

FORBIDDEN: THE CLAIM

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SAMANTHA SOMMERSBY

Chapter 1

It started out as a perfect day, the kind of day that it was worth staying up to enjoy. The sky was completely clouded over and the rain was pouring down in torrents. It was barely 8:00 a.m. when I dragged my favorite black leather chair over to the large picture window so I could enjoy my merlot and watch the storm. Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking *he drinks at eight o'clock in the morning?* The answer is yes. I drink what I want, when I want. I eat what I want, when I want. And, except for a short list of prohibited items, I do what I want, when I want. You see... I am immortal... I am a vampire.

~

It was early evening. Lightning split the darkened sky, illuminating the rocky coastline of the island. My island. I leaned my head back, released a sigh, draped my hand over the armrest of the chair, and let the last of Violet's letters flutter to the floor to join the others. I'd discovered them among Grace's belongings shortly after her death, and I'd spent the last few weeks reading them.

Each passage seemed to reveal something else to me, some nuance, some detail. I felt like a bit of a voyeur. It was as if I were staring into the window of her very soul. She'd laid it all bare. Not for me, of course, but it was there nonetheless. Her hopes and dreams, her fears and doubts, her longings. In her delicate hand she'd written to Grace more than a hundred letters over the years. During the course of their correspondence, Grace had clearly become her friend and confidant.

I stood up and stretched, then made my way over to my new iMAC G5. I was determined to give writing to Violet just one more try before turning in and getting a few hours of sleep. The high pitched hum sounded, the monitor came to life, and I pulled up a new document. In the past month I'd tried to write to her more than a dozen times to tell her of Grace's death. Tried and failed. I just...couldn't seem to find the right words.

Violet

Dear Violet

My dearest Violet

It was no use. I didn't even know how to begin. I picked up the snapshot of her that Grace had kept in her wallet, a young girl in cap and gown, sunlight bouncing off her fiery red hair. Her bright green eyes full of mirth. She had jumped up into the air, diploma in hand, and someone had captured the moment. My throat tightened and my chest constricted. I reminded myself for the thousandth time that I was grieving and that the sadness was natural.

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But this was more than sadness, more than grief for the loss of Fred and Grace. This was discontentment. And I shouldn't be feeling it. I have everything I've ever wanted, after all. So why am I sitting here torn apart by this sense of hunger, yearning for what I can't have and shouldn't want?

It was clearly her fault, Violet's. Her letters had touched me. And her face... Her face had managed to etch itself deep within my subconscious, weaving itself into my dreams. Unwittingly, unknowingly, she had awakened something in me, making me realize a depth of loneliness and an emptiness that I hadn't wanted to admit to. Until recently my resolve had been steadfast, my path certain. I had been content with my life up until now. It was a noble life, one of service and honor, one my father would have been proud of. Now? Now I felt riddled with self-doubt.

I'd always been somewhat of a loner, but since my elevation to *Dominie*, I hadn't left the island and I received few guests. I didn't want the distraction, the temptation. I didn't want to take the risk of repeating the sins of my father.

I hadn't been completely alone during my self-imposed confinement. There had been visits from Fred and Grace, there had been the occasional visit from other *Dominie*, and then there were my weeks with Rita.

Rita was my consort, presented to me by one of the elders. When I first met her she was fresh and sweet and satisfying...to a degree. She'd never really been my lover, although we fucked with some regularity, at least early on. Over the past fifty years, Rita had become more and more of a friend, perhaps the only one I'd ever had. I knew that she wanted more, but I couldn't offer it and she understood that. Not to her. Not to anyone.

I pulled up instant messaging so that I could check to see if Rita was on-line. She wasn't. I felt desperate to talk to someone. I never felt desperate. It had turned out to be a banner day for Byron Renfield—desperation and discontentment.

I walked to the window that overlooked the coastline and peered outside. The sky was a dark grey and the temperature was dropping. I expected the rain would be turning to snow soon. "Now is the winter of my discontent," I murmured, staring down into my now empty wine glass.

A knock at the door roused me from my self-pitying stupor. I wasn't expecting anyone and no one came uninvited. That's one of the advantages of living on an island. My heart skipped a beat and the palms of my hands began to sweat. Yes, my heart beats and my hands sweat. I'm immortal, I'm not dead.

The knock came again.

"Mr. Renfield?"

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I picked up my discarded black cashmere sweater, pulled it on over my head, and hastily combed my fingers through my hair. It was time for a trim, I thought, before running my hand over my chin to check for stubble. I needed a shave, too.

I padded barefoot over towards the front door, trying to remain calm even though my heart rate was increasing with each step. After confirming that the door was locked, I laid my hand on the surface of it and closed my eyes. On the other side I detected a human, a woman. And her pull seemed unusually strong. I shivered. I could already feel her effects. All human women were dangerous, but this one...

"Mr. Renfield?"

"Yes?"

What on earth possessed me to answer? I should have just stood there. She probably would have gone away...eventually.

"It's Violet. Violet Deeds," she shouted out over the din of the storm. "Could you let me in, Mr. Renfield? It's awfully cold and wet out here. Grace invited me up for the weekend. She said you wouldn't mind one more. It was so nice of you to—"

Before I was able to talk myself out of it, I opened the door. I told myself that it was just idle curiosity. That I just wanted to get a glimpse of her, maybe chat a bit, nothing more.

"Come in," I said, stepping back.

She rushed in and quickly closed the door. Then she turned and smiled up at me. My breath caught in my throat. She was simply dazzling. Despite the cold, warmth radiated from her body. Her scent surrounded me, enveloping me in an aroma so intoxicatingly delicious that it was almost dizzying. It had been so long since I'd been in the presence of a woman, a human woman that is; I had forgotten how enticing they could be.

I swallowed; perhaps opening the door had been a mistake. "Grace invited you, here?" I asked as she collapsed her umbrella and leaned it against the corner.

"Yes!" she replied nodding enthusiastically and extending her hand. "I received her letter about six weeks ago. Grace said that she and Fred were going to be with you for a while and she invited me up. I wrote back to confirm. I would have called you personally as well, but..."

Her hand was small and delicate and it was waiting for me to grasp it. I reached out, slowly, and encircled it in mine. The tips of my fingers began to tingle. A hum spread throughout my body. Her skin was soft, but her handshake was firm and confident. My toes curled, digging into the lush oriental carpet of the entryway in an attempt to anchor me.

"I don't have a phone," I finished, looking into her eyes.

"Right," she said, softly.

Seconds passed. Violet looked down and I realized that her hand was still in mine. I cleared my throat, loosened my grip, and watched as her hand slid from mine. The loss was registered deep in my belly.

"Sorry. You must be freezing. I have a fire in the living room. Can I take your coat, Miss Deeds?" I asked. Then I watched, like a starving man, as she unfastened the buttons and peeled the leather off of one shoulder, then the other. I was absolutely riveted. The supple looking black cowhide slid down the length of her long slender arms gradually revealing them to me. I noticed immediately how translucent her skin was. The pale blue cast to her flesh reminded me of the blue moon that followed the eruption of Krakatau back in 1883. I remembered how surreal that night had seemed, too. I had stood in the streets of Singapore, ash raining down upon me. That moon had been a spectacular sight...but not as spectacular as the vision before me.

Violet's rain-soaked hair hung in loose rivulets, framing her delicate features. Drops of water ran down her face and neck, glistening like jewels, making her flesh shimmer and making my mouth water. I imagined reaching out, touching her, gliding my hand over her exquisitely sculpted collarbone—better yet—my tongue. I imagined gliding my tongue over her collarbone, dipping it into the hollow of her throat before continuing the pleasurable journey downward, down to her warm, firm, perfectly round—

My eyes lifted to meet hers; they were green and clearly conveyed her annoyance.

"Sorry. Did you say something? I seem to be a bit distracted today."

"You were staring."

"You have lovely eyes, quite like your Aunt Grace's."

"You were staring at my breasts."

Well, what the hell was I supposed to say to that? The last time a human woman caught me staring must have been a century ago, and that young lady had been far more gracious – ignoring my brief indiscretion. Women today prefer the direct approach, right? That's what Rita always says. So, I went for direct. I swallowed down the lump in my throat and looked her in the eye.

"They're lovely, too."

Violet laughed and shook a scolding finger at me.

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I shrugged, giving her my best sheepish smile. I must have been forgiven, because she walked past me and into the living room. I rubbed the back of my neck and followed at a distance that allowed me to enjoy the view without looking obvious.

Violet Deeds may have been small boned, but she walked with determination. She was poised, self-assured, and she had a spectacular ass. She was wearing a plain black t-shirt, well-worn, form-fitting blue jeans, and what appeared to be a pair of very expensive black leather boots. I watched as she stopped in front of the fire, then shook out her damp mass of curly red hair, sending droplets everywhere.

“I’m hoping that Grace has some clothes I can borrow, it seems that the airlines sent my luggage to Bora Bora. Bora Bora. Bella Bella. I guess it’s an understandable mistake.”

“I’m afraid my manners are rusty. Can I get you a towel?”

“Nah,” she said, waving her hand dismissively. “And, please, call me Violet. May I call you Ren?”

It had been a month since I’d heard that name, since I’d even thought of it. “My sister called me Ren.”

“As did Aunt Grace,” she said as she extracted an envelope from the back pocket of her jeans. “So, where is she?”

“Grace wrote to you about me?” I asked, approaching her, curious about what Grace might have said.

“Yes, she’s mentioned you from time to time. You’re younger than I imagined. So, you and Fred are related?”

I felt the void again. Whenever I thought of Fred I felt it: the sadness, the loneliness, the anger.

“Oh, Fred! Don’t leave me!” I cried as I held her frail and withered hand in mine.

“It’s the way of things, Ren. We mate. We die. I wouldn’t have given up the time I’ve shared with Grace for anything, not anything. Where she goes, I go. It won’t be long now, Ren.”

“Don’t talk like that. You know how time moves. It could be a year, maybe a decade—”

“No. Not for me. I must go. She’s waiting for me.”

“Fred!”

“Shh, I need you to promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“When they talk of me I want you to tell them that with my last breath I said I had no regrets, welcomed death, and expressed my unwavering devotion to the woman I loved. Promise me, Ren. I won’t have people scaring their children with tales of my mistake. My life wasn’t a mistake.”

“But you’re dying, Winifred!”

She reached out and wiped the tears from my face. “I’m just off to join Grace,” she said.

Then she closed her eyes and turned to dust before me.

“Are you feeling all right? You’re looking a bit pale.”

My eyes snapped open and connected with hers. Violet was standing right in front of me, gazing intently, searching. Her scent swirled around me and God help me I let my lungs fill with it. I could smell the rain in her hair, the soap in her clothes, and the lavender and vanilla that she had used to wash her body. And then, beneath it all, there was that unmistakable base note. The scent that was uniquely her—Violet.

“I’m fine,” I managed to choke out.

“The flu’s been going around. I had a touch of it myself a couple weeks ago,” she said as she reached up and placed the palm of one hand over my forehead. I felt the fingers of her other hand wrap halfway around my wrist, settling over my pulse point. I stood there, resisting the urge to abruptly pull away.

“Your pulse is quite rapid and you’re diaphoretic.”

“Really, I’m all right,” I replied. “It’s just...I wasn’t expecting you. And, I’m afraid I’m not very good with words, Violet. So, I’m just going to come out with it.”

She stepped back. Worry clouded her face and I loathed being the one to place it there, to have to cause this pain.

“Something’s happened to Grace?” she asked.

I nodded, “Grace passed away. It happened about a month ago.”

“No!” she gasped, her hand flying up to cover her mouth as she sat down heavily on the sofa.

“I’m sorry.”

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“How is Uncle Fred?” she asked, her eyes brimming with tears.

For this I was going to have to sit down. “Fred isn’t your uncle,” I told her, reaching for the box of tissues that sat on the coffee table and offering her one. She didn’t seem to notice.

“I guess I just always assumed that they were married.”

“Actually, Fred was a woman and...she’s dead. She...she passed away an hour after Grace.”

“What?”

“Fred was a woman and she’s dead—”

“I heard you. I—I guess that I’m stunned. Are you sure?”

Was she kidding? Of course I was sure. I pulled a tissue from the box and gently wiped the tears from her face.

“All these years... I just assumed that Fred and Grace were...married.”

“Not legally, of course. But in every other way, Violet, they were. Winifred was a Renfield, you see. She grew up on this island, in this house. Grace had been ill for some time. They knew the end was near. They...came home to die.”

“Why didn’t Grace say anything? I would have come sooner...I...”

“I’m sorry,” I told her, feeling her pain deep in the pit of my stomach. “I miss them, too. Death was inevitable; I knew that. But the knowledge that it would someday happen hasn’t made it easier.”

“What was it? Cancer? Her heart?”

“Her heart gave out. It was just her time. And Fred...well...she couldn’t go on without Grace. Nor did she want to.”

“Oh, Ren!” she sobbed. Violet leaned towards me, wrapping her arms around my neck as she began to cry on my shoulder.

Never before had I held a human woman in my arms. It wasn’t what I’d imagined. It didn’t feel wicked or immoral. It felt...nice. It felt...right. It was almost as if I were connected to her, somehow. Connected in mutual grief, I suppose. I ran my hand up and down the length of her spine, soothing her, giving comfort and taking solace.

"I...I'm glad you came," I murmured into her damp curls. And I was. I reminded myself that in my younger days I'd lived among humans on and off, and I was weaker then. Certainly I could maintain control for a few days.

Violet lifted her head and looked at me, her eyes glistening. "I've gotten your shirt wet."

"I have others. Blow," I told her, handing her a tissue. She did.

"I don't usually cry in front of strangers," she said, obviously a bit embarrassed.

"But then, we aren't really strangers," I murmured.

"Grace spoke of me often?"

"She loved you very much. And she was terribly proud of you. The day you graduated from college, well... Here, look at this..." I said standing up and walking over to the desk to retrieve the photograph that I had been examining earlier. "Grace kept this in her wallet. She loved this photo."

Violet accepted the photograph and smiled down at it. "I remember that day. My mother was there. She was already quite ill at the time. The chemo wasn't helping. She died a month later. Grace called me then, it was the first time I'd ever heard her voice. We'd been writing back and forth for years. Talking of the weather, current events, telling her about my classes and friends. But something changed then. We talked all through the night. We...we became friends...good friends."

Violet's eyes flooded with tears. She tilted her head back and looked up at the ceiling for a moment before she seemed to collect herself. "Ren, the gentleman who brought me, the one with the boat. He's not coming back until Sunday afternoon. Is there any way to reach him?"

"Do you have a cell phone?"

"I...this was supposed to be vacation. Grace said to leave the cell phone and pager behind...just enjoy myself and so..."

"Don't worry about it," I assured her, taking her hand in mind and lightly stroking the top of it with my thumb. "We'll figure something out."

The barest hint of the scent of arousal began to permeate the air. Without meaning to, I was starting to affect her. Or maybe I did mean to, which was even worse. It was largely beyond our control and predictably inevitable. For thousands of years, women have seduced us, causing us to falter, to give in to temptation, to take just one little taste.

"You have any ideas?" she asked, sweeping her hair over one shoulder and leaving her neck exposed.

