

BLOOD UPON MY LIPS

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IT was an October wedding. The bride was a witch who solved preternatural crimes. The groom raised the dead and slew vampires for a living. It sounded like a Halloween joke, but it wasn't.

The groom's side wore traditional black tuxedos with orange bow ties and white shirts. The bride's side wore orange formal. You don't see Halloween-orange prom dresses all that often. I'd been terrified that I was going to have to shell out three hundred dollars for one of the monstrosities. But since I was on the groom's side I got to wear a tux. Larry Kirkland, groom, coworker, and friend, had stuck to his guns. He refused to make me wear a dress, unless I wanted to wear one. Hmm, let me see. Three hundred dollars, or more, for a very orange formal that I'd burn before I'd wear again, or less than a hundred dollars to rent a tux that I could return. Wait, let me think.

I got the tux. I did have to buy a pair of black tie-up shoes. The tux shop didn't have any size seven in women's. Oh, well. Even with the seventy-dollar shoes that I would probably never wear again, I still counted myself very lucky.

As I watched the four bridesmaids in their poofy orange dresses walk down the aisle of the packed church, their hair done up on their heads in ringlets, and more makeup than I'd ever seen any of them wear, I was feeling very, very lucky. They had little round bouquets of orange and white flowers with black lace and orange and black ribbons trailing down from the flowers. I just had to stand up at the front of the church with my one hand holding the wrist of the other arm. The wedding coordinator had seemed to believe that all the groomsmen would pick their noses, or something equally embarrassing, if they didn't keep their hands busy. So she'd informed them that they were to stand with their hands clasped on the opposite wrist. No hands in pockets, no crossed arms, no hands clasped in front of their groins. I'd arrived late to the rehearsal—big surprise—and the wedding coordinator had seemed to believe that I would be a civilizing influence on the men, just because I happened to be a girl. It didn't take her long to figure out that I was as uncouth as the men. Frankly, I thought we all behaved ourselves really well. She just didn't seem very comfortable around men, or around me. Maybe it was the gun I was wearing.

But none of the groomsmen, myself included, had done anything for her to complain about. This was Larry's day, and none of us wanted to screw it up. Oh, and Tammy's day.

The bride entered the church on her father's arm. Her mother was already in the front pew dressed in a pale melon orange that actually looked good on her. She was beaming and crying, and seemed to be both miserable and deliriously happy all at the same time. Mrs. Reynolds was the reason for the big church wedding. Both Larry and Tammy would have been happy with something smaller, but Tammy didn't seem to be able to say no to her mother, and Larry was just trying to get along with his future in-law.

Detective Tammy Reynolds was a vision in white, complete with a veil that covered her face like a misty dream. She, too, was wearing more makeup than I'd ever seen her in, but the drama of it suited the

beaded neckline, and full, bell-like skirt. The dress looked like it could have walked down the isle on its own, or at least stood on its own. They'd done something with her hair so that it was smooth and completely back from her face, so that you could see just how striking she was. I'd never really noticed that Detective Tammy was beautiful.

I was standing at the end of the groomsmen, me and Larry's three brothers, so I had to crane a little to see his face. It was worth the look. He was pale enough that his freckles stood out on his skin like ink spots. His blue eyes were wide. They'd done something to his short red curls so they lay almost smooth. He looked good, if he didn't faint. He gazed at Tammy as if he'd been hit with a hammer right between the eyes. Of course, if they'd done two hours' worth of makeup on Larry, he might have been a vision, too. But men don't have to worry about it. The double standard is alive and well. The woman is supposed to be beautiful on her wedding day, the groom is just supposed to stand there and not embarrass himself, or her.

I leaned back in line and tried not to embarrass anyone. I'd tied my hair back while it was still wet so that it lay flat and smooth to my head. I wasn't cutting my hair so it was the best I could do to look like a boy. There were other parts of my anatomy that didn't help the boy look either. I am curvy, and even in a tux built for a man, I was still curvy. No one complained, but the wedding coordinator had rolled her eyes when she saw me. What she said out loud was, "You need more makeup."

"None of the other groomsmen are wearing makeup," I said.

"Don't you want to look pretty?"

Since I'd thought I already looked pretty good, there was only one reply. "Not particularly."

That had been the last conversation the wedding lady and I had had. She positively avoided me, after that. I think she'd been mean on purpose, because I wasn't helping her keep the other groomsmen in line. She seemed to believe that just because we both had ovaries instead of balls that we should have joined forces. Besides, why should I worry about being pretty? It was Tammy and Larry's day, not mine. If, and that was a very big if, I ever got married, then I'd worry about it. Until then, screw it. Besides, I was already wearing more makeup than I normally did. Which for me meant any. My stepmother Judith keeps telling me that when I hit thirty I'll feel differently about all this girl stuff. I've only got three years to go until the big 3-0; so far panic has not set in.

Tammy's father placed her hand in Larry's. Tammy was three inches taller than Larry; in heels, she was more. I was standing close enough to the groom to see the look that Tammy's father gave Larry. It was not a friendly look. Tammy was three months, almost four months pregnant, and it was Larry's fault. Or rather it was Tammy and Larry's fault, but I don't think that's how her father viewed it. No, Mr. Nathan Reynolds definitely seemed to blame Larry, as if Tammy had been snatched a virgin from her bed and brought back deflowered, and pregnant.

Mr. Reynolds raised Tammy's blusher on her veil to reveal all that carefully made-up beauty. He kissed her solemnly on the cheek, threw one last dark look at Larry, and turned smiling and pleasant to join his wife in the front pew. The fact that he'd gone from a look that dark, to pleasant and smiling when he knew the church would see his face bothered me. I didn't like that Larry's new father-in-law was capable of lying that well. Made me wonder what he did for a living. But I was naturally suspicious; it comes from working too closely with the police for too long. Cynicism is so contagious.

We all turned towards the altar, and the familiar ceremony began. I'd been to dozens of weddings over the years, almost all Christian, almost all standard denominations, so the words were strangely familiar.

Funny, how you don't think you've memorized something until you hear it, and realize you have. "Dearly, beloved, we are gathered here today to join this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony."

It wasn't a Catholic or Episcopalian wedding, so we didn't have to kneel, or do much of anything. We wouldn't even be getting communion during the ceremony. I have to admit my mind began to wander a bit. I've never been a big fan of weddings. I understand they're necessary, but I was never one of those girls who fantasized about what my wedding would be like someday. I don't remember ever thinking about it until I got engaged in college, and when that fell through, I went back to not thinking about it. I'd been engaged very briefly to Richard Zeeman, junior high science teacher, and local Ulfric, Wolf-King, but he'd dumped me because I was more at home with the monsters than he was. Now, I'd pretty much settled into the idea that I would never marry. Never have those words spoken over me and my honeybun. A tiny part of me that I'd never admit to out loud was sad about that. Not the wedding part. I think I would hate my own wedding just as much as anyone else's, but not having one single person to call my own. I'd been raised middle-class, middle America, small town, and that meant the fact that I was currently dating a minimum of three men, maybe four, depending on how you looked at it, still made me squirm with something painfully close to embarrassment. I was working on not being uncomfortable about it, but there were issues that needed to be worked out. For instance, who do you bring as your date to a wedding? The wedding was in a church, complete with holy items so two of the men were out. Vampires didn't do well around holy items. Watching Jean-Claude and Asher burst into flames as they came through the door would probably have put a damper on the festivities. That left me with one official boyfriend, Micah Callahan, and one friend, who happened to be a boy, Nathaniel Graison.

They'd come to the part where the rings were exchanged, which meant the maid of honor and the best man had something to do. The woman got to hold Tammy's huge spill of white flowers, and the man got to hand over the jewelry. It all seemed so terribly sexist. Just once I'd like to see the men have to hold flowers and the women fork over the jewelry. I'd been told once by a friend that I was too liberated for my own good. Maybe. All I knew was that if I ever did get engaged again I'd decided either both of us got an engagement ring, or neither of us did. Of course, again, that not getting married part meant that the engagement was probably off the board, too. Oh, well.

At last, they were man and wife. We all turned and the reverend presented them to the church as Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Kirkland, though I knew for a fact that Tammy was keeping her maiden name, so really it should have been Mr. Lawrence Kirkland and Ms. Tammy Reynolds.

We all fell in to two lines. I got to offer my arm to Detective Jessica Arnet. She took the arm, and with her in heels, I was about five inches shorter than she was. She smiled at me. I'd noticed she was pretty about a month ago, because she was flirting with Nathaniel, but it wasn't until that moment that I realized she could be beautiful. Her dark hair was pulled completely back from her face, so that the delicate triangle of her cheeks and chin was all you saw. The makeup had widened her eyes, added color to her cheeks, and carved pouting lips out of her thin ones. I realized that the orange that made most of the bridesmaids look wan brought out rich highlights in her skin and hair, made her eyes shine. So few people look good in orange, it's one of the reasons they use it in so many prisons, like an extra punishment. But Detective Arnet looked wonderful in it. It almost made me wish I'd let the wedding lady talk me into the extra makeup. Almost.

I must have stared, because she frowned, and only then did I start forward, and take our place in line. We filed out like good little wedding party members. We'd already endured the photographer for group shots. He'd be hunting the bride and groom for those candid moments: cutting the cake, throwing the bouquet, removing the garter. Once we got through the receiving line, I could fade into the background and no one would care.

We all stood in a line as we'd been drilled. Bride and groom at the front of the line, because, let's face it, that's who everyone is really here to see. The rest of us strung out behind them along the wall, waiting to shake hands with mostly strangers. Tammy's family were local, but I'd never met any of them. Larry's family were all out-of-towners. I knew the policemen that had been invited; other than that, it was all nod and smile, nod and smile, shake a hand, or two, nod and smile.

I must have been concentrating very hard on the people I was meeting, because it surprised me when Micah Callahan, my official date, was suddenly in front of me. He was exactly my height. Short for man or woman. His rich, brown hair was nearly as curly as mine, and today his hair fell around his shoulders loose. He'd done that for me. He didn't like his hair loose, and I understood why. He was already delicate looking for a man, and with all that hair framing him his face was almost as delicate a triangle as Detective Arnet's. His lower lip was fuller than his upper lip, which gave him a perpetual pout, and though wider than a woman's mouth, that didn't really help. But the body under his black tailored suit, that definitely helped make it clear he was a man. Wide shoulders, slender waist and hips, a swimmer's body, though that wasn't his sport. From the neck down you'd never mistake him for a girl. It was just the face, and the hair.

He'd left his shirt open at the neck so that it framed the hollow in his throat. I could see myself reflected darkly in his sunglasses. It was actually a little dim in the hallway, so why the sunglasses? His eyes were kitty-cat eyes, leopard, to be exact. They were yellow and green all at the same time. What color predominated between the two depended on what color he wore, his mood, the lighting. Today, because of the shirt, they'd be very green, but with a hint of yellow, like dappled light in the forest.

He was a wereleopard, Nimir-Raj of the local pard. By rights he should have been able to pass for human. But if you spend too much time in animal form sometimes you don't come all the way back. He didn't want to squeak the mundanes, so he'd worn the glasses today.

His hand was very warm in mine, and that one small touch was enough, enough to bring some of the careful shielding down. The shielding that had kept me from sensing him all through the ceremony like a second heartbeat. He was Nimir-Raj, to my Nimir-Ra. Leopard King and Queen. Though my idea of the arrangement was closer to queen and consort, partners, but I reserved presidential veto. I'm a control freak, what can I say?

I was the first human Nimir-Ra in the wereleopards' long history. Though since I raise the dead for a living and am a legal vampire executioner, there are people who'll argue the human part. They're just jealous.

I started to pull him in against me for a hug, but he gave a small shake of his head. He was right. If just holding his hand sped my pulse like candy on my tongue, then a hug would be bad. Through a series of metaphysical accidents, I held something close to the beast that lived in Micah. That beast and Micah's beast knew each other, knew each other in the way of old lovers. That part of us that was not human knew each other better than our human halves. I still knew almost nothing about him, really. Even though we lived together. On a metaphysical level we were bound tighter than any ceremony or piece of paper could make us; in real everyday life, I was wondering what to do with him. He was the perfect partner. My other half, the missing piece. He complemented me in almost every way. And when he was standing this close, it all seemed so right. Give me a little distance and I would begin to wonder when the other shoe would drop and he would stop being wonderful. I'd never had a man in my life yet that didn't spoil it somehow. Why should Micah be different?

He didn't so much kiss me as lay the feel of his breath against my cheek. He breathed, "Until later." That one light touch made me shiver so violently that he had to steady me with a touch on my arm.

He smiled at me, that knowing smile that a man gives when he understands just how much his touch affects a woman. I didn't like that smile. It made me feel like he took his time with me for granted. The moment I thought it, I knew it wasn't true. It wasn't even fair. So why had I thought it at all? Because I am a master at screwing up my own love life. If something works too well, I've got to poke at it, prod it, until it breaks, or bites me. I was trying not to do that anymore, but old habits, especially bad ones, die hard.

Micah moved off down the line, and Detective Arnet gave me a questioning look out of her heavily painted but lovely eyes. She opened her mouth as if to ask if I were alright, but the next person in line distracted her. Nathaniel was distracting, no doubt about that.

Jessica Arnet was a few inches taller than Nathaniel's 5' 6", so she had to look down to meet that lavender gaze. No exaggeration on the color. His eyes weren't blue, but truly a pale purple, lavender, spring lilacs. He wore a banded-collar shirt that was almost the same color as his eyes, so the lavender was even more vibrant; drowningly beautiful, those eyes.

He offered his hand, but she hugged him. Hugged him, because I think for the first time she was in a public situation where no one would think it was strange. So she hugged him, because she could.

There was a fraction of a moment's hesitation, then he hugged her back, but he turned his head so he could look at me. His eyes said clearly, Help me.

She hadn't done that much yet, just a hug where a handshake would have done, but the look in Nathaniel's eyes was much more serious than what she'd done. As if it bothered him more than it should have. Since in his day job he's a stripper, you'd think he'd be used to women pawing him. Of course, maybe that was the point. He wasn't at work.

She stayed molded to his body, and he stayed holding, with only that mute look in his eyes to say he was unhappy.

His body seemed happy and relaxed in the hug. He never showed Jessica Arnet his confused eyes.

The hug had gone on longer than was polite, and I finally realized what part of the problem was. Nathaniel was the least dominant person I'd ever met. He wanted out of the hug, but he could not be the first one to pull back. Jessica had to let him go, and she was probably waiting for him to move away, and getting all the wrong signals from the fact that he wasn't moving away. Shit. How do I end up with men in my life who have such interesting problems? Lucky, I guess.

