

1

I WAS DREAMING of cool flesh and sheets the color of fresh blood. The phone shattered the dream, leaving only fragments, a glimpse of midnight blue eyes, hands gliding down my body, his hair flung across my face in a sweet, scented cloud. I woke in my own house, miles from Jean-Claude with the feel of his body clinging to me. I fumbled the phone from the bedside table and mumbled, “Hello.”

“Anita, is that you?” It was Daniel Zeeman, Richard’s baby brother. Daniel was twenty-four and cute as a bug’s ear. Baby didn’t really cover it. Richard had been my fiancé once upon a time—until I chose Jean-Claude over him. Sleeping with the other man put a real crimp in our social plans. Not that I blamed Richard. No, I blamed myself. It was one of the few things Richard and I still shared.

I squinted at the glowing dial of the bedside clock. 3:10 A.M. “Daniel, what’s wrong?” No one calls at ten after the witching hour with good news.

He took a deep breath, as if preparing himself for the next line. “Richard’s in jail.”

I sat up, sheets sliding in a bundle to my lap. “What did you say?” I was suddenly wide awake, heart thudding, adrenaline pumping.

“Richard is in jail,” he repeated.

I didn’t make him say it again, though I wanted to. “What for?” I asked.

“Attempted rape,” he said.

“What?” I said.

Daniel repeated it. It didn’t make any more sense the second time I heard

it. "Richard is like the ultimate Boy Scout," I said. "I'd believe murder before I'd believe rape."

"I guess that's a compliment," he said.

"You know what I meant, Daniel. Richard wouldn't do something like that."

"I agree," he said.

"Is he in Saint Louis?" I asked.

"No, he's still in Tennessee. He finished up his requirements for his master's degree and got arrested that night."

"Tell me what happened."

"I don't exactly know," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"They won't let me see him," Daniel said.

"Why not?"

"Mom got in to see him, but they wouldn't let all of us in."

"Has he got a lawyer?" I asked.

"He says he doesn't need one. He says he didn't do it."

"Prison is full of people who didn't do it, Daniel. He needs a lawyer. It's his word against the woman's. If she's local and he isn't, he's in trouble."

"He's in trouble," Daniel said.

"Shit," I said.

"There's more bad news," he said.

I threw the covers back and stood, clutching the phone. "Tell me."

"There's going to be a blue moon this month." He said it very quietly, no explanation, but I understood.

Richard was an alpha werewolf. He was head of the local pack. It was his only serious flaw. We'd broken up after I'd seen him eat somebody. What I'd seen had sent me running to Jean-Claude's arms. I'd run from the werewolf to the vampire. Jean-Claude was Master of the City of Saint Louis. He was definitely not the more human of the two. I know there isn't a lot to choose from between a bloodsucker and a flesh-eater, but at least after Jean-Claude finished feeding, there weren't chunks between his fangs. A small distinction but a real one.

A blue moon meant a second full moon this month. The moon doesn't actually turn blue most of the time, but it is where the old saying comes from—once in a blue moon. It happens about every three years or so. It was August, and the second full moon was only five days away. Richard's control was very good, but I'd never heard of any werewolf, even an Ulfric, a pack leader, who could fight the change on the night of the full moon. No matter what flavor of animal you changed into, a lycanthrope was a lycanthrope. The full moon ruled them.

“We have to get him out of jail before the full moon,” Daniel said.

“Yeah,” I said. Richard was hiding what he was. He taught junior high science. If they found out he was a werewolf, he’d lose his job. It was illegal to discriminate on the basis of a disease, especially one as difficult to catch as lycanthropy, but they’d do it. No one wanted a monster teaching their kiddies. Not to mention that the only person in Richard’s family who knew his secret was Daniel. Mom and Pop Zeeman didn’t know.

“Give me a number to contact you at,” I said.

He did. “You’ll come down then,” he said.

“Yeah.”

He sighed. “Thanks. Mom is raising hell, but it’s not helping. We need someone here who understands the legal system.”