Oh, I was getting lots of ideas. I needed to get some distance.

“No.”

“Me neither. I’m sorry, I’m afraid that I’m not thinking very clearly.”

“You’re upset.”

Violet turned away and nodded. I could tell that she was crying again. “Can I get you anything?” I asked.

“I think I just need a few minutes alone.”

Suddenly I’d gone from wanting to get away from her to not wanting to leave her side. It was ridiculous, I know.

“I have to check on dinner. Don’t worry. There’s plenty. Can I offer you something to drink?”

“A glass of wine?”

Now I knew that wine was a mistake. It lowers inhibitions, even for immortals.

“Grace was fond of wine. She was always writing to me about her latest find. Let’s toast to Grace and Fred, shall we?” she asked.

How could I refuse?

“I’ll be back with a bottle,” I told her as I stood up and walked into the dining room. I didn’t look back over at her, not until I was safely ensconced in the darkness. The dining room was between the kitchen and living room. It had no external windows and was pitch black. I hung back inside the threshold and waited until I felt my heart rate begin to return to normal. Only then did I turn around.

The living room was without a doubt my favorite room in the house. It’s where I spent most of my time. The polished wood floors, mahogany paneling, and long shelves of books were as familiar to me as the back of my hand. But they looked different now. The entire room looked different now, simply because *she* was in it.

Violet leaned down to unzip her leather boots then pulled them off, first one, then the other. Underneath she wore black fishnet stockings. I could see her brightly colored polished toenails peeking out from the weave of threads. She stood up and stretched, lifting her arms high over her head, her t-shirt rising up, bearing a bit of her stomach. Her flesh teased me, and for the briefest of moments I imagined myself kneeling before her, lifting up the edge of her shirt, brushing my lips across her soft skin, tasting her.

I felt myself harden as the fantasy took hold. I looked down. Great. Now I'd done it. I was fully aroused, and in my lightweight black woolen trousers, it was completely obvious.

"Ren?"

I stepped back reflexively, turned and fled to the kitchen, adjusting myself along the way as I tried to fill my mind with images that I hoped would suppress my desire and get rid of my raging erection. I reminded myself that although she was beautiful now, she wouldn't stay that way forever. I told myself that this was merely chemistry. I reminded myself of who I was, what I was. I wasn't some mere fledgling. I was Dominie. I would get through this. Then I would put her out of my mind and go on.

I rounded the center island just as she came through the swinging door.

"Ren?"

"Yes?" I answered as I uncovered the slowly simmering pot on top of the stove.

She peered into it from across the wide counter. "Wow. That smells fantastic. You cook? Can I move in?"

Violet closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. The smell of the savory sauce seemed to delight her.

"A bit," I said, giving the concoction a stir.

The truth is that good food and good wine has been one of the great pleasures of my existence. I like to savor my meals. For me, preparing them can be an almost sensual experience. I gazed into the pot and realized that one of the downfalls of living an isolated life is that I missed selecting the ingredients. I missed carefully choosing what was to become my dinner with my own hands.

"Wine?"

I nodded towards the counter. There were two bottles remaining from the recent batch I'd brought up from the cellar.

"The cork-pull is in the drawer there, glasses in that cabinet."

As I watched Violet reach up and pull down two glasses, I realized that I still enjoyed the art of cooking. Tonight for example, I had relished putting the ingredients together, letting things simmer for a bit, and anticipating the final outcome, how delicious it was going to be.

“I was wondering if you might have something dry I could borrow? Wet jeans,” she said, glancing down at the wet legs of her pants, “are so...not comfortable.”

I watched as she expertly worked in the cork-pull, then placed the bottle between her thighs and...pop. I was doomed. There was no way that I was going to lose my erection now.

“A shirt would do, or a robe?”

Of course I had shirts, but which one to give her? Anything I let her wear would have to be burnt; it would be covered in her scent. On the other hand, this would afford me the opportunity to get rid of her for a bit.

“Up the stairs, first room on your right. Pick whatever suits you,” I said as I positioned the cover back on the pot.

“Thanks!” she replied, handing me a glass of wine and smiling brilliantly at me. Christ, she had a beautiful smile.

“Take your time,” I told her. “Dinner won’t be for another hour. Feel free to freshen up if you’d like.”

Chapter 2

So, how bad could it be? Bad. So bad, that I was now in the downstairs bathroom sitting on the toilet with my dick in my hand. I couldn’t remember the last time that I’d reacted like this.

I closed my eyes and listened to the sound of the shower in the room above me. I rubbed the palm of my hand over the engorged head of my cock and then stroked firmly, with increasing intensity, up and down the length of the shaft. I envisioned her standing under the hot spray, the water cascading down her body as she rinsed the soap from her breasts. I imagined the trail of hot white suds sliding down over her taut stomach and disappearing between her silken thighs.

I shot off like a rocket. It was...horribly unsatisfying.

I heard the pipes squeal in protest as she turned off the water. That’s when I smelled it. Blood. I quickly used the towel to clean myself up, then tossed it into the clothes hamper and straightened my clothes.

I moved with purpose. Like a moth drawn to a flame, I made my way down the hall, walked up the stairs, then knocked softly on the door to my room. There was no response, so I turned the knob and eased inside. The door to my bathroom stood ajar.

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Violet was standing in front of the vanity, a towel held loosely around her. It dipped low in the back and she was holding it closed in front of her breasts. She was leaning forward, staring at something in the mirror, too intent on whatever it was to notice me. Her hair was freshly washed, it smelled of my shampoo and it hung tangled and wet down her back. I walked closer, my eyes sweeping the length of her body, drinking her in while searching for the source of her bleeding. Then I saw it, a thin trail of ruby red blood running down the back of her left calf. She had obviously taken the time to shave.

I knocked on the door. "You cut yourself."

She turned around, startled by my voice.

"What?"

I leaned against the doorjamb to the bathroom, striving for a casual pose when in reality I was filled with tension. "You're cut, on the back of your leg. There's blood."

She twisted around and looked down. "I guess I didn't notice. It'll stop soon enough." She pulled a tissue out of the box that was sitting by the bathroom sink and began to wipe up the trail.

"You should put pressure on it," I told her, taking the tissue from her. I bent down and placed it over the small cut, applying steady pressure.

"It's just a tiny nick," she said, blushing crimson.

Perhaps I had acted too boldly, or impulsively, perhaps my touch was too familiar. I half expected Violet to pull away, but she didn't, and within a few seconds I felt the muscles in her leg relax beneath my hand.

I looked up at her and said nothing. I was too busy being thankful that I had just jacked off and apparently was enjoying a slight refractory period. I lifted the edge of the tissue and confirmed that the blood flow had stopped. Then I stood back up, dropped the soiled tissue into the commode, and flushed. I focused on scrubbing my hands clean and ignored the impulse to rip her towel off and ravage her on the bathroom floor.

I glanced up and saw that she was staring at me in the mirror. My eyes connected with hers and suddenly my senses were awash in the scent of her arousal. I simply *had* to get out of there.

"Dinner will be ready shortly," I said, tossing the towel I was using to dry my hands onto the counter before hastily heading for the door.

"Are you gay?"

"What? No," I said, turning back to face her.

“It’s all right if you are. You can tell me.”

“And I would. But I’m not. Why? Do I seem...?”

“I just wasn’t sure. So, I thought I’d just come out and ask. I hope I didn’t embarrass you. It’s just...I’m getting some conflicting signals.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. Her aroma was mouth-watering, my pride unreasonably wounded, and my cock was beginning to spring to life again in hopes of having a chance to reclaim my manhood.

“I’m just trying to behave myself, Violet. And, it’s not easy. I find you very attractive.” I told her stepping closer and lowering my voice.

“You find me attractive?” she asked, looking up at me. She wet her lips in invitation.

“No. I find you *very* attractive. But Grace wouldn’t like me taking advantage of you. You’re too special. You deserve something meaningful, something lasting.”

“Sometimes casual and fleeting can be good, too,” she murmured, her lips almost touching mine.

“Oh, Violet...”

I was standing a hairsbreadth away from her now, her back against the tile wall. Her cheeks were flushed with excitement, her eyes dilated, she was practically panting from desire. With each word I spoke, her scent became stronger, more powerful, harder to resist.

“Ren—”

“God, Violet! I want nothing more than to make love to you right now.”

She was staring deeply into my eyes; her heart was pounding. I could hear the roar of her blood rushing in my ears and it called to me.

“Y-you do?” she asked, brushing her lips across mine ever so lightly.

She had barely touched my mouth, yet I was melting. Liquid heat spread throughout my entire being, the anticipation of how it would feel to kiss her, really kiss her, setting every nerve aflame.

“To worship you,” I admitted, reaching out to caress the side of her face. “To take you to the heights of passion, to push you to your limit and beyond. I could succumb to your charms so easily, Violet.”

She shivered slightly. Her tongue darted out and swept across my lower lip, begging entrance.

“But I can’t,” I finished stepping away, breaking the connection, creating distance. “It would be wrong of me.”

“Wrong?” she repeated, slightly bewildered.

I continued to step back, nodding slowly. “I’m sorry, Violet,” I told her. And I meant it, too. Then I walked out of the bathroom, out of my bedroom, down the stairs, and out the front door. If I wasn’t fearful of the ocean, I might have tried to swim for it. But the shipwreck that left me stuck for months in the Atlantic back in 1806 soured me on the water.

I sighed. The sun had just set, the temperature had dropped, and the rain had turned to snow. I tilted my head back, closed my eyes, and let the large fluffy flakes fall upon my face. The cold didn’t bother me. I knew that I could tolerate it. I could tolerate going without food for a few days too, for that matter. For several long minutes, I seriously considered the option of fleeing to the caves down by the shore.

“Ren? What on earth are you doing out here? It’s freezing and...”

My shoulders slumped in defeat. She’d probably track me down there, too. I realized then that I should have gone with the gay thing.

“It’s snowing!” she exclaimed, placing one bare foot hesitantly on the top step. She looked up at the sky and held her hands out, trying to catch the snowflakes as they gently drifted down upon us, the long white sleeves of my starched shirt making her look like an angel.

“Be careful. The stone steps get awfully slip-”

The words were barely out of my mouth when her foot slid out from under her. Although I rarely have the need to, I can move very quickly, and within a blink of an eye I had her in my arms.

“Are you all right?” I asked her.

“My ankle, I think I twisted it.”

I carried her back inside, kicked the door closed and stood there for a moment, contemplating my next step. I figured that my escaping to the caves was now completely out of the question. Humans need food and water. And with a bum ankle she wasn’t going to be able to fend for herself until Pete could come and take her away. On the other hand, she wasn’t going to be traipsing around and sneaking up on me with her

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flaming hair, sensual mouth and those deep green eyes that I was once again getting lost in. I could have contact with her on my terms...in small, tolerable doses.

"This time you're definitely staring at my eyes," she murmured softly.

"A man could get lost in those eyes," I whispered more to myself than to her, feeling suddenly self-conscious and uncertain.

Violet smiled at me and began to play with the hairs at the base of my skull. "I can't quite figure you out, Byron Renfield."

"That makes two of us," I admitted as I started to climb the stairs.

Violet leaned in even closer to me, her lips brushing up against the shell of my ear. I could feel the warmth of her breath on the side of my neck and I could feel the soft outline of her breast pressing against my chest.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Bed. You rest. I cook. We eat."

In the space of an hour this woman had come into my home and reduced me to speaking like some ridiculous parody of a cave man. This was getting to be humiliating. I walked into the guestroom, deposited her on top of the antique sleigh bed, and turned to leave, secure in the fact that she couldn't follow me and that I just needed a few minutes alone to regain my composure.

"Why would it be wrong?"

That stopped me. Not the question itself so much. It was more the tone of it. Insecure. She shouldn't doubt herself. She was perfection.

"Ren, why would it be wrong? You, um, you made it sound pretty enticing."

I couldn't turn around. I couldn't look at her. "It's not you. It's me."

"Which really means it's me," she said.

"You make me think things, imagine things, that I can't have and shouldn't want. We're from two different worlds, you and I," I told her, feeling weighed down by guilt.

"I'm from earth, Ren. Where are you from?"

"I was speaking metaphorically."

"Ren, there's obviously an attraction between us, a connection—"

My heart was racing, pounding in my chest. I was holding on to the doorjamb, hovering on the threshold, trying to take just one...more...step. And I couldn't. Correction. I didn't want to.

"Damn it!" I growled. "Why did you have to come here? This isn't a good time for me, what with Grace and Fred. I don't need this now, this distraction, this temptation. Do you have any idea how hard this is to resist?"

She rolled onto her side and my shirt rode up, slightly exposing her thigh. I could smell her arousal again.

"You seem to be doing a regrettably good job."

"It's been a long time since I've been with a woman, and..."

"And?"

"Violet, I've never been with a woman like you. But since you walked into this house, I've thought of little else."

"A woman like me, two different worlds. What are you saying, exactly? Look, I may not live on my own island but—"

"This has nothing to do with money."

"Are you sure?"

"Completely," I said. "I can't get close to you, Violet."

I turned to walk out adding, "I can't get close with anyone," before closing the door behind me.

~

7:04:59 PM brenfield: Thank God you're there. Can you come over? I need to have sex. Bad.

7:05:17 PM iamrita: Smooth Byron, really smooth.

7:05:41 PM brenfield: Is that a "no"?

7:06:15 PM iamrita: I haven't seen or heard from you in six months. Masturbate.

7:06:50 PM brenfield: I tried. It's not working. I'm not above begging at the moment.

7:07:14 PM iamrita: I can't. I'm with someone. You said it would be all right. I get lonely, Byron.

7:07:23 PM brenfield: By someone do you mean a...person?

7:07:45 PM iamrita: What? No! Wait a minute...

7:07:58 PM brenfield: Gotta go.

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7:08:36 PM iamrita: Have you fucked her?
7:08:42 PM brenfield: Who?
7:08:59 PM iamrita: The human. The one that has you all worked up.
7:09:07 PM brenfield: No
7:09:16 PM iamrita: But you want to?
7:09:18 PM brenfield: No
7:09:21 PM iamrita: Whew! You scared me for a minute.
7:09:33 PM brenfield: I want to make love to her.
7:09:38 PM iamrita: No!!!
7:09:48 PM brenfield: I know! It's horrible. What the hell am I supposed to do? She's here in the house.
7:10:03 PM iamrita: You could kill her. She's going to die eventually anyways so not a big loss, really.
7:10:25 PM iamrita: Byron? You there?
7:10:41 PM brenfield: I'm trying to think. I'm having a major crisis here. Could you maybe try to be helpful?
7:11:04 PM iamrita: Sorry. I'm thinking. How's my portfolio doing, btw?
7:11:21 PM brenfield: Fine. But if you're not going to remain at my beck and call enticing me with meaningless sex anymore, why am I handling your investments?
7:12:24 PM iamrita: Because I'm your friend?
7:12:38 PM brenfield: You're offering friendship? Right this minute I'd rather have you blow me.
7:13:11 PM iamrita: You know I'd give up Chad in a heartbeat, Byron. You only need to ask.
7:13:48 PM brenfield: Chad? His name is Chad? You're kidding.
7:13:14 PM iamrita: No. And he's at the door. I'll e-mail if I think of anything. And Byron? We've always been friends.

