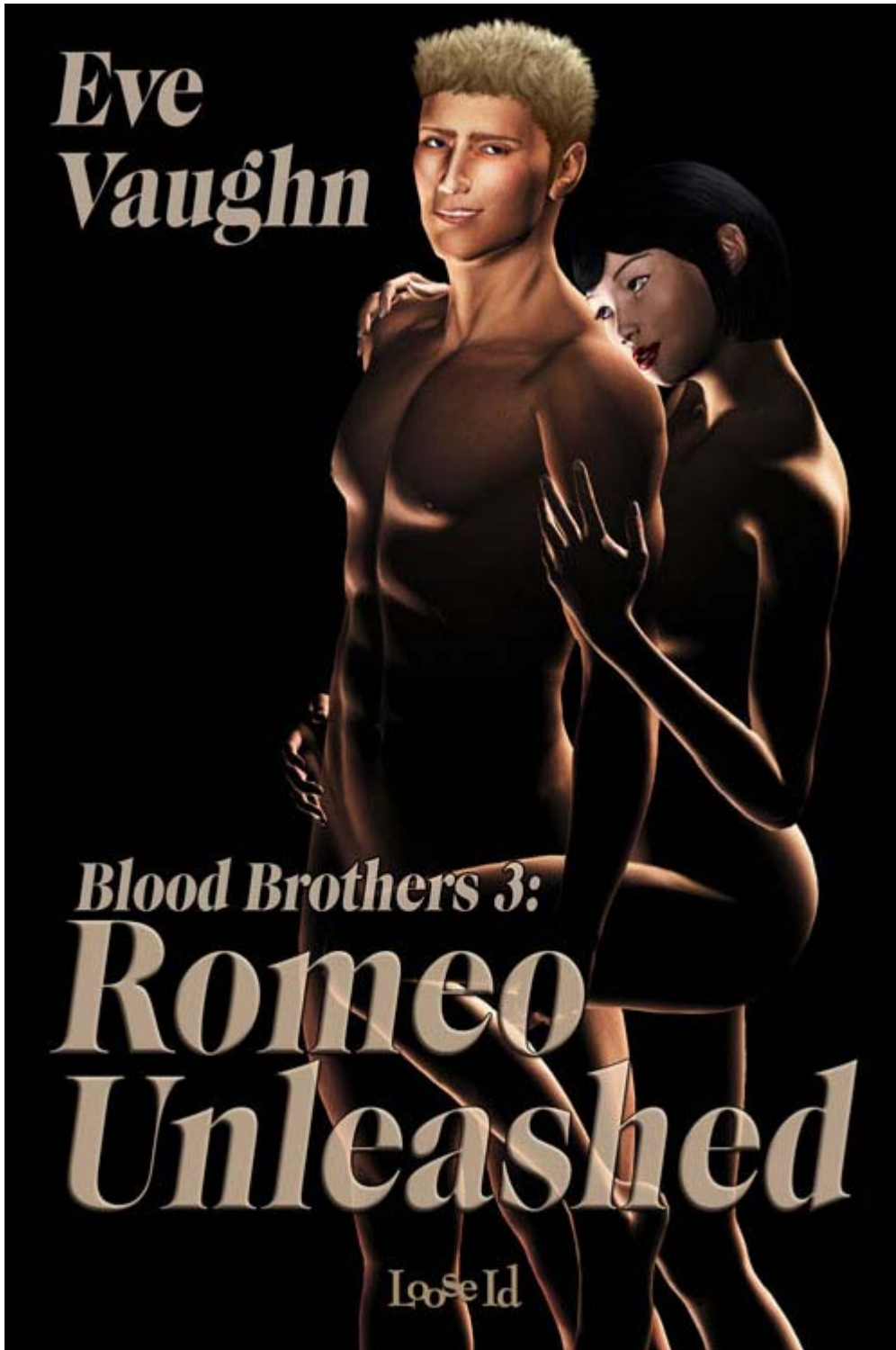


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***Blood Brothers 3:  
Romeo  
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# BLOOD BROTHERS 3: ROMEO UNLEASHED

Eve Vaughn

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# Blood Brothers 3: Romeo Unleashed

Eve Vaughn

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## Dedication

*To my freaky bunch, thanks for all the support. You guys rock!*

## Prologue

1876

“How long do you think he’ll be in this state, Marco?” Romeo turned away from his older brother, Dante, who sat in the corner of the living room with an empty expression in his cobalt eyes, to address his younger brother. A feeling of helplessness washed through Romeo, making him frustrated. He didn’t like not knowing what to do. His youngest brother, Marco, raked his finger through his long blond hair, pausing to take a moment to answer Romeo’s question.

“I really don’t know, Ro. I’ve never seen him like this, but don’t you think he’s entitled to his misery? Flora was everything to him. And it took me a long time to recover from what happened to Bianca and Gio ...”

Romeo cocked his head to the side and tried to read the expression on Marco’s face. He didn’t think his brother had ever recovered from the murder of his wife and child but knew better than to say so.

“At least we’ve been able to clean up most of the blood. Damn it!” He threw his hands up. “I hate seeing him this way. Isn’t there anything we can do? I don’t understand. If he loved her so much, then why did he kill her?” It was the one question that kept running through his mind, and it wouldn’t go away.

Marco looked at him with sharply intelligent amber eyes. In many ways, Romeo felt his younger brother was older than his years. “It’s because he loved her so much that he did it.”

“That makes absolutely no sense. *Dio*, I wish Nico were here, instead of out on a mission. Better yet, I wish I were in Spain right now with him.”

“Have a little compassion, Ro. Dante has just lost the woman he’d planned to spend eternity with. The least you can do is stop thinking about yourself for a minute,” Marco snapped.

Romeo glanced at Dante once more; his brother still sat in the corner, dark head now tucked between his knees. Romeo’s heart went out to him, but it was hard to fully sympathize when he didn’t understand what had happened and why. “Look, I need some air. I will be back in about an hour.”

“So you’re going to walk away? Just like that? Our brother needs you!”

“In case you haven’t noticed, Marco, our brother doesn’t even know we’re here. Exactly what would you have me do for him right now?”

“Fine. Go.”

“Don’t try to pull that shit on me, Marco. Just because I can’t relate, it doesn’t mean I love him less than you.”

“I’m not implying anything.”

“Then what the hell are you trying to say? I’ve been here for nearly a full day and Dante has barely twitched a muscle. When we try to move him, he won’t budge. I just want to go out for some damn air. I don’t need your guilt trips right now.”

“Let’s just hope you never feel this way about a woman.”

“I’ll never let a woman rule my heart. It’s not worth it.” Romeo pointed in Dante’s direction. “Take a good look at him. His mind is closed off to us. Excuse me for not wanting to turn into that.”

At that moment, Dante lifted his dark head, revealing red-rimmed eyes. “Go, then. I don’t need you here.”

Guilt surged through Romeo’s body. He hadn’t meant to sound so offhand about the situation when it was obvious Dante was in a great deal of pain. “Dante --”

“Go. I said I don’t need you here. I understand how much carousing means to you. Don’t let me stop you.” Dante turned his head away from Romeo as though the sight of him disturbed him.

“Please, I didn’t mean --”

“No! Nothing ever means anything to you. You didn’t like Flora anyway. Perhaps you are happy to see her gone.” Dante’s accusation would have angered Romeo if he didn’t realize how upset Dante was over his loss.

“I won’t stand here and pretend she and I were the best of friends, but you are my brother, and I care about you. I apologize if it sounded as though I don’t feel any sympathy about her death.”

Dante stood up for the first time in nearly twenty-four hours, then slowly walked over to Romeo, not stopping until they were nose to nose. “That’s your problem, *fratello mio*.”



You're nonchalant about everything. Perhaps I only have myself to blame for letting you run wild when you were younger. I only pray you'll never feel this pain I now suffer. Leave me. I don't want you near me." He turned his back on the bewildered Romeo.

His older brother had never looked at him nor spoken to him that way before, and it hurt. It hurt like hell. Romeo reached out to touch Dante's shoulder in a comforting gesture, only to have his hand shrugged off.

"Don't." Marco looked at him, a compassionate gleam in his amber eyes. "He's not ready for your apology right now. Perhaps you should take that walk now."

"I'm his brother, too. I should be here to help him through this. I shouldn't have spoken without thinking."

"It's his grief talking. I know your heart is in the right place, Ro, but there are times that you shouldn't say what's on your mind. Deep down, Dante is aware that you love him, but he's not prepared to listen to what you have to say yet."

"I never meant --"

"I know, Ro, and I overreacted earlier. It's not fair of me to expect you to understand the magnitude of his loss. Go for a walk. I'll stay with him." Marco gave him a slight smile.

Romeo glanced over at Dante's broad back, wanting to throw his arms around him and beg forgiveness, but realized Dante wasn't wouldn't welcome anything from him right now. "For whatever it's worth, I'm sorry."

Dante remained silent.

Marco grabbed Romeo's hand and squeezed it reassuringly before letting go. Romeo turned to leave, wishing he'd handled the situation better. In a few moments, he was outside of Dante's palatial Venetian townhouse.

The warm breeze hit his face as he stepped down onto the dark, narrow streets of Venice and began walking. A cacophony of noise and a multitude of smells filled the air -- the foods, the litter, and the beginning of booming industry. It wasn't the cleanest city, but its charm and ambiance made it one of his favorite places to be.

Romeo had never thought that when he came to visit his brother there would be such a mess. Dante had killed his blood mate -- wrapped his fingers around her throat and squeezed the life from her. Marco had said it was *la morte dolci*, but Romeo was still confused. He understood the mechanics of the illness, but he didn't know what would have made Dante snap the way he had. *La morte dolci* was only triggered when a vampire was denied what he most desired or needed. Had Flora denied herself to him?

Something about the situation didn't feel right, no matter what his brothers blamed it on. Perhaps one day the truth would come out, but judging from the state Dante was in, Romeo knew it was better at present for him to drop the subject.

Romeo could admit to himself that while he personally had nothing against Flora, she was just a little too clingy for his taste. He also secretly thought that had Dante and Marco

not let their cocks rule their heads, neither one of them would have needed to suffer. Women caused more problems than they were worth. The only purpose they served best were for sucking, fucking, then leaving -- not for giving your heart to. That's why no woman would ever touch his heart.

Never.

## Chapter One

Romeo took another sip of his beer. He grimaced as the cool golden liquid slid down his throat, then pushed the nearly full bottle away from him. He'd had better -- much better.

"Americans know nothing about beer." Wolf chuckled as though he'd sensed his friend's disgust before he took a swig from his own bottle. "Bah! What is this *Sheisse*?" He slammed the bottle back down on the bar.

"You got a problem?" The large bartender walked over to them, dark eyes squinting meanly. Romeo could tell they'd offended him because the beer in question was this particular tavern's special brew. Well, it certainly wasn't his and Wolf's fault that the beer tasted funny.

He gave the burly bartender an assessing look. The man standing on the other side of the counter had to be at least six-foot-seven and three hundred pounds -- most of which was fat. Romeo could tell this man was probably used to intimidating people by his gigantic size alone. He wondered if the bartender would stare him and Wolf down so hard if he knew they were vampires, both over five hundred years old and both able to break him into two in mere seconds.

Romeo hadn't had a good fight that wasn't mission related in over two months, and this man didn't look like he'd be much of a challenge. Pity. He had come to this roadside bar just outside of Boston because it had seemed like the kind of place he could see a little action, but it didn't mean he couldn't bait the bartender a little.

"Yes, I have a problem. This is supposed to be your best brew, but it tastes like goat's piss." Romeo could hear Wolf trying to muffle a laugh.

"If you don't like it, that's too damned bad. You aren't getting your money back." The bartender didn't look amused. "Who the hell do you two homos think you are to criticize? You wouldn't know good beer if it rained on you." The large man leaned forward until his

face was nearly pressed against Romeo's. His breath reeked of stale beer and onions. He obviously thought Romeo would back down.

"I know enough to realize when something sucks. Now, how about getting out of my face? You really should practice better oral hygiene if you plan on getting so close to people." Romeo gave the bartender a big smile, knowing he was seriously riling the man. "As for us being homos ... is that the best insult you could come up with? Did you sit up last night thinking of witty things to say to people?" The big man looked astonished and angry that anyone would talk to him like that.

"Look, pretty boy. You and your lover have ten seconds to get the hell out of this bar before I knock your teeth down your throat. You got it?" The bartender's breath seemed to get hotter with each passing second.

"Are these punks giving you trouble, Reg?" A tall, bald man, dressed completely in black leather stepped forward. From what Romeo could tell, the newcomer worked out, possibly too much. His bulky and muscular frame was so large that he was practically swaggering when he walked.

"Yes, Reg, is there a problem?" Romeo mimicked, feeling the anticipation of the coming confrontation.

The bouncer's nostril flared like an angry bull's. He looked as though he'd pop a blood vessel at any moment. "So you're a wiseass, huh? You're outta here!" He jerked his thumb, motioning toward the door.

"I thought America was a free country. Are we not allowed to express our opinions here? All we did was state how crappy the beer is. Is that a crime? Isn't this the state where the American Revolution really began? That was a fun war, wasn't it, Wolf?"

"Can't say I was there. A lot was going on in Germany at the time." Wolf covered his mouth, looking like he was ready to burst into laughter.

"Get rid of these two jokers before I kill them, Jaz." Reg glared at them.

Jaz grabbed Romeo's collar in one hand and Wolf's in the other. The two vampires grinned at each other, not budging an inch as the bouncer tried to lift them.

"Did you feel something, Wolf?" Romeo winked at his companion.

"No. Wait a minute. Maybe I did. Nope. I think it was just the wind." Wolf choked on a laugh.

Jaz clearly didn't have a sense of humor. Romeo turned around just in time to see a fist fly his way. He reached up easily, catching Jaz's palm in his hand. The bouncer tried to pull away, but to no avail. "Let go, damn it!"

But Romeo felt like teaching him a lesson; after all, Jaz had swung at him first. The bouncer threw his free fist toward Romeo's face, which the vampire caught in his other hand. "Don't make this harder on yourself, Jaz. As much as I enjoy a good bar brawl, I'll give you fair warning. Leave me and my friend alone and I won't knock you across the room."

Jaz's eyes widened as he struggled to free himself from Romeo's tight grip. "Let me go, motherfucker." Jaz lunged forward and head-butted Romeo.

Romeo didn't flinch as their heads connected. Instead, to Jaz's apparent surprise, he laughed and tightened his hold on the bouncer's fists, squeezing until he felt the crunching of bones.

"Augh! You son of a bitch!" Jaz screamed, his face turning bright red.

Romeo felt a blunt object strike his head before it shattered to pieces. He let go of the bouncer, who immediately fell to the floor. In a swift movement that he was sure surprised the bartender, Romeo turned around, grabbed Reg by his shirt and hauled him bodily across the bar counter to dangle in front of him. "I warned you, didn't I, but you had to do things the hard way, didn't you?" He was close enough to the shaking man that he could count his nose hairs.

"Look, buddy, we don't want any trouble. You're going to have to leave before someone calls the cops." Fear glistened in Reg's pale gray eyes.

This was certainly a change of tune from the arrogant barkeeper. Romeo was disappointed.

"I think we have trouble, my friend." Wolf pointed to a few burly patrons, and Romeo turned his head away from Reg's.

By now, the bar had gone silent. The jukebox music no longer played and patrons began to gather around them. There was another tall man; he had so much matted dark hair covering him from head to toe that he looked like the missing link. He held a pool cue in his fist while two other thick-necked, long-haired goons held their fists up in a fighting stance.

They looked like they meant business. Romeo threw his head back, laughing with delight. This was what he'd been waiting for all night. He turned to look at Wolf. "How quaint. Our first bar fight in nearly a month."

Wolf projected his thoughts to Romeo. *Uh uh, Romeo. These guys are mine. Remember, you took out that entire bar in San Antonio while I was in the john.*

*No way. This is the first good fight in a while that doesn't have anything to do with Underground work. His eyes locked with his friend's pale blue ones. Let me have this round and I swear the next set of rednecks is yours.*

Wolf released a mental sigh. *You're lucky I'm more in the mood for pussy tonight than fighting. Go ahead. You deserve it.*

*Thank you, Wolf. I owe you big time.*

*You're damn right you do.*

It was true, he felt like he did deserve it. He was taking a sabbatical from his current mission. His last assignment had taken a lot out of him, and for the first time in his long life, he felt like something was missing, but he didn't know what. He had everything a man could want. He traveled the world, had enough money in the bank to work only when he wanted

to, a best friend who enjoyed hell-raising as much as he did, and plenty of pussy wherever he went.

The past two months had been irritating at best. Generally, he enjoyed his work as an agent in the Underground, his brother Dante's organization, whose purpose was to take out rogue vampires and other out-of-control immortals.

Dante was especially passionate about the cause because rogues had killed their parents. Though they'd both been dead for over six hundred years, and Romeo was very young when it had happened, Romeo could still remember their images clearly. He had memories of his tall, dark-haired papa and his beautiful, blonde and petite mama.

Although there were many agents in the Underground all over the world, Romeo knew he and his other two brothers, Niccolo and GianMarco, were Dante's most trusted agents. But circumstances had changed the brothers' dynamics and priorities.

Marco had remarried and his new wife was expecting their first child in a few months. Niccolo, the brother closest to his heart, was now reunited with his child and the mother of his son, and the three of them had become a strong family unit. That kind of life wasn't for him, but in a way, he envied them all their closeness. Nico and Marco were so disgustingly happy he felt left out.

Romeo would never admit any of that to anyone, of course.

He shook off his morose thoughts. Dante normally wanted him to exercise a little restraint, but this time things were different. Someone was threatening their family, so it was personal. The killing rampage of the past several weeks should have pleased Romeo, but it didn't.

He gripped the bartender even more tightly. "I'm going to go easy on you tonight because I'm in a good mood."

"Go to hell!" Reg glared at him, a malevolent look on his bloated face.

"Hmm, it will probably be a long time before I see hell."

"Isn't it a little cruel of you to toy with him?" Wolf's tone was amused.

"You know I'm never cruel." Romeo pushed Reg away so forcefully that the other man stumbled halfway across the tavern before crashing into a table."

The big, hairy man with the pool cue finally stepped forward. "You've been asking for it, buddy. Now, you're going to get the ass-kicking of your life."

"Bring it on, bubba." Romeo beckoned him forward.

This only seemed to make the man angrier. His face turned bright red before he lunged at Romeo with the pool stick. Following suit, his companions rushed Wolf, who easily sidestepped them. From the corner of his eyes, Romeo saw Wolf flash to the other side of the bar, much to the amazement of the would-be attackers. That was one good thing about fighting with Wolf; the German vampire more than knew how to handle himself.

Romeo grabbed his adversary's pool stick in one hand and punched him in the face with the other. He felt bones crack beneath his fist. "Bubba" screamed with apparent agony as blood gushed from his broken nose. Romeo knew the man probably had him by a good one hundred pounds, but he was still able to lift him without breaking a sweat. He threw the screaming man along the length of the bar.

The two goons who'd tried to attack Wolf hesitated. "Come on, boys. You know you want to get some."

When they still didn't move, he rushed over to them, grabbed them both by the hair, and knocked their heads together. They crumpled to the ground. The small crowd that had gathered in the room looked on with stunned expressions.

"He just took out Big Mike and the boys," someone muttered in obvious disbelief.

"Does anyone else want to go the way of Big Mike and his boys?" Romeo challenged, scanning the room. No one so much as moved a muscle. "Good."

Romeo walked over to Reg, who was still huddled on the floor in apparent pain. Romeo dug into his pocket and pulled out a wad of hundred dollar bills. "Hopefully this will cover any damage and medical expenses."

"You psycho!" Someone yelled from the crowd. He didn't bother to see who the voice belonged to. He'd been called worse.

"Let's go, Wolf." Romeo glanced at his companion before walking out the bar, leaving behind the costumers who appeared as though they were trying to come to terms with what had just happened.

"What's wrong? You seem a little distracted tonight."

Romeo raised his left brow. "What do you mean?"

"You usually string the fight out a little longer. You know, have fun with it. Tonight, you just didn't seem totally into it."

"This mission is starting to get to me."

Surprise registered in Wolf's pale blue eyes, and a frown appeared on his face. "Is that so?"

"Yes."

"I've never heard you complain about an assignment before."

"I'm not complaining. I just said it's getting to me -- two totally different things."

"Then tell me how it's getting to you, as you put it. Granted, we've never had to do anything on such a grand scale before, but it's what we do."

"I suppose I'm concerned about my brothers. Nico and Marco can take care of themselves but they have new families to protect. I've grown quite fond of Maggie, Sasha and Jagger."

"Perhaps you're thinking of settling down, too? It was bound to happen."

“Hell, no. How many times must I tell you and everyone else that I’m not the family guy type?”

“Have you ever read Hamlet?”

“I seem to recall it. What does that have to do with anything?”

“Remember the famous line said by Hamlet’s mother? I think you’re protesting too much.”

“I ought to knock you on your ass,” Romeo growled, turning to a chuckling Wolf, who didn’t look the least bit concerned. Probably because he knew Romeo would never raise a hand to him, his friend of over two hundred years. Wolf had been attacked by six rogues when Romeo had stumbled upon them and helped him. The two had killed a rogue each by the end of the fight. It was Romeo who’d suggested Wolf join the Underground.

Romeo had found that he had a lot in common with the German-born vampire Wolfgang Wagner, including the fact that his friend enjoyed rabble-rousing as much as he did. When Romeo wasn’t on an Underground mission with one of his brothers, Wolf was the one he chose as his partner.

Some people even said they looked alike because of their similar coloring, blond hair and blue eyes, but where Romeo wore his hair short and spiky, Wolf’s hair hung down his back when worn loose. Romeo also knew that his blue eyes were much darker, sometimes so much so that they appeared black at times. Wolf’s were a pale but vibrant blue that reminded one of a cloudless sky. In addition, they both stood well over six feet, although Wolf was a couple of inches shorter at six-foot-four.

And yet, his friend could be an enigma whom Romeo sometimes had a hard time figuring out. He knew Wolf was vampire-born like himself and a little over five hundred years old. Wolf never talked about his family, and Romeo wasn’t sure he had one. It was generally believed that Wolf never mentioned his family because there had either been a huge falling out or they were dead.

“Well, what am I supposed to think when Marco and Nico’s new mates are all you can talk about lately? You keep saying how much you don’t understand why they’d want to give up their freedom and how you’ll never give up yours.”

“I won’t. Damn, Nico used to be a lot like me with the hell-raising, and Marco used to get more pussy than the two of us combined. Now Nico is all ‘Sasha this’ and ‘Jagger that.’ Marco spends his time holding his wife’s hair while she prays to the porcelain gods, and when he’s not rubbing her feet, he’s kissing them.”

“You sound like you resent your brothers’ happiness.”

“No way.”

“Hmm.”

Romeo’s eyes narrowed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”



“It doesn’t mean anything. I think maybe you miss how things used to be. Your brothers mean a lot to you. I doubt they love you any less because they have new families.”

What the hell did Wolf know? He was not jealous. Romeo didn’t care that his brothers preferred the staid, boring family life to adventure and freedom. “Let’s drop the subject, okay?”

Wolf gave him a long, assessing look, his pale blue eyes searching Romeo’s face. “Sure. Perhaps I know just what we should do to get your mind off things.”

“What?”

“Let’s go get some pussy.”

Romeo grinned. “Now that’s a plan.”

## Chapter Two

“Christine, I wish you’d be more serious about this.” Barbara Summers looked at her friend with frustration.

“Barb, if I’m not worried about it, then you shouldn’t be, either.”

“But it’s just not fair. You do so much good for so many people, yet you don’t care about yourself.”

“Well it’s not like I have very --”

“Don’t say it. Don’t you dare say it! I don’t think I can stand it. How can you be so nonchalant about it?” Barbara burst into tears.

Christine stood up, walked over to the sobbing woman and gave her a comforting hug. “Shh. Don’t cry. That’s the one thing I ask of you. No tears. It’s okay. These things happen for a reason.”

“What possible reason could there be for this to happen? I ... I don’t think it’s right!” Barbara wailed even louder.

“Bemoaning the issue is not going to change things, Barb. Let’s not talk about it anymore if it makes you feel bad.”

“You see. There you go again, thinking about someone other than yourself.”

Christine reached for her purse and dug out a packet of Kleenex. “Here you go, sweetie. Now dry your eyes and go cut me a slice of that yummy chocolate cake you baked. You see, I do think about myself.” She smiled at the older woman, hoping her level tone would reassure and calm her.

“You’re such a good girl, Christine. Not like that strumpet Rick is married to now. Even though they live a half hour away, Tracy never comes to visit me except for holidays. She never lifts a finger to help when she’s over here, and she actually made Rick hire a nanny to

look after the kids. I've never heard of such a thing, especially since she's not working. Now you tell me, what kind of mother wouldn't want to spend time with her own children?"

"To be honest, I can understand that she may be overwhelmed with two small children under the age of three."

"You're way too generous. I managed to raise four boys single-handedly when my Herb passed away, God rest his soul. And I did it working a full-time job. She's barely twenty-five, and you mean to tell me she doesn't have the energy? Humph. I bet she has plenty of energy when it's time for her to go shopping. She's going to bankrupt him, you mark my words. He's going to rue the day when he walked out on you."

"There's no point in bringing up the should-have, could-have, would-haves. Rick's happily married now with the family he's always wanted, and I'm content with what I've made of my life. You should give Tracy a chance."

"Ha! She and I have nothing in common. She's nothing but a man-stealing tramp!" Barbara sniffed.

Christine sighed. She didn't know if Barbara would ever make the effort with her daughter-in-law, Tracy, but one thing she knew with certainty: they would never be close if one of them didn't at least make an effort to get along. Christine had been devastated by the *way* her marriage ended rather than that it *had* ended, but she knew she was better off without shallow, self-centered Rick Summers in her life.

She and Rick had met in college while she was majoring in social work and he in accounting. Christine had fallen madly in love with the tall, blond, hunky Rick. She'd always had a thing for blonds and Rick was definitely an attractive man. She was so enraptured with him that when they'd both graduated from college, instead of pursuing her own career in social work, Christine had devoted herself to him.

Rick had spoken of starting a family right away and that had suited Christine just fine. She'd always wanted children, but after three years of marriage and no children, they were both concerned. The tests she and Rick had undergone had showed that they were both healthy and there was no reason why they shouldn't be able to have children, but wanting a second opinion, Christine went to another doctor.

When Christine was sixteen, doctors had discovered cysts on one of her ovaries, and it had had to be removed. They'd assured her that she would still be able to conceive. Now, however, another cyst had appeared on her remaining ovary, which also had to be removed. It had ended all chances of her having children of her own.

She must have cried for two weeks straight. It had cut her deeply to know she would never enjoy the miracle of natural childbirth, never feel the life of another human being developing within her, never feel a child suckle her as she provided nourishment. Sometimes, she would lay awake at night cursing God for the unfairness, but after a while, she'd realized that crying wouldn't change things.

In the beginning, Rick had made all the proper gestures by saying he still wanted her and that they could always adopt, but within a year, he'd changed his tune. They'd begun to drift apart and he was spending many nights at the office. While she had expected him to work long hours at his accounting firm during the tax season, Rick had continued to work several hours of overtime during off peak seasons. Christine had suspected he was cheating.

Two months after their fifth wedding anniversary, Rick took her out to dinner, something he rarely did. When he didn't quibble over the prices, even when she ordered the steak and lobster, she knew something was wrong.

"Chrissie," Rick had begun over his huge porterhouse steak. He always called her Chrissie when he was trying to cajole her into something.

"What is it? Be straight with me, because I know something is up."

He looked slightly offended. "What do you mean?"

"Why else would you bring me here? You didn't even bat an eye when I ordered the most expensive thing on the menu. So tell me."

Rick looked hesitant at first, but then came straight to the point. "Our marriage isn't working."

Christine had been expecting this conversation for a while now, but she hadn't thought it would hurt so much. "I see. Is it another woman?"

"Well, surely you realize we've drifted apart. You're a great woman, but you have to understand ... a man wants to carry on his legacy. I can't be with a half--" He broke off, looking embarrassed.

"With a half-woman? Because I can't bear children?"

"Well, you knew when we married that I wanted children." He sounded defensive, seeming pissed that he had to explain himself to her. If he thought she would let him off the hook so easily, he had another trick coming to him.

"You also told me I was more important than having kids, or was that a lie? I didn't know you married me solely to be your baby-making factory. What happened to adopting?"

Rick sighed. "Please lower your voice. People are starting to stare."

"So what? Let them."

"Let's be reasonable about this, Chrissie."

"Don't call me Chrissie. I hate that name."

"Fine, Christine, be reasonable. It isn't fair of you to expect me to raise children who aren't mine. What if we ended up with a crack baby, or a child who got sick and we had no way of knowing the birth parents' medical history? Who knows what kind of homes these children may have come from?"

"You seem to have forgotten. I was adopted, too."

"That's different."

“How is it different? I might not have been abandoned in some orphanage and I know who my birth parents were, but that doesn’t make me any less adopted. Do you think something is wrong with me, too? Am I also an undesirable?”

“You’re being too sensitive.”

“Well, how am I supposed to act when you tell me you’re going to end our marriage because I can’t give birth to your children?”

“People are staring,” he said in a hushed voice.

“Do you think I give a shit?” She stood up, throwing her napkin down on the table.

“You’re making a scene, Christine. Sit down!”

“For what? To hear you list more of my shortcomings? You haven’t seen a scene yet, buddy.” She climbed onto her chair and stepped on the table.

“Ladies and gentlemen, could I have your attention, please?”

“Christine, stop this right now!” Rick was livid, his eyes avoiding the curious onlookers.

She ignored him. If he thought bringing her to a public place to drop this bombshell on her would prevent her from making a scene, he was about to learn exactly how wrong he was.

“Ladies, and gentlemen,” she began again. By now, she had every single eye in the restaurant focused on her. The manager rushed over to their table with a look of utter astonishment on his face. Christine shot him a glare, daring him to stop her. He backed off. “My darling husband, Rick Summers, has just informed me he wants to end our marriage because I’m more barren than the Sahara Desert. He can’t be married to someone who can’t bear his seed.”

“Christine, you’re making an ass of yourself.” Rick stood up.

“I can’t be a bigger ass than you are. Everyone, listen up. Mr. Summers thinks he’s God’s gift to women, but let me tell you about the man behind the myth. He farts in his sleep, and every morning he looks in the mirror to tell himself how great a guy he is. He also makes me call him ‘The Rick’ during sex.”

The crowd began to snicker, much to Rick’s obvious embarrassment.

“You can take a cab home, Christine. You’re acting childish.”

“Why, because I’m not the docile little geisha girl you thought you’d married?” That was another thing she couldn’t stand. He called her his little geisha girl, but she wasn’t even Japanese. “News flash, asshole. I’m not your fucking doormat, so you can shove your over-inflated ego up your ass. That’s right, everyone. On our wedding night, he told me I was lucky to have a stud like him for my husband. His words exactly.” She looked down at the stricken Rick in the eyes. “Well, I wish you luck. The unfortunate woman you pick to sow your demon seed is welcome to you.” Christine hopped down from the table in one swift movement and grabbed a bowl of soup.