I held out my hand toward him, and the relief on his face was clear enough that anyone down the hall would have seen it, and understood it. He kept his face turned so Jessica never saw that look. It would have hurt her feelings, and Nathaniel didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings. Which meant that he didn't see her shining face, all aglow with what she thought was mutual attraction. Truthfully, I'd thought Nathaniel liked her, at least a little, but his face said otherwise. To me, anyway.

Nathaniel came to my hand like a scared child who's just been saved from the neighborhood bully. I drew him into a hug, and he clung to me, pressing our bodies tighter than I would have liked in public, but I couldn't blame him, not really. He wanted the comfort of physical contact, and I think he'd figured out that Jessica Arnet had gotten the wrong idea.

I held him as close as I could, as close as I'd wanted to hold Micah. With Micah, it might have led to embarrassing things, but not with Nathaniel. With Nathaniel I could control myself. I wasn't in love with

him. I caressed the long braid of his auburn hair that fell nearly to his ankles. I played with the braid, as if it were other more intimate things, hoping that Jessica would take the hint. I should have known that a little extra hugging wouldn't have done the job.

I drew back from the hug first, and he kept his gaze on my face. I could study his face and understand what she saw there, so handsome, so amazingly beautiful. His shoulders had broadened in the last few months, from weight lifting, or just the fact that he was twenty and still filling out. He was luscious to look at, and I was almost certain he would be nearly as luscious in bed. But though he was living with me, cleaning my house, buying my groceries, and running my errands, I still hadn't had intercourse with him. I was really trying to avoid that, since I didn't plan on keeping him. Someday Nathaniel would need to find a new place to live, a new life, because I wouldn't always need him the way I did now.

I was human, but just as I was the first human Nimir-Ra the leopards had ever had, I was also the first human servant of a master vampire to acquire certain... abilities. With those abilities came some downsides. One of those downsides was needing to feed the ardeur every twelve hours, or so. *Ardeur* is French for flame, roughly translates to being consumed, being consumed by love. But it isn't exactly love.

I stared up into Nathaniel's wide lilac eyes, cradled his face between my hands. I did the only thing I could think of that might keep Jessica Arnet from embarrassing them both at the reception to follow. I kissed him. I kissed him, because he needed me to do it. I kissed him because it was strangely the right thing to do. I kissed him because he was my *pomme de sang*, my apple of blood. I kissed him because he was my food, and I hated the fact that anyone was my food. I fed off Micah, too, but he was my partner, my boyfriend, and he was dominant enough to say no if he wanted to. Nathaniel wanted me to take him, wanted to belong to me, and I didn't know what to do about it. Months from now the ardeur would be under control and I wouldn't need *apomme de sang*. What would Nathaniel do when I didn't need him anymore?

I drew back from the kiss and watched Nathaniel's face shine at me the way Jessica Arnet's face had shone at him. I wasn't in love with Nathaniel, but staring up into that happy, handsome face, I was afraid that I couldn't say the same for him. I was using him. Not for sex, but for food. He was food, just food, but even as I thought it, I knew it was partly a lie. You don't fall in love with your steak, because it can't hold you, can't press warm lips in the bend of your neck, and whisper, "Thank you," as it glides down the hallway in the charcoal gray slacks that fit its ass like a second skin and spill roomy over the thighs that you happen to know are even lovelier out of the pants than in. When I turned to the next smiling person in line, I caught Detective Jessica Arnet giving me a look. It wasn't an entirely friendly look. Great, just great.

THE Halloween theme continued into the reception hall. Orange and black crepe paper streamers dangled everywhere; cardboard skeletons, rubber bats, and paper ghosts floated overhead. There was a fake spiderweb against one wall big enough to hang someone from. The table centerpieces were realistic looking jack-o'-lanterns with flickering electric grins. The fake skeletons were long enough to be a hazard to anyone much taller than I was. Which meant most guests were having the tops of their hair brushed by little cardboard skeleton toes. Unfortunately, Tammy was 5' 8" without heels; with heels she got her veil tangled with the decorations. The bridesmaids finally got Tammy's veil unhooked from the skeletal toes, but it ruined the entrance for the bride and groom. If Tammy had wanted the decorations safe for the tall people she shouldn't have left it to Larry and his brothers. There wasn't a one of them over 5' 6". Don't blame me. Groomsman or not, I hadn't helped decorate the hall. It was not my fault.

There were other things that I was going to get blamed for, but they weren't my fault either. Well, mostly not my fault.

I'd escorted Jessica Arnet into the room. She hadn't smiled at me at all. She'd looked way too serious. When Tammy's veil was safely secure once more, Jessica had gone to the table where Micah and Nathaniel were sitting. She'd leaned into Nathaniel, and when I say leaned, I mean it. Like leaned on him, so that the line of her body touched his shoulder and arm. It was bold and discreet at the same time. If I hadn't been watching for it, I might not have realized what she was doing. She spoke quietly to him. He finally shook his head, and she turned and wove her way through the small tables full of guests. She took the last empty seat at the long table where the wedding party was trapped. The last empty chair was beside me. We got to sit down in the order we'd entered. Goody.

In the middle of the toasts, after Larry's brother had made the groom blush, but before the parents had had their turn, Jessica leaned over close enough that her perfume was sweet and a little too much.

She whispered, "Does Nathaniel really live with you?"

I'd been afraid the question would be hard. This one was easy. "Yes," I said.

"I asked if he was your boyfriend, and he said that he slept in your bed. I thought that was an odd way to answer." She turned her head so I was suddenly way too close to her face, those wide-searching eyes. I was struck again by how lovely she was, and felt stupid for not noticing sooner. But I didn't notice girls, I noticed boys. So sue me, I was heterosexual. It wasn't her beauty that struck me, but the demand, the intelligence, in her eyes. She searched my face, and I realized that no matter how pretty she was, she was still a cop, and she was trying to uncover the lie here. Because she had smelled one.

She hadn't asked me a question, so I didn't answer. I rarely got in trouble by keeping my mouth shut.

She gave a small frown. "Is he your boyfriend? If he is, then I'll leave it alone. But you could have told me sooner, so I wouldn't have made a fool of myself."

I wanted to say, You didn't make a fool of yourself, but I didn't. I was too busy trying to think of an answer that would be honest, and not get Nathaniel and me in more trouble. I settled for the evasion he'd used. "Yes, he sleeps in my bed."

She gave a small shake of her head, a stubborn look coming over her face. "That isn't what I asked, Anita. You're lying. You're both lying. I can smell it." She frowned. "Just tell me the truth. If you have a prior claim, say so, now."

I sighed. "Yeah, I have a prior claim, apparently."

The frown deepened, putting frown lines between the pretty eyes. "Apparently? What does that mean? Either he's your boyfriend, or he's not."

"Maybe boyfriend isn't the right word," I said, and tried to think of an explanation that didn't include the words *pomme de sang*. The police didn't really know how deeply involved with the monsters I was. They suspected, but they didn't know. Knowing is different from suspicion. Knowing will hold up in court; suspicion won't even get you a search warrant.

"Then what is the right word?" she whispered, but it held an edge of hiss, as if she were fighting not to yell. "Are you lovers?"

What was I supposed to say? If I said, yes, Nathaniel would be free of Jessica's unwanted attentions,

but it would also mean that everyone on the St. Louis police force would know that Nathaniel was my lover. It wasn't my reputation I was worried about; that was pretty much trashed. A girl can't be coffin-bait for the Master of the City and be a good girl. Most people feel that if a woman will do a vampire, she'll do anything. Not true, but there you go. No, not my reputation at stake, but Nathaniel's. If it got out that he was my lover, then no other woman would make a play for him. If he didn't want to date Jessica, fine, but he needed to date someone. Someone besides me. If I wasn't going to keep Nathaniel forever, like almost death-do-you-part ever, then he needed a bigger social circle. He needed a real girlfriend.

So I hesitated, weighing a dozen words, and not finding a single one that would help the situation. I didn't know how to answer Arnet's question so I used the old excuse of needing to go to the ladies' room. I wanted to avoid her, if I could. And Micah, too. Micah had made me promise I'd dance with him. I hated to dance. I didn't think I was good at it. In the privacy of our home, Micah, and Nathaniel, and hell, Jason, had told me I was wrong. That I actually danced very well. I did not believe them. I think it was a throwback to a rather horrible junior high school dance experience. Of course, it was junior high, is there any experience except horrible for those few years? In Hell, if you're really bad, you must be fourteen forever, and be trapped in school, and never get to go home.

When I came out, Nathaniel was still at the table, but it was Jason with him, not Micah. Jason and Nathaniel were leaning so close together that their heads nearly touched. Jason's short blond hair seemed very yellow against Nathaniel's dark auburn. Jason wore a blue dress shirt that I knew was only a shade or two bluer than his own eyes. His suit was black, and I knew without seeing him standing that it was tailored to his body, and probably Italian in cut. Jean-Claude had paid for the suit, and he was fond of Italian-cut designer suits for his employees. When he wasn't dressing them like they were extras in a high-class porno movie, anyway. For a mainstream wedding, the suit worked. Jason also worked at Guilty Pleasures as a stripper, and Jean-Claude did own the club, but it wasn't that type of employment that let Jason rate designer clothes tailored to his body. Jason was Jean-Claude's *spomme de sang*. Jean-Claude did not think I treated Nathaniel with enough respect for his position as my *pomme de sang*. I had let Micah and Nathaniel go shopping with Jason for dress clothes, and I footed the bill for my two boys. It had been outrageous, but I couldn't let Jean-Claude be nicer to his kept man than I was to mine. Could I?

Technically, Micah wasn't a kept man, but the salary he drew from the Coalition for Better Understanding Between Furred and Non-Furred didn't cover designer suits. I made enough money to pay for designer suits, so I did.

I had time to wonder what Jason and Nathaniel were up to, talking so close together, like conspirators. Then I felt, more than saw, Micah. He was across the room talking to a group of men, most of them cops. He shook his head, laughed, and started across the room, toward me. I didn't get much chance to see Micah from a distance. We were always so close to one another, physically. Now I was able to watch him walk towards me, able to admire how the suit clung to his body, how it flattered the broad shoulders, the slender waist, the tightness of his hips, the swell of his thighs. The suit fit him like a roomy glove. Watching him move towards me, the suit was suddenly worth every penny. The music stopped before he reached me, some song I didn't recognize. He joined me at the table. Jessica Arnet was gone.

NATHANIEL sat on the other side of me, putting me in the middle. He sat so that the line of his body touched mine as much as possible. There was a time when I'd have made him give me breathing space, but I understood the shapeshifter's need for physical contact now. Besides, making Nathaniel move over an inch when he slept mostly naked in my bed nearly every night would have been silly. Jason just stood

and looked down at all of us. He looked unnaturally solemn, at least for him, then suddenly he broke into a grin. Now he looked like himself.

"It's aftermidnight, we thought you'd be outside feeding the ardeur." His grin was way too wicked to match the mildish words.

"I'm able to go longer between feedings," I said, "sometimes fourteen, or even sixteen hours."

"Oh, pooh," he said, and stamped his foot, pouting. It was a wonderful imitation of a childish snit, except for the devilish twinkle in his eye. "I was hoping to take another one for the team."

I frowned at him, but couldn't make it go all the way up to my eyes. Jason amused me, I don't know why, but he always had. "I don't think we'll be needing your services tonight, thanks for offering though."

He gave an exaggerated sigh. "I am never going to get to have sex with you again, am I?"

"Don't take this wrong, Jason, but I hope not. The sex was amazing, but what put you in my bed was an emergency. If I can't control the ardeur better than that, then I'm not safe to be out in public alone."

"It was my fault," Nathaniel said, voice soft.

I turned my head and was close enough to the side of his face to have kissed his cheek. I wanted to make him move, to give me more room, but I fought the urge off. I was just being grumpy. "It was my fault if it was anyone's, Nathaniel."

Micah's so-calm voice came from my other shoulder, "It was Belle Morte's fault, the wicked, sexy vampire of the west. If she hadn't been messing with Anita, trying to use the ardeur to control her, then it wouldn't have risen hours ahead of schedule." Belle Morte, Beautiful Death, was the creator of Jean-Claude's bloodline. I'd never met her in physical person, but I'd met her metaphysically, and that had been bad enough. Micah laid a hand across my shoulders, but managed to put his hand on Nathaniel's shoulder, too. Comforting us both. "You haven't collapsed since Anita's been able to stretch the feedings out more."

Nathaniel sighed so heavily that I felt the movement against my body. "I haven't gotten stronger, she has." He sounded so sad, so disappointed in himself.

I leaned in against his shoulder, enough that Micah was able to literally hug us both at the same time. "I'm your Nimir-Ra, I'm supposed to be stronger, right?"

He gave me a faint smile.

I laid my head on his shoulder, curving my face into the bend of his neck, and getting that whiff of vanilla. He'd always smelled like vanilla to me. I'd thought once it was shampoo, or soap, but it wasn't. It was his scent for me. I hadn't had the courage yet to ask Micah if Nathaniel's skin smelled like vanilla to him, too. Because I wasn't sure what it would mean if I was the only one who found Nathaniel's scent so very sweet.

"You want to ask Anita something," Jason said.

Nathaniel tensed against me, then in a small voice, he asked, "Do I still get my dance?"

It was my turn to tense. I couldn't control it, it was involuntary. Nathaniel got very still beside me, because he'd felt it, too. I didn't want to dance, that was true, but I had promised Micah and Nathaniel. "Sure, dancing sounds great."

That made Micah and Nathaniel pull back enough to look at me. Jason was just staring down at me. "What did you say?" Nathaniel said.

"I said, dancing sounds great." Their astonishment almost made it worthwhile.

"Where is Anita, and what have you done with her?" Jason asked, face mock serious.

I didn't try and explain. I just stood, and offered my hand to Nathaniel.

After a second of staring at it, and me, he took it, almost tentatively, as if he were afraid I'd take it back. I think he'd come ready for an argument about the dancing, and not getting one had thrown him.

I smiled at the surprise on his face. "Let's dance."

He gave me one of his rare full-out smiles, the one that made his entire face light up. For that one smile, I'd have given him a lot more than just a dance.

Of course, my good intentions lasted about as long as it took to be escorted onto the dance floor. Then suddenly I was expected to dance. In front of people. In front of people that were mostly cops. Cops that I worked with on a regular basis. No one is as merciless if you give them ammunition, no pun intended, as a bunch of policemen. If I danced badly, I'd be teased. If I danced well, I'd be teased worse. If they realized I was dancing well with a stripper, the teasing would be endless. If they realized I was dancing badly with a stripper, the jokes would be, well, bad. Either way you cut it, I was so screwed.