~

She was sleeping. Sprawled out on the guest bed, the edge of my shirt riding up just enough to tease me. There was a chill in the room. I set her dinner tray down on the dresser, then knelt before the fireplace and quietly removed the grate. It took me just a few minutes to get it started. I'd had lots of practice after all, centuries worth.

I sensed it the moment she woke. I didn't have to turn around. I knew. She was watching me.

"The fire will take the chill out of the air in a minute or two. I brought you dinner."

"What about your dinner?" she asked.

"I've already eaten," I lied. "Let me help you under the covers, and then I'll position the tray."

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“You’re good at this, taking care of someone. I’m sure that Fred and Grace were in good hands.”

My eyes filled unexpectedly with tears.

“You obviously were very close to them. Do you want to talk about it?” Violet asked, her tone gentle and caring.

“No.”

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “I didn’t mean to bring up painful memories. It’s just... I wish that I had come sooner, had a chance to say goodbye. She had a full life though, didn’t—”

“Why do people say that? It doesn’t even make any sense. What is a full life?” I practically shouted.

She started and then moved to get out of bed. I was afraid that my outburst had frightened her.

“What are you doing?” I asked lowering my voice, forcing myself to calm down.

“I need to use the bathroom. I think I can manage if you let me lean on you a bit.”

I walked over and easily lifted her up into my arms.

“You shouldn’t bear weight,” I told her. “And I should have brought you ice.”

“Yeah, but it’s not too late to redeem yourself,” she said, wrapping her arms around my neck and tossing her hair back over one shoulder.

“What?”

“The ice. It would still help.”

“Of course.” I carried her back to my bedroom and into the adjoining bathroom since it was closer than the guest bath down the hall. I set her down carefully next to the commode, then I turned on the light, closed the door and ran downstairs in search of ice.

When I returned a few minutes later, she was sitting on the red velvet chaise that was in the corner of my room, her foot propped up on a stack of Chinese silk pillows, my latest financial magazine in her hands.

“I have my answer if you want to hear it,” she said, tossing the magazine aside.

“What was the question?” I asked, sitting down alongside her.

I laid the bag of frozen peas I’d brought upstairs on top of her slightly swollen ankle. When I did, my fingertips lightly grazed her skin. It was a simple thing, touching her ankle; even that slight touch had the power to drive me to distraction. I pulled away.

“Thanks,” she said.

“You’re welcome.”

“You asked me for my definition of a full life.”

“Oh, that.”

“It’s an interesting question. I used to think that it had to do with how long someone was around. You know, living to a ripe old age. Until you were... ready to go,” she said.

“Go where?”

“Wherever. Maybe nowhere. Hell, I don’t know.”

“But you don’t think that anymore?”

“No. When I was a medical student, I saw my share of death. Being ready for it? It’s not about reaching some magical age. It’s about being at peace, about accepting your mortality, about looking back at your life and being satisfied with how you’ve lived it.”

Accepting mortality was something I’d never given much consideration to. I’d never had to. But I did then. I thought about Fred, about the choice she made and how she lived her life. Then I thought about my father, about how bitter and resentful he’d been. He carried his mortality like a shroud. Was it simply a matter of perspective? People link satisfaction with attainment, but what if it’s really about acceptance? What if it’s not about getting into Heaven? Maybe there is no Heaven for creatures like me. Maybe this life, here, now, is all I’m ever going to get.

She reached over and brushed her fingers across my wrinkled forehead. “You’re thinking awfully hard about something. Care to share?”

“Have you ever found yourself questioning whether what you believed was true?”

“Daily,” she admitted, sounding somewhat amused.

“I’m not talking about the little things...like whether it’s going to rain or not. I’m talking about the big stuff.”

Her expression turned serious. “Like?”

“Like, what if you didn’t have to die? What if you could live forever?” I asked her.

She shook her head and laughed. Well, of course she would laugh. I waited patiently.

“Do I get to be rich and beautiful?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Violet frowned. “What’s the catch?”

“Catch?”

“The down side. What do I have to give up?”

Now, they don’t talk about that much, vampires don’t. They don’t talk about the things that they miss, the things that they will never have. Perhaps it’s because we have no control over it. Why brood about what can’t be changed?

“Being around people,” I shrugged, passing it off as if it were nothing.

“So I’d have to be alone forever? No. Not worth it. I’m not that interesting.”

“Not alone, exactly. You could be around others that are like you.”

“So it would be me and a bunch of me clones? Kind of creepy, don’t you think?” she asked, distaste clearly evident in her voice.

God, this woman could be exasperating.

“No. That’s not what I mean. Let’s say that you were American.”

“I am American. Why can’t I be Italian?”

“Okay. Let’s say you were Italian, and you could only be around other Italians.”

“But what if I meet and fall in love with a man from France or Spain or Greece or—”

I held up my hand to stop her. “I get it. You can’t.”

“I can’t fall in love with them? So, I can’t feel love?”

“You can’t *be* with them,” I told her.

“Why?” she challenged, clearly not liking the idea.

“It’s like a rule.”

“It’s a stupid rule,” she declared.

“Yes,” I agreed. I watched her as she bit down on her lower lip. It was as sexy as hell and I found myself wanting to take her lip into my own mouth. It was full and red, ripe, and I wanted to sweep my tongue across it, to suck it into my mouth, to take just one...tiny...nibble.

“Ren?”

“Hmm?”

“Let me see if I have this straight. I’m going to live forever. I’m beautiful and rich, and I’ve met a drop-dead gorgeous French guy who promises to be the love of my life?”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s say I break the rule. What happens? Instant death?”

“Death, yes; but, not instant. You could live for quite some time, a hundred years, two hundred, maybe more.”

“I’m still beautiful and rich?”

“You age slowly.”

“Does my Frenchman leave me?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “You’re a romantic. No. He adores you. He has eyes only for you. Even when you are old, and gray, and disgusting.”

Her mouth fell open, and she gave my shoulder a little shove. “Disgusting? You should take lessons from my Frenchman. He tells me that I am getting better with age, like fine wine.”

“He just says stuff like that so that you’ll sleep with him,” I replied, goading her, and suddenly disliking the Frenchman.

“You’re clearly projecting,” she countered, getting miffed. “Anyways, so far I’m leaning towards saying yes, and then breaking the rule so that I can live happily ever after for a few hundred good years with Pierre.”

“He has a name now?”

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“Yes. He’s also a very attentive lover, and a devoted father.” I liked Pierre less and less, and enjoyed the banter more and more.

“You have children?”

“Two.”

“Risky.”

“Why?”

“If they aren’t like you, you must send them away.”

“Another rule?”

“Yes,” I said, remembering my mother’s pain. It all had occurred so long ago. Yet it seemed in many ways to have happened just yesterday. “So that they can live with others like them. So they may have a normal life.”

“Ren?”

“Hmm?” For a moment I’d gotten lost in the memories.

“Nobody has a normal life. It’s a myth.”

“Like vampires are myths?” I said hesitantly, trying to gauge her reaction.

“I’m a vampire now?”

“Immortal,” I clarified, not that she would understand the difference between those that are immortal and those that have crossed the line.

“Do I have to drink blood, sleep in a coffin—?”

“You don’t have to drink blood. You can eat regular food, and sleep in a regular bed. Only the warped vampires traipse around biting people and draining their blood, Violet.”

“Right. Sunlight?”

“It’s a problem. The older you get, the more powerful, the easier you can tolerate it.”

“I’m still saying I’d go for it and break the rules. I marry Pierre, keep the kids and live to a ripe old age with no regrets!” she concluded, quite pleased with herself.

“You’d break the rules,” I repeated.

“Yeah, why not?”

Why not, indeed? My father had broken the rules. I was here, after all. My parents died when I was still young, and Fred had essentially raised me. She certainly broke the rules. She didn't seem to regret it, either. Not one bit. Although she never had children, never had to face the pain of giving them up.

“Have you no respect for rules?”

“Are you asking Vampire me? Cause I hear vampires are pretty morally flexible, being evil and soulless and all.”

“You're not evil and soulless. You're just...different.”

“With stupid rules that make no sense. Okay, I have one now. You're stuck on an island for three whole days with a moderately attractive woman who finds you interesting and would like to get to know you better. Do you pretend you've already eaten, and make her dine alone in the guest room, or do you do the polite thing and have dinner with her?”

“How big are her tits?” I asked.

I saw it coming. I probably saw it coming before she even realized she was going to do it. Immortals are like that, especially those of us that have been around for a long time, we anticipate, and we defend. She grasped the throw pillow and swung it towards my head in a wide arch. Long before it could connect, I had her wrist grasped firmly in my hand and her arm held up over her head. My body was hovering over the length of hers and the rumble of a low growl was still emanating from my chest. She glanced down and then back up, searchingly into my eyes. And, that's when I made the biggest mistake of my three hundred and seventy-nine years. I kissed her.

I kissed her, and in that moment nothing else mattered. I wasn't thinking about next year, or next month, or even the next minute. All I was thinking about was how incredibly good she felt beneath me. Her lips were soft and sweet and willing. No, wanting. I wasn't tender. I wasn't careful. And I wasn't holding back. Not anymore, and maybe never again.

As my tongue entered her mouth, I felt her arch up, her breasts coming into contact with my chest. I had never tasted anything so exquisite. Stroking, exploring, over and over. All that existed was *her*—this moment. I wanted it to last forever. Then I realized, with an almost blinding clarity, that I didn't want to last forever without it.

“Ouch!” she cried out.

I was off her and halfway across the room in a flash.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"For what?"

"For hurting you."

"You didn't hurt me. I was moving my leg and I kicked the side of the chaise with my foot." She smiled at me coyly and added, "You could kiss it and make it better."

"We kissed."

"I kind of noticed. I was the one on the bottom. It happened right here, as a matter of fact."

"It wasn't supposed to!"

"How do you know? Maybe it was fate? Face it, you're powerless against me," she teased, her fingers playing provocatively with the top button of the shirt that she was wearing.

"I don't believe in fate. I'm going to reheat your dinner. We'll eat and then we'll... do something else."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. What do you feel like doing? We could read aloud to one another, or play poker on line or—"

"How about spin the bottle?"

"No kissing."

"It felt good," she sighed, sounding almost wistful.

And she was right. It had felt good, sinfully good. "Yes, it did," I admitted.

"Come here," she crooked her finger, beckoning me closer.

I closed my eyes in an effort to regain control. "No. It's too—"

"Never mind." She frowned. I could tell that I had wounded her, and I felt a pang of guilt.

"It would be my honor to have dinner with you, Violet. Let me take this back." I said, picking up the tray. "I'll set the table, heat everything up, then come back for you. We'll eat in the dining room."

“Thank you. Ren?”

“Yes, Violet?”

“It was a really nice kiss.”

I couldn't help myself. Against my better judgment, I found myself leaning down and brushing my lips across hers. “Best kiss I've ever had,” I murmured. “I'll remember it forever.”

“You're impossible,” she whispered.

“You're irresistible,” I replied, my voice rough from passion. “You make me want to forget...”

“I'm feeling...”

“Strangely aroused? Almost like it's beyond your control?”

“Yes!”

“Me, too,” I admitted. I was hard again, and all I could think about was what it would feel like to be inside of her. “But it's not beyond our control. We just have to...”

“Resist? What if I don't want to? It's perfectly natural, Ren. After all,” she began, teasing my bottom lip with her tongue. “You're a man... I'm a woman.”

I opened my mouth to her, and let her slide her tongue inside. She took full advantage, searching, seeking, wanting, needing.

If I didn't end this now...I wouldn't be able to end it at all. I pulled back, aching from regret and the obvious erection that I was now sporting. “I've got to go get dinner ready.”

“What about me?”

I smirked. “You're already ready, I think.”

“There go those mixed signals, Mr. Renfield.”

“I'm sorry. I told you that I was out of practice. You still want to brave dinner with me?”

“Absolutely,” she agreed, winking at me and then retrieving the magazine that she'd been reading earlier from where she'd dropped it on the floor.

~

I know what people think of us vampires, that we're evil, blood-sucking fiends. Some of us are, but the blood doesn't sustain us. It's not food. It's more like a drug. Blood is intoxicating for us, it breaks down inhibitions, and it makes us impulsive. It's addictive. We don't need it, but once we've had it, we want more. I've never personally tasted blood, not one drop, not in all my years of existence. I never wanted to go down that path, to relegate myself to that kind of existence, to be that dependent.

So why couldn't I get the image of that trickle of blood out of my mind?

Violet Deeds was dangerous. I knew beyond doubt and beyond reason that she could offer me everything that I shouldn't want. Or should I?

As I poured us two glasses of cabernet, I let that question roll around in my mind. Had Fred's life really been so bad? I took a sip from my glass. It tasted delicious, but probably not nearly as delicious as Violet would.

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed Violet might be right. The rules are stupid. They're contrary to nature. Most species are driven to procreate. Okay...so I could live forever. I don't *need* to create another me to ensure the survival of the species. But nonetheless, I found myself *wanting* to. I found myself suddenly...wanting it *all*.

Yes. Violet Deeds was extremely dangerous.

I carried the glasses of wine into the dining room, set mine at the head of the table, and surveyed the area.

I'd always enjoyed dining by candlelight, so the edges of the room were lined with tall candelabrum filled with long tapers. When I last renovated the house, I intentionally left the dining room essentially as it had been. A long cherry wood table dominated it surrounded by matching chairs richly upholstered in the same red damask as the surrounding walls. I had chosen to set the table with Fred's favorite china and used the antique stemware that I'd picked up ages ago in London.

My favorite feature, however, was the mural on the ceiling of the sunrise sky. The vibrant hues of gold, orange and red were warm and inviting. Every night as I ate I could gaze up and be reminded of the new day to come, a veritable eternity of new days, days that I rarely saw. The mural usually brought me comfort, but not tonight.

Tonight, I realized that unless I took a chance, unless I risked, unless I reached out, all those days and nights would be spent alone. I closed my eyes, reminded myself of my duty, and sighed in resignation. My body shuddered, trying to shake off the feeling of regret.

~

"I brought you a glass of wine. Dinner will be ready in about fifteen minutes. The table's set."

She looked up from reading the magazine and smiled. "Thanks."

"I've been thinking about what you said, about your choice."

"My choice?" she asked, confused.

I sat down on the chaise alongside of her and took a breath to brace myself. "You remember. Vampire you and Pierre?"

"Oh, that." Violet looked down once again at the magazine. "Do you really read this? It's...kind of boring."

"Really? You think so?" I loved that magazine.

She hesitated a bit, then said, "Kind of."

"I find it informative." I told her, feeling slightly defensive. "It's filled with practical advice."

"Cosmo's informative. This is boring."

Well, she had me at a disadvantage. I'd never read Cosmo.

Violet continued, "You know, Cosmo, the woman's magazine?"

"Of course," I said, "I subscribe to that, too. I keep it under the bed with my other non-manly magazines."

She laughed, then tossed the magazine aside.

"So, Grace said that you like to play the stock market."

"I manage one very large trust and then a few smaller portfolios...for close personal friends. I'd be happy to look over your investments and let you know if I can do better for you."