“I’ll have a friend call you with the name of a good local lawyer before I get there. You may be able to arrange bail by the time I arrive.”

“If he’ll see the lawyer,” Daniel said.

“Is he being stupid?” I asked.

“He thinks that having the truth on his side is enough.”

It sounded like something Richard would say. There was more than one reason why we’d broken up. He clung to ideals that hadn’t even worked when they were in vogue. Truth, justice, and the American way certainly didn’t work within the legal system. Money, power, and luck were what worked. Or having someone on your side that was part of the system.

I was a vampire executioner. I was licensed to hunt and kill vampires once a court order of execution had been issued. I was licensed in three states. Tennessee was not one of them. But cops, as a general rule, would treat an executioner better than a civilian. We risked our lives and usually had a higher kill count than they did. Of course, the kills being vamps, some people didn’t count them as real kills. Had to be human for it to count.

“When can you get here?” Daniel asked.

“I’ve got some things to clear up here, but I’ll see you today before noon.”

“I hope you can talk some sense into Richard.”

I’d met their mother—more than once—so I said, “I’m surprised that Charlotte can’t talk sense to him.”

“Where do you think he gets this ‘truth will set you free’ bit?” Daniel asked.

“Great,” I said. “I’ll be there, Daniel.”

“I’ve got to go.” He hung up suddenly as if afraid of being caught. His mom had probably come into the room. The Zeemans had four sons and a daughter. The sons were all six feet or above. The daughter was five nine. They were all over twenty-one. And they were all scared of their mother. Not literally scared, but Charlotte Zeeman wore the pants in the family. One family dinner and I knew that.

I hung up the phone, turned on the lamp, and started to pack. It occurred to me while I was throwing things into a suitcase to wonder why the hell I was doing this. I could say that it was because Richard was the other third of a triumvirate of power that Jean-Claude had forged between the three of us. Master vampire, Ulfric, or wolf king, and necromancer. I was the necromancer. We were bound so tightly together that sometimes we invaded each other's dreams by accident. Sometimes not so accidentally.

But I wasn't riding to the rescue because Richard was our third. I could admit to myself, if to no one else, that I still loved Richard. Not the same way I loved Jean-Claude, but it was just as real. He was in trouble, and I would help him if I could. Simple. Complicated. Hurtful.

I wondered what Jean-Claude would think of me dropping everything to go rescue Richard. It didn't really matter. I was going, and that was that. But I did spare a thought for how that might make my vampire lover feel. His heart didn't always beat, but it could still break.

Love sucks. Sometimes it feels good. Sometimes it's just another way to bleed.

2

I MADE PHONE calls. My friend Catherine Maison-Gillette was an attorney. She'd been with me on more than one occasion when I had to make a statement to the police about a dead body that I helped make dead. So far, no jail time. Hell, no trial. How did I accomplish this? I lied.

Bob, Catherine's husband, answered on the fifth ring, voice so heavy with sleep it was almost unintelligible. Only the bass growl let me know which of them it was. Neither of them woke gracefully.

"Bob, this is Anita. I need to speak with Catherine. It's business."

"You at a police station?" he asked. See, Bob knew me.

"No, I don't need a lawyer for me this time."

He didn't ask questions. He just said, "Here's Catherine. If you think I have no curiosity at all, you're wrong, but Catherine will fill me in after you hang up."

"Thanks, Bob," I said.

"Anita, what's wrong?" Catherine's voice sounded normal. She was a criminal attorney with a private firm. She was wakened a lot at odd hours. She didn't like it, but she recovered well.

I told her the bad news. She knew Richard. Liked him a lot. Didn't understand why in hell I'd dumped him for Jean-Claude. Since I couldn't tell her about Richard being a werewolf, it was sort of hard to explain. Heck, even if I could have mentioned the werewolf part, it was hard to explain.

"Carl Belisarius," she said when I was finished. "He's one of the best criminal attorneys in that state. I know him personally. He's not as careful about

his clients as I am. He's got some clients that are known criminal figures, but he's good."

