying her back across the couch.

It felt good to be this close to him again. The scent of his cologne and taste of his cool mouth left her moaning beneath him. She tried to unbutton his shirt, but her fingers were shaking too much to do anything other than fumble around.

Armando let out a small, nervous laugh and pulled back from her slightly. “I missed you too.”

The tears she’d been fighting to hold back for the last half hour gave way. At Mandy’s insistence, Armando peeled the shirt from his body. Her hands urgently tried to undo the top button of his pants. He brushed her hair from her face as she fumbled to free him from his jeans and wiped the tears from her cheeks. “Delizia, why do you cry?”

“You’re wearing jeans,” Mandy said, looking down at him in awe and sniffing.

Armando’s eyebrows rose. “You are crying because I am wearing jeans? Odd.”

She gave up on trying to free the thick press of his erection and reached up to pull his face down to hers. “No, I’m crying because it took losing a friend for me to see how much I love you.”

A small smile came to his lips and his eye glowed with hot meaning. “Is this shirt a favorite of yours?”

Mandy looked down at the T-shirt. “No.”

Armando chuckled and, taking a long nail, sliced open the front, freeing her large breasts to him. His lips lowered, devouring hers in a deep kiss that left her breathless. Small sounds of pleasure left her lips as his mouth moved down her neck. She didn’t even flinch as his parted lips strayed over her racing pulse.

“Argh,” he growled softly and she knew he forced himself to move on. A small smile glanced over her lips as she felt his self-control.

His kisses trailed over her heated flesh, across her collarbone, to one sensitive breast. Flicking his tongue across her nipple, Armando sucked the bud into his mouth. He toyed with it gently, bringing more and more pleasure to her.

“Armando!” Mandy cried out in pleasure, her panties dampening with desire for him. It had been too long since he’d held her like this and she’d missed him so much.

Her hands became frantic, eagerly stripping him from the remainder of his clothes. Her eyes devoured his naked body as he stood beside the couch. He was pale and beautiful and so very perfect. His long, thick erection stood waiting for her. She knew how velvety smooth it was from memory and that alone was enough to almost bring her. She wanted him desperately, wanted him to fulfill the ache that had bore a hollow in her chest.

“I love you,” she whispered, not feeling as if she could say it enough. Her eyes screamed for forgiveness for all the issues that had been between them.

“And I you,” he said, leaning over to remove her jeans with great care, worshipping her body with tender caresses and bold kisses.

Armando’s cool fingers glided over Mandy’s flesh, teasing her body to a feverish pitch. His tongue flicked over her stomach as he slowly edged his body to settle in-between her thighs. Mandy tensed as his mouth latched on to her clit, biting lightly.

“Ah, yes,” she panted, weak with longing. She wiggled her hips up into him as he drank from her body.

Armando moaned into her wet slit, moving his tongue over her to lap up her taste. Mandy knew he could feel what she felt. He invaded her mind, speaking low words to her, urging her on as his long tongue glided up into her hot passage.

Voglio fare l’amore con te. He projected into her mind. It didn’t matter that she understood only a fraction of what he whispered.

Ah, yes, Mandy thought, letting him hear her. *Ah, there, right there. Oh, yeah, don’t stop. Yes, yes...oh, Armando.*

Mandy reached down with her foot, searching for the hot feel of his cock. She wanted him inside her, but his mouth felt too good for her to protest as he thrust his tongue in and out of her body. Armando nibbled and sucked, milking a torrent of cream from within her. Suddenly, she tensed, screaming loud as she came hard against his mouth.

As the tremors subsided, Armando looked up at her and grinned. She lay weak, unable to move as he began to crawl up over her.

“Ah, sorry Kitten, no time for rest,” he murmured. “I am nowhere near finished with you.”

"I can't," she said softly, rolling her head back, teasing him with her breasts. He snatched one into his mouth and rolled the nipple with his tongue.

He moaned as he drew back and Mandy let out a whimper. "Don't go," she said, arms out to him.

Armando's dark eyes met hers as he bent down and scooped her into his arms. He growled slightly. "I want to take you here and now, Kitten, but I can take you harder in the bedroom." He gave her a wink and she squealed with delight.

Before Mandy could blink, Armando had sped her to her bedroom. He placed her on the mattress as he stood the bed.

"Bend over on the bed, *cara mia*," he whispered, giving her a devilish smile.

She instantly obeyed, crawling on the bed on all fours. Wiggling her ass at him, in a way she knew drove him to distraction; she offered her body to him. She let loose a throaty chuckle to hear his moan.

Armando's body slid next to hers. His cool hands explored her, pulling back her hair, running along the ridge of her spine. He teased her nipples from behind, letting her feel the heavy length of his cock rubbing along her thigh.

Mandy called out, beyond words and thoughts as she begged him to end their torment. Armando's lips found hold on her flesh as he sucked kisses along her back, trailing over one firm cheek and then the other. His fingers delved forward, eagerly slipping into the wetness awaiting him. Her cream dripped over him like honey as he thrust his fingers inside her quivering body.

"No, I want you, Armando, please! I need you!" Mandy tried to pull forward. His hands shot to her hips to hold her where he wanted her. "Pleeeeaassee!"

"Ah, Kitten, so hot, so wet," he murmured soothingly. "Do not worry, I will give you what you desire."

Mandy tensed. His body raised behind hers. The smooth tip of his shaft neared her slit and began to rub back and forth along the opening to her silken passageway.

"Now!" she demanded. She threatened him with her mind. *So help me, you better fuck me now or I'll...*

Armando groaned. With a mighty thrust he shoved his cock hard into her awaiting pussy. Mandy screamed in delight as he filled her up. The feel of her quivering flesh made him lose all control. Instantly, he began to ride her, ramming his hard shaft in and out, gliding with ease in the juices of her body.

“Ahhh!” she cried. “Oh, yes....”

“You feel so good!” he groaned, pumping his hips faster, propelling his cock deeper still. He fitted himself to her core, rocking so hard the bed began to squeak and bang in protest.

Mandy’s nipples rubbed erotically against the mattress as his hand pressed her back down. The tension between them built. Her body began to tense as she felt the earth-shattering approach of her climax.

Suddenly, she tensed. Her body racked with the pleasure only his enormous cock could bring. Her hot passage squeezed him tight, pulling him until she milked the orgasm from his thrusting body. Armando howled as he came, spurting hot come into her womb. This time, he made sure she knew she was only his. This time, he would not be letting her go so easily.

~*****~

Michelle listened to the girls talking with half an ear. She’d lost track of what cute frilly thing they were planning next for Mandy’s upcoming wedding over an hour ago. It didn’t help that her nose was plugged, causing a horrific sinus headache.

The J’s, Jaycee Clark and Jaci Burton, were having a ball tossing different wedding theme ideas for the engagement party back and forth. Elaine Corvidae sat quietly doodling a picture of Yozerf, her hero from the Lord of Wind and Fire series, only to chuckle softly as Jaci suggested they bring in white tigers, and all insisting all the men walked around on all fours wearing dog collars and leashes.

Michelle scowled in displeasure, her mind all too eager to picture Dmitri like that.

“Are you gals sure that there even is a wedding taking place?” Mike asked from behind the bar, looking bored. His only customers were a 6 foot tall cowboy and a woman with reddish-brown hair. Michelle shrugged at Mike, suppressing a laugh at his audacity. The other three women looked as though they wanted to string him up. His grey eyes widened and he backed away from the bar. “Yeah, right. Okay, I’ll be down in the cellar if anyone needs me.”

Michelle wished she could go with him. Hauling around carts of blood definitely held more appeal than planning the grand, happy occasion. She closed her eyes and rubbed at her face, concentrating on breathing through her misery.

“What do you need from the cellar?” Dmitri asked, appearing in the doorway.

Michelle cringed at the sound of his voice. She had known he was at the bar, but he’s stayed in the back office most of the time. She hated the way she still felt for him. She’d spent the greater part of the evening staring at her reflection in the mirror

commanding herself to stop feeling so intensely for him, but it obviously didn't work. She made a mental note to ask Mandy if she knew of any way to banish the thoughts. Her luck, Mandy would go all creepy on her and turn her into a toad. Now that she thought about it, it might be best to go it alone.

"Ah," Mike began, giving a guilty look to the still livid bridesmaids.

Michelle stood, crossing over to the bar. She made a point of not looking at Dmitri, as she stood before Mike. "Mike, can I get some whiskey?"

Mike blinked in surprise and glanced at Dmitri. "Ah...?"

"What are you asking his permission for?" demanded Michelle, still not looking at Dmitri, but very aware of where he was. She dug angrily into her purse and placed a twenty on the bartop. "Whiskey shot."

Mike again looked at Dmitri. This time, she followed his eyes. She couldn't help herself. Dmitri's eyes pierced into her and she could feel him like a shockwave through her body. Slowly, he turned to Mike and purposefully shook his head in denial.

Michelle glared at him and sniffed. She slapped another twenty on the bar. "I'm a paying customer, whiskey in a very, very, very tall glass."

Dmitri stormed to stand on the other side of the bar from her, elbowing Mike out of the way. Mike was only too glad to go, and ran downstairs to the cellar.

"You do not need a drink," he stated.

"What is it to you?" hissed Michelle. Oh, but he smelled good. She felt herself growing warm, just like she always did when she was around him.

"You know you can't handle your liquor. Besides, it is too early in the day—"

"Go to hell, you're not my keeper!" yelled Michelle.

"You do not look well. What is wrong with you?" Dmitri's hand began to lift as if he would touch her face.

Michelle jerked back. If he touched her, that would be the end of her resolve. Any sign of tenderness and she would forget everything, jump over the bar, and screw his brains out right then and there in front of witnesses. Gawd! What was wrong with her? He'd turned her into a complete horn-dog!

Hell, she thought bitterly, if we just had sex than maybe I wouldn't be so obsessed with him.

Dmitri pulled his hand back. He looked hurt.

“What concern is it of yours,” Michelle stated, keeping her expression hard. “Now give me a drink.”

“I don’t have time to babysit you when you get drunk,” he growled out of spite. She saw the golden glimmer of wolf in his eyes. He was definitely angrier than he let on.

Instead of scaring her, the power in him excited her. Her skin began to tingle until her body was screaming to just let him touch her. She wanted to feel him against her, his arms about her back, his lips to hers. She nearly moaned. Her eyes watered and she sniffed, trying to tell herself it was her cold that made her weepy.

“No one asked you to babysit me. What I do is no concern of yours!” Michelle waited for his response. His lips tightened and, to her great surprise, he said nothing. Slowly, he turned, poured a cup of coffee, and set it in front of her along with her favorite creamer, without another word.

Michelle watched him walk away with an ache in her chest. She eyed the coffee, knowing that she’d preferred it to whiskey anyway. She’d just been trying to piss Dmitri off. Well, it had worked. She gave a derisive laugh. Yeah, it had worked all right, but now she was even more aroused than usual with no cold shower in sight.

“He’s right. You shouldn’t be drinking with that cold you have.”

Michelle turned to the couple down the bar. The woman smiled at her. Miserably, she uttered, “It’s not a cold. I have allergies.”

“What are you allergic to?” asked the woman. “Dogs? Is that why there’s so much tension between you two?”

Michelle gave a dark laugh. “No, flowers. Someone has been sending lilies almost everyday to my apartment. I would think it was sweet, but I am severely allergic to them. I swear, whoever it is, the jerk is trying to kill me.”

Michelle heard a small noise. She turned to the office doorway to see Dmitri standing there pale. He quickly turned and disappeared once more into the office.

Good, she thought, let him be jealous! That’s what he gets for sleeping with sun-shy-slutty Barbie.

She knew she’d never invited him back to her home and he didn’t know where she lived so it couldn’t be him. The cards only had her name on it with no message and no signature. She didn’t care who the secret admirer was, she just wished the jerk would stop. Too many more days and she’d have to move to get away from them. She wasn’t interested in dating anyone anytime soon.

“Hum,” said the woman. “I don’t think your boyfriend likes that too much.”

“Oh, he is definitely not my boyfriend,” said Michelle, trying to force herself to be polite. She didn’t believe in airing dirty laundry in public. “I don’t have time for boyfriends. I work too much.”

“My name’s Heather Holland,” the woman said. She had adorable freckles across her pale skin and wore a comfortable T-shirt with Link on the front from the Legend of Zelda games. Then, motioning to the handsome cowboy, she said, “This is Cortland Masters.”

The cowboy nodded politely, his blue-green eyes shining with an easy charm. His dark blonde hair fell over his eye and he brushed it back. Michelle quickly introduced herself to them before motioning behind her to her friends.

“Oh, how great! I’m a writer as well! I work for Ellora’s Cave,” said Heather. “I have *The Beauty Within* and *The Drigon’s Fall* out now with them. I also have *Jungle Magic* out with RAH Pubs.”

“Really?” said Michelle, impressed. “I’ll have to review you for the Nocturnal Journal sometime.”

“Oh, definitely. In fact, I’m interviewing Cortland here right now. He’s my inspiration for my new novel, *Crimes of Passion*. It’s contracted to come out this June from Romance at Heart Publications.”

“Michelle!” yelled Jaci.

“We need your help on something!” added Jaycee. “Hurry, before Jaci has all the men in studded leather thongs.

Michelle grimaced. “Excuse me, we’re trying to plan an engagement party. Somehow I think we’d be better off planning a supernatural circus, but maybe that’s just me.”

Heather laughed and turned back to her conversation with Cortland. Michelle grabbed the coffee and went back to the table.

Chapter 22

Guest spot winners & interview with Patrice Michelle

Michelle looked around the Raven with a mix of disgust and amusement, before lifting the Kleenex to her nose and blowing. The lilies had stopped arriving that morning, or at least she hoped they had, since she didn't get her afternoon and evening deliveries from the florist.

It was Mandy and Armando's engagement party and she'd had no choice but to show, being as she was the maid-of-honor. It was a position she couldn't refuse, and yet a position she didn't really relish at the moment. She'd prayed that Armando would have an undead cousin hiding somewhere to act as best man, but to her horror, he picked Dmitri. Not only did she have to think about him all the time, now she had to see him all the time, too. Talk about adding salt to a festering wound. She'd much rather Mandy just staked her and got it over with. It would have been more humane in the long run.

The guests were starting to filter in. They were a strange mix of humans, lycans, vampires, and she was sure she'd just seen a troll go into the bathroom—but wasn't positive. Hearing a buzz fly past her head, Michelle swatted. Her hand smacked into a winged creature, sending it flying backwards.

"Oh!" Michelle gasped in horror to see the fairy smack into the door and tumble to the floor. The little creature shook herself, huffed, and flew straight for Michelle's head. A little noise came from her throat and she cringed, waiting for impact. The impact never came. A very familiar fist lifted and plucked the fairy from mid-air.

Michelle looked at Dmitri. For a moment, her mouth fell slack as she stared at him. His hair was slicked back and he wore an expensive suit of dark grey. It brought out the handsome, piercing depths of his eyes. Her heart fluttered. Her knees weakened. Her mouth went so dry she was sure she'd died.

Dmitri was the first to look away. Shaking the fairy gently in his palm, he growled, "I told you to stay out until you could behave Appleblossom. Don't think shrinking will get you in. I'll not have any barfights tonight—got it?"

"Quit calling me Appleblossom, you damned mangy mutt!" the fairy answered in a gruff voice that didn't sound angelic at all.

"Well, you're the one who posed for the children's book," Dmitri teased. Suddenly, his fist began to shake and the fairy grew in his palm until he was forced to let go. The being materialized into a full-grown woman only to glare from her darkly circled eyes. She shook with outrage. But, instead of going for Dmitri, she made a move to slap Michelle. Dmitri's hand caught hers and he motioned for Makonnen to escort her out.

When the fairy was gone, Michelle said the only thing she could think of. "Quit trying to protect me. I might have to work with you on this damned wedding, but I don't need you acting the part of the boyfriend. We both know that's not what you do best."

Dmitri's eyes darkened. She could tell when he was angry.

"Just stay away from me tonight," she growled, not looking at him again.

"Fine by me," he tersely answered.

"Great."

"Fine."

Dmitri stormed off and Michelle had to admit she was sorry to see him go.

"I should have stuck to my policy and not dated supernatural. Look at this place. It really is a supernatural circus," Michelle mumbled to herself when she was alone.

"With an ass like that, I can see why you did date supernatural."

Michelle jolted in surprise and turned to see Teresa, Kimberly and Loretta—old friends of Mandy's. She smiled, not knowing which spoke.

"Yeah, it's his temper you have to watch out for," Michelle said, trying to smile.

Teresa stood about 5'7" tall with a really curvy, brick-house figure that oozed sex appeal. Her long curly blonde hair was streaked with shades of red, contrasting prettily with her big blue eyes. She wore a leather halter and mini-skirt with spike heeled boots. It was easy to see why she and the outgoing Mandy were friends. It was obvious they shopped at the same stores. And Michelle was sure she'd seen her ride in on a Harley.

Michelle looked down at her charcoal slacks and white silk shirt. She looked like an office wench. Suddenly, she felt severely overdressed. Good thing she forgot the pearl necklace.

"Hum, I don't care about the temper. How was he...you know." Loretta smiled. She was shorter than Teresa and skinnier. Michelle knew she had a crazy sense of humor and a love for adventure. Well, Armando and Mandy's engagement was plenty of adventure.

"How was he in the sack," Kimberly said boldly, as if the comment needed clarification. She had short, dark brown hair and was very curvaceous. She wore high heel leather boots, skintight jeans, and a sexy black t-shirt.

Usually Michelle liked being around the spontaneous, fun woman. Kimberly was the type that wasn't afraid to act silly or be strange just to make someone laugh, and she knew a slew of dirty jokes. But, right now, Michelle wasn't in the mood. And she definitely didn't want to admit she'd never even landed her own ex-boyfriend in the sack—an ex-boyfriend who was a lycan, the species of creatures known for their

prowess. Great, she couldn't even attract a sex-fiend. Hell, her last date, Carl, had tried to eat her! Could she feel like more of a loser?

"I'll bet he's one hot lover. So, is it over between you two? Do you care if I have a go or what?"

"Jeez, Kim, just say whatever's on your mind," came Mandy's voice as she joined them. The bride-to-be was wearing a deep red, almost black shimmering long coat. Michelle could see right through it and it was plain that Mandy wasn't wearing a bra. It split open directly under her breasts, leaving her midriff bare. Mandy's pants, for lack of a better word were made of much the same material and were slit on the sides, leaving each leg bare to the waist. Thankfully, Mandy was wearing a thong or the see through peep show she was giving up top would have been repeated below.

"What?!" Kimberly shot. "You said she broke it off with him. If she doesn't want him, then I'll take him. I—"

With each of Kimberly's words, Michelle grew a little paler. Teresa and Loretta hooked their arms in hers and dragged her off.

"Michelle," Mandy began with an I'm so sorry look.

"Forget it. I don't care what he does, or who for that matter. If Kimberly..." Michelle couldn't finish the sentence. She didn't want Kimberly anywhere near Dmitri. Kimberly was great, but Dmitri was hers and she wasn't about to start sharing. Now, if she'd just get the nerve to let him know that she'd laid claim to him, all would be great. "It doesn't matter. Hey, is that Patrice Michelle I saw earlier? I didn't know you invited her."

"Oh, it was a last minute thing. We were at the office yesterday talking about her book that just came out in the Ellora's Caveman collection called Dream Walker. Someone mentioned the party so I asked her to come. I'm sorry, I know you were supposed to handle the guest list—"

"You think this is my doing?" Michelle chuckled. You have Jaci, Jaycee and Elaine to thank for this one. Oh, and your future husband and Dmitri. I didn't send out a single invitation."

Mandy almost looked hurt.

"Oh, hon, I didn't mean it like that. I love helping to plan your wedding. It's just, I've been sick with those damned flowers coming five times a day." Michelle reached over and gave Mandy a hug. "I did pick the invitations and I kept Jaci Burton from allowing live tigers into the mix. Charlie wanted to jump out of a cake for you. I stopped him. That alone should win me the friend of the year award."

Mandy chuckled. “It would have been kinda funny to watch the tigers eat some of the guests. Do you know my fiancé invited a family of trolls? Who knows trolls?”

Michelle giggled. “Ok, you. I have to go make sure that the caterers are prepared. I’m going to go yell at them and send them around with trays. You go mingle and enjoy this.”

Mandy hugged her again. “Thanks for doing this. I know it’s not easy working with him.”

Michelle gave a gentle shrug. “It’s nothing at all.”

~*****~

Mandy watched Michelle walk away towards the back of the bar and sighed. She knew better than that. Michelle still felt something for Dmitri. She’d bet her life on it. And, according to Armando, Dmitri was miserable without her—though she’d made her future husband promise to quit reading his friends. People deserved privacy in their own thoughts. Although, as the days went by and Michelle didn’t relent in her not caring, Mandy was tempted to beg Armando to take a peek into what was going on inside her friend.

She knew Michelle was sick, but she’d been withdrawn lately. It was almost as if she were walking through motions more than living them. Sighing, Mandy turned. She’d enjoy tonight, maybe get Michelle into a drunken confession, and hopefully find out what was going on between her two friends once and for all.

“MANDY!!!”

Mandy grinned at the sound of her name echoing in unison over the music that had started on the dance floor. She turned to see Anni and Jennifer, and did a little dance of excitement. Now the party would really get started! They may be the only two people in the world crazier than her.

Jennifer, 5’ 7” and tan, was a beautiful woman with mahogany hair. She had several body piercings that only added her to dangerous allure. She also had a thing for lycans—almost a fetish really.

Anni was the same height as Jennifer with curly auburn locks that flowed down her back, wickedly seductive hazel eyes and the pale skin of her Scot/Irish heritage. She loved anything Celtic, as was evidence by the large Celtic knot hanging from her neck into her cleavage. She too had a lycan fetish.

Yep, these were Mandy’s kind of people!

“So, where are all the wolves hiding at?” Anni demanded with a little pout to her full lips. “I know you invited more than this.”

Mandy glanced around, spotting a group of nearly twenty lycan males talking to Dmitri. Their laughter rose boldly over the hall.

“Yeah,” said Jenn. “We know most of them—or at least I do. Anni, here, is mad though, cause that tall one in the middle—um, Dmitri, I think he said his name was, refused her offer to let him spank her in the back room.”

“Jenn!” Anni’s mouth fell open.

“Anni!” Jenn mocked. “It’s true.”

“Ooo, yeah, I’d stay away from Dmitri,” Mandy said into the playful banter.

“What?” Anni asked, her eyes lit with excitement. “Is he bad?”

“He’s taken.” Mandy turned, seeing Michelle arguing with a man holding a tray. She pointed lightly in her friend’s direction.

“No way! Michelle and a lycan. You have to be kidding!” Anni’s mouth fell open and her almond shaped eyes widened in amazement. “But, she always swore she’d only do human!”

“Don’t say anything about it,” Mandy began.

“What?” Anni demanded.

“Yeah,” Jennifer added. “After all that time we spent listening to her lecture us about being careful with the supernatural...oh, no way. We so got to go tease her.”

“Don’t,” Mandy said, her voice stern. “It’s serious.”

Jennifer and Anni exchanged a look. They nodded in instant understanding.

“First you and then Michelle. My, are we getting older or what? Next thing you know, we’ll be attending a baby shower,” Anni said, reaching out to touch Mandy’s stomach. “Can vampires reproduce?”

Mandy’s eyes widened as she took her friend’s hand off her stomach. She hadn’t given that much thought, and made a mental note to find out about that ASAP. She didn’t have room for little ones in her life. Hell, she barely had room for Armando.

“I know. I can’t believe you’re settling down with one man, Mandy. It’s...perfect.” Jennifer smiled and gave her a small hug. “Congratulations.”

“Yeah, congrats!” Anni added, giving her own hug.

“Thanks guys. Promise me that you won’t say anything to Michelle. They’re having problems and she’s very delicate right now.” Mandy smiled as they all three made their way to the dance floor.

~*****~

“WHAT IN THE HELL IS THAT!” Michelle hissed to the caterer. “Those are not what I ordered!”

“But...?” The man began, at a loss.

Michelle grabbed a chocolate shaped penis off his tray and shook it at him. “I specifically said to add a little class to tonight. You call this class? I told you toast points, appetizers! I’d even settle for crackers and cheese at this point. Not chocolate...privates.”

“Oh, these are too perfect!” came a yell.

Michelle turned to see Patrice Michelle pulling a very large chocolate penis off one of the trays. She bit into it and a rush of cream filled center rolled over her skin. She started laughing, though the possessive Irish twins, Ian and Duncan, at her side didn’t seem so amused.

“This is the perfect gag!” Patrice mumbled, wiping her chin. “It’s too funny.”

“What else do we have?” Michelle asked, leaning in.

“Look, lady,” said the caterer. “I already got fifty trays filled with these things.”

“That’s not my problem. I didn’t tell you to do it and I’m not paying for it!”

“They were donated by a friend of the bride, a...uh...Kimberly. She made them, we’re serving them. And Dmitri already gave the go ahead.” The little man turned and waved to his awaiting staff. They began filing out of the kitchen carrying the genitals to the awaiting party. Michelle watched in stunned horror as everyone began laughing and biting into the delicacies only to find cream dripping down their faces.

All of a sudden, a dam burst in her eyes and she stumbled her way to the back office to hide. She shut the door behind her.

“Hey, I’ll be done in a minute,” Mike said from the desk. He turned to look at her. “What the hell happened?”

Michelle stiffened, wiping her eyes. “It’s nothing...these damned contacts. I got something in them and it...it hurts.”

“Yeah, right,” Mike said. “Did my cousin say something to you? Is that what this is about?”

“Just...just go away!” Michelle demanded, throwing herself on the couch. Before Mike could say another word, she threatened, “Lock the door behind you and, so help me, if you tell anyone you saw me in here I’ll...I’ll...I’ll cut off your balls!”