"My investments currently consist of a ten thousand dollar 'rainy day' savings account. Every other dime went into the down payment for my cottage. I've been saving for years. It's terribly small, but it's right on the beach."

"Sounds...sunny. You carry your wine. I'll carry you," I said, lifting her up into my arms and making my way towards the stairs. "You don't look like you spend much time in the sun. You're so fair."

“Yes. Cursed with red hair and pasty skin. I’m the girl that walks the beach in the morning with the big floppy hat, the long-sleeved white shirt, and loose fitting khakis. You must work out.”

“I have a gym downstairs. You’re free to use it while you’re here. And I adore fencing,” I told her. “Once upon a time I fenced competitively. Now I use a virtual program. It’s not as much fun. You don’t happen to fence, do you?”

“Um...no.”

“I could teach you?” I suggested.

“Bum ankle,” she reminded me as we reached the bottom of the staircase. “Besides, you’d sweep the floor with me.”

“I wouldn’t,” I promised, heading straight for the dining room. “I’d be very...gentle.”

“Gentle, huh?” she asked, looking around the dining room and then glancing back at me. “It’s beautiful, Ren.”

“It’s not often that I have a woman as stunning as you grace my table.”

I sat her down next to at head of the table and pulled out the chair.

“Always the gentleman,” she teased, taking her seat and reaching for the cloth napkin that had been neatly folded on her plate. “The china is beautiful.”

She surveyed the room, obviously taking in the abundance of candles, the sparking crystal, and expensive fabrics. “Are you trying to impress me, Mr. Renfield?”

“Do I *need* to impress you, Dr. Deeds?”

“Grace thought the world of you, Ren. That’s more than enough for me. To Fred and Grace,” she said, quietly.

Violet slowly lifted the glass to her lips and took a sip of her wine, eyeing me appraisingly over the rim of the delicately cut crystal. Her gaze was intent and unwavering. It bore into me and through me, heating me from the inside. I reached out and took the glass from her hand, making sure that my eyes never left hers. Color rose to her cheeks. She glanced down briefly. When her eyes once again rose to meet mine, I lifted the wine slightly in the air.

“To Fred and Grace,” I repeated. Then I took a sip from her glass.

She smiled, amused. “I see you’re not afraid of cooties.”

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I set the glass back down and slid it towards her. "I don't get sick. I'll be right out with dinner." I took a step back, then another, hating to leave the sight of her.

The flames of the candles danced, casting shadows around the room, the high polish of the table reflecting their light like a mirror, giving her porcelain skin and copper hair an almost iridescent glow. I was reminded of the beautiful enchantress in Dicksee's painting, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, and wondered briefly if like the heroic knight I was fated to be charmed into spiritual slavery. Or maybe I'd been enthralled long ago and Violet was here to rescue me.

*"I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful—a faery's child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild."*

"Keats," she said, leaning forward, having recognized the passage. "You've studied poetry?"

"I may not be good with words, but I appreciate them," I said.

"I think you underestimate yourself," Violet whispered.

God, how I wanted to take her into my arms and kiss her. My arousal was building and it was laced with something more primitive, the desire to take her, possess her, and mark her as mine. I turned and pushed my way through the kitchen door.

I walked over to the sub-zero freezer, opened it up, and let the bracing cold hit me. I grabbed a bag of frozen corn and fleetingly thought about dropping in down the front of my pants, then placed it on the back of my neck. It was starting to come together for me. I'm a little slow on the uptake, but give me time and I can usually suss things out. This wasn't about fate stepping in, or a test of my spiritual fortitude, or even divine intervention. This was an attempt at matchmaking. This was a misguided gift from Fred and Grace. Long ago Fred and I had called a truce and agreed to accept one another's lifestyles. I guess she figured death allowed her dispensation.

I tossed the bag of corn back into the freezer, slammed it shut, and then retrieved the plates I had served earlier from the warming drawer. The fact that this little weekend was a manipulation didn't change my predicament one iota. I was attracted to her, emotionally and physically. There was something in Violet Deeds that called to me, something beyond the normal emanation of a human woman.

I walked back out into the living room. The siren that had invaded my house was trying to balance a spoon on the end of her nose. I sat my plate down at one end of the table and then walked up to her.

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“A little moisture helps,” I said, taking the spoon from her as I put down the plate. I opened my mouth; let my warm breath cloud the surface of the spoon, then rubbed the area vigorously with my thumb before placing it on the tip my nose. “See?”

Violet laughed. The spoon fell and effortlessly I caught it.

“Good reflexes.”

“You should see me do the table cloth trick,” I said walking over to my chair. “It only works half the time, but then when it doesn’t, I still get out of doing dishes. So, all in all it’s basically a win-win situation... What?”

She was leaning over to one side and frowning. “Why are you way down there?”

“This is where I usually sit.”

“But I can’t really see you unless I...” She bobbed back and forth, trying to peer around the large silver candlesticks.

I picked up my glass, plate, napkin, and cutlery and then moved down the table to the place beside her. “Better?” I asked, sitting down.

“Much. It’s an interesting poem, don’t you think? I wonder what motivated Keats to write it? To give a woman such power, the power to enchant and seduce men into slavery.”

“Are you kidding? Women all possess that power.”

“Oh, please! This is fabulous, what is it?” She asked, taking another bite of her dinner.

“Veal.”

She stopped chewing, “I don’t eat veal.”

“You just said it was fabulous.”

“Do you know what they do to those poor little calves? I saw this documentary... I’ll just eat the rice.”

The meat had been cooked to perfection. It was so tender it was falling right off the bone. I lifted a forkful to my mouth... “What now?”

Violet was staring.

“Look, I promise you, Daisy Mae here had a perfectly wonderful life. All my meat comes from a ranch on the mainland. I own it. There are no crates.”

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“It still seems cruel. Taking a baby from its mother...”

I stood up, grabbed both of our plates, walked back into the kitchen and tossed them into the sink. Then I grabbed a frozen pizza out of the sub-zero, tossed it onto the rack of my Viking oven, turned the temperature up to 425 degrees and slammed the door shut.

I grabbed the bottle of cabernet off of the counter and headed back into the dining room, bottle in hand. “Pizza will be ready in twenty minutes.”

“I’ve driven you to drink and I’ve ruined dinner,” she said, sounding regretful.

I looked down at the bottle in my hand and set it on the table.

“You haven’t ruined dinner.”

“I’m a guest and I was rude. I’m trying to apologize,” she said, reaching for my hand.

I pulled Violet up out of her chair, wrapping my arm around her waist and pulling her flush to me. I was aroused again, hell, maybe still. I made no attempt to hide it. To the contrary, I pressed my hardness into her while crushing my lips to hers in a smoldering kiss. I felt confused and angry and sad and...oh-so-glad to have her here...in my arms...at this moment.

Violet gasped. The intensity of my assault might have surprised her, but she recovered quickly. She snaked her arms around my neck. I could taste the wine on her lips as I slid my tongue inside of her mouth, eager to drink in more of her. She released a moan, making me realize that my hand had found its way to her breast, soft and firm. The weight of it filled my palm perfectly. I swept the table clear and laid Violet upon it, she was all I wanted, all I needed to feast on. Her hair splayed out across the polished wood, creating a halo around her passion-filled face.

I hooked my hands under her knees and lifted her legs, parting them, opening her up...

“Earth to Byron,” said Violet, snapping her fingers in front of my face and effectively erasing the last remnants of my fantasy. “I said I’m trying to apologize.”

“Apology accepted,” I said leaning over and quickly blowing out the candles on the table and plunging the room into darkness “How about we eat in front of the fireplace in the living room?”

“Sounds great, Ren. And, you don’t need to carry me. I can hobble.”

“I like carrying you. It makes me feel manly.... You’re rolling your eyes, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Come on, Tarzan.”

~

“You’ve...um...got a little sauce...”

“Where?” I asked her.

“Right...” Violet leaned across the sofa and swiped the corner of my mouth with the pad of her thumb.

“There,” she said as she began to pull back. I reached for her wrist and then brought her hand back towards my mouth, taking her thumb inside and circling it with my tongue. “Mmm,” I moaned, then releasing her thumb added, “really good sauce.”

“It’s frozen pizza, it can’t be that good.”

“You’re right. That last nibble seemed to have a bit something extra.”

Violet laughed and then drank down the last of the wine. “I’ve enjoyed visiting about Fred and Grace, sharing memories. I wish I’d known them as well as you did.”

“I’ve enjoyed it, too. It helps, talking about it.”

Violet yawned.

“It’s late; I should get you up to the guestroom and let you get some sleep. I’ll come back down and clean up.”

“I’m not quite ready to surrender to sleep,” she said, laying down and lifting her feet up into my lap. “Tell me, what was it like growing up here?”

I wrapped my hands around her feet to warm them. “You’re freezing. You should have said something. Shall I put more wood on the fire? Violet?”

I looked up. In the space of a moment Violet had fallen fast asleep. I lifted her into my arms, carried her up the stairs, then laid her down onto the bed and arranged the down comforter over her. The room was pitch black, but I could still see the outline of her body under the covers and the soft features of her face.

I sat down on the bed alongside her. “I’m a vampire, Violet,” I whispered.

“I thought you were Pierre,” she murmured, sleepily, turning onto her side. “How about we throw away the metaphors. Tell me why you’re about to walk out of this room instead of sliding into this bed?”

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My heart was beating so loud I feared it was going to break my chest. Here it was, the moment of truth. Did I whisper my confession into the darkness knowing she would hear me? Perhaps.

“Don’t be afraid. Talk to me, Byron,” she begged, her voice laced with desire.

I felt as if I had taken a punch to the stomach. My heart clenched, my gut twisted and I was suddenly nauseous.

“I... I can’t. Good night, Violet,” I said, my voice sounding hollow to my own ears.

~

10:04:59 PM brenfield: Are you there?

1:01:03 AM iamrita: Just got in. How’s it going? Did you kill her?

1:01:43 AM brenfield: No. I need help.

1:02:17 AM iamrita: You want me to kill her?

1:02:22 AM brenfield: No!

1:02:25 AM brenfield: I kissed her. I want to kiss her again. I want to kiss her forever.

1:03:22 AM brenfield: Are you there?

1:04:04 AM iamrita: It would be insensitive of me to make fun of you now, right?

1:04:26 AM brenfield: Yes. Although I’m not sure I could feel worse.

1:05:15 AM iamrita: You’re acting like a fledgling. You know what this would cost you. Control yourself. What’s the human doing now?

1:05:31 AM brenfield: Sleeping.

1:05:42 AM iamrita: Pretty?

1:05:58 AM brenfield: Breathtaking. What if I can’t?

1:07:19 AM iamrita: Byron, you’re not going to lose control.

1:08:37 AM brenfield: I stayed up all day watching the storm. I’m tired. I’m drawn to her. The pull is very powerful. What if I go to her in my sleep?

1:08:46 AM iamrita: Do you still have the handcuffs?

1:08:59 AM brenfield: I think so. Yeah. Why?

1:09:21 AM iamrita: Use the handcuffs; get a couple hours of sleep. I’ll be there as soon as I can tomorrow to help you get rid of her.

1:08:33 AM brenfield: I’m not sure I want to get rid of her. I kind of want to keep her. That’s what I want to talk about. I’m conflicted.

1:08:47 AM iamrita: She’s not a cat, Byron.

1:09:13 AM brenfield: I know. It’s just...do you ever wonder what’s so wrong about it? Fred and Grace, they seemed happy, didn’t they?

1:09:36 AM iamrita: You mate with her you’ll die.

1:10:21 AM brenfield: I know. To Fred it was worth it.

1:10:38 AM iamrita: It’s forbidden

1:10:51 AM brenfield: I know.

1:11:17 AM iamrita: Get some sleep. We’ll talk tomorrow. Night.

1:11:42 AM brenfield: Night.

~

I stood under the spray of the shower and let the endless supply of hot water sluice over my shoulders and down my back, rinsing off the last of the soap. I then switched the jet to the massage option, turned towards the tile wall, and leaned against it, letting the water pound against the tightness in my mid-back. *Forbidden*. The word rang in my ears, taking me back in time.

“Father? Is everything all right?”

“No,” replied Astor Renfield, hastily wiping his eyes.

“Come, Byron,” interjected Fred. “Let’s leave Father alone.”

I could hear my mother’s heart-wrenching sobs coming from inside their bedroom.

“It was human?” I asked.

All he could do was nod.

“But—”

He walked over to the liquor cabinet, poured himself a brandy, drank it down in one swallow, and then disappeared back inside the master suite.

“I don’t understand, Fred. What does it matter?”

“It’s forbidden. They can’t keep it, Byron. It wouldn’t be fair to the child.”

“Is it fair to send it away to live with strangers?”

“It can have a normal life this way. Don’t make this harder for Father, he’s doing the right thing.”

“He’s doing the weak thing.” I spat with the confident superiority of adolescence. “And it’s killing Mother.”

Fred slapped me across the face. “How dare you! You have no idea what he’s given up for her. Do you expect him to become a total outcast?”

The sounds of shattering glass pierced through the air, and it was follow by an outraged, devastating scream.

“No! Lillian!”

Fred and I ran into the room. The infant lay, crying, alone on the bed. My father stood at the shattered window, his hands holding onto the sides of the frame, jagged glass cutting into his palms. I walked slowly over to the window and looked down into the courtyard. My mother's broken body lay below.

"I never should have mated with her," whispered my father. His voice filled with regret.

I turned and looked up at him, perhaps really seeing him for the first time in my life. "You're right. She deserved better," I told him. And then I watched, as my father turned to dust before my eyes.

I turned the water off, stepped out of the shower, grabbed a towel from the rack and wrapped it around my waist. I had vowed then that I would never be like my father, and I wasn't. I had done everything right. Or at least I used to think that I had. I'd stayed amidst my own kind, living a solitary existence, amassing a fortune, honing my powers, and fulfilling my duties as the clan treasurer. I'd been entrusted with a time-honored duty, managing the trust that helped care for the *Chosen*, the children fortunate enough to be born human. The children like Violet.

It was the only explanation, really. If Fred and Grace had been paying for Violet to go to school, she was Chosen. How could I possibly interfere with that? I couldn't. I wouldn't. Because I had somehow managed to fall in love with her.

~

"I'm sure you have a reasonable explanation," she said.

My eyes flew open. A bit of light streamed in from the hallway. It was just enough to barely illuminate my room, but as luck would have it, it glinted off the steel cuffs making them shine like a beacon in the night. Violet was standing at the edge of my bed staring down at me, her hands resting on her hips.

"What?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

She rolled her eyes. "The handcuffs?"

"What handcuffs?"

"Ren, I have a sprained ankle, not a head injury. I can see the handcuffs."

"You shouldn't be up. What *are* you doing up?"

"My ankle's a bit better. I had to go to the bathroom," she said. "On my way back I noticed them. What's their purpose?"

“These?” I looked up towards the head of my bed where my left hand was bound to the center iron rail.

She sighed; I could tell she was close to exasperated. “Yes, those.”

“To keep me from sleep walking, from sleep walking and bothering you.”

She spotted the key on my bedside table, picked it up, and then leaned over me. “Ren, I was *hoping* you were going to come and bother me. Let’s get these off of you. Before I start getting naughty ideas.”