“Don’t you dare!”

“Oh, I dare a lot.” She threw the soup all over his Versace suit.

“You go, girl!” a woman called out from one of the tables.

To both their surprises, the restaurant erupted in applause.

Rick had packed his bags that night and left. The next time she’d heard from him was through his lawyer. When the divorce went through, she got the house, the Mercedes and nice lump sum in alimony.

Christine had sold the large, four-bedroom Tudor style home and the Mercedes and bought something much more modest just outside Boston. She’d used the extra money to pursue her masters in social work.

Rick ending their marriage was probably one of the best things that had happened to her. She’d realized that she had stopped loving Rick a long time ago. They’d just been going through the motions, but the reason he’d ended things still stung. She’d deeply regretted not being able to have children of her own, but adoption was still something she had looked into.

The prospect of dating again hadn’t frightened her as it did other new divorcees. The thought of meeting new people and making connections had excited her. She knew she could probably begin another relationship if she wanted to. She took pride in her appearance and heritage without conceit. She never did understand why so many women of Asian descent opted to westernize their features with plastic surgery when all women were beautiful in their own unique way.

Her mirror reflected an attractive Chinese woman with short, silky black hair worn in a chin-length bob, almond-shaped eyes the color of fine sherry, a clear complexion, and a generous mouth. She stood five-foot-six and was slender and well toned with modest curves. She made sure she visited the gym at least three times a week to maintain a healthy and fit body.

Christine also had a flair for fashion. Even when she wore a pair of sweatpants and baggy shirt, she made it look like a million bucks. She wasn’t the classic beautiful, blue-eyed blonde, but, damn it, she was sexy and didn’t care what *Cosmo* said.

Rick had moved on with his life and seemed happy with his new and younger trophy wife. Christine had heard he’d plucked her straight out of college. She didn’t begrudge Rick his newfound happiness because he was now a closed door in her life. She still kept in contact with her former mother-in-law and friend, Barbara, because she lived alone and Christine worried about the older woman, who didn’t get many visitors. With two sons overseas in the Navy, one on the West coast and one too busy with his family, Barbara was a very lonely woman.

Christine was satisfied with her life. She had a fulfilling job, did volunteer work on the side, taught self-defense classes to women, and had plenty of friends. Her dream of adoption, however, was one she’d had to let go.

Barbara placed a generous slice of chocolate cake in front of her.

“Thank you. Your cakes are to die for. Whenever I try your recipes they never come out quite right for me.” Christine pouted.

“You have to be very precise with the ingredients, dear.”

“I am. I guess I’ll never be a master chef, but I’m content as long as you keep baking like this.”

“Anything for you, my dear. Christine,” Barbara said, a serious note in her voice as she took a seat next to Christine. “We’re no longer related, but you mean a lot to me. I just wanted you to know that before --”

“Please don’t say it. You don’t need the upset.”

“But I have to.”

“No, you don’t. I know how you feel about me. Besides, this was meant to be.”

“Why you and not Tracy?”

“Stop that! You and I both know you don’t mean it. She’s the mother of your grandchildren. At least for their sakes, please try to meet her halfway. Even if you two are never close, you can at least say you tried.”

Barbara poked out her lip mutinously, before sighing. “You’re right, of course, but that woman burns me up.”

Christine knew better than to push the issue. She changed the subject and they began to talk about other things. It was late when Christine finally left. Her drive home was uneventful. However, as she walked to her condo, she had the strangest sensation of being watched.

From her self-defense training, she knew that she should be always aware of her surroundings and she cursed herself for letting her guard down. She gripped her keys and hurriedly walked toward her front door. Just a few more feet and she’d be there. Her hands shook as she placed her key in the lock.

“Christine, you still tremble when I’m near. You know you have nothing to fear when I’m around.”

Nya.

Christine turned around and glared at her friend. Even though they’d known each other for nearly four years, the sight of her tall, willowy, dark-skinned friend always took her breath away. As always, Nya wore all black. Tonight, she wore a tight pair of leather pants and a half T-shirt that showed off her tight abdominal muscles.

Standing six feet tall, Nya was truly one of the most beautiful women Christine had ever seen. She had the ethereal and proud beauty, as well as the royal bearing, of an African queen. Her skin was like midnight, and her hair hung past her bottom in neat little corn-rowed columns that accentuated her stunning features. Deep brown eyes the color of warm

earth slanted slightly upwards, and high cheekbones and large, lush lips completed the picture of exotic perfection. She could have graced runways or magazine covers if she desired.

Christine felt safe whenever Nya was around. After all, who better to be friends with if not a two-hundred-year-old vampire. She could hardly believe she was friends with one of the night creatures, let alone that vampires even existed.

They'd met one night when Christine was coming home from volunteering at the orphanage. Two men had attacked and dragged her to the back of an alley. To this day she still didn't know if their intentions had been to rape, rob, kill her, or all three. Just as she'd screamed for help, Nya had appeared. Fear had immobilized Christine as the tall black woman had bared her fangs and ripped the men apart with her bare hands.

Nya had then taken her home and seen to it that Christine was okay. The vampire had stayed until the morning hours before disappearing. From then on, Nya showed up whenever she pleased, which wasn't very often, but the two women had managed to forge a lasting bond with each other. Nya had encouraged her to take a self-defense class. Because of the attack and because she'd enjoyed the classes so much, Christine had decided to teach other women to protect themselves.

Aside from Barbara, Nya was the only other person Christine felt she could confide in. The strange thing about their relationship was that while Nya knew everything about her, Christine knew next to nothing about Nya. Judging from her accent, however, she came from the South, with a little hint of someplace else. Christine threw her arms around her friend.

Nya returned her embrace, a slight smile on her full lips. "Are you turning in for the night? I rather fancied going out."

"Well, I do have to work tomorrow."

Nya shrugged. "It's okay. I don't mind going alone, but I had hoped you'd come with me."

"Wait. Let me go change. I haven't seen you in a few months. As long as we're not out too late, I can hang with you for a little while."

"Are you sure that you'll be up for it?"

"Of course."

"Good. How have you been doing? Any more headaches? I trust are taking care of yourself like you're supposed to."

"I'm doing as well as can be under the circumstances, and, no, I haven't had a headache in a few weeks."

Nya gave her a long, questioning look. "I worry about you."

"There's no need."

"All you have to do is say the word and I can fix things for you, Christine."



“No. I’d rather not.”

“I think you’re very brave.”

“Ha! I don’t feel very brave. I wish there was some way I could make provisions for Jamal and Adrian.”

“You know I will make sure they’re okay.”

“But it’s not the same.” Christine’s eyes welled with tears as she thought of the brother and sister pair she’d grown attached to at the group home.

Nya gifted Christine with one of her rare smiles. “I think I know just the place to take your mind off things.”

## Chapter Three

“Slim pickings tonight,” Romeo muttered to Wolf as he surveyed the busy nightclub. For a Tuesday night, it was busier than most establishments of its kind, but then this was one of the area’s most exclusive scenes, so it never lacked for patrons.

The steady beat of house music blared throughout the club, guiding the swaying bodies on the dance floor. Romeo preferred the rowdiness of a roadside bar, but this was a better place for finding women who didn’t mind no-strings-attached affairs. There were willing women at the bars, but most of them were a little too rough around the edges for his taste.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that. I’ve seen a few who’d make excellent bed partners.” Wolf pointed toward the bar at a group of scantily clad women who were laughing and dancing with each other.

A petite blonde smiled at him. Romeo smiled back, letting his gaze roam over her curvaceous body. She ran a slick tongue over glossy red lips. If that wasn’t a fuck-me signal, he didn’t know what was. Though he could feel a familiar stirring in his pants, he couldn’t imagine spending the night with her. He turned back to his friend. “I think I’ll pass.”

“Are you crazy? She’s gorgeous and she’s been sending you signals since we walked into this place.”

“If you’re so into her, then you take her.”

Wolf shot him a look of surprise. “You’re joking, right?”

“I never joke about pussy.”

“Well, I think I just may take you up on your offer, I --” Wolf stopped, looking toward the front entrance. “Never mind. I think I have the taste for something a little more exotic tonight.”

Romeo turned to see who had caught Wolf’s attention and spied two women entering the club, one tall and one of average height. He looked first at the taller of the two, and the

instant recognition of one of his kind hit him. A vampire, and female at that. It wasn't uncommon for immortals to frequent this establishment, considering this was owned by his brother, Niccolo.

The fem was tall, at least six feet, and had to be one of the most beautiful women, vamp or mortal, that he'd ever seen, with skin like a starless sky at night, full and luscious lips that begged for a lover's kiss, and large round eyes the color of rich milk chocolate. Her corn-rowed hair slid past her shoulders, emphasizing her wonderful bone structure and face. She also had the slender, reed-like slimness of a supermodel and carried herself like royalty.

"I think I may have found my companion for the night."

Wolf shook his head. "I hope you don't have your eye on the black one, because she's the one I want."

"No way, Wolf. Take the other one. She's pretty enough."

"Fuck you. Remember back in the bar when I let you deal with Big Mike and his cronies? You owe me."

"Aww, shit, man. You're not calling in the favor now, are you?"

"Like hell I'm not." The feral gleam in Wolf's eyes told Romeo that he wouldn't back down.

Romeo stole one last glance at the dark beauty. "I hope her pussy doesn't get wet," he muttered.

Wolf chuckled. "Sour grapes? And please don't worry about her pussy. I'll make sure it stays nice and damp with nature's lubrication." He stuck out his tongue to demonstrate.

"Keep rubbing it in and I'll crack your skull," Romeo threatened, although they both knew he wouldn't follow through.

"Chin up. Her friend seems pretty enough," Wolf said, mocking his earlier words.

Romeo rolled his eyes, doubting that statement very much until he took a good look at the female vampire's companion. A human. He was sure of it, but there was something different about her. On first glance, she was certainly attractive, but next to the Amazon, she was rather unremarkable. On closer inspection, however, she had a subtle beauty that hit you when you least expected it. Of average height, she had a slender body with gentle curves that he wouldn't mind sampling.

The exotic slant of her eyes gave away her Asian ancestry. If he were guessing, he'd say she was Chinese. She had the face of a serene angel, crowned with a glorious cap of chin-length black hair. Romeo's eyes drifted over the full contours of her scarlet lips and wondered what they would taste like.

His cock twitched as he imagined her dark hair a startling contrast against his white sheets. He also wondered what it would feel like to run his fingers over her honey-tinted skin. Romeo moistened his lips. Maybe Wolf really was doing him a favor and didn't realize it. "Yes. She will do."

Wolf wasn't paying attention because he was already walking over to the two women. Romeo caught up with him just as his friend reached them. His prey was even prettier up close. Her dark eyes darted between him and Wolf. He smiled knowingly, reading her look of appreciation.

"Good evening, ladies. Would you care to join us in the VIP lounge for a couple of drinks?" Wolf got in before Romeo could speak.

"That would be nice. What do you think, Nya?" the smaller woman asked.

Nya looked at him and then at Wolf, a faint look of contempt in her brown eyes. What the hell was her problem? Rome got a strange vibe from her, but couldn't pinpoint it. He looked at Nya's friend again and wondered if she realized what Nya was. She seemed totally at ease with the female vampire, so perhaps she didn't.

"Yes, Nya, what do you think?" Wolf asked, obviously not picking up on the same feeling as Romeo. His friend was in charmer mode. Leave it to Wolf to think with his cock.

"If it's what you want, Christine, I see no reason why not." So Christine her name. The woman Romeo had every intention of spending the night with.

"Don't let us twist your arm, sweetheart," Romeo shot back at Nya, although his eyes never left Christine's pretty face. There was something about her that made him feel calm. When their eyes met, she looked away quickly, a slight blush reddening her cheeks. He knew she was attracted to him, too.

"Shut up, Romeo," Wolf hissed at him before turning back to Nya. "Ignore my friend."

"Oh, that won't be hard to do," Nya said through clenched teeth.

The comment seemed to get Wolf's attention. He gave Romeo a questioning look.

"Be nice, Nya." Christine nudged her friend.

"Yes, be nice." Wolf smiled at her. "Wolfgang Wagner, at your service, and this is my friend Romeo."

Nya's eyes narrowed and fixed her brown gaze on Romeo's face. "Romeo?"

"Romeo Grimaldi," Wolf elaborated.

Nya's face remained impassive; for a second he thought he saw a brief flash of recognition, but it had disappeared so quickly he couldn't be sure. His name was well known in many immortal circles, so perhaps she had recognized it. He didn't know her, and didn't know what her problem was, but at this point he didn't care. What he did care about at this moment was getting to know the lovely Christine a little better, or at least enough to get her into bed.

Romeo watched as Wolf kissed Nya on the hand, then Christine. An irrational wave of anger swept through him. What was that about? It had to be the events of the past couple of months getting to him, otherwise, why else would he feel so annoyed?

"How about following us to the lounge?" Romeo suggested.

“How is it that you’re a VIP here?” Nya sounded suspicious.

“I know the owner.” Romeo didn’t tell her of his family connection. Nico owned several clubs across the country. This was just one of many.

The fem didn’t respond, seemingly deep in thought. Romeo took Christine’s hand in his and led them to the back of the club. When they were seated inside the lounge, he ordered drinks for the four of them.

“Please excuse us for a moment,” Nya said abruptly. “Christine, would you come with me to the restroom?”

Christine looked as though she’d been on the verge of speaking to him. That damned friend of hers was starting to get on his nerves.

“Oh, sure.” She got up and followed the fem out of the VIP section.

When they were both out of earshot, Wolf turned to him. “She’s magnificent, isn’t she?” Wolf’s gaze had been firmly glued on Nya’s ass as she’d left the room.

“There’s something up with that fem.”

“What do you mean? I like a woman who doesn’t make it easy for me. There’s more fun in that.”

“Maybe so, but I’m getting some kind of vibe from her that I don’t quite understand, almost as if she’s hiding something, which is odd since I’ve never laid eyes on her before. She also doesn’t seem to like either of us very much.”

Wolf chuckled. “You’re just annoyed that she didn’t fall into a puddle at your feet.”

“Fuck you. That isn’t it.”

“Then what is it?”

“The way she looked at us. I just got the feeling she wasn’t happy about being approached. She obviously sensed that we’re also vampires.”

“Yes. Odd that she’s hanging out with a human.”

“It’s been known to happen, you know. Look at my brothers.”

“Yes, and that’s just one of the reasons the Council isn’t happy with all four of you.”

“Can we not talk the Council for tonight? I just want to enjoy myself.”

“Fair enough. I wonder what the women are discussing in the bathroom.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“I’m sorry, Nya, but they were so cute, and I thought it would be fun to hang out with them.” Christine looked in the mirror over the sink, checking that her makeup looked okay. She’d never seen two more gorgeous specimens, both blond and blue-eyed, but it was the taller of the two with the short, spiky hair that held her interest.

If the past few months had taught her anything, it was to seize the day, and she couldn't remember a time when she'd been so attracted to someone like this, not even to Rick in college. Christine wanted him. Her need for this man had hit her like a sledgehammer. Images of her lying naked beneath him filled her mind.

It had been several months since she'd had sex and the occasion hadn't been very memorable. She'd briefly dated Randall, a guy from her gym. He had been a nice enough guy in the beginning, but the more time they had spent together, the more he talked about himself -- apparently his favorite topic. If Randall was a bore when they talked, he was an even bigger loser in bed. She considered herself a hot-blooded woman with needs and had thought that he could fulfill them, but a bout of sex with him basically comprised a few quick thrusts and he was done. That had been the first and the last time she'd invited him into her bed.

Christine peeked at her friend in the mirror. She giggled to herself as she gazed at Nya's stony expression.

One dark brow rose. "What's so funny?"

"Vampires aren't supposed to have reflections."

"You watch too much television." Nya's response sounded curt.

"You're not mad at me, are you? I mean, it is okay that I agreed to have drinks with them, isn't it?"

"You do realize they're vampires, right?"

She gasped. "Really? They don't look like it."

"Do I look like it?"

Nya had a point. "How can you tell?"

"A vampire can always recognize one of our kind. If I were a guessing woman, I'd say they're probably both very old."

Christine's eyes grew wide. "Do you think they want us for a snack?"

"Again, I have to say that I think you should revise your television schedule. They may want to feed from you, but I think they have something a little more carnal in mind."

"You don't seem very happy about that."

Nya's face remained stony. "I'm not in the mood for this tonight. I sense that they mean no harm, but I must still caution you to be careful."

Christine turned to face the vampire. "I want the one with the short hair. Romeo. I wonder if that's his real name."

"Yes. It is."

Nya's tone voice told her that there was something she didn't like about him. That was strange; her friend rarely gave anything away. "Is that why you dragged me into the bathroom? To warn me off? Is there something I should know about him?"

“No. I’m just urging you to be cautious. Vampires aren’t to be trusted.”

“But you’re a vampire.”

“And who should know better than another one?”

“You sound like you don’t like your own kind. Don’t you have any vampire friends?”

Nya shrugged. “A few.”

“So you don’t think I should ... you know?”

“You’re a grown woman. I can’t presume to tell you what to do. If I thought you were in real danger, I would say so, but if I were you I would guard my heart wisely, especially with Romeo.”

Christine’s eyes narrowed, wondering what her friend was getting at. “You sound as if you know him.”

“I don’t, but he’s known in many immortal circles. I didn’t make the connection at first until I heard his full name, but his reputation precedes him.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Only if your heart becomes involved.”

Christine fell silent and tried to digest all that Nya had said ... and hadn’t said. “Well, it’s not like I’ll have many more opportunities like this, will I? For just this one night, I want to throw caution the wind.”

A sad gleam entered Nya’s chocolate-colored eyes.

“Please don’t look at me like that. I couldn’t stand it if you pitied me.”

“I can fix it for you.” The vampire reached out and gripped Christine’s hand, holding onto it as though she didn’t want to let go.

“No. It isn’t meant to be.”

“I ... I don’t have many friends. Actually, you are my only human friend, and when I’m with you, I almost feel human again.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way, you know. You don’t have to shut yourself off from the rest of the world.”

“My choice was taken away from me years ago, but you still have a chance, Christine.”

“No. I couldn’t ask you. Besides, I’m not sure I want to be --”

Nya held up her hand. “Say no more. I understand, but your decision still saddens me greatly. Had I been give the same choice, I would have chosen a different path, too.”

“There is redemption in forgiveness, Nya.” Christine reached up and touched the smooth contours on the vampire’s cheek.

Nya released Christine’s hand and stepped away from her touch. “My soul has already been damned. Forgiveness would do it no good.” The expression on her face became

unreadable once more. "If you want to be with Romeo tonight, then you have my blessing. If I thought for a second he would physically harm you, I would gut him like a fish."

Christine winced at her friend's graphic statement. At times it was easy to forget Nya was a bloodsucker, but when Christine was reminded of it, it made her more aware of her own mortality.

"What are you going to do about Wolf? He seems quite taken with you," she teased.

"He's going to have to stick his pickle somewhere else tonight. Like I said, I'm not interested."

"Poor guy."

"I'm sure he'll find another willing woman to satisfy his needs. Perhaps you --"

"But I want Romeo."

"There's no reason why you can't have them both. Vampires are a kinky lot."

"You mean ... you think they'd be interested in a threesome?"

Nya lifted one shoulder in a half shrug. "Why not?"

"It's bad enough that I'm contemplating a one-night stand with a complete stranger, and a vampire at that."

"What happened to throwing caution to the wind?"

"I'm not a slut."

"Why would having a threesome make you a slut?"

"I don't know. It seems so ... decadent."

"Well, it's certainly your call, but whatever you decide, just be safe."

"I will."

A slight smile curved Nya's lips. "Good." She turned around and headed out the door, Christine on her heels. When they made it back to the VIP lounge, the men were talking quietly, sipping their drinks.

The look in Romeo's cobalt eyes made Christine shiver. She felt the stirrings of lust shoot through her body. Her pussy began to tingle in reaction. She quickly glanced at Wolf, who seemed only to have eyes for Nya. Although the thought of a threesome with two drop-dead gorgeous men sounded tempting, Christine knew Romeo would be all the man she needed tonight.

Romeo encompassed both women in his smile, but his gaze stayed on her face. She smiled back, glad she'd decided to come out with Nya tonight. The subtle gleam of appreciation in the gorgeous blond vampire's eyes told Christine that she wouldn't be going home alone tonight.



## Chapter Four

*Your baby is going to die. You will finally pay for the sins of the past, Grimaldi.*

*A tall woman with long, dark, red hair laughed, holding a swaddled baby in her arms. The baby was crying in earnest, its little red face scrunched up in frustration. Maggie raced toward them, but by the time she reached the maniacal woman, she was gone.*

*A bloody baby's blanket that the baby had been wrapped in lay on the floor, empty. Maggie fell to her knees and screamed.*

*Once she started screaming, she couldn't stop. Hands gripped her shoulders and she fought against their hold. Maggie scratched and clawed at them, trying to break free when she suddenly felt a sharp sting on her cheek.*

Her eyes flew open.

"Maggie, are you okay?" GianMarco's beloved face held a look of concern. Her heart felt like it was pounding a thousand beats a minute, and her body was drenched with sweat. She placed her hand protectively over the rounded hump of her belly and breathed a sigh of relief. Her baby still rested safely in her womb.

Maggie looked around, her eyes adjusting to the darkness of their bedroom until she could make out everything. She was safe in her bed with her husband. "What ... what happened?" She touched her now-aching cheek.

GianMarco took her hand and grazed her knuckles with his lips. "Forgive me, *ciccina mia*. I tried to wake you, but you didn't respond, so I slapped you. I didn't mean to hit you so hard, but you frightened me. I don't think I have ever heard anything quite like the sound you made. You screamed with such terror in your voice that I had to wake you up somehow."

He wrapped his arms around her and Maggie rested her head against his solid chest. She always felt safest within the circle of his arms. They'd been married for four months now and in three months they would bring their first child into the world.

Maggie had never known what true happiness was until GianMarco had entered her life. After suffering through a disastrous twenty-some years of marriage, her confidence had been shattered, but her hunky, blond, amber-eyed vampire had taught her how to love again. Never mind that he was a vampire and that he had very powerful enemies. Just being with him fulfilled her.

Everything seemed to be right with her world. She was closer than ever to her two adult children, her love for her husband grew stronger every day, and a new baby was on its way. It would still be a while before she could completely adjust to being a vampire, but day by day it got easier.

The changes in her body didn't seem so overwhelming anymore. Maggie was learning to handle her newly heightened senses and extra strength, but because she carried a child now, she was very tired, much more tired than she'd been when she'd carried her first two children. Vampire fetuses not only fed from their mother's food supply, but her blood as well, and it was draining. Maggie was constantly in need of feedings, and she slept most of her days.

She ran her thumb over the sensual curve of GianMarco's bottom lip. "I'm sorry I frightened you."

"Won't you tell me what's wrong?" Worry etched his granite-like features.

"I had that dream again ... about the baby, but this time it was much worse."

"Was it the same woman from before?"

"Yes. It was horrible. She disappeared with the baby, but I think she killed it, because all that was left behind was a bloody blanket. What does this all mean? I never had a nightmare in my life before I got pregnant with our baby."

"Do you think your pregnancy had something to do with the nightmares? I don't remember Bianca having any when she was pregnant with Gio."

Maggie saw the brief flash of regret in her husband's eyes when he mentioned his first wife and child; both had been murdered by rogue vampires centuries ago. "Maybe. It could be a vampire thing."

"I don't think so. I rarely have nightmares, and they're never the same."

"There's something about this woman. She seems ... I don't know ... like she has some kind of vendetta against this family."

"I don't want you to worry about that, Maggie. I will keep you and our child safe."

She gripped his hand in hers. "GianMarco, these dreams almost feel like premonitions. What if someone really does mean our child harm? Why our baby? I mean, I realize there

are people who are out to get you and your brothers, but to want to hurt an innocent child ... I just don't understand."

GianMarco rocked her in his arms, gently swaying back and forth. "Shh. We'll not speak of this. Know that I would die before I allow anything to happen to you or our child."

"I have no doubt you would, but I worry about your brothers, especially Dante. He hasn't come to visit since ..."

GianMarco's lips pursed together, and she knew she'd hit a nerve. "I feel like this is all my fault."

"Don't say that, *belissima*. Dante has issues to work out that have nothing to do with you."

"But the last time he was here, he acted as though he hated me. If anything, I should be ticked off with him for going caveman on me. It was supposed to be a simple feeding, right?"

"I thought so, too, but there are things about Dante that not many people understand."

"Then make me understand."

Her husband sighed, brushing away a stray blond lock from his forehead. "I don't think they're my tales to tell."

"I'm your wife now. We shouldn't keep secrets from each other and, if in some roundabout way this affects me, too, then I think I have the right to know."

"Maybe you're right, but I hardly know where to begin." GianMarco dropped a kiss on top of her head. "Dante has made many sacrifices for Romeo, Nico and myself. He has devoted his life to us and the Underground, and there's nothing else he's as emotionally vested in as our family. I'm sure you can appreciate his feelings since you have two children of your own."

"I would die for my babies."

"I know you would, *belissima*. In many ways, Dante has been more of a father to us than a brother; he's certainly old enough to have fathered us. For years, Dante has gone without so that his brothers could have anything and everything. Then, little over a hundred years ago, he met a woman."

"His blood mate? You never told me he had a blood mate."

"He didn't, but at the time he certainly thought so. I only met Flora a few times myself, but I don't think she was as involved with Dante as he was with her."

"What was she like?"

"She was very beautiful, almost too beautiful. She had long brown hair, deep brown eyes. Some might say she was perfect in face and body. It wasn't hard to see why Dante was so besotted with her."

"Was she human?"

“No. She was a vampire, a young one, maybe fifty if that. She had a helpless air, which always appealed to Dante because he was so used to taking care of people, and she was certainly the type that enjoyed being taken care of. She was nice enough, I suppose, but what mattered was that Dante seemed completely taken with her. He resided in Venice then, and he’d just asked Flora to live with him when I came for a visit.” He paused, frowning.

“What happened?” Maggie prompted when he didn’t immediately speak again.

“I went to see him and Romeo joined me. When we arrived, Flora was dead. The amount of blood -- dear God, the sight of blood smeared all over the walls was enough to make even a vampire balk.”

Maggie gasped. “Oh, my God. Poor Dante. Who did that to her? Was it rogues?”

“Dante did it.”

“But ... I don’t understand.”

“No one did. It’s only recently that we’ve learned there was much more to it than we originally thought.”

“What did you originally think it was?”

“We thought it was *la morte dolci*. Why else would he kill his blood mate? We believed it had driven him crazy, but now it seems there were powerful forces working against him, against them. Flora was used as an instrument of revenge to bring Dante to his knees.”

“But why? Was he also bewitched like Niccolo had been?”

“That’s not important right now. We’re discussing where you come into the picture. The night when I was suffering from *la morte dolci* --”

“Yeah, the night you nearly killed me,” she teased, then instantly regretted it. The flash of pain that crossed GianMarco’s face tore at Maggie’s heart. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think before I spoke. I didn’t mean it that way.”

“I know. It just hurts me to know that I caused you pain. I love you so much. I’m sick with love for you. Sick with it,” he said through clenched teeth, his fierceness making her shiver with a thrill of excitement. “If anything were to happen to you or our child, I don’t think I could survive.” GianMarco cupped her face in his hands and kissed her passionately.

Maggie’s pulse raced, and she could feel a familiar stirring in her pussy. She smiled at him. “As much as I want to make love to you right now, you were going to tell me how I fit into the equation.”

“Oh, yes, I was telling you about that night when *la morte dolci* had me in its grip. Dante came to my rescue, expecting only to help me, but your vulnerability that night touched something deep in him. It brought out his protectiveness, in addition to the fact that he was very attracted to you, my little chocolate beauty.”

“Chocolate I may be, but I’ve never been little and, since this pregnancy, I feel like a big, fat, ugly balloon.”

“You’re beautiful to me. Nothing pleases me more than to look at your naked body, your belly swollen with my child. My cock stays hard twenty-four seven.”

She gave him a light tap on the shoulder. “You always have sex on your mind.”

“Can you blame me when I’m married to the most wonderful woman in the world?”

“You’re full of it.”

“Never that, my dear.” He lifted her hand to his mouth again and planted another wet kiss on it.

“What about Dante?”

“What about him?”

“Aren’t you concerned about his feelings?”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t, but I also know he wouldn’t do anything to hurt either of us. He’ll soon realize his feelings for you aren’t what he thinks they are. He does love you, Maggie, but not the way I do.”

“I hope you’re right. I miss him.” She suddenly felt sad because of the gulf between the two brothers who’d always been so close.

“I do, too.”

A sudden idea came to Maggie. “Montana!”

GianMarco gave her a bewildered look. “What?”

“Montana would be perfect for Dante.”

The blond vampire crinkled his nose. “She’s a little wild for him, don’t you think?” Maggie knew very well that while GianMarco liked Montana as a person, he thought she could be a bit brash and outspoken. He had once told Maggie that he thought Montana was a bad influence on her.

“Maybe Dante needs a little wildness in his life.”

“I wouldn’t advise you to go meddling in his affairs.”

“Oh, stop being such a fuddy duddy. I think this idea has merit.”

“Just be careful, love. When emotions get involved, people can get hurt.”

“It will work out great. Besides, me and Montana will be sisters for real then.”

GianMarco rolled his eyes. “Please tell me you’re not trying to set your friend up with my brother because you want to be sisters with her.”

“That’s not it at all. I just think they would be good together.”

“If you say so.”

A sharp thump pounded at the base of her belly, making Maggie jump. “Oh!”

“What is it?”

“She kicked!” Although GianMarco had told her that the likelihood of a female-born vampire was slim, Maggie stubbornly believed she carried a girl.

Her husband held his hand over her stomach, not quite touching it.

“Please.” She took his hand, guiding it to her belly. As though sensing her father’s touch, the baby kicked again. The look of utter wonder on GianMarco’s face tugged at her heartstrings.

Maggie swore she saw tears in his eyes even though she knew he’d deny it if she brought it up. “She knows her papa.”

“I don’t know what to say,” he whispered.

“Say you love me.”

“I do love you, more than life itself. *Dio*, you’re lovely. I think I could stare at you all day.”

She didn’t think she’d ever tire of his compliments. There was no feeling like being loved and cherished the way GianMarco did her. “I think you’re pretty damn good to look at yourself ... and you’re delicious, too.” Maggie ran her tongue over suddenly dry lips.

He lifted one dark brow with a lazy smile on his sensual mouth. “Is that your subtle way of telling me you’re hungry?”

She gave him a big smile. “Now that you mention it ...” Maggie felt her incisors descend before she leaned over and gently sank her teeth into the flesh just above his collarbone. She realized, of course, that he had effectively changed the subject regarding Dante, but there would be more time for discussion later. Right now, all she could think about was her driving hunger and how hot she suddenly felt.

GianMarco threw his head back and released what sounded like a moan of pure ecstasy. His coppery-sweet, life-giving fluid flooded her mouth and slid down her throat. If someone had told Maggie several months ago that she would enjoy sucking blood, she’d have laughed her ass off, but here she was savoring every drop that touched her tongue.