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“Thanks for inviting me! This party is just too much!” Patrice Michelle said to Mandy and grinned and swayed lightly on her feet as she gave an air toast. She giggled. “Poor Ian though, some guy mentioned my tattoo and grabbed my ass. The poor guy almost lost it and tore the man’s head off. Duncan’s outside with him cooling off right now.”

Patrice turned and showed Mandy the Celtic tattoo on her lower back where her black dress dipped into a low vee.

“I didn’t know you had a tattoo,” said Mandy, grinning. She sat at the table, laughing over the chocolate penises Kimberly had made, with Loretta and Teresa. They were taking turns biting off the tips when Patrice came up.

“It’s fake,” Patrice admitted.

“Hey, I want one!” Michelle announced, to Mandy’s surprise. Michelle’s silk shirt was unbuttoned low, showing the top edge of her bra beneath the white silk. Mandy had seen her out on the dance floor, moving and grinding with anything that would dance with her—but in a tasteful way. She never let any of the men get too close, but she wasn’t adverse to flirting. Mandy frowned a little to see it. It wasn’t like Michelle to lose control.

Mandy had noticed that Michelle had been drinking quite heavily and had encouraged it. She’d even had Mike add a little extra to the mix. Michelle needed to relax.

“Hey!” Michelle sat by Mandy. “I’m going to do it!”

“What?” Patrice laughed. “Get laid?”

“Nope!” Michelle announced. “I’m going to get a tattoo!”

Anni and Jennifer came off the dance floor. “Oh, how fun! Can we go with you?”

“I’d do it right now if there was an artist!” Michelle announced.

“Oh, I know just the guy!” Loretta said. She got up and took off drunkenly across the dance floor.

Michelle paled slightly, but she was too gone to care for long.

“Ah, crap! I gotta go. Duncan’s waving at me from the door. Mandy, great party and congrats. I’ll get with you Tuesday about my books.”

Mandy waved her off. Turning to Michelle, she asked, “Are you sure you want a tattoo?”

“Positive,” Michelle answered nodding. She picked up Mandy’s drink and gulped it down, coughing.

“Maybe you should think about it,” Mandy began, giggling at the face Michelle made.

“You out of all people should support this,” Michelle growled.

“I just don’t want you doing something you’ll regret because of Dmi—”

“Don’t even say his name to me. I don’t like Dmitri!” Michelle yelled over the loud music.

Mandy saw the hard look in her friend’s eyes. Maybe it was true. Maybe she was really over him. She slowly nodded. Michelle was a big girl, she could make her own big girl decisions.

“Now,” Michelle announced. “Is this a party or what? Come dance with me!”

Mandy let Michelle lead her out on the dance floor followed by the whole group. Armando was swiftly beside them, pulling his fiancée into his arms as they danced to a tune all their own, kissing and moaning in their mutual passion.

As the single ladies danced and swayed to the music, Kimberly picked up some guy who had a python around his neck by telling him she liked to mud wrestle and owned weapons. She stumbled off with him, leading him by his collar. Teresa found herself sandwiched between a hunky lycan and a vampire.

Anni and Jennifer shared a large group of lycan males who were close to competing for their attention. One spanked Anni hard on her ass, and she nearly swooned with pleasure, her decision made as she wrapped her arms about the man's neck. Jennifer picked three of them and they drunkenly stumbled from the bar as a big group.

Loretta came back with a big giant of a man covered in tattoos. Michelle grinned and before she knew it, she was lying on her stomach atop the bar, her shirt pulled up, and the tattoo artist was crouched atop her with a buzzing tattoo machine he'd gotten from his car.

"Just do it!" Michelle said, bracing herself and kicking her bare feet lightly on the bartop. The surrounding crowd cheered them on.

"Touch her and die."

Michelle blinked, lifting her heavy lids to look at Dmitri. She struggled to push up as his hands came for her. With a swift, angry pull, he yanked her off the bar. She fell into his strong chest. When she looked up, he was partly shifted—his eyes glittering dangerously at the tattoo artist.

"Get out of here!" he demanded. The man nodded and left, terrified.

Michelle was too drunk to move. Dmitri was warm, solid, close. She felt the familiar bend of his muscles to her chest. Without thinking, she lifted her arms up and grabbed his face in her hands. In front of the large, gathered crowd, she jerked his face down and thrust her tongue passionately into his mouth. Dmitri's hands stiffened before gliding around her waist and up her back in a solid, possessive caress. His tongue rubbed against hers, rolling between her lips as he sawed his mouth to hers.

Weak sounds came from her throat as she tasted him. His smell was all around her, making her forget the crowd. Her fingers dipped into the silken locks of his hair, pulling him closer. Shockwaves of desire erupted in her, potent from the months they spent simmering in wait for him. His arousal for her pressed large and hot into her stomach, drawing her attention. She gasped to feel it and pulled back.

Blinking drunkenly, she gulped. The sounds of the crowd invaded her. They were cheering them on. Dmitri's hot eyes were watching her. His chest was heaving and he was still partly shifted to wolf. She'd been kissing him as part lycan! That's why his erection had felt that much bigger! His wild look devoured her and she knew if she didn't do something quick he'd pounce on her and fuck her right on the bar with everyone watching.

Reacting on pure fear—fear of her actions, fear of his beastly desire she'd tempted—Michelle slapped him hard and ran. Slamming into Mike, she ordered, "Take me home! NOW!"

One glance at his cousin and Mike nodded, swept Michelle's arm into his hand, and ran like hell.

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"What's going on?" Mandy asked, coming from the back office, wiping her mouth. Slick cream slid over her fingertips and she hurriedly licked them clean.

"Ah, just Dmitri and Michelle again," said Jaycee from the bar. She started laughing. "Did you get one of those chocolate cocks? They're great aren't they?"

Mandy blushed and turned just in time to see Armando stepping out from the office, zipping his pants. "Umm, yeah, chocolate cock...that's what I had...yeah," she said with a wink in Armando's direction.

Chapter 23

Double Trouble

"Mandy!" Michelle rushed forward, a worried frown on her face. The Raven was nearly packed. Armando had been nice enough to let them use the club on a Friday night for their joint 'Double Trouble' book release party. Actually, it had been Mandy's idea since they both had two books coming out that month. "Where have you been? I need talk to you!"

"I've been planning this," Mandy said, a little defensively. She waved her hand around to the banners and gathering crowd to a table that held their books on top.

Michelle grabbed Mandy's arm and began to drag her towards the back office. When they were alone, she turned her desperate eyes to her friend.

"Is this about the engagement party?" Mandy asked. "I heard what happened. Did you really kiss Dmitri in front of everyone? Are you two back together?"

"No!" Michelle shot back, too quickly. "I mean, yes, I did kiss him, but no we aren't back together. I haven't even talked to him."

"What? After that he didn't call you?" Mandy eyes widened in amazement.

“He called.” Michelle looked guiltily to the floor. “I didn’t answer.”

“Oh,” Mandy sighed, nodding in understanding. “Did something happen with Mike? Jaycee said you left with him.”

“No,” Michelle answered. Then, as the question sunk in, she grimaced, “No, of course not...just...well. Oh My! Just look!” Michelle unbuttoned her pants and lifted her shirt.

“Uh, thanks.” Mandy laughed. “But, I’m kinda with Armando now.”

“Could you be serious for one second, please?” Michelle whispered, as if they could be overheard. “Look!”

Mandy rolled her eyes before looking to where Michelle’s hip was exposed. Her jaw dropped and her mouth fell open. Slowly, Mandy knelt down. Reaching out a finger, she touched the little full moon she found there and said, “You got a tattoo. And it’s real. And it’s a full moon.”

“I know. I woke up after the engagement party and my hip hurt. I don’t really remember doing it...well, except of vaguely lying across some hotel room—”

“What!” Mandy demanded. “You didn’t go to a professional shop! Shit, Michelle. Do you know the diseases you could get from dirty needles—hepatitis C to name a biggie. Man, I hope they used actual tattoo ink. That crap they buy out of the Bargain Bin isn’t made for the skin and you could end up with blood poisoning....”

Mandy kept shaking her head in disappointment, probing the tattoo for infection. Her mouth opened to continue her tirade when she glanced up. Michelle’s eyes were filled with tears.

“Oh, no!” Michelle moaned, shaking her head. “I didn’t even think of that. I was just relieved I remembered enough about the tattoo artist to know I didn’t sleep with him in the hotel room.”

“I’ll show you hotel room,” Mandy grumbled. Seeing Michelle shake, she lightened up, “Does it hurt?”

“Thank you God! I’ve been dreaming of this since I met the both of you. You gotta let me stay and watch! I’ve died and gone to erotic girl heaven.”

Michelle gasped, turning to Mike in the doorway. For a moment it didn’t register that her pants were lowered and Mandy knelt before her.

“Holy Shit!” Mike exclaimed rushing forward. He stared at where Mandy touched the tattoo on Michelle’s hip. “You got a tattoo for Dmitri! Does he know?”

"It's not for Dmitri!" Michelle hissed. Suddenly, she realized Mike had a black eye.

Mike ignored her. "Has he...ah...*howled* at the full moon yet?"

"Oooh! That's great. I wonder if he changed at the site of it," Mandy added.

"Oh, he'll change all right," Mike allowed with a knowing nod of his head.

"Would you two shut up!" Michelle hissed.

"What happened to you?" Mandy asked Mike, before Michelle could continue to scream at them.

"Oh, ah." Mike shrugged. "Dmitri just needed to blow off a little steam after the engagement party."

"Dmitri did that to you?" Michelle demanded.

"It's nothing," Mike answered, again shrugging. "Your boyfriend was just a little mad that you ran off with me. I told him nothing happened, but he still needed a sparring partner and the other twenty lycans he beat up only left him ready for more. You know, you shouldn't work our kind up into a sexual frenzy like that. It took him quite a long time to release the tension you put into him. Next time, don't start anything like that unless you're going to finish it. Dmitri is only lycan. We're a passionate bunch and can only deny our bodies so long before the beast comes out to play. I bet he was pounding his sausage for hours—"

"Mike!" Michelle turned bright red. Mandy giggled. "I...I... That's not even a saying!"

Mike gave her a wolfish grin and looked again at her hip, as Michelle pushed Mandy's hands away and righted her clothing. "Though, I'm sure if you show him what you did for him, he'll be—"

"It's not for him! And he's not my boyfriend!" Michelle yelled. "And it's not a full moon. It's a circle. It was going to be a sun but I chickened out, OK!"

Mandy smirked. Mike's grin widened.

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much," Mike muttered. Mandy started laughing full out, nearly falling over herself.

"Michelle, the tattoo's finished. No one is going to believe that it's the wrong design. I don't believe it." Mandy patted her lightly on the shoulder. Michelle jerked away.

Glaring at both of them, she demanded, “You’re to tell no one about this. It’s not for him and I’m going to have it removed.”

“I hear that hurts worse than getting them,” Mandy offered. Michelle paled. “Why don’t you just keep it? I think it’s cute.”

“Mandy, Michelle!” Jaycee called from the front door. Mike smiled, but she ignored him. “Better get out here. The press is starting to arrive.”

“Where’s my date?” Mandy asked.

“Armando’s in the kitchen attending to the wait staff he hired for tonight,” Jaycee answered.

“Yeah, I need to go find mine,” Michelle said under her breath. They all looked at her.

“Dmitri’s not here yet,” said Jaycee.

“What do I care?” Michelle snapped. As she stormed out of the office, she growled, “And HE ISN’T MY BOYFRIEND!”

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“Mandy M Roth, award winning author of IMMORTAL OPS, DAUGHTER OF DARKNESS and VAMPYRE PRODUCTIONS: VALKYRIE brings us another two hit releases this month with PEACE OFFERINGS and VAMPYRE PRODUCTIONS: VALHALLA.” The speaker stopped and waited for the crowds cheering to let up.

Mandy stood proudly by Armando as she stepped into the crowd. She gave a wave of her hand as the spotlight hit her. A wide grin spread over her face.

“Our other author tonight, Michelle M Pillow, who most of you know for her phenomenal debut novel, THE MISTS OF MIDNIGHT and the fictionwise number one best-selling futuristic romance DRAGON LORDS: THE BARBARIAN PRINCE.”

This time when the spotlight shone, Michelle stepped forward and gave a small smile. Next to her side a tall, slender man waited in a tux. When she stepped back, she picked up his arm and tried to fade back into the shadows.

“In PEACE OFFERINGS, Mandy Roth brings us to the world of the fairies. For over a hundred years the Blessed and Unblessed Courts have been at war. A year ago, that all changed. Peace came suddenly and left the Courts struggling to maintain it....”

Michelle listened quietly, before leaning to look at her escort. “Thanks for coming with me tonight, Brian. I didn’t want to be here alone.”

“...Queen Moya of the Blessed Court promised her daughter’s hand to Prince Elwyn of the Unblessed Court in hopes that this would seal the deal. Mackenzie, the Queen’s daughter is furious about this decision. Even by faerie standards this is archaic...”

“Hey, no problem,” Brian answered. “I’m only too happy to be here. I’m proud of you.”

“...Mackenzie wants to marry for love and passion and at the very least a man she’s met. She has never even seen what the Prince looks like, and has heard only horror stories about how barbaric he is...”

“Hey,” Mandy hissed, leaning over. She winked at Michelle’s escort. “What am I chopped liver?”

Michelle rolled her eyes. Armando glanced down at Mandy and chuckled before nodding at Michelle.

“Mandy’s second release this month is,” the speaker continued, “VAMPYRE PRODUCTIONS: VALHALLA. Now, I’m sure many of you are familiar with the first installment VALKYRIE.” The speaker paused and a murmur of agreement went over the crowd. He chuckled, before saying, “Valhalla, the heavenly oasis that the Valkyrie’s call home is scrambling to prepare for the Apocalypse. Evil has stopped playing by the rules and started recruiting from a supernatural gene pool. The Elder Valkyries are left no alternative but to send their strongest warrior in search of brave male souls that possess supernatural powers. Linnea isn't happy with the Elders decision, but she's always done what was expected of her, and this is no expectation. Leaping through the waterfalls and into legendary battles has never scared her before, but now she's in a race against time to gather the men before the vampires get to them...”

“Chopped onions maybe,” Michelle whispered under her breath. “I know your books make me cry.”

“At least my characters have sex,” Mandy teased back.

“Yeah, with everyone,” Michelle giggled. It was their way. They hated these events and teasing each other mercilessly was a game they started to get through the dreaded speeches. They both hated the spotlighted attention, Michelle more so than the bolder Mandy.

“...Can she find the brave warriors Valhalla needs in time? Is love inevitable? Will it last? Follow Linnea on the journey that led her to become Valerie and find out the truth of her life before Guytano.”

“Shut up, Mildly sensual,” Mandy shot.

“Whore,” Michelle answered. Her escort chuckled. Armando did the same.

“Wench.” Mandy’s grin widened.

“Can I leave yet?” Michelle asked, through the side of her mouth. “Is it over?”

“Nope,” Mandy giggled.

“Michelle Pillow’s first release this month is book one of her new dark romance series, *TRIBES OF THE VAMPIRE: REDEEMER OF SHADOWS* and has already gotten five star reviews...”

“I’m going to be sick,” Michelle whined.

“...Hathor Vinceti does not feel as if she completely belongs in the world around her, yet she never imagines that more could be waiting for her. She decides to move to London to help Georgia run her seasonal upscale bed-and-breakfast home. But in London, Hathor finds more than just an exotic city that captures the mind—she finds a thriving underworld seething with wickedly bored vampires. And what could be worse than immortal beings with nothing to do and forever to do it...?”

“Hold on, it’s almost over,” Mandy assured her. “Just smile and nod, smile and nod. Beauty Queen it baby.”

Michelle bobbed her head like a bobble doll causing the other three to laugh and draw the attention of the nearby crowd.

“At least I didn’t make us stand up front during this,” Mandy said. “Pretty ingenious to hire a speaker to do it for us, if I do say so myself.”

“...Surviving on blood and living in agony, Lord Servaes the Marquis de Normant has given up on trying to discover a mortal end to his vampire life. He never asked for immortality and he does not understand those who have. He never asked to use his gifts—his accursed blood—to save the mortal who dares too close to danger. Servaes is drawn to the strong willed mortal who would deny him so easily—who by all rights should not be immune to his vampiric powers—and for once he thinks of drinking of something sweeter than the dregs of society.”

They all ignored the speaker.

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re a…” Michelle’s face fell. Her rounded eyes looked over the crowd. Mandy glanced at her, seeing her pale face.

“Michelle’s second release coming this month is part of the ULTIMATE WARRIORS anthology, entitled SILK,” the speaker continued. “In order to keep his secret formula from the enemy, the dying Dr. William St. James made the impossible choice. He injected the only sample of it into his daughter, killing her chance at a normal life so that an elite superhero may be born. Now, ten years later and utterly alone, Quinlan St. James is still torn between the woman she could have been and the superhero, Silk, she has become…”

“You wrote about a superhero?” Mandy asked. Then, seeing Michelle’s pale face, she demanded seriously, “What is it?”

“Michelle?” Brain was concerned.

“…Nikandros is an immortal Protector, sworn to an eternity in the service of good. His is a lonely existence, one chosen long ago…”

Mandy followed her eyes across the hall. A small smile lit her features as she saw Dmitri in the crowd, his eyes trained on Michelle.

Michelle felt the fire of his gaze from across the room. Her heart leapt into her throat. She couldn’t breathe. She felt him as if he was pressed against her and her brain chose the moment to remind her how good his body felt, how wonderful his lips moved, how great he tasted, how rich his voice was when he said her name—when he said anything. How did things get this messed up?

“…Believing that Quinlan might be selling her father’s formula to the highest bidder, the Protectors send him to seduce the reclusive billionaire. However, instead of a coldhearted conspirator, he discovers a lonely woman with a heart of gold—and a secret identity. Now it’s up to him to prove her innocence without blowing his cover.”

Michelle didn’t hear the speaker of the applauding crowd. Feeling someone pulling on her arm, she glanced at Brian.

“Are you all right?” he asked. “You’re pale.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” she answered reaching back to pat his arm. She looked up at him and smiled.

“Ok, but you just say the word and I’ll get you out of here.” He looked to where she’d been staring at Dmitri and she felt him tense under her hand.

“Is that…?” he began.

Suddenly, the spot light shone on them and a loud applause erupted over the crowd. The speaker was finished. Michelle lifted her hand, trying to see Dmitri. The light was too bright.

“Come on,” Mandy hooked her arm in Michelle’s and pulled her forward. “Time to bow.”

~*****~

“There you are, Kitten.” Armando purred as he stepped out into the back alley. “Why are you out here, all alone?” He stressed the all alone part and Mandy knew he was pissed. He didn’t trust the elements that frequented his own establishment and she found that incredibly sad.

“I needed some air.”

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close to him. “I think that your Double Trouble Premiere went over well, don’t you?”

“Oh, yeah if you call Michelle turning three shades of green when we went up to the podium right before she yelled at Dmitri for punching Mike then yeah, it went great.”

“I cannot believe that she got a tattoo of a full moon for him, yet she distances herself so.”

“I know, but ask her and she’ll deny it.” Mandy let out a tiny laugh and rubbed her cheek against his cool chest. A shiver went through her as a small breeze blew past. Armando rubbed her arms, but did little in the way of warming her up. She felt him stiffen beneath her touch and looked up to find his face blank. “What’s wrong?”

“It is moments like this that I am reminded of what I am.”

She stood on her tiptoes and kissed his jaw. “I love you just the way you are.”

“But it would be better if I were human or if you were a...”

Mandy jerked away from him, not bothering to hide her surprise. “If I were a what, Armando? What? You’d rather I was a vampire? If you’re in the market for one of *those*, you’ll need to call Eliza-bitch back to town. Sorry, I’m just an ordinary hum...”

He seized hold of her and brought his mouth down on hers. The kiss was chaste at first but the moment his tongue moved into her mouth Mandy's body ignited with the need to feel him in her. His hand went to her waist, slowly working her dress up her thighs.

She let out a sultry laugh as he fumbled with her panty hose. "Baby, not out here. It's cold."

"Do my ears deceive me, or did I just hear you turn down sex and refer to me in a tender manner?" Armando kissed her neck, continuing to work on her panty hose. "Really, what is the point of these?"

"Oh, you didn't complain when I tied you to the bed with some of these the other night and..."

He tossed his head back and let out a low moan. "You tell me that I cannot take you out here yet you remind of all the pleasures you have to offer. You are an evil woman, Kitten."

"Awe, I love you too." She said, pulling back from him slowly. "I need to get home. It's late and I still need to get packed for tomorrow."

"Why, what happens tomorrow?"

Mandy bit the corner of her lip. "I told you about taking the job in Chicago."

Armando looked like he'd been slapped. His eyes widened as he shook his head. "*Non*, you cannot be seriously thinking of going to work in Chicago still."

"Yeah, seriously enough to be heading up there to apartment hunt for a few days. I need to find a place to live before I just show up for my first day. Living in a hotel does not sound the least bit appealing."

"Did you listen to yourself?" Armando asked, narrowing his gaze. "I, I, I...never once did you mention *we*. I can see that the fact that there is a *we* now is lost on you, Mandy."

"What? I'm supposed to give up the opportunity of a lifetime to stay here and..."

"And what? Be my wife? That is what you agreed to do when you put that ring on your finger, or did you not understand the terms?"

"Oh, I understood the terms just fine. I just didn't the message about all the strings attached."

Armando took a step towards her and she backed up quickly. “Oh, my dear those are not strings you are so worried about, I believe it is commitment in general. You are so selfish and self-centered that you can only see what is important to you...for you...you do not bother with what others may need or feel.”

Mandy’s mouth dropped. “How the hell can you say that to me? I sat in Chicago ALONE crying my damn eyes out because I wasn’t pregnant with your child. And before you say that was selfish, the reason I was so frickin’ upset was because I knew how much it meant to you and I couldn’t give it to you. I couldn’t bring that one little bit of life back to you—to lessen the pain that I see in your eyes.” She let her gaze go hard. “I’ve watched you for over a year. You keep to yourself, and aside from Dmitri I don’t think you bother to make friends. I’ve seen you look at groups of people at the club with a sense of loss in your eyes. I couldn’t stand it, Armando. I wanted to fix it and I didn’t know how. I didn’t even think you noticed me, let alone were willing to let me close to you, and once you did I realized that I didn’t come equipped with the skills needed to heal you. I am what I am and if that’s a selfish bitch then so be it. Gawd, you have some nerve. You can take this ring and shove it right up your sophisticated ass...”

“You watched me from afar before our relationship began?” He sounded surprised.

Mandy rolled her eyes. “You can’t be serious! How many times did you ever see me bring another man into the club with me?”

Armando looked distant for a moment before shaking his head. “Now that I think about it I cannot recall a time that you did. I know that you dated other men. I could smell them on you...after you...” His face went hard and Mandy knew that this was subject that he didn’t like to talk about.

“I’m no saint, baby. I screwed other men, sure, and you had other women, but I never drug my boyfriends in to meet you.”

“Why?”

“What? Would you prefer that I did?”

Armando pulled her closer to him, his grip firm. “You have other boyfriends?”

“Focus! I’m trying to tell you that I’ve been into you for a very long time. I was concerned for your feelings even before I was aware you had any towards me.”

“Ahh,” Armando said, sounding like the realization of what she had said sunk in. “Why do you want to run away to Chicago then?”

“I’m not running to Chicago.” Mandy huffed.

“Really?”

“Don’t sound so smug.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Mandy couldn’t help but smile. “I bet you will.” She twisted in his arms in an attempt to head back into the club.

“Not so fast.” Armando let a razor sharp nail extend from his fingertip and ran it across her panty hose quickly.

She gasped at the nerve he’d shown, and felt her body tighten with anticipation of what else he might do. She didn’t have to wait long. Armando pushed her back against the cold brick and lifted her dress high above her waist. He undid the front of his own pants, kissing her lips hard, and feverously.

Armando gave her no more warning before he had her lifted up and thrust himself into her. Mandy screamed out, into his mouth, a mix of pleasure and pain. Unsure if she wanted him to stop or continue on, she clung to him as he hammered away at her.

Mandy looked into his dark eyes and watched as they swirled. Her head grew heavy and for a moment, she was lost as to what she’d been thinking about—what they’d been discussing. All that mattered was him, his happiness, their happiness.

~*****~

Michelle listened as Brian went on and on about what an ass Dmitri was. She couldn’t disagree with him at the moment, but she did feel a bit defensive when it came to him.

“I can’t believe that you have feelings for him. It’s bad enough that he’s part dog, but come on Michelle, he’s hot-headed, arrogant, egotistical....”

“I know,” Michelle said dreamily.

“Would you like to repeat all of that, this time to my face.” Dmitri growled out, appearing suddenly behind them.

The tiny office seemed too small. Michelle tried to wedge her body between Brian and Dmitri, but she was too late. Brian rose to the challenge and stepped forward. “Yeah, as a matter of fact I would like to repeat it to your face. How Michelle ever

managed to get herself messed up with the likes of you is beyond me. I thought I knew her better than that.”

“Just how well do you know her?” Dmitri asked, his face turning towards Michelle. She gulped and found that she couldn’t respond. She’d never seen his rage directed at her before and she didn’t care for it one bit.

“I know her pretty fucking well...I’m her...” That was all Brian managed to get out before Dmitri hurdled him through the air.

Instantly, Michelle snapped out of her stupor and ran towards them. “Dmitri NO! Brian, oh God... Brian?” She dropped down next to him and touched his head. He was out cold. She turned to glare at Dmitri.

He smiled and shrugged. “Guess, you should pick stronger fuck buddies.”

“WHAT? Are you sick? Brian is my brother you idiot!”