I grinned. “What kind of naughty ideas? Wow, you smell really nice, Vi.” Her proximity already had my head practically swimming.

She paused and looked down into my eyes. I couldn’t help myself. My free hand moved as if it had a mind of its own to caress the back of her long slender neck.

“You tasted really good, too. When I kissed you earlier? I’ve never tasted anything so sweet,” I murmured, recalling how the effects of that kiss had lingered long after her lips parted from mine and wanting so much to experience those sensations again.

“Really?” she asked, sounding a bit breathless.

“Really. You should go, Vi. You should go back to your room,” I told her, removing my hand.

She reached up and awkwardly tried to fit the key into the lock.

“I can’t quite reach it,” she murmured as she shifted further.

She was kneeling on my bed now, her torso hovering over my bare chest. The top few buttons of her shirt were undone, and I admit it, I peeked. Her full breasts were enticingly suspended before me, swaying gently back and forth as she struggled with the key.

“It won’t turn all the way,” she said.

“Keep trying. I think you almost have it,” I encouraged, arching up and trying to subtly get a better look. At times like this, apparently I have no shame.

Violet swung one leg over my hip and persistently continued to work on it. She was so intent on her task, I’m not sure that she even realized that she was straddling me at first. But I realized it. Every inch of my body realized it. Now, I’ve never been very fond of having a woman on top. Rita tells me it’s because I’m a control freak and that I need to get over it. Upon reflection, I realized that her chaining me to the bed with the handcuffs

was likely her idea of therapy. She probably thought she'd ride me into submission and that I'd someone see the light. Maybe I had.

I moved my hand to Violet's waist to still her movements. As I did, she clearly registered for the first time that I was fully aroused and that my erection was resting comfortably beneath her. The warm heat of her body penetrated the thin cotton sheet. I imagined sinking deeply into it, into her. I shifted my hips ever so slightly, watching as her eyes widened. She lurched forward.

"Ouch!"

"What?"

I didn't have to ask. I knew. She had cut herself.

"I slipped. I grazed a knuckle on one of these stupid links."

"Violet, you need to get off," I told her.

"I think I almost have it."

"No. *Now*. You need to get off *now*, Violet. The blood. It's... I can't..."

"You can't what?" she asked sitting up and looking down at me curiously.

My oversized shirt had shifted on her and slipped off of one shoulder. I could see the evidence of her pebbled nipples through the light layer of fabric. Her spectacular mane of wavy hair framed her face. It was wild and sexy. I had never wanted anyone so much in my entire life. I could feel it, rising up within me, the desire, the need. I wanted to pull her towards me and push her off. I did neither. Despite my trying to stave it off, a low growl began to rumble from deep within my chest.

"Ren?" She sat up even straighter, her hot pussy pressing, sliding against my cock.

"Please, Violet!" I managed to choke out. I turned my head away and closed my eyes, listening with a sense of dread as the rumble built. I was losing the battle for control and losing it fast. My only hope was to get some distance between us. "Go!"

But she didn't go. Instead, she reached out to me. She placed the palm of her hand on my cheek and gently turned my head so that I was once again facing her.

My eyes flew open, connecting with hers as the primitive roar ripped from my throat. I watched in horror as Violet scrambled off me towards the end of the bed, her feet and arms working furiously.

"No...!"

My warning didn't come quickly enough. She had reached the end of the bed and when her right hand came down to find only air, she tumbled unceremoniously to the floor.

"Aah!" she shrieked.

"Vi?" I asked, trying to sit up.

She didn't move. I heard a hollow thump as her head struck the floor. Her heart was racing.

"Vi? Are you hurt? Look, I'm staying right here...all chained up."

"N-no, I'm not hurt!" she said, sounding almost angry.

"Thank God," I sighed, my head dropping back down on my pillow.

"You're a... What the hell are you!" she yelled.

"A vampire. I'm immortal. I did tell you earlier."

She pulled herself up and then started to retreat, hopping backwards.

"There's no need to run away. I'm not going to hurt you."

She paused. "Why were you yelling at me to go?"

"The desire to mate with you was becoming overwhelming. I could feel it building. I didn't want to lose control in front of you, but it happened. You saw."

"M-mate with me?"

"Don't worry. The look of horror on your face was better than a cold shower. In fact, I may never get another erection again." Christ, I felt miserable. The sting of rejection had hit me full force and burned worse than I'd ever imagined.

"I don't understand," she said almost to herself as she hobbled towards me.

"What?" I asked, with a glimmer of hope.

"I'm not sure I understand any of it," she said, shaking her head forlornly.

I breathed a sigh of relief. "It's a lot to take in."

"You're a vampire."

“Yes.” I waited patiently, praying that she would accept me, accept who and what I am.

“Oh!” she gasped. “I get it!”

“What?”

“I’m dreaming!”

“I don’t think so, Violet,” I said, disappointment settling in.

“What other explanation could there possibly be?” she asked as she climbed back up onto the bed and began to crawl up the length of it.

“What other explanation could there be? How about the ‘I’m a vampire’ explanation? W-what are you doing?”

“I want to see if you have fangs before I wake up,” she said reaching towards my mouth.

“I don’t have fangs!” I protested, turning my head away. “They went away with the erection.”

She paused. “Super strength? Why can’t you just pull the headboard apart?”

“I could. But why would I break my bed? Plus, I have the key,” I said, holding up the key she’d dropped seconds earlier. I slipped it into the locking mechanism and the ratchet popped open. I slipped my hand free and tossed the key onto my nightstand.

“Wow,” she chuckled as she rolled onto her side and stretched out alongside of me. “I can’t remember the last time I had a dream this vivid. I used to dream about crazy stuff when I was a kid, but—”

Violet tried to stifle a yawn. Then she laid her head upon my chest and draped her arm across my waist.

“You’re not dreaming. Violet let me up. I’ll send an e-mail to Pete and then I’ll move to the caves. You can wait it out here until Monday, okay? There’s plenty of food and....”

“Good night, Ren,” she whispered.

“You’re going to sleep? Here?”

I looked down at the top of her head and watched her left shoulder rise and fall in a shrug.

“Why not? It’s comfy here.”

She yawned again.

“Besides, when I wake up, I’ll be back in my own bed. You’ll be back to trying to ignore me.”

“I haven’t been ignoring you.”

“I might as well make the most of the fantasy. Not every woman gets to be seduced by a tall, dark, and handsome vampire.”

I smiled. She thought I was handsome. “You fantasize about being seduced by a vampire?”

“Doesn’t every woman?”

I did my best to lull her back to sleep. I enjoyed the feel of her silken hair on my chest and the tickle of her breath as she exhaled. I began to emit an almost imperceptible vibration from my chest, a sign of deep satisfaction. Running my hand up and down the length of her back, I inhaled deeply, trying to commit the moment to memory, the feel of her, the smell of her.

“Good night, Violet,” I whispered into the darkness. “I wish... I wish I could love you.”

~

I didn’t sleep for the remainder of the night. I didn’t want to miss one second of the pleasure that I felt while Violet rested comfortably and peacefully in my arms, her body molded to mine. I watched as the minutes swiftly passed and then an hour before sunrise I turned off the alarm and sadly slipped from the warmth of my bed. I knew that when Violet awakened, she would realize the truth of my words and I wanted to remember her this way—wanting me. It may have been an honest fantasy that she shared, but fantasy and reality are a world apart. I remembered the initial look of horror on her face when she saw what I was. I didn’t think that I could bare that look again.

I made Violet a pot of coffee. I didn’t have the stomach to drink any of it myself. Besides, I didn’t want the caffeine to interfere with my plans to get good and drunk. I figured that was the only way that I was going to be able to make it though the next forty-eight hours.

Violet was still sleeping soundly in my bed when I picked up the bedroll that I hadn’t used in decades along with the two bundles of wood and tinder and the three bottles of twenty-five year old single malt that I’d been saving. With supplies in hand, I quietly left my house.

The snow crunched under the soles of my boots as I trudged halfway down the stone steps and then veered off onto the path that led to the caves close to shore. It had been

ages since I'd been to the caves. When I was a child I had spent countless hours there exploring, living in my imagination.

It was cold outside. The frigid air was bracing. Everything seemed harsh, stark and eerily quiet. The world was a landscape of white and grey. The ocean looked ominously black. I had never felt so lost or so empty. They say you can't miss what you've never had. They're wrong. I knew that now. I was missing it desperately, the possibility of a normal existence. The possibility of sharing my life with someone, of living with them, of growing old with them, of having children, of knowing that I was part of it...the cycle of life. I didn't want to sit on the sidelines, watching it pass without purpose, experiencing only petty and meaningless pleasure. Not anymore. I'd had my fill, I suppose.

I paused and looked out at the ocean, dark and immense. Then I glanced one last time back towards the house. Tears of frustration clouded my vision and for the first time in my existence I found myself regretting, no, hating what I was.

I wiped my eyes on the sleeve of my cashmere overcoat, swallowed down the lump in my throat, and then with profound sorrow, I forced my wretched self to continue down the path and into the largest of the caves. I was emotionally and physically exhausted. I didn't even bother to build a fire. I threw the bedroll onto the cold, hard floor, drank down a half a bottle of scotch, then fell into a restless sleep.

Chapter 3

"There you—"

Within a fraction of a second I was completely awake and had Violet pinned to the wall of the cave, her feet dangling, comically, above its sand floor. I was sure that my eyes were still flashing red. I could hear the remnants of my attack growl as it faded to a low rumble and then died all together.

Violet's eyes were wide with fear. She licked her lips and then quietly said, "You're hurting me, Byron."

I gently eased her down the wall. As soon as her feet were safely on the floor, I stepped back into the darkened recesses of the cave. I was awash in shame, horrified that I could have hurt her.

"Sorry. You shouldn't be here. And you should *never* sneak up on a vampire."

"I guess my mother forgot to tell me about that one," she teased.

"This isn't something to joke about, Violet. I could have... I could have hurt you."

“But you didn’t,” she pointed out as she walked towards me.

I turned around to face the wall. I couldn’t bear to have her see me like this, ferocious fangs and raging red eyes.

“I woke up alone in your bed, the handcuffs still dangling from the headboard. It felt...wrong. I waited for you to come back, but you didn’t. I got worried, then I remembered you mentioning the caves. It’s silly, I know. Me worrying about a...”

“Vampire.”

“It’s all true,” she said, resting her hand upon my shoulder. “Look at me.”

“No. I’m not back to normal yet.”

“What’s *normal*?”

“Violet, I’m trying to do the right thing here. Don’t you think I know that this is wrong? Don’t you think I know I’m an abomination? That this...what’s happening between us...”

Violet stepped in front of me; her eyes shining with unshed tears. “I didn’t mean that you were wrong, or that the attraction we’re experiencing is wrong. I meant it felt wrong for me to wake up alone in your bed. Wrong because you weren’t there with me.”

She reached for my hand, interlacing her fingers with mine. She was shivering almost uncontrollably. The temperature outside was just above freezing, the rain again pouring down.

“You’re cold, and you’re soaked through,” I said. I felt my fangs recede and stepped out of the shadows

“I’ll live,” she said.

I swallowed. Then I walked over to stack of wood and began to start a fire. “You shouldn’t have walked all the way down here on that ankle.”

“My ankle is fine. I had to talk to you. This is real, isn’t it? You’re real.”

I watched as the tinder caught and the fire spread, catching the well-aged wood. She was patient. I’ll give her that. It occurred to me that this was her job, getting people to talk about difficult issues, helping them sort out their problems, deal with conflict. The fire flared up, warming the small space quickly.

“Yes. I’m real. This is real.”

“Wow. I have this couple on my caseload that say they’re vampires. I wonder—”

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“Vi, real vampires don’t go around announcing it. For the most part we live quiet lives. Violet, if you don’t get out of those wet clothes, you’re going to catch your death,” I told her as I stood up and removed my coat.

“I’ll be fine,” she tried to assure me, her teeth chattering.

“No, you won’t,” I told her, walking over to her. “Humans get sick. They get sick and they die. You’re lips are already blue and your body temperature is dropping.” I traced her mouth with the pad of my thumb. Violet’s lips were trembling slightly. Whether from cold or desire, I wasn’t sure. They beckoned to me, begging me to warm them, so I did. Kissing them tenderly and thoroughly. Kissing them as they were meant to be kissed.

I pulled back, and gazed into her eyes. “You came to me. Of your own accord, you came.”

I took her hand and then led her over to the fire.

“Undress. Lay your clothes out on the rocks. I’ll give you my coat to wear. It’s warm and dry. As soon as the rain lets up, we’ll get you back inside. You must have dozens of questions.”

I sat down on one of the larger boulders, my coat across my lap.

“Ren, are you going to watch me undress?”

I smiled, relieved. “Yes. And you’re calling me Ren again. Does that mean I’m out of the dog house?”

“Maybe,” she replied, as she quickly shed her coat. Her fingers were trembling from the cold and she had trouble unbuttoning the shirt that she was wearing, my shirt.

“Here,” I said, setting my coat aside. “Let me help you.”

“You’re really immortal?” she asked me again.

I finished unbuttoning the shirt and slid it off her shoulders. She was wearing a black bra underneath.

“We’ve gone over this.”

“Right,” she said as I unzipped her boots and pulled them off, tossing them aside.

“Stake through the heart?”

“Wounds heal instantly. I’m impervious, Violet.”

“How can that be?”

“You mean the science of it? I don’t know.”

I laid her damp shirt onto the rocks and then turned back and dropped to my knees before her. “The shirt’s not too bad. It’s only gotten slightly wet in the front.”

I unsnapped the top button of her blue jeans and then pulled down the rasp of the zipper to reveal a pair of black cotton panties. Who knew that cotton could be so sexy?

“And there are others like you?”

“Of course.”

“How long?”

I slid the jeans past her hips and down the length of her stocking clad legs. I ran my hand over the fishnet, trailing it up her calf, behind her knee, over the top of her thigh, and then up to cup the firm globe of her ass. Then I looked up at her. “My entire life, three hundred and seventy-nine years. And in all that time... I’ve never seen anything quite so lovely as you.”

Violet reached down and caressed the side of my face. “So you were... What do they call it, sired? You were sired in 1627?”

“You’re good at math.”

“That’s nothing; you should see me do long division.”

“Step out of these. Yes, they call it sired. But *they* are idiots. The sired thing? It’s complete nonsense.”

She placed her hand on my shoulder and then slowly stepped out of her jeans. I tossed them onto the rock that I had just been sitting on and stood up to retrieve my bedroll.

“I was born, Violet, just like you,” I explained. I positioned the bedroll close to the fire. “My father, Astor, was a vampire. My mother, Lillian, a human.”

“Are they...”

“Dead.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

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I picked up the blanket I had brought. "Don't be. It's the natural order of things. Like with Fred and Grace. Fred was my sister, Violet. She, too, was a vampire."

"But, I don't understand. You said vampires are immortal."

I sat down on the pallet and patted the space next to me. "Come."

She hesitated.

"Come, Violet. I'm not going to bite you," I teased.

"You're not?" she gulped.

"No. I'm not going to lie to you, Vi. The thought of tasting you is very tempting. But the blood of a human, it isn't something to take, something to steal."