When she knew she’d had enough, Maggie lifted her head and pushed him back on the bed, thankful that they slept in the nude, making it easier for her middle-of-the-night feedings. She pushed the blanket aside to reveal his long and rock-hard cock.

GianMarco always seemed ready at the mere touch of her fingertips. She encircled his thick shaft in her hands and ran her tongue on its satiny head, reveling in his unique flavor. He sighed in obvious delight, and Maggie’s heart warmed, knowing that he was turned on by her ministrations.

He was so large; she delighted to feel the power of his manhood within the palm of her hand. Maggie lowered her mouth, careful not to rub her teeth against his sensitive flesh. With her free hand, she cupped his balls, giving them a gentle squeeze.

“Oh, God, Maggie,” GianMarco groaned.

Her fist and lips tightened around his dick as her mouth moved up and down the length of him. If she could have smiled, she would have. She was just happy that she could

please him this way. As she grew large with his child, they had had to be increasingly inventive in their lovemaking.

His hands dug into her hair while he elevated his hips in an upward thrust, pushing his cock deeper into her mouth. After months of practice, Maggie could take nearly his entire length into her mouth, but she wasn't all the way there yet.

Her fingers continued to fondle his sac while she increased the speed of her movements over his rod to match his thrusts. Her pussy became moist, her juices dripping out to dampen her inner thighs.

GianMarco must have smelled it. "Turn that big sexy ass of yours around so I can taste some of that delicious pussy."

Maggie maneuvered the lower part of her body around until her hips straddled her husband's face. She lowered her wet cunt over his mouth, and his lips immediately fastened over her labia, sucking on them with a voraciousness that sent bolts of delight through her body.

Maggie nearly lost her train of thought when his tongue delved between her pussy lips and speared her hot channel. "Oh, dear Lord," she moaned, lifting her head from his cock. She mashed her pussy against his face, feeling his fingers shift, his sharp nails digging into her flesh. The pleasure far outweighed the pain.

She lapped at the precome glistening on the head of his cock, knowing that GianMarco was close to his peak. Maggie lowered her head and sucked the heated skin of his balls. His flesh was incredibly hot beneath her mouth. No matter how many times she did this to him it was never enough.

Maggie groaned at the exquisite sensation of his tongue fucking her, taking her, branding her. It was almost too hard to concentrate when he did such wonderful things to her with his talented mouth. She returned her attention back to his shaft, stuffing as much of it as she could between her lips.

Suddenly, the tongue in her pussy ceased its thrusts and GianMarco's fingernails broke her skin. He pushed his hips up and a stream of his essence trickled down the back of her throat. She licked and slurped, making sure she didn't spill a single drop.

She lifted her head only when she'd sucked GianMarco dry, his sexual secretions satisfying her hunger as much as his blood had. Maggie lifted her hips up and away from his face, but GianMarco didn't seem prepared to let her go. He pulled her back and parted her damp folds before his lips latched onto her clit.

"Oh, GianMarco, that feels wonderful!" She sighed with pleasure. He always made sure she was fulfilled and Maggie loved him for that. When he slid two fingers inside her sopping hole, it took every ounce of her willpower not to collapse on top of him like a quivering mass of gelatin.

GianMarco took his time licking, stroking, and sucking on her pussy until Maggie felt an explosion within her. Her juices gushed from her cunt, which the eager vampire below her lapped greedily. His tongue licked her with long, broad strokes, making her shiver uncontrollably.

He placed a gentle kiss on her outer labia. "Come here," he growled.

Maggie moved until she rested at his side.

"Turn on your side. I want to fuck you so bad it hurts."

The missionary position had become difficult for them, so most times when they had intercourse it was either on their sides or doggy style. When GianMarco positioned Maggie the way he wanted, he lifted her thigh and slid his cock inside her hot box. "Damn, this is some tight pussy."

"And this is some extra special cock," she whispered back. "I don't think I will ever get enough of you."

"Nor I you." GianMarco's hot breath fanned the side of her face. He planted kisses all over her neck while moving inside of her with gentle thrusts.

"I love you so much."

"I love you, too, *ciccina mia*. I will never let you go."



## Chapter Five

“Are you sure this is what you want?” Romeo asked for the third time that night. Jasmine-scented perfume drifted to his nostrils and Romeo had to stop himself from burying his face against her skin. It had been a long time since Romeo had wanted a woman with such an animalistic need.

Christine fumbled with her keys before unlocking the front door of her tiny Cape Cod. “You wouldn’t be with me right now if I wasn’t sure. You do want this, too, don’t you?” She looked over her shoulders, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

She obviously had no idea how much he wanted her. He wanted to pull her into his arms and rub his cock against the gentle swell of her bottom. He realized he’d been extremely lucky to meet her tonight. Wolf had been so entranced by the fem vampire that he was truly missing out on this beauty. A slow smile tilted his lips as Romeo thought about his friend, who’d been left stewing at the club when Nya made it clear in no uncertain terms that she wasn’t interested.

It had been rather pathetic to watch Wolf try to win the fem over, only to be rebuffed none too gently over and over again. Romeo felt lucky that it wasn’t him in the same position, because Nya didn’t seem inclined to like either one of them.

Christine, on the other hand, had made it obvious that she was very willing by flirting with him throughout the night. He’d liked the way she talked, even though most Boston accents annoyed him to no end, sounding coarse and unrefined to his ears. From her mouth, however, it sounded delightful. Her intelligence and grasp of world events also intrigued him. She was definitely not the bimbo type to go from one one-night stand to another, so it surprised him that she’d been willing to bring him back to her place.

“Come on in, please. Would you like some coffee or something to eat -- oh! I’m sorry.” She stumbled over the last words.

What was that all about? He stepped into her small but cozy living room. The house was neat and full of furniture and knick-knacks, yet it didn't seem cluttered. He felt a strange sense of coming home. "Nice place."

"Thank you. I like it." She smiled at him.

One of Christine's front teeth slightly overlapped the other, but it only seemed to add to her charm. It was a smile he knew he'd remember for a long time to come. "So, what were you about to say?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why did you stop after asking me if I wanted something to eat?"

"Uh, well ..." She covered her mouth, her face going slightly red. "I didn't mean to offend you. I didn't think before offering."

Now he was really confused. "You were just being a good hostess. Why would I be offended?"

"Because you don't eat," Christine blurted out before her face went an even deeper shade of red.

"Says who?" Was this woman on some kind of drugs? How could he have misjudged her so badly? "Why wouldn't I eat?"

"Because ... uh, never mind."

Romeo tried to touch her mind, but something seemed to be blocking him. Humans couldn't block their thoughts from vampires, yet he was ninety-nine point nine percent sure Christine was human. What was going on? "Tell me what you meant by that comment."

"Well ... I've never seen Nya eat anything."

Her meaning finally dawned on him. "You know what your friend is?"

She nodded.

"And you know what I am?"

"Yes."

"Is that what Nya talked to you about when she dragged you away from the table?"

"Sort of."

"I see." He didn't really, but this certainly made things more and more interesting.

Christine raised her head almost in a defiant gesture. "I'm not scared, though."

Romeo couldn't help but to grin at that. She was obviously trying to conceal her fear, but he definitely liked her more with each passing second. "And why aren't you scared? How do you know I won't drain you of all your blood and leave you for dead?" He took a step forward, yet she remained where she was, although a thin sheen of sweat glistened over her brow.

"Because Nya said you wouldn't hurt me and I trust her."

“Funny how she knows that about me when tonight was the first time I’ve had the ... pleasure of meeting her.”

Christine cocked her head. “You sound like you don’t like her.”

“I don’t know her well enough to form an opinion, although she seems already to have formed one of me. Tell me, what else did your friend say, and how is it that you have become so close to one of my kind?”

“It’s a complicated story. It doesn’t matter, does it? We both want one thing tonight. Have you changed your mind?”

“Hell, no, but I will have my answers -- if not now, then eventually. And, by the way, I do eat. You must watch too damn much television.”

Christine laughed. “That’s exactly what Nya said earlier.”

“You know, if I could live the nineteenth century all over again, I’d kick Bram Stoker’s ass.”

This time, Christine clutched her sides, laughing harder than ever. Her laughter was so infectious, he couldn’t help but to chuckle himself.

“So you find that amusing, do you?”

“It was the way you said it,” she said, wiping a tear from her eye.

“Well, imagine what it’s like for me when I see Hollywood’s version of vampires. I stopped watching vampire movies after *Blackula*. Even I had to draw the line somewhere.”

This seemed to tickle Christine even more. “*Blackula*? I can’t say I’ve seen that one. Please tell me you’re making that one up.”

“You didn’t miss much. It’s a blaxploitation movie from the seventies. Don’t get me wrong, Richard Roundtree in *Shaft* was the man, and I loved Pam Grier in *Foxy Brown*, but *Blackula*? Come on.”

“I see your point. The title alone sounds horrible. I know how you feel, though. *Full Metal Jacket* ruined my life.”

“How so?”

“You have no idea how many men think it’s cool to approach me by saying, ‘Me so horny. Me love you long time!’”

“You’re kidding.”

“I wish. It didn’t help that Two Live Crew remixed it into a song. That had to be the worst summer of my life. Let me tell you something -- the next guy who asks me for a happy ending is going to get my knee shoved into his crotch.”

She looked so cute during her little rant. “You poor baby.” Romeo reached out and pulled her into his arms.

“I’m sorry about my narrow views of vampires.”

“And I promise I won’t ask you to ‘suckie suckie.’” He winked at her.

Christine glared at him before her features softened when she realized he'd only been teasing her. She laughed again. "You're too much."

"And you're too beautiful," he murmured, caressing her soft cheek.

"So ... would you like something to eat?"

"The only thing I want to eat right now is your pussy," Romeo whispered before lowering his head. Her dark eyes widened, but she didn't pull away. The feel of her soft lips beneath his had his cock straining against his jeans, begging to be released.

His tongue traced the seam of her lips, licked off the fruity flavor of her lip gloss. When she sighed and wrapped her arms around his neck, Romeo took advantage and slid his tongue into the sweet cavern of her mouth.

Christine was absolutely delicious. He could taste the faint trace of alcohol, along with a cherry flavor, as if she'd eaten some candy earlier. With her head tilted back, her mouth opened under the gentle persuasion of his kiss and Romeo explored every cavern and crevice, savoring the very essence of her.

God, she was lovely. Never before had his body reacted quite this way. He lifted his head to look down at her. Christine's eyes were closed and her lips were slightly parted, as though waiting for him to bring his head back down to hers. Romeo's lips traced a path from her jaw to her neck, then she seemed to tense up.

"Relax," he whispered against her skin.

Romeo's lips grasped the pulsing hollow at the base of her neck, loving the sound of her soft moans. The tormenting sweetness of her body against his only fueled the flames of his passion further. His fingers deftly worked to unbutton her blouse. He was eager to see all of her.

Romeo slid her top from her shoulders, his hand sliding inside her bra to tweak one pert nipple. She trembled beneath his caresses, and her reaction excited him. "Do you like that?"

"Oh, yes. More. Oh, God, more," she moaned, arching her back. Romeo smiled down at her, rolling the tight tip between his fingers. In one sudden movement, he ripped the bra away from her body with his free hand, not bothering with the clasps. "I'm sorry, I'll buy you another."

"It's okay."

His hands worked on her skirt and panties until he had her naked in front of him. Stepping back to survey her perfect body, Romeo smiled. She was gorgeous from her small, but beautifully shaped bronze-tipped breasts, to her flat stomach and small waist, which flared into rounded hips and slightly muscular legs. He could tell that she worked out and took good care of her body.

Romeo licked his lips at the sight of her hairless cunt. He had no preference for shaved or unshaved women, but looking at the smooth skin between her silky thighs, he couldn't wait to bury his face inside it.

Christine brought her arms up, crossing them over her breasts in a self-conscious gesture.

"Don't. You have nothing to be ashamed of. You're beautiful."

"Well, I'm standing here naked while you still have all your clothes on."

He grinned. "Something that can easily be remedied," Romeo said, shrugging out of his leather jacket.

"No. Let me." Christine covered the short distance between them and placed her hand on his shirt.

"If you insist."

"I do."

She slid her hand under his T-shirt. The contact of her palms on his chest filled him with such a rush of desire, he could barely keep still. If he wasn't careful, this woman would be the death of him.

"Lift your arms up," she instructed, loving the feel of his hard flesh beneath her fingertips. She tugged his shirt over his head to reveal a chest that was all ripples and hollows. A dusting of blond curls, two shades lighter than the hair on his head, covered Romeo's chest. It was sexy as hell. Christine ran her palm over his toned pectoral muscles, pressing her lips against the taut peak of one brown nipple.

He shook.

"I love your body."

"Not as much as I love yours."

"Shut up, and let me do my thing," she ordered with mock severity as she unbuttoned his jeans.

"Ah, I didn't know you were a take-charge kind of woman."

"Take charge is my middle name."

"Well, I do love a woman who knows her own mind. Do your worst, babe." The deep timbre of his voice sent a thrill racing through her. He was too sexy to be real. Romeo was all man, with just a hint of danger about him that fulfilled her wildest dreams.

He excited her like no man ever had. Even barely touching him, Christine could feel the heat coursing through his body. Christine knelt down. "Lift your feet."

"Yes, mistress."

She looked up to see a twinkle in the depths of his cobalt eyes. "Smart ass."

"Hey, I've been told my ass was cute, but never smart." Romeo winked at her again.

She shook her head, wondering how she would make it through the night without laughing herself crazy. She removed his boots, then slid his jeans down his hips, only looking up when he stepped free of the pants.

“Holy moly,” Christine muttered. Romeo wore no underwear and his cock jutted out like a huge spear.

“Do you like what you see, sweetheart?” He raised one dark blond brow.

“It’s huge, practically a monster,” she whispered, reaching up to trail her fingers over the length of his cock. It was so long and thick, Christine didn’t know how she could possibly take it in.

Romeo stuck his tongue out at her. “It’s not a monster. But you can name him that if you’d like.”

He hadn’t already named it? Rick had called his “The Terminator,” although she’d secretly referred to it as “Limp Willy.”

“I get to name it? What an honor.” She smirked.

“Does it really need a name when action speaks louder than words?”

He had a point; besides, coming up with a name for his dick was not her priority. She had more intimate things in mind. Christine’s fingers circled his cock, and she slid her hand back and forth.

“Yes,” he moaned.

“What? No jokes this time?”

“I can’t think of any right now to save my life. Touch me, Christine. Take me into your mouth.”

She pouted. “I thought I was in charge.”

“I don’t care who’s in charge, but I think I’ll explode if I don’t feel your mouth on me.” His impassioned plea was all she needed to part her lips over Romeo’s throbbing erection.

He filled her mouth so beautifully. Slowly, oh, so slowly, her mouth closed over his rod. Already she could taste the evidence of his arousal. The salty flavor tingled on her tongue. With a growl, Romeo bent over and hauled Christine to her feet, his cock slipping wetly from her mouth.

“Change of plans. I need to be inside you now.”

Before she knew what was happening, he’d scooped her off her feet and carried her up the stairs. “Which room is yours?”

Christine buried her face in his neck. “The first on the left.”

He plopped her down on the middle of the bed and fell on top of her.

She pulled him against her, flicking her tongue out to meet his when Romeo lowered his head. The kiss was savage, frantic, hungry. She couldn’t get enough of him.

Christine raked her fingers down his back in her excitement. Romeo lifted his head. "You little wildcat. So you like to scratch, do you? Well, I like to bite," he said, before pressing heated kisses on her face and chest.

She reveled in the heady sensation of his lips on her skin. Then it hit her what he'd just said. He wanted to bite her? Christine tensed up.

"What's wrong?" he murmured, kissing the side of her neck.

"Are you going to drain me?"

Romeo lifted his head with a quizzical look in his eyes. "What?"

"You know ... my blood."

"No. You don't have to worry. If you don't want me to drink from you, then I won't." The soothing tone of his voice calmed the racing of her heart, but she couldn't stop shaking.

"Don't be scared. Here, let me show you that you can trust me." Romeo rolled over onto his back, dragging her with him until she straddled his thighs. He revealed even white teeth in a teasing grin. "Have your wicked way with me, sweetheart."

Christine couldn't help but giggle, feeling at ease once more. Her eyes drifted to the sensual curve of his mouth and she leaned forward, pressing a hot, hungry kiss against his lips, shoving her tongue past them. She loved being the aggressor.

Christine captured his moan in her mouth, tasting and savoring him. When Romeo moved to wrap his arms around her, she pushed his wrists on either side of his head, knowing that he could break free if he wanted to, but that he wouldn't. She didn't know why, but she trusted him.

"You told me I could be in charge," she whispered against his cheek. Christine rubbed the stiff points of her breasts against his chest, the friction sending pulses of delight throughout her body. They were barely touching, but she was on fire for him. Her pussy had never felt so moist and hot before.

There was so much Christine wanted to do to and with this sexy vampire -- touch, caress, conquer him -- but it had been so long since she'd felt such an aching lust for anyone that all she could think of was sinking onto his cock. Already she was soaking wet with her need for him.

Christine sat up, releasing his arms.

"You're so beautiful," he groaned, reaching up to caress her cheek in his palm. She still couldn't believe she was here with such a hunk, and he was looking at her as though she were the most desirable woman in the world.

Smiling down at him, she responded in kind. "You're not so bad yourself."

"Christine, take me inside you."

The raw passion in his voice told her that he was fast losing his control. Christine circled her fingers around his thick cock. "It's so big," she said again, more to herself than to him.

"It's all right. Take your time."

Christine raised her hips and lowered herself over him, the thick purplish head of his shaft resting against her labia.

"That's it, sweetheart. Easy." Romeo sat up just enough so that he could part her damp folds. Christine's breath caught in her throat at the feel of his fingers on her pussy. She lowered herself further, feeling her vaginal walls stretch to accommodate his size.

Christine whimpered, biting her lip in pleasure-pain. Pleasure because Romeo's thumb rubbed her clit in circular motions, pain because of his immense size. Actually, it wasn't so much pain as it was discomfort, but she was determined to have all of him.

Slowly but surely, inch by delectable inch of delicious vampire cock filled her cunt until Christine didn't think she could take anymore.

"You can do it," Romeo urged, rolling her throbbing button between his fingers, her pussy growing even wetter as a result, making it even easier for him to go deeper.

"Goddamn you're tight. Your pussy fits like a glove around my cock." Romeo grunted when he was completely inside of her.

Christine closed her eyes while she adjusted to him. She ached a little, but the pleasure far outweighed the pain. He cupped her breasts, squeezing and kneading them until she cried out his name. "Yes, Romeo! Yes!"

She felt a dampness over her nipples and realized he'd taken the moisture from her pussy and coated the tight buds. The scent of her desire wafted to her nostrils, filling her with an ungovernable lust.

Christine tightened her knees around his hips, feeling a wonderful sensation of power as she savored the feel of his massive cock. Placing a hand on his rippled stomach, she began to move.

Romeo's breath burst from his throat in hurried pants. "That's it, sweetheart, ride me."

"Oh, Romeo!" Christine never knew that making love could be so mind shattering, that it would make her feel quite this way. She really doubted she would ever feel the same way with anyone else. It could only be like this with Romeo, but she'd worry about the why and how later. For now, Christine just wanted to enjoy this moment as though it were her last and fuck this hunky vampire silly.

Romeo released her breasts and gripped her hips, guiding her up and down on his cock. Her nails dug into his skin as she climbed toward her orgasm. She looked down to watch his slick rod moving in and out of her; she had never seen a more erotic sight. With one powerful thrust of his hips, Christine felt the stream of his ejaculate shoot into her pussy.



The powerful flow must have hit her in just the right spot because she found her own release within seconds. Christine arched her back, her body shuddering uncontrollably until she collapsed against his sweat-dampened body.

She panted and gasped for breath. "That was --" She broke off, not able to come up with an adequate word to describe the orgasmic feeling of their coming together, but it felt as if their souls had just touched.

Christine had had good sex before -- she'd even had great sex -- but nothing compared with this. Words just seemed too trite to explain what had just happened or the new sensations coursing through her.

"I know how you feel, Christine," Romeo whispered against her hair.

"Yes," she answered, feeling exhausted but complete.

And that scared the hell out of her.

## Chapter Six

“What the hell do you mean you’re going to spend a few days with her?” Wolf demanded on the other end of the line. Romeo held his cell phone away from his ear while his friend cursed him out in three different languages.

“It’s not my fault you had no luck with the ice princess last night.”

“Far be it for me to call a woman so lovely a bitch but ... well, you get the picture.”

“So what did you end up doing last night, or should I say whom did you end up doing?”

“Remember the three women at the bar?”

“Yes. Which one did you leave with?”

“All of them.”

Romeo could hear the smug note in Wolf’s voice and shook his head. Wolf always found a way to turn things to his advantage. “As I was saying, I’m going to spend the next few days with Christine. Call my cell if anything important comes up. Otherwise, I’ll meet you at Logan on Friday as scheduled.”

“This can’t be my friend, love-’em-and-leave’em Romeo. What’s so special about this woman? She must have some really good pussy if you’re sticking around for more.”

For some reason, hearing Wolf talk about Christine as though she were just another convenient bed warmer didn’t sit well with him. “This subject is not up for discussion,” he retorted with clenched teeth.

A pregnant pause followed before Wolf spoke again. “Fine. I’ll see you in a few days.” The phone went dead. Damn, he hadn’t meant to come off so abrupt; he’d make it up to Wolf later. He walked back to Christine’s room and slid beneath the covers next to her sleeping form. She looked like an angel, the silky curtain of her midnight hair falling over her creamy cheeks.

There were dark smudges under her eyes that sleep hadn't removed the night before, revealing a vulnerability about her that he found touching. His gaze drifted to her small but prettily curved lips. Romeo smiled as he thought of the pleasure he'd had kissing them. Last night had been like nothing Romeo had ever experienced. Christine was not the most skilled lover he'd ever been with, but she made up for it with sheer enthusiasm. Her soft little moans and her gasps of surprise and wonder had made his body react in ways Romeo didn't think possible.

He hadn't been able to get enough of her. After the first time they'd fucked, he'd let her sleep for half an hour, then woke her up and took her again. Romeo let her rest some between bouts of making love. Every little stroke, groan, and sigh from Christine turned him on and Romeo had lain well past dawn trying to figure out what it was about this particular woman that made him want her so much.

Yes, she was lovely, but in his more than six hundred years on Earth, there had been women far more beautiful, yet he couldn't tear his eyes away from her. Romeo pushed a dark lock of hair from her face and ran the back of his hand against her soft skin.

He didn't know what to think about these new feelings he was experiencing, but one thing was certain, he wanted her again. Already Romeo had waited over an hour since waking up for Christine to stir. The woman slept like the dead. If it weren't for the even sound of her soft breathing he would have thought she was.

Christine's skin was cool to the touch, but the warmth of her blood flowed just below the surface of her skin. Again Romeo tried to read her mind, and although he could see faint images, it felt like something was blocking him. Perhaps it was just happenstance. Right now, there was one need that had to be taken care of or he'd go crazy.

His cock ached like a son of a bitch and the only cure was plunging it into the depths between her silky thighs. He pulled the covers back to reveal two perfect breasts. Romeo bent over and took one turgid peak into his mouth.

She was delicious. Romeo swirled and licked the now puckered tip with his tongue, stroking it urgently. He could taste the faint hint of sex against her flesh. A low groan burst from her throat, making him smile.

Romeo switched his attention to the other nipple, this time sucking as much of her tender breast into his mouth as he could. He felt her fingers push through his hair.

"What a way to wake up."

He could hear the smile in her voice. "I got tired of waiting," he growled, nipping her skin. "Tasty."

Christine pushed her body against his. "You were an animal last night."

"You have that effect on me." Romeo moved lower, kissing a trail down the center of her body. The taste of her against his mouth was intoxicating. She shivered in reaction.

Just knowing he affected her this way was enough to keep him rock hard. He parted her legs before settling himself between her thighs. The scent of their mingled sex drifted to his nostrils, creating such a head rush that he thought his cock would explode.

Christine tried to shut her legs. “No! I haven’t showered yet.”

“I’ve lived a very long time, honey, and trust me, tasting the two of us on your pretty little pussy is not a bad thing.” To demonstrate his sincerity, he separated her slick labia and pressed a long, lingering kiss on her clit. “Mmm, tasty.”

“But ...”

“Shh,” he whispered, before lapping at her with his tongue. It didn’t take long for her to relax and writhe under the ministrations of his mouth. The bittersweet stickiness of their joining filled his mouth and flowed down his throat, the life-giving essence filling him, feeding him, making him stronger.

As he continued to eat her pussy, there was something unusual about her flavor that made him pause. It didn’t distract him from the pleasure of the act, but it was enough to make him wonder what made her so different from any other human female he’d sampled.

“Please don’t stop,” Christine moaned. Romeo chuckled. Only moments before, she’d been self-conscious about him going down on her. Now it seemed she couldn’t get enough.

“With pleasure.” He ran the broad side of his tongue from the top of her slit to the crack of her ass, stopping only after it had circled the tight ring of Christine’s anus.

“Romeo, what are you doing?”

“Loving you.”

“But you can’t do *that*.”

“Why not?” He repeated the action and her body shook like a woman in the middle of a seizure.

“I can’t take it. I can’t,” she gasped. Her lips said one thing, but the way she bucked her hips against his face told him that her body wanted more.

Romeo then licked and stroked her cunt until Christine tensed and a fresh flow of her cream dripped into his mouth. He caught every drop with his tongue, making sure none escaped. By the time he finished, Christine’s head moved back and forth against her pillow, mouthing inarticulate words.

He moved on top of her, resting his lower body between her legs. “I don’t know if I could ever tire of your pussy.”

“That was amazing,” she sighed, her voice full of wonder. “Are all vampires as good as you?”

“I wouldn’t know. I haven’t fucked all vampires.” Romeo lifted himself just enough to guide his cock inside her channel.

“Oh,” Christine moaned.

“You’re so sweet.” He moved against her.

Christine wrapped her arms around his muscular body, turning her head to the side.

“Damn it.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I should have been at work two hours ago.”

“Call in sick.”

“That would be rather irresponsible of me.” She grinned up at him as she clenched her vaginal muscles around his cock.

“Shit. If you keep doing that you’re not going anywhere for a very long time.”

Christine repeated the motion. It felt like a vacuum sucking him into a cave of wet, hot sensation. Romeo thrust into her harder than he’d intended, but the pure ecstasy of her pulsing motions wreaked havoc on his self control.

Romeo prided himself on being a patient and skilled lover, but with Christine he couldn’t rein in himself. He moved to his knees, bracing himself on rigid arms and plunged deeper and faster into her tight sheath.

“Romeo! Oh, God, Romeo!” she yelled. Her nails raked down his chest nearly drawing blood, but it was no more than a slight, stinging sensation. The blood pounded in his head. Beads of sweat popped out on his forehead as he pulled closer to his ultimate goal. His incisors descended. “Christine,” he cried out. “I want to taste all of you.”

“No, please,” she begged, a flicker of fear entering her dark eyes.

“You have nothing to be afraid of.”

“Your ... your eyes are glowing.”

Romeo sighed, letting his teeth retract. The last thing he wanted was her to be afraid of him. Besides, just being inside of her was enough ... for now.

He *would* have all of her, but first he’d win her complete trust. Christine visibly relaxed, giving him a tentative smile. She wrapped her legs around his flanks, taking him deeper into her still.

That was when he completely lost it. Letting out a primal growl, he thrust into her and shot his seed up her slick tunnel, shuddering against her petite frame. Romeo collapsed next to her, not wanting to crush her with his weight, and pulled her into his arms, loving the feeling of her head resting against his chest.

He wasn’t used to cuddling with a woman after sex. Hell, most of the time, he didn’t stick around long enough to learn their names, but this felt right.

Christine lifted her head to study his face. “You’re quiet. What are you thinking?” She kissed his chest.

“I was thinking about how amazing you are.”

“I would say you’re pretty amazing yourself. I’ve never spent a more enjoyable night, and I’m just glad I could before --” Her voice trailed off.

“Before what?”

“Nothing.”

“No, tell me.” Romeo sat up, leaning against the headboard. He pulled her against him, tilting her chin up so that he could look into her eyes. “You can tell me.”

“It’s nothing really, and I’d rather change the subject, please.”

“Christine --”

“No. Please respect that I don’t want to dwell on this topic.”

He frowned. What had he said? She looked upset and he wasn’t sure why. “I’m sorry.”

“No. I’m sorry. I was just being silly. I do have to call my office, though, before they report me to the missing person’s bureau.” She giggled, wiggling from the circle of his arms.

Romeo tried to pull her back, not liking the emptiness he suddenly felt at her absence, but she slipped away. He watched her tight ass move up and down slightly with each step she took. He would have that ass, too, eventually. He fought to keep from jumping out of bed and tearing after her. What the hell was wrong with him? He didn’t chase women. They chased him.

Was he becoming like his brothers? Hell, no. Never that. Christine was just a pleasant interlude during one of the most trying missions of his life. Just thinking about what he needed to do at the end of the week made him feel wary, and that didn’t sit well with him.

No one enjoyed a fight as much as him, but after last night, his enthusiasm for the whole thing wasn’t there. Maybe he just needed the rest. Yes, that was it. He needed the rest, and maybe if he kept telling himself that it would become true.

Christine called her office and only got a minimal amount of flak from her boss because she rarely called in sick. Even if he had given her a hard time, she wouldn’t have cared. She wanted to spend the day with Romeo. It wasn’t as if she’d have many more days with him.

He was a vampire and she was probably just another roll in the hay for him. Nya had told her how promiscuous vampires were. No matter how temporary his attention was, she was flattered that he seemed so into her. If this past year had taught her anything, it had taught her to live like there was no tomorrow.

She walked back into the bedroom and paused, taking in the glorious view of Romeo’s nude body as he lounged her bed like he was posing to be sculpted. Christine didn’t think it was possible for any artist to capture the beauty of his sinewy frame. He turned his head toward her and smiled. God, he was gorgeous.

Romeo crooked his finger at her. “Come here.” She walked over to the bed and fell into his waiting arms.

“What took you so damn long?” he growled, kissing her breast. She sighed in pleasure. “Spend the next few days with me.”

“I have to work.”

“Tell your boss you’re sick.”

“But I have tons of work on my desk.”

Romeo cupped one sensitive breast and squeezed, grazing his teeth against her throat. Christine gasped at the awesome sensation. “Okay. Maybe just a couple of days.”

## Chapter Seven

“Are you certain this is the place, son?” Nico looked around the abandoned warehouse.

“I’m certain, Papa. My memory is still a bit hazy about those weeks, but I am certain this is the place Adonis brought me. But it’s different. When I was here before, the place was furnished like a palace.” Jagger kicked aside an empty crate.

“Are you sure it was real? It’s possible it could have been an illusion. You were under a powerful spell. I sense a great deal of evil in this place. Black magic,” Sasha finished on a whisper.

Dante stood to the side, watching his brother Niccolo, his nephew, and Niccolo’s mate interact. What was being said was important, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that they were under observation. His heightened senses made it possible for him to hear even a pin drop in a noisy room if he so chose, but he heard and saw nothing other than the other three in the building.