Chapter 24

Interview with Anya Bast

Michelle picked up a flower from the black bucket and sniffed it. Leaning over to read the tag, she couldn’t make out what it was. Seeing the florist, she said, “Excuse me, what’s this one called?”

The man paused, tilted his head back to see through his glasses and said, “Poppy.”

The man continued on. Michelle sighed, putting it back. To herself, she muttered, “It’s...different.”

Flower shopping was the last thing Michelle wanted to be doing. According to Mandy and her endless stack of wedding etiquette books, the maid of honor and best man were suppose to help with all of the wedding details. Now, Michelle was no expert, but the whole thing sounded highly suspicious to her. Mandy and Armando decide to get married and suddenly she had another full time job? Where was the fairness in that? And, to make matters worse, Dmitri was the best man. Life was definitely stacked against her right now.

She glanced over her shoulder where Dmitri stood, looking at a book with a female florist. He said something and the woman giggled. Michelle rolled her eyes and silently started mimicking her laugh so she couldn’t see. Edging closer, she tried to hear what they were talking about.

“Mmm, Sage,” Dmitri laughed, sounding all too charming. “I don’t know. Domestic virtue doesn’t seem to be the bride’s strong suit. How about violets or stephanotis?”

The woman giggled louder. Michelle grabbed the nearest flower, barely looking at it and stepped forward. “How about this?”

Dmitri turned at her interruption and Michelle thrust a piece of lavender at him. “It smells good and it’s...lavender.”

Dmitri’s brow arched. “Don’t you know anything about flowers? Lavender is the flower of distrust. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were trying to curse this wedding.”

The woman giggled. Michelle grimaced.

“Well, excuse me, flower boy! I’m so sorry I’m not a hundred years old like some people. Too bad the centuries of living didn’t teach you to control your damned temper.” Michelle tossed the lavender in its bin and stalked to the far side of the store. A few minutes later, Dmitri was standing by her side.

“What the hell is your problem?” he growled under his breath.

“My problem?” Michelle shot. “I’m not the one with a problem. You’re the one who can’t control your temper.”

Dmitri looked at Michelle’s angry face. “I already said I was sorry, but you’re brother insulted me.”

“Sometimes the truth hurts.” Michelle shrugged.

“How come you never told me you had a brother?” he demanded.

“What? Why would I tell you anything like that? Michelle frowned. “I once had a goldfish who died and I flushed him. You think you need to know that to?”

Dmitri’s features hardened. “Because we’re...were together. You never mentioned anything about a brother.”

“You never asked.”

“I shouldn’t have to ask.” Dmitri frowned. “Friends just tell each other things. Hell, when we were dating you never even let me know where you live. You never really trusted me. Admit it.”

“Why are you bringing this up? It was obvious we weren’t meant to be. We’re not really even friends. We’re only here because our best friends are getting married.

Otherwise, we'd probably not even be talking to one another." Michelle felt a pain roll through her but she swallowed it down. "Face it, Dmitri. We're too different. There is nothing about us that works."

"You never gave us a chance. You kept yourself from me." Dmitri's eyes softened as he looked at her. Her heart fluttered in her chest. Her mouth went dry until she forgot who she was.

Michelle remembered how hard she tried to keep her feelings light when they were together, knowing that was what he would want from her. She hadn't wanted to burden him with her emotions. She hadn't wanted to ruin what they had by talking serious. Dmitri had been, and still was, a bad boy. Bad boys didn't like to be tied down with romantic sentiments and serious types like her. They liked to be wild and carefree. Didn't they? As she looked at him, his eyes full of some unnamable emotion, she wasn't so sure. Had she misjudged him?

"Dmitri," she began, "I—"

Her phone began to ring, cutting off her words.

"I have to take this. It could be work. Anya Bast is supposed to call me for an interview time," Michelle said. Dmitri nodded.

"Hello?" Michelle answered the phone. Glancing at Dmitri, she stiffened and turned her back. "Yeah, Hi Brian. What's up?"

~*****~

Mandy sat there staring at Darren unsure what to say or do. He picked up his sandwich and took a bite, his eyes focused on her the entire time. Her stomach tightened. She wasn't sure if was from being overwhelmed by the fact that he'd appeared at her office less than twenty minutes ago.

He winked at her. "What's wrong, honey?"

"What's wrong?" Mandy's mouth dropped open as she thrust her plate forward. She'd lost her appetite the minute she'd seen him. "I don't hear from you for two years and suddenly you show up here, of all places, and insist that I come to lunch with you. What the hell's going on, Darren?"

He ruffled his hand through his brown, shaggy hair and gave her a wolfish grin. "What? You're not happy to see me?"

She stared the lycan across from her that had managed to do the unthinkable—break her heart. Her eyes narrowed and she knew he could sense her anger, rage, pain from his actions.

Darren's face softened. "Honey, I wasn't ready for a relationship then. I wasn't ready for you." He let out a low whistle. "You're a handful you know. I've got primal urges and you still managed to wear me out."

Mandy stood slowly, grabbing her purse, and phone in the process. Darren caught her wrist and held it tight. "No, Mandy. It took me this long to find you. You will sit down and talk to me."

"What the hell are you talking about? It's not like I was hard to locate. I write for a National Magazine you idiot."

He winched, but didn't release her. "You moved three states away... no...you RAN three states away and left me no way to reach you. I stopped by your mother's house but she threatened to put a silver bullet 'where the sun doesn't shine' if I attempted to contact you again."

Mandy beamed brightly, proud of her mother's phrasing. "Maybe I should call her and let her know that you didn't listen."

Darren's green eyes widened. "NO!"

She laughed. "Oh, is the big bad wolf scared of my mommy?"

"Hell yeah!"

He leaned forward and touched her hand, sending heat racing up her arm. She jerked back like he'd scolded her, when in truth he'd done far worse. He'd made her second guess her feelings for Armando.

"I should have never agreed to meet you. I'm supposed to be meeting Michelle and Dmitri at the flower shop."

"You didn't agree. I left you no other choice." He said with a sly grin.

She hadn't realized that she'd spoken aloud and wasn't sure how to respond to him now. Mandy had spent their entire relationship denying they had one and when he walked out on her she'd been devastated. It's what set her off on a six-month "use anything that moves for sex" spree and she wasn't the least bit proud of that. She'd thought that her feelings for him had vanished, having him here in front of her told her otherwise.

"So, tell me about yourself." She said, hesitantly.

“I own several real estate agencies spanning from here to Florida. I still spend my weekends out on the boat or at the islands. You know how it is.” He added, he voice low and sexy. He reached out and touched her hand again. “You look a bit pale. Are they working you like a dog at the Nocturnal Journal?”

Mandy laughed at the thought of anyone thinking her pale. Every time she stood next to Michelle, Michelle looked iridescent—borderline translucent. She looked down at her hands and noticed for the first time that they really did look paler than normal. It was no doubt from taking on a nocturnal lifestyle to better suite Armando’s rising hours.

“Mandy?”

“What? I’m sorry, Darren. You were saying?”

“I was saying that I’m in town for a few weeks to oversee a few large sales and was hoping that we could spend some time together... catch up... that kind of stuff. You’re free, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m not free.”

His green eyes narrowed on her. “You’re not serious with anyone are you?” The threat was veiled but there. “How about I pick you up at your place tonight around eight?”

Mandy stood quickly, knowing that if she sat any longer across from him that she’d never leave. “I can’t. I’m sorry.” She made a run for the door, but her heels didn’t want to cooperate with her.

Darren was there in an instant to help steady her. He pressed his mouth down to her ear and spoke low to her. “I can smell your excitement, your fear and I like it.” He licked her cheek before freeing her.

~*****~

“Come on, you can tell me.” Michelle reached over the counter and set a twenty dollar bill on the countertop. Looking the young florist in the eye, she said, “I recognize you as the delivery boy. Now, I want you to tell me who sent me all those lilies.”

The delivery boy looked at the twenty and glanced around the flower shop. Michelle and Dmitri had hit every florist in town looking for the best deal and best arrangements. For some reason, half the shops in town refused to do supernatural

events—something about magic getting out of hand with the use of some of the herbs and their insurance not covering it. This shop, the last on their list, was one of the only ones willing to work with them on the grand event. She'd been just about to settle on a bouquet when she'd seen him—the dreaded lily delivery boy.

“Come on,” she wheedled, “you can tell me.”

Michelle threw down another twenty.

“I...I can't, ma'am.” The kid shrugged and let the money lie. His eyes darted behind her back and she glanced over her shoulder. Dmitri stood there holding a hundred dollar bill.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

“What? I thought we had to pay some of the deposit.” Dmitri came forward. “Our order's all done.”

“Hum,” Michelle sighed. “In that case, I have to get going.”

Michelle turned to leave.

Dmitri threw down the hundred when Michelle wasn't looking and shook his finger in warning to the delivery boy for silence. The kid grinned and nodded. Calling over his shoulder, he said, “Don't take the bus. I'll give you a ride.”

~*****~

Mandy double-checked that all her windows and doors were locked before climbing into the tub. The meeting with Darren had left her a bit shaken. He was a notorious hot head who was very sexy, but very deadly. While he'd never raised his hand to her, she'd seen him lose control of the beast within him more than once. No part of her wanted a repeat performance.

She sunk down into the warm water and took in the scent of vanilla bath crystals. If there had ever been a day that she required instant relaxation and no stress, today was it.

The phone rang and she reached out to swat it with her hand on the floor. She knocked it over and saw Armando's name on the caller ID. She couldn't talk to him right now. Her mind was reeling with a billion thoughts and none of them were on her husband to be. She knew how powerful Armando was and he'd sense her distress the minute he heard her speak and she couldn't risk it.

Armando tried to call two more times before Mandy gave up and got out of the tub. It was clear to see that she wasn't going to get the relaxing soak she craved. She wrapped her yellow silk robe around her and wandered out to the kitchen to start tea water.

A knock on the door left her missing the stove and dropping the teapot onto the floor. She narrowed her gaze on the door as she stalked over to it. "Just because you didn't get me on your first three calls does not mean you need to run right over here!" She said, throwing the door open.

"Surprise," Darren said, with a devious grin.

Mandy's heart went to her throat. Unconsciously, she rubbed her hand over her neck as she tried to force a smile to her face. "Darren, what are you doing here?"

He brought his wrist up and extended it out to her. "It's eight, remember."

"I thought I told you no."

Darren's green eyes swirled to amber as he took a step into her apartment. "You did, but I think we both knew that I wouldn't listen to you."

Mandy glanced at her window nervously. Darren was acting edgy and the fact that he lost control of his eyes told her that it was either close to a full moon or a full moon. Since Darren wasn't born a lycan he didn't have the same control that Dmitri and Mike did. No, Darren had survived an attack when he was in his early teens and had been left a werewolf ever since.

"Darren, should you be out and about this time of month?"

He slid an arm behind her and pulled her close to him. Mandy put her hands on his massive chest in an attempt to keep from getting too close to him, but his mouth was on her before she could react.

Darren pulled the short silk robe up and grabbed hold of her backside, bringing a yelp from her. Mandy pushed on him harder, but made no headway with him. Part of her wanted to shove him out the door, another part wanted to explore her feelings for him. He'd been such a huge part of her life that it was hard to think clearly around him.

Thankfully, Darren ended the kiss, but didn't let her go. "Hi honey, I'm home." He said with a laugh. "You can't tell me that you didn't miss me. Admit it, you did, didn't you?"

"Darren, I..."

His mouth clamped down on hers before she had a chance to answer. He pulled away with a low growl. "You can't stay mad at me, can you? Tell me that you want me, that you missed me. I need to hear you say it."

"Yes, Mandy, please enlighten us. Do you miss him?"

Mandy froze when she heard Armando's voice. Darren pulled her tighter to his chest and growled at Armando. "Stop it, Darren!" She cried out as she tried to free herself from his embrace.

Darren eased up, but didn't let her completely out of his arms. "Why in the hell is there a vampire standing in your doorway?"

Armando cocked an eyebrow at him and Mandy noticed that his eyes were jet black. That was bad, very, very, bad. "Funny, I was about to ask you why a wolf was standing in your living room with his mouth pressed to yours and his hand on your backside."

Armando took a step in and Mandy could feel the power pouring off him. He was beyond pissed. She stepped in front of Darren, trying to defuse the situation. "Armando, please..."

"His name's Armando. Why not skip to the chase and go for a Rico Suave? I'm digging the accent there buddy. Spend a lot of time working on that. Do you find it off sets the fact that you're dead?"

Mandy spun around and put her hand on Darren's chest. "Stop it, now! I'm serious. Don't provoke him."

"Mandy, it is obvious that he is not afraid of me. Why would you be concerned over him provoking me? He thinks himself the better of the two of us, should I test his theory?" Armando sounded every bit as evil as a vampire was capable of sounding and it sent chills down Mandy's spine.

"Who is this man, Mandy?" Darren asked. His voice was deeper than normal and that meant he was close to the change.

Armando smiled wickedly, letting his fangs show. "I think the better question is, who are you?"

"I'm her husband."

Armando stopped dead in his tracks as his penetrating gaze went to Mandy. She couldn't help but back up and felt Darren's hands on her arms. He slid them around her protectively, pulling her into his body.

“Have you nothing to say, Kitten?”

Mandy swallowed the lump in her throat. “Ex...”

“Excuse me? I had hard time hearing you with you whispering and all,” Armando said, his black eyes locked firmly on her.

“He’s my ex-husband. We were only married a few weeks before...” The words got stuck in her throat.

Armando put his hands in the air and tipped his head. “Before you what, Mandy? Before you realized what a horrible mistake you made, or...?”

“Before he walked out on me and I filed for a divorce.”

“I see.” Armando’s voice never waived. “Were you ever going to tell me of this?”

Mandy looked away, unable to lie to him, but unsure whether or not she ever really planned on telling him about Darren. Hell, she’d never told a soul about it. It hurt too much. It was the one time in her life that she’d let a man in her barriers and had ended up betrayed and hurt beyond belief. It was the reason she was gun shy to go through with another wedding.

“Answer me, Mandy. Were you ever going to tell me?”

“If Elizabeth hadn’t have shown up, would you have told me about her?” It was petty and wrong to stoop so low, but Mandy didn’t feel she had a choice. She didn’t play fair when her back was against the wall.

Armando tipped his head back and laughed wickedly. His eyes seemed to reflect her image perfectly. She swallowed down the lump in her throat and felt the hair on the back of her neck rise.

“Stop it, Armando.” She knew he was using his vampire tricks on her and she didn’t appreciate it. “Knock it off!”

He put his hands up and attempted to look like he wasn’t doing anything. She knew it was a lie. “Kitten, would I ever use tricks on you?”

“Why don’t you just revoke his invitation?” Darren asked, pressing his mouth to her ear. “I’m a little sick of him calling you Kitten and I’d kind of like to see him be ripped out of the room.”

Armando narrowed his eyes on her as Darren's lips swept past her neck. "Yes, Mandy. Why don't you revoke my invitation? It would save the wolf from having to step out from behind you."

The minute the words came out of Armando's mouth Mandy knew that Darren would retaliate. He always teetered on the edge with his temper and Armando had picked up on that instantly. He had hundreds of years to learn to control his demon. Darren only had fifteen years.

Darren pushed past Mandy and moved towards Armando. They circled each other warily. Each crouched to the point that they were hunched over and snarling. Mandy moved to the center of their endless circle and glared at them both. The air was thick with their power and she knew that the scene would turn violent if she didn't intercede.

"Armando, you need to leave."

Darren grinned as he waved goodbye to Armando. "Looks like she picked, vamp."

"It would appear so." Armando's voice was cold.

There was no way she could let Darren leave. He was too close to turning and she would feel responsible if he hurt anyone. "You keep poking the bear, Armando, and you won't stop. Darren can't be let loose on the town. It's full moon and his control isn't like Dmitri's or Mike's."

"I am not a bear, Mandy. And, you never complained about my 'control' before." Darren said, reaching for her. She sidestepped his touch to avoid upsetting Armando anymore.

"Don't start. You can sleep in the closet for all I care."

Darren winked at her and licked his lower lip. "We'll see about that."

"Darren," she said, pleading with her eyes for him to stop. He growled at Armando as he walked back towards her bedroom. The look on Armando's face said he wasn't happy about that either.

Mandy waited until Darren closed the door before speaking to Armando. "What happens now?"

"I would have thought that an apology would be in order, but you apparently do not think as most do." His tone was harsh and his face unreadable. He walked closer to her and a cold wind swirled quickly around them.

She'd never seen him display this kind of power and wasn't sure what to do. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt him, but it seemed like that was all she was capable of. Armando put his hand out and lightening flashed outside the window, followed by a roll of thunder that made the house shake. Her gaze went back to Armando. Had he caused that?

He smiled, showing his fangs. "There is much you have never bothered to learn about me, Mandy."

She bit back the 'apparently' that was on the tip of her tongue and stood motionless. Armando wasn't acting like himself and no part of her wanted to play the let's get to know the vamp in me game.

"I think it is past time that you 'got to know the vampire', cara mia."

~*****~

Michelle was still shaken from being so close to Dmitri when she met Anya at the club. It seemed like she'd been coming to the Raven forever. Seeing Mike behind the counter, she smiled at him. He motioned to a far booth where a blonde, blue eyed woman waited and handed her a coffee with cream. Michelle took it and went to the booth.

"Hi, you must be Anya Bast."

Anya stood. "Yep, that's me. This is Gabriel, the man I was telling you about on the phone. He's the inspiration for BLOOD OF THE RAVEN."

Michelle turned to the gorgeous vampire at her side. He had long black hair and blue eyes. She was a little surprised to see him in the club while it was light outside.

"I came through the 'other' entrance," he said, as if sensing Michelle's momentary confusion.

"Anya tells me you're from France?" Michelle smiled at him. He wasn't bad on the eyes in the least.

Gabriel chuckled, "France about 400 years ago."

"I know who to call for historical reference tips."

"I would be happy to assist you. I aide Anya in 'anyway' I can."

“So, Anya, tell me about your new release.” Michelle took a seat and grabbed her notepad from her purse. If she kept talking to Gabriel she’d make a fool of herself and drool or worse yet, think of Dmitri and go into heat. Why did supernatural men have to be so damn gorgeous?

“Autumn Pleasures. It’s a historical fantasy romantica, the fourth in a series, but can definitely stand-alone. Over the course of the series there has been a war between Nordan and Sudhra. The war is over, but now there’s a rift between the two countries. Lord Gregor of Nordan accepts Lady Anaisse of Sudhra as his wife in an effort to stitch up the tear between the nations, and because he’s been attracted to her for years. But there’s another man lurking about who has also been attracted to her for years. In his disturbed mind, he has only one goal and that’s to kill Anaisse.”

“Wow, sounds great,” Michelle said, taking notes. She debated on asking for an autograph, it seemed a little rude. “And don’t you have a book that’s in print?”

“BLOOD OF THE ROSE,” Anya answered.

Michelle caught a glimpse of Dmitri over the distance. Great, the in heat session was about to start. Someone had to market a lycan repellent and she needed to find out who that was.

Anya continued to talk and she tried her best to listen, but her eyes kept straying to Dmitri. Brian was still livid about being punched and she couldn’t blame him, but on another level Dmitri’s possessiveness had been kinda sweet. Did it mean anything? Or had he simply been trying to defend his own honor? She honestly was confused and didn’t know where to go from here.

“I love writing, how about you?” Anya asked.

“I love him, yes.”

“Him?”

Michelle looked at Anya with wide eyes as the shock of what she’d just slipped hit her. “I...umm...yes, I love writing.”

Anya looked towards the other side of the room and back to Michelle. “It looks like ‘writing’ is coming this way.”

Michelle dropped her head down onto the table. Could the night get any worse?

Something touched her shoulder gently. “Michelle?” Dmitri asked, softly.

Who's Your Daddy?

She loves me! She loves me!

Dmitri grinned, not caring that he looked like an imbecile as he reached down to touch her shoulder. He heard Michelle's word from across the bar. She loved him! He couldn't believe it. He'd hoped she cared for him, or in the least was still attracted to him. But, love? He'd never dreamt of that.

She loves me! She loves me!

Expecting a soft tenderness in her eyes when she turned to look at him, he was sorely disappointed. She frowned up in confusion. Surely, she knew he could hear everything she said. His kind had excellent hearing. But, as she continued to stare up at him, her eyes narrowed in irritation, he knew she had no idea.

"Yes?" she prompted, sounding scornful. "Can I help you?"

The author across the table chuckled. Turning to the vampire with them, Anya said, "Come on, let's get out of here. Michelle, it was great talking to you. I look forward to your article."

"Thanks," Michelle answered. Dmitri frowned as she pushed past him to stand up from the table, shaking off his hand. He didn't pay attention to them as they spoke a second longer. When Anya left, Michelle turned to him.

Dmitri couldn't stop himself. He began to reach for her. His lips parted ready to stake his claim. His body itched to be next to her. He'd put his desires off so long and finally, FINALLY, here she was and she loved him. Nothing else mattered. She actually cared for him. His grin widened with an affected charm.

Michelle recoiled back as if he was insane. "What's gotten into you, wolf boy? Is there supposed to be a full moon tonight or what?"

Dmitri's hand reached to touch her and the sweet perfume of her body filled his head. His body lurched, becoming painfully aroused. The grey depths of his eyes threatened with a shift, swirling with the dangerous passions of his lycan nature.

Michelle took a step back. Her words weak, she whispered, "Dmitri...?"

His grin widened. He didn't know what to say, as he was content to just stare at her. The passion rose in his blood and he struggled to keep it down. He knew the truth of her feelings now and nothing she said or did was going to get in their way.

~*****~

Armando stalked away from Mandy's building blinded by rage. She had a way of turning him into a madman with little to no effort and he never knew quite how to handle her. Her energy and individuality had been part of what attracted him to her, but it was also what drove him over the edge. The fact that she'd never told him about being married had hurt worse than when he walked in and found her kissing that pathetic excuse for a lycan.

Mandy should have confided in him. She should have known that he'd love her regardless what secrets her past held. He'd roamed the earth for hundreds of years and had never loved unconditionally prior to her. Why did she have to make it so difficult?

He took another step and realized what he was doing. He was giving into her yet again—setting himself up for a lifetime of allowing her to behave any way she saw fit, and knowing that she was permitting an aggressive werewolf to bunk with her during a full moon proved that her judgment was not what it should be.

“No.” He said, suddenly stopping and turning around.

Armando used his supernatural speed to cover the distance back to her front door and didn't bother knocking. She was his and he would do whatever it took to keep her. She would have to learn to live with it or learn to live with it. There would be no exceptions. He thrust the door open and Mandy whirled around, her green eyes wide.

“Armando?” He could sense the fear in her voice and knew that he looked like he felt—capable of killing.

“I am staying here with you tonight.”

“Like hell you are!” She shouted, glancing back towards her bedroom.

Armando grimaced as he heard the shower running. Thinking of Darren naked in Mandy's master bathroom was more than he could handle. “You heard me, Mandy. I am staying here with you tonight and any other night I see fit. AND while we are on the subject, from here on out we will not separate. I have grown tired of only seeing you once or twice a week. You will stay with me as well. Decide what you need to have at my home to be comfortable and I will see to it that it is there. Are we clear?”

Mandy's mouth dropped open and her eyes narrowed on him.

Great, his intentions had been to beat the living hell out of Darren and sweep Mandy off her feet, not infuriate her. It mattered not, what was done, was done. The only thing left was damage control. He scanned Mandy's thoughts quickly, uncertain if she had grown accustomed to the feel of his mind merging with hers.

She didn't seem to notice. She was too busy forming the idea of permanently revoking his invitation to her home and sticking her ring up his ass. He shook the vivid image from his head and grabbed hold of her free will. It was a gift that all master vampires possessed, but one he'd sworn that he'd never use on her. Now, she'd left him no choice. They were meant to be together, and he would not allow a werewolf to stop them.

"Mandy," he said, slowly, using his voice as an additional push. "You want me to always be welcome in her your home. Do you not?"

She blinked and began to shake her head no. He had to give her credit. She was strong willed, but he was stronger. He tightened his mental hold on her, careful not to cause her too much discomfort. "You wish me to have an open invitation, yes?"

"Y-es." She seemed to choke on the word.

"Very good. Now, you must state that you recognize me as your master."

Her eyes nearly bulged out of her head. He felt her body trying to react. She fought against his hold and he knew that that caused her a great deal of pain, but he couldn't let go now. If he did, he would lose her forever. Mandy wasn't a woman to stand for this behavior, no matter how necessary it was.

Mandy projected her thoughts out at him. She wanted to kick him square in the head and do some rather vile things to his private parts. He winched and couldn't help but to cup his groin. Her imagination was very colorful and slightly alarming. No wonder she did so well writing paranormal thrillers, she was scarier than anything he'd come up against, and he'd come up against some of the nastiest demons the world had ever seen. A lesser man would have run. He just filed away the need to sleep with one eye open for a while and continued to press her. "Say it, Mandy, recognize me as your master."

"I re-cognize you...as...my...mas-ter." She said, between gritted teeth.

Instantly, Armando felt his power encompass her. She would forever be his now regardless if she tried to revoke his invitation or not. She belonged to him, as it was meant to be. She was now under his full protection and if he chose to issue an order, she would feel compelled to listen to him. Knowing Mandy, she'd find a way to fight him on

it so he saw little reason to force her compliance any further. He let his hold on her mind slip.

He waited for her to scream at him. Instead, her body slumped down to the floor. He ran to her, grabbing her in his arms, looking for signs of a problem. He found that her mind was confused and that her struggle to maintain her freewill had given her a migraine. She was tired, hurt, and felt betrayed. The thought that he'd caused her pain sickened him. He touched her forehead and drew the pain from her, absorbing it into himself.

“Mandy?”