"Right, only the warped vampires do that," she said matter-of-factly. "You're obviously not one of those."

"No," I laughed. "I'm only mildly neurotic."

She walked over, sat down beside me, and then stretched out, her body next to mine.

I wrapped my arm around her waist and then swiftly rolled. She was on top of me for an instant, then I had her positioned so that she was closest to the fire. Reflections from the orange glow of the flames danced across her face.

"Amazing," she whispered, searching my eyes.

"What?"

"You. We're not from two different worlds, Ren. We're from the same world. It's just that until yesterday we didn't know it," she said, reaching up to trace the outline of my mouth. "Well, you knew about me—"

"Violet, relationships between humans and vampires... Well, they aren't supposed to happen. Without meaning to... I've affected you, making you want me. I don't want you doing something that you'll later regret."

"Regret? No regrets, Ren," she whispered, rubbing her soft cheek against mine. "Tell me this doesn't feel right to you. Tell me you don't want me as much as I want you. Tell me this...my coming here...tell me it wasn't meant to be."

"You don't understand. You don't appreciate what it all means, trust me. You're not prepared to live with the consequences," I told her. But even as I said it, my hand

wandered to her breast. I cupped it in my palm, feeling the weight of it and wanting my mouth on it.

“I know one thing,” she said as she leaned up, brushing her lips against mine. “I know I’m not prepared to just walk away from this, from you.”

I reached my hand back behind her neck, pulling her towards me, crushing my lips to hers, unleashing the passion that I felt, the passion that I’d been holding back. She released a moan, opened her mouth and I slid my tongue inside. I reminded myself that she was wanting, willing and I slowed down, so that I could savor her.

“I want you,” she gasped, breaking off the kiss and reaching for the buckle of my belt.

“Violet-” I began. She silenced me, placing a finger over my lips.

“Shh. I’m a big girl, Ren. I know what I’m doing. I want you so much. Make love to me, Ren. Make love to me.”

I heard it as she pulled down the zipper of my trousers and then I felt her hand as it wrapped around my cock. Her hand may have been cold, but her touch warmed me like no other. She squeezed me slightly and then stroked me confidently up and down my shaft. It made me impossibly harder. My resistance was crumbling and I no longer cared. I wanted her, this, plain and simple.

“This isn’t just sex, Violet.”

“Oh, Ren,” she moaned, taking my hand and leading it inside her panties, guiding my fingers to her moistened curls. “Feel that? Feel what you do to me? Feel how much I want you.”

I sat up and pulled my sweater off over my head, then tossed it carelessly onto the dusty floor of the cave along with my fears and doubts, along with the prejudiced judgments that I had lived with for centuries.

Violet reached out for me and I fell back into her waiting arms. I kissed a path from behind her ear down the length of her neck, enjoying the cool feel of her skin beneath my warm mouth. I could hear the blood rushing in her veins and the promise of even a drop of it was almost overwhelming. The low rumble began to build, unbidden, in my chest. I steadily moved down her body, intent on devouring her, tasting every inch of her.

She was magnificent, spread out beneath me, breathing heavily. Violet’s chest was rising and falling as I lowered the cups of her bra fully revealing her exquisite breasts to me. I palmed one, rolling its already pebbled nipple between my thumb and forefinger before bending down and giving freely into my yearning need to latch onto it.

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“Christ! Oh! Oh, Ren!” she gasped as she reached down and threaded her fingers through my hair.

The head of my cock was rubbing up and down along the outside of her panties. I could feel her dampness through the thin barrier. “I want to be inside of you,” I admitted, releasing her breast and looking deep into her eyes.

Violet reached down and rubbed her hand across the head of my cock, spreading the moisture that she discovered there.

“I want that, too,” she whispered.

“I don’t have any protection. I- I’ve never needed it before. Vampire women, they can’t have children. I-”

“I’ve got that covered, Ren,” she said as she slid her panties aside and guided me.

My eyes locked on hers. The head of my cock brushed up against her soft curls and she gasped, then smiled and nodded her encouragement. I tilted my hips forward, wanting only to be closer, to be in her, to feel her wet heat surround me. I slid between her lips, separating her folds, slipping past her swollen clit. She was slick with desire, desire for me, a vampire.

Her tongue darted out to wet her lips and she closed her eyes.

“No, look at me,” I begged as I entered her. “See me, who, what I am. I need to know that... I need to know that you realize...”

And she did. Violet opened her eyes, her gaze meeting mine.

“I see you, Byron Renfied,” she said, pulling me deep inside, her legs wrapping around my hips.

She reached up and licked the outside shell of my ear and then pulled my earlobe into her lush mouth, sucking on it rhythmically.

“I see you,” she murmured again.

I pulled back slightly for a moment, wondered if this could really be happening. “Do you?” I asked her.

“Yes.”

I leaned down and rested my forehead against hers. I closed my eyes and inhaled, slowly. I could smell the rain outside and the burning wood. I could smell my shampoo in her hair and the lingering scent of my soap on her face. The sound of the wind and

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rain outside, the crackling of the fire, those little sounds she was making. I intended to remember all of it. Always. Forever.

I kept the pace controlled and steady, wanting to bring her slowly to climax, wanting to make this first time last forever, wanting it to be perfect.

“So good,” she moaned, arching up, her body taut.

I slipped my hand under her waist and lifted her slightly. The base of my cock dragged across her swollen clit with each thrust, heightening her pleasure.

She moved her hands to my shoulders and held on. Her head was thrown back, her neck stretched out before me. It was an unwitting invitation, I knew. But it moved me nonetheless.

“I wish I could spend eternity like this. Inside of you, just like this,” I confessed.

“Oh, Ren!” she cried out.

I continued to move, deep inside of her, churning my hips over and over, her slick walls coating me with her hot juices. I felt it as she began to tremble around me. The realization that her orgasm was seconds away almost made me lose control. I stopped for a moment, trying to stave it off, trying to regain my composure.

“Don’t stop,” she panted. “Don’t ever stop. I want this to last forever. Please... Ren...make it last forever!”

“I can’t give you forever, Violet, I wish that I could.”

“Baby, let’s see how close we can get,” she whispered and then she kissed me.

In that instant Violet Deeds became my world, utterly and irrevocably. The rumble in my chest was no longer a warning to heed. It was like a sounding of trumpets, a signal to celebrate. I felt my fangs elongate as I leaned down, trailing hot opened mouth kisses down the side of her face, over her jaw line, to that spot on her neck, the one just below and behind her ear, the one that was to become mine. I had no misgivings. There was no hesitation. I latched on, firmly, my mouth covering her flesh and then I did it. My fangs pierced her flesh, sliding inside of her with one sure thrust, before instantly retracting. My mouth filled with her essence.

The taste of her was powerful, even more so than I had imagined it would be. As that first bit of her blood coated my tongue I was struck by how incredibly sweet it was. It warmed my throat when I swallowed, then the heat built, rising inside of my body, creating a slow burn.

The roar in my chest broke free unbidden, forcing me to release her neck. It sounded fierce and raw and primitive. It sounded exactly like I felt at that moment. Never had I felt such excitement, such hunger. I wanted more of her. No, I needed all of her. I reared up and searched Violet's face, looking for signs of fear, hoping to get encouragement or at the very least permission to continue.

Violet was radiant with her wild mane of hair spread out beneath her, her deep green eyes shimmering with unshed tears. The firelight danced across her skin, creating shadows and painting it so that it glowed. Her chest was flush with arousal and her lips were full and red from the fervor of my kisses.

My hips began to churn, over and over, picking up the pace of that ancient rhythm as my eyes were drawn to my mark, there on her neck, exactly where it was destined to be, exactly where it belonged. I leaned down and lapped up the thin rivulet of glorious nectar that leaked from it. I could feel it as Violet's pussy began to quiver around my cock, pulling me deeper still. I was on the precipice and she was right there with me.

"Yes!" she cried out. "Oh! Yes!"

I latched back onto my mark and took a forceful pull.

"Oh, Ren!" she screamed, her voice rough with passion as a powerful orgasm began to wrack her body. I took another pull from her neck as I thrust into her one more time, one last time, spilling my seed, tasting her, taking her, claiming her as mine, for always.

The echoes of Violet's scream bounced off of the walls of the cave. The ecstasy showing in her face filled me with a strange sense of pride. Instinctually I leaned down and lapped at the twin set of punctures on her neck until the wound sealed.

"Ren?"

"Hmm?"

"That was..."

"Amazing," I finished.

"Yes," she agreed, caressing the side of my face. "Amazing. Though you did fall a bit short of forever."

Chapter 4

Bile rose up in my throat. She hadn't understood. How stupid had I been? What had I done? I'd heard what I wanted to hear. I'd moved too rashly.

I stood up quickly and hastily tossed the blanket at her before I walked over to the entrance of the cave and stepped outside. Heedless of the cold I let the rain pour down on me. I threw my head back, then with my arms outstretched, fists clenched, I let out an unbridled roar. Its sound bounded off the rocks and echoed through the nearby caves before being swallowed by the wind and the rain and the vastness of the ocean below.

“What’s wrong?”

“Leave me be!” I shouted as I heard her approach.

She wrapped her hand gently around my bicep. “Come on—”

My eyes flashed red and I rounded on her, making no attempt to hide my fury. “Have you no sense, woman?” I ground out, struggling to maintain some degree of control.

She released me and stepped back. She was wearing my cashmere coat. The hem hung down to the ground, the sleeves completely covered her arms. She looked so small and fragile. “I was just teasing, Ren. You were incredible. *We* were incredible. I didn’t mean to insult your performance. You—”

“It’s too late, Violet! I didn’t understand. I misunderstood. I...”

“Misunderstood what?”

“When you said that you wanted it to last forever, you were talking about the sex. Weren’t you, Violet?”

“Yes.”

“You wanted me to *fuck* you forever...that’s what you meant.”

“I wouldn’t call it fucking. What did you think I meant? Did you think I was proposing marriage?” she asked.

“Vampires don’t get married. We mate, Violet. Once. For life. Through the Claim.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. Oh.”

I walked with purpose back into the cave and kicked sand over the fire, smothering the flames.

“So what now?”

"I'm going back to the house," I said picking up two of the bottles of scotch. "I'm going to take a hot bath and have a really big drink."

"Kind of early for a drink, don't you think," she murmured.

I rounded on her, enraged. How dare she. Just who did she think she was? I drink what I want, when I want. I eat what I want, when I want. And except for a short list of prohibited items, I *do* what I want, when I want. I am immortal. Or...at least I used to be.

I pointed the bottle at her and yelled, "You come in here with that sexy walk, those big innocent eyes, your beautiful hair and..."

"And what?"

"And you've turned my life upside-down, that's what! I told you that this wasn't just sex!"

"And it wasn't, not for me, either. I think this is maybe something we could build on."

"Build on," I repeated, my voice sounding hollow.

"Yes!" she said, enthusiastically.

I shook my head. She was shaking like a leaf. Our union was too fresh, she was still vulnerable, and she would be for months. I threw one of the bottles of scotch against the rocks below and then I leaned down, picking her up and throwing her over my shoulder. I looked down at the rocks below and the image of my mother's crushed body lying on the cobblestone of our courtyard swam before me. I would not repeat my father's mistakes. Not all of them, anyways.

"I need to get you inside," I told her. "It's my job to take care of you now."

"Put me down! I can take care of myself. I can walk. My ankle is fine. I walked down here, didn't I?"

I paid no attention, moving quickly. My strength was not only restored, her blood had magnified it.

The house was cold. Of course it would be cold. She probably had no idea how to start a fire and not enough sense to find the thermostat and turn the heat up. I flipped the switch on the thermostat by the staircase and then proceeded up them, taking two at a time.

"I don't understand why you're so upset," she pouted as I walked through the doorway to my bedroom and then dropped her, rather carelessly, onto the bed.

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I walked over to the fireplace, crouched down, picked up the matches, and struck one. “You don’t see why I’m upset?” I asked, my voice sounding much calmer and steadier than I felt at the moment. I tossed some tinder onto the grate and watched it catch, taking some measure of comfort in the familiar ritual.

“Can’t you explain?”

“Can’t I explain?”

“This is going to take much longer to straighten out if you’re going to insist on repeating everything I say.”

I stood up and faced her. Boy, was that ever a mistake. She was sitting up, one leg tucked under her, the other trailing slightly behind. She was leaning forward on her left arm and on the left shoulder my coat had slipped a bit, exposing one perfect breast. Her eyes were shining with tears and her hair was glistening from the morning rain. My eyes met hers and my mouth went dry. I was already once again craving the feel of her, the smell of her, the taste of her. It took every bit of strength I had not to cross those three feet and gather her up into my arms. But there were things to be said, and fucking her again wasn’t going to change that.

“I did explain. Well, I tried...last night I...” I turned around to face the fire and busied myself adding a log to the flame.

“Try again,” she said softly. She stood up and walked over to me. Placing her hand on my shoulder, she added, “Please, Ren, don’t shut me out.”

I turned and studied her for a moment. She was frightened and uncertain. She wanted me still, yet I could sense that she regretted moving so quickly. Sadder still, I was acutely aware that a part of her regretted having come here at all. I could feel what she was feeling now, whether I wanted to or not.

“I can’t really shut you out, Vi. No more than you can shut me out. We’re joined now. It’s something that can’t be undone. The transformation, it’s already started.”

“Transformation?”

“Your Awakening. We need to talk.”

“That’s never good,” she said, anxiously. “Nothing good ever follows ‘we need to talk’, Ren.”

“Blow.”

“Huh?”

“Blow.” I released a warm breath into the cold of the living room. It condensed and hung in the air before dissipating.

She followed my lead, then shrugged. “So, it’s still cold in here.”

“Do you feel it?” I said, opening up the front of the overcoat and unabashedly raking my eyes over her body. She wore only the black thong and stockings now.

Violet smiled. “Well, not when you look at me like that.”

I slipped my coat off of her shoulders and watched it pool at her feet before I interlaced my hand with hers then led her over to the mirror above the hearth. Standing behind her, I leaned her head back every so slightly and tilted her head, showing her the set of twin puncture wounds. “You’re my mate, Violet. You gave your blood and your body to me. You gave it willingly. Mating transcends the bonds of marriage. There’s no such thing as a vampire divorce. This is for life, Vi. As time passes, you’ll begin to take on some vampire characteristics.”

“You turned me into a vampire?” she asked, her voice bordering on hysteria.

“No. Something...in between. Your senses will sharpen, your aging process will slow, you’ll get stronger—”

“Now I need a drink,” she said as she lowered herself to the floor.

“I’ll get you some water,” I replied, starting for the bathroom.

“Don’t bother.”

I turned back just in time to see Violet reach for the bottle of scotch and unscrew the cap.

“Explain,” she said before tilting the bottle back and letting the amber liquid trickle into her throat.

I walked over to my chest of drawers, pulled out a cream-colored cashmere sweater and tossed it over to her. “Slip this on. You may not feel cold, but you’re still vulnerable to—”

“The magic is gone,” she quipped from underneath the oversized garment. “Mated less than one hour and you can’t stand the sight of me.” Then she took another drink and hiccupped. Christ, she could be adorable.