"Can you contact him and get him started?" I asked.

"You need Richard's permission for this, Anita."

"I can't talk Richard into taking on a new attorney until I see him. Time is always precious on a crime, Catherine. Can Belisarius at least start the wheels in motion?"

"Do you know if Richard has an attorney now?"

"Daniel mentioned something about him refusing to see his lawyer, so I assume so."

"Give me Daniel's number, and I'll see what I can do," she said.

"Thanks, Catherine, really."

She sighed. "I know you'd go to this much trouble for any of your friends. You're just that loyal. But are you sure your motives are just friendly in this?"

"What are you asking me?"

"You still love him, don't you?"

"No comment," I said.

Catherine gave a soft laugh. "No comment. You're not the one under suspicion here."

"Says you," I said.

"Fine, I'll do what I can on this end. Let me know when you get there."

"Will do," I said. I hung up and called my main job. Vampire killing was only a sideline. I raised the dead for Animators Inc., the first animating firm in the country. We were also the most profitable. Part of that was due to our boss, Bert Vaughn. He could make a dollar sit up and sing. He didn't like that my helping the police on preternatural crimes was taking more and more of my time. He wouldn't like me going out of town for an indefinite period of time on personal business. I was glad it was the wee hours and he wouldn't be there to yell at me in person.

If Bert kept pushing me, I was going to have to quit, and I didn't want to. I had to raise zombies. It wasn't like a muscle that would wither if you didn't use it. It was an innate ability for me. If I didn't use it, the power would leak out on its own. In college there had been a professor who committed suicide. No one had found the body for the three days that it usually takes for the soul to leave the area. One night, the shambling corpse had come to my dorm room. My roommate got a room switch next day. She had no sense of adventure.

I would raise the dead, one way or another. I had no choice. But I had enough reputation that I could go freelance. I'd need a business manager, but it would work. Trouble is, I didn't want to leave. Some of the people who worked at Animators Inc. were among my best friends. Besides, I had had about as much change as I could handle for one year.

I, Anita Blake, scourge of the undead—the human with more vampire kills than any other vampire executioner in the country—was dating a vampire. It was almost poetically ironic.

The doorbell rang. The sound made my heart pulse in my throat. It was an ordinary sound, but not at 3:45 in the morning. I left my partially packed suitcase on the unmade bed and walked into the living room. My white furniture sat on top of a brilliant Oriental rug. Cushions that caught the bright colors were placed casually on the couch and chair. The furniture was mine. The rug and cushions had been gifts from Jean-Claude. His sense of style would always be better than mine. Why argue?

The doorbell rang again. It made me jump for no good reason except it was insistent and it was an odd hour and I was already keyed up from the news about Richard. I went to the door with my favorite gun, a Browning Hi-Power 9mm, in hand, safety off, pointed at the floor. I was almost at the door when I realized I was wearing nothing but my nightgown. A gun, but no robe. I had my priorities in order.

I stood there, barefoot on the elegant rug, debating whether to go back for the robe or a pair of jeans. Something. If I'd been wearing one of my usual extra-large T-shirts, I'd have just answered the door. But I was wearing a black satin nightie with spaghetti straps. It hung almost to my knees. One size does not fit all. It covered everything but wasn't exactly answering-the-door attire. Screw it.

I called, "Who is it?" Bad guys usually didn't ring the doorbell.

"It is Jean-Claude, *ma petite*."

My mouth dropped open. I couldn't have been more surprised if it had been a bad guy. What was he doing here?

I clicked the safety on the gun and opened the door. The satin nightie had been a gift from Jean-Claude. He'd seen me in less. We didn't need the robe.

I opened the door and there he was. It was like I was a magician and had thrown aside the curtain to show my lovely assistant. The sight of him caught my breath in my throat.