The past two months had been among the most stressful of his life. Learning that he might have other siblings was one thing, but that they were trying to wipe out the rest of the Grimaldi clan was a lot to deal with. Also at the back of his mind was the widening gap between him and his youngest brother, Marco, and all because Dante coveted his wife.

It was a hard situation to deal with and had kept him awake many nights, but he realized that if he didn’t want to do anything foolish again, it would be best to stay away. Dante gnashed his teeth together as he thought of Marco fucking, loving, and caressing Maggie’s lush body.

*Dio!* Why did he feel this way? Why was he thinking about a woman he had no right to lust after, especially when there were more pressing matters at hand? Dante sighed in frustration and raked his fingers through his hair.



He loved all of his brothers, but Marco was the one he'd felt closest to. This gulf between them was tearing him apart, but he didn't lay the blame at Marco's or Maggie's feet. Maggie herself was an innocent in this entire mess. No, no one was really to blame, and that was what made this situation so hard.

*Dante*, a voice whispered. He looked up to see Nico, Jagger and Sasha talking among themselves. What in the world?

*Dante*. There it was again. Was he going crazy? Why was he hearing voices that weren't there? He jumped when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He'd been so deep in his thoughts that he hadn't noticed Sasha's approach.

She looked up at him with questioning brown eyes, concern etched on her pretty face. Looking at her, it was easy to see why Nico was so taken with her. "Are you okay?"

Dante smile at her, trying to pretend he was fine. "Yes."

Her brows furrowed. She pushed away a stray lock of sable brown hair from her forehead. "We're family now. Please tell me. Who is trying to contact you?"

"How did you --"

"I'm a witch. I can feel the energy surrounding you. Someone, a witch, perhaps, is trying to contact you."

Dante realized there was no use trying to lie to her. "Yes," he sighed. "But it's only a faint impression. I can only hear my name. I think it's a woman."

Sasha held her hands up as though she would touch him. "May I?"

He eyed her suspiciously. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to unlock your mind and channel the person trying to contact you."

Dante felt uneasy about Sasha touching his mind. What if she were to tap into his other secrets? That was the last thing he needed.

"Please trust me. I see your reluctance, but I only want to help. If channeling this person will help us figure out this entire mess, don't you think we should try?"

Dante knew she made perfect sense, but he remained stubbornly silent.

"Listen to her, Dante. She can help you." Nico walked over to where they stood.

"Uncle Dante, perhaps whoever it is trying to contact you has the answers," Jagger joined in.

Dante realized this wasn't a fight he was going to win. "Fine. Just have done with it."

"Close your eyes," Sasha instructed.

Dante did as he was told and felt her soft fingertips touch his temples.

"Relax," she whispered. "Yes, that's it. Free your mind. Yes."

*Dante*, the voice grew louder.

"Go ahead and answer her"

“Yes, I am here. Who is this?”

*Dyannara Lucci.*

He frowned. “Dyannara? I know of no one by that name.”

*I beg to differ, Dante Grimaldi. I’ve seen you many times, and we’ve even met face to face. I never forget a name, or a tongue ... or a cock.* The laughter resonated in his mind.

“Who are you?” he demanded, getting angry.

*I’m very ’urt that you don’t recognize me, love.* The subtle Italian accent changed to the familiar cockney tones of a woman he and GianMarco had encountered in a London nightclub several months ago.

“You set us up, you bitch!”

Again the laughter exploded in his mind. *I’m surprised that a man of your advanced age wouldn’t realize that not everything is as it appears.*

“Who are you working for?”

*That doesn’t matter right now. In time, all will be revealed. For now, I would advise you to get over to Warsaw. I don’t think you’ll make it in time, but you’ll find something very interesting there.*

“What are you talking about?”

*You’ll found out. We’ll meet again soon, Dante. I’m very much looking forward to it.*

“Dyannara? Dyannara!” The voice was gone. He opened his eyes. Sasha let go and stepped back, a dazed look in her eyes.

She covered her mouth with her hand, and the look she gave him told Dante that she’d seen much more that he had wanted her to.

“Sashsa --”

She held up her hand. “It’s none of my business. I think we need to get to Warsaw right now.”

*You know how I feel about Maggie, don’t you?*

She looked away, a deep blush reddening her cheeks. *Like I said, it’s none of my business.*

“What’s going on?” Nico asked.

“The woman from the nightclub ... remember, I told you about her?”

Nico frowned. “The same woman Marco encountered in his home?”

“It appears so, yes.”

“What does she want?”

“She said there is something in Warsaw that we should see.”

“But that’s hours away. If this is another massacre, we won’t make it in time,” Jagger said.

“Yes, I know. She also said that we wouldn’t make it in time, but we have my private jet at our disposal. We can make it there by midnight.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Nico threw his arm around Sasha’s shoulder and began to lead her out of the room. Jagger followed at his mother’s other side.

Sasha turned her head toward him, her gaze locking with Dante’s, her mind open to his. *Your secret regarding Maggie is safe with me.*

Dante looked away. He’d address this issue later. For now, the possibility of finding some answers was at hand.

\* \* \* \* \*

Romeo had to get the hell out of this house. The more time he spent with Christine, the more he liked it, and he didn’t want to. He knew he’d asked her to take some days off to be with him, but if they stayed together any longer, he wouldn’t be able to walk away.

He watched the gentle sway of her hips as she hummed and stirred eggs in a bowl to make French toast. Christine turned around and gave him a brilliant smile that made his heart flip. Well, maybe one extra day wouldn’t hurt.

“I hope you’re hungry.”

“For food, only minimally. For you ... well, that’s another story.”

“Please. I’m still recovering from an hour ago. You were insatiable.”

Romeo cocked an eyebrow at her. “I heard no complaints from your lips.”

“No. I was too busy moaning. I’m surprised I’m able to stand straight. I think your cock touched my spine.”

He laughed. “I know what you need to fix that. In fact, I have the perfect cure.”

“Oh, yeah? What do you have, Dr. Romeo?”

“Some peniscillin.”

Christine howled with laughter. “Has anyone ever told you that you have some serious issues?”

Romeo winked at her. “All the time.”

“You’re such a card. Anyway, breakfast is almost ready. Would you get the plates out of the top cabinet to the right? The silverware is in the drawer by the refrigerator.”

Romeo bounded up and went to the cabinet. He’d never set a table in his life, yet this cozy little domestic scene with Christine felt comfortable. Once the food was done and served, they sat down to eat.

“Mmm, this is delicious. You’re a good cook.”

“Thanks.” She smiled with obvious pleasure and Romeo thought that he would die a thousand deaths just to see that smile.

There was a brief pause before Christine spoke again. She set her fork down. "So, tell me about you. Do vampires have families?"

Romeo took a sip of his orange juice to wash down a mouthful of fried potatoes. "I have three brothers ... that I know of."

"That you know of?"

"It's a little confusing, but I'm the second oldest of my brothers."

"Are your parents still alive?"

Though they had been gone since he was not quite eleven, he still keenly felt their absence. "They died a long time ago."

"I'm sorry."

"It's all right. I had my brothers and I suppose that's more than some people have."

"What are they like? Your brothers, I mean." Christine looked at him with an intent expression in her dark eyes. Romeo generally didn't talk about his personal life, but she seemed genuinely interested in him and, for some reason, that pleased him.

"Well, Dante is the eldest. Actually he's quite a bit older than the rest of us and a bit of a tight ass. He tells me that I'm too wild for my own good, but I think perhaps if he were to relax ... Sometimes I think he takes things a little too seriously, but he's a good guy. He's sacrificed much for my brothers and me, and for that I will always be in his debt. I can't remember a time when he hasn't been there for us." He paused. "I worry about him, though. He sometimes acts as if the weight of the world is on his shoulders. But that's neither here nor there." Romeo took another bite of his meal while Christine waited patiently for him to continue.

Her elbows were on the table and her pert chin rested on the palms of her hands. She had the look of a mischievous imp and it took every ounce of his willpower not to lean over the table and kiss her senseless. For probably the tenth time that morning, he thought about how pretty she was.

"As for Niccolo, or Nico, as we call him, he's sort of quiet. He only really talks when there's something important to be said, but in a way he can be a little like me. There's a bit of a wild streak, but he exercises quite a lot more restraint than I do. You would like him, but don't let his silence fool you. He's not one to be crossed. Then there's GianMarco -- Marco, the youngest. He's very used to getting his way; I guess it's the younger child syndrome. But he's a lot like Dante, too. He can be very serious, and he's fiercely protective, but he's a bit of a dreamer, too. He used to be promiscuous, even for a vampire, but he's become considerably tamer since his wife, Maggie, came into his life."

"Vampires marry?"

"We can if we choose to. Some do, some don't."

"Then why did GianMarco marry?"

“Actually, he has married twice and for the same reasons. You humans see things in black and white. Things like a marriage certificate matters to you. To an immortal, it’s just a piece of paper. The true bond is here.” Romeo pointed to his heart. “This is much stronger than any man-made decree, especially when that bond is for eternity. There are immortals, however, who have embraced a more human lifestyle in order to blend in. Marco’s wives were human before he took them as mates. He legalized their bonds to show his commitment to them.”

“I see.”

“Speaking of which, why hasn’t someone snatched you up?”

She let out a humorless laugh. “Someone did.”

That didn’t sit well with Romeo at all, her words slamming into his chest like a sledgehammer. Where was this possessiveness coming from?

“Who? Where is he now?” he demanded. *So that I can tear him apart.* His fists hit the table and made the dishes bounce.

Christine’s arms fell to her side, and she sat back in her chair. “Easy, boy. I said someone did, not that I’m still married. My ex is happily remarried with his two point five children.”

Romeo felt the tension slowly leaving his muscles. “What happened?”

Her lips twisted as though she’d just tasted something bitter. “He left me for a whole woman.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I can’t have children of my own and he couldn’t stand the idea of adoption, of raising someone else’s children.” Christine shrugged with a nonchalance that surprised him.

Romeo examined her closely, searching her face for signs of sadness, but found none. “You seem to be taking it rather well.”

“It was five years ago and, trust me, it hurts a lot less now than it did then. Besides, I think I fell out of love with Rick a long time before he left me. It’s hard to stay in love with someone who thinks the world revolves around him.”

“He wasn’t worthy of you. While I’m sure most people believe that children are a natural extension of marriage, if the foundation between a man and woman isn’t strong enough, children will only make things worse.”

Christine shot him a surprised look. “Very well put. You sound like you know what you’re talking about.”

“Like I said, I’ve lived a long time and have met many people and experienced many things.”

“Have you ... have you ever thought of settling down like your brothers?”

“Hell, no!” Romeo regretted those words the minute they left his mouth when he saw Christine wince. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. If that’s how you feel, then at least you’re honest.”

“But what I’m trying to say is --”

Christine shook her head. “There’s no need to explain. Let’s just enjoy the time we have together, okay?”

Romeo nodded his head, still feeling a little uneasy about how his statement might have come across. An awkward silence fell between them as they both resumed eating. He wasn’t particularly hungry anymore and only ate half the contents on his plate. He finally pushed it away.

“Now it’s your turn. Do you have any family? Mother, father, siblings?”

“Well, my birth parents died thirty-two years ago when I was three. My father was a doctor, and he came over from China to set up a practice in this country so he could provide a better future for my mother and me. I was two when he sent for us. From what I remember, life was good, but one night, the house caught on fire. You see, my dad was a heavy smoker; he’d fallen asleep with a cigarette in his mouth. He got caught in the flames and died. My mother got me out of the house, but just barely. She died that night of smoke asphyxiation.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Like you, it’s been a long time, and sometimes I can’t even remember what they looked like.”

“You were born in China, but Christine sounds Western.”

“I was adopted at four and my name was changed. My given name is Li Mei.”

“Beautiful Plum Blossom. It suits you.”

“You speak Mandarin?”

“I speak many languages.” He broke into a stream of Mandarin.

Christine laughed. “Whoa. You’re going much too fast for me. My Chinese language skills are basic at best. I haven’t spoken it in so long I’ve forgotten a lot of it.”

Romeo grinned. “Terrible with languages, are you?”

“Awful.”

“Maybe I’ll have to teach you.”

“Maybe.” Christine waggled her dark brows at him.

“You didn’t mention your adoptive parents.”

“There’s not much to say. Although I’m grateful that they took me into their home, I never really felt like a part of their household, especially when they had a child of their own. I was good enough for them when they thought they couldn’t have any, but when they finally conceived and had their own ... Don’t get me wrong, they weren’t bad people, and I

never wanted for anything, but they just loved their own child a lot more and showed it in many ways.”

Romeo was upset on her behalf. How could people treat children like that? It still amazed him that someone could go through as much as Christine, and yet have such an innate goodness shine through.

“Hey, Romeo, heads up!”

He looked up only to get a face full of French toast. It stuck to his cheek, and Christine began to cackle like a loon.

“What was that for?”

“Haven’t you ever heard of a food fight?” She took her fork and flicked scrambled eggs at him. This time he ducked, laughing. Peeling the toast from his face, he flung it back at her, his vampire reflexes not allowing her enough time to get out of the way. It caught her in the chest. A knock-down, drag-out food fight ensued.

Breakfast remains flew across the table, some of it barely missing him. Romeo got in a couple of good licks, taking care not to hurt her by leashing his full strength. By the time there was nothing left to fling, they had both fallen to the floor, laughing uncontrollably.

Romeo couldn’t remember a time when he’d had so much fun with a woman outside of bed. He looked at her, taking in the beauty of her delicate features now animated with merriment. “You know what this means, don’t you?”

“What?” Christine grinned at him.

“We’re going to have to take another shower.”

“Are you just trying to get me naked again?”

“You read me so well, my dear.”

## Chapter Eight

“Shit! Shit! Shit! Romeo was supposed to take care of this, and I can’t get a hold of him.”

Nico patted Dante on the shoulder. “Calm down, Dante. He’s already taken care of three Council members. There are only two more ... three, if you count Locke. He’s been at this for the last two months. You know just as well as the rest of us how difficult it is to track Council members when they don’t want to be found.”

“He said he was going to the States for a week; he didn’t say he would be incommunicado.”

“You know Ro, he’ll get the job done.”

Dante slammed his fist in his hand. “And in the meantime, more innocent people will die. I gave him a job to do, and because he decided to take some time off, people are dead.”

“Whoa! You’re not being fair.”

“Fuck being fair! Do you realize how difficult it was to keep those reporters away? We won’t be able to keep this undercover for very long. You should be pissed. Your mate and son are now lying in a hotel, exhausted because they were drained from having to cover up this mess.”

After communicating with the witch Dyannara, Dante and the others had flown to Warsaw. Just as he was getting off the plane, one of his agents had informed him of a massacre in the heart of the city. What they’d found was far worse than any of the scenes they’d come upon before. The victims were not only murdered, but they had been brutalized and mutilated. Some had even been devoured with only the remains of gnawed bones left behind.

And the stench, oh, God, the stench was like nothing he’d ever smelled. It was a wonder that some hapless human hadn’t stumbled upon the scene. The cleanup effort had almost turned his stomach. What kind of sick bastards could do this to innocent people even



if they were trying to rid the world of humans? The other question was how did the witch know this would happen?

A psychic occurrence possibly could explain it away, but if Dyannara knew about this, why hadn't she done something to stop it? But then, although she'd denied it, wasn't she also the one who'd set up him and Marco in the London club to be taken out by a couple of rogues?

None of this made sense, and he was no closer to the mysterious Adonis than he had before. He silently cursed in frustration. Ivan's last words had also plagued his mind. How was it possible that they had two brothers he knew nothing about? His parents had had no other children after Marco. The only possibility was that they had to be older. Yet, if that was the case, what were the circumstances of their birth? Why had Mama and Papa never mentioned them?

"Even if Ro was on the job right now, it wouldn't guarantee that this wouldn't have occurred," Nico said

"And maybe it would have."

"For all we know, the Council might not be behind these deaths. Perhaps Ivan was mistaken. Sasha said her father was near death when he mentioned the Council's involvement."

Dante grew angrier when he remembered the wizard's confession. Ivan Romanov was not only powerful before his death, but he had had many powerful allies as well. It had been no secret that he'd backed the Council in all their decisions. Ivan had had no reason to lie about their involvement in this diabolical plot.

Dante folded his arms over his chest. "And if you believe that the Council is innocent, I have a bridge in Brooklyn to sell you."

Nico gave him a long, searching look, annoyance flashing in the amber depths of his eyes. "I'm not sure what's gotten into you lately, but you'd better get over it quickly before you alienate everyone."

"What," Dante began through clenched teeth, "are you trying to say?"

"I'm not trying to say anything. I believe I just said it. You've been acting like a dictator these past few months, and some members of the Underground have mentioned it."

Dante was shocked. He'd thought he had made it clear that anyone with a problem could come to him. To hear that the people he trusted were talking behind his back was disturbing. "What have they been saying?"

"That you've changed. You have no patience, and you're short with everyone. Many are speculating what may have caused this change in you."

"They need to mind their own goddammed business, and I don't put much store in things people can't say to my face."

Nico poked a finger against Dante's chest. "In that case, I'm telling you straight to your face to stop being such an asshole. You know damn well that we all work our asses off for you, and God knows it's not for the money. Most of these men could buy and sell Bill Gates ten times over, but they do it for a common goal. We all want to eradicate the rogue threat. Marco, Romeo and myself have been with you from the beginning and we've put up with a lot of your shit without complaint. Don't make this harder for us than it already is."

Nico's words were hard to swallow, but Dante knew there was more than a kernel of truth there, too. But he wasn't in the mood to be reasonable. "Are you saying the threat to our family means nothing to you?"

"You know that's not what I meant. You're deliberately twisting my words. If I didn't care, I wouldn't be here. If Maggie were not in a delicate condition, Marco would be here, too, and you damn well know it."

At the mention of Marco and his wife, Dante ground his teeth together. "So where is Romeo? Let me guess. He's probably in some bar causing trouble or with some whore. I guess I should have known better than to trust him with so important a mission. I suppose if I wanted things done right, I should have done them myself."

Nico's amber eyes began to glow, and Dante knew he'd gone too far.

"I ... I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

"Then why the hell did you say it?"

"I don't know ... I just ... I didn't think."

"Damn right, you didn't. Look, you can stand here like a jackass, if you want, but I'm going to the hotel to be with my mate and son."

Dante closed his eyes in despair. When his brother turned to walk away, Dante called to him. "Nico! Please know that no one is more important to me than you and our brothers. I love you all."

Nico's face remained stony. "Then start acting like it." With that, Nico flashed away.

Dante leaned against the stone wall of the abandoned building. He felt like crying, but tears were not a luxury he'd indulged in since childhood. Nico was absolutely correct, of course. He *was* being an asshole, and the last thing he needed or could afford was to lose the respect and love of those around him. If only he could figure out why he was still having these feelings for Maggie, then perhaps he wouldn't be so short with everyone, especially when they didn't deserve it.

His cell phone rang. "Dante here."

"It's me."

"Where the hell have you been, Romeo? I left a message on your phone. You should at least have the courtesy to return my calls in a timely fashion."

"I'm not calling to be lectured. I just wanted to let you know that Wolf and I are flying to Buenos Aires in the morning. I believe Pierre Renault has a summer home there."

Pierre Renault was the number three man on the Council, a centuries-old wizard who was also a tight ally of Devlin Locke's, the current head of the Council and Dante's personal nemesis.

Dante bit his tongue to prevent himself from saying what was really on his mind. He silently counted to five before speaking. "Are you certain of this?"

"Pretty certain. Wolf received some tips and we're going to head down there."

"Wolf received the tips? Where. Were. You?"

"I spent time with a friend."

"A lady friend, I suppose?" Dante gritted his teeth, gripping his phone even more tightly.

"And if I was?"

"While you were screwing some bimbo, another incident occurred in Poland."

There was a sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line. "First off, I've done what you've asked. Half the Council members have been taken care of. God knows when they'll begin sending people after me. Second, I've spent the last two months eating, sleeping and breathing this mission, so don't you dare imply that I haven't been doing my duty. You'll just have to forgive me for taking a few days off to unwind. Look, I don't have time for this shit. I'll check in when I get to Argentina."

Before Dante could respond, the phone clicked off. He'd done it again. Fuck! His usually easygoing brother had nearly raised his voice at him. Dante cursed himself yet again for being such fool.

\* \* \* \* \*

Christine bent her neck, letting the water beat down on her head. Romeo had said he needed to make a call and would join her shortly, so she wondered what was taking him so long. She shivered in anticipation at the thought of him taking her in the shower again, just as he had earlier that morning.

She didn't know what had made her start a food fight, but she'd felt so at ease with him that it never occurred to her that Romeo wouldn't like it. Rick had expected so much of her. There had been little humor in their marriage, so it felt good to be around someone who didn't take himself so seriously.

Christine had dated men with a sense of humor before, but Romeo made her smile without even trying. Although they'd known each other for only two days, she was starting to have feelings for him. When they made love, laughed with each other, and just talked, she could easily imagine a future with him. That was something she couldn't afford to do. If her heart go involved, it would be harder to turn him away after a while.

It wasn't as though he'd want to stick around anyway, but just in case, Christine knew she had to tread carefully. Why did life have to throw so many curve balls when you were

going for the home run record? It just wasn't fair. Why couldn't she have met him years ago when ... well, that didn't really matter now.

Her vision became cloudy, but it wasn't because of tears, No, it was from the shower spray. Of course, it was. She rested her head against the shower stall, glad that the water covered her misery.

The next thing she knew, she was urgently pulled back against a muscular frame. Christine gasped when she felt firm, determined hands dip between her thighs and fingers began to tweak her clit.

Her breath caught in her throat. "Romeo." His free hand circled her throat, and his lips slid up and down the side of her cheek, hot against her already heated skin. A burning ache built up in the pit of her belly and spread through every vein of her body.

Romeo's tongue grazed her neck and Christine thought her knees would give out on her. His caresses were rough and hurried, as though he was driven by a force he couldn't control, but she loved it.

She moved against his hands as his fingers probed her pussy so deliciously. Romeo's cock pressed against her backside, sliding against the crack between her cheeks. Christine leaned into him, her arms coming up to reach around his neck.

"You feel so damn good, Christine. Just know that this is more than sex," he whispered.

What did he mean by that, and why did his words fill her with a joy she hadn't felt in a long time?

"It means more to me, too." She sighed.

The hand that had been caressing her throat dropped to one tight breast. His other fingers slid against her damp slit. "Please put your fingers inside of me," she pleaded.

"You want my fingers inside your cunt, sweetheart?"

"Yes, please," she moaned. "Don't torture me."

"As if I could deny you anything." He teased her by sliding one long digit into her channel.

"More!"

"More?" She could hear the smile in his voice.

"More," Christine demanded again, bringing her arms down and gripping his hand, forcing another of his fingers inside her.

"You want it bad, don't you?" His grip tightened on her breast and Christine knew she'd lose it if Romeo continued to touch her like this. He finger-fucked her with quick, skilled thrusts, making her pant for air.

Christine reached behind her and wrapped her fingers around his cock, sliding her hand over the slick rod, her pace matching the rhythm of his hand.

When he thrust his fingers into her cunt, she squeezed him harder, this mutual giving of pleasure driving her even higher. Just when she didn't think she could take anymore, in one synchronized motion, Romeo removed his fingers from her, turned her around, set her against the shower stall, and lifted one of her thighs, pushing his dick into her eagerly waiting pussy.

All she could do was gasp in surprise and pleasure. Even though they'd already fucked more times than she could remember, his size was still something she was getting used to. It made her ache a bit, but it was a good kind of ache. She loved the way his cock stretched her vaginal walls so deliciously.

The sheer power evidenced in his thrusts triggered a primal feeling within her to be taken and claimed by him. How she wanted this man and every inch of his wonderful vampire cock. "Yes, Romeo! Fuck me! Fuck me! Fuck me!" Her voice grew louder with every word. Christine grasped his shoulders to steady herself, her fingers gripping his flesh, and her legs wrapping around his steadily thrusting hips.

The water grew cooler with each minute that passed, but Christine barely noticed. She was kept warm from Romeo's skin pressing against hers. He bent his head and kissed her. "Beautiful, just beautiful. Let me taste you, Christine. Trust me."

Christine couldn't deny him, though her body began to shake; she tilted her head back in silent consent.

"Relax, sweetheart."

She closed her eyes against the glowing of Romeo's cobalt eyes. Holding her breath, she prepared herself to feel the sting of his bite, but what she felt when his incisors pierced the tender skin of her neck was like no other sensation she'd ever experienced.

His feeding from her created such a head rush that she was close to passing out with pleasure. His cock continued to work in and out of her. Her nails dug deeper into his shoulders, breaking skin, but she couldn't help herself and Romeo didn't seem to mind.

A torrid wave of lust rocked her body, guiding her to a mind-blowing peak. Her hands fell away from his shoulders, and, feeling weak, Christine leaned back against the wall. Romeo finally lifted his head, a drop of her blood stained the corner of her mouth.

She never knew that a vampire's bite could be so pleasurable. It took another couple of powerful thrusts before Romeo reached his own orgasm, the semen pulsing up inside her.

He stayed inside of her while he placed kisses on her face and throat. Christine felt safe and treasured in Romeo's arms and didn't want the moment to end, but like most good things she knew it had to.

Romeo grabbed a nearby washcloth and rubbed it over her body. The rag felt good against her burning skin. "That was wonderful," she sighed when his semi-erect penis slid out of her.

“You were wonderful.” Romeo turned the water off before lifting her in his arms and stepping out of the shower.

“We’re still wet. Shouldn’t we dry off first?” she murmured against his chest.

“Why? You’re just going to get wet again when I lick every delectable inch of your body.”

## Chapter Nine

Christine could barely open her eyes her head hurt so much. The throbbing ache in her head was even worse than usual. It was times like this that she wished she were dead. Trying not to make any sudden movements lest she cause herself more pain, she rolled over slowly and reached for her nightstand drawer. She pulled out her bottle of tablets and, not caring that she didn't have any water, Christine swallowed the two pills carefully, then lay back on the bed with her eyes tightly shut.

It could partially have been due to waking up in the middle of the night to find Romeo gone. He hadn't even left a note. She had realized that their arrangement would only be for a few days, but she hadn't expected him to leave so abruptly, without so much as a goodbye.

She placed a hand over her head and one on her chest. Why did it have to hurt so much? When she'd seen him walking toward her in the club, she should have run away and never looked back. Foolishly, Christine had let her guard down, and in the short time they'd spent together, Romeo had touched something within her that she had long thought was long gone.

*Damn him! I'll just have to forget about him, pretend nothing happened.* Perhaps when her head felt better, she'd go to the group home downtown she'd volunteered at off and on over the past few years. It was a place for children in the foster care system who were hard to place in homes. Since she'd already called in sick for the day, there was no point in sitting around the house moping. That would be the worst thing she could do. Besides, she sincerely doubted that Romeo was thinking about her, wherever he was.

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Romeo couldn't get her out of his mind, and it was slowly driving him insane. When he'd stolen out of her quiet home in the middle of the night, he'd longed to take her in his

arms and reassure her ... of what, he didn't know. One thing he did know was that if he hadn't left her right then, he wouldn't have been able to.

Damn. How was this possible, that after all these centuries of carousing and literally thousands of women, this one woman could have such a lasting effect on him? When he was with Christine, why did he always want to hold her and never let go? Why did he get jealous at the mere thought of her with other men? Why was there this unfamiliar ache in his chest now that he wasn't with her?

Was it possible that *this* was the love he'd mocked and ridiculed his brothers and others for so long? Was this what Marco felt for Maggie and Nico for Sasha? Hell. This love shit was for the birds. He could almost imagine his brothers laughing at him. It was a good thing that he'd gotten away from her when he did. This way, his heart wouldn't be too gone.

Romeo stared out the window of the airplane and took off his headphones. Next to him, Wolf thumbed through a magazine, looking bored.

"You seem to have a lot on your mind, my friend," Wolf said, not looking up.

Romeo shrugged. "No more than usual. I'm just anxious to get there and take out Renault."

"It seems like you have something else other than this mission on your mind. Would it have anything to do with the lovely young woman from the club?"

"What happened between me and Christine is none of your concern." Romeo glared at his friend, his hackles rising at the mere whisper of her name on the other vampire's lips.

Wolf's eyebrows drew together, a tightness forming at his mouth. "Easy. I was only asking. What's wrong with you? You've been abrupt with me since I met you at the airport ... which is a day earlier than planned, by the way. We're supposed to be friends, and if you can't confide in your friends, who can you confide in? Or is this something you would rather discuss with one of your brothers?"

Romeo didn't want to discuss this with anyone, but the thought of being hounded by his brothers didn't sit well with him. "Fine, if I tell you, will you get off my back?"

"I'm not twisting your arm, you know." Wolf turned his attention back to his magazine.

Romeo shut his eyes and opened them again. He touched Wolf's arm. "Look, I'm sorry. I know I'm being an asshole, but I can't really explain it."

Wolf frowned, not seeming to understand.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is ... damn. Have you ever been in love?"

Wolf looked around them as though he was searching for something.

"What are you doing, Wolf?"

"I was just checking for pods."

"Pods?"



“You know ... *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. What did you do with my friend Romeo?”

“Very cute, wiseass. I swear to God if you start laughing, I’ll rip your damn heart out.”

Wolf obviously tried to cover a chuckle. Romeo wanted to belt him one. “There’s no need for threats. Your question was surprising, is all.”

“Well?” Romeo practically growled.

“Well, what?”

“Have you ever been in love, damn it?” Romeo didn’t realize that his voice had risen to a level where the other first-class passengers could hear until the flight attendant walked by.

“Sirs, I’m going to have to ask you to keep it down as a courtesy to the other passengers.” She had incredibly long lashes, and raven locks fell over her shoulders. A gleam of appreciation entered her hazel eyes as she looked at them both. She was quite lovely, but Romeo felt unmoved by her charms.

“We apologize,” Romeo answered curtly, turning his head away to convey his disinterest.

Wolf, on the other hand, didn’t seem so indifferent. “Don’t mind my friend, *fraulein*. I’ll make sure he keeps the volume down.”

Romeo glanced at Wolf, only to see him giving the woman his famous Wagner smile. He rolled his eyes. Wolf flirted with anything in a skirt.

“That was a little rude,” Wolf said, when they were alone once more.

“How was it rude? I simply apologized.”

“It wasn’t what you said, it was how you said it. You must really have it bad for this woman.”

“I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Oh, no, you don’t. You’re not going to bring up a subject, then drop it.”

“Funny, because I just did.”

A short silence followed before Wolf spoke again. “To answer your question, I have been in love before.”

Romeo faced him. “You have? You never mentioned this before.”

“You never asked me before.”

“Do you care to elaborate?” Romeo prompted when the other vampire fell silent.

“No, I don’t, but I will for you.” He took a deep breath. “It was a very long time ago, long before we met. I wasn’t quite fifty, and her name was Elsa.”

“What happened?”

“She was human.”

“And? You keep stopping as if everything is self-explanatory.”

“Just as you don’t wish to discuss your lady, I, too, have a difficult time talking about Elsa.”

He had a point. “I’m sorry.”