“Are you going to get drunk?” I asked, stepping into a pair of black sweatpants. “It’d be perfectly understandable.”

"I don't know yet," she said taking another swig. "Want some?"

"Nah," I shook my head and joined her on the floor. I stared into the flames of the fire. I didn't know where to start...how to explain. "I'm not sure where to begin."

"Take your time," she said. "After all, you've got all the time in the world, right?"

I reached for the bottle, took a deep swallow, then set it aside. "Maybe that's where I should start. I'm not. Immortal that is. Not anymore. When a vampire and a human mate...something happens. The balance is upset. That's why it's forbidden. I'm tied to you now, Violet. Our life force has been joined. When you die, I die. I'll turn to dust when you leave this life and only then. Like with Grace and Fred."

"That's what happened to Grace?"

"Fred and Grace were mated for a bit over three hundred and fifty years. Grace was human, like you."

Violet closed her eyes and began to massage her temples. "I'm not feeling so well. Could you close the curtains? It's awfully bright in here. And...I hate to say it, but you need a bath. You smell like—"

"I've just had wonderfully illicit sex?"

"Ren!" she scolded.

"Sorry. Everything's the same, Violet, it's just that your senses are sharpening."

She shivered. "You're scared," she observed.

"Terrified," I admitted, climbing to my feet. "I best start the bath."

"I can feel it, your fear. And...you can feel what I feel?" she asked, following me into the bathroom.

I nodded. "No secrets. Although I've heard that over time some couples learn to mask their emotions and guard against the intrusion."

"You're afraid I'm going to want to leave," she said as I turned on the taps and stopped up the enormous whirlpool tub.

I turned to face her. "And you're afraid I'm going to expect you to stay."

"Oh, God!" moaned Violet placed one hand over her chest. "I—I can't breathe... Is this part of the awaken thing?"

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“Awakening, and no. At least I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so!” she yelled, her upper chest quickly rising and falling as she continued to take quick shallow breaths. “You’re the goddamned expert here, Byron!”

Oh-oh. It was back to Byron again.

“You’re just hyperventilating,” I told her, trying my best to appear steady and calm.

“Or having a heart attack...”

“You’re not having a heart attack,” I assured her, as I quickly divested her of her clothes. “You’re just anxious. Let me help,” I said, sweeping her hair over her shoulder, exposing her neck and giving me access to my mark.

“What are you doing?” she gasped. Blinded by fear, she pushed me away.

“Don’t be afraid, Violet. I’m not about to hurt you. I plan to live at least another three hundred years. Remember...you go...I go.”

Her eyes connected with mine in the bathroom mirror. I wrapped my arm around her waist and pulled her flush to my body. “Feel my intentions,” I whispered in her ear. “You know what I want; I’m going to take care of you,” I told her. Then I leaned down and once again pierced my mark.

As soon as the wound opened I felt her begin to calm, the connection soothing her, reassuring her. I pulled her blood into my mouth and I poured my heart out to her, letting her feel the pain and the hurt, the fear and the doubt, the hope and the longing. When her knees weakened, I was there to catch her. I lifted her into my arms and lapped up the last remnants of her essence before placing her in the bath.

She looked up at me with heavy lidded eyes. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“The next few hours will be difficult. You’re going to crave my bite, Violet, just like I’ll crave your blood.”

She was shaking almost uncontrollably despite the heat of the water. “Y—you w—won’t leave me?”

“Never,” I promised as I shed my sweatpants and climbed in behind her. “I’ll never leave you,” I murmured into her ear as I pulled her back against my chest and nuzzled her neck.

I picked up a sponge, dipped it into the water, poured some of my clove bath gel onto it, then began to wash her back.

“Smells good,” she sighed leaning back against me as I reached around and began to glide the sponge across her breasts, taking care to encircle each dusky pink nipple before sliding down to wash her stomach.

“Close your eyes,” I murmured. “Relax.”

I dipped the sponge into the water and ran it over her sex. She squirmed a bit, lifting her hips, seeking more pressure. She wanted me, again. The scent of her arousal mingled with the spicy aroma of the bath gel was extraordinary. A soft rumble began to emerge from my chest, slow and steady.

“Mmm,” she moaned placing her hands on my knees and squeezing. “I can feel the vibrations.”

I smiled. “You like it.” I released the sponge into the water, then I reached down with one hand, separating her folds. I found her slick as I circled her clit with my thumb, taunting her, teasing her. I pulled gently on her nipple with my other hand, enjoying the hardness of it, rolling it between my thumb and forefinger. “You want to feel my mouth on you?”

“Yes,” she gasped, arching up.

“Where?” I asked, sliding my finger deep inside of her. “Here?”

Violet moaned.

“Or maybe here?” I suggested, tugging on her other nipple. My dick was unbelievably hard and I wanted her again desperately. I slipped another finger inside of her. She rode my hand wantonly, climbing, reaching, seeking release. I felt her uncertainty for a moment and I paused. Her rocking motions ceased and I removed my hand.

Violet turned around to face me. “Look at me, Byron.”

I did.

“You’re right. This isn’t just about sex,” she said as she lifted up and then lowered herself, slowly taking me inside of her. “I can feel how much you care about me, how badly you want me. It’s all right, Byron. Say it.”

“This is crazy, Violet. We barely know one another. I can’t—”

“Yes, you can,” she said, kissing me tenderly on the mouth, sliding up and down.

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Our tempo was building. Violet wrapped her arms around my neck and I latched onto her breast, sucking it into my mouth, flicking her hardened nipple as I thrust into her.

“Oh, baby. You’re so deep,” she moaned. “That feels so good.”

Violet’s soft velvet walls clenched around my cock, pulsating. When I reached down between us and encircled her clit, she was slick with honeyed desire and I was desperate for a taste of her sweetness. There would be time for that. That and so much more.

“Ren!” she gasped as I pinched her swollen bud. The rhythm built.

I released her breast with a pop. “You’re so wet,” I said, amazed, rubbing my drenched fingers together. “Come for me, Violet. Come all over my cock,” I commanded. Then I kissed her passionately and snaked my hand around her waist, past the small of her back, down between the cheeks of her ass. I began to circle her tight hole, gently probing, seeking entrance.

Violet gasped. Her eyes wide as my index finger, coated with her juices, eased inside. I felt her body tense. She paused, her fingers digging into my shoulders.

“Relax,” I said. “Breathe. It’s going to feel so good. I promise. We’ll go slowly... Trust me.”

“I trust you,” she said, smiling down at me as she eased back down the length of my cock, letting my finger penetrate her at the same time.

I moved my finger in and out, matching the rhythm of my other thrusts, waiting until she again relaxed and then I added a second. Her muscles clamped down, her body seizing up momentarily at the intrusion.

“Oh, God!”

In and out. In and out.

“That’s it, sweetheart. Come for me.”

“I...I need...”

“I know what you need,” I told her, picking up the pace...harder...faster. The purr in my chest now a steady rumble. I was breathing heavily and Violet... She was panting. Her hair was damp. Her body was slick with sweat. She was glowing, and it was all my doing. Perspiration gathered in the hollow of her throat and glistened on her chest. I lapped it up, tasting the lingering salt on her flesh, it was delicious and so unmistakably her.

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I felt my fangs begin to elongate. Violet grabbed the back of my hair and yanked my head back, forcefully. I growled, more from surprise than anything else. Then she stared into my bright red eyes and crushed her lips to mine, sweeping her tongue inside my mouth, nicking the side of it on my fang. As her blood filled my mouth I came with a roar and so did she. Tremors wracked her body while I spilled my seed inside of her womb.

“You know...” I gasped between breaths, “...the more we practice, the better we’re going to get at this.”

Violet was draped over me, her head resting on my shoulder, her arms dangling down my back.

“I’m afraid you’re going to kill me,” she groaned.

I pulled her from me, held her face in my hands and gazed searchingly into her eyes. “Did I hurt you? I was registering a little pain...but there was also pleasure so I thought...”

“You thought right. I’m feeling a little light-headed, though.”

“You need water and rest. Up you go. Let’s pull the stopper, take a quick shower, and get some sleep.”

“Then what?”

“Then we’ll eat to replenish our energy so that we can make love again.”

“That is what it was, wasn’t it?”

“It was for me,” I whispered, feeling suddenly shy. I leaned my forehead against hers and closed my eyes.

“Me, too,” she whispered back.

~

I woke starved...for more of Violet. Although we had fallen asleep in one another’s arms she was now lying on her back, arms outstretched above her head, her wrists dangerously close to the handcuffs that still dangled from my headboard. Another time, I thought as I sat up. The bed sheet pooled at my waist. I looked down upon my mate, her countenance tranquil. She looked completely sated. But I vowed to do better.

“I want to please you. I want to learn everything about you,” I told her as I began to ease down her body. Her stomach was taut and quivered beneath my mouth. “You’re ticklish,” I said trailing my kisses lower still. “Open up for me. I want to taste you. I want to look at you—”

"I'm sleeping, you sex fiend," she murmured, allowing me to spread her legs apart despite her earlier protest.

"Right. So I'll do all the work. You just lay there and...rest."

Her pussy was already moist. I separated her outer lips and breathed deeply. "Your scent is amazing," I whispered reverently before slowly dragging my tongue up the length of her sopping channel.

I felt ravenous, that first taste only whetting my appetite. Inflamed, I began to fervently explore her inner folds with the tip of my tongue. Violet moaned, her hips rising off the bed. I glanced up in time to see her reaching up to grab hold of the headboard's iron bars. Her cream flowed into my waiting mouth and I greedily lapped it up, relishing its taste and the newfound feelings that the evidence of her arousal had awakened in me. She was mine and I would, in my lifetime, possess her wholly, fully, completely—in every way and as often as I liked.

I felt Violet lace her fingers through my hair and when I looked up I found that she was gazing down at me, wonder in her lust-filled eyes. I pulled back slightly and smiled. Then, using just the tip of my tongue, I teasingly flicked her now fully engorged clit.

"Ren!" she gasped.

I paused for the briefest of moments, then pulled her closer to me still and dove back in, taking her swollen nubbin between my teeth, tugging on it with abandon.

"Oh, God!" she cried.

I latched my mouth onto her completely, sucking hungrily on the sensitive bundle of nerves.

"Tell me what you want," I demanded, wiping her juices from my chin with the back of my hand and then eagerly licking them up.

"You," she said simply, reaching for my cock. "I just want you. All of you."

"You have me, Violet," I told her, sliding two fingers inside her pussy. She was trembling beneath my touch, her release approaching.

"Yes! No! I want you inside of me. I want your cock inside of me. Please, Ren."

I gently curled the fingers of the hand moving inside of her forward, searching for the spot that would ensure her release. Violet's breathing was becoming more and more ragged.

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“Whatever my baby wants,” I told her, removing my hand and driving my cock inside of her. She pushed back, matching my urgency, impaling herself on me. I wrapped one arm around her waist and reached up to grasp the iron rail with my free hand.

“Oh, God!” she moaned in anticipation.

This was Eden, I decided, pulling out and then burying myself in her once again, moving closer and closer to my mark.

“Christ, I think I’ve found Paradise. I could spend eternity just like this...” I whispered into the shell of her ear, my fangs elongating.

“Well *that’s* certainly not going to happen. What the hell are you thinking, Byron!”

Violet shrieked. With lightning speed I pulled out of her, tossing the coverlet over her nude body to shield her.

“Rita, fuck! You could have knocked!” I was furious.

“You know her?” asked Violet.

I stormed into the bathroom just long enough to retrieve my sweatpants. “Rita, Violet. Violet, Rita. Rita’s my...”

“Lover,” filled in Rita.

I tried to remain calm and to *not* feel guilty. What I had with Rita was irrelevant now. And it was about sex, not love. Never love.

“That’s an exaggeration and you know it,” I told Rita, quickly stepping into my sweats. “Violet, Rita’s my consort and...sometimes I think of her as a friend. I have feelings for her, yes, but they aren’t the same feelings that I have for you. You’ve got to know the truth of that, Violet.”

“I believe you,” she said getting up from the bed and wrapping the coverlet around her.

“She believes you? Just like that?” Rita gasped, horrified. “You went and put her in thrall!”

“That’s not true, I’ve been suppressing since she arrived, well...mostly.”

“Oh, my God! Tell me you didn’t, Byron,” said Rita as she walked over towards Violet, clearly having seen the mark on her neck.

Violet backed away.

“Idiot!” shouted Rita at me. “How long?”

“Maybe six or seven hours ago,” I told her. “It can’t be undone. More importantly, I don’t *want* to undo it. I love her,” I said defiantly.

Rita began to laugh. “Are you stoned? You’re going to throw everything away for *her*?”

“Hey!” interjected Violet.

Rita continued, “This isn’t love, Byron. Your chemistry’s been upset. This is nothing more than that. Her presence here has weakened and distracted you.” She held her hands out in front of Vi and then took an unsteady step back. “She’s strong, very strong. I’ll give you that. You nasty girl! Have you any idea what you’ve done?”

“Back off,” I told Rita, stepping between them, intent on protecting my mate. “This isn’t—”

“She’s a mistake!” Rita hissed. “There must be some way...”

“Will you two stop speaking as if I weren’t here!” shouted Violet over my shoulder.

“Sorry, honey,” I said turning to face her, and reaching out to smooth down her mussed hair.

Violet was inconsolable. “Don’t you honey me! What does she mean that my presence here has weakened you? Tell me the truth!” she commanded, poking me in the chest.

“Nothing,” I said, flashing Rita an angry glare. “Pay no attention to the jealous shrew, who is fired by the way.”

I couldn’t have her drive a wedge between Violet and I. Not now. Not ever. But she was starting to do just that.

“Bullshit! You’re panicking, Byron,” Violet accused.

Shit. I forgot that she could read me like an open book now.

“Talk to me,” she pleaded.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re beautiful when you’re angry?” I asked.

“You’re stalling. If you don’t start talking—” she threatened.

“Jealous shrew?” interjected Rita. “Please! I’m your friend and you know it. They’ll make you step down, Byron. And that won’t be good for anyone. The trust will fall apart. Think about the future of the children. Think about the example you—”

“Children? You have children?” cried Violet, outraged.

“That’s enough!” I cried out.

My ears were ringing and my head was spinning. I grabbed a sweatshirt out of the closet and fled, pulling it over my head on my way down the stairs, slipping my arms into the sleeves. Both Violet and Rita followed me—like a pair of persistently annoying pit bulls. I ignored them. I sat down in front of my computer and fired it up, intent on drowning myself in the exciting world of stock analysis.

Think about the children? What had Rita imagined I’d been thinking about, day in and day out, year after year? I’d dedicated myself to serving the Chosen and to serving the Clan. How dare she?

“Are you just going to ignore us?”

I figured the best way to answer that was to remain silent and hope that they took the hint and went away. I needed time to think.

“Byron—” began Rita.

I held up my hand to silence her.

She was unrelenting. “It’s Saturday, the markets are closed. *We must* sort this out. You have to—”

“Stop!” I growled standing up, my eyes flashing red. “You *don’t* tell me what to do.”

“Well, someone obviously has to,” she mocked.

“I am still Dominie,” I reminded her.

“Your status won’t matter. In this case, it’s likely to work against you. You will be expelled and you know it. As soon as they find out—”

“They’re not going to find out.”