His shirt was a conservative business cut with fastened cuffs and a simple collar. It was red with the collar and cuffs a solid almost satiny scarlet. The rest of the shirt was some sheer fabric so that his arms, chest, and waist were bare behind a sheen of red cloth. His black hair curled below his shoulders, darker, richer somehow against the red of the shirt. Even his midnight blue eyes seemed bluer framed by red. It was one of my favorite colors for him to wear, and he knew it. He'd threaded a red cord through the belt loops of his black jeans. The cord fell in knots down one side of his hip. The black boots came almost to the tops of his legs, encasing his long, slender legs in leather from toe to nearly groin.

When I was away from Jean-Claude, away from his body, his voice, I could be embarrassed, scratchy with discomfort that I was dating him. When I was away from him, I could talk myself out of him—almost. But never when I was with him. When I was with him, my stomach dropped to my feet and I had to fight very hard not to say things like *golly*.

I settled for “You look spectacular, as always. What are you doing here on a night that I told you not to come?” What I wanted to do was to throw myself around him like a coat and have him carry me over the threshold clinging to him like a monkey. But I wasn’t going to do that. It lacked a certain dignity. Besides, it sort of scared me how much I wanted him—and how often. He was like a new drug. It wasn’t vampire powers. It was good, old-fashioned lust. But it was still scary, so I had set up some parameters. Rules. He followed them most of the time.

He smiled, and it was the smile I’d grown to both love and dread. The smile said he was thinking wicked thoughts, things that two or more could do in darkened rooms, where the sheets smelled of expensive perfume, sweat, and other bodily fluids. The smile had never made me blush until we started having sex. Sometimes all he had to do was smile, and heat rushed up my skin like I was thirteen and he was my first crush. He thought it was charming. It embarrassed me.

“You son of bitch,” I said softly.

The smile widened. “Our dream was interrupted, *ma petite*.”

“I knew it wasn’t an accident that you were in my dreams,” I said. It came out hostile, and I was pleased. Because the hot summer wind was blowing the scent of his cologne against my face. Exotic, with an undercurrent of flowers and spice. I almost hated to wash my sheets for fear of losing the scent of him sometimes.

“I asked you to wear my gift so I could dream of you. You knew what I meant to do. If you say other, then you are lying. May I come in?”

He’d been invited in often enough that he could have crossed my threshold without the invitation, but it had become a game with him. A formal acknowledgment every time he crossed that I wanted him. It irritated me and pleased me, like so much about Jean-Claude.

“You might as well come in.”

He walked past me. I noticed the black boots were laced up the back from heel to top. The back of his black jeans fit smooth and tight so there was no need to guess what he wasn’t wearing under them.

He spoke without turning around. “Do not sound so grumpy, *ma petite*. You have the ability to bar me from your dreams.” He turned then, and his eyes were full of a dark light that had nothing to do with vampire powers. “You welcomed me with more than open arms.”

I blushed for the second time in less than five minutes. “Richard is in jail in Tennessee,” I said.

“I know,” he said.

“You know?” I said. “How?”

“The local Master of the City called to tell me. He was very much afraid that I would think it was his doing. His way of destroying our triumvirate.”

“If he was going to destroy us, it would be a murder charge, not attempted rape,” I said.

“True,” Jean-Claude said, then laughed. The laughter trailed over my bare skin like a small, private wind. “Whoever framed our Richard did not know him well. I would believe murder of Richard before rape.”

It was almost exactly what I’d said. Why was that unnerving? “Are you going down to Tennessee?”

“The master, Colin, has forbidden me to enter his lands. To do so now would be an act of aggression, if not outright war.”

“Why should he care?” I asked.

“He fears my power, *ma petite*. He fears our power, which is why he has made you persona non grata in his territory as well.”

I stared at him. “You are kidding, I hope. He’s forbidden either of us to help Richard?”

Jean-Claude nodded.

“And he expects us to believe it’s not his doing?” I said.

“I believe him, *ma petite*.”

“You could tell he wasn’t lying over the phone?” I asked.

“Some master vampires can lie to other master vampires, though I do not think Colin is such a power. But that is not why I believe him.”

“Why then?”

“The last time you and I traveled to another vampire’s lands, we slew her.”

“She was trying to kill us,” I said.