I felt fourteen again, and awkward as hell. But it was almost impossible to be awkward with Nathaniel as your partner. Maybe it was his day job, but he knew how to bring out the best in someone on the dance floor. All I had to do was let go of my inhibitions and follow his body. Easy, maybe, but not for me. I like the few inhibitions I have left, thank you, and I'm going to cling to them as long as I can.

What I was clinging to now was Nathaniel. Not much scares me, not really, but airplane rides and dancing in public are on that short list. My heart was in my throat, and I kept fighting the urge to stare at my feet. The men had spent an afternoon proving that I could dance, at home, with only people who were my friends watching. But suddenly, in public in front of a less than friendly audience, all my lessons seemed to have fled. I was reduced to clinging to Nathaniel's hand and shoulder, turning in those useless circles that have nothing to do with the song, and everything to do with fear, and the inability to dance.

"Anita," Nathaniel said.

I kept staring at my feet, and trying to not see that we were being watched from around the room.

"Anita, look at me, please."

I raised my face, and whatever he saw in my eyes, made him smile, and filled his own eyes with a sort of soft wonderment. "You really are afraid." He said it like he hadn't believed it before.

"Would I ever admit to being afraid, if I wasn't?"

He smiled. "Good point." His voice was soft. "Just look at my face, my eyes, no one else matters but the person you're dancing with. Just don't look at anyone else."

"You sound like you've given this advice before."

He shrugged. "A lot of women are uncomfortable on stage, at first."

I gave him raised eyebrows.

"I used to do an act in formal wear, and I'd pick someone from the audience to dance with. Very formal, very Fred Astaire."

Somehow, Fred Astaire was not a name that came to mind when I thought of Guilty Pleasures. I said as much.

His smile was less gentle and more his own. "If you ever came down to the club to watch one of us work instead of just giving us a ride, you'd know what we did."

I gave him a look.

"You're dancing," he said.

Of course, once he pointed out that I'd been dancing, I stopped. It was like walking on water; if you thought about it, you couldn't do it.

Nathaniel pulled gently on my hand, and pushed gently on my shoulder, and got us going again. I finally settled for staring at his chest, watching his body movements as if he'd been a bad guy and it was a fight. Watch the central body for the first telltale movements.

"At home you moved to the rhythm of the song, not just where I moved you."

"That was at home," I said, staring at his chest, and letting him move me around the floor. It was damn passive for me, but I couldn't lead, because I couldn't dance. To lead you have to know what you're doing.

The song stopped. I'd made it through one song in public. Yeah! I looked up and met Nathaniel's gaze. I expected him to look pleased, or happy, or a lot of things, but that wasn't what was on his face. In fact, I couldn't read the expression on his face. It was serious again, but other than that... We stood there, staring at each other, while I tried to figure out what was happening, and I think he tried to work up to saying something. But what? What had him all serious-faced?

I had time to ask, "What, what's wrong?" then the next song came on. It was fast, with a beat, and I was so out of there. I let go of Nathaniel, stepped back, and had turned, and actually gotten a step away, before he grabbed my hand. Grabbed my hand and pulled me in against him so hard and so fast that I stumbled. If I hadn't caught myself with one arm around his body, I'd have fallen. I was suddenly acutely aware of the firmness of his back against my arm, the curve of his side cupped in the hollow of my hand. I was holding him so close to the front of my body that it seemed every inch of us from chest to groin pressed against one another. His face was painfully close to mine. His mouth so close it seemed a shame not to lay a kiss upon those lips.

His eyes were half-startled, as if I'd grabbed him, and I had, but I hadn't meant to. Then he swayed to

one side and took me with him. And just like that we were dancing, but it was different from any dancing I'd ever done. I didn't follow his movements with my eyes, I followed them with my body. He moved, and I moved with him, not because I was supposed to, but for the same reason a tree bends in the wind, because you must.

I moved because he moved. I moved because I finally understood what they'd all been talking about; rhythm, beat, but it wasn't the beat of the music I was hearing, it was the rhythm of Nathaniel's body, pressed so close that all I could feel was him. His body, his hands, his face. His mouth was temptingly close, but I did not close that distance. I gave myself over to his body, the warm strength in his hands, but I did not take the kiss he offered. For he was offering, he was offering himself in the way that Nathaniel had, no demand, just the open-ended offer of his flesh for the taking. I ignored that kiss the way I'd ignored so many others.

He leaned into me, and I had a moment, just a moment, before his lips touched mine, to say, No, stop. But I didn't say it. I wanted that kiss. That much I could admit to myself.

His lips brushed mine, gentle, then the kiss became part of the swaying of our bodies, so that as our bodies rocked, so the kiss moved with us. He kissed me as his body moved, and I turned my face up to him, and gave myself to the movement of his mouth as I'd given myself to the movement of his body. The brush of lips became a fullblown kiss, and it was his tongue that pierced my lips, that filled my mouth, his mouth that filled mine. But it was my hand that left his back and traced his face, cupped his cheek, pressed my body deeper against his, so that I felt him stretched tight and firm under his clothes. The feel of him pressed so tight against my clothes and my body, brought a small sound from my mouth, and the knowledge that the ardeur had risen early. Hours early. A distant part of me thought, Fuck. The rest of me agreed, but not in the way I meant it.

I drew back from his mouth, tried to breathe, tried to think. His hand came up to cup the back of my head, to press my mouth back to his, so that I drowned in his kiss. Drowned in the pulse and beat of his body. Drowned on the rhythms and tide of his desire. The ardeur allowed, sometimes, a glimpse into another's heart, or at least their libido. I'd learned to control that part, but tonight it was as if my fragile control had been ripped away, and I stood pressed into the curves and firmness of Nathaniel's body with nothing to protect me from him. Always before he'd been safe. He'd never pushed an advantage, never gone over a line that I drew, not by word or deed; now suddenly, he was ignoring all my signals, all my silent walls. No, not ignoring them, smashing through them. Smashing them down with his hands on my body, his mouth on mine, his body pushing against mine. I could not fight the ardeur and Nathaniel, not at the same time.

I saw what he wanted. I felt it. Felt his frustration. Months of being good. Of behaving himself, of not pushing his advantage. I felt all those months of good behavior shatter around us, and leave us stripped and suffocating in a desire that seemed to fill the world. Until that moment I hadn't understood how very good he'd been. I hadn't understood what I'd been turning down. I hadn't understood what he was offering. I hadn't understood... anything.

I pulled back from him, put a hand on his chest to keep him from closing that distance again.

"Please, Anita, please, please," his voice was low and urgent, but it was as if he couldn't bring himself to put it into words. But the ardeur didn't need words. I suddenly felt his body again, even though I stood feet apart. He was so hard and firm and aching. Aching, because I'd denied him release. Denied him release for months. I'd never had fullblown sex with Nathaniel, because I could feed without it. It had never occurred to me what that might mean for him. But now I could feel his body, heavy, aching with a passion that had been building for months. When last I'd touched Nathaniel's needs this completely, he'd

simply wanted to belong to me. That was still there but there was a demand in him, a near screaming need. A need that I'd neglected. Hell, a need that I'd pretended didn't exist. Now, suddenly, Nathaniel wasn't letting me ignore that need anymore.

I had a moment of clear thinking, because I felt guilty. Guilty that I'd left him wanting for so long, while I had my own needs met. I'd thought that having real sex with him would be using him; now suddenly that one glimpse into his heart let me understand that what I'd done to him had used him more surely than intercourse. I'd used Nathaniel like he was some kind of sex toy, something to bring me pleasure, and be cleaned up and put back in a drawer. I was suddenly ashamed, ashamed that I'd treated him like an object, when that wasn't how he wanted to be treated.

The guilt hit me like a cold shower, the proverbial slap in the face, and I used it to pack the ardeur away, for another hour or two, at least.

It was as if Nathaniel felt the heat spill away from me. He gave me those wide lavender eyes, huge, and glittering, glittering with unshed tears. He let his hands drop from my arms, and since I'd already dropped my hands away, we stood on the dance floor with distance between us. A distance that neither of us tried to close.

The first shining tear trailed down his cheek.

I reached out to him, and said, "Nathaniel."

He shook his head, and backed away a step, another, then he turned and ran. Jason and Micah tried to catch him as he rushed past them, but he avoided their hands with a graceful gesture of his upper body that left them with nothing but air. He ran out the door, and they both turned to follow. But it wasn't either of them who had to chase him down. It was me. I was the one who owed him an apology. The trouble was, I wasn't exactly clear on what I would be apologizing for. For using him, or for not using him enough.

I caught up with the men in the parking lot.

"Nathaniel says you didn't want to dance with him," Micah said.

"Not true," I said, "I danced, twice. What I didn't want to do was play kissy-face in front of the cops."

Micah looked at Nathaniel. Nathaniel looked at the ground. "You kissed me earlier in front of Detective Arnet. Why was this different?"

"I kissed you to give Jessica the clue to stop hitting on you, because you wanted me to save you from her."

He raised his eyes, and they were like two pretty wounds, so pain-filled. "So, you only kissed me to save me, not because you wanted to?"

Oh, hell. Out loud I tried again, though the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach told me that I was going to lose this argument. Lately, around Nathaniel, I always felt like I was doing something wrong, or at least not right. "That isn't what I meant," I said.

"It's what you said." This from Micah.

"Don't you start," I said, and I heard the anger in my voice before I could stop it. The anger had been there already, I just hadn't been aware of it. I was angry a lot, especially when I wasn't comfortable. I liked anger better than embarrassment. What's a girl to do if she can't get angry and she can't run away from the problem? Hell if I know. Some of my wise friends encouraged me to be honest, emotionally honest with myself and those closest to me. Emotional honesty. It sounds so harmless, so wholesome; it's neither.

"I don't want to fight," I said. . There, that was honest.

"None of us do," Micah said.

Just hearing him be so calm helped the anger ease away. "Nathaniel pushed it on the dance floor, and the ardeur rose early."

"I felt it," Micah said.

"Me, too," Jason said.

"But you don't feel it now, do you?" Nathaniel said. His eyes were almost accusing and his voice held its own thin edge of anger. I wasn't sure if I'd ever heard him that close to being angry.

"Anita is getting better control over the ardeur," Micah said.

Nathaniel shook his head, hugging himself tight. "If it had been you, she would have just come out into the parking lot and fed."

"Not willingly," I said.

"Yes, you would," he said, and his eyes held the anger his voice had held. I'd never seen those lavender eyes angry before. Not like this. It was strangely unnerving.

"I would not have sex in the parking lot of Larry and Tammy's wedding reception, if I had a choice."

That angry gaze searched my face as if trying to find something. "Why not feed here?"

"Because it's tacky."

Jason patted his arm. "See, it isn't you she turned down, it's that she doesn't want to fool around at Larry's wedding. Just not her style."

Nathaniel glanced at Jason, then back at me. Some strange tension that I didn't quite understand seemed to flow away from him. The anger began to fade from his eyes. "I guess you're right."

"Well, if we don't want to be fooling around in the parking lot, then we need to get going," Micah said. "The ardeur doesn't like being denied. When it does come back tonight, it won't be gentle."

I sighed. He was right. That bit of metaphysical bravado on the dance floor would have all sorts of consequences later tonight. When the ardeur rose again, I would be forced to feed. There would be no stuffing it back into its box. It was almost as if, being able to stop the ardeur in its tracks, to completely turn it off once it had filled me, pissed the ardeur off. I knew it was a psychic gift, and that psychic gifts

don't have feelings and don't carry grudges, but sometimes, it felt like this one did.

"I'm sorry, Anita, I wasn't thinking." Nathaniel looked so discouraged that I had to hug him, a quick hug, more sisterly than anything else, and he responded to my body language and didn't try and hold me close. He let me hug him, and step away. Nathaniel was usually almost painfully attuned to my body language. It was one of the things that had allowed him to share my bed for months without violating those last few taboos.

"Let's go home," I said.

"That's my cue to part company," Jason said.

"You're welcome to bunk over if you want," I said.

He shook his head. "No, since I'm not needed to referee the fight, or for sage advice, I'll go home, too. Besides, I couldn't stand listening to the three of you get all hot and heavy and not be invited to play." He laughed and added, "Don't get mad, but having once been included, it's harder to be excluded."

I fought the blush that burned up my face, which always seemed to make the blush darker and harder.

Jason and I had had sex once. Before I realized it was possible to love someone to death with the ardeur, Nathaniel had collapsed at work and been off the feeding schedule for a few days. Micah hadn't been in the house, and the ardeur had risen early. Hours early. It had been interference from Belle Morte, the originator of Jean-Claude's bloodline, and the first, to my knowledge, possessor of the ardeur. It only ran through her line of vamps, nowhere else. The fact that I carried it had raised very interesting metaphysical questions. Belle had wanted to understand what I was, and she had also thought it would raise some hell. Belle was a good business-y vampire, but when she could take care of business and make trouble, all the better. So it hadn't been my fault, but my choices had been limited to taking Nathaniel and possibly killing him, or letting Jason take one for the team. He'd been happy to do it. Very happy. And strangely our friendship had survived it, but every once in a while I couldn't pretend it hadn't happened, and that made me uncomfortable.

"I love the fact that I can make you blush now," he said.

"I don't."

He laughed, but there was something in his eyes that was more serious than laughter. "I need to tell you something, in private, before you go running off, though."

I didn't like how suddenly serious he was. I'd learned in the last few months that Jason used his teasing and laughter as a shield to hide a rather insightful intelligence that was sometimes so preceptive it was painful. I didn't like his request for privacy either. What couldn't he say in front of Micah and Nathaniel? And why?

Out loud I said, "Okay." I started off to the far side of the parking lot away from the Jeep.

When the shade of the trees that edged the church parking lot lay cool above us, I stopped and turned to Jason. "What's up?"

"The thing on the dance floor was sort of my fault."

"In what way, your fault?"

He actually looked embarrassed, which you didn't see much from Jason. "He wanted to know how I got to have sex with you, real sex, the very first time I helped feed the ardeur."

"Technically, it was the second," I said.

He frowned at me. "Yeah, but that was when the ardeur was brand new and we didn't have intercourse, and there were three other men in the bed."

I turned away so the dark would help hide the blush, though truthfully he could probably smell it hot on my skin. "Sorry I brought it up. You were saying?"

"He's been in your bed for what, five months?"

"Something like that," I said.