An ironic smile twisted Wolf’s lips. “It’s okay. As you know, religion ruled people’s lives back then and her home was particularly strict. Anything they couldn’t understand had to be evil. She couldn’t accept the fact I am a vampire.”

“But if you loved her, then surely she loved you back.”

“I don’t know. I thought she did, but Elsa couldn’t reconcile her feelings for me and what had been hammered into her head all her life. She knew that to be with me, she would eventually have to let me bring her over. For a while she agreed to it. To us. I read her fears and I tried my best to reassure her, but in the end, my love wasn’t enough.”

“What happened?”

“Elsa jumped out of a window in her family’s country manor.” Wolf said the words without inflection, as though he were relaying something from the news, rather than someone whose lover had chosen death over him. Romeo didn’t know what to say. Any words after such a revelation would seem trite and insincere.

“I didn’t know.”

“Why would you? I’ve told no one else.”

“Is that why you’ve always said humans are for fun?”

“Partly. Only fate can decide if I find a mate again. I hope to God it’s another immortal, be she vampire, witch or shifter, because I don’t ever want to go through that again.”

“Christine is not like that. She accepts me for who I am.”

Wolf raised a brow, “How can you be so sure? Did you tell her?”

“She already knew. I’m sure her friend told her about us.”

“And she wasn’t frightened?”

Romeo smiled when he thought of the way she’d exposed the lovely column of her throat to his gaze. “Not a bit. I mean, she was a little at first, but she eventually accepted my bite.”

“I see. It’s a very dangerous thing to tell a human of our existence without checking them out first.”

“I know, and yet she’s friends with another vampire. Some humans can be trusted.”

“I’m aware of this. I’m just proceeding on the side of caution for now.”

“In a way, I think it kind of excited her that I am a vampire.”

“She isn’t one of those doom and gloom Goth freaks, is she?”

“No, and I will thank you not to refer to her as a freak.”

“I didn’t. I think it’s as plain as the nose on your face that you’ve fallen for this woman. You’re much too sensitive about her, so let’s just drop it.”

“But I barely know her,” Romeo protested.

“Perhaps not up here,” Wolf tapped the side of Romeo’s head, “but apparently your heart and body do. When we leave Buenos Aires, you should go back to her and find out if this woman is your true mate. From the sound of it, she is.”

“But she can’t be. I just can’t fall in love.”

“Why not?”

“Because ... well, for one thing, if I were to take a mate, I wouldn’t be able to do the things I like.”

The corners of Wolf’s lips tilted up. “Like hell-raising and bed-hopping?”

“Exactly.”

“Perhaps she will want to do some hell-raising and bed-hopping of her own.”

“Over my dead body! The only man she’ll ever be with again is me,” Romeo hissed before he could help himself. He knew he was caught the moment the words were out of his mouth. Wolf’s smile widened.

Romeo shook his head. “No, that’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

“That’s all beside the point. What about my duties to the Underground?”

Wolf wrinkled his nose. “What about them?”

“You’re really dense sometimes, you know that?”

Wolf laughed. “Maybe about some things, but I wonder why I can clearly see this issue for what it is when you cannot. So, I ask again, what about your Underground duties?”

“I can’t have a mate and still do what I need to do. Look at Marco. He’s become so utterly domesticated, it’s sickening. Nothing against his mate, but he’s given up a lot. I’m not about to do the same thing.”

“That’s bull and you know it, Romeo. The only reason Marco is not active with the Underground right now is because his wife is very pregnant and she’s still young for a vampire. Look at your other brother. Not only has Niccolo’s mate joined him, so has his son.”

“Yes, but he has to constantly baby-sit the two of them.”

“You do a disservice to Sasha and Jagger. I’ve seen those two in action. They may be young and somewhat inexperienced, but I wouldn’t mess with either of them.”

Wolf was right, of course. His sister-in-law, Sasha, and nephew, Jagger, could hold their own and, when she eventually had her baby and regained her strength, Maggie would be able to as well ... so why was he fighting his feelings for Christine so hard? *Because I don’t want it to turn out like it initially did for Nico and Marco.* Sure, they were happy now, but they’d also suffered great loss and pain before obtaining the happiness they now enjoyed.

Romeo couldn't imagine going through all that with Christine. Furthermore, being with her would be the same as putting a target on her back. The Grimaldis had too many enemies. Who was to say that they wouldn't try to get at him through her, the way rogue vampires had done to Nico with Sasha and Jagger?

He didn't know if he had the strength to love her.

## Chapter Ten

“Are you sure this is the place?” Romeo turned to his companions. He and Wolf had been met at the airport by Aries Kiriakis, a shifter and sometimes agent in the Underground. Romeo liked the young man, who had not only proven to be valuable to the cause many times, but also had a wildness about him that Romeo liked.

“Yes, I’m sure. This is where I last saw them. Renault is with two guards. There is also a shifter and another vampire in there. No doubt he’s aware of the Council member terminations. You’ll need to be careful. Renault is crafty in his skills as a wizard. He can make you see things that aren’t there.”

Romeo tsked. “That doesn’t scare me.”

Aries shook his dark, shaggy head, his black eyes narrowing in seriousness. “I wouldn’t take this so lightly, my friend. I’ve seen him in action. It won’t be as easy as you think.”

“If you say so.” Romeo sighed heavily. He needed to break some heads to take his mind off things. Perhaps when he was kicking a little ass again, things would go back to normal and Christine would be but a distant memory.

Dante was right. He should have taken care of this by now. So what if he’d spent two months trying to track these bastards down? He should have stuck to his task. The one thing that bothered him most about this mission was that it was taking so long to find the Council members. The point of having a Council was so that they were accessible to other immortals. Yet it almost seemed as though they’d known what was going to happen. Aries’ words aside, had the first three Council members he’d terminated known he was coming for them? Why had it taken so long for the possibility to occur to him?

There had to be a leak in the Underground. It was the only explanation. Romeo thought about Trent Black, another agent who had been taken out by rogues. When he had

been killed, it had looked like Trent was in cahoots with the bad guys, but who was the leak now? He vowed to find out.

“Earth to Romeo.” Wolf waved his hand in his face. Romeo forced the disturbing thoughts from his mind.

“What did you say?”

“I was asking how you wanted to handle this. They’re in there and I believe they know we’re out here.” Wolf surveyed their surroundings, probably making sure they weren’t being watched.

“They do know we’re out here. If I can smell them, and I can, you’d best believe the shifter inside can smell us, too.” Aries inhaled deeply, taking another whiff of air. “Yes, there’s definitely a scent of awareness about them. We should go on the offensive before they come out to us.”

“Good point. If they’re waiting for us, we may as well go through the front door. I’ll take Renault. Wolf, you take the vampire, and Aries --”

“Yes, I know. I’ll take the shifter. You always give me the shifter.”

“We’re wasting time. Fine, you take the vampire and Wolf will take the shifter. Satisfied?”

Aries shrugged. “I was just making an observation. No need to bite my head off.”

“Let’s just go and get this done.” Romeo walked to the front of the house with Wolf and Aries following closely. When they stepped up to the front door, it flew open. Standing at the entrance was a tall, thin vampire. He looked as though he hadn’t seen the sun in years.

“We have been expecting you for a while now.” The vampire smiled eerily, which immediately put Romeo on his guard. “Come in.” He motioned them into the house.

Romeo looked at his companions, who looked as dumbfounded as he felt. What was the meaning of this?

“You were expecting us?”

“But, of course. Please come in; my boss would love to speak with you.”

Romeo frowned. “You do know why we’re here, don’t you?”

The creepy smile spread across the pale vampire’s face again. Romeo hadn’t lived so long by being stupid. Before he could question Pale Boy again, Wolf asked the question that was on all their minds.

“Who told you we’d be here?”

Pale Boy threw a contemptuous look at Wolf. “My master only has business with Grimaldi. He doesn’t deal with underlings,” he sneered.

“I’ll show you underlings, you dumb fuck.” Wolf shot forward. Romeo, not one to break up a fight, stepped aside. Wolf grabbed the pale vampire by the collar with one fist and

raised the other to slam into his adversary's face. To their surprise, just when Wolf's fist was about to connect, the vampire disappeared.

"What the hell?" Wolf exclaimed, looking around him.

"It's begun," Aries whispered. "I told you Renault is a powerful wizard. I bet that vampire wasn't real. Even the scent threw me off."

Wolf protested. "But I felt him. He was solid."

"Temporarily. I warned you that Renault is very skilled."

Romeo loved to fight, but battling wizards was tricky because they never fought fair. Then again, most rogue vampires didn't either. "We'll proceed with caution. Just be on the lookout. He's probably set a trap to get me in the house alone. Stay close." Romeo entered the house and moved into a long hallway. The thrill of what was to come seared through his body.

"I've locked onto their scent. We're getting closer," Aries said from behind him.

The house was shrouded in darkness, but one good thing about being a vampire was the ability to see in the dark. Romeo didn't know what Renault was playing at, but whatever it was, it wouldn't work.

His fingers twitched, itching to break bone, tear flesh, annihilate. A primitive feeling older than existence filled him with the need to kill -- his bloodlust was aroused. This was more like it. These were feelings he could deal with. As he walked further down the twisting corridor, Romeo realized they had been walking for a time but getting nowhere. "What's going on here?" he whispered to the two immortals at his back.

"He's using magic to prevent us from getting to him. He may try to get out of the house before we reach him. Wait!" Aries paused, sniffing the air again. He turned toward a wall and threw a fist out, shattering the barrier to bits. "This way." The shifter took the lead, sniffing as he went until he stopped in front of a steel door that looked similar to one in a bank vault.

Romeo placed his hand on the barrier. Even though he was strong enough to break through the door, it would still take precious minutes that he might not have. If Jagger had been here, he'd be able to get past it in a matter of seconds. With Wolf and Aries to help him, they should be able to get through it relatively quickly. "Boys?"

The three of them slammed their fists against the steel door, making it shudder. They repeated the motion four more times before the door collapsed inward. Before they had a chance to step through, a shifter in wolf form sprang forward, his teeth bared and aimed at Romeo's throat. He ducked just in time.

Aries let out a savage howl before falling to his hands and knees, his body quickly transforming, dark, coarse hair springing out where bare skin had been. His face elongated and sharp teeth extended from his mouth.

Romeo turned back to the shifter, who had sprung at him again. This time he was ready and gripped the wolf by the neck, shaking him and giving Aries enough time to complete shifting.

From the corner of his eyes, he saw his friend springing toward them. Romeo let go of the shifter in his grasp and turned to Wolf. "Let's go."

The two vampires entered the room while the two shaped-shifted immortals circled each other in preparation for a fight to the death. Romeo had every confidence that Aries would come out on top and, even if he didn't, Romeo wouldn't allow the rogue out of the house alive.

Inside the room, a vampire stood proud and defiant, his silver eyes glowing malevolently. He didn't seem very threatening with his diminutive height and slender frame, which almost appeared feminine. Years of experience, however, had taught Romeo not to underestimate an opponent's size, because it was always the smaller ones you had to doubly be wary of.

"Backup is on the way, you know." The small vampire grinned. "You might get rid of us, but more will be here shortly. You won't leave here intact."

"Where is Renault?" Romeo demanded.

Out of the shadows stepped an extremely obese man, who looked as though he'd never missed a meal in his life. The thought had barely crossed Romeo's mind when he was hit with a bolt so strong it sent him stumbling back.

"Looking for me?" This had to be Renault. Romeo had only had pictures of his prey, but the one for this Council member had obviously been taken years ago because the man in the photo was much slimmer.

Regaining his footing, Romeo charged toward the wizard. Wolf was already exchanging blows with the other vampire. Renault disappeared and materialized on the other side of the room.

"Did you think I would make it easy for you, Grimaldi? Do you honestly think killing me will change anything? If you think that, you and your brothers are dumber than we thought," Renault taunted.

On the verge of charging at him again, Romeo halted. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Why don't you figure it out for yourself? You have already killed three of us, yet the movement goes on, stronger than ever. We shall inherit the earth. This world was meant for the strong. Why you and your brothers persist in trying to stop this is beyond me." Renault shook his head.

Romeo flashed forward, temporarily distracting the wizard long enough to hit him in his spongy stomach. "Oof." The wizard doubled over before once more disappearing and



reappearing on the other side of the room. Renault glared at Romeo with hatred so tangible he could almost see it.

“You’ll pay for that, vampire.” The wizard raised his hands and, to Romeo’s surprise, he was lifted off his feet and slammed into a wall. His body was lifted in the air again and crashed so hard into another wall that bones were crushed this time.

It felt like some of his ribs had snapped. Romeo gritted his teeth, determined not to give the bastard the satisfaction of hearing him scream. He knew it would be a few minutes before he could heal. Once he got his hands on that wizard’s neck, he was going to rip his fucking head off.

“Give up, Grimaldi, and I just may take pity on you.” The wizard laughed.

“Do you think your wizard tricks will be able to stop me from killing you? Do your worst, but if I get my hands on you, you will wish you’d never started this.” Romeo spat, blood mixing with his saliva.

“Those are brave words for someone in your condition.”

“One thing you seem to have forgotten, wizard, a vampire my age heals rapidly. Wizards don’t. Perhaps you are the one who should give up.” Romeo struggled to his feet, finally realizing that charging at the wizard would do no good. Renault could anticipate his moves and teleport to the other side of the room ... Wait, that was it! When the wizard teleported, it was always to the exact opposite side of the room.

Romeo felt his bones mending, but he wasn’t quite one hundred percent yet. Still, he had to make his move now or who knew what the wizard had planned for him. He saw Wolf tear his sharpened nails down the side of the rogue vampire’s face, popping out an eye. Wolf was clearly doing okay on his own.

Romeo had to take care of the wizard now. If it was true that reinforcements were on their way, he knew he and his friends had to end this quickly. Romeo made to move as though he were charging toward Renault but, anticipating that the wizard would dematerialize and reappear on the other side of the room, he immediately changed direction, catching his enemy by surprise.

Romeo grabbed the wizard by the throat and rammed his fist into the man’s face, hearing and feeling bones shatter. Romeo hit him again and again in the same spot until Renault’s face had collapsed into itself. His incisors descended and he tore at the wizard’s throat.

Surprisingly, the wizard still hung onto life, his body growing so hot suddenly that Romeo had no choice but to let go. Renault’s nearly lifeless body slumped to the floor. “If you think killing me will put an end to this, you’re wrong. This is only the beginning,” the wizard whispered ... and died.

Romeo stomped on his head and squished it beneath his heel in disgust. He touched his sore ribs. They ached a bit, but the pain was bearable. He turned around in time to see Wolf

rip out the rogue vampire's heart and crush it in his fist to ensure death. Wolf tossed the rogue and his heart aside, then wiped his hand on his pants. "Rogue blood makes me nauseous," Wolf muttered.

Romeo shot him a faint smile. "Let's check on Aries and get the hell out of here before the cavalry arrives." The two vampires stepped out of the room to see Aries in human form standing naked over the rogue shifter who lay dead at his feet. "Damn. I should have brought an extra pair of pants with me." Aries laughed.

Romeo shook his head. "Unfortunately, the clothes on the bodies in that room won't fit you. Just shift to wolf form again, and we'll get you something to wear when we're a good distance away from here." He then turned to Wolf. "We have a problem."

"What is it?"

"There's a traitor among us."

## Chapter Eleven

Dante pounded into her sopping wet pussy, grinding harder and deeper with each stroke. Her thick chocolate thighs quivered in his grip. “Oh, yes! Fuck this pussy, white boy. Give it to me good!” the woman yelled out in ecstasy.

He wished she'd shut the hell up, because he was going to lose interest fast. *Dio*, what was her name again? Was it Rolanda? Roshonda? Ronisha? Whatever it was, he didn't care. He just needed relief from the ache that had built up within him.

On the way home to his apartment, Dante had stopped at one of the restaurants he owned. He'd spotted this woman dining with a few others. Though her dining companions could probably have passed for supermodels and had given him interested looks, it was her plump frame and chocolate brown skin that had caught his eyes. When she'd laughed, her cheeks had dimpled up prettily ... just like Maggie's. He'd observed her over a glass of Merlot, her mannerisms and features so like the woman he was obsessed with.

By the time the woman and her friends had prepared to leave, Dante had managed to convince himself how much like Maggie she looked. He'd approached her and it wasn't long before she'd agreed to bring him back to her lower East Side apartment. She'd told him that she was a designer and she was meeting with a couple of clients, so he hadn't been far off his mark in thinking her companions were models.

The more he'd talked to her, however, the more he'd realized that she was nothing like Maggie. This woman was a bit too uncouth for his taste, but by the time he'd got to her place, his cock had ached badly and Dante couldn't face another night of masturbation.

So what if she wasn't who he really wanted. She was a warm body with a pussy. She'd do. Besides, if he closed his eyes, he could pretend.

“That's right. Give Rolandra what she wants. Fuck me with your big cock,” the woman yelled again, finally clearing up the mystery of her name.

Dante shuddered as he continued to thrust into her, closing his eyes and visualizing the voluptuous angel who'd haunted his dreams for the past few months. "Oh, Maggie," he groaned.

The body beneath him stiffened, but he continued to plow into it until he found his release. When he opened his eyes, it was to see a very pissed off face beneath him. "Get the fuck off me. How dare you call me by some other bitch's name?" Rolandra shoved at his chest.

Dante groaned in embarrassment, his dick instantly going limp. He pulled back. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking,"

"Damn straight you weren't thinking, so how about getting your cracker ass out of my bed and out of my apartment?!"

He winced at her harsh words but was glad to do as she asked. Uncouth wasn't quite the word for this woman. What was that term he'd heard? Ghetto. Yes, this woman certainly fit the description, and he'd been a fool to come here. All because of the inconvenient passion he had for his sister-in-law. Dammit.

Rolandra screamed at him. "What the fuck are you waiting for?"

Dante realized that he'd put her nose out of joint, so offering her any further apologies would do him no good. He quickly dressed and left her apartment in time to hear his cell phone ring. "Dante here."

"It's Romeo."

"To what do I owe this honor, little brother?"

"I took care of another one." Romeo didn't need to elaborate. Dante knew exactly what he referred to.

"Good, but why are you calling me now? You haven't bothered to check in with me before."

"For once, will you shut the fuck up and listen?"

The serious note in his brother's tone made Dante pause. "What's wrong?"

"I think we have a traitor in the Underground."

Dante heart began to pound. It was a serious accusation that Romeo was leveling. He trusted all of his agents, but if Dante had to choose, he'd take his brother's word first. "Why do you think that?" Even as he asked the question, the memory of Trent Black came to mind.

"The Council seems to know what we're up to. This last time, they were aware of when we would show up. How would they have fathomed our plans unless someone told them? The only people we notify of what we're up to are agents. Shit, how am I supposed to proceed?"

"You were with Wolf and Aries for the last kill, weren't you?"

"Yes."

“Do you think it could be one of them?”

“I don’t think so, and I don’t think we should look at the people I’ve taken on the mission, but maybe the ones who wanted in but were denied.”

“That’s an interesting theory. I’ll get on that now. Proceed with your assignment, but if something smells really fishy, pull out. I don’t want you walking into a trap. Do you understand? No heroics.”

“Have you known me to be out of control?”

Dante was not amused. “I mean it, Romeo. I won’t lose you to something stupid. Be careful.”

Romeo sighed on the other end of the phone. “Yes, Papa.”

“Cut it out.”

“Well, you do act the role of a father sometimes.”

“Maybe I wouldn’t act it if you didn’t act like a child.”

“Okay, I’m ending this conversation now. I’ll talk to you later.”

The loud clicking in his ear told him that Romeo had hung up on him. Damn it. Would he end up alienating all of his brothers before he worked this demon out of his system?

\* \* \* \* \*

Christine walked into the group home, her arms full of toys.

“Hey, Christine. We haven’t seen you in a couple of weeks. Your little buddies have been asking for you.” Marla Walker, the case worker for the facility, smiled at her.

“Did they? How sweet. I missed them, too. Are they home now? I know this isn’t usually when I visit, but I figured since this is after school hours, I had a good shot of catching them both.”

“Yes, Jamal is in his room having a time out, but you know how that is. And, of course, Adrienne is sitting with him. It’s a wonder we can get him on the school bus every day without the little one having a fit.” Marla shook her head of fluffy brown curls, sighing with obvious frustration. “Jamal was at it again in school today. I wonder about that one.”

“What did Jamal do to deserve a time out this time?”

“He bit the teacher.”

“Did the teacher touch him? You know he doesn’t like being touched.”

“He says that she tried to hold him down in his seat.”

“What excuse did the teacher give for doing that?”

“She claims she only guided him to his seat when he wouldn’t sit down.”

“Jamal isn’t the type to make up stories,” Christine said.

“You’re right, but while I don’t necessary agree with her methods, it’s no excuse for biting.”

Christine shrugged, thinking the teacher should probably have kept her hands to herself. “May I see them?”

“Sure. I see you’ve come with gifts again. You’re really spoiling those children.”

““Isn’t that what children are for?”

“Well, I have four of my own at home, and if you spoil them too much they’ll walk all over you. Maybe it’s different for you since you don’t have any of your own yet.” Marla turned around, her ample hips swaying.

Christine was glad the other woman had turned her back; otherwise Marla would have seen how upsetting her comment had been. The case worker was a very nice person, but she didn’t have a great deal of tact. At times, Christine thought she had accepted not being able to have children, but in the past couple of months, that fact had hit her harder.

Marla led Christine through the house and up a flight of steps until they stopped on the landing. “You know the rest of the way. Stay as long as you like. I’m sure the kids will enjoy your visit.”

“Thank you.” Christine walked over to the familiar bedroom, knocked, then gently pushed it open. Her heart flipped when she saw her two friends sitting in the corner, a small boy and a tiny girl who had a head full of braids and barrettes. She studied them in silence, her heart swelling with love.

She was fond of all the children in the home, but she was particularly fond of these two. Their story had touched her heart. Jamal and Adrienne had been born to a crack-addicted mother who’d shamelessly neglected her children. The kids had been removed from her and placed in the care of their only surviving relative, an uncle, who apparently had only taken in the children to get the monthly check the state sent for their care.

It had only come to light that the children were being abused when Jamal ended up in a hospital with both arms broken and several cracked ribs. As tiny as she was, Adrienne had suffered, too. Not only was she physically abused, the uncle had apparently touched her in inappropriate ways. The children had also been starved, fed only enough to survive. When Jamal was admitted to the hospital, he was only twenty pounds, dangerously underweight for a four-year-old ... Adrienne, who was now three years old, was still roughly the size of an eighteen-month-old baby.

The little girl only said a few words and had only recently learned to walk. At six, Jamal was at times labeled a troubled child because of his “acting out.” It was no wonder, considering what he’d gone through. The most tragic part of the whole affair was that their mother had gotten herself together and was on the verge of taking her children back when she’d learned she had full-blown AIDS. She had died within months from pneumonia.

Thankfully, the children had tested negative for HIV. It was very hard not to sympathize with these two when they'd gone through so much in their young lives. They clung to each other fiercely. Once, when a couple had tried to foster Adrienne, she had had a screaming fit because she wouldn't be parted from her brother. Christine knew the two of them had little chance of being adopted together so she had put in the paperwork to take them into her own home. When she had received her life-changing news and had to withdraw her application, she'd been angry and sad, for herself and for the two children.

"Adri, this is an A. Say A." Jamal held up a red wooden letter in front of his little sister.

Adrienne looked at her brother and stuck her thumb in her mouth. Christine smiled. It was obvious these two adored each other.

"Say A. If you say it, I'll give you candy."

Adrienne seemed disinterested and continued to suck her thumb, her large eyes never leaving Jamal's face. Jamal shook his head with exaggerated impatience. "Come on, Adri. You can do it. This is A for Adrienne."

The little girl pulled her thumb from her mouth. "A," she said, before stuffing the digit back between her lips.

"Very good!" Although Adrienne still looked very unimpressed, Jamal leaned over his sister, giving her a hug.

"Yes, very good, Adrienne," Christine couldn't help adding as she stepped further into the room. Jamal looked over with a frown until he spied her. His small face lit up with pleasure before he jumped up and ran over to her.

"Miss Christine! You came back. We thought you forgot about us." He hugged her leg.

Her heart did another flip and tears filled her eyes. How could anyone label this child a problem when there was so much love in his heart? Adrienne wobbled to her feet and toddled over to them. Her eyes wide, she gave Christine a shy smile but didn't speak, which wasn't a surprise.

"How can I forget about my two bestest friends in the whole world?"

"Hmm, I don't know, but it has been an awful long time since your last visit."

"I'm really sorry about that," Christine apologized solemnly.

"We forgive you." Jamal eyed the toys and smiled, revealing a missing front tooth. "What did you bring us?"

"I wonder if you miss me for myself or the toys," she teased.

"Well, you always bring really neat stuff, but you're okay, too."

Christine laughed. Leave it to a six-year-old to deflate one's ego. "I brought you the Transformer's action figure you told me about and, for Adrienne, I brought a Cabbage Patch kid." She handed them the presents.

"Thank you," Jamal said, then nudged his sister. "Say thank you, Adri."

The little girl removed her thumb and showed tiny white teeth. “Tank oo.”

Christine was glad to see the child was starting to say a few more words, although not speaking on the level a three-year-old should. Still, she was showing progress.

“So what’s this I hear about you getting into trouble at school?”

Jamal screwed his face up. “Mrs. Duran wouldn’t let me go to the bathroom, and I almost had an accident, so when I got up to go anyway, she held me down in my chair.”

“And that’s when you bit her?”

The little boy nodded.

Personally, she thought the teacher should have been horsewhipped for not letting him use the bathroom, then compounding her error by keeping him in his seat. On the other hand, she couldn’t encourage his biting. “You could have really hurt her. Do you remember what I told you before? We don’t solve our problems with our hands or teeth; we do it with our words.”

“But she was so mean. I hate Mrs. Duran, and she has a big hairy wart, probably from kissing a frog.”

Christine stopped herself from laughing out loud. “Hate is such a strong word, don’t you think? Why don’t you and I write a letter to her? You can tell me how it makes you feel when she doesn’t listen to you, and I’ll write it down.”

Jamal placed his finger under his chin, a look of deep contemplation on his dusky face before he nodded. “That sounds fair. Okay, I’ll do it, but I don’t know if it will work.”

“It won’t work if we don’t try.”

“Okay.”

“Go get some paper and a pen, and we can start working on it.” She followed the children to Jamal’s desk in the corner of his room.

Christine loved these two so much that it hurt her heart to know that she would soon have to stop visiting them.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Five down, one to go,” Romeo muttered, wiping the blood from his mouth. A dead shifter now in human form lay at his feet. The dead man had once been Gordon Wyatt, former Council member.

It hadn’t been easy to locate him. After leaving Buenos Aires, one of his contacts had notified him that Wyatt was in hiding in Montreal. Romeo was thankful he had Wolf and Aries with him to take care of the rogue guards who’d been surrounding the house. Wyatt had fought to the bitter end, but like the other five Council members before him, he had met his end.



“Romeo, look out!” Aries shouted, just in time for Romeo to see two rogues spring almost as though from the air in front of him. Where the hell had they come from? He leapt aside, barely missing a stocky vampire’s blow, but he was caught on the side of the face with a left hook. Wolf and Aries jumped on the second rogue, pulling him away from Romeo, giving him the opportunity of a one-on-one with the rogue who’d attacked him.

Romeo brought his knee up, jamming it into his adversary’s stomach, then followed it up with a quick punch, only to have it blocked and countered. The rogue interlocked his hands and swung at Romeo, catching him on the side of the head again and snapping his head back.

Holy shit, that blow had packed a lot of power! He glanced up to see the rogue advance on him with glowing red eyes and extended claws. He was so swift that Romeo could barely make him out. Fingers locked around his throat, and he felt air expelled from his lungs.

Why was this rogue so damn strong, and why did that crazed look in his eyes seem so familiar? His mind drifted back to the fight in a London nightclub when it had taken him and all his brothers to take out two unusually strong rogues.

This particular rogue bared his sharp incisors before lowering his head. Romeo shoved at his enemy’s face, trying to still the descent, and transformed his fingers to sharpened points. He brought his free hand up and tore the other vampire’s eyes out along with part of his cheeks.

Though the rogue howled, his murderous grip continued to tighten. Romeo clawed at the hands, unable to believe his opponent’s incredible strength. One thing was certain -- these were no ordinary rogues. Gripping his assailant by the shoulders, Romeo used all his strength and propelled the vampire backward, slamming him into a wall.

Still the rogue wouldn’t release him. Bright spots of light danced in front of Romeo’s eyes and he knew he’d soon pass out. His knees grew weak; he felt them buckle, but Romeo couldn’t let things end like this. He thought of his brothers and knew that he had to stay strong for them. Then he thought of Christine.

Christine.

She had never been far from his mind since he’d left her, and now, the thought of not seeing her again gave him the strength to hold on to consciousness. With one last burst of strength, Romeo gripped the rogue’s head and twisted as hard as he could, snapping the vampire’s neck.

Finally, the grip on his throat slackened enough that he could take advantage of his enemy’s momentary weakness. Romeo jammed an elbow into the vampire’s face, which sent his nose’s cartilage and bones into the cranium. Snapping a neck or receiving a shot to the nose like that would have killed any human and at least have temporarily disabled most vampires, but the rogue stayed on his feet.

This was definitely out of whack. However, the fingers around his throat loosened. Romeo twisted away and sent a heart-stopping blow to his opponent’s chest with one leg,

then followed up with his claws, tearing into the rogue's torso and not stopping until he reached the heart. Only when Romeo squeezed the beating organ to a pulp did the rogue finally fall.

Romeo dropped to his knees, trying to catch his breath. That fight had taken more out of him than the one between him and Wyatt. He looked up just in time to see Aries' wolf form gnawing at the second rogue's entrails while Wolf yanked out the screaming vampire's heart.

Were there more of these creatures? If so, they needed to get out of there and fast.

"They were strong." Wolf said, stating the obvious, his breath coming out in heavy pants.

Aries stepped away from the body and shifted back to human form. "There was something different about them," he agreed.

"What --" Romeo broke off his statement. Two women now stood in the room, one of whom he recognized. "Nya!" Romeo shot to his feet.

She stood next to a diminutive redhead. "You are going about this all wrong, Grimaldi. Killing the Council won't stop the massacres."

"Have you come to fight us, too, honey? Woman or not, if you're not on my side, I have no problem with taking you out." Romeo advanced toward her.

Nya looked unmoved. "Don't threaten me, especially when you don't know what you're talking about. If you go after Locke, you'll only end up getting hurt."

The redhead standing next to her tittered. "I'd listen to her if I were you." With a brief wave of her hand, they were gone.

"What the hell was that about? That was the fem from the club!" Wolf exclaimed.

"Yes, and she doesn't appear to be working with the good guys."

What was Christine doing hanging out with that woman? Oh, God. Christine! He had to get to her right away.

## Chapter Twelve

GianMarco growled at his wife. “You know Dante won’t thank you for this, Maggie.”

She batted her lashes innocently. “Whatever do you mean, sweetie? I’m simply asking him over for dinner, and Montana just happens to be coming by as well.”

“You are trying to play God. Just because you think he and your friend will be good together doesn’t necessarily mean they’ll like each other.”