She stayed limp in his arms, scaring the hell out of him. He wanted her mad and violent. At least that way he knew she was fine. Her current state terrified him. Had he broken her? Had he used too much of his power on her? He'd heard of vampires doing that, leaving the human a vegetable.

The bedroom door opened and Armando looked up to find Darren dripping wet and completely nude. He couldn't help but to glance down to survey his competition. A smile crept over his face when he saw that although Darren was more than capable of pleasing a woman, he didn't compare to him. It was petty, but gave him great comfort.

Armando smelled the wolf within Darren try to surface. “What the hell did you do to Mandy?” Darren demanded.

As much as he wanted to beat the man to a bloody pulp, Mandy was his first priority. He raised his hand and let his power flow forth. “Sleep.”

Darren fell backwards with a thud. Armando could have cushioned his fall with his own power, but didn't want to. In fact, he thought of waking Darren just to watch him drop once more. He pulled his hand back and watched as his power dragged Darren's large body across the floor. He deposited him in the corner and set his attentions back on Mandy.

“Kitten?”

She blinked up at him. Her hand came up suddenly and struck him across the face. A direct hit had never felt sweeter. “How could you?”

The hurt in her voice almost broke his composure. He would not cry in front of her. He had never been prone to expressing his feelings and felt no need to start now. “I did what needed to be done and I regret nothing.”

“I trusted you.”

She scored another direct hit, this time with her words, and he felt a piece of him shatter. His voice shook when he spoke. "So, much so that you never told me that you had been married."

"I never told anyone."

"I am not just anyone, Mandy." He wiped away the tears on her cheek and realized that he'd been projecting his sorrow onto her. She cried for him, as a true mate would. It mattered not that she wasn't a vampire they were connected now. "Do not weep, Kitten. It breaks my heart to see you sad. We will get through this."

"No, we won't. I'm your puppet now, not your wife."

Armando didn't correct her when she referred to herself as his wife. No, they were not yet married, but hearing her say it melted him. "Do you really think that I would prefer to have a puppet instead of you?"

She arched a black eyebrow at him. "Everyone would prefer a puppet to me."

"I am not everyone, Kitten. I am the man who is in love with you. You are my heart, and literally my soul. Without you, I am a shell, forever destined to wander this earth alone. Forgive my need to secure our happiness, for you are all that I have."

She groaned and tipped her head back. He pulled her closer to him. "Mandy?"

"Why did you have to go all poetic on me? Gawd, it's hard to stay mad at that and I'm hella good at holding a grudge! My head still hurts."

"Here," he said, touching her forehead again, drawing the remaining pain into himself.

"Thanks."

"Does this mean that I am forgiven?"

"This means that if you ever hold the fact that you're my...mas..mast...oh, hell, you know the word, over my head I will stake you in your sleep. Are we clear?"

"Crystal. Besides, I caught a glimpse of your rather vivid and somewhat disturbing imagination. Tell me, would you really do the things you envisioned?"

"What do you think?"

He shuddered.

"What did you do to Darren?" She asked, peeking over his shoulder.

“I put him to sleep.”

She stiffened, her eyes wide with fear. “You didn’t.”

Armando laughed despite himself. “Oh, how I wish I would have ‘put him to sleep’, no he is merely resting. He will not wake until I permit it.”

“Is it painful?”

“No.”

“Good, leave him and take me to bed. I need to be held, and if you tell anyone that I said that you’re fair game for direct sunlight.”

He picked her up and carried her towards the bedroom, knowing that she would need to be near him often now that she was his. He was also smart enough to know that she wouldn’t want to hear that little piece of information at the moment so he left it alone. He also left off the part about her start towards immortality. Each time he drew blood from her, or touched her mind he would strengthen their bond, allowing her to live as long as he did. Most would take the news that they’d live forever well, Mandy was not like most people. She was certainly a breed all unto herself and he loved her for that.

~*****~

“You’re scaring me, Dmitri,” Michelle said, backing away. His eyes were filled with a dangerous light. She’d seen the wolf in him before, but there was something different in his look—something terrifying and oddly erotic. “I’m going to go and get you some help. Don’t move...I...I’m just going...Mike.”

Michelle stumbled away from him, swallowing nervously as she made her way across the bar. Seeing Mike doing his horrible impersonation of Tom Cruise from the movie *Cocktail*, she grimaced. A bottle of wine flew through the air and he caught it behind his back.

“That’s what I’m talkin’ about, baby!” Mike swore. A group of giggling twits watched him from the bar.

“Mike,” Michelle began. “There’s something wrong with your cousin.”

“Yeah, doll, I know,” Mike laughed. “He needs a good shagging! Why don’t you hop on him and help a lycan out? You know, let him give you some LLL.” He said, putting his hands up to indicate about ten inches.

The girls giggled.

“LLL?” Michelle asked, unsure that she wanted to hear the answer.

“Long lycan lovin’, sugar.” He grinned foolishly and Michelle threw her hands in the air. Why do I bother?”

“Hey, do me a favor, sugar,” Mike said as a large group of customers came into the bar. “Dmitri got a shipment of A pos today for the vamps and we’re out up here. Could you ask him to bring a couple cases up?”

“No, Mike...”

“Thanks sweeting!” Mike blew her a kiss before turning back to the giggling brigade once more. “Watch this, loves!”

“Mike seems busy,” Dmitri said from behind her. “Come, help me with the cases. The door sticks and if someone doesn’t hold it open I’ll get locked inside. The locksmith will be here tomorrow to fix it.”

“Does it look like I work here?” Michelle demanded.

“You’re here enough,” he shot back, with the same strange grin. “Just help out, would you?”

Michelle could no longer resist the soft tone of his voice, than she could stop breathing. Pretending to be more exasperated than she really was, she sighed and nodded. “Fine. Just hurry up. I want to go home.”

Dmitri led the way into the office. Then, pushing a button on the wall, waited as the hidden basement door slid open. Michelle grabbed the door and stood.

“No,” Dmitri motioned. “Down here.”

Michelle frowned, looking down the dark stairwell. “I... You’re not trying to kill me or anything are you? It’s so dark.”

“It’s not made for humans. We don’t exactly need a lot of light to get around.” Dmitri turned on the stairs to look up at her. Light from the office fell over his handsome face. “Come on, I promise nothing down here will hurt you.”

“I’m going to regret this,” she mumbled, stepping down. The office door closed behind her and she felt along the wall as she walked down. Reaching the bottom, she felt a hand on her waist.

“This way,” Dmitri murmured. A tingle went over her spine. He led her to a nearby room. “This is the door that sticks. Just hold it open while I set these cases out.”

Michelle held the door, unable to help herself as she watched Dmitri’s tight body move under the weight of the cases. He brushed past her, his strong arm grazing close to her chest. If she didn’t know better, she’d think he’d done it on purpose.

“Excuse me,” Dmitri breathed as he passed again, coming close to where she stood. His dark eyes pierced into her and she couldn’t move.

Michelle watched him, almost dazed as he bent over to grab another case. Her lips parted and her mouth went dry. Damn, but he had a really nice ass. It almost wasn’t fair. Then, hearing a scurrying noise behind her, she jumped in fright. “Ahhh! Rat!”

“Don’t! The door...” Dmitri dropped the case with a thud and began to turn.

Michelle hurried from the door, crashing into him as she tried to get away from the rodent. Warm, strong arms wrapped around her from behind as she stumbled into a solid chest. Shivering, a weak noise left her lips and she gasped.

“If you wanted to get me alone, all you had to do was ask.”

His soft voice flowed over her in a hot wave of desire. She blinked, momentarily confused. His hands stroked up her arm with a masterful skill that left her breathless.

“I...I...” Michelle couldn’t move.

~*****~

Mandy clutched onto Armando’s shoulders as he released himself within her. Her body shook as he kissed the tiny bite mark closed on her neck. Sharing blood with him was beyond erotic, and she was surprised that she’d allowed him to do it, especially during sex. He pulled out slowly, wrapped her in his arms, and slid down on the bed next to her.

She snuggled into the wall of his chest and for the first time in her life, felt comfortable in the arms of another. Michelle would have paid good money for a Polaroid of the moment. She laughed softly.

“Kitten?”

Mandy stroked his smooth chest, tracing her way down his chiseled abs. She looked up into his dark eyes and frowned. “What’s wrong? You look so serious.”

Armando’s expression softened as he moved his mouth to hers. His kiss was sweet and slow. He sucked on her tongue before pulling back with a groan. “I fear that we will not get out of this bed today if we do not stop now.”

Mandy let out a sultry laugh as she sank down, drowning his stomach with kisses. He jerked and grabbed her shoulders. “Kitten, you are insatiable.”

“Thanks.”

“I have to go into the club tonight to meet with the realtor about purchasing the adjacent property. Don’t you have to meet with your bridesmaids soon as well?”

She nodded her head as she licked his navel, running a trail of kisses down the line of dark hair that started there. Armando sucked in his breath and she moved down over him. His body obviously wanted to play more and so did hers. She cupped his sac and looked up at him. His eyelids were heavy and his body tight. “Funny, looking at you now you’d never guess that you were the master in this situation.” She licked the tip of him and he jerked before moaning slightly. “Are you the boss, Armando?”

Armando let out a shaky breath as his hand moved to her hair. “Somehow I knew you would be able to twist the arrangement around to suit you.”

She let her tongue run along the length of him. “Are you complaining?”

“Why would I do that?” A mischievous grin covered his face.

“Do you think you should wake Darren up now? I’m sure he’ll be sore.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Is that your new answer for everything?” Mandy asked, running her tongue back over him. He tipped his head back and closed his dark eyes. There was no doubt in her mind that she held complete control over him, master vampire or not.

~*****~

“I wasn’t!” Michelle managed at last, pulling up and away from Dmitri. He chuckled, taking a seat on a crate, as she went to try to open the door. Pounding on the metal, she screamed, “Help! Come on! Mike!”

“He can’t hear you,” Dmitri drawled lazily. “He’ll not come down until he realizes the bar hasn’t been stocked.”

Michelle shivered. It was really dark in the room and she could barely see. “Where’s the light?”

“Ah, there’s a light in the fridge,” Dmitri offered.

Michelle squinted and made her way over to where she remembered seeing it. She found it and felt around for the handle. Opening it up, she turned to see Dmitri lounging against a makeshift seat in the boxes. Turning, she looked into the fridge.

“Oh, gross!” She instantly shut it. The thing was filled with blood packets. “You guys knock off a Red Cross or what?”

“Talk to Armando. It’s his flavor. I prefer whiskey.”

She heard another shuffling and screamed, hurrying from the fridge. Her foot hit a crate and she fell back. Dmitri caught her before she hit the floor. He leaned over from his place, holding her inches above the floor.

“Relax,” he soothed. “You’re so jumpy.”

She heard the smile in his voice and stiffened. Defensively, she whispered,

“There was a rat.”

“We don’t have rats at the Raven,” Dmitri growled, almost sounding offended.

Michelle heard another noise and gasped. She jolted in Dmitri’s arms, shivering as she reached up to hold onto him. If there was one thing she was absolutely terrified of, it was snakes and rats.

“Oh, Ooooooh,” Dmitri whispered as her arms snaked up. His arms tightened around her. “Maybe we do have rats.”

“You’re laughing at me, aren’t you?” she whispered. Her body trembled in fear and she refused to let him go. Before he could answer, she insisted, “I can’t see anything. It’s too dark. Do you see anything? And be honest, don’t lie to me.”

His arms shifted, drawing her closer. Her heart beat erratically, a curious warmth replacing the unreasonable fear. Dmitri's breath whispered over her neck, as he said, "There is one very large rat in the corner."

Michelle made a weak sound, instantly lifting her feet off the floor. She sunk onto his lap and Dmitri groaned.

"Hey," he soothed. "Don't worry. He won't come near me."

"You're sure?" Her face turned naturally to his. She felt the unmistakable length of his arousal next to her hip. It excited and scared her. He was so big, so powerful. She nervously bit her lip. There was something about him that took her breath away each and every time. His hand found her hip and began to massage lightly, working up her side. A small sound left her. Her eyes fluttered closed. "Dmitri, what are you doing?"

"Protecting you from rats," he whispered back. She felt his lips close, brushing ever so lightly against her mouth.

"Dmitri?"

"Hum?" His mouth drew closer still, rubbing gracefully back and forth in a kiss so tender it made her toes curl.

"Is there really something there?" Michelle angled her head, waiting in breathless anticipation for him to kiss her. Unbidden, her hands crept over his chest to his neck, holding him for support.

"Mmmm," was his groaned reply as he lowered his mouth to hers. Instantly, the soft caress became demanding, sawing against her lips. Heat rolled through her stomach, making her gasped into his opened mouth.

She didn't know how he managed, but his fingers snaked beneath her shirt and found hold on an aching breast. Rubbing his thumb back and forth, he budded her nipple against his roaming fingers.

Michelle squirmed. Her hips angled and he took full advantage, gliding his fingers over her stomach to her waistband. She grabbed at his shirt, pulling it up so she could feel his muscled chest. His hips rocked along hers, pushing the hard length of his passion up into her hip. He was so huge!

"Dmitri," she gasped, pulling her lips away. He merely changed course, kissing eagerly down her throat, nibbling her with his teeth. Primal sounds of passion reverberated in his chest. "Dmitri, I..."

Dmitri, I'm scared.

The words never left her mouth. His hands boldly parted her jeans, reaching to find the aching torment of her sensitive opening.

“Damn it, Dmitri!”

Michelle froze. Mike continued to curse and she could hear him kicking at the case left by the door. Dmitri stopped at her sound of complete horror. She pushed up, trying to straighten her clothes. The door opened and she turned to see Mike peering in at them, a wide grin on his face.

“Well, well, didn’t mean to interrupt,” Mike winked at them. “Just let me grab another case and I’ll leave you be.”

Michelle glanced back to see Dmitri hadn’t smoothed his clothes. His rugged disheveled appeal was almost too much for her senses. Only Mike’s laughing kept her from going back into her arms. Dmitri’s eyes burned into her. It was as if he didn’t hear or see Mike.

“I…” Michelle turned, needing to get away so she could think straight. She might care for Dmitri, but he’d made it clear he didn’t care for her. Or did he? His eyes said otherwise, but his actions as of late were another story. “The air’s too stale. I can’t breathe down here.”

Michelle ran past Mike. They listened to her leave.

“Having fun?” Mike teased.

“If you weren’t my cousin, I would rip out your throat. You have the worst timing,” Dmitri growled.

Mike only laughed harder. “Ah, now, come on.”

Dmitri surged to his feet. His fist to Mike’s mouth stopped anything further he might try to say. Then, storming out the door, he pushed it shut, locking Mike inside. With a grim look of satisfaction, he walked back upstairs, leaving Mike trapped.

Chapter 26

Vampire vs Lycan

Michelle nervously watched as Mandy held up a dress. Okay, dress was a nice assessment, considering what Mandy held was two strips of black leather. Seeing Mandy's hopeful nod, she slowly shook her head in denial.

"If you make me put that on, I will quit your wedding," Michelle stated. "The answer's no. And, before you ask, I'm not wearing that same thing in red, or green, or purple, or pink, or oran—"

"Okay, okay," Mandy laughed. "I get it. No ass hanging out for prude girl. Geesh. How am I supposed to have a black leather themed wedding if the maid of honor won't wear black leather?"

"You're not having a black leather themed wedding. Armando forbids it. Remember?"

"Oh, huh. I thought he said no to the lycans wearing dog collars. I didn't know he meant everyone." Mandy laughed, and began looking for another dress. "That pretty much rules out the wedding dress I had picked out."

"Well, at least you were planning on wearing a wedding dress. It's more than I could have hoped for." Michelle looked around. She couldn't believe Mandy brought her to a place called Hell's Boutique to look for gowns. Hearing a clanking of chains, she uttered without even looking, "No, Mandy."

"Ah, come on," Mandy whined. "Dmitri would love it!"

Michelle's mouth opened to respond, but a smooth as honey voice interrupted her.

"Oooo, I like that one!"

Michelle frowned at the shopkeeper. She wasn't in the mood to shop for bridesmaid gowns anyway. She wanted to sit in front of her TV watching bad horror movies and crying into her barrel of ice cream. Only, she couldn't do that either. Brian was staying with her and he refused to let her have a moment's peace—especially about Dmitri.

Anywhere she tried to go, she couldn't think. The office was busy. She had five book projects going on there, and the editors were really starting to come down on her. She couldn't concentrate on proofing.

Brian was at her house working on his latest photo assignment. His crap was everywhere, which wasn't his fault, but she couldn't even use her home office or her kitchen counters, or her bathroom turned darkroom, or the kitchen table.

Dmitri was at the Raven and she was being a baby about seeing him until she had at least five minutes to contemplate what had happened, if she wanted it to happen, what she'd say to him, what she wanted to say to him, if she truly did love him or is she was just horny as all hell! Did she want a relationship? Did she not want a relationship? Did he even want a relationship? Maybe he just needed sex? Who the hell knew anything at this point? And now she had to dress shop for a stupid bridesmaid dress that she'd hate for one day and never wear again to celebrate the happiest event in her best friend's life! When all she wanted was to fall into bed and sleep!

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" Michelle screamed, yelling so loud her whole body shook. She pressed her hands to her temples, unable to take the pressure. Stopping, she turned glassy eyed to Mandy and fell on the floor—passed out.

~*****~

Dmitri shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He was supposed to be doing the club's paperwork, but he kept getting distracted. Who the hell was this Everest guy anyway? And how the hell did Michelle know so much about him?

"Hey, Dmitri," Armando said, ducking around the corner of the office from the basement entry.

Dmitri jumped and hurriedly clicked the computer screen. "Damn! Can't you see I'm busy here? Why do you have to go all undead and sneak up on a guy?"

Armando paused and sniffed. "Busy, eh? Then why all the aggressive pheromone in the room? You look like you're about to piss and mark your territory. Please, not on the carpet. I've already told everyone you're house broken."

"Why don't you go suck on somebody's neck?" Dmitri grumbled. "Leave me alone. I'm working."

"What are you really up to?" Armando asked.

"Paperwork," Dmitri said, unconvincingly.

"Dmitri," Armando warned. "I can read you. Don't make me. Your mind scares even me lately."

"Fine!" Dmitri clicked the computer screen back over and frowned. "It's Michelle's latest books."

"You're reading a romance novel. No wonder you're aggressive. I think porn might actually do you more good, perhaps lesbians...."

“Ha Ha. It’s called MOUNTAIN’S CAPTIVE,” Dmitri sneered, motioning to the screen. “I want to know when she was in Montana bunked up in some guys lodge. This Everest sounds shady. And the heroine? What a joke. Blonde hair? Yeah, Michelle is blonde.”

“They’re both probably fake names. Even when the people are real, they’re names are changed—usually.” Armando shrugged. “Mandy’s written several heroines with dark hair. Gwen, from DAUGHTER OF DARKNESS. There are others, but I don’t obsess about them enough to remember it all. Hum, I actually liked Gwen. Reminded me of Mandy and I’d like to think all the men in it were me, in some form.”

“Even the elf?” Dmitri asked, eager to piss Armando off so he could have someone to rage with.

Armando’s lip twitched. “It was a faerie. Wait you’ve read Mandy’s books, too? What has happened to you?”

Dmitri frowned, and mumbled, “I wanted to support them. I figured I kind of had to read them all. Besides, Mandy’s are pretty violent at parts and a guy can get into that. I mean, who melts off a guy’s....”

“DON’T remind me.”

“Anyway, I needed a basis for comparison on Michelle’s novels. So, yeah, I read Mandy’s—those VAMPYRE PRODUCTION novels VALHALLA and VALKYRIE. Now there was a great series, I mean if you were a girl.”

“I sort of liked IMMORTAL OPS myself and the two PEACE OFFERING books weren’t bad. I haven’t had a chance to read MISFITS IN MIDDLE AMERICA though.”

“Why am I discussing romance novels with you?” Dmitri frowned. Armando shrugged as if it were no big deal. What had happened to them? They meet a couple of hot chicks and now they were reading romances instead of talking about the Supernatural Bowl? “I know where I was going. I was making a point.”

“By all means, please,” Armando waved his hand.

“All right, Michelle’s books. I’ve been doing my research. THE MISTS OF MIDNIGHT, I’m not bothered by. I mean, it’s about a ghost and we both know it’s rare that they date anything.” Dmitri paused and kept clicking. “Now, TRIBES OF THE VAMPIRE: REDEEMER OF SHADOWS, okay, she got that off you and Mandy—somewhat. I can buy that.”

Dmitri turned a sharp, suspicious look onto Armando. Armando smiled and held up his hands. “No, friend, I am not interested in Michelle and how many times do I have to tell you, we are and always have been just friends.”

“Fine,” Dmitri grumbled. “ULTIMATE WARRIORS: SILK, not concerned. Though the... um... imagination in the certain...”

“Sex scenes, Dmitri,” Armando chuckled. “You can say it. We’re immortal adults, you know.”

“Fine, the sex is hot,” Dmitri admitted. He kept clicking the screen over as he spoke, growing more agitated. “But then, we come to the next two. Her bestseller, DRAGON LORDS: THE BARBARIAN PRINCE. I mean, look at the cover. It’s a guy in a fucking loincloth! Now, this first one came out and I assumed it was like the others. Besides, he was technically an alien from another planet. But, if that wasn’t bad enough. She’s written about one of those Qurilixian men again. I knew that Ualan dancing with her that night was bad news. And now this guy has a brother?! DRAGON LORDS: THE PERFECT PRINCE my ass! If anyone named Olek or Ualan ever comes in here, I want to know. Michelle’s probably seeing a dragon shifter. I can feel it.”

“She’s not seeing anyone,” Armando said. “Rest assured.”

Dmitri spun around in his chair. “You’ve read something, haven’t you? You have to tell me!”

“I told you, I promised Mandy that if I did read anything off her or Michelle, I wouldn’t reveal it.” Armando shrugged. “My hands are tied with this one. Sorry buddy.”

Dmitri’s face contorted with rage. His gray eyes darkened, flickering with amber. His hands began to shake. He sized Armando up, knowing that if they fought they would be well matched. Vampire vs Lycan. Battle to the death or until Armando talks!

“I, however, did not promise not to read you.” Armando sighed. “Restrain the wolf, Dmitri. We’re not fighting over this. Why don’t you just call her and talk to her?”

“Because, all mighty mind reader, I’ve already tried that. She won’t answer at home, and if someone does pick up it’s her damned brother who threatens my life if I dare to come around his sister again. The damned secretary at her work keeps taking messages that are never returned. I’ve even gone to her office in person and got the ‘she’s not here’ run around. Mandy’s not talking and you’ve not been too much of a help. So tell me. How can I talk to her and straighten us out if I can’t even find her! I need to get out of here,” Dmitri said. “I need to get away from all this. I can’t take it. I’ve never felt this out of control before! I... I hate her.”

“No, quite the opposite,” Armando said. “You can’t leave, which brings me to the reason I actually came. Giovanni called. He really wants that lot next door and has made

arrangements for us to meet with a realtor tonight. I can't be here right away, so you'll have to talk to him. I need you level headed for this. Neither one of us want to piss him off. Although, if Michelle holds out on you for another month you'll probably be able to take on him and a whole army of undead."

"Where are you going? Out with Mandy?" Dmitri sneered, though he was really just jealous and they both knew it.

"No," Armando's face became dark, his paler skin turning flush with a subtle rage. "The blood supplier has been trying to skim our stock when he delivers. I'm going to pay him a visit. If I have to, I will take what he owes us from his neck."

"Why can't I do that?" Dmitri grumbled, eager for a good fight.

"You don't drink blood."

"Oh, yeah." Dmitri sighed, knowing he couldn't get out of it. If Gio wanted it done, he had to meet with the realtor and make the deal. He sure as hell didn't need that vamp pissed at him. Armando turned to leave. "Hey, wait, while you're there, do me a favor and pick up some more A-pos. You guys are going through it like crazy."

"Sure." Armando started to leave, only to say, "If you want someone to beat on, go find Mike. He was screwing around with some redhead in the basement last night when he was supposed to be tending bar."

Dmitri's head lifted and a wolfish grin crossed over his features. Standing, he strode straight for the office door, "Oh, Mike!"

~*****~

Armando opened the backdoor to the club and stood silent for a moment. The sound of voices hadn't surprised him, but the sound of one in particular did.

"Darren, this wasn't nearly as painful as I thought it'd be."

"Getting what you want never should be. I'm happy that you agree to my terms."

Armando stiffened. What terms had Dmitri agreed upon and why? He adjusted his jacket and walked into the room casually, not wanting to give Mandy any more reason to be upset with him. The site of Darren decked out from head to toe in an Armani suit with his hair slicked back made him want to tear someone's head off, preferably Darren's. "Good evening, I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

Dmitri turned and gave him a slight wave. “Hey, I just got done working out the kinks here with Darren Simons, the owner of the property we’ve just purchased.”

“Owner of the property?”

Darren flashed him a wolfish smile and he had to fight the urge to knock his teeth from his head. “I’m not the owner anymore... at least not according to the contract that your partner just signed.”

“Contract?”

Dmitri turned to Darren and motioned to Armando. “Could you give us a moment? I’d like to bring him up to date.”

“Oh, I’d be happy too.” Darren gave him a cold look. “It’s amazing what some people need to be brought up on. You’d think that with matters as important as this, that he’d already know. Just like you’d think people would know who’s been pumping in and out of....”

Armando saw red and lunged at Darren. Dmitri dove in front of him, effectively blocking his path.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Dmitri asked, thrusting him backwards. “Why the hell are you attacking a junior partner?”

“A what?”

Darren put his hands up as if to say ‘I’m innocent’ and winked at him. The demon within took over and before he knew it, his fingernails had lengthened, and his fangs had descended.

“ARMANDO! Enough!” Dmitri shouted. “Don’t make me have to shift. These pants are new and I sort of like them.”