"And he's not had intercourse yet. Hell, he's not had orgasm, not real orgasm with like release and everything."

I couldn't blush harder or my head would explode. "I'm listening."

"Anita, you can't keep pretending that Nathaniel isn't real."

"That's not fair."

"Maybe not, but I had no idea that you weren't at least doing him orally or by hand, or watching him do himself. Something, anything."

I just shook my head and looked at the ground. I couldn't think of anything good to say. If I hadn't just had my metaphysical peek inside Nathaniel's head, I would probably have gotten angry, or rude. But I'd seen too far into Nathaniel's pain, and I couldn't pretend anymore. Couldn't ignore it.

"I thought that by not doing the final stuff that it would make it easier for him when the ardeur gets under control and I don't need *apomme de sang* anymore."

"Is that still your idea, to just dump him when you have enough control that you don't need to feed?"

"What am I supposed to do with him? Keep him like a pet, or a really big child?"

"He's not a child, and he's not a pet," Jason said, and the first hint of anger was in his voice.

"I know that, and that's the problem, Jason. If the ardeur hadn't come up I'd have been Nathaniel's Nimir-Ra, and his friend, and that would have been it. Now, suddenly he's in this category that I don't even have a name for."

"He's your *pomme de sang* like I'm Jean-Claude's."

"You and Jean-Claude aren't fucking, and nobody gets upset about that."

"No, because he lets me date. I have lovers if I want them."

"I've been encouraging Nathaniel to date. I want him to have girlfriends."

"And your not-so-subtly encouraging him to look at other women made him turn to me for advice."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"He doesn't want to date other people. He wants to be with you, and Micah, and the vampires. He doesn't want another woman in his life."

"I am not the woman in his life."

"Yes, you are, you just don't want to be."

I leaned against one of the narrow tree trunks. "Oh, Jason, what am I going to do?"

"Finish what you started with Nathaniel, be his lover."

I shook my head. "I don't want that."

"The hell you don't. I watch the way you react around him."

"Lust isn't enough, Jason. I don't love him."

"I'd argue that, too."

"I don't love him the way I need to."

"Need to, for what, Anita? Need to for your conscience? Your sense of morality? Just give him some of what he needs, Anita. Don't break yourself doing it, but bend a little. That's all I'm asking."

"You said the thing on the dance floor was sort of your fault. You never explained that."

"I told Nathaniel you don't like passive men. You like a little dominance, a little pushiness. Not much, but enough so that you aren't the one that says, Yes, we'll have sex. You need someone to take a little of the responsibility off your shoulders."

I stared at him, studied that young face. "Is that all it is for me, Jason? I just need someone else to help me spread the guilt around so I can fuck?"

He winced. "That isn't what I said."

"Close enough."

"Get mad, if you want, but that isn't what I said, or what I meant. Get mad at me, but don't take it out on Nathaniel, okay?"

"I was raised that if you had sex it was a commitment. I still believe that."

"You don't feel committed to me." He said it as if it were just a fact, nothing personal.

"No, we're friends, and I was sort of a friend in need. But you're a grown-up and you understood what it was. I'm not sure Nathaniel is enough of a grown-up to understand that. Hell, he can't even say no to women who are almost strangers."

"He turned down at least three dance offers while we were talking, and I know for a fact that he turned down the beautiful Jessica Arnet for a date."

"He did, really?"

Jason nodded. "Yep."

"I didn't think he'd be able to say no."

"He's been practicing."

"Practicing?"

"He tells you no sometimes, doesn't he?"

I thought about it. "Sometimes he won't repeat conversations to me, or tell me things. He says I'll get mad at him, and so I should ask the other person."

"You wanted, no, demanded, that Nathaniel be more responsible for himself. You made him get his driver's license. You've forced him to be less dependent, right?"

"Yeah."

"But you didn't think what it would mean, did you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You wanted him to be independent, to think for himself, to decide what he wanted out of life, right?"

"Yeah, in fact, I said almost exactly that to him. I wanted him to decide what he wanted to do with his life. I mean he's only twenty for God's sake."

"And what he's decided he wants to do is be with you," Jason said, and his voice was softer, gentler.

"That is not a life decision. I meant like a career choice, maybe go back to college."

"He's got a job, Anita, and he makes better money as a stripper than most college graduates do."

"You can't strip forever," I said.

"And most marriages don't last forever either."

My eyes must have gotten too wide, because he hurried with his next words. "What I mean is, that you treat everything like it's a forever question. Like you can't change your mind later. I don't mean to imply that Nathaniel wants you to make a honest man of him. That never came up, honest."

"Well, that's a relief, at least."

"You'll need a *pomme de sang* for years, Anita. Years."

"Jean-Claude said maybe in a few months I'd be able to feed from a distance, and not need the up close and personal stuff."

"You've made progress on going longer between feedings, Anita. But you haven't made much progress on truly controlling the ardeur."

"I controlled it on the dance floor," I said.

He sighed. "You shut it down on the dance floor. That's not control, not really. It's like you have a gun, and you can lock it in the gun safe, but that doesn't teach you how to shoot it."

"A gun analogy? You've been thinking on this for awhile, haven't you?"

"Ever since Nathaniel told me that you hadn't been allowing him release during the feedings."

"Allow? He didn't ask, and how was I supposed to know he wasn't even doing himself in private? I mean, I didn't tell him not to."

"You can play with yourself, and it feels good, but it doesn't meet the real need."

I pushed my back tight into the tree, as if the solid wood could catch me, because I felt like I was falling. Falling into a chasm so deep that I'd never get out. "I don't know if I can do Nathaniel, and still look myself in the mirror in the morning."

"Why does doing Nathaniel bother you that much?"

"Because he confuses my radar. I have friends, I have boyfriends, I have people who are dependent on me, people I take care of. I do not fuck the people I take care of. It would be like taking advantage of your position."

"And Nathaniel falls into the taking care of category?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You think by having sex that you're taking advantage?"

"Yes."

"That's not how Nathaniel sees it."

"I know that, Jason, now." I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the roughness of the bark. "Damn it, I want the ardeur under control so I don't have to keep making these kinds of decisions."

"And if I could wave a magic wand over you and you instantly could control the ardeur, what then? What would you do with Nathaniel?"

"I'd help him find a place of his own."

"He does most of the housework around your place. He buys your groceries. He and Micah do most of the cooking. Nathaniel taking care of the domestic stuff is what allows Micah and you both to work all those hours. Without Nathaniel, how would you organize it?"

"I don't want to keep Nathaniel just to make my life easier. That's like evil."

Jason let out a big sigh. "Are you really this slow, or just driving me crazy on purpose?"

"What?" I said.

He shook his head. "Anita, what I'm trying to say is that Nathaniel doesn't feel used. He feels useful. He doesn't need a girlfriend, because he thinks he already has one. He doesn't want to date because he's already living with someone. He doesn't need to look for a place of his own, because he already has one. Micah knows that, Nathaniel knows that, the only person who doesn't know that seems to be you."

"Jason..."

He stopped me with a raised hand. "Anita, you have two men who live with you. They both love you. They both want you. They both support your career. Between the two of them, they're like your wife. There are people in this world who would kill to have what you have. And you'd just throw it away."

I just looked at him, because I didn't know what to say.

"The only thing that keeps this little domestic arrangement from being perfect for all concerned is that Nathaniel is not getting his needs met." He stepped in close to me, but the look on his face was so serious, that it never occurred to me that kissing was coming, because it wasn't. "You've set up the dynamics so that you wear the pants in this trio, and that's fine, it works for Micah and Nathaniel. But here's the hard part about wearing the pants, Anita, it means you get to make the tough decisions. Your life is working better than it's worked since I met you. You've been happier, longer, than I've ever seen you. Micah, I don't know that well, but Nathaniel has never been this happy in all the years I've known him. Everything is working, Anita. Everybody is making it work. Everybody but..."

"Me," I said.

"You," he said.

"You know, Jason, I can't say you're wrong about any of it, but I hate you right this second."

"Hate me, if you want to, but I'm tired of watching people have everything their heart's desire and throw it away."

"This isn't what my heart desired," I said.

"Maybe not, but it's what you needed. You needed a wife in that old 1950s sort of way."

"Doesn't everybody," I said.

He grinned at me. "No, some people would like to be the wife, but I just can't find a woman who's man enough to keep me in the style to which I have not yet become accustomed."

It made me smile. Damn it. "You are the only one who can say shit like this to me, and not have me pissed

at them for days, or longer. How do you get away with it?"

He planted a quick kiss on my my lips, more brotherly than anything. "I don't know how I get away with it, but if I could bottle it, Jean-Claude would pay a fortune for it."

"Maybe not just Jean-Claude."

"Maybe not." He stepped back, smiling, but his eyes had that serious look again. "Please, Anita, go home, and don't freak. Just go home, and be happy. Be happy, and let everyone around you be happy. Is that so hard?"

When Jason said it like that, it didn't seem hard. In fact, it seemed to make a lot of sense, but inside, it felt hard. Inside it felt like the hardest thing in the world. To just let go, and not pick everything to death. To just let go and enjoy what you had. To just let go and not make everybody around you miserable with your own internal dialogue. To just let go and be happy. So simple. So difficult. So terrifying. I turned away from him then, and walked back to the car.

NATHANIEL was leaning against the side of the Jeep watching us walk towards him. He was leaning with his hands behind him so that his weight trapped his hands behind him, pinned between his hips and the Jeep. It wasn't just intercourse that Nathaniel hadn't been getting with me. Nathaniel had other "needs" that I was, if possible, even less comfortable with. It made him feel peaceful to be tied up. Peaceful to be abused. Peaceful. I'd asked him why he enjoyed it once, and he'd told me that it made him feel peaceful. It made him feel safe.

How could being tied up make you feel safe? How could letting someone hurt you, even a little, make you feel good? I didn't get it. I just didn't get it. Maybe if I'd understood it better, I'd have been less afraid to go that last mile with him. What if we had intercourse and it wasn't enough? What if he just kept pushing, pushing me to do things that I found... frightening? He was supposed to be the submissive, and I was his dominant. Didn't that mean that I was in charge? Didn't that mean he did what I said? No. I'd had to learn enough to understand Nathaniel and some of the other wereleopards, because he wasn't the only one with interesting hobbies. The submissive had a safe word, and once they said that word, all the play stopped. So in the end, the dominant had an illusion of power, but really the submissive got to say how far things went, and when they stopped. I'd thought I could control Nathaniel because he was so submissive, but it was tonight that I realized the truth. I wasn't in control anymore. I didn't know what was going to happen with Nathaniel, or me, or Micah. The thought terrified me, so I thought about it, really thought about it. What if I found Nathaniel a new place to live? What if I found him a new place to be? A new life?

I rolled it over in my mind as we walked across the pavement. I thought about sending him home with someone else, letting him weep on someone else's shoulder. But more than that, I thought about getting under the covers with only Micah on one side, and no one on the other side. Nathaniel had his side of the bed now. I hadn't realized it until that second, hadn't let myself realize it. The three of us enjoyed reading to each other. For Micah and me it was a revisiting of childhood favorites, for the most part, but for Nathaniel most of the books were new to him. He'd never had anyone read to him before bedtime. Never had anyone share their books with him. What kind of childhood is it without books, stories to share? I knew that he'd had an older brother, who died, and a father who died, and a mother who died. That they'd died, I knew, but not how, or when, except that he'd been young when it happened. He didn't like talking about it, and I didn't like seeing the look in his eyes when he did, so I didn't push. I didn't have a right to push if I wasn't his girlfriend. I didn't have a right to push if I wasn't his lover. As his Nimir-Ra, he

didn't owe me his life story.

I thought about not having Nathaniel in the bed, not for feeding, but not having him there to hear the rest of the book we were reading. The thought of him not being there was painful, a wrenching kind of pain, as if my stomach and my heart both hurt at the same time.

He opened the door and held it for me, because this close to the ardeur, it wasn't always good that I was driving. He held the door and was as neutral as he could be, as I moved past him. I didn't know what to do, so I let him be neutral and I was neutral, too. But as I buckled my seat belt in place and he closed the door, I realized that I would miss him. Not miss him because my life ran smoother with him than without him, but I would simply miss him. Miss the vanilla scent of him on my pillow; the warmth of his body on his side of the bed; the spill of his hair like some tangled, living blanket. If I could have stopped my list there, I'd have sent Nathaniel to his room for the night; he did still have a room where all his stuff stayed, all his stuff but him. But I couldn't stop the list there, not and be honest.

He'd cried when Charlotte died in *Charlotte's Web*. I wouldn't have missed seeing him cry over that for anything. It had been Nathaniel's idea that we could have a movie marathon of old monster movies. You have not lived until you've sat through *The Wolfman*, *Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman*, *Curse of the Werewolf*, and *Face of the Screaming Werewolf* with a bunch of shapeshifters. They had heckled the screen and thrown popcorn, and howled, sometimes literally, at the movie version of what they knew all too well. The werelions had all complained that at least werewolves had some movies, that once you'd named *Cat People*, the lions didn't have any movies. Most of the werewolves had known about the 1980 version, but almost no one had known about the original in 1950. We had another movie night planned where we were going to watch both versions. I was sure we'd spend the night complaining, cheerfully, at how far off both films were, and get eerily silent when it hit close to home. Alright, they'd be eerily silent and I'd watch them watching the screen.

I was looking forward to it. I tried picturing the night without Nathaniel. No Nathaniel coming and going out of the kitchen with popcorn and soda making people use coasters. No Nathaniel sitting on the floor, next to my legs, half the night spent with his head on my knee, and the other half playing his hand up and down my calf. It wasn't sexual, he just felt better touching me. The entire pard, and pack, felt better touching each other. It was possible to be up close and personal without it being sexual. It really was, just not usually for me.

Which brought me back to the problem at hand. Funny how the thinking led back to it. Tonight when the ardeur finally surfaced, what was I going to do? I could exile Nathaniel to his room, legitimately, because I'd need to feed tomorrow, too. I could save him like for dessert. But we'd both know that that wasn't it. I wasn't saving him, I was saving myself. Saving myself from what, I wasn't sure, but it was definitely about saving me, and had nothing to do with saving Nathaniel.

He didn't want to be saved. No, that wasn't true. Nathaniel already thought he had been saved. I'd saved him. I'd been treating him like a prince who needed to find his princess, but that was all wrong. Nathaniel was the princess and he had been rescued, by me. As far as Nathaniel was concerned, I was the prince in shining armor, I just needed to come across, and then we could all live happily ever after.