Maggie waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. “The way I see it is we’re all going to have a nice meal together, and that’s all there is to it.” She grinned.

GianMarco realized he was fighting a losing battle. Ever since Maggie had come up with her bizarre matchmaking idea, she’d talked of nothing else. He wanted to give his mate anything her heart desired, but this was beyond his power. He couldn’t make two people care for each other if they didn’t.

GianMarco scolded her lightly. “I still can’t believe you called him and told him there was an emergency.”

Maggie shrugged. “It *is* an emergency. We haven’t seen him in several months and we miss him. How’s that for an emergency?”

It was like banging one’s head against a brick wall. He knew he’d get nowhere with his stubborn wife. He sighed, trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice. “You know as well as I do that Dante is doing important work right now. To ask him to come here on a whim was selfish.”

Her lips pursed, and she placed her hands on ample hips. “Selfish? Are you serious? I’m trying to do a good thing here. Besides, you said you’d talked to him yesterday, and that he was in New York to take care of a few things at home, that he’d be in the States for a few days. How is it selfish that I think he’d be happier spending his time here with his family?”

“Because he wouldn’t be happier, damn it!” he snapped, and instantly regretted it when Maggie’s face fell. “Maggie --”

“Save it. I know what you meant. Look, do you think I like being the cause of this rift? I know you miss him. I love Dante ... but I’m in love with *you*. It tears me apart to see the sadness in your eyes when his name is mentioned. I hate seeing you like this and I don’t know what to do to fix it, so I thought ...” She sighed. “If you really think he’ll have a problem with this dinner, I’ll call Montana and tell her not to come.”

Just then the doorbell rang. “I think it’s a bit too late for that.” GianMarco rolled his eyes.

“That’s odd, she’s early. Montana’s never early.” Maggie stood on tiptoes and brushed her lips against his. “Don’t be mad at me, okay?”

GianMarco’s cock jumped to attention. No matter how many times she touched him and in what manner, he always got horny. He loved her so much that it sometimes hurt to be away from her, even for only a few minutes. “I could never be mad at you. I think you had better go answer the door.” He brushed his knuckles against her cheek in a light caress, his heart swelling with love and his loins aching for her.

When Maggie turned around, he playfully swatted her on her generous backside. She stuck her tongue out at him. “If you keep it up, the door will never get answered.”

“Maybe that’s the idea.”

She seemed on the verge of walking back into his arms when the doorbell rang again. Maggie pouted. “I guess I’d better go get that.”

He watched her waddle down the hallway to the living room, knowing that if he even suggested answering the door, she’d yell at him. Since her pregnancy, GianMarco had barely let her out of his sight. Other than making love with him, he didn’t allow her to do anything strenuous, not letting her stay on her feet for more than a few minutes. She’d often get flustered with what she called his smothering, but he couldn’t help it. He didn’t want anything to happen to her and their child. Telling her to sit while he answered the door would probably have started an argument, so he allowed her this little victory, but immediately regretted it when he heard a blood-curdling scream fill the house.

“Maggie!” GianMarco raced into his living room in time to see two rogues trying to push their way into his home. Maggie pressed her body against the door, but he knew she wouldn’t be able to hold them off for very long.

His incisors descended and his fingers transformed to sharp talons. How had he not sensed their presence? He ran to the door to help hold them off. “Maggie, get back! I’ll take care of them.”

By now, however, the rogues had kicked the door forward, sending Maggie stumbling back. She landed squarely on her bottom. “Hide, Maggie!”

GianMarco flew at the closest rogue. Rage filled him. Rogues had broken into his home and threatened his wife and unborn child. They would die tonight.

He slammed the first red-eyed vampire against the wall, bending his head to rip a chunk from his throat. Blood spurted out, splashing him in the face. Just as he was about to take another piece from his opponent's neck, the second rogue gripped him by the hair, yanking so hard he felt his neck snap.

"GianMarco!" came Maggie's horrified scream.

"Run away, Maggie! Run, baby!"

"I'm not going to leave you," she cried.

"Foolish woman," he muttered as his body was picked up and tossed into the air. He went crashing to the floor. He was in excruciating pain, but it would take precious minutes before he would heal properly. He couldn't afford to wait; he had to protect Maggie. He had to act now.

GianMarco sprang to his feet, his head drooping. His heart stopped at the sight that greeted him. While she struggled valiantly, one rogue had Maggie by the hair, a hand wrapped around her neck. He knew that Maggie, as a relatively new vampire, had no hope of matching the rogue's strength. The second rogue, the one who had thrown him on floor, delivered a blow to the side of her face. She screamed.

Racing forward, he attacked the rogue, who looked as if he were about to strike Maggie again, and wrestled him to the floor. He punched his enemy in the face with all his might. Sharp claws tore into GianMarco's face, making him howl in pain. Trying to channel every ounce of strength he had, GianMarco gripped the rogue by the hair and pounded his head into the floor over and over again, hearing the sound of his cracking skull.

He stole a quick glance at the rogue holding Maggie and was surprised to see that she'd somehow managed to get out of his grip. She was actually raining blows over the rogue's head.

His temporary distraction cost him, because the rogue beneath him rammed his fist into GianMarco's face. His grip on his adversary's hair loosened and he felt a knee to his stomach, which knocked the breath out of him. These rogues were extraordinary. Their strength was unbelievable, and he'd only seen these glowing red eyes once before. Holy shit, they were the same kind as those rogues from the nightclub months before.

GianMarco heard a loud thud and his heart fell when Maggie's body collapsed next to his. No! No! No! Not again! Damn it, no! If there was truly a God, He wouldn't allow this to happen to him a second time.

To his relief she stirred, but she'd lost a lot of color. To his horror, he saw bones sticking out of her arm. Letting out a primal howl, he jumped to his feet, pulling the rogue who was attacking him off the floor. With all his strength, he flung his adversary into the

other vampire, sending them both tumbling back. GianMarco would have charged them again, but another figure stood in the doorway.

“Dante!”

Dante’s steady cobalt gaze quickly surveyed the room before he transformed into battle mode. He didn’t speak, merely grabbed the closest rogue and pummeled him with his fists in a jackhammer motion. GianMarco charged the second vampire, his claws tearing through clothing, then gripping the rogue’s manhood and yanking it with all his might, tearing it from the rogue’s body. The rogue howled, but GianMarco stuffed the vampire’s own balls into his mouth.

“You dare to come into my home and try to destroy what is mine? You dare to harm my wife and disturb the sanctity of my home?” GianMarco was angrier than he’d ever been in his life. “You will die, but I’m going to make it as painful as possible.” With that, he ripped the rogue’s arms out of their sockets, then tore into the vampire’s stomach, letting the contents spill out. He slammed the rogue into a wall and tore off a chunk of his face, all while enjoying the sounds of his screams.

“Enough, Marco. Put him out of his misery,” Dante said from behind him.

“Fuck you, Dante. It’s not your wife he harmed,” GianMarco hissed, even as he realized his brother was right. This rogue no longer posed any threat, but GianMarco was not inclined to be merciful. He spat in his enemy’s face.

Dante gripped his shoulders and pushed him aside before ripping into the rogue’s chest and tearing out the heart.

“That was my fight to finish,” GianMarco said through clenched teeth.

“And while you’re tearing apart someone you’ve already defeated, your injured wife remains on the floor.”

“Oh, God. Maggie.” GianMarco turned around to see his mate lying very still. In his crazed state, he’d forgotten her; his only focus had been vengeance. If it weren’t for the steady rise and fall of her chest, he would have thought her dead.

He raced over to her and knelt at her side. Maggie’s eyes were open, shocked. Her uninjured arm was held to her stomach. GianMarco lifted her against his chest and cradled her body against him. “Baby, please say something,” he whispered against her soft hair.

“I hurt.” She croaked the words and he saw the dark bruises on her throat from where the rogue had tried to choke her.

“I know it hurts, baby, but we’ll fix that.”

He stood up with her in his arms. Maggie’s head fell limply against his chest. GianMarco’s eyes met his brother’s. “Why?”

Dante shook his head. “See to her needs first, then we’ll talk.”

GianMarco nodded, bounding up the stairs three at a time and taking Maggie to their room. A chill raced down his spine as he thought of what would have happened to his beloved if Dante had not showed up.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dante checked the body of one of the rogues. Pulling back the collar, he found what he'd been looking for. D.O.D. Disciples of il Diavolo. Evil had been at work here tonight, but why GianMarco and Maggie, and how had they reached the front door without either of them sensing their presence? Dante shuddered to think what the consequences would have been had he arrived any later.

Maggie.

His beautiful, brave Maggie must have fought courageously. Any vampire would be honored to have her as his mate. *Stop it, Dante! Stop this right now. You are not to think of her in that way.*

Again questions plagued his mind. Why *this* brother? GianMarco had not been active in the Underground for months. In addition, although Romeo had taken out five of the six Council members with only Locke remaining, the attacks on them were becoming more frequent: Romeo in Montreal and Nico, Sasha, and Jagger in Poland. The latter three had been ambushed on their way to the hotel. Now this.

There was only one explanation for the attack from these particular rogues. His old enemy was sending them a message. Whatever name he was going by, *Il Diavolo* or *Il Demonio*, he would pay for daring to fuck with his family. Worse yet, he had to find out if the claims of a dying wizard were true.

"I will avenge you, Mama and Papa," he whispered.

"Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" a voice screamed from the doorway.

Dante turned and saw a tall, brown-skinned beauty with short, curly hair looking around her in horror. Who was this woman? She was dressed in a white linen pantsuit, her face artfully made up.

He stood up. "Who are you?"

"I could ask you the same question. This is my friend's house. Oh, my God, what did you do to them? Murderer! I'm calling the police!" She spun around, obviously planning to make a dash out of the house.

Dear Lord, this was the last thing he needed. Dante was at her side in the blink of an eye. "No. You won't be calling the police. You will calm down instead."

"Calm down?! Take your goddamn hands off me! I know karate and if you don't back off I will kick your fucking ass." She took a karate stance that anyone could have learned from watching a movie. Having studied many fighting styles in his long existence, he very much doubted this woman knew any martial arts.

“Please, I mean you no harm.”

“You lying murderer!”

He sidestepped the purse she swung at him. “Look, there’s a logical explanation for this.”

“There are two dead bodies on the floor and you have blood all over you. What possible explanation do you have for this? And you’re getting blood on my suit, you fool. This outfit cost the Earth.” She wrenched her arm from his grip.

Dear God, this woman was not only clearly certifiable, she was a harridan as well.

“Montana, I see you made it.” GianMarco walked up to them.

She jumped. “Jesus Christ, you scared the shit out of me! How about announcing yourself the next time you walk up on a sista? In the hood, that’s how you get yourself cut.” Montana then turned to Dante with a smirk on her face. “Now you’re going to get it, you bastard. Get him, Marc. He broke into your home and killed two men.”

Dante looked at his brother. “Friend of yours?”

“Maggie’s, actually.”

“Your wife is a damn saint.”

Marco sighed. “Don’t I know it.”

Montana put her hands on her hips. “What’s going on here? Why aren’t you taking care of him, Marc? And where the hell is Maggie?”

Dante turned his back on her. She grated on his already fragile nerves. “Shall I or will you do the honors?”

Marco smirked. “You’re closer.”

“Very well,” Dante muttered. Facing the screeching woman again, he gripped her face in his hands with a quick movement, locking his eyes with hers. “You will cease your yelling. You have a very important engagement to go to. You didn’t really see what you thought you saw. You will remember nothing about this when you walk out the door.”

Montana’s dark eyes widened. She nodded dazedly. Dante released her face and snapped his fingers. She left.

“What a harpy.”

“She has her moments.” Marco shrugged.

“How’s Maggie?”

“She’s in a great deal of pain. I set her arm, and she should heal in a couple of days. I let her feed from me to speed the process, but she is so young. The baby is kicking so he’s all right.”

“Good.”

“What now? I have to keep Maggie safe. She’s already worried as it is about the baby. It is disturbing that these rogues got past the guards down the road.”



“They work for *him*.”

“Shit!”

Dante gripped his brother’s arm. “I’m sorry for staying away. If --”

“No. We’ll talk about that later. For now we have to figure out how to keep my wife safe.

Dante nodded. “Yes, we mustn’t allow anything to happen to Maggie.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Christine was having the most delicious dream. Romeo had entered her room and was slowly planting kisses all over her body. She moaned and undulated against him, unable to keep still while he touched every intimate part of her.

Hands roamed her breasts, stomach, and ass. She cried out as he pried open her thighs and his hot, wet tongue stroked her clit. “Yes! Oh, Romeo, I love you,” she whispered.

Christine reached down and grabbed a handful of silky blond hair, bucking her hips against her lover’s handsome face. Two long fingers pushed their way inside her damp heat. “You taste so good.” Hot breath fanned across her swollen tissues.

She grabbed her breasts, squeezing and kneading them. This was one fantasy she didn’t want to wake up from.

“Open your eyes, Christine, I want you to know this is no dream,” her lover whispered.

Her eyes shot open. It took her a moment to gather her wits before a burst of nerve-jolting pressure shot up her spine. She looked down to see Romeo between her legs, licking and nibbling at her flesh as if this was what he was meant to do. “Romeo!” She was torn between surprise and pleasure. It was almost as if her heart had wished for him and he’d appeared.

Her heart skipped a beat. He’d come back to her. Christine had missed him so much. “How ... how did you get in here?” she asked, releasing a long, heavy moan.

“I have my ways.” Romeo placed a hand on her chest, gently pushing her back down onto the bed. The exquisite sensation of his tongue on her pussy burned a trail of heavenly delight from her crown to the tips of her toes. Christine closed her thighs against his head, thinking it couldn’t get any better than this.

The skilled way his tongue circled her clitoris while his fingers steadily pushed in and out of her told Christine what she already knew, that he’d had lots of practice at doing this.

The thought of him with other women bothered her, even though she realized she had no right to feel that way.

This was supposed to be a fling, but whenever she was with Romeo she couldn't help herself. The scariest thing of all was that he stimulated her body, mind, and soul.

Christine didn't want to believe that she could fall for someone on such a short acquaintance, but Romeo was like no other man she'd ever met. She'd been so miserable with him gone that she'd cried herself to sleep tonight. Not even her visit to the children had cheered her up like it normally did.

Nya would tell her to live for the moment and think of tomorrow later. Yes, that was what she'd do, because the thought of tomorrow just seemed too grim. "Romeo, please," she begged not exactly sure what she was asking for. All Christine knew was that she couldn't get enough of it.

It was like they could communicate without any words. He added another finger into her wet pussy, twisting and thrusting them inside her. When his teeth nipped her clit, she thought she'd lose it. A sudden head rush hit her and she shook, reaching an incredible climax. Though she lay a quivering mass beneath him, Romeo continued to eat her out, stilling her movements with his free hand.

He removed his fingers from her cunt and placed them on her lips. Christine tentatively stuck her tongue out to taste the bittersweet flavor of her own cream. It was rather decadent thing to taste herself on his fingers and not something she would have thought to do before she had met this sexy vampire.

Romeo slid the fingers past her lips and she sucked them into her mouth. "That's it, baby. Suck it. Lick all of it off, sweetheart. Taste how delicious you are."

Her lips tightened around his fingers, sucking harder. Christine never realized how much of a turn-on this would be. She'd seen porn where the man would stick come-drenched fingers in his partner's mouth and had always thought that it was rather cheesy. Now Christine couldn't imagine why she'd ever thought that way.

When she could taste only skin, Romeo removed his fingers and gripped her thighs. He lapped at her flowing juices as though he tasted sweet nectar. He parted her ass cheeks before pressing kisses against the puckered bud of her anus. No one had ever kissed her there before and she wasn't sure whether she liked it or not.

"Romeo, what are you doing?" She tried to sit up, only to be pushed down again.

"I'm loving you. Just relax." His tongue circled the tight ring again.

She felt a thrilling sensation build up in the pit of her stomach. His tongue swirled and licked her asshole; with each stroke of his tongue, she liked it more. Romeo dipped his fingers into her pussy again, then rubbed her anus, wetting it further. He repeated the motion until he finally seemed satisfied.

Christine's eye widened when she felt a finger push into her ass. "Oh!" She knew exactly what he wanted. He slowly slid his finger deeper into her, readying her for his cock. Christine had only had anal sex a few times with her ex-husband, but she'd only endured it.

The way Romeo was taking his time, preparing her, made her actually want this. He added another finger inside her ass, sliding in and out of her butt until she couldn't keep still. "Are you ready for me, sweetheart? Do you want my cock in your ass?"

"Stop teasing me and do it," she ordered, reaching out to fondle his erection as burning pulses of lust rippled throughout her body. Christine guided him to her tight, cream-slicked hole.

Romeo smiled at her, his blue eyes taking on an iridescent glow in the dark. He scooped her butt off the sheets and pushed his cockhead past the puckered ring. Christine bit her lip, trying not to cry out. He was so large that they would need to go slow.

"Shit, I'm going to come before I get all the way inside you. Damn, your ass is tight." He groaned. "How are you doing, sweetheart?"

"Good," she whispered, nodding her head as her body grew used to him.

He slid another inch of his cock inside of her. "Relax some more, babe."

Christine released the breath she'd been holding, taking in his cock until it was nearly to the hilt. Romeo's thumb moved over her clit when he began to move. "Ah, yes; tight, wonderful ass, just as wonderful as your pussy. You have no idea how much I missed this beautiful little body."

Her body?

Was that all he'd missed? Here she was pining away for him, and all he'd missed was her body? As though sensing her displeasure, he asked, "What's wrong?"

"You ... didn't miss me?"

"Of course, I did. I missed you very much." Romeo planted a kiss on her belly. "I missed your delicious taste, your pussy, your body, your warmth ... your smile."

Her eyes welled up with tears. No words of love were spoken, but she felt cherished, and that was enough. It was more than she had any right expect. Romeo slid deeper into her ass and she could feel his heartbeat joined to hers when he pressed his torso against her breasts.

Christine tangled her fingers into his hair, loving the texture of his blond spikes. His hair was short, but it was just enough for her to hold onto while he pressed kisses to her and nibbled on her neck. She tightened her sphincter around his cock, pulling him deeper.

Romeo increased the pace of his movements, his balls slapping her rump with each powerful thrust. Christine screamed. "Yes! Fuck my ass! Yes!" She'd never felt so sexually liberated, and she loved it. The wanton passion he unleashed within her made her feel proud and unashamed.

This was so damn good. She writhed beneath him, reveling in the exquisite sensation of his cock pumping into her ass. Romeo released a loud grunt, emptying his balls of their seed, spurting come up her ass.

She pulled him close, holding his body against hers. Wave of pure ecstasy pulsed to every single nerve ending inside her, pushing her to another explosive orgasm, one so powerful that she began to cry.

Romeo licked her tears as they fell. "Why are you crying, sweetheart?"

"Because it was so good. It just seems to get better every time."

A slow smile touched his lips. When he didn't respond, she wondered what he was thinking. He pulled his cock out of her ass with a wet sounding pop before tucking her beneath his arm.

They lay entwined, not speaking, just listening to the night sounds around them. "Go to sleep, Christine. You must be exhausted."

She closed her eyes, feeling tired but content. Then she opened them again. "Will you be here in the morning?" she asked.

"Yes."

Christine breathed an inward sigh of relief before falling asleep within the circle of Romeo's arms, a smile on her face.

\* \* \* \* \*

Romeo was awakened by a loud groan. He squinted his eyes against the sunlight filtering through the pastel-colored curtains. He glanced to his left and saw Christine clutching her head, a look of utter agony on her face. Tears ran from the corners of her eyes.

Panic tore through him. "Christine, what's wrong!"

"Pills," she moaned.

"Headache?"

"Yes. Please get my tablets in the top drawer to your right. There's a bottle with a prescription label on it."

Romeo had never seen her like this. He grabbed the pills, clumsy fingers prying open the bottle, and fed her a pill. "Let me get you some water, too." He ran to the bathroom and grabbed a cup, filling it with water from the tap before hurrying back to her. He pressed the cup of water against her lips until she gulped most of it down.

"One more, please," she whispered.

He did as she asked, then held her in his arms while she cried, feeling helpless. "Migraines?" he asked softly.

Christine nodded.

“Here. Let me help you. Your pills will need a while to work. I have something better.” Romeo let his pinky extend to a sharpened point, then he pricked the pad of his other pinky with it, letting a drop of blood bead on the flesh. “Open your mouth.”

“No,” she moaned, apparently not wanting to taste his blood.

“It will help you with the pain. I can’t stand to see you like this. Please, sweetheart, just a little taste. It won’t hurt you, merely take away the pain.” He coaxed her lips apart and squeezed some droplets on her tongue. “Swallow,” he instructed.

Christine finally gave in, albeit reluctantly, before resting her head against his shoulders. Romeo rocked her in his arms while planting kisses on her forehead.

It was several minutes before she spoke. “Romeo?”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“The pain is gone.”

He smiled, feeling quite smug. “I knew it would.”

“Thank you. It was worse than ever this time.”

“I didn’t know you suffered from migraines.”

She stiffened. “What?”

“Umm, your migraines.” Romeo had the distinct impression that she wasn’t being completely honest with him, which brought to mind something else. “How did you meet your friend, Nya?”

Christine lifted her head to look at him with questioning eyes. “Why?”

“Humor me.”

“She saved my life. I was attacked by some thugs and she intervened.”

“How well do you know this woman?”

“To be honest, I don’t really know a lot about her. She doesn’t say a lot, but she always seems interested in my life, and she has a good shoulder to cry on. Nya is a good friend to me.”

“Has she ever mentioned what she does when the two of you aren’t together?”

Christine forehead wrinkled. “Why are you asking all these questions about her?”

Romeo grinned, picking up on the possessiveness in her tone. “Are you jealous?”

She smacked him on his shoulder. “No.”

“Liar.”

Christine gave him a sheepish grin. “Maybe a little. She’s gorgeous.”

“But she’s not you.” Her answers reassured him that she knew nothing of her friend’s activities, but he still didn’t want her mixed up with anything dangerous.

“You really need to be careful with her.”

“I trust Nya completely. I know this sounds odd, but she kind of has the soul of a child.”

“More likely the soul of a lioness.”

“No, seriously. She’s suffered.”

“How do you know if she hasn’t told you a lot about herself?”

“That’s just it. It’s not what she’s told me, it’s what she hasn’t told me. I’ve read between the lines, and I know she hasn’t had a happy life. Why do you suddenly want know so much about her?”

This was not the time to get into his family history. Romeo just wanted to enjoy Christine’s company. “It doesn’t matter. I was just curious. What would you like to do today? Do you need to go into your office?”

“No. It’s Saturday, silly.”

“Oh, yes. I sometimes lose track of the days.”

“I can’t afford to do that. What do you do for money?”

“When I was younger, my brother invested some for me, and it’s grown substantially over time. If I’m bored, I find odd jobs, mainly construction because I like working with my hands, but the family business usually keeps me busy.”

“What’s the family business?”

What exactly could he tell her without giving too much away? Thinking quickly, he said, “Uh, it’s an agency of sorts. Enough about me, you never answered my question. What do you want to do today?”

“Other than make love?” She grinned cheekily.

“I like how you think, lady.”

“Well, I promised my friends I’d visit today.”

“Tell them you can’t make it.”

“No. I can’t do that to them.”

“Don’t you want to spend time with me?” He kissed the corner of her mouth.

“I would love to, but I can’t break my promise to them. You should come with me.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Please.” She stuck out her bottom lip in an enticing pout. The compelling look in her eyes made it difficult for him to say no.

“Okay, but I don’t want to stay long. I want you all to myself.”

“Trust me. You will like my friends.”

“If you say so,” he conceded, wondering what he was getting into.

## Chapter Fourteen

“What is this place?” Romeo asked Christine when they pulled up to a large Victorian-style home in the heart of the city.

“This is where my friends live.”

“You’ve been very close-mouthed about them,” he said as he got out of the car. Why was she being so secretive? What was she hiding? Instinct told him that he had no reason to suspect her of any foul play, but if the last months had taught him anything, it was definitely that he needed to be cautious.

Christine moved around the car and took his hand. When she smiled at him, Romeo knew that he could deny her nothing. He wanted to take her into his arms, press her against the car, and ravish her. He was now well and truly under her spell and didn’t think it was necessarily a bad thing.

They walked to the door hand in hand. When Christine knocked on the door, she turned to him, smile still intact. “You’ll like my friends. Don’t be nervous.”

“Who’s nervous?”

A glow of excitement radiated from her and Christine’s face lit up when she talked about these mysterious friends of hers. Apparently she thought a lot of them, and if they were important to her Romeo wanted to make a good impression. It was laughable when he thought about it.

Usually he didn’t give a damn about what other people thought of him, but here he was, jittery as a chicken in a fox’s den. This need for approval disturbed him, and Romeo wasn’t sure how to handle it.

The door was opened by a large redhead, a huge grin on her cheerful face. “Christine! They’ve been waiting for you. I see you’ve brought a friend with you this time,” the woman finished with a wink.



“Hi, Marla. This is Romeo.”

Marla looked him up and down, appreciation gleaming in her green eyes. Holding out her hand, Marla’s gaze locked on his. “Well, how do you do, Mr. Romeo? Is that really your name?”

Romeo shook the hand offered to him and grinned. He liked her. “Are you asking is it really my name or if I live up to it?”

Marla raised a brow in surprise, probably wondering how he’d read her mind. His smile widened. “If there was any doubt before, there’s none now. Romeo, I hope you’re not trying to flirt because I’m old enough to be your mother.” She wagged her finger at him.

Romeo brought her hand to his lips. “You’d be surprised.”

She chuckled, pulling her hand away. “Real smooth, lover boy. Come on in.”

“Are they upstairs?” Christine asked, looking around.

“No, they’re in the playroom doing crafts.”

“Okay. Thanks.” Christine took Romeo’s hand again and dragged him past a grinning Marla. She led him down a corridor to a room in the back of the house before she stopped and turned around to face him. “They’re not really used to strangers, so if they don’t take to you, it’s nothing personal.”

Romeo wondered what that meant, but decided not to question her because he’d soon find out. He shrugged and followed her inside.

To his utter surprise, he saw two small children, a boy and a girl, drawing pictures at a little table in the middle of a room full of toys. The little boy lifted his head, and hazel eyes lit up in a caramel face when he spotted Christine. “Miss Christine!” He jumped up and raced over to where she stood, then stopped just shy of her when he noticed Romeo.

The little girl, who couldn’t be older than two, just stared at him with large, dark eyes in a milk-chocolate face, her head full of braids and colorful barrettes. She was quite adorable. The boy would have been a cute kid if there wasn’t a nasty glare on his face.

The boy looked Romeo up and down as though sizing up an opponent. “Who is this?” The kid jerked his thumb in Romeo’s direction with narrowed eyes.

“This is my friend, Mr. Grimaldi.”

The child crossed his arms over his chest. “I don’t like him,” came the rude reply.

“Jamal, that’s not very nice. You don’t even know him,” Christine scolded gently.

“So?”

“So you can’t judge someone without getting to know them first.”

Defiance flashed within the depths of the child’s hazel eyes. His lips pursed mutinously.

Romeo didn't know why, but he kind of liked this kid. He had no experience with children, but he could tell this little boy was a fighter. He wanted to reach out to the child, but decided to let him make the first move, as this was Jamal's territory.

"Jamal, don't you remember what you told me about the little boy at your school who didn't like you because of the way you look?" When he didn't answer right away, she prompted him. "Jamal?"

The boy gave an exaggerated sigh. "I didn't like it," he finally answered.

"Then should you give him a chance, right?"

"I guess. Okay, Mr. Grimbody, what are your intentions with Miss Christine?" Jamal asked, staring him square in the eyes.

Romeo looked at Christine, who covered her mouth, obviously to stifle a laugh. Just how old was this kid anyway? "I beg your pardon?"

The little boy rolled his eyes and sighed as though he were talking to someone who really wasn't all that bright. "I said --"

"I know what you said, but what exactly do you mean by asking me that?"

"You don't watch a lot of TV, do you?" Jamal shook his head in obvious disgust.

"I try not to."

"Well, when a woman brings her boyfriend over for a visit, I'm supposed to ask what your intentions are."

This was obviously no child. It was a forty-year-old man trapped in a little boy's body. What *were* his intentions with Christine? After being with her last night, he'd be a fool to continue thinking it was just sex. When he wasn't with her felt like he was only half alive. His dreams were filled with her, and the thought of her being with other men drove him to the brink of madness.

Surely this was the love that had Marco and Nico acting like a couple of nuts. If they felt half of what Romeo felt when he was with Christine, he could see why they never wanted to leave their mates' sides.

Romeo looked over at Christine's lovely face and felt his heart swell.

Shit.

He was in love, all right.

Romeo shifted on his feet uncomfortably and looked back down at the little inquisitor. "Well, I really do ... lo-- like her."

"Are you going to marry her?"

"Jamal!" Christine's sharp rejoinder saved him from answering a question he didn't know the answer to.

The child batted innocent eyes in Christine's direction. "What?"

"You're being a little rude."

“I’m sorry, Miss Christine. I just thought you would come alone like you always do.” Jamal shot Romeo a look full of resentment. Romeo suddenly had the compulsion to win this child over.

He knelt down in front of Jamal. “I can understand why you would want to have Miss Christine all to yourself. She is very special, isn’t she?”

The boy remained sullenly silent even though he looked like he wanted to agree with Romeo. Finally, with a nod of his small head, he turned his back on Romeo and returned to the table.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know he would react like this. For some reason ... I don’t know why, but I thought you would get along.”

“It’s okay. How old is he?” Romeo’s voice dropped to a whisper so that the children wouldn’t be able to hear.

“Jamal is six and Adrienne is three.”

Romeo frowned. “The little girl is three? I don’t know a lot about kids, but isn’t she a bit on the small side?”

The child in question continued to stare at him with wide, questioning eyes. She stuffed her thumb in her mouth while twirling a barrette.

“It’s a long story. They’ve had a tough life.”

“What is this place?”

“It’s a state-run home for children who can’t be fostered out.”

“What’s wrong with these two? They seem like perfectly good children.”

“Well, you see how Jamal reacted to you. It took him a while before he warmed up to me. And poor Adrienne can’t stand to be parted from her brother. She gets hysterical when she’s away from him, but under the circumstances, that’s understandable.”

“What’s happened to them?”

The tale Christine unfolded filled him with revulsion and sadness. How could anyone do that to ones so young and innocent? If he ever came across a child abuser they wouldn’t live to see another day. “And what happened to the people who had these two in their care?”

“The aunt got probation, but no jail time. I believe the uncle is in jail, but serving time for an entirely different offense.”

A look of melancholy entered Christine’s eyes. Romeo had lived enough years to know that the world was full of monsters, and they weren’t necessarily creatures like vampires.

“They mean a lot to you, don’t they?”

“Very much.”

Adrienne climbed off her chair and toddled over to them, stopping in front of Romeo.

To his surprise, and, judging by her gasp, Christine's as well, the girl silently held her arms up to him. Without hesitation, Romeo scooped her off her feet. She weighed so little, he was almost afraid that he'd break her, but Adrienne obviously didn't share his fear.