“They *always* find out eventually and—”

Anger was rising in me like I have never experienced before. A part of me knew that Rita was speaking the truth, but I didn’t want to hear it. I had earned my status. I had worked hard to achieve it. I wasn’t about to just let it go without a fight.

Violet must have sensed it building, the emotional tie that now existed between us telegraphing a portent of what was to come. She scrambled backwards, practically

tripping over the coverlet that was still wrapped around her. I was within the space of a moment all red eyes and fangs and towering over Rita, an indignant roar echoing throughout the room.

“That’s better,” I declared once the roar faded to a low rumble. I looked down upon Rita, kneeling before me, her eyes downcast in subjugation. “You forget yourself,” I growled.

“Yeah?” asked Violet. “Well, I still remember who I am,” she declared, walking up to me. “Put the fangs away, Byron. We need to talk this out.”

Un-fucking-believable. She was going to challenge me in front of someone? This I couldn’t have. The rumble in my chest remained steady and I gave her my most menacing glare.

Violet leaned in close and whispered in my ear, “I get it. You need to save face. But I’m not going to back down here. And I’m certainly not going to kneel before you, not like that. We’re connected, Ren. I know that you don’t want to hurt me.”

“That doesn’t mean that I won’t,” I barked.

She looked at me, a bit shocked at first, then she smiled and said softly, “Don’t ever play poker with me, baby.” She leaned up and nuzzled my neck. “It’s going to be all right,” she promised. “We’ll figure this out, Ren. We’re in this together.”

Together. I felt the need to connect with her again, to wrap my arms around her and reaffirm our bond. There was so much we had yet to experience of one another. I remembered the handcuffs and an image of Violet tied to the bed swam before my eyes.

“Rita, go home!” I said as I reached for Violet’s hand and began to lead her towards the stairs.

“I can take her with me!” Rita shouted, jumping to her feet.

“What? No!”

“You plan on holding her prisoner here, Byron? Like your father held your mother prisoner? Is that what you want?”

“She’s not my prisoner!” I insisted. Then I looked at Violet. “You’re not my prisoner.”

“When do you plan on releasing her?”

Violet’s anxiety was rapidly rising. “I can’t stay here forever, Ren. I have patients back home, a life—”

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“We don’t have to stay here forever,” I assured her, reaching up to caress her neck, rubbing my thumb across my mark to soothe her.

Almost instantly her heart rate and pulse began to slow down, just as I knew it would.

“He’s manipulating you, Violet. He’s manipulating you through the Claim,” said Rita.

Violet looked up at me, her eyes flooding with tears. “He doesn’t mean to,” she said.

And I didn’t. I wanted her to stay with me, yes. But more than anything I wanted her to *want* to stay—to *choose* to stay. I wanted to deserve her, to be worthy of what she had given me. I just...wanted to love her.

I swallowed, hard, and then I said it. “I love you, Violet.”

“I know,” she nodded as the tears began to spill over. “Please don’t ask me to give up who and what I am.”

I felt as if I were drowning.

“I’m not,” I insisted.

“What does it mean to be Dominie? Tell me about the children,” she asked, tears now rolling down her cheek. “What have you risked for me?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I insisted, practically choking on the words as I wiped the tears from her face.

She sat down on the bottom step and just looked up at me, waiting for a response. Several minutes passed before I took my place beside her. I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and pulled her close.

“I’ve devoted my life to serving the Clan, Violet. My conduct has been exemplary. I’ve followed the rules. I’ve obeyed the Canon. I’ve served as Treasurer of The Trust for the past three hundred and fifty years or so.”

“The Trust?”

“I was appointed to the position of Treasurer right before Fred and Grace became mates. It has grown tremendously under my direction. It supports our Chosen children. It’s large enough now that the Dominie draw an annuity from it.”

“What do you mean by chosen children, Ren? What are they chosen to do?”

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“Children born from a mating such as ours, a mating between a male vampire and a female mortal, can be either mortal or immortal. The mortal children are believed to be blessed, favored by the highest power.”

“Favored how?”

“They will someday join Him in the afterlife.”

“And those that are immortal?”

“Are here to serve. If we serve well...we get elevated. In the end, those that are elevated, the Dominie, will get their reward.”

“What end, Byron. You’re immortal...or...you were.”

“This world won’t last forever, Violet. The end will come. And when it does, the Dominie will join Him.”

“And you’re one of those? A Dominie?”

“After serving as Treasurer for two centuries, they elevated me. I’m the youngest to ever have the title bestowed upon them.”

“And you’ve taken that from him,” accused Rita.

“Oh, Ren,” she sniffed. “I’ve stolen heaven from you? Not that I believe in heaven, but...”

“It’s all right, Vi,” I assured her, taking her face in the palms of my hands. “Don’t cry. You didn’t take it away. Don’t you see? You’ve given it to me. We’ll be all right, baby.”

“It’s not going to be all right, Byron. Do you think they will let you walk away from this? They let you in. They trusted you. They can’t *afford* to let this go.”

“It’s not like I want to quit, I—”

“You are so naïve! They’re not going to let you stick around! They’ve held you up as an example! You’re their golden boy, what all the little vamps are supposed to aspire to be. You’re a dead man, Byron.”

“They can’t kill me, Rita.”

“They can now.”

Rita didn’t have to say another word; she glanced at Violet and it hit me like a ton of bricks. And in that instant, Violet realized it, too. They’d go after her, and in doing so

they'd get rid of both of us. I'd disappear. I'd be replaced. And the secret of my *failure* would remain just that, a secret.

"I'm not ready to die," said Violet.

Fred's dying words rang in my ears, "*When they talk of me I want you to tell them that with my last breath I said I had no regrets, welcomed death, and expressed my unwavering devotion to the woman I loved. Promise me, Ren. I won't have people scaring their children with tales of my mistake. My life wasn't a mistake.*"

"You're not going to die," I told her, my heart breaking. "Rita will see you home."

Just the mere thought of separating had me breaking out in a cold sweat.

She started trembling and unconsciously reached up to touch the mark I'd left on her neck.

I looked at Rita, "Stay with her until you're sure she's safe. Help her through the trauma of the separation."

"I thought you fired me?" she asked sarcastically.

I just glared at her.

"What about you?" asked Rita.

"I'll be fine as long as I know that Violet is all right," I lied. "Leave us."

I waited until Rita retreated to the kitchen, then I pulled Violet onto my lap and peeled the coverlet off of her, exposing her to me, and then I kissed her. I explored the warm, wet cavern of her mouth as if I was discovering it for the first time, trying to memorize the feel of it, taking pleasure in the taste of it. There was so much that I wanted to do, so much that I wanted to say, and so little time.

Never before in my existence had I felt the pressure of it—time. I'm not sure that I even appreciated the concept before. Now I knew that every second that ticked by was one less that I would get to spend with her. The taste of the salt from our co-mingled tears hit my tongue and I pulled back.

"You could come with me?" she said, only it was more of a question.

She felt frightened and desperate and uncertain.

I rested my forehead against hers and released a ragged sigh. I so much wanted to ease her pain, pain that she wouldn't have been feeling if she hadn't of come here. But the pain was real and I couldn't fix it, not today.

“I can’t right now. There are things I need to do first, arrangements that must be made. But I will come to you, Violet. Have no doubt about that. I will come to you. That is...if you want me.”

“When?”

“As soon as I can, as soon as it’s safe. I’ll find a place where we can meet...maybe someplace in England or Ireland. Scotland is nice.”

“I live in San Diego, Byron,” she said, brushing away her tears.

“It’s awfully sunny there, Vi.”

“All the more reason. They’d never suspect you’d be there. Right?”

“Maybe. It’s true what she said, you know. There is chemistry involved, physical need driving this attraction, Violet. I don’t want you to—”

Violet placed her hand over my mouth and looked me in the eye. “Do you believe in love at first sight?”

I chuckled. “Until last night I didn’t believe in love at all.”

“Look inside yourself, Byron. Look inside of me. Feel what I feel. This is real. I don’t know how or why...but I do know that I want to hold onto it...onto you.”

She was right. There were feelings, strong feelings. “Until death do us part?” I murmured against her ear.

“Until death do us part, baby,” she replied.

I sunk my fangs deep into her neck and renewed our bond, then carried her upstairs and made love to her one last time. That final encounter wasn’t about passion. It was about solace. It was about a promise being made and a commitment being kept. It was about mourning the loss of one another and rejoicing in the discovery of life and love. Certainly not the life or love that we had planned on, I’ll give you that. But who’s really good at planning these things? Certainly not me.

Violet left with Rita the following morning after an emotional goodbye. The sky was completely clouded over and the rain was pouring down in torrents. It was barely 8:00 a.m. when I watched the boat that Rita had come in take them away. I dragged my favorite black leather chair over to the large picture window so that I could drown my sorrows in merlot and watch as the small vessel that carried them became a distant dot on the horizon. Now, I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking *he just lets her go while he sits there and drinks?* The answer is yes. I drink what I want, when I want. I eat

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what I want, when I want. And except for a few things... I do what I want, when I want. And what I want...what I *will* have...is to be with her...always...and unconditionally.

I walked over to my G5 and sat down to run stock screens. I would have to plan this out carefully, so as not to garner too much attention. When the market opened in Tokyo, I wanted to be ready to execute the first wave of trades. I was going to need new accounts to start moving money into. And I was going to need a passport, credit cards, and an entire background—fast.

I leaned back in my chair, looked around my living room, and smiled at the irony of it all. My house had never felt so empty. My life had never felt so full of meaning. I had been living the fantasy...eternal youth, immortality, rich beyond anyone's wildest imagination, a private Island, an enormous house, status in the community...I was the envy of my friends...the few I had.

That is, until a slip of a girl came to me, tempting me to take a taste, just one, of her forbidden fruit. And I did have a taste. And it was good. The fruit was my redemption, and Violet became my paradise. I imagine that many would think me a fool for having paid such a cost, for giving up so much. I have no regrets. You see...I've found something truly priceless. I've found love.

The End

Coming Soon....Forbidden: The Awakening

Samantha Sommersby
Forbidden: The Claim

Samantha Sommersby has been writing romance since 2001. She was first published in 2005 and also has written under the pen name Lara Williams. Her background in the medical and specifically the psychiatric field is apparent in her work and allows her to bring a unique perspective to characters and stories. Sam loves to spend the day in her office creating—spinning rich tales, and weaving together interesting plots. Her aim is to create a hero that will literally sweep a reader off her feet.

She currently lives in Southern California with her husband of sixteen years, her twelve-year-old son, and a cocker spaniel named Buck. Sam's husband is a Social Worker who works with abused children. He's an avid sailor who loves to surf and you'll find bits of him in every hero that she's ever written. She describes her son as wonderfully sensitive with a sarcastic sense of humor. He plays the piano, composes his own music, is a competitive fencer, and worships video games.

Like most writers, she'll tell you that she's always desperately trying to balance her "real life" work, family, and writing. She still works a full-time job, writing in the wee hours of the morning or on weekends. When she does manage to set aside some "play" time for herself, then you'll most likely find her reading a book, at the movies, or out wine tasting (she collects California Cabernets).

To date she's been publishing with Linden Bay Romance and is extremely pleased to be a part of their family of authors. Sam loves to hear from readers and can be reached at:

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Other works by Samantha Sommersby:

Blazing Sun, Burning Hearts

It's 1917 and Lieutenant Jackson Crawford is in Arabia on an important mission. A seasoned soldier sent to ensure a victory that will secure British interests in the Suez Canal, Crawford was prepared for resistance from the prince; he was prepared for the crude weapons, the hellish sun, and the never-ending sand. What he wasn't prepared for was Harvard bred archeologist turned spy Lillian Barton Drake.

Weeks after Lilly's arrival in the desert she found herself in the center of a bloody massacre. Rescued by the prince, she travels as part of his entourage, doing her utmost to gain his trust while avoiding becoming a part of his harem. Then into the camp rides an exhausted Jackson.

In a twist of fate Jack fights for Lilly's honor risking life and limb to claim her as his own. Casting aside common sense the couple begin a passionate

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affair that sets the desert on fire and is guaranteed to melt your heart. Will their love be strong enough to survive the ravages of war, the duty they've sworn to their country, and the secrets of Jackson's past?

Trilogy No. 101

You just never know where you're going to find love....

Blackout: Ashley and Curt get trapped together in an elevator. As the temperature rises they begin to reveal themselves in more ways than one!

Touch the Fire: Firefighter Garrett Flint rescues the beautiful Nicole from a burning building and then breaks all the rules by taking her into his home and into his heart.

June in August: June Monroe grew up next door to Wiley Patton. When he left for Vietnam she was just fifteen and hopelessly in love. Now three years later he's returned from war and little June is all grown up.

In the Still of the Night

It begins with a chance meeting on a train. Psychiatrist Wesley Atherton meets the woman of his dreams, but when the train derails, a series of events are set in motion that has Wes racing against Death itself in order to save his new love, Katherine. Confronted by the unimaginable, Wes struggles to hold onto his own sanity as the couple fight against the dark force that endangers them and all those they hold dear.

Wes and Katherine quickly realize that it's a fine line between madness and mysticism, and between what's normal and what we don't understand. And it's a line they must cross to win.

Samantha Sommersby weaves an intricate tale of love threatened by ultimate evil. *In the Still of the Night* delivers a knock-out punch that will keep you on the edge of your seat and leave you begging for more.

As You Wish

Mystery, danger, true love, and the best-damned birthday present ever! *As You Wish* has it all.

The instant attraction Liz and William feel for one another produces enough heat to rival the Sahara. But William has secrets from his former life, and Liz's ability to trust in love again is tied to someone from her past. Before they can find happiness together, Liz and Will must put aside past tragedies and embrace a new definition of family.

Add in one psychic sister, a deranged stalker, and a group of tried and true friends (not to mention a sailing fantasy that is too hot to handle and a welcome home dinner so sexy it will make your mouth water) and *As You Wish* delivers whole-heartedly. It's a fast-paced story with exotic locales and characters that will warm your heart (whew - especially that William Carlton!). *As You Wish* is a story you will want to read over and over.

Shelter from the Storm

Jennifer Jones likes being in control. A violent incident from her past makes it an essential part of her life. After a surprise turn of events Jennifer finds herself searching for a new roommate. Enter Maclain Moore, sexy social worker, sensitive listener, and Jennifer's new boarder. Mac is no stranger to heartache. He's surrounded by it at work and has his own set of skeletons rattling around in the closet.

Unsuspecting Jennifer has no idea how far out of control her life is about to spin. Her attraction for Mac is undeniable and tempting. Soon after he moves in Jennifer is confronted with the news of the death of her estranged mother. Suddenly she's faced with the task of taking in her much younger sister, making her life even more crowded, messy and very, very scary.

This is a compelling story about two vulnerable people previously burned by love and thrown together by circumstance. Samantha Sommersby delivers whole-heartedly with this one. The growth of the relationship between the characters is wonderfully portrayed. We see the loss and the gain, the sadness and the joy, and most of all the passion. *Shelter from the Storm* reminds us that not everyone has to go looking for love. For a lucky few. Love finds them.

This is a publication of Linden Bay Romance

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