Trouble was, I was no one's prince, and no one's princess. I was just me, and I was all out of armor, shiny or otherwise. I just wasn't the fairy-tale type. And I didn't believe in happily ever after. The question was, did I believe in happily for now? If I could have answered that question, then all the worry would have been ended, but I couldn't answer it. So as Micah drove us towards home in the October dark, I still didn't know what I'd do when the ardeur finally rose for the night. I didn't even know what the right thing to do was anymore. Wasn't right supposed to help people, and wrong supposed to hurt people?

Didn't you make the right choice because it was the right thing to do?

I always felt squeamish about praying to God about sex, in any context, but I prayed as we drove, because I was out of options. I asked for guidance. I asked for a clue as to what was the best for everyone. I didn't get an answer, and I hadn't expected one. I have a lot psychic gifts but talking directly to God is not one of them, thank goodness. Read the Old Testament if you don't think it's a scary idea. But worse than no answer, I didn't feel that peace that I usually get when I pray.

WHEN we reached our house, Micah and Nathaniel got out of the Jeep first. I followed behind, slowly, still not sure what I was going to do.

The living room was dark as I entered the house. The only light was from the kitchen. One or both of them had walked through the pitch-dark living room and only hit a light switch when they went to the kitchen to check messages on the machine, which was on the kitchen counter. Leopards' eyes are better in the dark than a human's, and Micah's eyes were permanently stuck in kitty-cat mode. He often walked through the entire house with no lights, just drifting from room to room, avoiding every obstacle, gliding through the dark with the same confidence I used in bright light.

There was enough light from the kitchen, so I, too, left the living room dark. The white couch seemed to give off its own glow, though I knew that was illusion, made up of the reflective quality of the white, white cloth. I was pretty sure the men had both gone to change for the night. Most lycanthropes, whatever the flavor, preferred fewer clothes, and Micah didn't like dressing up, not if it included a tie. I walked into the empty kitchen not because I needed to, but because I wasn't ready to go to the bedroom. I still didn't know what I was going to do.

The kitchen held a large dining room table now. The breakfast nook on its little raised platform with its bay window looking out over the woods still held a smaller four-seater table. Four had been more chairs than I needed when I moved into this house. Now, because we usually had at least some of the other wereleopards bunking over due to an emergency, or, often, just the need to be close to more of their group, their pard, we needed a six-seater table. Actually we needed a bigger one than that, but it was all my kitchen would hold.

There was a vase in the middle of the table. Jean-Claude had sent me a dozen white roses a week, after we started dating. Once we had sex, he'd added one red rose so it was actually thirteen. One red rose like a spot of blood in a sea of white roses and white baby's breath. It certainly made a statement.

I smelled the roses, and the red one had the strongest scent. Hard to find white roses that smelled good. All I had to do was call Jean-Claude. He was fast enough to fly here before dawn. I'd fed off of him before, I could do it again. Of course, that would simply be putting off the decision. No, it would be hiding. I hated cowardice almost worse than anything else, and calling on my vampire lover in this instance was cowardice.

The phone rang. I jumped back so hard that the roses rocked in their vase. You'd think I was nervous, or guilty of something. I got the phone on the second ring. It was for Micah, a Furry Coalition emergency.

One of the shifters had had an accident. He was in the hospital emergency room right now. But the cops were making noises about taking him to a so-called safe house.

They were actually prisons for lycanthropes. Once you went in, they never let you out.

Someone had to go and get him before that could happen.

Micah got on the phone long enough to take the address and name of the hospital down, then hung up. He looked at me, face careful, neutral with an edge of concern. "I'm okay with you and Nathaniel being here alone for the ardeur. The question is, are you okay with it?"

I shrugged.

He shook his head. "No, Anita, I need an answer before I leave."

I sighed. "You need to get there before the wolf loses it. Go, we'll be all right."

He looked like he didn't believe me.

"Go," I said.

"It's not just you I'm worried about, Anita."

"I will do my best for Nathaniel, Micah."

He frowned. "What does that mean?"

"It means what it says."

He didn't look happy with the answer.

"If you wait around for me to say, Oh, yes, it's fine that I'm going to feed the ardeur and fuck Nathaniel; the wolf in question will have shapeshifted, been shot by the cops, and maybe taken some civilians with him before you even leave the house."

"You're both important to me, Anita. Our pard is important to me. What happens here tonight, could change... everything."

I swallowed hard, because I suddenly didn't want to meet his eyes.

He touched my chin, raised my face up to meet his gaze. "Anita."

"I'll be good," I said.

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not sure, but I'll do my best, and that is the best I can offer. I won't really know what I'm going to do until the ardeur rises. Sorry, but that's the truth. To say anything else would be a lie."

He took a deep breath that made his chest rise and fall nicely. "I guess I'll have to settle for that."

"What exactly do you want me to say?" I asked.

He leaned in, and laid a gentle kiss against my lips. We rarely kissed so chaste, but this close to the

ardeur, he was being careful. "I want you to say you'll take care of this."

"Define take care of it?"

He sighed again, shook his head, and stepped back. "I've got to get dressed."

"Are you taking your car or the Jeep?"

"I'll take my car." He smiled at me, almost sadly, and left to go get dressed. He made a soft exclamation as he went around the corner. He spoke in low voices with another man. The cadence was wrong for Nathaniel.

Damian glided around the corner. "You must be very distracted not to have sensed me sooner." He was right, I was good at sensing the undead. No vamp should have been able to get this close without me knowing, especially not Damian.

Damian was my vampire servant, as I was Jean-Claude's human servant. The ardeur was Jean-Claude and Belle Morte's fault, something about their line had contaminated me. But Damian as my servant, that was my fault. I was a necromancer, and apparently mixing necromancy with being a human servant had some unforeseen side effects. One of them was standing across the kitchen staring at me with eyes the color of green grass. Humans didn't have eyes like that, but apparently Damian had, because becoming a vamp doesn't change your original physical description. It may pale you out, lengthen some of the teeth, but your hair and eye and skin color remain the same. The only thing that was probably more vibrant was his hair. Red hair that hadn't seen the sun for hundreds of years, so that it was almost the color of fresh blood, a bright, fresh scarlet, so that he moved in a swirl of crimson hair. All vamps are pale, but Damian started life with that milk and honey complexion that some redheads have, so he was even paler. Or maybe it was the quality of his paleness, like his skin had been formed of white marble, and some demon or god had breathed life into that paleness. Oh, wait, I was that demon.

Technically, my power, my necromancy, made Damian's heart beat. He was over a thousand years old, and he would never be a master vampire. If you aren't a master, then you need a master to give you enough power to rise from the grave, not just the first night, but every night.

Damian must have come straight from work, because though he, like most of the vamps fresh over from Europe, almost never wore jeans and tennis shoes, he also didn't like dressing up as much as Jean-Claude insisted on.

He was wearing a coat I'd seen before. It was a deep pine green, a frock coat like something out of the 1700s, but it was new, designed to gape open to expose the pale gleam of his chest and stomach. Embroidery nearly covered the sleeves and lapels, putting a little glitter of color near all that white skin. His pants were black satin, poofy, like there was way more cloth there than was needed for Damian's slender legs. He wore a wide green sash for a belt, and a pair of black leather boots that folded over just above the knee. The outfit was very pirate-y.

"How was work?" I asked.

"Danse Macabre is the hottest dance club in St. Louis." He kept walking towards me, gliding rather. There was something about the way he looked at me that I didn't care for.

"It's the only place where people can go and dance with vampires. Of course it's hot." I looked at him, and I knew he had fed tonight, on some willing woman. Willing blood feeding was considered the same

as willing sex. Just be of age, and you could feed the undead, and have bite marks to show your friends. I'd ordered Damian to only feed from willing victims, and because of our bond together, he could not disobey me. Necromancers of legend could boss around all types of undead, and they had to do your bidding. The only undead I could boss around was Damian, and frankly, I found even that unsettling. I didn't like to have that kind of control over anyone.

But then, Damian had a kind of control over me. I wanted to touch him. When he entered a room, I had an almost overwhelming urge to touch his skin. It was part of what it meant to be master and servant. This attraction to your servants, this need to touch and tend them was one of the reasons that most servants were treasured possessions. I think it also kept even the craziest, most evil of vamps from killing their servants out of hand. For often a vamp didn't survive the death of his servant, the bond was that close.

He walked around the table, fingers trailing on the backs of the chairs. "And I am one of the vampires that they have been pressing their bodies up against all night."

"Hannah is still managing the club, right?"

"Oh, yes, I am merely a cold body to send into the crowd." He was around the table now, to the island that separated the working area of the kitchen from the rest of the room. "I am merely color, like a statue, or a drape."

"That's not fair. I've seen you work the crowd, Damian. You enjoy the flirting."

He nodded, as he came around the end of the island. Nothing separated us now but the fact that I was still leaning against the far cabinets, and he had stopped at the end of the island. The urge to close that distance, to wrap my hands around his body, was almost overwhelming. It made my hands ache with the need, and I ended with them pressed behind me, pinned by my body the way Nathaniel had leaned against the Jeep earlier.

"I enjoy the flirting very much." He traced pale fingers along the edge of the island, slowly, tenderly, as if he were touching something else. "But we are not allowed to have sex while we work, though some of them beg for it." The emerald of his eyes spread and swallowed his pupils, so that he looked at me with eyes like green fire. His power danced along my skin, caught my breath in my throat.

My voice started out a little shaky, but I gained firmness as I talked, until the last was said in an almost normal voice. "You've got my permission to date, or fuck, or whatever. You can have lovers, Damian."

"And where would I take them?" He leaned against the island, arms crossing over that expanse of pale chest.

"What do you mean?"

"I have a coffin in your basement. It is adequate but hardly romantic."

He could have said a lot of things that I'd expected, but that wasn't one of them. "I'm sorry, Damian, it never occurred to me. You need a room, don't you?"

He gave a small smile. "A room to use for my lovers, yes."

Then I realized something. "You mean like bring strangers here. People you've just picked up, and have

them like sleep over, be at the breakfast table in the morning?"

"Yes," he said, and I understood the look on his face now; it was a challenge. He knew I wouldn't like the thought of strangers coming into the house, much less facing a strange woman that he'd simply brought home to fuck, first thing in the morning.

I had a tiny spurt of anger, and that helped me think. Helped push back that need to touch him, that had nothing to do with the ardeur, and everything to do with power. "I know you had a room at the Circus. Maybe we could arrange something with Jean-Claude, so you could take lovers back there."

"My home is here, with you. You are my master now."

I cringed a little at the master part. "I know that, Damian."

"Do you?" He pushed away from the island, and came to stand just in front of me. This close the power shivered between us. It made him close his eyes, and when he opened them they were still drowning emerald pools. "If you are my master, then touch me."

My pulse was jumping in my throat like a trapped thing. I didn't want to touch him, because I wanted to touch him so badly. In a way, this was part of the attraction between Jean-Claude and me, as well. What I'd taken for lust and new love was also partly vampire trickery. A trick to bind the servant to the master, and the master to the servant, so that both served the other willingly, joyfully. It had bothered me when I first realized that part of what I felt for Jean-Claude was somehow tainted with vampire mind games, though it wasn't on purpose from Jean-Claude's point of view. He couldn't help how it worked on me any more than I could help how it worked on Damian.

He was standing so close I had to crane my neck backward to see his face clearly. "I want to touch you, Damian, but you're acting awfully funny tonight."

"Funny," he said. He moved in so close that the edges of his coat, the poofy satin of his pants brushed the thick cloth of my tuxedo pants. "Funny, I don't feel funny, Anita." He leaned his face close to mine, and whispered his next words, "I feel half-crazed. All those women touching me, rubbing themselves against me, pressing their warm," he leaned in so that his hair brushed my cheek, "soft," his breath felt hot against my skin, "wet," his lips touched my cheek, and I shuddered, "bodies, against me."

My breath shook on its way out, and my pulse was suddenly loud in my ears. It was hard to concentrate on anything but the feel of his lips against my cheek, though all his lips were doing were resting lightly against my skin. I swallowed hard enough that it hurt, and said, "You could have gone with any one of them."

He laid his cheek against mine, but it meant he had to bend over more, which moved his body farther from mine. Compromise. "And could I trust that their windows were proof against sunlight?" He stood up, and put a hand on either side of the cabinet behind me, so that I was trapped between his arms. "Could I trust that they would not harm me, once the sun rose and I lay helpless?"

I tried to think of something to say, something helpful, something that would help me to think about something other than how much I wanted to touch him. When in doubt be bitchy. "I'm getting a crick in my neck with you standing this close." My voice was only a little breathy when I said it. Good.

Damian put his hands around my waist, and just the solid feel of his hands around me stopped whatever else I meant to say. It stopped him for a moment, too. Made him bend his head down, eyes closed, as if

he were trying to concentrate, or clear his mind. Then he lifted me, suddenly, and sat me on the edge of the counter. It caught me off guard, and he had put his hips between my knees before I could react. We weren't pressed together, except for his hands on my waist, but we were one step away from it.

"There," he said, voice hoarse, "now you can see me better."

He was right, but it hadn't been what I meant him to do. I wanted breathing space, and instead my hands were free, and he was a hard thought away. My hands came to rest on his arms, and even through the heavy material of his coat I could feel the solidness of him. It was as if my hands had a mind of their own. I traced up the line of his arms, found his shoulders, and ended with my hands on the broadness of those shoulders, with his hair tickling along the back of my hands. There was something about my hands on his shoulders, or the silk of his hair on my skin that made me bend towards him. I wanted a kiss. Simple as that. It seemed wrong to be this near and not touch him.

He bowed his head towards mine. His eyes were like deep green pools, deep enough to drown in. He whispered, "You have but to tell me stop, and I will stop."

I didn't say stop. I slid my hands to the smooth pale line of his neck, and the moment I touched his bare skin with mine, I was calmer. I could think again. That was his gift to me, as my servant. He helped me be calmer, more in control. When I was touching him, it was almost impossible for me to lose my temper. He lowered my blood pressure, helped me think.

I cupped his face between my hands, because I wanted to touch him, but what I gained from his centuries of controlling his own emotions was that when he put his lips against mine, I was not lost. Not overwhelmed unless I wanted to be overwhelmed. It wasn't that I felt nothing, because it wasn't possible to be enfolded in Damian's arms, pressed against his chest, have his lips caressing mine, and be unmoved. You'd have had to be made of stone not to melt into that embrace, just a little. But, as I'd gained calmness from him, he had begun to gain back the passion that he'd lost over the centuries. A passion not just for sex, but any strong emotion, because the master that made him tolerated no strong emotion, save fear. She'd beat everything else out of him over more centuries than most vampires ever survived.