She placed a starfish-shaped hand on the side of his face, wetting his cheek with her damp thumb. He stared into her dark eyes and she stared back. In her little face, he saw a great sadness and much pain. Three years old and already she'd suffered enough to last a lifetime.

Romeo felt a strange connection with this child. It was a different feeling than the one he felt for Christine, but the odd feeling was there nonetheless.

"She likes you, Mr. Grimbody. She really likes you." Jamal walked over to him, awe on his young face.

Adrienne leaned forward, resting her head against his chest. A fierce feeling of protectiveness washed over him; he wanted to make sure that nothing harmed this child again. He glanced at Christine, who had a suspicious sheen in her eyes.

Jamal, on the other hand, stared up at him with his mouth wide open, obviously not believing his eyes, especially when his little sister, secure in Romeo's arms, went to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

"That was amazing, Romeo. I've never seen her do that," Christine repeated for the fifth time during their car ride home.

"Jamal seemed to warm up to me after that." Romeo sounded quite pleased with himself, and he had every right to be. Never in a million years would she have ever expected to see Adrienne reach out for someone other than her brother.

The little girl barely let Christine hold her. Even though it didn't make sense at the time, something had told her that Romeo and the children would get along, but she hadn't expected them to hit it off quite like that.

Christine had been a little concerned after Jamal's initial reaction, but he did come around after Adrienne's seal of approval. Once they had laid the little girl down for a nap, Christine, Romeo, and Jamal went outside to play basketball. Romeo would often lift Jamal up so that he could reach the hoop. It had warmed her heart to see how good the two of them had finally got on. The little boy didn't have any real male influences in his life, so it was nice to see such a positive interaction.

When Adrienne woke up, they ate a picnic lunch in the backyard, but the little girl wouldn't sit anywhere except on Romeo's lap, again amazing Christine. The day had been perfect. What probably would have made the day more perfect was if Romeo and she could make love one last time, but she knew that wasn't to be. Her feelings had become too involved when she'd tried so hard for them not to be.

Now she was in a position she cursed herself for getting into. She was in love with him and there was absolutely nothing that could be done about it. Christine didn't want to burden him with her feelings when she knew that even if he did return her love, things would come to an end eventually. She had to do this now or never, or she'd find it impossible to sever their tie.

Christine pulled up to the driveway of her house with a heavy heart. "Romeo," she began as they got out of the car.

He studied her face with intent blue eyes. "I'm not sure if I like the sound of that 'Romeo.'" He walked over to her, but she backed away. She didn't want him to touch her because if he did, Christine would never be able to do what she had to do.

"What's wrong?"

"I really wish I didn't have to do things like this."

"Like what?"

"Well ... I ..."

"Tell me."

"I think this is the last time we should see each other."

"What?" he spat out, advancing toward her.

Christine braced herself, trying to stay strong. "I think this is the last time we should see each other," she repeated.

"I believe an explanation is in order."

"I ... well, this has been a fun experience, but like all good things this must come to an end."

"Like hell it does." Romeo grabbed her by the forearms and pulled her roughly against his chest.

She'd never been scared of him in their time together but, for the first time, she felt real fear. His cobalt eyes glowed menacingly. "I had fun with you, but that's all I wanted. I just wanted to see what it would be like to fuck a vampire." With each word she spoke, her heart broke some more, especially when his face turned pale, then a deep shade of red.

"Liar! You can't tell me what we shared was just a roll in the sack. It meant something, damn it!"

Was it possible that he'd fallen for her, too? No. It couldn't be, otherwise this was a bigger mess than she'd thought. Christine feigned an air of nonchalance, forcing herself to laugh in his face.

"Please tell me that you didn't fall for me. Aren't vampires supposed to be lusty creatures? Nya told me about the famous Romeo Grimaldi and I had to find out for myself if the tales about your ... uh, cocksmanhood were true." Christine winced inwardly at the whopping lie she'd just told.

“You little -- no. I don’t believe you. I can’t believe you. How could you let me make love to you in every way possible, and that was only this morning, then tell me it’s over? The time we spent with the children today meant nothing to you?”

She shrugged. “I was just throwing them a bone. They get so few visitors. It could have been any man.”

“You’re a fucking liar and I won’t let this be over. You still want me and I can prove it!” He pushed Christine back against the hood of her car.

“Romeo, what are you doing?” Christine cried out in surprise. To her chagrin, she felt a tingle of excitement racing through her body, but she couldn’t give in to him, no matter what. She tried to wiggle free of his strong hold. “No, Romeo.”

“You say no now, but your body is already saying yes.” In one swift movement, he ripped her shirt down the middle. Christine wore no bra underneath because the top had one built in. Her breasts were now exposed to his hungry gaze. Her nipples puckered from a combination of the gentle breeze and Romeo’s intense stare. Christine had never been more thankful to have tall hedges on either side of her driveway; otherwise the neighbors would have gotten a good show.

“Look at your nipples, all tight and pointed just for me, waiting for my caress.” He palmed each breast with an insolence that tore at her soul. Her tender lover was gone, and in his place was a vampire scorned. Romeo squeezed one sensitive tip until Christine whimpered. As much as she hated that he handled her so roughly, her body still welcomed his touch.

She could feel the dampness of her panties already. Romeo unsnapped and unzipped her jeans, pulling them down her legs. Only after he tore her panties off did he speak again. “I can smell your pussy, Christine. Already you’re wet for me. You want my cock.”

“No,” she moaned.

“Oh, yes, you do.” Romeo ran long fingers over her slit before delving inside her hidden depths.

“Oh,” she moaned again, trying to fight the fiery sensation of lust running through her body.

“Tell me you want my cock.”

“No,” Christine gasped out, fighting desperately to hold back the tears. She hadn’t known he would react like this, but in her mind she deserved it for hurting him.

Romeo undid his jeans, freeing his hard dick. He pulled the lower half of Christine’s body closer to his erection, rubbing it against her labia. “Say it, goddamn it! Say you want my cock. Tell me you want me.”

She could deny it no more. “Yes, oh, God, yes. I want your cock. Fuck me, Romeo. Please.”

“With pleasure,” he growled before plunging forward. Romeo gripped her thighs tightly, pounding into her with savage thrusts. “Your pussy wouldn’t get so wet if you didn’t want me anymore. This is *my* pussy. Mine. And you had better not forget it.”

Christine’s head rolled from side to side, her voice lost. Tears wet her face when she spied the angry and hurt face above her. Romeo fucked her until she was sore, and even then he didn’t stop, nor did she protest. She wanted him too much and would accept his pain and rage to be with him this one last time.

“Ah!” he screamed his release, shuddering against her. The ache in her heart was far greater than the one in her pussy. She looked away from him, unable to face him.

“Tell me how much you want me again, Christine,” Romeo demanded with an almost pleading note to his voice.

“You can make my body want you, but my heart and soul will never be yours.”

Christine felt his shaft slip out of her. For one anxious moment, she thought he would hit her.

“Damn you to hell!” Romeo shoved his cock back into his jeans and rearranged his clothes.

“Where are you going?” she asked tentatively when he started to walk away.

“That is none of your fucking business.”

Christine closed her eyes so that she wouldn’t have to watch the other half of her soul walk out of her life.

## Chapter Fifteen

“What the fuck are you looking at?” The surly biker raked his gaze over Romeo. Without warning, Romeo slammed his fist into the man’s face, sending him reeling to the floor with a scream of pain. “My nose! Goddamn it, you broke my nose. I’m going to sue you, motherfucker!”

Romeo kicked the man in the ribs. “Stop being a little bitch.”

“Hey, buddy. Why don’t you lay off?” Another biker joined him, pushing Romeo away from the howling man.

Romeo turned on the man, who probably had a good fifty pounds over him. Not that it mattered. He’d take on everyone in this bar if he had to. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll walk away.” He had been prepared to give the man a chance, but he changed his mind.

Romeo grabbed the second biker by the arm and propelled him against a pool table. Three more bikers surrounded him, and he readied himself. He’d only come to the bar to have several drinks, but a biker gang gathered around the pool tables had seemed to single him out. They probably saw him as an easy mark to rob and possibly rough up.

Romeo would have ignored them, because for once, he wasn’t in the mood for a brawl, but neither was he in the mood to put up with anyone’s shit. They’d been trying to pick a fight with him for the past hour, calling him “queer” and other names to get a rise out of him. It was only when the biker who now lay on the floor with a broken nose had bumped him that Romeo finally reacted.

A tall, fat biker raced at him while Romeo eluded him. He then punched his adversary in his protruding stomach. Someone jumped on his back; Romeo reached up and clapped his hands strongly over his attacker’s ears, probably bursting the eardrums.



“You boys are starting to fucking piss me off.” Romeo took two bikers and smashed their heads against the pool table, sending them toppling to the floor. He had to get out of here before he killed one of them in a fit of temper.

He dashed out of the bar, tired of this little game.

“Hey, Blondie!”

He turned around to see yet another biker standing behind him, only this time, the idiot held a gun.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Romeo muttered to himself. Before the gunman could pull the trigger, Romeo was in front of him, thrusting the gun away and smashing it to pieces in one hand, then backhanding the man with the other.

This was usually where he’d make some kind of witty remark, but he just didn’t feel like it right now. With one last kick to the villain’s ribs, Romeo turned away in disgust, leaving the injured man in his wake. He walked down the seedy streets of New York.

The only reason he now found himself trolling the streets like a lovesick fool was because he’d needed to get out of Boston as fast as he could. If he’d stayed within the same city limits as Christine, there would have been nothing to keep him from going back to her and making her admit that she loved him, too.

Romeo knew he couldn’t have imagined the look in her eyes when they’d made such wonderful love together. The tender way her gaze touched him when they’d played with the children made him long for permanence. He wanted what Marco and Nico had. He supposed it served him right to suffer now for the years he’d mocked the sentiment of love.

When he’d left Christine, Romeo had gone to a nearby motorcycle dealership and purchased a ride. He already had several at his various residences, but he didn’t have one handy here. He’d called Wolf, then Dante to tell them he’d be incommunicado for a few days.

Then he drove around wondering what his next course of action should be. Romeo didn’t know whether to just move on to the next woman or learn to deal with the loss of Christine. The problem was that he no more wanted another woman than he wanted to live without her.

Romeo knew he’d been rough with her the last time they were together and felt ashamed, but her words had hurt him more than any physical pain could have. Her sudden about-face almost made him think she was hiding something. Could there possibly be more that he didn’t see? Did this have something to do with her friend Nya?

How were the two connected and why couldn’t he read her mind? These were questions he knew he should have investigated when they’d first come up, and now it was a little too late.

His heart told him she was an innocent, but with the crazy shit happening lately, anything was possible. Romeo rambled around New York for three days, only venturing out of his penthouse apartment when he couldn't stand being inside anymore.

Romeo sighed when he found himself back in front of his building. He nodded to the doorman as he walked inside. His heart felt heavy and he didn't know how to deal with it. Romeo entered his residence and threw his keys on the table, noticing the angry flashing light of the answering machine.

He wasn't inclined to answer it, but no one called him on his line unless it was a matter of life and death. He clicked the play button.

"Whatever funk you're in, get out of it. Call me when you get this message." *Beep.*

Romeo shook his head. Leave it to Dante to get straight to the point. He picked up the phone and punched Dante's numbers in.

"Dante here."

"What the hell is so important that you called me on this line?"

"Get your ass over here right now."

"Where is here?"

"Edinburgh."

Romeo frowned "What are you doing there?"

"We've located Locke's base."

Romeo roared. "He's been found?! Why wasn't I notified right away? This is my mission!"

"Is it, Romeo?"

"Haven't I taken out the first five members?"

"And there's still one alive," Dante pointed out smoothly. "When this is taken care of, we're going to have a long talk, Ro."

"I don't think I'm in the mood for one of your lectures, Dante."

"You need someone to talk to you about your strange behavior."

"Okay, if we talk about mine, we'll talk about yours next, right?" he countered.

"This isn't about me," Dante hissed, his annoyance coming clearly through the phone. Romeo thought his older brother had a lot of nerve to bring up his so-called strange behavior when it was Dante who had been acting like a prick for the past few months. Romeo realized, however, that this was not the time to argue about it.

"Okay, fine. I'll be on the next plane out, but if you're so concerned about my performance and you're already over there, what do you need me for?" The devil in him couldn't help but ask.

A pause on the other end of the line followed his question. "What aren't you telling me?"

“There’s some kind of summit,” Dante finally answered.

“What do you mean?”

“There are a lot of rogues here. Locke seems to have gathered a small army around him.”

“Shit. How many?”

“At least fifty.”

“Strength in numbers, huh?”

“Something like that. Make sure Wolf is on that plane with you.”

“Who else is with you? If Locke has fifty deep we’re not going to be able to take them out by ourselves.”

“Nico, Jagger, Sasha, Marco --”

“Marco is there? What about Maggie? I’m surprised he would leave her side.”

“She’s here, too.”

He had to be joking. “What? Are you crazy? She’s going to get herself killed.”

“Not to fight. Do you think Marco would allow that? No, he’s out for blood and refused to miss this.”

“What about his mate?”

“She’s safely tucked away at the hotel. When we fight, she’ll be guarded by three agents.”

“Why does he have a hard-on for this fight? He’s been inactive for the past few months.”

“He and Maggie were attacked in their home.”

“Shit! When the hell did that happen and why wasn’t I told?”

“It’s hard to tell someone I can’t get in contact with.”

Romeo sighed. “How about when I called you tell you about the traitor among us? Surely you could have told me then.”

“I would have told you, but it happened after we spoke.”

“Is ... is the baby okay?”

“He’s fine.” Dante’s curt tone told Romeo that it would be a good idea to change the subject.

“Do you think three guards will be enough to protect her? Those red-eyed rogues are more powerful than the ones we normally deal with.”

“Sasha and her brothers have put a ward on the hotel room. It will be very hard for our enemies to break through.”

“The Romanov brothers are there? They’re more psychotic than you claim me to be. Sheesh, this must have be the real deal if you had to enlist their aid.”

“Just the twins -- Cutter and Blade. I also have Angel, Carter, and a dozen others. We attack tomorrow.”

“Can we trust the people you’ve chosen for this mission?”

“I was very careful to select only agents who have been with the Underground for several years.”

“Good. I’ll be there as soon as possible.”

“Thank you.”

A brief pause followed. “Dante --” Romeo broke off, not really certain what to say.

“What?”

“Nothing, just take care. Uh, I don’t always say it, but I do lo--”

“I know. I’ll see you when you get here.”

Romeo sighed, rubbing his temples. He at least now had something to take his mind off Christine, but what would he do when this was all over?

\* \* \* \* \*

Dante paced the floor of the hotel room after speaking with Romeo.

“If you keep pacing around like that you’re going to make us all dizzy.” Nico yawned, a bored expression on his face. His arm was draped around his mate’s shoulder. The intimate pose sent a twinge of envy shooting through Dante.

Anyone looking at them could tell how much in love they were and he couldn’t begrudge his brother his newfound happiness. Having been bewitched by a manipulative wizard, Nico had suffered through thirty years of separation from his mate and son.

Dante looked over at his nephew. Already Jagger had proven to be a formidable adversary, demonstrating the maturity and skill of someone several years older. Dante was proud of him and hoped that if he was ever blessed with a son one day, he’d be just like Jagger. At the thought of children, his heart twisted.

Only two doors away lay the woman he couldn’t stop thinking about. He cursed Marco for insisting that they come here, putting Dante in this tenuous position. When he was far away from her, the ache in his heart didn’t seem so strong, but in such close proximity it was difficult to maintain his peace of mind.

A knock on the door brought Dante out of his thoughts. He nodded toward Carter, who was closest to it. Carter admitted Marco. Dante looked away, feeling guilty about where his thoughts had been.

“Did I miss anything?” his brother asked as he entered the room.

“Nothing yet. How’s Maggie?” Sasha asked.

“She’s fine. Right now she’s resting. I think all this traveling has worn her out.”

Dante heard the smile in his brother’s voice as he talked about his mate, which, for some reason, set him off. “Which is exactly why you should have kept her home,” he couldn’t help snapping.

Marco’s forehead creased, then he projected his thoughts to Dante’s mind. *And let those bastards get away with what they did? I’m not going to let that attack go unanswered. A man has a duty to protect his family, and I’m not going to let what happened to Bianca and Gio happen to Maggie and our baby. Do you know that she has nightmares? They’ve been off and on, but ever since the attack, she’s woken up screaming every night. How do I assure her that everything is going to be okay when she’s attacked in her own damn home?*

When put like that, it was hard to argue. Dante felt an asshole, but he could hardly discuss his feelings with Marco in a room full of Underground agents. He turned away from his brother to address the crowd. “I suppose everyone is here now?”

Nico looked around the room. “Except for Romeo, I believe so.”

“Good. First off, I want to thank you all for being here tonight. Also, I’d like to send a special thanks to Branson and Jordan for tracking Locke down. I have to admit that I’ve wanted him for a long time. Tomorrow, we’re going to go in and attack on my signal. Apparently there’s going to be some kind of meeting. We’re going to make sure it’s never completed.” He paused for a moment to survey the brave immortals gather around him, all staring back at him with intent eyes.

“I will be honest with you. Some of us won’t survive this fight. These are rogues ... more powerful than any others I’ve seen before. They’re hard to kill so I want you to be smart about this fight. Shifters will fight shifters, wizards against wizards. Help each other out because if there are to be casualties, we want as few as possible ... at least on our side.” Dante stopped again to look at everyone, his gaze lingering over his family’s faces.

Although he was grateful for their presence, he was more frightened that they were risking their lives for what was essentially his cause, not theirs. He loved them more than they knew and vowed that if he survived tomorrow, he’d make it up to them, especially Marco, for the way he’d been acting lately.

“You don’t have to worry. We will back you one hundred and fifty percent.” Nico stood up, a stoic expression on his serious face.

Marco smiled, walking over to him and squeezing his arm in a comforting gesture. The looks he exchanged with his brothers told Dante that all would be well and no words needed to be spoken. The only person missing was Romeo.

Dante hoped to God that his brother would arrive here safely.

## Chapter Sixteen

Romeo stood outside the door, waiting for Dante's signal, his heart pounding with anticipation. This would be a battle royale. Never had there been such a gathering of forces. Somehow, Locke had managed to surround himself with several guards, clearly knowing his time was near. Romeo's hands clenched and unclenched, ready for action. He was barely able to keep himself in check.

He knew Jagger, Sasha, and her brothers, Cutter and Blade, were working to remove the wards from around the compound, but how long would it take? It must be more difficult than they'd thought if it needed all four of them to do the job. It was hard enough to wait here without knowing what his fate would be at the outcome of this fight, but standing around gave him too much time to think about *her*.

Damn it, he wanted to forget Christine. He cursed the night she'd walked into his life. She'd made him think she was sweetness and light when she really had the heart of a whore. What a fool he was for falling for someone who only saw him as a convenient lay. Still, his heart couldn't fully believe her words. How was it possible for two people to share what they had had and it just be lust? It made absolutely no sense.

*Are you all right?* Nico's voice filtered into his thoughts. His younger brother stood next to him with a look of concern etched on his face.

*It's nothing. I just want to get this over with. Once Locke is dead, then maybe we can get to the bottom of this mess.*

Nico shook his head. *If you believe that, then you're crazy. This fight is only the beginning. Once Locke is gone, we'll still have to figure out who the hell Il Diavolo is and how he's connected to us. That's not what was on your mind, though. I've observed you enough to figure out there's something else going on with you. And it has nothing to do with this fight.*

*I don't want to talk about it.*

*Okay. But when you're ready, I'll be here for you.*

Romeo sighed, unable to resist asking, *How do you do it?*

*How do I do what?*

*How are you able to deal with this ... love thing?*

One of Nico's dark brows shot up. *Love?*

*If you tease me, you won't live to see this fight,* Romeo threatened.

A smile split Nico's face. *So that's what's been happening with you. Wait until I tell Marco and Dante.*

Nico's laugh reverberated through his head, and Romeo had to call upon all of self-control so he wouldn't snap his brother's neck. He'd expected this reaction and, under most circumstances, he would have been able to handle the light-hearted ribbing, but what was there to laugh about? He'd finally found the woman he wanted to spend eternity with but she'd kicked him to the curb.

The laughter stopped. *You don't seem happy about it.*

*You're a fucking genius, you know that?*

*There's no need to be nasty, Ro. Tell me what's wrong.*

Romeo released a mental sigh, knowing Nico would get the whole story out of him sooner or later. *She told me she doesn't want to see me again, that she only wanted to know what it was like to fuck a vampire.*

*Please tell me you weren't used for sex.* Again, Romeo could hear the amusement creeping into his brother's voice. He glared at Nico.

A sheepish grin touched Nico's lips. *Sorry.*

*I know there was more than sex between us. How else could she respond to me in such a way?*

*Why didn't you call her on it?*

*I ... I tried, but it was impossible. I've never felt this way in my life and it kind of sucks.*

*Love tends to do that to you. It isn't always the sweet emotion poets spout off.*

*Look who you're talking to.*

*No one can understand the dark hell I went through in working out my feelings for Sasha, but the reward has been more than worth it. Each day that I'm with her is a gift. If you truly love this woman, then you must fight for her.*

On the cusp of replying, they were joined by Jagger. He's lost his healthy color and looked tired.

Nico turned amber eyes toward his son. "What's wrong, Jagger?"

“The wards are strong and taking long than expected to remove. Mama thought it would be best if I save my strength. I think they are nearly finished, though.”

“Perhaps you should go back to the hotel. I must have been crazy for allowing you to come here.” Nico cursed vehemently.

“Don’t start, Papa. I can handle myself. How could anything go wrong with you, Mama, and my uncles surrounding me?”

Romeo admired his young nephew, who reminded him a lot of himself when he himself had been younger. The half-vamp, half-wizard youngling had indeed proven his abilities over and over again, despite not quite reaching age thirty.

Nico didn’t look convinced but remained silent, his lips pressed into a thin line.

Dante finally moved, turning to those gathered around. “It is done.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Romeo followed closely behind Dante as they burst through the door. They walked inside to a wide-open room filled with a mass of glowing red eyed rogues. To his and, Romeo was sure, his brothers’ collective surprises, standing in the middle of the room was the last person they expected.

“Adonis,” Dante whispered.

“Welcome ... brothers. I see you’ve brought reinforcements.” Adonis greeted them with a maniacal smile on his face.

Romeo advanced, but Dante held up his hand. “So this is your doing?” he asked, staring the red-headed vampire in the eyes.

Adonis’s amber gaze gleamed with merriment. “Isn’t it obvious? Really, do you think the Council was intelligent enough to pull this off on their own?”

“Hey, wait a minute!” Devlin Locke stepped forward, an angry red flush on his face.

“Shut up, Locke, unless you want to join those who will not leave here alive,” Adonis hissed, before turning back to Dante, the smirk returning to his face.

“What’s this all about? You at least owe us that before we kill you.”

The redhead laughed. “You have me quaking in my Gucci shoes, Dante, but I don’t owe you a thing. Wouldn’t it go against your principles to destroy me? I thought you were protective of your brothers. Don’t you feel our connection? Doesn’t the same blood that flows through my veins flow in yours?”

“You liar! We share no blood tie!”

“On the contrary. Do you not see the resemblance? Yes, my hair is red, but look at my eyes. Aren’t they the same as brother Niccolo and GianMarco’s ... and our papa’s?”



Romeo had silently watched the exchange while keeping a wary eye on the many rogues behind Adonis who seemed ready to pounce at any second. He'd realized they only waited for a signal from their leader, who apparently wasn't Devlin Locke.

With Adonis's revelation, Romeo stared at the vampire, not knowing whether to attack or wait to find out what the hell this all meant. Another brother? It had been hinted at for months, but when faced with the reality, he didn't want to believe it, yet the claim seemed to be true.

There *was* a strong resemblance between Adonis and he and his brothers, especially Dante. No. This couldn't be. Yet, even as he denied it, Romeo could feel a connection with the vampire. Judging from the quick look he stole at his brothers, they felt it, too.

Was this some kind of sorcery?

"No, Romeo, this is no trick." Adonis smirked. Damn. Romeo cursed himself for not closing his mind from intrusions. "You did such a good job taking out the other Council members for me. I thank you for saving me the trouble."

Romeo looked over at Dante, who'd lost all color in his face. "But Locke ..." Romeo's voice trailed off.

Devlin tossed a strand of his long, brown hair over his shoulder and laughed. "The others mean nothing to me. They had served their usefulness."

Oh, God, what had they done? All of this was getting much too complicated.

"Yes," Adonis continued, "the Council's usefulness has expired, hasn't it?" Before anyone could respond, the redhead was behind Locke in the blink of an eye. A fist exploded through Locke's chest, whose brown eyes widened with shock and pain as a thin line of blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

Romeo didn't know who was more flabbergasted -- him, the rest of his companions, or the unfortunate Council leader himself.

"But ... but you promised. You said I would be your second in command." Locke's voice grew weaker with each word.

Adonis yanked his arm out from Locke's body, removing the other man's heart as he did so. When the body fell, the redhead laughed. "I lied."

The Council leader's body lay on the floor, and the room fell deathly silent. Romeo shifted on his feet, feeling even more uneasy. What were they to make of this now?

Adonis laughed louder, seeming to enjoy the stunned expressions on everyone's faces.

"Why?" Dante asked in a harsh whisper.

Adonis shook his head, an exaggerated sigh passing his lips as though the issue were quite simple. "Dante, Dante, Dante. It has amused me to hear about little brother Romeo's cross-country murdering spree. Ironic, isn't it? Your Underground is supposed to end the rogue threat, yet you condone the rogue-style slayings of Council members, each taken out in very interesting ways. They were innocent, you know ... at least of my role in this."

“Innocent my ass. I’m tired of talking. Let’s gut this motherfucker.” Romeo made a move to charge Adonis, but Dante’s arm came up to stop him.

“Wait.”

Adonis smiled. “They obey your commands so well, just like well-trained lapdogs.”

Rage boiled just below the surface, threatening to rear its head. Romeo’s fingers clenched and unclenched.

“What exactly do you mean by innocent, because from the way I look at it, they were all guilty as hell.” Dante’s voice deadly calm, but Romeo realized that his brother was just as close to snapping as he was.

“Those Council members had nothing to do with the killings. Oh, sure, they had some grandiose scheme of taking out humans, but honestly, of the billions of the buggers that walk the earth, what good would terminating them all do when immortals have controlled this world since the beginning of time? We own banks, run the media, control the political climate, and rule the world already. We need the humans to carry out our orders and run our businesses. Unbeknownst to them, of course.” Adonis chuckled again.

Dante persisted. “Why then?”

“Why not?”

“I think we are owed an explanation, goddamn you,” Romeo hissed.

Adonis shook his head, looking bored. “Tsk tsk, little brother. I’d watch my temper if I were you.”

“You son of a bitch. You’ll tell us or die now,” Romeo challenged, taking another step forward. Marco yanked him back as two fierce-looking, red-eyed rogues also stepped forward.

Adonis sighed. “This endless quest for answers is tedious, so I’ll give you the short version. The Council had been talking about getting rid of humans for years, but none of them had the *cogilioni* to take any action. That is when Locke, the fool, came to me. He wanted me to help him execute this stupid plan of his so that he could get the head Council seat. I agreed to give him the power he sought as long as I would be the leader of this new world order. I enlisted other allies ...” He trailed off and focused on Sasha and her brothers.

“Your father’s thirst for power got him killed,” Adonis taunted with a mock pout.

Romeo expected one of the twins to attack, but surprisingly it was Sasha who reacted. “You bastard! I will kill you! I will kill you!” she screamed, then cursed him in Russian. A burst of light tore from her fingers, but Adonis moved so quickly that it was barely visible to Romeo’s eyes.

Amazing. He was incredibly fast and would be a tough opponent to beat. Cutter and Blade held their sister back as they glared at Adonis. For once, those two were showing a little restraint, but for how long was anyone’s guess.

“Really, brother, was it necessary to bring a woman to a man’s fight?” Adonis turned back to Dante. “As I was saying, I let the Council believe I wanted what they did. I even sent some of my friends to kill a bunch of humans. I was very specific about who I wanted them to terminate, just to throw you gentlemen off the scent. I knew you’d believe that the Council was directly behind the killings and go after them. I even figured out that the four of you would eventually come together like this, especially when I sent my men to attack you and your families. Now I will kill every single one of you and enjoy it immensely.”

Dante shook his head, a look of astonishment and anger on his face. Romeo knew exactly what his brother was feeling. They’d all been duped.

“I see you’re still wondering why I’d do this. It’s very simple, really. I hate you all. I will destroy everything that spawned from Giovanni and Marina Grimaldi. Just as I destroyed them ... my papa and his bitch of a mate. That’s right. I killed them both. Look no further for *Il Demonio* because I stand before you now.” His smile encompassed them all. “Attack!” Adonis suddenly screamed.

A hard blow thumped Romeo in the back of the head as all the red-eyed rogues converged on their group. He turned around and was stunned to see who’d attacked him.

Carter sneered at him with glowing red eyes.

“It was you! You have been reporting our every movement!” Romeo couldn’t believe it.

All around him Underground agents fought against the rogues around them. Dante and Adonis had their hands wrapped around each other’s throats. Marco was pounding a rogue in the face, while Nico rolled on the floor with a vampire who looked like he was trying to bite him.

“You little fucker! How could you do this to Dante?” Romeo demanded as he grabbed Carter by the collar.

The stocky vampire laughed before kneeing him hard in the nuts. “Very easily. Dante cannot offer me infinite power, but Adonis can.”

When Romeo dropped to his knees, Carter clipped Romeo on the chin, snapping his head back. The son of a bitch was stronger than ever. Romeo interlocked his fingers in one big fist and slammed it into Carter’s solar plexus. “You motherfucker. We fucking trusted you and this is how you repay us?”

Carter doubled over but still managed to get a hit in, landing it right on Romeo’s nose. Blood squirted from his nostrils, but he was just able to avoid another fist.

“You’re all going to die, you know,” Carter jeered, somehow shaking off the blow to his chest and backhanding Romeo, who was still trying to get to his feet. His balls still ached like crazy, but too many people were depending on him. His incisors lengthened and his fingers transformed to long points.

He quickly dodged another punch and hopped to his feet, only to have Carter’s sharp claws tear into his chest. Romeo jumped back, thanking his lucky stars that the rogue’s

fingers hadn't had a chance to break through his sternum. The pain was excruciating, but he had to keep going.

Romeo delivered a blow of his own, followed by another jab and uppercut. The shorter vampire went stumbling back, falling into another red-eyed rogue who wasn't having too good a time against Sasha. The witch was sending sharp random objects toward his head. The crazed look in her eyes kind of reminded him of Sissy Spacek in *Carrie*. Sasha seemed to be holding her own so far, and Nico kept close by.

Carter regained his footing and came barreling after Romeo, his claws extended. Unfortunately, Romeo didn't get out of the way in time. The rogue's fingers tore into his throat and he got elbowed in the chest. He fell back into another battling pair, with the new rogue pushing him back toward Carter, who was ready to hit him again. This time Romeo was just able to duck.