“Technically,” he said, “she had set all of us free save you. You she wished to make a vampire.”

“Like I said, she was trying to kill me.”

He smiled. “Oh, *ma petite*, you wound me.”

“Cut the crap. This Colin can’t really believe that we are just going to leave Richard to rot.”

“He has the right to deny us safe passage,” Jean-Claude said.

“Because we killed another master in her own territory?” I asked.

“He doesn’t need grounds for his refusal, *ma petite*. He merely has to refuse.”

“How do you vampires get anything accomplished?”

“Slowly,” Jean-Claude said. “But remember, *ma petite*, we have the time to be patient.”

“Well, I don’t, and Richard doesn’t.”

“You could have eternity if you would both accept the fourth mark,” he said, voice quiet, neutral.

I shook my head. “Richard and I both value what little is left of our humanity. Besides, eternity my ass, the fourth mark wouldn’t make us immortal. It just means that we live as long as you do. You’re harder to kill than we are, but not that much harder.”

He sat down on the couch, folding his legs under him. It wasn’t an easy position, wearing that much leather. Maybe the boots were softer than they looked. Naw.

He rested his elbows on the couch arm, leaning his chest outward. The sheer red cloth covered his chest completely and left nothing to the imagination. His nipples pressed against the thin fabric. The red haze of cloth made the cross-shaped burn scar look almost bloody.

He raised himself upward with his hands propped on the couch arm like a mermaid on a rock. I expected him to tease or say something sexual. Instead, he said, “I came to tell you of Richard’s imprisonment in person.” He watched my face very closely. “I thought it might upset you.”

“Of course it upsets me. This Colin guy, vampire, whatever the hell he is, is crazy if he thinks he’s going to keep us from helping Richard.”

Jean-Claude smiled. “Asher is negotiating even as we speak to try and allow you to enter Colin’s territory.”

Asher was his second banana, his vampire lieutenant. I frowned. “Why me and not you?”

“Because you are much better with police matters than I am.” He threw one long, leather-clad leg over the couch arm and slithered over it to his feet. It was like watching a lap dance without a lap. To my knowledge, Jean-Claude had never stripped at Guilty Pleasures, the vampire strip club he owned, but he could have. He had a way of making even the smallest movement sexual and vaguely obscene. You always felt like he was thinking wicked thoughts, things you couldn’t say in mixed company.

“Why didn’t you just call and tell me all this?” I said. I knew the answer, or at least part of it. He seemed to be as enamored of my body as I was of his. Good sex cuts both ways. The seducer can become the seduced, with the right victim.

He glided toward me. “I thought this was news to be delivered face-to-face.” He stopped just in front of me, so close that the slightly full hem of my nightie brushed his thighs. He gave a small movement of his body and the satin edge of the nightie moved gently against my bare legs. Most men would have had to use their hands to get that kind of movement. Of course,

Jean-Claude had had four hundred years to perfect his technique. Practice makes perfect.

“Why face-to-face?” I asked, my voice a little breathy.

A smile curled his lips. “You know why,” he said.

“I want to hear you say it,” I said.

His beautiful face fell into blank, careful lines, only his eyes held the heat like a banked fire. “I could not let you leave without touching you one last time. I want to do the wicked dance before you leave.”

I laughed, but it was tense, nervous. My mouth was suddenly dry. I was having trouble not staring at his chest. The “wicked dance” was his pet euphemism for sex. I wanted to touch him, but if I did, I wasn’t sure where it would stop. Richard was in trouble. I’d betrayed him once with Jean-Claude; I wouldn’t let him down again. “I need to pack,” I said. I turned abruptly and started walking toward the bedroom.

He followed me.

I put my gun on the bedside table beside the phone, got socks out of the drawer, and started tossing them into the suitcase, trying to ignore Jean-Claude. He doesn’t ignore easily. He lay on the bed beside the suitcase, propped on one elbow, long legs stretched the length of the bed. He looked fearfully overdressed against my white sheets. He watched me move around the room, moving just his eyes. He reminded me of a cat: watchful, perfectly at ease.