He drew back enough to see my face. "You're calm. Why are you calm? I feel crazed, and you give me peaceful eyes!" He grabbed my upper arms, and dug his fingers in until it hurt, and I still felt calm. "It is cruel fate that makes you calmer and calmer the more we touch, and drives me more and more wild." He gave me a small shake, his face was raw with emotion. "I am being punished and I have done nothing wrong."

"It's not punishment, Damian," and even my voice was low and calm.

"Jean-Claude says that if you wished, you could gain calm only when you needed it. That you could touch me and enjoy touching me, but not be trapped behind this mask." His fingers were digging in so hard, I was bruising.

"You're hurting me, Damian." My voice was still calm, but there was an edge of heat to it, an edge of anger.

"At least you feel something when I touch you."

"Let go of my arms, Damian." And just like that, he released me, let me go as if my arms had grown hot to the touch, because he could not disobey a direct order from me. Whatever that order might be.

"Take a step back, Damian, give me some room." I was angry now, even with the rest of his body touching me. When he did what I told him, and was no longer touching me at all, the anger filled me up and spilled over my skin like heat. God, it felt good. I was used to being angry. I liked it. Not the most positive thing to say, but still true.

I started to rub my arms where he'd squeezed, then stopped. I didn't like letting anyone know how much they'd hurt me.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," he said, and he was holding his own arms. I thought for a moment he was feeling my pain, then realized he was hugging himself to keep from touching me.

"No, you just want to fuck me."

"That's not fair," he said.

He was right, it wasn't fair, but I didn't care. Without him touching me, I could be as unfair as I wanted to be. I wrapped my anger around myself. I fed it with every petty impulse I'd fought for days. I should have remembered that one control is much like another. That if you throw away one kind of control, it makes other kinds harder to hold onto.

I unleashed my anger like you'd unleash a rabid dog. It roared through me, and I remembered a time when my rage had been the only warmth I allowed in my life. When my anger had been my solace and my shield. "Get out, Damian, just go to bed."

"Don't do this, Anita, please." He held his hand out to me, would have touched me, but I moved back, just out of reach.

"Go, now."

And with that he couldn't help himself. I'd given him a direct order. He had to obey.

He walked out, tears glittering in his green eyes. He passed Nathaniel in the doorway.

I hadn't let myself get this angry in so long. It had felt good for a few moments, but I was already beginning to regret how I'd treated Damian. He hadn't asked to be my servant. The fact that I'd done it accidentally didn't make it any more right. He was an adult person, and I'd just ordered him to bed like he was a naughty child. He deserved better than that. Anyone did.

The anger pulled back, and even my skin felt cooler. The term hot with anger was very real. I was ashamed of what I'd just done. I understood why, in part. I so did not need another man tied to me by metaphysics that demanded a piece of my bed, or at least my body. I didn't need that. I especially didn't need a man who might not even be capable of feeding the ardeur. Because even in the middle of the worst of the ardeur, Damian's touch could cool that fire. With him holding my hand, the ardeur could not rise, or at least it could be put away for hours. So why didn't I paste Damian to my body? Because of how much more he wanted from me than I was comfortable with giving. I could not use him to help me fight the ardeur if I wasn't willing to give in to that skin hunger we both felt for each other.

Nathaniel padded into the room, wearing nothing but a pair of silky jogging shorts. He'd taken his braid out, so that his thick hair spilled around him like some kind of cape. "Are you alright?"

I started to say, I owe Damian an apology, but I didn't say it, because in that one breath, the ardeur

rose. No, not rose, engulfed, drowned, suffocated. I suddenly couldn't breathe past the pulse in my throat. My skin felt thick and heavy with it. I don't know what showed in my eyes, but whatever it was, it stopped Nathaniel where he stood, froze him like a rabbit in the grass that knows the fox is near.

The ardeur spilled outward, like invisible water, hot, wet, and suffocating. I knew when the power hit Nathaniel, because he shivered. Goose bumps broke on his body, as his very skin reacted to the power.

I'd shoved the ardeur down once tonight, and that had a price. I'd refused the touch of my servant, and that had a price. I'd embraced my anger, and let it spill out onto someone I cared about. That had a price, too. I didn't want Nathaniel to be the one who paid that price.

I didn't remember crossing the room, but I must have, because I was standing in front of him. His eyes were wide, so wide, his lips half-parted. I was close enough to see the pulse in his throat beating against the skin of his neck like a trapped thing. I leaned in towards him, leaned just my face until I could smell the warm vanilla scent of his neck. Close enough to taste his pulse on my tongue like candy. And I knew this candy would be red and soft and hot. I had to close my eyes so that I didn't lean my mouth down to that point, didn't lick over his skin, didn't bite down and free that quivering piece of him. I had to close my eyes so I wouldn't keep staring at that pulsing, jumping... My own pulse was too fast, as if I would choke on it. I'd thought that feeding the ardeur on Nathaniel was the worst I could do, but the thoughts in my head weren't about sex. They were about food. Thanks to my ties with Jean-Claude and Richard, my werewolf ex-fiancé and the other third of our triumvirate, I had darker things inside me than the ardeur. Dangerous things. Deadly things.

I stayed perfectly still, trying to master my own pulse, my own heartbeat. But even with my eyes closed, I could still smell Nathaniel's skin. Sweet and warm and... close.

I felt his breath on my face, before I opened my eyes.

He had moved in so close that his face filled my vision. My voice came soft, half-strangled with the needs I was fighting, "Nathaniel..."

"Please," he whispered it as he leaned in, whispered it again as his mouth hovered above mine, he sighed, "Please," against my lips. His breath felt hot against my mouth, as if when we kissed it would burn.

His lips this close to mine had done one thing. I wasn't thinking about ripping his throat out anymore. I understood then we could feed on sex, or we could feed on meat and blood. I knew that one hunger could be turned into another, but until that moment, where I could almost taste his lips on mine, I hadn't realized that there would come a point where *something* must be fed. I did not feed Jean-Claude's blood lust, though there was a shadow of it in me. I did not feed Richard's beast, with its hunger for meat, but that lived in me, too. I held so many hungers in me, and fed none of them, except the ardeur. That I could feed. That I did feed. But it was in that heartbeat, as Nathaniel kissed me, that I understood why I hadn't been able to control the ardeur better. All the hungers channeled into that one hunger. Jean-Claude's fascination with the blood that ran just under the skin. Richard's desire for fresh, bloody meat. I had pretended I didn't carry their hungers inside me, not really. But I did. The ardeur had risen to give me a way to feed, a way that didn't tear people's throats out, a way that didn't fill my mouth with fresh blood.

Nathaniel kissed me. He kissed me, and I let him, because if I drew back from it, fought it; there were other ways to feed, other ways that would leave him bleeding and dying on the floor. His lips were like heat against my skin, but part of me wanted something hotter. Part of me knew that blood would be like a scalding wave in my mouth.

I had a sudden image so strong that it made me stumble back from him. Made me push away from that warm, firm flesh.

I felt my teeth sinking into flesh, through hair that was rough and choking on my tongue. But I could feel the pulse underneath that skin, feel it like a frantic thing, the pulse running from me, like the deer had run through the forest. The deer was caught, but that sweet, beating thing lay just out of reach. I bit harder, shearing through the skin with teeth that were made for tearing. Blood gushed into my mouth, hot, scalding, because the deer's blood ran hotter than mine. Their warmth helped lead me to them. Helped me hunt them. The heat of their blood called me to them, made their scent run rich on every leaf they passed, every blade of grass that brushed them, carried that warmth away, betrayed them to me. My teeth closed around the throat, tore the front of it free. Blood sprayed out, over me and the leaves, a sound like rain. I swallowed the blood first, scalding from the chase, and then the meat that still held the last flickering of pulse, a last beat of life. The meat moved in my mouth as it went down, as if it were struggling, even now, to live.

I came back to the kitchen, on my knees, screaming.

Nathaniel reached out towards me, and I slapped at his hands, because I didn't trust myself to touch him. I could still taste the meat, the blood, feel it going down Richard's throat. It wasn't horror that made me slap at Nathaniel. It was that I had liked it. Gloried in the feel of blood raining down on me. The struggles of the animal had excited me, made the kill all the sweeter. Always when I touched Richard, there had been hesitation, regret, revulsion about what he was, but there had been no hesitation in that shared vision. He had been the wolf, and he had brought the deer down, taken its life, and there had been no regret. His beast had fed, and for this one moment, the man in him had not cared.

I shut down every shield I had between him and me, and it was only then that I felt him look up, felt him raise his bloody muzzle, and look as if he could see me watching him. He licked his bloody lips, and the only thought I had from him was good. It was good, and there was more, and he would feed.

I couldn't seem to cut myself off from him. Couldn't shut it down. I did not want to feel him sink teeth into the deer again. I did not want to be in his head for the next bite. I reached out to Jean-Claude. Reached out for help, and found... blood.

His mouth was locked on a throat, fangs buried into that flesh. I smelled that flesh, knew that scent, knew it was Jason, his *pomme de sang*, that he held clasped in his arms, clasped tighter than you hold a lover, because a lover does not struggle, a lover does not feel their death in your kiss.

The blood was so sweet, sweeter than the deer's had been. Sweeter, cleaner, better. And part of that better was the feel of his arms locked around us, holding us as tight as we held him. Part of what made this more was the embrace. The feel of Jason's heart beating inside his chest, beating against the front of our bodies, so that we could feel the franticness of it, as the heart began to realize something was wrong, and the more frightened it got, the more blood it pumped, the more of that sweet warmth poured down our throats.

All I could taste was blood. All I could smell was blood. It spilled down my throat, and I couldn't breathe. I was drowning. Drowning in Jason's blood. The world had run red, and I was lost. A pulse, a pulse in that red darkness. A pulse, a heartbeat, that found me, that brought me out.

Two things came to me at once. I was lying on cool tile, and someone had me by the wrist. Their hand on my wrist. I opened my eyes, and found Nathaniel kneeling beside me. His hand on my wrist. The

pulse in the palm of his hand beat against the pulse in my wrist. It was as if I could feel the blood running up his arm, smell it, almost taste it.

I rolled closer to him, curled my body around his legs, laid my head upon his thigh. He smelled so warm. I kissed the edge of his thigh, and he opened his legs for me, let my face slip between them, so that the next kiss was against the smooth warmth of his inner thigh. I licked along that warm, warm skin. He shuddered, and his pulse sped against mine. The pulse in the palm of his hand pushing against the pulse in my wrist, as if his heartbeat wanted inside me. But it wasn't his heartbeat that he wanted inside me.

A roll of my eyes, and I could see him swollen and tight against the front of his shorts. I licked up the line of his thigh, licked closer and closer to that thin line of satin that stretched over the front of his body.

I tasted his pulse against my lips, but it wasn't an echo from his hand. My mouth was over the pulse in his inner thigh. He let go of my wrist, as if now we didn't need it, we had another pulse, another, sweeter place to explore. I could smell the blood just under his skin, like some exotic perfume. I pressed my mouth over that quivering heat, kissed the blood just under his skin. Licked the jumping thud of his pulse, just a quick flick of my tongue. It tasted like his skin, sweet and clean, but it also tasted of blood, sweet copper pennies on my tongue.

I bit him, lightly, and he cried out above me. I slid hands over his thigh, held it tight, so that the next bite was harder, deeper. His meat filled my mouth for a second, and I could taste the pulse under his skin. Knew that if I bit down, that blood would pour into my mouth, that his heart would spill itself down my throat as if it wanted to die.

I stayed with my teeth around his pulse, fought with myself not to bite down, not to bring that hot, red rush. I could not let go, and it was taking everything I had not to finish it. I reached down those metaphysical cords that bound me to Jean-Claude and Richard. I had a confusing image of meat and viscera, and other bodies crowding close. The pack was feeding. I shoved that image away, because it wanted me to bite down. Richard's muzzle was buried deep into the warmth of the body, buried in the sweet things inside. I had to run from those feelings, before I fed on Nathaniel the way they were feeding on the deer.

I found Jason lying pale on Jean-Claude's bed, bleeding on the sheets. Jean-Claude's blood thirst was quenched but there were other hungers. He looked up at me, as if he could see me. His eyes were drowning blue, and I felt it, the ardeur had risen in him. Risen in a wave of heat that left him staring down at Jason's still form with thoughts that had nothing to do with blood.

He spoke, his voice echoing through me. "I must shut you out, *ma petite*, something is wrong tonight. You will force me to do things I do not wish to do. Feed the ardeur, *ma petite*, choose its flame, before another hunger comes and carries you away." With that, he was gone. Gone as if a door had slammed shut between us. I had a moment to realize that he'd slammed a door between not just himself, but Richard and me, as well. So that I was suddenly cut adrift.

I was alone with the feel of Nathaniel's pulse in my mouth. His flesh was so warm, so warm, and his pulse beat like something alive inside his skin. I wanted to free that struggling, quivering thing. I wanted to break it free of its cage. To free Nathaniel of this cage of flesh. To set him free.

I fought not to bite down, because some part of me knew that if I once tasted blood that I would feed. I would feed, and Nathaniel might not survive it.

A hand grabbed mine, grabbed mine and held on. I knew who it was before I raised my face from

Nathaniel's thigh. Damian knelt beside us. His touch helped me get to my knees, helped me think, at least a little. But the ardeur didn't go away. It pulled back like the ocean drawing back from the shore, but it didn't leave, and I knew it would come back. Another wave was building, and when it crashed over us, we needed a plan.

"Something's wrong," I said, and my voice shook. I held on to Damian's hand like it was the last solid thing in the world.

"I felt the ardeur rise, and I thought, great, just great, left out again. Then it changed."

"It felt wonderful," Nathaniel's voice came distant and dreamy, as if all he'd been having was good foreplay.

"Didn't you feel it change?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Weren't you afraid?"

"No," he said, "I knew you wouldn't hurt me."

"I'm glad one of us was so sure."

He raised up onto his knees, from where he'd half swooned. "Trust yourself. Trust what you feel. It changed when you tried to fight it. Stop fighting it." He leaned in towards me. "Let me be your food."

I shook my head, and clung to Damian's hand, but it was as if I could feel the tide rushing back towards the shore. Feel the wave building, building, and when it came, it would sweep us away. I didn't want to be swept away.

"If Jean-Claude told you to feed the ardeur, then feed it," Damian said. "What I felt from you just now was closer to blood lust." His face was very serious, sorrowful even. "You don't want to know what blood lust can make you do, Anita. You don't want that."