By now the pain in his balls had dulled and so had the pain from the gashes in his chest and throat. He tore into Carter's stomach, making the other vampire howl. Romeo head-butted his opponent in the face, then lowered his head toward the rogue's throat. He stripped away a large piece of flesh and flung it back in his enemy's face with disgust. "Die, you worthless sack of shit." Gathering all his rage, Romeo wrapped his fingers around Carter's neck and ripped his head off before spiking it on the ground like a football.

The head's eyes remained open, glaring at him. Romeo bent over and tore into the cavity of the rogue's chest and pulled out his heart, squeezing it to mush. Not wasting any time, he whisked over to his closest brother, Marco, to help him out. Already one dead rogue lay at his brother's feet.

Marco was pounding his adversary's face with rapid blows. Romeo rushed behind the creature and grabbed his arms, holding him as tightly as he could while Marco disemboweled him.

Romeo let go in order to rip out the rogue's spine, giving Marco enough time to get the heart. When the body hit the ground, Marco rushed over to Nico while Romeo ran over to Wolf, who was being double-teamed by two attackers. Romeo pulled at the rogue who was pummeling his friend in the gut.

Romeo and his opponent exchanged blow for blow, both giving as good as they got, neither backing down. Suddenly, the rogue split in half right before his eyes. He gasped, then realized what had happened. Cutter Romanov stood there or at least Romeo thought it was Cutter; he could never tell the twins apart. "You owe me, Grimaldi," the blond wizard smirked.

"Not quite, pal," Romeo said, bending down to dig out the fallen vampire's heart and crushing it.

"Touché," the wizard saluted him before rushing to assist another one of their allies. Romeo spied Wolf ripping the heart out of his opponent, then his eyes sought out his

brothers. Nico and Jagger were facing off one rogue, while Marco had his hands firmly around another's neck.

Sasha and one of her brothers were doing a good job of tearing another rogue to shreds. The witch had a huge black eye and an ugly bruise on her cheek, but she fought on. He knew Nico continued to keep a close eye on her.

The numbers of Adonis's troops were dwindling. Romeo was glad to see that most of the slain lying around him were rogues, but sadness hit him at the sight of a few dead comrades, one of whom was Angel Ramirez. Not having time to dwell on what he saw, Romeo sought out Dante, and his heart plummeted.

His brother was getting his ass served to him. Adonis had him in the air by the throat, pounding him in the face. Dante clawed at the tight grip and struggled to break free, but apparently to no avail.

Romeo sprang at Adonis, jumping on his back, and raked his talons down the side of the redhead's face. This was enough to make him drop Dante. Adonis roared, turning around so quickly that Romeo didn't have time to dodge the fist that slammed right into his chest. The blow sent him flying halfway across the room. He crashed to the floor, gasping for breath. He'd never been hit so hard in his life, and he'd been hit thousands of times.

Adonis ran toward him, but Dante had sprung back to his feet by now and delivered a blow to the back of Adonis's head. The redhead stumbled forward, right into the fist Romeo had ready for him. It sent him backward, then to the side, where he was hit again by Marco, who'd suddenly appeared.

Adonis staggered. Nico appeared and backhanded him. The four brothers took turns throwing punches and kicks. Even though they hit him as hard as they could, Adonis remained on his feet for a remarkably long time. When he finally fell to his knees, they surrounded him, but then a blinding white light filled the room.

"Get out of here now, Adonis!" a loud, deep voice boomed throughout the room.

In his temporary blindness, Romeo swung his arms trying to connect with anything. Bright, colorful spots danced before his eyes, and it took several seconds before his eyesight came back to him.

Adonis was gone! The only people remaining in the room were his family, the remaining agents who'd survived the fight, and three newcomers, one of whom he immediately recognized. "Nya!" he hissed.

She nodded toward him in acknowledgement, but didn't speak. It seemed that Marco and Dante recognized another member of the trio, judging from the looks on their faces as they eyed a slender redhead of medium height and stunning features.

"Dyannara," Dante whispered.

Romeo looked to the tall, dark man standing between the two women. A twinkle of sadness filled the deep green eyes looking back at them.

“What is the meaning of this? Where is Adonis?” Dante demanded.

The tall vampire glanced at all of them before he spoke. “I couldn’t let you kill him. Forgive me ... brothers.”

With a wave of the redhead’s hand, the three of them disappeared.

“No! Goddamn it, no!” Dante yelled.

## Chapter Seventeen

Romeo's heart pounded faster than he could ever remember it doing as he parked his bike in Christine's driveway. He was relieved to see her black Honda Accord there, because he didn't think he had the patience to wait for her return. He would have knocked when he got to her door, but it was slightly ajar.

Maybe Christine had forgotten to close it all the way when she stepped into her house, but Romeo got another vibe. There was another vampire here. What the fuck? Had Christine already moved on to her next vampire conquest? Fuck that, she belonged to him, and if he had to fight for her -- hell he'd already survived the fight of his life, what was one more battle?

He pushed the door in, his incisors descending. He was ready to kick some major ass. Romeo heard movements upstairs, which sounded like they were coming from the bedroom; otherwise the house was eerily silent. He took the steps three at a time until he reached Christine's room.

Romeo kicked the door in and stormed through. What he saw angered and surprised him. Christine was nowhere to be found and Nya was rifling through her drawers. "You bitch! What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded. For all his high dudgeon, she seemed unmoved, not even bothering to lift her head.

She continued her task as if he weren't there or hadn't said anything, and that ticked him off. "What the fuck are you doing here?" Romeo asked again.

"I heard you the first time. Lower your voice because I'm sure the neighbors can hear you as well." Nya pulled out some clothes and walked them over to a suitcase. Her cool response had him so confused he didn't quite know how to act, including whether he should charge her. All he knew was that this woman was his enemy, possibly in cahoots with Adonis, and she was in his woman's house.

Deciding to attack now and ask questions later, Romeo was next to her so quickly, Nya didn't move out of the way. He grabbed her by the shoulders and slammed her slender body into the wall. It went against his principles to manhandle a woman, but she was no mere woman. She was a killer who was possibly one of the rogues responsible for the massacres of hundreds.

Nya gritted her teeth, but didn't express any pain or even a hint of fear. She merely looked at him with her usual contempt.

"I won't ask you again, bitch. What are you doing here and where is Christine?"

"Do you honestly think I'd tell you anything after this?" she asked incredulously.

He rammed her into the wall again, her head making a loud thud as it snapped back. Romeo wrapped his hand around her throat and brought his face to hers until their noses touched. He realized she was much younger than him, but there was still an immense power within her. He wondered why she didn't fight back. The more passive Nya remained, the angrier Romeo grew. "Say something, bitch."

"That's the third time you've called me a bitch, even though you know my name. Apologize," she said, an ironic smile twisting her full lips. Her chocolate-colored eyes twinkled dangerously.

Who the hell did she think she was? He'd destroy her. Romeo's fingers tightened around her neck, his thumb pressing down on her windpipe. Nya gasped for breath. A knee came up, connecting with his balls so hard it felt like he would cough them up, and a punch landed on the side of his head.

His grip fell away and she moved back from him. "I suppose chivalry is dead." She sighed and went back to her task of gathering Christine's clothes and packing them neatly into a suitcase. When Romeo made a move to grab her again, she shook her head. "I wouldn't do that if I were you. I'm not as big a pushover as you seem to think."

"Where is Christine? And why are you packing her belongings?" he asked through clenched teeth, realizing she wasn't going to say anything further until he calmed down.

Nya sighed, flinging one of her long plaits over her shoulder, and sat down on the bed. "Believe it or not, Romeo, I'm not your enemy."

He snorted. "Yeah, right. It sure seems that way from where I'm standing, toots. Rescuing Adonis certainly doesn't help your case."

"Firstly, you're not standing. Secondly, there are things you don't understand."

"Then make me understand," he practically sneered.

"It's not my place to tell you. Everything will be revealed in time ... by Giovanni."

"Giovanni? That's the rogue you were with, right?"

Nya rolled her eyes. "For a seemingly intelligent guy, I fail to see how you can put two and two together and come up with five. Giovanni is no rogue. Do you think I'd hang out with rogues?"



“I wouldn’t know, Nya. You’re pretty damned secretive, you show up in the damnedest places and, even though you and Christine are supposed to be friends, she knows as much about you as I do.”

“There are some things that are on a need-to-know-basis, so if you don’t know, then you don’t need to know. And there is no supposed about it. I *am* her friend.”

“Sure, whatever. What does Giovanni have to do with this?”

She briefly glared at him before continuing. “Do you honestly think he’d allow you to kill his brother? *Your* brother? Like I said, it isn’t my story to tell. All I can say is that he is one of the few living creatures that I trust. Don’t go jumping to conclusions because that’s what got you and your brothers in trouble in the first place.”

Romeo didn’t want to believe her but, oddly enough, he sensed that she was telling him the truth. Besides, after seeing Adonis and Giovanni together, he could no longer deny their connection. Still, he knew no more about Nya than before. “Just whose side are you on, lady?”

Another humorless smile touched her lips. “That’s easy. Mine. Look, I suppose I can tell you why I’m here and Christine isn’t, although it should be obvious to you that I’m packing some things for her.”

“Well, duh. I’m not a simpleton.”

“If you say so.” She shrugged.

He felt wringing her neck again, but kept his temper in check. “Why are you packing for her?”

Nya’s eyes were downcast, and for the first time he’d known her, she looked frazzled. Alarm shot through him. “What is it? What’s happened to her?” Romeo raced over to the bed and yanked Nya to her feet and shook her.

“Let me go, you ass. If you don’t stop shaking me, I’ll never get the words out.”

If he didn’t know better, Romeo would have thought she had tears in her eyes. But it couldn’t be, not this fierce vampire fem who’d shown no fear when he’s been seconds away from snapping her lovely neck.

This made him more panicked than before. “Nya?”

“Do you love her?” Her question took him by surprise.

“What?”

“Do you love her? Answer me truthfully.”

“I would walk through fire for her, kill a million rogues for her, and die a thousands deaths for her. If that isn’t love, then I don’t know what is. Just please tell me where she is.”

Nya nodded, seeming to accept his answer. “She’s ... she’s in the hospital.”

“The hospital? What’s happened? Was she in an accident?”

“No. Her time has come. She’s worse off than ever before. The doctors said that in a couple days, she’ll probably slip into a coma, then she won’t feel a thing. That she’ll go peacefully.”

“What? What the hell are you talking about?”

Now it was obviously Nya’s turn to be surprised. “You didn’t know? I was wondering why you hadn’t figured it out yet.”

“If I knew, would I be asking? Stop speaking in riddles. You’re not Yoda and I’m not Luke. What’s wrong with Christine?”

Nya’s mouth fell open, her eyes searching his face for answers. “She’s dying.”

“You’re lying! You’re a goddamn liar!”

“Bitch I may be, but I’m no liar. Haven’t you been with her when she’s had one of her headaches?”

“She told me they were migraines!”

“Hardly. She has an inoperable brain tumor. It’s a wonder she’s been able to hold on this long, but Christine insisted on leading a normal life.

“No!” he roared. “No! You’re supposed to be her friend. Why didn’t you try to save her?” Even as he denied it, he realized that that was the reason he hadn’t been able to read her mind. In order to communicate telepathically, vampires tapped into the neurons that controlled thoughts. Obviously in Christine’s case, the tumor had been blocking his access to her thoughts. It had also clearly affected her physiologically and that was why her juices had tasted differently to him.

“Don’t you think I’ve tried? If she would have taken me up on my offer, she wouldn’t be in a hospital right now. It’s not something I can just force on her, because that would be the most horrible thing that I could do. This has been a weight on my heart ever since I found out.” A tear escaped from the corner of her eye, which she hastily wiped away.

“Why didn’t she tell me?”

“Maybe because she didn’t want your pity.”

“But I love her!” Suddenly it all made sense, the cryptic statements, and the abrupt way she’d ended things. She hadn’t wanted him to know because she loved him, too. His mind drifted to the time where she’d confessed her love for him while he was trying to rouse her from her sleep. How could he have forgotten that? There was hope!

“Did you tell her you loved her?”

Romeo’s face grew hot as he thought of their last encounter and how shabbily he’d treated her. Oh, God. He couldn’t lose her. He just couldn’t. “Take me to the hospital.”

“What do you mean to do?”

“Save her, and I won’t take no for an answer.”

Nya sighed in apparent relief. “She has to consent, though.”

“I’ll make sure of it.”

“Thank you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Christine looked out the hospital room window listlessly, not interested with what was on the television screen. Thank God for morphine, because the headaches were not only worse, but they were also nonstop. She knew it would be a matter of days rather than weeks now.

When she’d been diagnosed with a terminal brain tumor, the doctors had told her she’d only live for a matter of weeks, but her will had kept her alive. Yes, the headaches were bad, but she’d managed to deal with them and had confounded the doctors with her continued survival.

Christine had drawn strength from her friends, her job, the children, then Romeo. But after the abrupt way things had ended between them, her health had rapidly declined. She wished he knew she loved him. Maybe Nya could relay the message for her. At least her soul would be at peace if he knew their brief time together meant more to her than she’d wanted to admit.

Christine was thankful she had been able to say a proper goodbye to Jamal and Adrienne. They didn’t understand why she kept telling them that she loved them or kept giving them frequent hugs, but she made sure they knew they were loved. Saying goodbye and knowing it would be the final one hurt more than she’d realized it would.

She’d cried for hours but was happy to know that when they were older, they’d inherit her estate. Nya had promised to watch out for them and make sure they would be okay. Christine tried not to, but she couldn’t help thinking about Romeo, too. How she missed him. Her heart ached and she wasn’t sure how to handle it. At this point, death looked awfully inviting, because living without Romeo just wouldn’t have been worth it. This love for him was so inconvenient, because the moment she opened her eyes, and before she went to sleep at night, Christine thought of him.

The way they had parted still ripped at her inside. She hadn’t wanted to hurt him, but she hadn’t wanted his pity, either. No. It was for the best. He’d soon forget her.

She also wished she weren’t such a coward when Nya had offered to bring her over, but Christine didn’t know whether the vampire life was the kind of life she wanted to lead.

Just then her room door flew open.

“Sir, you can’t go in there. It’s past visiting hours!” A harried nurse panted, obviously from trying to catch up with him.

“Romeo!” Christine tried to sit up, but didn’t have the strength to do so. She winced at the jarring movement.

“Christine! You are crazy if you think I’m going to let you die. I can just shake you, woman! Why the hell didn’t you tell me?” he demanded, looking even angrier than when she’d last seen him.

Nya stepped into the room behind Romeo and the nurse. “Nya! How could you? I told you not to tell him until after I was gone.”

“I had to, Christine. He threatened to kill me if I didn’t.” The amused twinkle in the female vampire’s eyes had Christine highly skeptical of that claim.

“It would have been rather shitty of her if she didn’t,” Romeo added.

“Sir, ma’am, you’re going to have to leave or I’ll call security.” The nurse stamped her feet to get their attention.

Romeo turned to Nya. “Would you mind taking care of this for me? I promise I won’t ever call you a bitch again ... well, not for the rest of the day, at least.”

Nya glared at him before turning dark glowing eyes on the now gaping nurse. “You will leave us. This man will be allowed to stay as long as he likes. You will make an exception for me as well. You have other nursing duties to attend to, and you won’t come back to this room unless the patient buzzes for you.”

The nurse nodded. “Yes. Stay as long as you like. I won’t be back unless Miss Summers buzzes for me,” she said, walking back out the door.

Romeo smiled at Nya then. “Now, how about getting lost yourself? Me and my woman have some unfinished business to discuss.”

Christine gulped. His woman? This was news to her.

Nya gave Romeo the middle finger before turning on her heel to leave them alone. She shut the door behind her with a decisive click.

“That was rather nasty of you, and I don’t really know why you’re here. I don’t need your pity.” She crossed her arms over her chest, but the movement made her dizzy. She sank deeper into the pillows, nausea hitting her hard. It felt like she was getting weaker by the minute and hated him for seeing her like this. “Please go away, Romeo.” Even as she said the words, she was glad to see his beloved face one last time.

“I never pitied you, Christine. I ... I love you. I wasn’t going to let another man have you, so what makes you think I’d let death take what’s mine?”

Her jaw dropped. “No, you can’t love me.”

“Why not?” Romeo sat down beside her, grabbing her hand and squeezing it. Her eyes drank in each one of his handsome features, from his deep cobalt blue eyes to his sexy lips and chiseled features. Her heart swelled with love for him.

“I’m a big mess right now.”

“Well, you might be very close to death, but you’ll always be the most beautiful woman in the world in my eyes, no matter the circumstances. I love you so much that you’re

the first thought when I wake in the morning and the last thought before I go to sleep. Please be honest with me, Christine. Do you love me, too?"

The anxious expression in Romeo's eyes proved the love he'd confessed. Tears sprang to her eyes. How could she deny her feelings for him any longer? "Yes. I do love you, Romeo, but I'm dying. It's not fair to you."

"Christine, I'm a vampire. Surely you must know I won't let you die when there's something I can do about it. This tumor has obviously robbed you of your senses if you think I would allow you to leave me."

"But ... you want to change me into a --"

"A vampire? Would that be so bad, my darling?"

"I don't know if I can get used to drinking blood for the rest of my life."

"After your first blood, you need never drink blood again."

"What? I mean how?"

"It's not the blood. It's what's in the blood. The same life-giving essence in blood is the same stuff in sexual secretions. Why do you think I enjoy eating that delicious pussy of yours so much?"

Christine gasped. "You mean ... I can ..." she broke off, her face growing hot.

"You could feed from my cock." He grinned at her embarrassment.

"Oh, I guess there's still a lot I need to learn about vampires. What ... what would happen?"

Romeo briefly detailed how they would drink each other's blood, in essence exchanging fluids.

"I ..." She didn't know what to say. Could she completely give her trust and her heart to this man?

Romeo squeezed her hand, looking earnest. "Please be my wife. We'll do the whole white wedding thing if you like, and we'll adopt Jamal and Adrienne. We'd be a real family."

Her eyes widened in surprise. Did he mean it? She searched his face and saw ... love and acceptance. "Is that what you really want to do? You want to adopt the children?"

"I know how much you love them and I'm already halfway in love with them myself."

"But what if you want children of your own? I can't give them to you."

"You're what matters to me, and I *will* have children of my own, Jamal and Adrienne. What do you say, Christine? Let's get hitched."

There was only one thing she could think to say. "Yes!"

## Chapter Eighteen

“Did you see the looks on their faces? Oh, my God. I can’t believe this is all happening!” Christine whirled around her living room, feeling like she was on cloud nine and she didn’t ever want to come down.

Only a month ago, she’d thought her life was over, but thanks to Romeo, not only was she cured for good, she’d be by his side always, and she had a new family. To her utter joy, they had put the paperwork in to formally adopt Jamal and Adrienne and were informed today that it would be a matter of weeks before the children would be theirs. Thank goodness for bureaucracy. Her original paperwork was still on file and had not been taken out of the system. In addition, thanks to some of Romeo’s immortal connections, the adoption would go through faster than most.

The best part about the past month was the little ceremony in Vegas with an Elvis impersonator presiding. It was just so Romeo. His family had been there, and Christine had had a chance to meet his brothers. They were just like he’d described them. Christine loved the camaraderie between Romeo and her brothers-in law, who teased her husband mercilessly. Romeo took his ribbing good naturedly, and they’d all had a good time.

Also in attendance was Romeo’s best friend, Wolf, whom she’d already met at the club, GianMarco’s very pregnant wife, who looked like she’d pop any second, and Niccolo’s mate and son. Barbara had even shown up. The only one missing had been Nya, who’d later sent them an elaborate wedding gift, a crystal vase from Tiffany’s.

Life just couldn’t be any better. Christine still had a lot of adjusting to do as far as this vampire thing. Her insatiable thirst was so uncontrollable that several times she’d had to wake her husband up in the middle of the night to feed. But these were some of the most pleasurable experiences she’d ever had. Since becoming a vampire, her eyesight had sharpened, her hearing had increased, and she was stronger than ever, but the most

wonderful part was that her orgasms were more powerful. Every climax she now experienced was tenfold of her previous pleasure. She also loved going down on him, sucking his dick until his balls emptied into her mouth and down her throat.

Romeo pulled Christine into his arms and gave her a kiss on the nose. "I can't believe this is happening, myself. I'm happier than I've ever been."

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather be in some bar picking fights?"

"Hell, no. I want to be with you, and since I'm soon going to be a father, I think we should get in as much alone time as possible. I've been reading some parenting books and --"

"Really? You read parenting books? When did you do that?"

"I, uh -- well, when you go to sleep I do a little light reading. Please don't say anything to my brothers; if you thought they picked on me at our wedding, they would be even more relentless about this."

"Well, I could be persuaded to keep silent on the subject."

He lifted one dark blond brow. "Oh, and just how do you propose I do that, wife?"

"Mmm, I love the way you say that."

"Not as much as I love saying it. Being with you has given me so much joy, I can't adequately describe my feelings." He gave her a quick kiss. "So tell me, what it is that I have to do in order for you not to tell my brothers."

"Well, we haven't made love in a while."

"We made love just before we left to see the children."

"That was four hours ago. A woman need to know her husband still finds her desirable."

"You know I can't keep my hands off you, woman," he growled before lowering his head to hers.

She opened her lips under the gentle persistence of his tongue. His kiss was wet and hot, instantly filling Christine with an undeniable lust that made her body shake. She playfully nipped his tongue, then sucked it into her mouth.

She loved doing this to him, because she knew that he loved it. Already she could feel Romeo's stiff cock pressing against her stomach through the material of their jeans. With each kiss she shared with this beautiful man, it felt like nothing else could be as fabulous.

He cupped her ass in his hands, rubbing his pelvis against the juncture of her thighs. Her pussy throbbed in reaction. She wanted more -- to be closer to him, to feel his naked skin against hers. Christine tugged his T-shirt up and ran her palms beneath it, feeling the ripples of his rock-hard stomach.

God, he was gorgeous, and he was all hers! She pulled back, breaking their kiss. "You taste terrific, but I know what else would taste just as good -- well, probably better."

Romeo panted. "And what's that, sweetheart?" Already her husband seemed to be having trouble breathing. She liked it when he was just on the edge of control.

"Your cock, of course."

"Hungry again, babe?"

"I'm always hungry for you. Don't you know that?"

"Well, I think we can fix that." He chuckled.

They undressed each other in haste, not bothering with clasps or snaps. With Romeo, Christine learned that she'd have to get used to constantly replacing her wardrobe, because buttons and zippers never lasted long when he was around. But that didn't matter. Her husband was a lot wealthier than he'd originally let on, so money would never be an issue. Romeo was even having a house built for them close to his brother GianMarco's home with a huge yard for the kids to play in.

Christine was thrilled at the prospect. She'd gotten on very well with her new sister-in-law, Maggie. It would be nice to be around another young vampire like herself and swap stories. She loved life, but right now the only thing she wanted to do was to get as much of Romeo's cock into her as possible.

She ran her tongue down the center of his chest and over to one brown nipple, taking it between her teeth and giving it a playful nip before letting her incisors descend and biting him on the breast in order to taste his blood.

If someone would have told her that she would actually get off on sucking blood, she would have had them committed, but it was true. Christine loved it. Romeo stroked her hair and groaned, gently pulling her head off him when he felt she'd drunk enough. Her body ached with an unbelievable rapture that made it hard for Christine to contain herself.

She knelt down before him with a reverence that touched him to the depths of his being. Romeo tried hard to remain still when he felt her warm breath fanning his cock. Already he wanted to shoot his load into her tempting mouth, but he let her do what she wanted. She needed to feed and, besides, this gave him so much pleasure that she could make him come quickly.

Before Christine, Romeo had prided himself on being able to last for a long time, but with his lovely wife, he was lucky if he could hold out for a few minutes. With her, he couldn't contain his excitement. He loved her so much.

He ran his knuckles against the back of her head when she opened her mouth and sucked his cock into the damp recesses of her mouth. Her head bobbed back and forth on his dick with an amazing skill that made his balls throb.

His knees began to shake, and Romeo gritted his teeth, forcing himself not to yank her off her feet and fuck her sweet pussy until she couldn't stand. Looking down and seeing the



look of bliss on her face and her lips wrapped tightly around his dick was so erotic a sight that he shuddered with pleasure. He wanted more.

As though sensing his need to be caressed, she cupped his balls in one hand, giving them a gentle squeeze. “Oh, yes, Christine. Just like that. I love the way you suck me, sweetheart.”

His mind touched hers. *The feel of your beautiful mouth on my cock is like nothing else.*

*I love you so much, Romeo.*

After he'd brought her over, he'd been able to read her mind and it had strengthened their bond. She was a new vampire, so she couldn't read his mind unless he projected his thoughts to her. Their silent communication when they lay in each other's arms at night made his heart leap with love for her.

He put his hand on either side of her head, feeling close to his climax. When she began to do the humming thing around his sensitive flesh that drove him crazy, he lost it. “Ah! Christine, you little minx!” he yelled, as he came into her mouth.

Her hands reached around and clamped on his buttocks pulling his cock deeper into her throat. She swallowed his essence, only letting a small thin line of his juices trickle down the side of her mouth. When she finally pulled back, releasing his cock, she wiped it off with her fingers and slurped it off. “Yummy,” she said, winking at him, an expression of abject adoration in her eyes. Once again he could feel his heart pulsing with love for this woman.

“Shall we go upstairs to the bedroom?”

“I don't think I can make it that far. I want some pussy now.” He bent down, scooped her off the floor, and took her to the couch, bending her over it. “Brace yourself, baby, because I'm ready again.”

She laughed. “You're so kinky.”

“And you're so wet. Damn, Christine, I never knew a pussy could get so wet until I met you. I don't even have to touch it.” Romeo ran his fingers over her already dripping slit.

She moaned, pushing her hips back against his touch. “It's your fault, you know.”

“Mine?”

Christine turned around to look at him imploringly. “If you didn't have the most delicious cock on the planet, I wouldn't go crazy for it. Now, are you going to stick it in me anytime soon or are you going to talk?”

“What if I want you to beg for it?” Romeo teased.

“You won't, because you want my pussy as much as I want your cock, so how about giving up the goods? I'm not getting any younger here.”

“Ha ha, very funny, smartass.”

“Hmm, you’ve always told me that I have a cute ass, not a smart one,” she said, mimicking something he’d once said. Romeo threw his head back and laughed.

“One hard cock coming right up.” He parted her slick labia with his fingers and slid his cock into her tight channel.

“Ohhh,” they groaned simultaneously, then laughed.

That was the best part about making love with Christine, they always had fun with it. It was never just the same humdrum routine, and Romeo didn’t think it would ever be.

He gritted his teeth, flinging his head back to let out a howl of pleasure. Her pussy was so tight and wet it sent shockwaves of heated desire through his body. He loved the way she fit so snugly around him.

He dug his fingers into her hips when she started to rear her hips against him. “That’s it, baby, give me that pussy. Oh, yeah,” he groaned.

“You like this tight pussy, huh?”

“Hell, yes. I love fucking my pussy.”

“Your pussy?”

“You’d better believe it.” He smacked her on the rear. “Who’s your daddy?”

Christine giggled. “Don’t you even start that.”

He ground harder into her. “Tell me who this pussy belongs to.” Romeo smacked her on the other butt cheek this time.

Christine tightened her vaginal muscles around his cock, and he groaned, feeling a firestorm of uncontrollable desire surge through him and pulling him so close to his peak that he fought to hold on.

Her pussy clenched around his cock again, as though she were attempting to pull him deeper. “Do you like this, baby?” she asked in a sultry tone.

Romeo plowed into her tight sheath, losing more control with each pump of his hips. Damn it, he wouldn’t be able to hold back. A blazing burst of his seed shot deep inside Christine’s cunt.

She gasped and groaned again, clenching her muscles around him, milking his cock. He felt the moment of her detonation when she stiffened and began to shake. As though her arms could hold her no more, Christine collapsed on the couch, bringing him with her.

Romeo reluctantly dragged his cock from inside of her, and they lay on the couch, limbs entwined, panting for breath.

Christine was the first to speak. “Romeo, who’s your daddy now?”

He drew her tightly to him and guffawed. Never had he been happier to admit defeat.

## Epilogue

Dante paced his living room floor, wondering what his next course of action should be. Everything was finally coming together yet, conversely, it wasn't. The Council was gone. It had been their idea to rid the world of humans, but they hadn't been the ones to implement the entire scheme, and they hadn't been the ones to send out the death squads.

All along, it had been Adonis trying to draw them out. Now that Dante knew Adonis was the one who had killed his parents and was even now trying to kill him and his family, it was hard to reconcile that with the fact that they were also brothers. The connection Dante felt between Adonis and Giovanni was undeniable but beyond confusing.

Just when he and his three brothers were about to take Adonis out, Giovanni had stepped in, but he hadn't attacked them. Why? And why hadn't their parents ever mentioned two more brothers? If that wasn't enough to deal with, to learn that there had been an Underground traitor and possibly another tore at him.

Dante remembered the incident in L.A. when he'd killed the sniveling rat who'd taunted him about Trent's involvement with the enemy. The vampire had even insinuated that there were more and, because he had trusted his men so completely, the accusations had been an insult. Faced with irrefutable proof, however, it was nearly more than he could handle.

If there were more traitors within the Underground, he would seek them out, and they would feel his wrath. Carter had certainly been a shock, but who else was there?

Things had calmed down since the Edinburgh fight. He'd lost only three agents other than Carter, but it was still three too many. Adonis had gone into hiding, and there had been no massacres since, so all he could do now was play the waiting game and see what Adonis or Giovanni would do next.

He raked his fingers through his hair. He had to get out of this apartment or he'd drive himself insane with worry. Maybe he'd visit one of his brothers, but who could he visit? GianMarco had Maggie, and Niccolo had Sasha and Jagger. Even Romeo had a mate now.

Never in a million years would he have thought his wild brother would settle down, much less adopt two human children. Everyone had someone now ... except him. It depressed him to no end.

His mind drifted back to Flora. He now knew why he'd been tempted by her. Although she'd been sent to destroy him, in the end, she, too, had been betrayed by the very person who'd promised her power and riches. What he'd done all those years ago had torn at him, but to know the truth didn't make the torment any less.

The hole in his soul only seemed to be widening and Dante didn't know what he could do about it. Damn it, they all had families of their own. Why couldn't he? This feeling of jealousy and rage toward his brothers was something new, and he didn't like himself for it.

His cell phone rang. Expecting it to be one of his brothers, he answered. "Dante here."

"Dante," the voice simply said.

"Who is this?"

"It's Giovanni. We have to talk."

 THE END 

## **Eve Vaughn**

Eve Vaughn enjoys writing above all else. She began writing short stories to amuse herself since she could form letters. Mischievous as a child, she lost her television privileges quite a bit and found writing to be her outlet. Besides writing, Eve likes reading, baking, volunteering, traveling, and spending time with her family. She currently resides in the Philadelphia area with her husband and turtle.

Eve loves hearing from her fans so feel free to contact her at [EveVaughn10@aol.com](mailto:EveVaughn10@aol.com) or join her yahoo group at [evevaughnsbooks@yahoo.com](mailto:evevaughnsbooks@yahoo.com).