Darren sat down in the chair and tossed his feet up on the table. “This is really pointless. Our time could be spent going over my conditions to the purchase.”

“Conditions?” Armando droned out.

“Listen, there’s a lot of things I’d do to help out a were, but taking on a pissed off vampire isn’t one of them. If you goad him one more time, I’ll let him go.” Dmitri said, turning his attentions back to Armando. “How do you even know Darren?”

Darren leaned back in the chair. “Did I forget to mention that I’m Mandy’s ex-husband?”

Dmitri's eyes widened. He loosened his grip on Armando and stepped back. "Kick his ass, and then I'll tell you about what I did."

~*****~

Armando stared at Dmitri in disbelief. He couldn't believe that his best friend had done something so foolish. "You gave the guy lifetime access to any of our facilities?" Dmitri shifted and nodded his head. "Hey, seemed like a bargain because the guy knocked twenty percent off the price of the property, so...."

"So you gave my fiancée's ex a free pass to interfere in our lives."

"Right," Dmitri said, before shaking his head. "I mean no. I didn't know the guy was her ex. Hell, I didn't even know she'd been married before. Do you think Michelle's been married?"

Armando rolled his eyes and glanced towards Darren. "I will speak to our lawyers in the morning."

"Talk away dead boy. The contract is rock solid."

The phone rang. Dmitri looked at the two of them and laughed. "If you think I'm answering that and leaving you two here to kill yourselves, you're dead wrong."

"He's dead, I'm just..." Darren began.

"A lycan wannabe." Armando finished for him.

The stopped ringing and the sound of Mike's voice filtered into the back office. "DMITRI!"

All men turned their attentions to Mike who had appeared in the doorway pale and breathing irregularly. "That was the hospital. Mandy asked them to call here... Michelle was taken in by squad and... and... something happened with her blood pressure and then...."

Chapter 27

Honey, I'm home!

Dmitri's tires screeched as he turned into the parking lot of the Mid County Hospital. He felt his body tense. Mike had been all but useless in giving information. All he'd been able to say was that some nurses' aide called and asked for Armando. He'd told her that Armando was gone and then gave him the message that Michelle was in the hospital and Mandy needed Armando get down there. That was it. That wasn't a whole lot to go on.

Hell, Mike should have at least asked what was going on. Dmitri would have slugged his cousin, but Mike already looked shaken by the whole thing. Mike didn't like to admit it, but deep, deep down, he had feelings and obviously he considered Michelle a close friend.

His car door was open before he'd even put the car into park. Leaping out the driver's seat, he slammed the door shut without locking it and ran for the rotating front door. A low growl sounded in the back of his throat while he was forced to wait for an older gentleman in a walker. Tapping his foot, he finally made it inside and rudely brushed past him.

"Michelle Pillow," Dmitri said, stopping at the front desk. He knew his voice sounded panicked, but he didn't care. Like it or not, he was going to storm up to that hospital room—no matter if she was mangled from a car wreck, dying of cancer, missing all four limbs—and tell her he loved her. Their petty bickering had gone on too damned long. He was in love with her and she loved him—he didn't plan on giving her a choice in this—and he was going to spend the rest of his life making her happy, whether she liked it or not.

"No, my name is Susan," the woman answered coyly. She was cute, but Dmitri didn't see her. He frowned, not appreciating her humor or the fact that she was twirling her hair trying to flirt with him. Before he'd met Michelle, he'd of had this girl in a linen closet within ten minutes. Now, she just looked cheap, tawdry, empty. He wanted more than that. And he was going to get it.

"Michelle Pillow's room number," he said stiffly.

The girl sighed and turned to her computer. He was pretty sure that she took twice as long to give him an answer because he'd been rude. Just when he was about to reach over the counter and strangle her, she said, "Michelle Pillow, Room 456."

Dmitri nodded, trying his best not to growl at her instead. He took off running for the elevators, mumbling, "4-5-6," over and over so he wouldn't dare forget. The elevator took forever to get to the fourth floor. Then as the doors opened, he frowned. He was on the maternity level. Dmitri stormed to the desk, and demanded, "Room 456."

What in the hell was she doing in the maternity level? Fine, whatever. If she was pregnant, he'd take the kid as his own and that would just expand their happy little fucking family and she'd be a loving wife and mother and it would all be so fucking perfect. Oh, and she could just have a few of his babies why she was at it.

"We don't have a room 456, sir," the nurse said. Her tone was stiff, but when she looked at him, she took pity and said, "What's your wife's name?"

"Michelle Pillow," he answered. She looked at her computer and frowned. "I'm sorry, are you sure you have the right hospital? We have no one in labor by that name... oh, wait, there is a Michelle Pillow on floor tw...o."

Dmitri was already to the elevator, swearing at how many times and ways he was going to rip out the receptionist throat when he found her. Getting to the second floor, he again went to the desk. Not even trying to control himself, he growled, "Michelle Pillow."

"214," the woman answered, as if she dealt with stress everyday and wasn't fazed by his.

Dmitri began to turn, when he heard someone say, "Wait a minute."

Dmitri spun around, shaking so bad that he had to see her now or he was sure the worry was going to kill him. He blinked seeing a doctor.

"214?" The doctor waited for Dmitri's nod. "You must be Armando. Mandy said she had you coming down. I'm Dr. Thomas. Listen, Mandy said I should talk to you. When Michelle came in she was pretty upset. She kept mentioning a Dmitri.

Dmitri felt his heart let loose, pounding violently.

"Do you know him?"

Dmitri nodded, unable to speak.

"Until she wakes up, I'd think it would be a good idea if she didn't see him. Michelle's had a mild attack. We're running some tests and the last thing she needs until we find out what's wrong is to be worked up. From the sounds of things, and from what Mandy has shared, this Dmitri is a primary stress source." The doctor gave a smile that was more polite than cheery. "That young lady has had a lot to deal with lately. With her heart condition, I really am surprised she's held up so well. Oh, and please try and get her to take her medicine. She really shouldn't have been off it like she was."

Dmitri went numb.

“Well, I’ll let you go,” the doctor said. “You can see her now. Mandy said you were family, so you’re allowed to stay as long as you like past visiting hours. I think it would be good to have a friend by her side when she wakes up.”

~*****~

Mandy headed into the office extra early to beat their boss in. The guy was a punk to begin with. Add the fact that Michelle would be out of commission for a few weeks due to stress on her weak heart, and you’d end up with an super punk.

Hank, their new boss, would have no problems with firing Michelle. He’d think of some creative way to title it so that he could get away with it, and there was no way that Mandy could let that happen. Michelle needed her job at the Nocturnal Journal so Mandy was willing to take on her workload to help her out.

She sat down at Michelle’s desk and searched her files. She had lists upon lists of interviews that needed to be done, so Mandy fired up the computer and began the arduous task of emailing all candidates. It was eleven by the time she’d gotten far enough on Michelle’s work to be able to concentrate on her own.

Mandy locked Michelle’s office door on her way out and headed down the hall to her own. Opening the door slowly, she jumped with a start when she came face to face with Darren. “What the hell are you doing here? Are you trying to kill me?”

He flashed a bad boy smile at her and propped his enormous feet up on her desk. She gave him the evil eye, but he kept them there. “No, baby, I’m not trying to scare you. I just wanted to see you and I’m sick of that friggin’ dead guy getting in the way.”

Mandy arched an eyebrow. “Friggin’ dead guy?”

“The vampire.”

“Ah, I see. So, what is it you want to talk to me about that Armando can’t be present for?” She gave his feet a good shove on her way to her chair. His size thirteen’s crashed to the floor and left Mandy grinning from ear to ear.

Darren leaned forward and gave her one of his famous ‘I’ve done something you’ll hate’ looks. “We need to talk about our marriage.”

“Great, this shouldn’t take long. We were only married a couple of weeks.”

Running his hand through his shaggy hair, he let out a sigh. “Yeah, about that....”

Mandy's gut clenched. Darren was up to his old tricks again, and she didn't like it one bit. "About that what?"

He glanced up at the calendar on her wall and shrugged. "We've been married more like two years now."

"Pffftt..." Mandy snorted. The calm look on Darren's face made her stop and take notice. "What the hell did you do, Darren?"

"It's more like what I didn't do." He reached over the desk to touch her and she eyed her letter opener. She wasn't above stabbing the man if need be. "I sort of never got around to turning those papers in."

Mandy shot up and out of her seat, sending several folders flying to the ground in the process. "YOU WHAT?"

"Well, you signed all that you needed to sign and then left the papers with me to give back to my attorney. I kind of forgot to do it."

"NOBODY forgets to turn in paperwork. AND you swore to me that it was annulled!"

"I lied."

Mandy's blood boiled. How could he do this? How could he waltz in after all these years and drop this on her? "You've got to be kidding me. Why would you wait two years to tell me this?"

Darren's face reddened. "I thought you'd come to your senses about us. I assumed that when I moved out here and relocated my business, you'd take one look at me and know that we were still meant to be together."

She thrust her hands up in the air. "Hold on... what do you mean, moved out here?"

"Honey, I'm home." He said, in a bad accent.

"Get the papers and get them to your attorney, NOW!"

Darren shook his head. "No. I've already spoke with him and he's willing to take this to court. You see, sweetie, you married a werewolf, and by law we've got certain rights, too. You're my mate, in the eyes of the law, and that entitles me to certain privileges."

Mandy lunged at him, wanting desperately to tear any body part she could get her hands on off him. He caught her in mid-stride and held her arms at bay as he pressed his face close to hers. She snarled at him. “If you think I’m having sex with you, you can....”

“No, no sex... yet, but I will be moving my bags in to your house tonight.”

“LIKE HELL YOU WILL!”

Darren laughed her outrage off. “Mandy, it’s simple. I’ve checked into this. I’m entitled to reside with you—my mate and you can’t stop me. I could force you to move in with me, but I’m guessing that would be even harder on you, and if we’re going to make this union work, we’ll need to compromise.”

Running out of options, Mandy attempted to head butt him. She missed and came into contact with his shoulder blade. A loud thud, followed by excruciating pain was all she got of the experience.

“Sweetie, be careful. I don’t want you to hurt yourself. Your body is not only your temple, it’s mine now, too.” He smiled down at her. “Don’t worry, I won’t push you for children, yet.”

“Darren, this is ridiculous. Don’t do this. I’m supposed to be marrying Armando in a couple of weeks. Don’t come in here and turn my life upside down.”

“NO,” Darren shouted. “You stop turning my life upside down! It ends now, Mandy. We need to make this work. That’s what married people do you know, and if we can’t then I promise to step aside and let you marry that dead piece of....”

“Darren!” Mandy scolded. “Please don’t do this. What are we going to work out in three weeks? Nothing!”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong. We’ll have more time than that because I say we will. I want at least two months with you—at least that or I refuse to ever step down.”

~*****~

Michelle blinked, opening her eyes. She had a killer headache, but that was nothing new. She’d been so stressed lately, a little migraine was nothing. At least her stomach wasn’t churning, that was something. Seeing a bright light, she blinked again.

“Michelle?”

Was that Dmitri’s voice? Her heart fluttered almost painfully.

“Michelle, are you...?” Ok, that was Brian. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ve been here all night,” Dmitri’s voice hissed. “What are you not doing here?”

“I—” Brian began.

“Bri?” Michelle mumbled. “What’s going on? Where am I?”

“Hey, sis,” Brian said and she felt someone lift her hand. Her eyes came into focus and she saw her brother. “Doc says you haven’t been taking your pills.”

“Ugh,” Michelle grimaced. “I told you I wasn’t. They’re placebos, I’m sure of it. I don’t feel any different when I’m on them.”

“You need to be taking them,” Brian scolded. He gave a pained look over her and Michelle turned her head to follow him.

She’d almost forgotten Dmitri was there. Her headache was making it hard to concentrate. Damn, but he looked good, even tired and red eyed as he was. She tried to smile, instinctively glad to see him, but the look faltered. “What are you doing here?”

“Mandy had to go into work to cover for you, so I volunteered to stay,” Dmitri said. His voice and expressions were tight.

“You didn’t have to do that,” she whispered. Pleasure flooded her that he had been by her side, even as she wished he’d never see her like this. “This... it really isn’t a big deal.”

Brian snorted. Michelle turned her glare onto him and gave him the ‘shut up or I’ll beat you’ look. Brian sighed.

“Sis, I hate to do this, but I’ve got to leave on an assignment. The... magazine’s not giving me a choice.” Brian glanced at Dmitri. “You know—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Michelle interrupted. She glanced at Dmitri. “I know. You be careful all right? Call when you get near a phone.”

Brian nodded. Dmitri’s cell phone rang and he stood up to answer it. “Yeah?”

With Dmitri distracted, Brian leaned over. “You know I wouldn’t go if it wasn’t important, right?”

“You do what you have to,” Michelle said. “I’ll be fine. Promise.”

Brian looked pained. “I want you to stay with Mandy... for me. The doc doesn’t want you being alone and I agree. And promise me, you’ll take your medicine. I don’t want to be distracted out on the field, you know, taking pictures. I’ll lose my focus.”

“I’ll be good,” Michelle promised, chuckling softly.

~*****~

“Mandy, slow down,” Dmitri said into the phone, as he left the hospital room. “What’s do you mean Darren is moving in with you?”

“Lycan law. He never annulled the marriage,” Mandy answered. “He has mating rights.”

Dmitri frowned. That’s all she needed to say. He knew lycan law better than anyone. Being Were, they had certain protected rights as mating was a hard enough process to begin with.

“There’s more, though,” Mandy said. “Michelle was supposed to stay with me, but now, with Darren...”

“Yeah, Armando’s going to be pissed and she doesn’t need to be in the middle of this. Did you tell Darren about Michelle? What kind of asshole moves in and kicks a sick friend out? You picked a real winner there, Mandy,” Dmitri grumbled.

“Dmitri, please don’t. This is hard enough as it is. You think I like it? I have to call off the wedding. Please, I need your friendship right now.” Mandy sounded near tears.

“You got it,” he answered.

“Thanks,” Mandy said. “I can tell Armando the wedding’s postponed partly due to Michelle’s episode, but he’s going to find out about Darren’s little ploy one way or another. I’ll just have to deal with that later. Now about Michelle, I got her workload covered.”

“I’m sure she’ll appreciate it,” Dmitri said.

“And I need you to take her home,” Mandy announced.

Dmitri felt his stomach tighten. “Me? What about her brother?”

“Brian’s leaving town. Some big photos shoot,” Mandy said. “And well, her home—”

“You’re telling me that little twerp is going out on a photo shoot while his sister’s sick? He’s been living off her for how long and now he’s just going to up and leave her?” Dmitri started to shake, wondering if he wanted to beat Brian up so close to medical attention or if he wanted to wait for the dark alley so he could suffer more. He felt his body tingling with the threat of a shift.

“That’s not all. Would you just listen?” Mandy sighed heavily. “Michelle can’t go back home at all. She doesn’t have a home to go back to. It burned down last night. That’s why Brian didn’t come to the hospital.”

“What?” Dmitri demanded.

“Some kind of electrical problem,” Mandy said. “We’re still waiting to hear. It took out her apartment and many others. Everything she had is gone. Well, I did have her laptop. She left it at the office. It has all her manuscripts and stuff in it, which is a relief because that girl’s bad about backing up files and the backups are all burned to a crisp anyway.”

Dmitri couldn’t move. “We can’t tell her.”

“I know,” Mandy said. “With everything she’s had, to add this would be... like adding the death sentence. We just have to keep things quiet. That’s why I want her to move in with you.”

Dmitri’s heart pounded so hard he felt it in his stomach. “With me?”

“Yes, do you mind?”

“No,” he said instantly. Mind having Michelle under the same roof as him, day and night, where he could watch over her, protect her, touch her. His heart stopped. He couldn’t touch her. He couldn’t add to her stress. Suddenly, the idea sounded like hell. Michelle in his home, untouchable, unkissable. He’d be unable to declare his feelings for her like he wanted to, unable to convince her to love him. In a whisper, he repeated, less convincingly, “No.”

“Thanks, Dmitri!” Mandy said. “I’d ask Armando, but Michelle would be too uncomfortable there and he’s going to be in too lousy a mood when I tell him about Darren to take care of anyone.”

“Hey!” A nurse yelled, breaking into his conversation. “This is a hospital. You can’t have that phone on in here!”

“I’ve gotta go. Don’t worry. I’ll convince Michelle to come home with me,” Dmitri said.

“Thanks. I’ve got work covered and I’ll go get her some clothes to wear tomorrow. I think the Salvation Army’s open. They should have old t-shirts,” Mandy said. “We’ll tell her that Brian took her house key and we can’t get in.”

“Get off the phone, sir!” the nurse demanded.

Dmitri clicked it shut and turned his gold flecked eyes at her and growled. She jumped and backed away, pale. Feeling somewhat satisfied, he moved to walk back into Michelle’s room, hoping he could restrain himself long enough not to kill Michelle’s no good brother.

Chapter 28

House Guests

“Would you please shut-up? My best friend in the world has some funky ass thing going on and I can’t even be there for her because I get to play ‘babysit the werewolf!’ And, you DON’T even want to get me started on having to cancel my wedding!” Mandy wasn’t in the mood to listen to Darren another second.

“What’s the matter, honey? Not happy to have your better half home with you?” Darren asked. He made a move towards her and she reached for her knife drawer.

“Don’t make me have to stab you. I’ll claim it was self defense.” She arched an eyebrow and gave him a wry grin.

Darren glanced around her kitchen and smiled. “You have to admit, this could be good for us.”

“What, standing in my kitchen while I think up ways to tell my fiancé that I’m still married to a man he hates? Oh, yeah, it’s a riot. Please sign me up for the next harebrained idea you have. I’d really hate to miss anything.”

“Come on, Mandy,” he said moving to embrace her. She snarled at him, daring him to try it. He backed off. He was smarter than she gave him credit for. “We were hot together. Even you can’t deny that.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but stopped when she realized that Darren was right. They had been hot together. Sex with him had been wild, unpredictable and often tiring. Armando was the only man she’d ever been with that was in the same toe-curling,

earth shattering, wet panty category, and the minute he found out about this she'd lose him.

Putting her head down, she reached up and rubbed her neck in an attempt to relieve some of the day's stress. It'd been a hell of a day. Hank had spent the afternoon riding her ass about deadlines. The florist that she and Armando had decided on for their wedding had called to let her know that they'd need to stop back in--something about a freakish strain of larva eating through plants. And, to top it off, her period was late again. No doubt due to stress.

Darren turned the kitchen CD player on and laughed when *Bad Moon Rising* greeted them. "Been thinking of me?"

"Not fondly."

"Let's dance," he said putting his hand out to her. She shook her head no and turned to go back to chopping zucchini. Instantly, Darren was behind her. He slid his arms around her waist and began rocking against her backside.

"There's a bad moon on the rise..." Darren never lost step with the music. He'd always had an amazing voice and she hated to admit that she missed hearing it. Unable to resist the sway of his hips and the lure of his voice, Mandy gave in and moved with him. "Hope you got your things together...."

Laughing, Mandy turned into him and allowed him to lead her around the kitchen. It'd been awhile since she felt this free--this relaxed. They twisted and twirled together and when the song ended, Mandy assumed that they were done. She couldn't have been more wrong. The Steve Miller Band's song, *The Joker*, came on next.

"Some call me the gangster of love... Cause I'm right here, right here, right here, right here at home..." Darren pulled her close to him, pressing their bodies so tight that Mandy had no choice but to take note of the erection he was sporting beneath his pants. "Really love your peaches want to shake your tree..." Grinding his bulge against her, he made her weak in the knees.

She did her best to put distance between them, but it didn't work. His lips brushed her neck and she arched her head back, allowing him better access to her. Running her hand through his shaggy hair, she pulled his head tighter to her neck. "This is wrong."

"No," he said, still planting sensual kisses along her neck. "It's not wrong, Mandy. I'm your husband. This is what husbands do. And," he grabbed her hand and placed it against his rock hard erection, "this is what you do to me."

Mandy gasped. Heat rushed through her body, collecting between her thighs in anticipation of what was to come. She tried to pull her hand away, but Darren held firm. “No, Mandy, you aren’t going to run from this. Not anymore.”

“We can’t... I can’t... Armando... I can’t do this to him... please Darren, try to understand.”

“Oh, I understand just fine.” He rocked his hips gently to the music causing her to stroke him through his pants. “I understand that you’re technically my wife and you agreed to give me two months. If I can’t sleep with you then neither can he. And, before you protest know that I could drag a divorce out for years and years.”

She opened her mouth to tell him to go to hell and he felt her legs give out when he planted his warm lips over hers. Sweeping her up in his arms, Darren continued his pleasurable assault on her mouth as he moved their bodies to the music. He carried her as if she weighed nothing towards the kitchen door.

“No,” she said, reluctantly pulling her lips from his. “I can’t...”

“Don’t do this, Mandy. I’ll drag a divorce out forever if you don’t give me just as much of a chance as the dead guy gets.”

She didn’t particularly like hearing Armando referred to as the dead guy, but fighting with Darren was pointless. He’d claimed mating rights and no judge in the world would side with her in the matter. “What about dinner? I need to finish making it.”

A wolfish grin spread across Darren’s chiseled face. “Dinner sounds good, but there’s something else I’ve been wanting to eat for quite some time now.” With that, he clamped his mouth back down on hers and walked towards her bedroom.

~*****~

Michelle looked over Dmitri’s home from his window, wondering how on Earth he managed to get her to come with him. All she knew is that he started talking, saying something about Mandy covering her work load--a fact Michelle would be protesting as soon as she saw her friend--and then she was nodding at him, staring at his full mouth more than hearing the words through the blood rushing through her head.

Before she knew it, she was in his car being brought to his home. No matter how many times she played that scenario in her fantasies, her being sick had never been a factor. It was almost humiliating, him seeing her like this. He was lycan. He was so

strong, immortal. And here was a big red flag waving, saying, 'Here, look at the mortal woman, she's weak, she's sickly, you can do better!'

Swallowing, she looked up at the sky. It was late afternoon yet. Michelle moved to push open her car door. She shouldn't be here. Just Dmitri's nearness was torture and now she was going to be staying with him? It didn't make sense. She should be staying with Mandy, if anyone.

Dmitri ran around the car before she could get out and lifted her up into his arms. Michelle protested as he bounced her more securely into his hold. "I can walk."

"Then why did they wheel you out in a wheel chair?" Dmitri asked.

"Cause they're stupid," Michelle grumbled. "Everyone is overreacting."

"The doctor said--"

Feeling a lecture, Michelle interrupted. "The doctor's always say something, but just ask them what's wrong with me. You'll hear silence."

Dmitri was quiet.

~*****~

Michelle knew living with Dmitri was going to be hard, but she didn't think it would be so hard so fast. It didn't help that he gave her his bed that first night. She'd laughed, asking what happened to the round bed he had last time she'd been over, the night she'd passed out and woke up thinking she'd been abducted by aliens. He confessed to being in the middle of redecorating. She liked the new, four poster bed better. It felt older and suited Dmitri more.

Being the gentleman he was—sometimes--Dmitri slept on the couch while she slept on the bed. Well, 'slept' was an overstatement. She'd lain awake surrounded by Dmitri's smell on the grey silk sheets until she thought she'd explode with lust. Once, she almost crawled out of bed and attacked him. Only the fact that she was exhausted kept her from following the impulse.

The bed was bad enough, but it seemed no one had her apartment key and so she didn't have any clothes. Brian had taken it with him when he left and she knew there was no way for her to get a hold of him. Her super wasn't answering his phone either. Without clothes, she had to borrow Dmitri's. Somehow, wearing his pajama pants and t-shirts made her horny as all hell. Ok, it was Dmitri that was making her horny.

“Would you like dinner?” Dmitri asked. Michelle jumped, nearly coming out of her skin as he walked in. She’d been staring at his big screen TV from his leather couch, not seeing the show as she imagined... Ok, she couldn’t go into what she imagined with him standing before her. He carried grocery bags.

“Oh, hey, you’re letting me stay here. The least I can do is take care of dinner,” Michelle said, standing. Dmitri smiled and carried the grocery bags to the kitchen.

His place really was big--lots of space. She liked it. His bathroom had a huge corner shower with bench seats, a whirlpool tub set into the floor--it was too cool, a large office with a bookcase full of books. Now, that had surprised her. She hadn’t figured him for the reading type. Now, the big screen TV she could see, being that he was all about the sports. I mean, who had a TV and accessories that required five remotes? Michelle was scared to turn the channel.

Grabbing the phone, Michelle began to dial, having long ago memorized all the delivery numbers.

“Pauly’s,” a voice said.

“Hey, Paul, it’s Michelle Pillow,” Michelle said.

“Hey, chicky, what can I get for you? The special?”

“No, actually, I need food for two. How about chicken primavera, garlic bread, some of those cherry filled thingies, and... that should do it.” Michelle walked to the kitchen.

“Who you talking to?” Dmitri asked.

“I’m making dinner,” Michelle said. “What’s the address here?”

“What are you doing?” Dmitri asked, frowning.

“Cooking,” Michelle said, looking confused.

“On the phone?”

Michelle laughed. “Oh, yeah, take out, sorry. It’s the only way I cook.”

“Would you like this on your tab?” Paul asked.

“Yeah, my tab’s fine,” Michelle answered, before looking at Dmitri. She covered the phone with her hand. “Do you have dishes or do we need to have them bring plastic ware?”

“You have a tab? How often do you eat out?” Dmitri asked.

“Every meal, well except when I make a peanut butter sandwich,” Michelle answered. “We need plastic ware?”

“Uh, no,” Dmitri said.

“No, Paul, actually, yes Paul, give me the plastic. No dishes tonight,” Michelle said. Looking at Dmitri she asked, “Address?”