"Why is it different tonight?" It was a child asking someone to explain why the monster under the bed has grown a new and scarier head.

"I don't know, but I do know that for the first time when you touch me, I feel it. A dim echo, but I feel it. Always before, Anita, when you touched me, it went away." He made a movement with his fingers like putting out a candle, "snuffed out. Tonight..." He leaned over my hand, and I knew he was going to lay his lips across my knuckles. One of the gifts of the ardeur is that it lets you look inside someone's heart. It lets you see what they truly feel. When his lips touched my skin, I felt what Damian was feeling. Satisfaction. Eagerness. Worry, but that was fast fading under the feel of his lips on my skin. He wanted. He wanted me. He wanted to feed the hunger of his skin. The hunger of his body, not so much for orgasm but for that need to be held close and tight, that need we all have to press our nakedness against someone else's. I felt his loneliness, and his need, even if it was only for one night, not to be lonely, not to be exiled down in the dark, alone. I saw how he felt about his coffin down in the basement. It was not his room. It was not his in any way. It was just the place he went to die every dawn. The place where he went to die, alone, knowing that he would rise as he had died, alone. I saw the endless stream of women that he had fed on, like pages in a book, a blonde, a brunette, the one with a tattoo on her neck, dark skin, pale skin, the one with blue hair, an endless stream of necks and wrists, and their eager eyes, and

grasping hands, and nearly every night, it was in public view, as part of the floor show at Danse Macabre. So that even his feedings were not private. Even that was not special. It was eating so you wouldn't die, with no meaning to it.

In the center of his being was a great emptiness.

I was supposed to be his master. I was supposed to take care of him, and I hadn't known. I hadn't asked and I'd been so busy trying not to be tied to another man through some weird metaphysical shit that I hadn't noticed that Damian's life sucked.

"I'm sorry, Damian, I..." I don't know what I would have said, because his fingers touched my lips, and I couldn't think. His fingers held heat and weight that they'd never had before.

His eyes widened, surprised, I think, as surprised as I was at the sensation. Or did my lips give heat to his skin, too? Did my lips suddenly feel swollen and eager as his fingertips did to me, as if both mouth and fingers were suddenly more?

I moved my lips against his touch, a bare movement, just enough to press my mouth against the ripeness of his fingers; barely enough to call it a kiss, but it wasn't his skin I tasted, or not the skin I was touching. It was as if I laid my mouth against the most intimate parts of him. There was the hard, solid press of his fingers, but the taste, the smell of him, was the perfume of lower things, as if I were a dog on the scent of where I wanted to be.

His breath drew in a shaking gasp, and when I rolled my eyes up to see his face, the look in his eyes was one of drowning, as if I already touched what I could taste. His eyes filled with emerald fire, and just like that there was a line of desire carved from my mouth down his fingers, his hand, his arm, his chest, his hips, to the center of his body. I could feel him thick and rich and full of blood. Could taste the warmth of him as if my mouth were nestled against his groin. I could taste him, feel him, and when I slipped my mouth over the tips of his fingers, slid something so much smaller, harder into my mouth; his green eyes rolled back into his head, ginger lashes fluttering downward. His breath sighed out in one word, "Master."

I knew he was right, in that one moment, I knew, because I remembered being on the other side of such a kiss. Jean-Claude could push desire through me as if his kiss were a finger drawn across my body, down my very nerves so that he touched things that no hand or finger could ever caress. For the first time I felt the other side of such a touch; felt what Jean-Claude had felt for years. He'd tasted my most intimate parts, long before he'd ever been allowed to touch them, or even see them. I felt what he'd felt, and it was wondrous.

Nathaniel touched my hand. I think I'd actually forgotten about him, forgotten about anything but the sensation of Damian's flesh against mine. Then Nathaniel touched me and I could feel his body through the palm of my hand as if a line ran from the pulse in my palm down his body in a long line of heat and desire and... power.

I felt that power flare outward from my mouth and hand to their bodies. It was my power, the power Jean-Claude had woken in me by his marks, but it was also my power, my necromancy that burned like some cold fire through Damian's body, but when it hit Nathaniel's body, the power changed, shifted, became something warm and alive. In the blink of an eye, the power flared through me, through all of us, but it wasn't sex that I felt anymore, it was pain. I was trapped between ice and fire; a cold so intense that it burned, and the fire burned because that was what it was. It was as if half the blood in my body had turned to ice, so that nothing flowed, and I was dying; and the other half of my body held blood that was molten like melted gold, and my skin could not hold it. I was melting, dying. I screamed, and the men

screamed with me. It was the sound of Nathaniel and Damian, their screams, not my own, that dragged some part of me above the pain.

That one blinded, aching part knew that if I let this consume me, we would all die, and that was not acceptable. I had to find a way to ride this, to control this, or we would be destroyed. But how do you control something that you don't understand? How do you ride something you can't see, or even touch? I realized in that moment that I touched nothing. That somewhere in the pain I'd let go of both of them. My skin was empty of their touch, but the link between us was still there. One of us, or all of us, had tried to save ourselves by letting go, but this was not a magic so easily defeated. I knelt alone on the floor, touching no one and nothing, but I could feel them. Feel their hearts in their chests as if I could have reached out my hand and carved those warm, beating organs from their bodies; as if their flesh was water to me. The image was so strong, so real, that it made me open my eyes, helped me ride down the pain.

Nathaniel was half crouched, his hand reaching out to me, as if I'd been the one who pulled away. His eyes were closed, his face screwed tight with pain. Damian knelt, pale face empty; if I hadn't been able to feel his pain I wouldn't have known that his blood was turning to ice.

Nathaniel's hand touched mine, like a child groping in the dark, but the moment his fingers brushed me, the burning began to fade. I gripped his hand, and it didn't hurt anymore. It was still hot, but it was the beating pulse of life, as if the heat of a summer's day filled us.

The other half of my body was still so cold it burned. I took Damian's hand, and the moment we touched that, too, ceased to hurt. The magic, for lack of a better term, flowed through me; the chill of the grave, and the heat of the living, and I knelt in the middle like something caught between life and death. I was a necromancer; I was caught between life and death, always.

I remembered death. The smell of my mother's perfume, Hypnotique, the taste of her lipstick as she kissed me good-bye, the sweet powdery scent of her skin. I remembered the feel of smooth wood under small hands, my mother's coffin; the clove scent of carnations from the grave blanket. There was a bloodstain on the car seat, and an oval of cracks in the windshield. I laid a tiny hand on that dried blood, and remembered the nightmares afterward, where the blood was always wet, and the car was dark, and I could hear my mother screaming. The blood had been dry by the time I saw it. She had died without me ever saying good-bye, and I had not heard her screams. She'd died almost instantly, and probably hadn't screamed at all.

I remembered the feel of the couch, rough and nobbly, and it smelled musty, because after Mommy went away nothing got cleaned. In that moment I knew it wasn't my memory. My father's German mother had moved in and kept everything spotless. But I was still small and hugging the side of that musty couch, in a room I'd never known, where the only light was the flicking of the television screen. There was a man, a huge dark shadow of a man, and he was beating a boy, beating him with the buckle end of a belt. He kept saying, "Scream for me, you little bastard. Scream for me."

Blood spurted from the boy's back, and I screamed. I screamed for him, because Nicholas would never scream. I screamed for him and the beating stopped.

I remembered the feel of Nicholas spooning the back of my body, stroking my hair. "If anything happens to me. Promise me, you'll run away."

"Nicholas..."

"Promise me, Nathaniel, promise me."

"I promise, Nicky."

Sleep, and the only safety I ever knew, because if Nicholas watched over me, the man couldn't hurt me. Nicholas wouldn't let him.

The images broke then, shattering like a mirror that had been hit; glimpses. The man looming up and up; the first blow, falling to the carpet, blood on the carpet, my blood.

Nicholas in the doorway with a baseball bat. The bat hitting the man. The man silhouetted against the light from that damned television, the bat in his hands. Blood spraying the screen. Nicholas screaming, "Run, Nathaniel, run!" Running. Running through the yards. A dog on a chain, barking, snarling. Running. Running. Falling down beside a stream, coughing blood. Darkness I remembered. And try as I might, chaos was all I could see. A man's throat exploding in a bright gush of blood; the feel of my blade hacking so deep that it numbed my arm; the force of running headlong into someone else's shield with my own; being forced back down narrow stone steps; and over all that was a fierce joy, an utter contentment; battle was what we lived for, everything else was just biding time. Familiar faces swam into view, blue eyes, green, blond and red-haired, all like me. The feel of a ship under me, and a gray sea, running white with the wind. A dark castle on a lonely shore. There had been fighting there, I knew that, but that was not the memory I got. What I saw was a narrow, stone stairway, that wound up and up into a dark tower. Torchlight flickered on those stairs, and there was a shadow. We ran from that shadow, because terror rode before it. The gate crashed down, trapped against it, we turned and made our stand. The crushing fear, until you could not breathe. Many dropped their weapons and simply went mad, at the touch of it.

The shadow stepped out into the starlight, and it was a woman. A woman with skin white as bone, lips red as blood, and hair like golden spiderwebs. Terrible she was, and beautiful, though it was a beauty that would make men weep, rather than smile.

But she smiled, that first curve of those red, red lips, that first glimpse of teeth that no mortal mouth would hold. Confusion, then the feel of small white hands like white steel, and her eyes, her eyes like gray flames, as if ashes could burn. The images jumped, and Damian was lying in a bed, with that terrible beauty riding him. His body was filling up, about to spill over and into her; riding the edge of pleasure, when she changed it, with a flex of her will, as a flex of her thighs could give pleasure; a thought and he was drowning in fear. A fear so great and so awful that it shriveled him, tore him back from pleasure, threw him close to madness. Then it would pull back like the ocean pulling away from the shore, and she would begin again. Over and over, over and over; pleasure, terror, pleasure and terror, until he begged her to kill him. When he begged she would let him finish, let him ride pleasure to its conclusion, but only if he begged.

A voice broke through the memories, shattered it. "Anita, Anita!"

I blinked and I was still kneeling between Nathaniel and Damian. It was Damian who had called my name. "No more," he said.

Nathaniel was crying, and shaking his head. "Please, Anita, no more."

"Why are you blaming me for the tour down bad memory lane?"

"Because you're the master," Damian said.

"So it's my fault we're reliving the worst events of our lives?" I searched his face, while I kept a tight grip on his hand. It wasn't erotic anymore, it was more like their hands were safety lines.

"You are the master," Damian repeated.

"Maybe it's over, whatever it was, maybe it's finished." He gave me a look that was so like one of Jean-Claude's that it was unnerving. "What's with the look?" I asked.

"I can still feel it," Nathaniel said, and his voice was hushed, thick with fear.

"If you would stop arguing, and start paying attention to what's happening, you'd feel it, too," Damian said, and he wasn't talking to Nathaniel.

I shut my mouth, it was the best I could do for not arguing, but even silence was enough. Into that brief silence I felt power like something large had pushed against a door in my head. A door that would not hold for long.

"How did you break us free of it this much?"

"I'm not a master, but I am over a thousand years old. I've learned some skills over the years, just to stay sane."

"Alright, Mr. Smartie-Vampire, what's happening to us?"

He squeezed my hand, and something in his eyes said plainly that he didn't want to say it out loud. I realized that I couldn't feel his emotions.

"You're shielding us all, aren't you?"

He nodded. "But it won't hold."

"What is it? What's happening to us? Why are we sharing memories?"

"It's a mark."

I frowned at him. "What?" Marks were metaphysical connections. I shared them with both Jean-Claude and Richard.

"I don't know what number, but it's a mark. It's not the first, maybe not even the second. Maybe the third? I've never had a human servant, or an animal to call. I've never been part of a triumvirate. You have, so you tell me."

"Us," Nathaniel said, in that breathy, scared voice.

I looked into those wide lavender eyes. He was waiting for me to make this better. The problem was, I didn't know how. I didn't know how it had begun, so how could I end it? I turned away from the utter trust in his face, because I couldn't think looking into his eyes. I tried to think back to the third mark. There had been a sharing of memories, but it had been benign. Glimpses of Jean-Claude feeding on perfumed wrists, sex with women wearing way too many undergarments; Richard running in wolf form in the forest, the rich world of scent that he had in that form. They had all been sensual, but safe memories. It had never occurred to me to ask either of them what memories they'd gotten from me. I probably

didn't want to know.

"Third mark, I think. Though with Jean-Claude in charge it was just flashes of memory; mostly sensual, nothing too serious. Why are we trapped in therapy hell?"

"What did you think of just before the memories began?" Damian asked.

"Death," I said, "I was thinking about death, I don't know why."

"Then think of something else, quickly." His voice held a hint of panic, and I could feel why. I could feel that door in my head beginning to bow outward as if it were melting. I knew when it went, that we better have a plan.

"I didn't try to mark anybody," I said.

"Do you know how to stop it?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"Then think of something else, something better."

"Think happy thoughts," Nathaniel said.

I gave him a look. "Who do I look like—Peter Pan?"

"What?" Damian asked.

"Yes, I mean no, but think," Nathaniel said. "Think happy thoughts. Think like you need to fly. I survived what happened after... after Nicholas died. But I do not want to live through it twice. Please, Anita, think happy thoughts."

"Why don't one of you think happy thoughts?" I asked.

"Because you're the master, not us," Damian said. "Your mind, your attitudes, your desires, are what will rule how this goes, not ours. But for God's sake, stop thinking about the worst things that ever happened to you, because I don't want to see the worst that I remember. Nathaniel's right, think happy thoughts."

"Happy thoughts," Nathaniel said, and he wrapped both his hands around one of mine. "Please, Anita, happy thoughts."

"I am fresh out of pixie dust," I said.

"Pixie dust?" Damian said, but he shook his head. "I don't know what you are talking about. Just think of something pleasant, happy, anything, anything at all."

I tried to think happy. I thought about my dog, Jenny, who had died when I was fourteen, and crawled out of the grave a week after she died. Crawled out of the grave and into bed with me. I remembered the weight of her, the smell of fresh turned earth, and ripe flesh.

"No!" Damian screamed. He jerked me to face him, his eyes wild. "No, I will not see what comes next in my story. I will not!" He grabbed my upper arms and turned me to face him, shaking me. Nathaniel

wrapped himself around my waist, huddling around my body. Damian said, "Don't you have any good memories?"