Dmitri gave it to her and she repeated it. When she hung up the phone, he said, “I bought stuff to cook.”

“Oh, cook, cook? I can’t,” Michelle said. “I mean, I burn water. I burn pans. I burn--”

“I get point,” Dmitri chuckled and ran his hand through his hair. He really did look sexy standing in the kitchen. He wore loose blue jeans and a blue shirt. The color did something sexy to his gray eyes. “But, I meant I was going to cook for you.”

“Oh,” she said. “Wow.”

“Wow?” Dmitri’s voice dipped and he took a step towards her.

Michelle shivered. The lust, which hadn’t really left her, came back full force. Oh, living here was such a bad idea. Did he know he was that sexy? Did he look like that on purpose? And how in the hell did she date him and not jump his bones. Nothing like a near death experience to put things in perspective. She wanted to seduce him. Her stomach growled and she thought, food first, seduce Dmitri later.

~*****~

Dmitri watched Michelle eating. It was all he could not to jump on top of her. Damn, she looked sexy in his clothing. She’d look better out of them. He wondered if she knew how seductive she was being. Watching her take small bites, savoring her food--argh! A man could only take so much.

Dmitri forced his heart to slow. He couldn’t make a move, not right now. She was sick. The doctor said no stress. Though, from what she said, the doctors didn’t seem to know much about what was wrong with her. He wanted to get a supernatural opinion and had already made arrangements to take her into the supernatural district for an appointment with an elfin healer. Now it was just convincing her to go. The elves could really do so much more than the human doctors.

Michelle made a small moaning noise as she licked her fork. Dmitri grabbed a piece of bread and savagely tore it. It was going to be another long night.

~*****~

Michelle eyed Dmitri over the coffee table. He sat on the couch and she was on the chair across from him. Dinner was about over and all her attempts at turning him on seemed to be failing. She wasn't giving up easily though. She wanted him and she was determined to seduce him. Dipping her finger in sauce, she tried to look seductive as she licked it off.

Dmitri swallowed and looked at her strangely. "Uh? Do you need napkin?"

Michelle frowned.

"They're disposable--no washing involved." He grinned at her. He reached over, lifting a napkin for her.

The grin was too much. She couldn't take it. A growl in her throat, she jumped over the table and tackled Dmitri onto the couch. He tensed in surprise, but she didn't stop. Her mouth met his, kissing him hard with all the passion in her body. She wiggled around until she was straddling his hips. She groaned, feeling his hard erection between his thighs.

He wanted her.

Michelle began tearing at his clothes, rubbing her body into his arousal, trembling as it stimulated her clit. She nearly came just from the stimulation.

"Michelle," Dmitri gasped, trying to pull his mouth away.

She didn't listen, just moved her mouth to his throat, biting and kissing him with wild abandon. He tasted good, was so hot to the touch. She loved how hot he always was, about ten degrees above her temperature. She pulled at his shirt finding the hard muscles of his stomach. She ground her body harder into his, riding him through his pants.

"Ahh--hha," Dmitri said. He pushed her off of him and stood, breathing heavily. "We can't... you're... sick."

To Michelle's horror, he practically ran from her to the bathroom. She'd been so close to climaxing just from rubbing against him. Her heart pounded and she couldn't remember ever feeling so alive. And he'd stopped. He stopped.

He didn't want her.

~*****~

Dmitri tore into his bathroom, trying his best to remain calm. Great, Michelle's finally ready to sleep with him and this happens. It was for the best, she really was sick and he wanted her to see the supernatural healer first.

But, this? Did it have to be this? God, he'd waited for so long to have her and now she was more than willing, practically attacking him--THIS!!

Dmitri looked down at his pants in horror, beyond mortified. He'd come in in jeans with just less than a minutes worth of dry humping.

Chapter 29

Wait...I can explain!

Mandy woke to the sound of the phone ringing. She cracked an eye open and watched as Darren leaned over to grab it. Running her hand up his arm, she moved her body over his slightly. "Mmm, don't you dare answer that."

He chuckled and the sound reverberated through her as she lay partially on his massive chest. "What's a matter? Afraid of what someone might think?" He held the phone up, base and all while it continued to ring.

It was just out of reach and Mandy had to move up and over Darren in an attempt to grab it. "Darren, come on...they'll hang up before you give it to me."

He arched a dark brow and gave her a wolfish grin. "Oh baby, I'll give it to you. If you want it."

“Tempting. Now, give me phone.”

Darren pulled the sheet over her and covered them up. It was kind of cute the way he remembered how cold she got when she first woke up. That was something Armando never paid much attention to. Maybe that was because he was always cold.

Darren laced his free arm around her back, effectively holding her body pressed to his. His erection dug into her abdomen and she shifted a bit in an attempt to stop the moisture that was building between her thighs. It didn't work. He brought the phone closer to her and she grabbed the handset. “Hello?”

“Hey, I was beginning to think you fell off the face of the earth,” Michelle said, with a slight laugh.

“Hey you, how are you feeling?” Guilt washed over Mandy. She'd dropped the ball, again, in their friendship. How Michelle put up with her was completely beyond her, and she'd never be half as good as friend to her. Maybe she was genetically predisposed to fuck up? Maybe she was just a sucky friend. “Listen, sorry about not getting over to see you yet.”

Dead silence greeted her. Darren nuzzled his face into her neck and his stubble tickled, causing her to laugh.

Michelle laughed slightly too. “Yeah, it is funny. You apologizing shocked me into silence. Wow, warn me before you do that again. I'd hate to have a heart attack.”

It was Mandy's turn to fall silent, only hers wasn't out of shock. It was fear. The reality of Michelle's words turned her stomach. Losing her would not be something she'd bounce back from—ever.

Darren bit at her collarbone and she tried to slide off him. He held her tight, grinding his hips against her in the process. “I can smell that you're wet for me.”

Mandy rolled her eyes and looked at the wall, hoping that fixating on anything other than Darren's face would help her concentrate.

“Hello? Earth to Mandy...do you read?” Michelle said. “Did you hang up on me again?”

“No, no, I'm here. You just should avoid teasing about dropping dead.”

“Right, like anyone one of us couldn't get struck by a bus tomorrow.” Michelle laughed softly. “You know that may be a welcomed fix to my problem.”

Mandy propped herself up a bit on Darren, driving his erection lower. He growled and rubbed himself against her. The only thing that kept him from entering her was two thin layers of silk, his boxers and her panties, which were now soaked. Darren dropped the base of the phone onto the table and seized hold of her ass, making her yelp.

“Uhh, okay. Anyway, I’m making out with Dmitri…”

That caught Mandy’s attention. “You were what?”

Michelle huffed. “Don’t act so surprised. You’re not the only one with a libido. It just so happens that yours is some sort of medical marvel that men line up just to be near. You do realize that you’re sex drive is like twenty times greater than a porn star’s, right?”

Darren slid his hand around and moved it between them. Caressing the outer edges of her cleft, through her wet panties, he kissed at her jaw.

“Stop,” Mandy said, breathily.

“See, you can’t even tell me to stop picking on you without sounding like you’re having sex.” Michelle laughed softly. It sounded forced. Something was wrong.

“What happened? Do you need me to come…?”

Darren bit at her earlobe and tried to slide his finger under her panties. “Oh, yeah, I need you to come alright.” His playful nibbling turned more aggressive and his attempts to get her to fuck him increased ten fold. Quickly, he began to simulate the same rhythmic motions he used whenever she rode him. Somehow, Mandy managed to keep him out of her panties. But he in turn freed his cock from his boxers and rubbed it against the wet material.

Mandy tried to roll off him, but he increased his hold on her, and moved his hips in a pattern that left his now exposed member rubbing against her swollen bud. As much as she wanted to deny that it felt good, she couldn’t. And the look on his face said he knew it. He glanced over her shoulder, towards the bedroom door and smiled. Mandy followed his gaze, but found nothing there. At times, Darren could be odder than her.

“What did you say?” Michelle asked. “Please tell me that you’re not fucking Armando as we speak, because I’m not sure I could handle the fact that you’re getting some and I’m not.”

That statement alone should have shocked Mandy. If Darren wasn’t trying so hard to get into her panties, she’d have explored that further. “Umm, no… I’m not fucking Armando as we speak.”

“No you are most certainly not fucking me.”

The sound of Armando's voice made Mandy's stomach drop. "I have to go," she said, clicking the phone off. Darren continued to move his hips and hold her tight.

~*****~

Michelle stared at the phone in disbelief. First Dmitri runs away in what could only be viewed as a rejection and now Mandy was practically hanging up on her without saying goodbye? What was going on? Now everyone knew she was sick, they were running for the hills. It wasn't like she was infected with the black plague!

"Might as well be," she grumbled, looking around Dmitri's bedroom. She picked up her pills and studied the label. With a frown of disgust she threw them at the trashcan.

Things around the house were tense and Michelle just about had enough. Three days in Dmitri's home was more than enough torture. Hell, she slept in his bed for crissakes! And he slept on the couch. The couch! What was that? It wasn't like she'd demanded a long term relationship. Hell, they weren't even dating anymore. Did he think if he slept with her, he'd have to take her back? What, now he couldn't separate love and sex? All she wanted was sex from him--hot, erotic, full blown lycan sex. It wasn't like she was asking him to love her.

Michelle bit her lip, refusing to delve any further into that thought. No, she didn't want him to lov... Didn't want... Ah, DAMN IT!

No one knew it yet, but she was moving out. It wasn't like she needed a nursemaid and she did have her own apartment. Mandy and she both had the book deal coming out. Their titles were seeing print and would be available in most bookstores. Like she really needed sexual frustration at night to add to the stress of work.

Oh, and Dmitri was the epitome of anal-retentive when it came to his house. The man cleaned! ALL THE TIME. That morning, just when she got her book notes spread out the way she liked them, she'd gotten up to take a shower. When she finished, he'd picked it all back up and had it neatly filed in her bag. What was that? Now she couldn't find a damned thing and she'd been looking through them all day. He actually alphabetized her notes. Like she could remember that system. She had everything organized according to importance—to her. Now she had to recite the alphabet in her head whenever she needed some information.

She'd have moved out that instant if she didn't have to go down to the Raven to meet some people for work later. Frowning, she looked over the papers laying out over Dmitri's bed and frowned. She couldn't find her notes on *THE BARBARIAN PRINCE* novel that was due out in print for the Christmas season. She found notes on Mandy's *DAUGHTER OF DARKNESS*, due out at the same time, but no *DRAGON LORDS*.

Mandy would probably need those back. Michelle shrugged. Served Mandy right for getting into her bag and trying to make her a pie chart of her characters while she was in the hospital. Michelle glanced at the trashcan, guiltily eyeing the pie chart. Maybe she should keep it—just in case Mandy asked.

Getting up to see if Dmitri had filed her notes some place she'd never think of, she went into the living room. Dmitri wasn't there.

“Damn it, Michelle!” came Dmitri's voice, hissing in anger.

Michelle flinched. What did she do now? “Yeah?”

“What? I didn't...” Dmitri came out of the bathroom, holding her underwear. He looked confused that she'd heard him.

She paled. Well, at least the underwear was clean. They must have fallen out of her bag when she took a shower that morning. And thank God they were the ones Mandy had bought her and not a pair of granny panties. Seeing Dmitri, in his tight t-shirt and even tighter blue jeans, holding her underwear up, was not her idea of fun. It looked altogether too intimate. “Riffling through my bags?”

Dmitri stared at her. Suddenly, he cleared his throat. “No, I found these on the bathroom floor. I don't mind helping you do laundry, cause you're, you know, sick, but can you please try to get these into the hamper.”

“They're not used!” Michelle said, reaching forward to snatch them. He looked almost disappointed. “They fell out of my bag! And I don't need you to do my laundry for me.”

“But—”

“Can we discuss this later? It's late and I need to get ready for a meeting.” Michelle made a move to walk past him, going out of her way to make sure they didn't touch. She couldn't stand being in his presence. She felt so unattractive, so rejected. “I'm meeting with some people later.”

“Where do you have a meeting this late in the evening?” he asked.

“Not that it's your concern, but at the Raven.”

“I can take you.” Dmitri moved to follow her.

“Nope, won't be necessary. I already called a cab.” Michelle opened the bedroom door and quickly shut it behind her.

Dmitri frowned, looking at the door. Grumbling to himself, he said, “Good going, Dmitri. Way to piss her off.”

He really didn't care that she'd left her underwear on the floor, or that she made a mess. He just kept cleaning because he wanted her to be comfortable. And it kept him busy—so he didn't have to think of his humiliation the night before. In his pants?

Dmitri planned on making it up to her. He was going to surprise her tonight and take her out on a real date. Just thinking of it, he looked down. Already he was aroused. Great. Whatever happened, he would not be repeating those embarrassing events. He glanced around the apartment and frowned. What is it Mike always said? Before you go on a date, you needed to clear the plumbing? Dmitri had never worried about it before, and he hated to admit it, but it sounded like some good advice. Maybe if he serviced himself a few times he'd relieve enough pressure to make himself last past second base. It was worth a try.

~*****~

Mandy dropped her head down and Darren's chest and closed her eyes, knowing that she was about to lose the most important thing in her life. Cool energy prickled up her back and she recognized it for what it was, Armando's power.

Darren growled and flipped her over on the bed. The sheet went with her, leaving Darren completely exposed. His boxers were pushed down and his ruddy cock was in complete view of Armando. He adjusted his boxers and covered himself. Not that it did any good. He was still hard, now his erection was just pressed outward against the silk material. Armando's power moved from a light trickle to a harder pressing feeling. Mandy gasped and slid up on the bed. Darren moved in front of her on the bed. “Drop the fucking magic shit. You're hurting her.”

Armando tipped his head to the side and Mandy caught sight of his swirling eyes. He was pissed and that was never a good thing. “I am beginning to wonder if she lives for pain. Do you, Mandy? Do you enjoy pain? You seem to enjoy inflicting it on others.”

His power yanked hard on her, lifting her off the bed slightly. Darren grabbed hold of her and tried to pull her back down. It didn't work. It only served to hurt more. She cried out. Darren jumped off the bed and charged at Armando.

Armando smiled wickedly and lifted his hand. Darren jerked back for a moment but then continued his charge. Armando looked a bit surprised. “Ah, the little were has more strength than I gave him credit for. Does he really think I'll stand by and let him get into those panties of yours, as if he hasn't already?”

“Yeah, this time I was expecting it, asshole. Now, put my wife down!”

“Wife? Oh, Mandy, really...you should chose the men you fuck a bit more wisely. At the very least find one that's not delusional.” His cold gaze locked on her and she turned her head, unable to face him when he was like this.

Darren slammed into him and they tumbled out into the hallway. Mandy thought Armando's magic would drop, it didn't. He was a master vampire who was a hell of a lot stronger than she'd ever dreamt possible and Darren had just walked right into his trap.

“Darren! NO!”

What is wrong, kitten? Do you fear for your wolf's life? Armando's voice boomed through her head. It no longer felt smooth and silky. It felt like shards of broken glass.

A loud boom followed by crashing noises sounded from the other room. Mandy screamed out and pushed hard against Armando's power. Something popped, inside her. It wasn't painful so much as it was different. Armando's powers dropped and so did Mandy. She bounced off the bed and hit the floor with a thud. Pain shot up her elbow and right leg.

“Armando, stop...please stop!” she cried out as she pushed to her feet and ran for the door. When she rounded the corner, she found the two of them walking in a slow circle, eyeing each other up. Each one was covered in blood, but Darren was the only one she could see visible wounds on. “Stop it! Both of you!”

“Get out, Mandy!” Darren shouted.

She snorted. “Yeah, like I'd leave you two alone together.”

A wry grin spread across Armando's face. Even when he was teetering on the edge of a full shift into his demon, he was still gorgeous. How the man could still make her chest tight, even when he was just this side of being a monster was beyond her.

“Is that how you see me, Mandy? Am I a monster to you?” Armando asked, his eyes darting to Darren. “Shall I show you what a true monster looks like?” He lashed power out at Darren.

Darren dropped to his knees and arched his back. He cried out and Mandy watched in horror as his body rippled and contorted. When she saw the fur sprout on his arms, she knew what Armando was doing and at the moment, she hated him for it.

“Stop it! You're hurting him! Forcing him to shift could kill him!” She ran towards Darren to try to help him.

Darren growled out at her and shook his head violently. "Get...away...from me...not safe..."

A cool arm slid around her waist and yanked her backwards. "Armando, stop it, please don't do this. You'll kill him."

"Perhaps."

"God no! Please, it's not what you think. Nothing..."

Armando spun her around to face him. He snarled and she caught sight of his fangs. Paralyzed by fear, she was powerless to do anything but stare at him. He reached down and grabbed her between her thighs. Cupping her tight, he bent his head down to meet her gaze. "You wear his smell and he yours. And it is clear you are wet. Tell me how it is not what it appears to be." His voice was deeper now, and a hell of a lot scarier. "Tell me how you broke my hold on you. How did you manage to free yourself from the bed?" Armando drew in a deep breath and shook her. "You smell different than you should this time of the month," he drew in another breath, "you are behind in your female workings again."

Laughing at a pissed off master vampire about his choice of phrases for a menstrual cycle wasn't a good idea. Mandy bit her lip and nodded.

Armando's face twisted and he looked disgusted. "We were to be married in a few short weeks and yet you have been fucking him." She shook her head no. "Do not lie to me, Mandy. You will not like what happens."

Mandy stared at Armando with wide eyes. He wasn't one to threaten her and she hadn't missed how he'd referred to their wedding in the sense it was called off. Her stomach lurched and she had to fight back vomit. "Please, don't do this, Armando. Don't throw it all away, not until you hear me out."

He laughed wickedly and she cringed. "Kitten, I am not the one who threw it all away. You allowed him back into you life, you..."

"We're still married. He claimed mating rights," she blurted out fast. "I didn't know, Armando. I didn't know that he never turned the paperwork in for our annulment. Please, please don't do this."

Armando released his grip on her and she staggered backwards. He lashed more power out at Darren, causing him to scream. Mandy stepped in front of Darren and shook her head. "No more, please."

"You still defend him after his deception?" He looked off towards her bedroom door. "Tell me, how long have you known about this?"

She didn't respond. Nothing she could say would make it better and remaining silent seemed like the best option.

Armando laughed and nodded his head. "I see. So, because of lycan laws, you opened you legs for him. Yes, I can see how you were left no choice there. That was so much easier than coming to me for assistance."

"No, that's not what happened," she whispered, suddenly terrified of Armando.

He winked at her and she shivered. "You are wise to be afraid."

"Mandy...go," Darren said, his voice strained.

She chanced a glance at him, and found him on his hands and knees in human form. Every ounce of her wanted to run to him to make sure he was okay. It didn't matter that they'd been, or rather were still, married. It was the right thing to do. No one should be tortured.

"Oh Kitten, you have suddenly grown a conscience," Armando said, sardonically. "Funny, I thought its name was Michelle. She is not here to instruct you on being a decent person so tell me how it is you came up with that all on your own."

Mandy's fear was replaced quickly by anger. This had all gone too far. "Get out, Armando!"

"No, I will stay."

"Don't make me revoke your invitation."

He smiled. "Try it. I am in need of a laugh."

Confused by his change in tone, Mandy's mind raced. If she let Armando stay, he'd kill Darren. Granted, at times she wanted to do the same thing, but she'd never really let harm come to him. She could try to talk with Armando later, when he was a bit calmer. "I'm sorry--Armando but I revoke your invitation. You are no longer welcome in my home."

Wind whipped past Mandy and circled Armando. She expected him get yanked through the front door, but he didn't. Instead, the wind circled him, lifted his long black hair and ruffled his designer shirt. The wind faded fast, leaving Armando laughing methodically in its wake. "Kitten, there is something I forgot to tell you. When I became your master, you lost your right to revoke invitations. It is just one of the perks of the job."

Mandy backed up slowly and Armando thrust magic at her. She shook her head in disbelief of what was happening and stopped when a warm hand touched her shoulder. “Darren?”

“I’m here and we need to go. Now.”

Armando bowed slightly and extended his arm towards the front door. “Be my guest.”

Mandy glanced down at herself. Wearing only a bra and underwear outside wasn’t something she was particularly keen on, even with her wild ways, but standing in a room with Armando when he was like this wasn’t smart. She decided on risking a ticket for indecent exposure.

Darren walked in front of her and took her hand. “Come on, Mandy. If he won’t leave, we will.”

She watched Armando closely as Darren led her out the door. He was too quiet, too okay with them walking out. Something was wrong. Once they’d both crossed the threshold, Armando lifted clear off the ground and flew directly at them. Mandy screamed, and Darren yanked her out of harms way.

Armando landed and laughed. He looked around the upper landing and smiled. “Now, this is a much better place to dispose of you, wolf.” He stared at Mandy and smiled. “You see, I know how particular Mandy is about her home and even in my ‘state’ I would like to spare her from having to clean up after me.”

Mandy froze. He was going to kill Darren. This was no longer a show of power. This was the end all be all between them.

Darren walked backwards with her shielded behind him. He stopped. “Go wait outside, Mandy.”

She backed up a bit more, careful to step down the first stair and then realized what she was doing. She was giving Armando a clear shot at Darren. The events that followed unfolded in slow motion--Armando lifted his hands as Mandy raced up to Darren. An overwhelming amount of raw power slammed into them. Darren’s body lifted off the ground and slammed into the wall. A split second passed as Mandy met Armando’s gaze head on. Something moved over his face.

“NO!” he shouted too late. His energy slammed into her and sent her pummeling over the railing. She reached out towards him as her stomach dropped out. The minute she hit the bottom floor, darkness surrounded her.

~*****~

Michelle slipped her jacket and grabbed her purse. She still didn't have any notes, but it didn't matter. She was just nervous. She'd written the book. It wasn't like she needed to read it again to know what happened.

Looking in the mirror, she frowned at how pale her skin was. The cab should be waiting for her, so she would just have to put makeup on in the car. Opening the bedroom door, she tried to stay quiet as she snuck down to the bathroom. She really didn't want another run in with Dmitri. It was just too humiliating. If she played her cards right, she could be moved out that night before he even knew she was gone. Sure, it was the cowardly approach, but right now she didn't care.

She opened the bathroom door, she was greeted with a low moan. Dmitri stood against the wall, his head bent, pleasuring himself. His hand wrapped around and incredibly large, incredibly thick... "Oh My God!"

Dmitri's eyes flew to hers. Michelle did the only thing she could think of. She slammed the door and made a run for it.

"Shit! Michelle, wait!" Dmitri yelled. Michelle only ran faster. Here she was only a few feet away, obviously more than willing, and he was choosing to go at it alone. Hey, there were only so many ways a girl needed to be rejected. She got it. She wasn't attractive. "Michelle! Wait, I can explain."

"There's nothing to explain. It's your house, you can do what you want." Michelle slammed the front door and ran for the cab. The car pulled away, just as Dmitri made it to the front door. She watched him for a brief second before staring straight ahead.

~*****~

Armando watched in horror as Mandy flipped over the railing. He launched into the air, but couldn't get to her in time. When he cleared the landing, the sight of Mandy twisted on the cement floor below, made every ounce of the demon within him fade away. Only the man was left and he knew without a doubt that he caused this. He landed by her side, stroked her blood soaked hair out of her face and dropped his head down.

"Ohmygod," Darren said, appearing next to Armando. He checked Mandy for a pulse--one that Armando already knew wasn't there and began to shake his head. "No, no...what the hell...?"

The part of Armando that was good, the part that kept the demon at bay most of the time kicked in. He'd bonded Mandy to him once so he had more power over her than any other human. He let his power ripple out and over her. Her body jerked and Darren seized him by the throat. He hoped the wolf would rip his throat out. After what he'd done, he deserved it.

"Fix this now!" Darren shouted.

Surprised by Darren's faith in his abilities, Armando continued to pump his magic through Mandy. Their bond would be even stronger now, but it didn't matter. What he'd done was unforgivable.

Mandy gasped, but didn't waken. Armando had made sure she couldn't. She was alive and would fully recover, most likely within the next hour or so, but the pain would be great if he didn't block it. Darren ran his hand down to her lower abdomen and met Armando's gaze.

Armando sighed. "I am sorry. I could save her, but not your child."

Darren took Mandy's hand in his and brought it to his lips. He planted a small kiss on it, making another pang of jealousy tear through Armando. He fought it down and remained in control.

"She wasn't lying to you. We never had sex. I tried. Lord knows I tried. I even managed to get her down to her undergarments, but she said no." He stroked Mandy's arm gently as Armando soaked in what he was saying. "She refused to hurt you. We spent the night catching up on people we used to know. We fell asleep late this morning talking about you and the phone woke us up. When she reached to get it, I toyed with her," he dropped his head, "I just wanted to tease her. But when I sensed you...I...I wanted you to know that she was mine. I knew you were there...hell, I sensed you when you got within a mile of this place. But I didn't tell her. I made it look like we were fucking...we weren't...she wouldn't do that to you."

Armando's gaze raked over Mandy and came to a stop on her stomach. The realization of what he'd done hit him. That was how Mandy had been able to break his hold on her. "The baby was..."

Darren nodded. "Yours...yes. She didn't know she was pregnant. I sensed it my first day back in town. It wasn't until I met you that I knew for sure it was yours." He wiped his face and kept his head down. "I wanted a life with her. That's why I never annulled our marriage. I knew one day that we'd be ready to commit fully to one another and then we'd...I didn't mean for any...I'll go."

Armando pulled back from Mandy, unable to hide his shame. Looking at her only reminded him of what he'd done. He'd been furious with her. Blinded by rage. It was clear that as good as his control over his demon was, it was almost non-existent when it

came to her. “No, you will stay. I will go.” He stood and walked towards the lobby door. Each step he took tore at his insides. “Take care of her, wolf.”