It was like one of those games where they tell you not to think of something or to think of something. I was supposed to think of good things, and for the life of me, everything ended badly. My mother had been wonderful, but she'd died. I'd loved my dog, but she'd died. I'd loved Richard, but he'd dumped me. I thought I'd loved someone once in college, but he'd dumped me. I thought about the feel of Micah's body, but I was waiting for him to dump me, too. Nathaniel hugged me tighter, his face buried against my back. "Please, Anita, please, happy thoughts, fly for me, Anita, please, God, fly for me."

I touched his arm, his hand, and thought of the vanilla scent of his hair. Thought of his face alive and listening as Micah read to us. I still thought Micah would go from Prince Charming to the Big Bad Wolf (no anthropomorphic bias intended), but Nathaniel would never dump me. There were moments when the thought of having Nathaniel with me forever panicked the hell out of me, but I forced that worry down. Pushed it away. I concentrated on the feel of him, and as if he felt my thoughts, he began to relax against me. He came to his knees behind me, his arms still around my waist, spooning our bodies together. He leaned his face over my shoulder, and I caught the sweet scent of his skin. I had my happy thought. I wouldn't fly because Nathaniel had asked me to, I would fly because of Nathaniel.

I laid a kiss against his cheek, and he wound himself around the back of my body, rubbing his cheek against the side of my face, my neck.

Damian still held my arms in his hands, but loosely now. He stared down at both of us. "I take it you found a happy thought?"

I breathed in that clean vanilla scent and *gazed* up at Damian. "Yes." My voice was already thick with the scent of skin and the sensation of Nathaniel's body against mine. I thought, it's like he's a living comfort object, like a teddy bear or a penguin, but even as I thought that, I knew it was only partial truth. My stuffed toy penguin, Sigmund, had never kissed my neck, and never would. It was one of Sigmund's charms. He didn't make many demands on me.

That door in my mind was melting, like a block of ice left in the sun. Panic fluttered in my chest, and I knew that panic would be a bad emotion to take behind that melting door. I pulled Damian down to us, and whispered, "Kiss me."

His lips touched mine, and the door vanished. But we didn't get memories this time, we got the ardeur. For the first time, I embraced it, called it pet names, and did the metaphysical equivalent of saying, Come and get me. Come and get us.

I'd never embraced the ardeur before. I'd been overwhelmed by it, conquered by it, given in to it, but never lowered my flag and surrendered to it, not without at least a fight. Jean-Claude had told me that if I could only stop fighting it wouldn't be so terrible. That once a little control was gained, you needed to "make friends" with the power. I'd given him a look, and he'd dropped the subject, but he was right, and he was wrong. For him I think it would have been a seduction, but it was me, and the fact that I could still think while it was happening was a problem more than a blessing.

I was okay with my tuxedo jacket going bye-bye. I was okay with Damian's green coat sliding to the floor, even if it did leave his upper body pale and naked, with the fine muscles gliding under skin the color of fresh, white sheets. Nathaniel was the problem, or rather my confusion about him. I ran my hands up the unbelievable warmth of his skin, but the look in his lavender eyes was too much. I did not love Nathaniel, not the way I needed to, but the look in his eyes left no doubt how he felt about me. This was

wrong. I could not take this from him, if he were in love with me, and I was not in love with him. I could not do it.

I pulled my hands away, shaking my head. Damian was molded against my back, but the moment I pulled away from Nathaniel, his eager hands slowed. "Shit," he whispered, and leaned his face against the top of my head.

Nathaniel's eyes went from shining with love, to something darker, older. He put his hands on either side of my face, cradling me. "Don't pull away," he said.

"I have to."

"If it's not sex, it will be blood, Anita, can't you feel it?" Damian asked.

I could feel something. It was as if this time it was I who put up the shields. But there was still something large and frightening on the other side. Something that I had put in process, but not on purpose, something that was hungry. It didn't care what it fed on, but it would, eventually, feed on something.

Damian's hands were still on my shoulders, but he'd leaned his body back enough so we no longer touched anywhere else. "Anita, please..."

I turned in Nathaniel's hands, so that I could glimpse Damian's face. "It's wrong, Damian."

"The sex, or who the sex is with?" he asked.

I took a breath to answer him, but Nathaniel's hands closed round my face. He turned me back to look at him, and I was suddenly almost painfully aware of the strength in his hands. A strength that could have crushed my face rather than cradled it. He was so submissive that he rarely reminded me of how very strong he was, how dangerous he could have been, if he'd been a different person.

I started to say, Let go of me, Nathaniel, but only got as far as, "Let go," before he kissed me. The feel of his lips on mine stopped my words, froze my mind. I couldn't think, couldn't think about anything but the velvet feel of his mouth on mine. Then something seemed to break inside of him, some barrier, and his tongue thrust into my mouth as deep and far as it could go. The sensation of him thrusting that much of himself that deeply into me tore my shields away, and since no one else was fighting, the ardeur roared back to life. It roared back to life on the edge of Nathaniel's lips, his hands, his need.

There was a confusion of ripping cloth, buttons snapping and raining down on us. Hands, hands everywhere, and the sound of clothing ripping. My body jerked with the force of my clothes being ripped away, and my hands were ripping at their clothes. It was as if every inch of my skin craved every inch of their skin. I needed to feel their nakedness glide over mine. My skin felt like a starved thing, as if I hadn't touched anyone in ages.

I knew whose skin hunger I was channeling. It wasn't just sex that Damian had missed. There are needs of the body that can be mistaken for sex, or lead to sex, but it isn't sex that they are about.

There was one leg left of my pants, pooled around my ankle. My vest flapped open, and the shirt was in shreds. It was Damian's hand from behind that grabbed a handful of my panties and pulled, ripping them off my body, leaving me nude from the waist down. I might have turned around to see how much clothing he still had on, but Nathaniel was in front of me. His shorts had been shredded. By me I think. He knelt on the floor in front of me, naked. I almost never let Nathaniel be nude around me. It had been one of the

reasons I'd been able to resist taking those last steps with him. Just keep your clothes on and nothing too bad will happen.

Now, he knelt in front of me, and all I could do was gaze up the line of his body. His face with those amazing eyes, that mouth, the line of his neck spilling into the wide, hard flesh of his shoulders, the chest that showed the weight lifting he'd been doing, the curve of his ribs under muscle leading my gaze to the flat plains of his stomach, the slight dimple of flesh that was his belly button, the rich swell of his hips, and finally the ripeness of him. I'd seen him totally nude and excited only once before. I didn't remember him being this wide, not quite this long, of course he hadn't been pressed this tight to his own stomach, as if the very ripeness of his flesh was almost too much to contain. He seemed thick and heavy with need, as if the lightest touch might make him spill that ripeness out and over me.

I started to reach for him, but Damian chose that moment to brush the head of his own ripeness against the back of my body. The movement made me writhe, and lower the front of my body, raising myself upward to him like an offering, like something in heat. The thought helped me swim back up into control, at least a little. I'd never even seen Damian nude, and now he was about to plunge that nudeness into my body. It seemed wrong. I should see him first, shouldn't I? There was no logic to the argument. No logic left to anything, but it made me turn my head, made me look at him.

The blood red of his hair spilled over his shoulders so that it framed the unbelievable whiteness of his body. He was narrower of shoulder, of chest, and his waist seemed to go on forever, smooth and creamy, like something you should lick down, until you found the center of his belly button, and just under that, the length of him. He rode out from his body, so it was harder to judge length. He seemed carved of ivory and pearl, and where the blood ran close to the surface he blushed pink like the shine inside a seashell, delicate and shining. I realized in that moment that he had been paler in life than any vampire I'd ever seen nude, and his body was almost ghostlike in its coloring, as if somehow he wouldn't be real.

Nathaniel's face brushed mine, brought my attention back to him. He had knelt down so low that his face, like mine, was almost touching the floor. He pressed his cheek against mine and whispered, "Please, please, please," over and over, and between each please, he kissed me, a light touch of lips; please, kiss, please, kiss. With his kisses and his voice warm against my face, he brought us both up to our knees again. I'd been so aware of his face, his mouth, his eyes, that I hadn't thought what kneeling this close would do until his nude body pressed against the front of mine. Until the thick, solid length of him pressed between us, pinned against my stomach by the push of our bodies. He was so warm, so unbelievably warm, so warm, almost hot, and the push of him against my body was so solid, as if he were fighting not to push himself through the front of me. To make a new opening, anything, anything, just to be in the warm depths of my body. It took me a second to understand it was Nathaniel's need I was feeling. That he did want that badly, but it was my wanting, too. My wanting and denying that want, that helped make this moment what it was. Over all that was Damian at my back, his body one huge piece of need. Nathaniel and I were being drowned in Damian's skin-hunger. So lonely, so terribly lonely. And under that was Damian's fear. Fear that this would not happen, that he would be exiled back to his coffin, with all this undone. His loneliness was like a theme underneath his lust, and I had a glimpse of a room high in the castle. A room that overlooked the sea. Silver bars upon the windows, heavy with runes, and the sound of the surf always through the windows, so that even if he turned away, he could still hear it. She'd given him one of the best rooms in the castle as his prison, because she had a way of knowing what things meant to you. A way of knowing what would hurt the most. It was her gift.

Someone kissed me, hard and fast, forcing my mouth open, pushing his tongue so far in I almost choked, but it brought me back, brought us all back from that lonely room and the sound of the sea on the rocks below.

Nathaniel drew back enough to say in a harsh whisper, "Happy thoughts, Anita, happy thoughts." Then his mouth was on mine, tongue, lips, even teeth light against my own lips, so that it was more eating than kissing, but it brought a whimper from my throat, a small helpless sound of pleasure.

My hands were on his body, following the flow of his shoulders, his back, and the smooth silken curve of his ass. The back of his body filled my hands, and the front of him was like heat wrapped in flesh, as if we'd burst into flame.

Damian's hands were on the back of my bra; somehow it had survived that first rush. He snapped it open, and the front of it fell against Nathaniel's chest. Hands spilled over my breasts; one from behind, and one from the man pressed against the front of my body. Damian's touch was delicate, stroking. Nathaniel wrapped his hand around my breast and dug his nails into my flesh. It was Nathaniel's hand that bowed my back, tore my mouth away from his, and forced a scream from my mouth.

Damian hesitated, pulled back from that scream, though he had to feel that it was pleasure and not pain. He didn't like to hear women scream. And just like that we were back in his memory. There was a room underneath the castle, torches, darkness, and women, any woman that she thought was prettier than she. No one was allowed hair more yellow than hers, eyes more blue, or breasts larger. These were all sins, and sins were punished. A rush of images; piles of yellow hair, wide blue eyes like cornflowers, and the spear that put them out, a chest as pale and fair as any he'd seen, and the sword...

Nathaniel screamed, "Nooooo!" He reached past me, and grabbed a handful of red hair. He jerked Damian so hard against me, that just feeling the hard length of him made me writhe between them. "Happy thoughts, Damian, happy thoughts."

"I don't have any happy thoughts," and on the heels of that statement were other dark rooms, and the smell of burning flesh.

I was the one who screamed this time, "God, Damian, no more. Keep your nightmares to yourself." The memory that had gone with that smell had dampened the ardeur. I could think again, even pressed between both their bodies.

"Tell him to fuck you," Nathaniel said.

I stared at him. "What?"

"Order him to do it; then he won't be conflicted."

It seemed almost ridiculous to be huffy, kneeling pretty much nude between two nude men, but it was still how I felt. "Maybe I'm conflicted."

"Almost always," he said, and smiled to soften the words.

Damian's voice came, low and heavy with something like sorrow. "She doesn't want to do this. She wants me to help her stop the ardeur, not to feed it. That's what she really wants, I can feel it, and that's what I have to do."

"Anita, please, tell him."

But Damian was right. He was the only port in a storm of sexual temptation. I valued his ability to make me not feel the ardeur. I valued that more than anything his body could do for me. And because I truly

was his master, and that was my true wish, he had to help me do it. The coolness of the grave rose between us, and it wasn't frightening this time. It was soothing, comforting.

"Anita, no," Nathaniel said, "no." He put his face against my shoulder. The movement put his body further away from mine, and that helped me think, too.

I turned to look at Damian, though I didn't need to see his face to feel the overwhelming sadness. The sense of aching loss that seemed to fill him, like some bitter medicine. But the look on his face drove the sorrow home like a blade thrust through my heart. It hurt to see anyone's eyes full of such pain.

I turned to face him still held lightly in both their arms. Nathaniel put the top of his head against my naked back, shaking his head. "Anita, can't you feel how sad he is? Can't you feel it?"

I looked into Damian's cat-green eyes and said, "Yes."

He turned his face away, as if he'd shown me more than he was comfortable with. I touched his chin and brought his face back to me. "You don't want me," and there was a world of loss in those words. A loss that tightened my throat, made my chest hurt. I wanted to deny it, but he could feel what I was feeling. He was right, I didn't want him, not the way I wanted Nathaniel, let alone the way I wanted Jean-Claude or Micah. What do you say when someone can read your emotions, so that you can't hide behind polite lies? What do you say when the truth is awful, and you can't lie?

Nothing. No words would heal this. But I'd learned there were other ways to say you're sorry. Other ways to say, I'd change it, if I could. Of course, even that was a lie. I wouldn't lose the cool reserve that Damian could give me, not for anything.

I kissed him, and meant for it to be light, gentle, an apology that words could not make, but Damian thought he'd never get this close to me again. I felt a fierceness rise up through him, a desperation, that made him tighten his grip on my arms, made him thrust his tongue into my mouth, and kiss me hard and eager, and angry.

I tasted blood, and assumed he'd nicked me with his fangs. I swallowed the sweetish taste of the blood without thinking. Then I could smell the ocean, smell it like salt on my tongue. We drew back enough to look into each other's faces, and I saw the trickle of blood trailing over his lower lip. Nathaniel had time to say, "I smell seawater." Then the power flooded up and up, and smashed us against each other. It ground us against the floor like a wave cracking a boat against the rocks. We screamed, and writhed, and I could not control it. If I'd been a true master, then I could have ridden it, helped us all, but I'd never meant to mark anyone. Never meant to be anyone's master. We were being swept away and I didn't know what to do. The inside of my head exploded in white star bursts and gray miasma. Darkness ate at the inside of my head. If I'd been sure we'd wake up again, I'd have welcomed passing out, but I wasn't sure. I didn't know. But it didn't matter; darkness filled up the inside of my head, and we all fell into it. No more screaming, no more pain, no more panic, no more anything. My last clear thought was the realization that I'd accidentally drunk the blood of a vampire I was tied to by three marks. His blood had been the fourth mark. The one step Jean-Claude, Richard, and I had denied ourselves—now I'd done it by accident, God help us all.