Chapter 30

Every Breath You Take

“Please reconsider and stay home,” Darren pleaded softly.

Mandy shifted in his arms and tried to stand up. He’d been holding onto her since she’d woken to find herself bathed and in bed. Glancing up at him, she narrowed her eyes. “Tell me again how I ended up in bed-- wet.”

He kissed her forehead lightly. “Honey, I already told you that when you got hit with a little too much power, it knocked you out.”

Something about the look on Darren’s face made her wonder if he was telling the truth. He caressed her shoulder and closed his eyes. “Stay home, please. Mandy, you had a hell of a night and you need to rest.”

Mandy patted his bare chest and laughed. “We sure did have a hell of a night. But, I already told you... I feel fine. Better than fine actually. It’s weird. I have more energy now than I’ve had in over a month.”

Darren nodded. “I know, honey, but it would put my mind at ease if you stayed away from the Raven for awhile. I really think it would be for the best.”

He was right and she knew it, but it didn’t matter. She’d let Michelle down too much already and she wouldn’t do it again. “No, I promised Michelle I’d meet her there so I need to go. This is important to me. Please try to understand.”

“I get it. I don’t like it, but I get it.” His jaw tightened and he hugged her tight as he whispered, “I thought I’d lost you.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Tell you what... I’ll be fine with you going to the Raven if you let me come too.”

Mandy's eyes widened. "Uhh, I'm not sure that's such a good idea." She tried to remember on what terms Armando left, but she couldn't. The last thing she remembered was Armando bowing and telling them to go ahead and leave. The idea of putting Armando and Darren in the same room again didn't seem wise. "In fact, I'm sure that's not a good idea."

"I told you that the dead guy and I came to an understanding."

"Stop calling Armando 'the dead guy.'"

Darren chuckled. "Sorry. Habit, I guess. But I'm serious. We won't get in a fight again."

"Right," she said sarcastically. "I need to talk to him anyway. He might be a bit calmer now. Do you think I'll be able to smooth things over with him?"

"Are you sure you want to?"

Mandy pulled back from him, a bit surprised by his question. "Of course I do. What makes you think I wouldn't?"

Darren's gaze raked over her. A sly smile spread over his handsome face and he winked. "Well, you are lying naked in another man's arms."

Mandy went to say something witty back, but stopped. He was right. She'd been shocked at first, to find she had no clothes on. But the minute she found Darren lying next to her, staring at her, she felt an overwhelming amount of relief that it wasn't Armando. What was that about? She'd never been terrified of finding Armando by her side. If anything, she looked forward to waking next to him. Not this time. No. This time she'd been so happy it was Darren that she'd practically thrown herself at him. He'd wrapped her tight in his arms and held her quietly since then.

"You've changed a lot," she said, running her hand over his upper arm.

"Changed how?"

"For one, you're bigger than I remember you being." Immediately, she shook her head, knowing how he'd take it. "And I mean bigger in the sense of more muscular. You were always that way but now you seem even more so. And...."

Darren let out a manly chuckle and ran his hands through her hair. "Normally, I'd make a joke about being 'bigger' in all areas... but... I'll pass."

“See! That’s another thing that’s changed.” She looked up into his eyes and smiled. “The Darren I remember couldn’t resist being a smart ass. It didn’t matter who he hurt in the process. If the opportunity was there, he took it. But, you pull back now.”

He smiled and nodded. “It’s because we’re older now, Mandy. I’d like to say we’ve matured but I know us a little too well. But, we have grown up just a bit.”

“Have I changed?”

Darren bit his lower lip and laughed softly. “Hmm, let me think... you’re still as mouthy as ever. You still have a quick temper. You still have the ability to make the men in your life nuts and you...”

She smacked his chest and pinched him. “Hey!”

“Ouch,” he said jokingly. “You didn’t let me finish. Mandy, you still have my heart and I think you always will. When we were younger, that scared the hell out of me. My feelings for you were so intense, so raw, that I hated myself for it and I...”

Mandy sat up and stared at him. “And, that’s why in the end you pushed me away?”

The look in his green eyes said she was right. “I’m sorry I hurt you. I didn’t know how to deal with it all. Hell, we knew each other forever and from the moment I laid eyes on you... it... it was like I was spellbound. You didn’t seem to notice that I was into you for the longest time. Then, when I finally got you to go out with me, I lived everyday in fear you’d leave.”

“So, what, you date me for years, marry me and then walk out?”

“No. Not exactly.” He reached for her but she shook her head. He put his hands down and nodded. “A couple of weeks after we were married, I woke up before you did, like usual. I laid there watching you sleep for the longest time. I don’t know... my mind began to wander and I thought about all the ways I could lose you... all that I wanted to give you... all that you deserved, and it hit me that I wasn’t good enough for you. Not then anyways.”

Mandy sat there staring at him. Tears came to her eyes and the emotions she’d run from two years ago flooded back. “You fucking left me because you thought you weren’t good enough for me? What the hell is that about? A piece of me died the day you left me, Darren!” She moved off the bed and snatched the sheet up to cover herself. “You were the first man I’d ever let past my defenses and I loved you with all my heart! It destroyed me when you left without saying a word. Do you know what I did? Do you?”

Darren dropped his head slightly and whispered, “No.”

She laughed and put her hand on her hip. "I'll tell you exactly what I did, Darren. I fucked anything that moved for close to six months! I didn't care who or what they were, so long as I got to use them and be done with them. I fucked so many men that I lost count... God... I lost count! I lost all respect for myself. I figured that if the one man I loved couldn't love me, no one could."

Darren looked up at her, his eyes red and full of unshed tears. "I didn't know you loved me, Mandy. You never said it. Not once in all the years we were together."

"I married you, Darren. I thought that spoke volumes!"

She spun on her heels and stormed toward the bathroom. Instantly, Darren was behind her, pulling her to a stop, and closing his arms around her.

"Honey, don't do this. Don't still hate me for making the wrong decision."

Mandy snorted. "The wrong decision? Is that what you call almost ruining my life? Gawd, Darren you are the reason I hesitate at every turn with marrying Armando. It has nothing to do with him. I love him and he's the only reason I'm not still fucking any available man. He made me value myself again. He made me believe I had a right to be loved."

Darren rocked her gently and held her tight. "Shh, I know that I fucked up. Every day since I left, I wanted to come to you--to make it right between us. But, I couldn't do it. I couldn't show back up in your life in the same place I was before. I needed to be a better man, Mandy. You deserved that."

"No," she bit out. "I never said you weren't a good man... that you weren't good enough for me! I loved you for you, Darren. You ripped my heart out only to show up when I found a man who made me whole again. Why didn't you go when you found out I was engaged? Why didn't you let me be happy? I deserved that."

Darren sighed. "If I could do it over again, I would have walked out the minute you told me you were engaged. I'm sorry, Mandy. I never meant to hurt you--again. I'll go." He loosened his hold on her and backed away.

Mandy turned towards him and caught hold of his waist. Every ounce of her wanted to smack his face--to hurt him half as much as he'd hurt her. Instead, she pulled him close and put her head against his chest. Fighting to get control of her emotions, she looked up into his eyes. "Come with me to the Raven tonight. I want you there. I think I need you there."

Darren was quiet for a moment. He tipped his head to the side and narrowed his gaze. "Are you asking me to stay?"

Mandy shrugged. "I don't know what I'm asking you. And, I'll understand if you do walk away. I can tell you that the idea of you disappearing from my life again scares me. The problem is, I can't promise you anything above friendship, Darren." She nuzzled her face back against his chest and hugged him tight. "I get that this is going to send you mixed signals, but if you decide to stay... could... would you... What I want to know is, would you stay with me for awhile? Just until... I don't know... just for awhile."

"In your house?" Darren asked, his voice strained.

Mandy tried to pull away. Her emotions were running wild and she didn't want to make a bigger mess of her life than she'd already had. "Forget it. I'm sorry I asked. I didn't mean it in a...."

"Yes, I'll stay with you."

Relief washed over Mandy. There was no way she could survive her best friend being sick, Armando leaving her and Darren disappearing. She pulled back from him and stood tall. "Thanks."

He smiled and glanced towards the bathroom. "No problem. Now, little wife of mine, get your ass in there and get cleaned up if you're still planning on going to see Michelle."

Her mouth dropped open and Darren snatched the sheet away from her. Laughing, he dangled it out in the air and winked.

"Darren!"

"It's good to be home. Now go get ready."

~*****~

Michelle frowned, eyeing her watch. Mandy had stood her up--again. She wasn't really surprised. It was pretty clear she wasn't on anyone's priority list as of late. Dmitri obviously didn't need her for anything. Michelle blushed, taking a quick drink of coffee. Mike was nearby and she didn't want him to see her--whatever it was she was doing.

"Um, hey, that guy down there wants to buy you a drink. Usually when they ask I tell them you're taken, but you looked like you could use someone buying you a drink." Mike winked.

"Yeah, right, they must ask all the time," Michelle drawled sarcastically in obvious disbelief. She thought of Dmitri standing in the door as her cab rolled off. Or

worse, Dmitri in the bathroom jacking off. Worse yet, Dmitri running from her, just short of screaming. Michelle pushed her coffee towards Mike. "Flavor this up, would you?"

Mike reached for the creamer.

"No," Michelle pointed at the stocked cabinet. "That."

"Michelle, you shouldn't... I mean, Dmitri said we weren't to give you liquor. You remember that party where you woke up and thought you'd been abducted by aliens?" Mike grinned.

How in the world did he know about that? Michelle frowned. Mandy. "Dmitri is not my keeper, Mike. If the gentleman at the end of the bar won't pay, I will. Give me a drink."

Mind-numbing liquor sounded great. Maybe she'd become an alcoholic. Michelle gave a derisive laugh.

"You, ah, won't have an attack or anything?" Mike asked worried.

Michelle frowned, but his words only reminded her she needed to take a pill. She dug into her purse. No wonder Dmitri didn't want her. What was her lifespan anyway? Fifty years, tops? He'd live forever. Could she really blame him? "Just forget it."

Mike nodded, seeming relieved.

~*****~

"You don't have to do this."

Mandy held Darren's hand tight and nodded. Just staring at the Raven's front door made her sick to her stomach. "I have to do this. I need to see Michelle."

"That's not what I meant," Darren said, bringing their joined hands to his lips. He planted the softest of kisses on her hand.

"I have to face him sometime."

"Right, but you just had a hell of an argument with him two hours ago. Maybe you should give it a few more days." He pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. "But, if you want to do it now then I'm here for you."

His support meant more to her than she realized and she almost burst into tears again. Crying wasn't something she did often and already tonight she'd lost control too many times to count. "Okay, it's now or never."

Turning, she pulled Darren with her to the front door. She spotted Makonnen, one of the clubs bouncers, and smiled. "Hey, handsome."

At seven feet tall and three hundred pounds he looked like he'd be a bad ass. In many respects he was. But Mandy knew him and Makonnen was a gentle giant. He looked at Darren and narrowed his eyes. "Mandy?"

"Let me guess, Armando told you not to let Darren into the club."

Makonnen shook his head. "No, in fact, he hasn't been to the club in days. Dmitri mentioned that he was back from his business trip, but he hasn't come here... at least not yet. I do know that he missed a meeting he was supposed to have with Dmitri but I figured he stopped off to see you the minute he got back to town."

That was odd. The Raven was Armando's baby, his outlet. He and Dmitri held partnerships in countless other business but the Raven was the only one he spent a great deal of time at. The hairs on the back of her neck rose quickly and she glanced around the parking lot. The dark night seemed to close in on her.

Darren's hand tightened on hers and he leaned down to kiss her forehead again. "Go on inside, honey, and find Michelle. I forgot something in my car."

Mandy nodded and headed into the club happy to leave the coldness that suddenly surrounded her.

~*****~

Armando watched from the shadows as Mandy stood hand and hand with Darren near the entrance to the club. The jealous streak within him surged up and he clenched his fists tight. He knew she sensed him then. Mandy had somehow picked up on his power, his presence and he felt her fear. He also felt her confusion. Her thoughts were wide open to him now that they'd bonded so thoroughly. She was an open book to him. He knew she still loved him and that although she was afraid of him, she still wanted to talk with him. That wasn't an option.

Armando couldn't forgive himself for what he'd done to her, to their child. He'd destroyed their happiness with his anger, his demon. Never again would he put himself in a position to hurt Mandy physically. If that meant distancing himself by severing ties then so be it. She would rebound from emotional heartache but would she survive his demon should it get loose again.

He watched as Darren kissed Mandy's forehead and sent her inside to see Michelle. The werewolf had no doubt sensed him lurking near them and wanted to assure Mandy's safety. That both pleased and infuriated Armando.

When Darren turned and looked in his direction, Armando allowed himself to be seen. Lifting the darkness he'd created to mask his presence, he stepped forward.

"You got yourself under control?" Darren asked, without the slightest bit of fear in his voice.

Fool, Armando thought as he moved towards him. "I am under control, wolf."

Darren nodded. "I won't let you talk to her alone. While she seems to think you're calmer now, I don't."

"I am happy to see you protect her so. Though, I will admit that I would prefer to do it myself, but circumstances as they are...."

"So what? Are you just going to lurk in the background from here on out or are you going to work it out with her?"

Armando stepped forward and fought the urge to take Darren by the throat. "Why are you so concerned?"

~*****~

Michelle tried to her take pill as secretively as she could. Mandy plopped down beside her, scaring her as she swallowed. She coughed, trying not to choke. Mandy's smile instantly faded to concern.

"Hey, easy," Mandy said.

"Damn, I thought you'd stood me up," Michelle said, trying to discreetly put her bottle back into her purse without it being seen. "You're late--again."

"I know, I'm sorry. It..." Mandy looked towards the door, shivering visible. "It couldn't be helped. You know, car trouble."

"Hum."

"So, you called earlier. What were you saying about you and Dmitri?" Mandy asked, straight to the point.

Michelle chuckled. Seeing Mandy's face, she knew her friend was stressed. She didn't need to burden anyone. Besides, it was way too embarrassing. "It's nothing. He's just a housekeeping psychopath."

"Ouch, you must be in hell," Mandy teased.

"I am. He alphabetized my notes."

"He touched the sacred Michelle filing system?"

Michelle tried to frown but couldn't. Not wanting to get into her and Dmitri's living arrangements, she turned to a safe topic--work. "Okay, the Christmas Party. I talked to Armando several weeks ago and he said we can have it here." Mandy frowned. Michelle wondered about it. "Anything you need to tell me?"

"Nope."

"Okay." Michelle didn't believe her, but who was she to argue? "I've had our assistant send out invitations so we can't cancel. Are you sure you're okay? You look pale."

"Quit worrying. I'm fine. Besides, you're the one who glows in the dark."

"Sorry, I've been cooped up for so long." Michelle shrugged and grabbed her purse. She took out her notes. "Here's the list. Prince Ualan and his brothers should be here."

"Mm," Mandy's eyes lit, "Prince Zoran. I so want to be that warrior's little slave."

Michelle frowned. Mandy was always bold about stuff like that--even joking--but this time there was a strange light to her eyes when she said it. If Michelle didn't know better she'd think Mandy was serious.

"Mm, DRAGON LORDS," Mandy continued, growing dazed. "With their... ah... muscles... Will the Var be here to?"

Michelle tried to ignore the fact Mandy was panting heavily. "Ah, they said they'd try to send an ambassador. Prince Jarek or Reid, I believe. I can't remember for sure. It's not a definite. They don't exactly get along--are you alright?"

"Don't you think Mike looks good in those pants?" Mandy asked. "I never noticed he has such a nice ass."

To Michelle's horror, Mike with his lycan hearing, turned and winked at Mandy. To her further horror, Mandy grinned naughtily and winked back.

“Are you possessed?” Michelle said, shaking her.

Mandy blinked at the contact, looking at Michelle’s hand. “Huh? What? I’m with you. Christmas party. Go on.”

Michelle frowned. Mandy looked fine now. Taking up her notes, she went back to planning the party.

~*****~

Mandy sat next to Michelle, listening to the list of guests for the Christmas party. Everyone from the King of the Dark Realm to Royalty from far off planets was coming. Normally, the thought of spending an evening like that would have excited her, now it was slightly off putting.

Partying at the Raven had been a constant in her life since she moved out here and now she wanted desperately to get the party location moved. Too bad the invitations had already gone out.

Mandy glanced over at Michelle and watched as her friend dug her hand into her purse and searched for something. She leaned over to grab Michelle’s bag. “For the love of peters, what are you looking for? You’ve been in and out of that bag like ten times.”

Quickly, Michelle tried to snatch it bag. Mandy held it out. “Come on, what are you looking for? Please don’t tell me its condoms because I’m thinking any that are in your purse expired long ago.”

“Tell me about it,” Michelle mused as she continued to go for her purse. “Mandy, give it back.”

“No.”

“Mandy, give me the damn purse.”

Shocked by Michelle’s tone, Mandy stared at her. Gawd, she was pale and thinner than she remembered. Michelle was already skin and bones to start with. Losing even a few pounds could leave her looking like the Crypt Keeper.

“Is Dmitri taking care of you?”

Michelle’s eyes widened as she grabbed her purse. “No, as a matter of fact he’s... umm... I mean, yes. He’s taking care of me. Why?”

“You’ve lost weight. Does he feed you?”

A dreamy, far off look appeared on Michelle's face. "Yeah, he can cook all right."

Mandy snickered. "You still get turned on every time someone makes you a meal?"

"I don't get turned on when you cook for me."

"Yes, but you don't have the same tendencies I have so it's understandable. Oh, remember that time you had the crush on the pizza delivery guy?"

"At least I don't think Mike has a nice ass," Michelle shot back.

Mandy stared over at Mike and licked her lips. Quickly, she shook her head. "Ick. Umm, no... err... no I don't," she said, a little to fast.

Chapter 31

Tis' The Season To Be Dumped

Michelle leaned forward and filled her glass with more wine. She caught the worried look in Mandy's eyes and just laughed. "It's not like a few glasses of wine are going to do me in. Relax. And go fish!"

Mandy arched a black brow, grabbing a card from the pile on the floor before them. "Right, that was an acceptable," she hiccupped and giggled, "umm, excuse three bottles of wine ago. But it isn't about to fly now, honey. If you die, I'll bring you back!"

Laughing Michelle shifted herself on the floor of the Raven and found a more comfortable position. Not that there really was a comfy spot on a floor as hard and shiny as a damn bowling alley lane. "God, please don't try. I can still remember the last time you talked me into a séance. How the heck long did it take you to get rid of those ghosts?"

"Ester left as soon as I cast her out, but Martin is still around. Though he hardly shows up anymore." Mandy's bottom lip stuck out and Michelle giggled at the thought

of her friend being upset that she wasn't haunted as often. "I do miss coming home to find the house tidied up a bit. Marty really disliked dust."

"Only you would luck out enough to get a ghost as anal retentive as you about cleaning," Michelle droned. "I'd end up with Jack the Ripper."

"Ohh, that could be interesting. I'd love to find out who he really was."

"Ask Armando. He's like ancient. Maybe he'll know. Hell, could have been one of his chums. It's not like he's always been easy going." Mike's sudden outburst reminded Michelle that he was with them. He'd had so much beer that she didn't understand how he was still awake, let alone semi-coherent.

Armando, easy going? Right.

Mandy turned slightly and Michelle noticed the unshed tears in her green eyes. It had been well over a week since her friend had any communication with Armando and even Michelle knew it was over between them. Mandy, as strong as she pretended to be about it all, was heartbroken.

It was still hard for Michelle to travel around, especially since the damn doctors wouldn't let her drive anymore. At least not until her 'little episodes' stopped. She would've ignored their order, but Dmitri watched her like a hawk, or was that watched her like a lycan? She was still waiting for them to tell her how her house burned down. Actually, she was keeping the fact she knew about it to herself, watching all her friends squirm around the subject.

She chuckled to herself. Yep, she was drunk. She so needed to be drunk. Mandy gave her a strange look, but Michelle pretended not to notice as she drank more wine.

Since she couldn't drive, she wasn't available to her friend, even though Mandy had never asked her to be. Michelle wished someone was there for her. That being said, Michelle was happy that Darren had gotten stuck in the city due to the blizzard. Sure, he was a decent enough guy who seemed to be helping Mandy through some rough times but she didn't like him. The crap he'd pulled had been the catalyst to all Mandy's current problems and someone who supposedly cares for you doesn't do that.

Michelle hadn't told anyone but Mike that she still viewed Darren as pond scum. Mandy had enough baggage to deal with and didn't need to hear her ramble on about her new choice of roommates. Besides, the only other candidates to keep Mandy company were Mike and James. There was no 'lesser of two evils.' There was just Jack and Ass. Mandy didn't have a Dmitri to run around and wait on her every need.

Although, Michelle thought ruefully, if he continues to annoy me, I'll make him trade Darren for Mandy.

The fact they wouldn't survive a week together would make it worth doing. They were too much alike. They'd sterilize each other to the point their skin molted. Michelle drank more wine, hiding her laugh.

Glancing around a very empty Raven, she still found no sign of Dmitri. Mike had picked her up from his home and brought her down to the club late the night before. He wanted to help with the decorations for today's Christmas party. Only, due to the blizzard, there wasn't going to be a Christmas party. Mandy got a ride in from Darren, who had to run into the city at the last minute to close a deal, and Michelle had little desire to watch the two of them together any longer. She'd gotten kind of used to Mandy and Armando being together all the time.

Funny, but she sort of felt as though her parents were breaking up. Not that she viewed Mandy as a mother figure. But learning their relationship was over had the same impact on her. It was a cruel twist of fate that two people so meant to be together, couldn't make it work.

Mike caught her searching for Dmitri and shook his head softly. He'd already told her that Dmitri wasn't coming. It's not like she really wanted him to brave the elements just so she could pretend to ignore him. He was a great deal more observant than Michelle had ever given him credit for. In the car on the way in, he'd did his best to make small talk before giving up and heading straight to the grand daddy topic at hand—her and Dmitri. Mike had insisted that Dmitri cared for her and that he just needed some time.

Time to think of new ways to 'get off' without me.

Humiliation threatened to creep back up on her and she'd frankly had enough of it. Taking another sip of her wine, Michelle focused her mind on other things, like how no one could make it through the blizzard to attend their Christmas storm. Oddly enough, it wasn't so bad. She and Mandy had needed to spend time together and Mike wasn't being his normal dork of a self. Listening to him snore last night as they camped out on the floor of the Raven did make him seem like more of a man than a smarmy bar barracuda.

~*****~

Mandy stared at the front door, wondering if Armando would still show up. He'd refused to return any of her calls and when she'd stopped by his house her key no longer worked. That had been the moment she broke down the hardest. It was the ultimate sign of being shut out of his life. Not that she didn't deserve it. The minute Darren told her they were still married she should have went to Armando and told him all about it.

Why the hell did I think I could fix it? Why did I ever even let myself get involved with someone again? I should have learned my lesson after Darren.

Armando had made her feel as though she was worthy of love. Sadly enough, she wasn't. Her decisions were always wrong regardless how hard she tried to make them right. It didn't matter anymore. She'd taken it upon herself to write to each and every guest invited to their wedding to inform them that it had been called off. Already, she'd gotten so many calls about it that she'd taken to leaving her answering machine on. She wouldn't mind talking with everyone about it but felt Armando should be the first she discussed it with. Since he'd vanished and literally locked her out of his life that wouldn't be happening anytime soon.

Shockingly enough, Darren had been her rock for the last week. He'd not once tried anything sexual and he never said an ill word about Armando. That in itself was freaky enough to make her believe the world may be ending soon. If that wasn't enough, Mandy had been experiencing some odd things. Twice since she and Armando had their big blow up, Mandy's body had felt as though it were on fire. The heat had been so intense that she'd stripped down, believing her skin was on fire and screamed for Darren. He'd taken her directly to the shower and held her while cold water sprayed all around them.

After the heat wave had passed, Mandy could barely move on the bed without something stimulating her, making her crave sex. Darren, who had refused to leave her side, spent the majority of the night fighting off her advances. The very scent of him in the bed next to her made her mad with lust. The intense arousal didn't pass until late into the next day. She'd been at her desk when her boss, Hank, had walked in. The craving for sex dissipated immediately and she'd been so shocked by its quick withdrawal that she jumped to her feet. The strangest thing happened then—her computer monitor caught fire and her screen cracked.

Hank, afraid the company would be sued if she was injured, checked her over thoroughly. The second his fingers touched her skin, a fiery sensation surged through her and into him, leaving him lurching backwards holding his burnt fingers.

Other oddities had started as well. She'd been too caught up in thinking about Armando to sleep so she decided to watch see what was on television. Darren refused to go to bed without her so he lay on the couch, holding her in his arms. As usual, it didn't take him long to fall asleep. The moment she heard his breathing shallow, she realized she'd left the remote out of reach. Not wanting to wake him and not wanting to spend the evening watching infomercials, Mandy cursed softly and glared at the television. A fraction of a second later, the channel changed. Confused, Mandy stiffened in Darren's arms and watched as the channels continued to change. When Darren squeezed her tight it stopped. They both lay there, silent, knowing something was very *off* with her.

“Do you have any Jack-In-Irons?”

The sound of Michelle's voice brought Mandy out of deep thought. Glancing down, she did her best to focus on the cards before her. Knowing it was pointless to continue, she laid them down and rose to her feet. "I need some air."

"You aren't planning on going out in the middle of a blizzard are you?" Mike asked, concern lacing his voice.

Mandy smiled, hoping it would ease his worry. It did. "I promise not go far. Besides, I don't have a snow shovel in my purse so it's not likely I can even get too far out the front door."

Michelle looked up at her and nodded. It was amazing how well her friend knew her. If Mandy told her she needed air then Michelle accepted it. No questions asked. That's part of the reason they got along so well.

"Thanks," Mandy said.

"Take all the time you need but know that I will not kiss anything that gets frost bite." Michelle winked.

"Hey, will you kiss anything that doesn't?" The gleam in Mike's eyes made Mandy laugh and Michelle snarl.

"Try not to kill each other you two!"

~*****~

Michelle watched Mandy grab her coat and head outside. As much as she liked Armando, she really wanted to hit him over the head with something heavy. Sure, Mandy was far from perfect but her intentions were always good. And the month's Mandy and Armando had been together, Michelle had watched her friend mature before her eyes. Would she regress now? Would she begin using men and discarding them at will?

Maybe Mandy's onto to something. Maybe men aren't worth the trouble. I could do that. How hard can having casual sex be?

Glancing over at Mike, who was now sprawled out on his back staring at the ceiling, singing *A Teaspoon of Sugar*, she realized just how unequipped she was to do that. Who was she kidding? There was only one man she wanted to have sex with and he preferred his hand to her.

So much for the theory men will screw anything they can fit their willies in.

“Stop thinking about him. You’re making my head hurt,” Mike said, rolling over to stare up at her.

“I’m not...grrr...what are you a mind reading too? As if being a sarcastic lycan wasn’t keeping you busy enough.”

Tossing his hands in the air, he smiled. “Hey, don’t attack me for stating the obvious. I already told you he’s into you. Stop worrying about it.”

“Pfffttt, yeah right, let’s see how you feel after you throw yourself at a woman you love and she rejects you only to go into the bathroom to masturbate.” The minute the words left her mouth, Michelle froze.

Mike appeared to have grown springs in his ass as he leapt to his feet and jumped up and down. “Holy Shit! Dmitri really did it? Ohmygod, this is too good. He jacked off and you caught him in the act. Man, you should have taken a picture of his face. That would have been a riot at family reunions.”

“Shut-up, Mike!”

“Wait, tell me exactly what happened. I need details.”

Michelle cast him a disgusted look. “You want to know what your *male* cousin looked like while he was...”

Something passed over Mike’s face and he paled considerably. “Right. On second thought, keep the details on that to yourself. But could you elaborate a bit more on the loving Dmitri thing.”

Michelle opened her mouth to tell him she never said she loved Dmitri and shut it fast. *I said that out loud?*

In a roundabout way she had admitted it out loud. “Oh my gawd, I told you I love Dmitri!”

“Well duh!”

It was Michelle’s turn to fall back on the floor and sprawl out. What had she done? The mouth of state now knew how she felt about his cousin. Mike would have a banner up in no time flat to tell the world.

The bitter cold wind whipped past Mandy, leaving her wrapping her gray scarf around her neck. Chilled to the bone, she just stared out into the white wall of nothingness. It was symbolic of her future that she shuddered. For the first time in almost a year, she couldn't see past the moment. She'd lived by the seat of her pants so long that one would naturally assume it was like riding a bike. One would be wrong.

Where are you, Armando? You would really think that as old as you are, you'd be grown up enough to face me.

For some reason Mandy thought that by concentrating hard on Armando, he would come. Looking through a brief reprise in the excess snow fall, Mandy spotted a tall figure with long flowing black hair walking in her direction.

"Armando?" Hope surged through her as she watched the figure approach.

No, I am most certainly not Armando, a strange, deep voice boomed through her head.

"I'm not going to scream. I'm not going to scream."

Why would you feel the need to scream, Mandy?

"Okay, I might scream."

The heavy snow fall around her cleared, as if by magic. Suddenly, it looked as though she was under an invisible protective canopy. Now, with the snow cleared from her line of vision, she saw the person approaching and he was certainly not Armando.

While similar in height, build and hair, the man walking towards her seemed to almost shimmer. The closer he got the more detail she could make out. What grabbed her most were his eyes. They were royal blue. Not a color normally found in nature. It was too intense, too alluring. In fact, all of him was too alluring, from his squared face, full lips, down to his black, knee high leather boots.

Taking a step back, Mandy grew nervous about whom or what was approaching her. The only supernatural around for miles was Mike and she doubted he'd be very effective if she needed protection. Hell, Michelle with a stick of gum would be more effective than Mike. He'd put his eye out with it.

I mean you no harm.

Mandy bite back a nervous laugh. "Yeah, I've seen that movie, buddy."

~*****~

Dmitri stood silent in the shadowed office doorway too stunned to move. Had Michelle really just admitted to loving him? His heart raced. The need to go to her was great but the less he was around her, the better he was at controlling the urge to claim her as his own. The last thing she needed was wild lycan sex while she was sick. He'd made an appointment for her with the best supernatural doctor in town. Only problem was he was booked solid and it was all Dmitri could do to get in that year.

Mike continued to jump up and down like the moron he was, but on this occasion it was warranted. It seemed to be validation of what Dmitri had heard. How long had Michelle felt this way? What if it was temporary? What if one of the meds she was on caused erratic behavior? If he acted on what he'd just hear would she laugh in his face?

Where the hell was Armando? Dmitri needed someone to talk to and he was still missing in action. Talking to Mike was out of the question. The last time he'd taken Mike's advice, he'd ended up with his hand wrapped around his shaft and Michelle's pale face behind him.

Now that Mike knew about that little incident, he'd be all too willing to rub it in too.

"Are you ever going to come out?" Mike yelled at him. "You've been hiding in the corner for over an hour. I can't do anymore to help you out, buddy."

Dmitri took a hesitant forward. There was no point denying his presence now.

"Michelle, I need to talk to you," he said, coming forward. "Alone. It's important."

"Won't do no good," Mike said. "She can't hear you. You missed your chance, lover boy, 'cause she's fast asleep."

Dmitri sighed. That was the story of his life. Would the fates ever give him a helping hand in this matter? What were they trying to tell him? Closing his eyes, he thought of their relationship—not all of it, just the part where they'd been dating. He stepped to Michelle. Her eyes were closed. Drinking down the last of her wine, he handed the empty glass to Mike.

"I'm just going to put her in the office. The couch is much more comfortable," Dmitri said.

"Hey, don't make me send in a chaperone. Mandy's right outside." Mike grinned. "Or wait, would the chaperone be needed in the bathroom? I hear you like to fly solo."

Dmitri lunged, but Mike ran out of the way, dashing across the bar to join Mandy outside. Going to Michelle, he lifted her in his arms. “We ever going to get this figured out, sweetheart?”

That was it. If he had to slash a few throats, that doctor would be getting her in sooner.

Chapter 32

Stray Cats & Angry Kittens

Dmitri pressed his hands into the Optimulialus’ throat. It was a demon common to the seedier side of the underground culture. He’d had the unfortunate pleasure of meeting up with one a year ago. After the burns from its saliva healed on his arms, he swore to rip the next one he found apart. Not wanting to be too hasty, he’d held back. This one was proving to be one of the biggest pains the ass Dmitri had dealt with lately. It even beat Mike out for top spot. The promise he’d made to himself was sounding better and better.

The creature looked surprised that a lycan would dare to challenge him. But how could he not? Dmitri had spent the last two months prowling the alleys trying to find someone he could bump off the supernatural doctor’s list. The doctor could possibly be Michelle’s last line of help and Dmitri would be damned if he let a chance for her to see him slip by. Dr. Putnam was notorious for packing up and disappearing overnight. Once, he’d vanished for a century. Michelle didn’t have a century.

Dmitri didn’t care that the demon outweighed him by three hundred pounds or that if he wanted the demon could probably cast a spell over him to curse him for three lifetimes. This ugly creature had the earliest appointment time with Dr Putnam and Dmitri wanted it. Now.

The creature laughed, baring his hideous teeth. “I know who you speak of. You’re not the only one who’s been asking around for her, lycan. Others inquire about her well being.”

Dmitri stiffened. He could only assume this creature was mistaken. As far as he knew, he and Mandy were the only ones trying to find Michelle a cure and Mandy ran all her leads past him, leaving him to do the leg work.

“Don’t believe me, lycan?”

“I want that appointment and you’re going to give it to me,” Dmitri growled.

“Her name is Michelle. She is a blonde human. Ugly, lycan.”

Who you callin' ugly?

Getting a good whiff of the beast's foul stench, Dmitri curled his nose in disgust. There were times when having super senses wasn't such a blessing. “Who's been asking around about her?”

A third eye opened in the Optimulialus' forehead. The creature ignored him, taunting, “You can't touch her, can you? Something always gets in the way. I've seen that look in a lycan's eyes before. You've been holding yourself back, saving yourself for her. You're going mad, aren't you? And for her. How sweet.”

“Shut up, you know nothing about it! Now will you give me your appointment or not?”

“You should stay away from her lycan. She's not for you.” The beast laughed hard, before swinging out his arms. He thrust Dmitri back into a gate, slamming his body into the brick wall of the dank alley. “He's not going to be happy if you touch his daughter.”

Dmitri took a deep breath. He surged to his feet. “Her parents are dead. You don't know what you're talking about.”

“She's soft isn't she?” The Optimulialus laughed. “Would you trade her to me for the appointment?”

Dmitri stiffened. “You will never lay a filthy paw on her!”

“Neither will you.” The beast laughed. “Dogs and cats never did get along. A doctor can't help her. If you want her to get better then leave her alone. Never speak to her again.”

Dmitri moved to charge him. The beast reached out, tossing a dumpster at Dmitri's head. The metal container slammed into his body, sending him flying back into the wall. Dmitri moaned, weakly pushing the container off. Stumbling to his feet, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a list. It was time to pay a visit to the creature with the second appointment time. One way or another, Michelle would be getting in to that doctor today.

~*****~

Mandy stood near the office door with her eyes wide and her stomach in a knot. She'd promised Dmitri that she'd drop a few more leads off at the Raven before she had to get home and review her weekly column. She thought it would be a simple task. Armando had been missing in action for weeks and she'd resigned herself to the fact that he hated her, or at least she thought she had.

Seeing him making out with another woman nailed the lid on the coffin—pun intended. The woman was almost as tall as he was and had a head of gorgeous red hair that hung to her mid-back. Mandy knew she should leave them, give them privacy but she couldn't get her feet to move as she watched the mysterious woman unbuttoning Armando's shirt. A shirt Mandy had given him as a gift.

Unshed tears filled her eyes as Armando returned the woman's kisses with as much energy as she had. Not wanting either of them to find her standing there, Mandy turned fast and ran directly into Muir. She bounced off him hard and staggered back a tiny bit. Instantly, he reached and grabbed hold of her, keeping her upright.

"I did not mean to startle you. I thought you realized I was near," he said, his voice low and polished.

She should have known he'd be close. He was always close anymore. Since the moment he'd shown up in the middle of a snow storm he's shadowed her every move. At first Mandy was convinced that he was a stalker but when Darren explained that Muir had been sent by the high council to watch over her she'd stopped worrying about him harming her and started worrying about why in the hell she'd require protection.

Staring up into his royal blue eyes, Mandy did her best to appear fine. After seeing the man she loved with another woman it was hard to do. "I didn't... umm...."

"Mandy?"

Hearing Armando say her name chipped away madly at the thin hold she had on herself. Hot tears ran down her cheeks. She didn't turn to face Armando. She couldn't. The man had taken everything from her when he walked out of her life. She was a shell of herself. A numb, going through the motions robot that wasn't sure she'd ever be about to feel again.

Muir reached out and ran his thumb over her wet cheek. His soothing touch was the only thing that kept her from audibly sobbing. It was humiliating enough having been caught spying, for lack of a better word, on Armando and her replacement but to break down so openly would have been too much for her to deal with.

"Sweetie, are you going to introduce me to your friends?" the redhead asked, her voice a tad higher than Mandy thought it would be.

"I... errr... yes, umm...."

“My *name* is Vivien, Armando.”

“Yes, right, Vivien,” Armando murmured. “That is Muir from the council. He’s a representative of the Magik section and the other is...”

“Late for an appointment.” Muir stared down at Mandy and gave her a soft look.

“Mandy?”

As much as she wanted to turn around, she couldn’t. There was no way she could put on a happy face. Not when she still loved him with all her heart. Putting her hand on Muir’s massive chest, she patted him gently. “You’re right. I need to go.” Muir took her hand in his, shocking Mandy and headed towards the front door.

“Mandy, wait. I wish to speak with you.”

She could feel Armando moving up behind her but she refused to turn and face him. The man assumed she had sex with Darren. What he’d walked in on looked horrible and in fact was horrible. She deserved to lose him. Hell, she should have never even had him to begin with. Armando was a nice guy. The kind of guy she’d spent so long avoiding. She should have known it would end badly.

A cool hand fell upon her shoulder, sending a chilling sensation over her. Instantly, her body reacted to Armando’s touch. “Please, Mandy, I wish to speak with you.”

“Why?” she asked, still refusing to face him. “I’m fine. It’s over. You’ve moved on. I’m happy for you. Have a nice life, Armando.”

Muir tightened his grip on her hand. “Are you all set?”

“Yes.”

“Where do you have to go that is more important than speaking with me?”

That comment made Mandy turn to face him. “I have to stop by the church, Armando. Today’s the day we were supposed to be there ourselves, in case you forgot. Turns out a couple of the people you invited didn’t get the memo about our wedding being called off. They’re giving Father a hard time about leaving. I need to handle that. Then I’ve got an appointment to view a house and I don’t want to miss it. Go back to celebrating your freedom. It’s good to know that it didn’t take you long to bounce back into the game.”

Looking into Armando’s dark eyes and not crying was the hardest thing she’d ever done. There was no way she was going to give him the satisfaction of seeing her break down. She’d shed more than enough tears over him.

His eyes widened. "Today is the day we were to..."

"Wow, you didn't even remember, did you? Damn, if you should happen to have a knife on you and would like to thrust it into my gut, by all means, have at it. It may actually relieve some of the pain of guilt that I have. Not that you care if that ever goes away." Mandy didn't bother to hide her shock and outrage. He may have walked out of her life and moved on but at one point in time she believed that he truly had cared for her.

Apparently not.

"I will see to the guests at the church. Go enjoy your," he gave her a questioning look, "Did you say that you have an appointment to view a house?"

"Yes."

"I thought you were happy with your apartment and its location."

She couldn't believe he was serious. This had been one of the hardest days of her life and here Armando stood asking about why she was moving as if everything was fine between them. "I'm not happy in my place anymore. It doesn't hold good memories and it... it... umm. Never mind."

"It what?" Muir asked softly.

Because Muir asked, Mandy answered. "It gives me the creeps every time I come in and out of the downstairs entrance. I keep having the worst dreams about that area. It's insane, I know it is but that doesn't mean I feel comfortable there anymore."

Armando gasped, drawing her attention towards him. He stared at her like he was seeing her for the first time. "Are you well?"

"Am I well? What? Are you implying that I really am crazy? Oh, go with heartless bitch. That's one of my personal favorites. How about a woman who obviously likes pain?"

Muir squeezed her hand tighter. "Come, let us get on our way. Darren will be concerned if we are too late. Even if the vampire handles the other matter, you are still behind schedule."

"How is Darren doing?" Armando asked, taking Mandy by complete surprise. No amount of sarcasm was detectable in his voice.

"Listen, I don't want to make small talk with you, Armando. Go back to screwing your new girlfriend and I'll leave you be. I don't care anymore. I can't care. I've got bigger things to worry about."

“Bigger things?”

Mandy snorted. “You really did walk completely out of my life didn’t you? Hmm, let’s see. Besides finding out I’m still married to Darren, finding out that you walked out on me without so much as a goodbye, worrying day and night about Michelle, having some guy show up out of the blue telling me I require protection, skull spitting headaches that come on all the time now and dealing with some weird energy that keeps coming over me, I haven’t been up to much. And yourself?”

Armando arched a brow and stepped closer to her. “Headaches and energy?”

Feeling one coming on, Mandy slowly rolled her neck and took a calming breath. “The day after you left, I started getting them. They come out of nowhere and only stick around for about twenty minutes or so but they still hurt. And talk to Muir about the power thing. He keeps claiming its some magic. I’m thinking it’s something the cable company did to me. So far, I’m a human channel changer and able to blow up television and computer monitors with just a thought. I’d get a cape but none match my shoes.”

Armando looked at Muir. “Explain this to me.”

Outraged that Armando would dare to speak to Muir with that tone, Mandy started to say something but was cut off by Muir.

“It’s simple, vampire. When you impregnated her, you kick started the vampire in her. When you killed her and then brought her back, you kick started the portion of her that contains the magiks gifted upon her. It’s really rather simple. Then again, everything has been very simple yet the two of you made it all so very hard.”

It took Mandy a minute to register what Muir had just said. The second she did, she was unable to hide her laughter. Holding tight to his hand, Mandy leaned forward as she moved from a loud outburst to the silent laugh phase. “Ohmygod, that was good. I think I like the part about me being pregnant best. I’m fairly sure I’d know if I was by now. Don’t you think?”

A sad look passed over Muir’s handsome face. “Mandy, you are correct. You are no longer with child.”

“No longer with... that’s not possible. Armando can’t have children and I’ve not been with anyone but him since the first day I went out with him.”

Muir shook his head slightly. “Occasionally, it is possible for a vampire to reproduce. You carry the blood of one in you from long ago. It makes since that your body would accept what his offers.”

“It makes sense? Nothing makes sense! The whole lot of you are delusional. Armando tell this man that we were never pregnant and you have never hurt me like that.

I mean, sure, you tore my heart out and staked it to the wall for all to see but that doesn't constitute as killing me."

Armando spun her to face him completely and pulled her close to him. His cool energy wrapped around her a second before he pushed his power out and over her. Images of the last night she'd seen him flooded through her head. It was all from his prospective. She saw herself in the bed with Darren and how very much it looked as though they were indeed having sex. She saw herself being pinned to the wall by Armando's magic. Images Armando forcing Darren to shift passed by.

The minute the images moved to the hallway, Mandy felt her stomach drop out. She watched as Armando threw power at Darren, hitting her in the process. She'd been told that it knocked her out cold but the moment she saw her body lurch high into the air and flip over the second floor railing Mandy knew it had all been a lie.

The images continued. This time showing Armando and Darren sitting beside her unmoving body. It all kept coming. Hearing Armando tell Darren that he was unable to save his child send chills through her. The second that Darren revealed that he knew she'd been with child and that it was Armando's made her feel as though a truck had slammed into her. This couldn't be true. The two of them would never keep information this important from her. No. They would have told her. One of them would have told her.

"I am telling, or rather, showing you now, Mandy."

~*****~

Two elves, a slippery troll and a slime demon later, Dmitri had his appointment. He was sore, smelly, slimy and covered in some kind of magical dust. But, it had been worth it. All he had to do was shower and find Michelle.

When he got home the house was quiet. She'd been going to the office to work lately. It was strange, but she had never once said anything about Brian burning down her house. Mandy was babysitting her cat so Michelle had been going there a lot as well. Part of him wondered if it was just an excuse to avoid him.

Jumping in the shower, Dmitri washed off the slime. Wearing a pair of black slacks and a matching black shirt, he ran his fingers through his hair and headed out the door.

I love Dmitri.

Dmitri stiffened to think of it. She'd said those words. Michelle had actually said those words. The last two months hardly changed anything. He'd tried to get close to her, but she skirted away from his touch. If he hadn't heard the words for himself, he might have had to give her up completely.

Dmitri got into his jeep and started it up just as his cell phone rang. "Yeah?"

"Um, Dmitri?" Michelle's voice whispered, sounding shaken. "Are you terribly busy right now?"

"What is it?" His hand tightened on the wheel.

"I, um, hate to bother you, but..."

"What's wrong? Where are you?" He felt his whole body tense.

"I'm, ah, at the office. Can you get down here right away?"

~*****~

Mandy stared up at Armando with so much hurt, so much anger that she couldn't find the words she needed to express how she felt. Hell, she wasn't even sure how she felt. This wasn't news that ever in a million years she'd expect to hear or see in this case.

"Kitten, say something."

How could he dare to call her Kitten when he'd walked out and left her lying in Darren's arms only to show up with a redhead in his office. A redhead that he was most certainly going to screw.

Not once in the entire time he'd been gone had Mandy done anything more than co-exist with Darren. He'd filled a void in her life that didn't include sex. It wasn't as though she hadn't thought about it. Her body lit with so much sexually charged need that at times she thought it would burst into flames but Darren had stopped it when Mandy had been physically unable to. Between the two of them, they'd avoided what they both had wanted to do only for her to find out that Armando had been fucking other women all along.

Knowing that he cared so little about her, about causing her to lose their child that he ran off to gods knew where, with gods knew who sickened her. Mandy prayed that Armando was eavesdropping in her mind again. She wanted him to know what she couldn't seem to verbalize. He was a coward. He should have been there when she woke.

He should have told her what had happened. He should have stood by her side during the last several months. He could have stayed and just told her flat out that he didn't love her, that he never really did. But he didn't. Instead, he left another man to clean up his mess.

“Would you ever have told me the truth if Muir hadn't have brought it out in the open, Armando?”

He looked away, his dark eyes refusing to meet her gaze, refusing to face her just like he'd done for so many months.

“I see. I guess we're done here.” Mandy let out a disgusted grunt. “Sorry that we interrupted your late afternoon quickie. Carry on. It's clear you have no problem doing that. You might want to call Michelle. Maybe she'd be willing to act as your conscience, Armando, since you seemed to have lost your way somewhere along the way.”

Turning, she walked towards the exit. Mandy had thought she was numb before. That was nothing compared to the way she felt now. She'd gone from desperately wanting Armando back in her life to being ashamed for him. She wasn't without fault in the situation but when it's reached the point that people got hurt, people died and an innocent was stripped away for no reason other than jealousy the scorekeeping ended.

“Mandy, we need to talk about this. It cannot be left this way between us,” Armando pleaded.

A slight smile played across her lips as she continued on her path for the exit. “Why, Armando? You had no problem leaving this as is for so long. Hell, you were planning on leaving them status quo for the rest of my life. Thank the gods I won't live as long as you or you might have to pretend this even slightly bothers you for eternity.” “It more than slightly bothers me, kitten. It has eaten at me. It is something horrible that I must carry.”

“Pfft, that's some heavy burden. Tell me, does ramming yourself into the redhead help alleviate the load? Oh, gee what am I talking about? Of course it does.”

Muir fell into step with her, not saying a word and not having to.

Mandy thrust the door to the club open, hoping that Armando had followed too close and that the sunlight would hit him. That would be too easy of an out for him. The coward's path. Then again, he'd proven himself to be a man who seems to enjoy taking that fork in the road.

Michelle stared down from the filing cabinet, not exactly sure how she got up there. All she knew is that three very big cats were looking up at her—a black panther, a white tiger and a female lion. One minute she'd been wading through the ton of paperwork Hank had flooded her with after she refused to go out on a date with him, then the next, she was leaping through the air to get on top of her filing cabinet.

They growled, roaring violently beneath her. She watched the cats pace around her desk. It was like they were looking for something—or waiting. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she began to cry.

“They sense your fear, lass,” a low, male voice said, the accent unmistakably Scottish.

Michelle tensed. That wasn't Dmitri. She wanted Dmitri. Dmitri always protected her. He always came when she needed him. When she came to her senses, he was the first person she thought to call.

The man lounged in the doorway. At first all she could see was the top of a head. Long blond waves spilled over his shoulders. His black jacket was buttoned from neck to waist, falling open over his pants. When he looked up at her, she was struck by startling yellow-green eyes. The man was handsome and by the smile lining his mouth he knew it.

Almost weak, a name passed her lips. She didn't know where it came from. “Connor.”

“You know me,” he said, smiling. He lifted his hand up to her as if he expected her to take it.

Michelle shook her head. “No.”

His smile faded. “You remember?”

“Get them away,” Michelle demanded, looking at the cats. The beasts had settled and were lying contentedly on the floor.

Connor frowned up at her. Slipping sunglasses out of his front pocket, he put them on. His voice hard, he stated, “You get them away and do try to remember me before we meet again.”

“No,” Michelle said as he walked away, leaving her in the office. “Wait.”

The cats lifted their heads, becoming restless once more. Michelle didn't dare take her eyes off of them.

“Dmitri,” she whispered. “Where are you?”

~*****~

Dmitri ran into Michelle's office building. He felt the stirrings of supernatural magic in the air. It was eerily quiet. There had to be some kind of powerful magic over the place to make everyone in it disappear. Sniffing, he smelled cats.

"Shifters," he whispered. Running, he detected Michelle, her scent unmistakable. He ran faster.

Seeing a group of cats in Michelle's office, he growled, letting his body partially shift.

"Michelle?" Dmitri roared.

"Here! I'm here!"

A cat roared. Dmitri opened his mouth and gave a mighty growl. The animals took off, sensing his anger. He swiped at them as they darted past, but didn't give chase. It had been too long of a day to play animal control with a bunch of stinking cats.

Walking into Michelle's office, he glanced around. Michelle sat on her filing cabinet, her eyes closed tight. He felt himself relax. Lifting a hand up, he said, "Michelle, give me your hand."

Michelle instantly climbed down, falling into his arms. "I was so s000000cared. I don't know where they came from. Suddenly, everyone was just gone and I... and..." She sniffed clinging to him.

"Shh, it's all right." Dmitri patted her back as he walked her quickly away. They weren't the only ones left in the office. He felt magic stirring around them. "Let's get you out of here, all right? I'll keep you safe, I promise."

~*****~

Michelle lifted her head as Dmitri led her away. Dmitri was partially shifted into his lycan form and she found it incredibly sexy. His protective arms were around her, holding her. He pushed the button for the elevator, breathing heavily as he looked around. Michelle couldn't resist. She slid her body to the front of his, pulling her arms around his neck.

“You came for me,” she whispered, molding her body to his.

“I’ll always come for you,” he whispered back.

Glancing over her shoulder as Dmitri pulled her into the elevator, she saw Connor watching them from an office door. She shivered, Dmitri pulled her closer. Connor shook his head in warning before he disappeared.



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