I went into the nearby bathroom to get toiletries. I had a man’s shaving kit bag that I kept all the small stuff in. I was traveling out of town more and more lately. Might as well be organized about it.

Jean-Claude was lying on his back, long, black hair spilling like a dark dream on my white pillow. He gave a slight smile as I entered the room. He held a hand out to me. “Join me, *ma petite*.”

I shook my head. “If I join you, we’ll get distracted. I’m going to pack and get dressed. We don’t have time for anything else.”

He crawled toward me over the bed, moving in a rolling glide like he had muscles in places he wasn’t supposed to have them. “Am I so unappealing, *ma petite*? Or is your concern for Richard so overwhelming?”

“You know exactly how appealing you are to me. And yes, I am worried about Richard.”

He slid off the bed, following at my heels. He glided in a sort of graceful slow motion while I hurried to and fro, but he paced me, matching each of my quick steps with his easy ones. It was like being chased by a very slow predator, one that had all the time in the world but knew in the end it would catch you.

The second time I almost ran into him, I finally said, "What is your problem? Quit following me around. You're making me nervous." Truth was, his body being so close made my skin jump.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and sighed. "I don't want you to go."

That stopped me in my tracks. I turned and stared at him. "Why, for heaven's sake?"

"For centuries I have dreamed of having enough power to be safe. Enough power to hold my lands and finally, at long last, have some sense of peace. Now I fear the very man who could make my ambitions come true."

"What are you talking about?" I came to stand in front of him, arms full of shirts and hangers.

"Richard; I fear Richard." There was a look in his eyes that I'd seldom seen. He was unsure of himself. It was a very normal, human expression. It looked totally at odds with the elegant man in his peekaboo shirt.

"Why would you be afraid of Richard?" I asked.

"If you love Richard more than you love me, I fear you will leave me for him."

"If you haven't noticed, Richard hates me right now. He talks more to you than to me."

"He does not hate you, *ma petite*. He hates that you are with me. There is a great difference between the two hatreds." Jean-Claude stared up at me almost mournfully.

I sighed. "Are you jealous of Richard?"

He looked down at the toes of his expensive boots. "I would be a fool if I were not."

I transferred the blouses to one arm and touched his face. I turned his face up to mine. "I'm sleeping with you, not Richard, remember?"

"Yet, here I am, *ma petite*. I am dressed for your dreams and you do not even offer me a kiss."

His reaction surprised me. Just when I thought I knew him. "Are you hurt that I didn't give you a hello kiss?"

"Perhaps," he said very softly.

I shook my head and tossed the blouses in the general direction of the suitcase. I bumped his knees with my legs until he opened his legs and let me stand, pressing my body the length of his. I put my hands on his shoulders. The sheer red cloth was rougher textured than it looked, not soft. "How can anyone as gorgeous as you are be insecure?"

He wrapped his arms around my waist, snuggling me against him. He squeezed his legs against me. The leather of the boots was softer than it looked, more supple. With his arms around me and his legs squeezing against me, I was effectively trapped. But I was a willing captive, so it was okay.

“What I want to do is go down on my knees and lick the front of this nifty shirt. I want to know just how much of you I can suck through the cloth.” I raised my eyebrows at him.

He laughed soft and low. The sound raised goose bumps up and down my body, tightening my nipples and other places. His laughter was a touchable, intrusive thing. He could do things with his voice that most men couldn’t do with their hands. Yet he was afraid I’d leave him for Richard.

He rested his face on my chest, cradled between my breasts. He rubbed his cheeks softly back and forth against me, making the satin slide against me, until my breath came faster.

I sighed and leaned my face over him, folding our bodies together. “I don’t plan to leave you for Richard. But he’s in trouble, and that comes before sex.”

Jean-Claude raised his face to me, our arms so entangled that he almost couldn’t move. “Kiss me, *ma petite*, that is all. Just a kiss to tell me that you love me.”

I laid my lips against his forehead. “I thought you were more secure than this.”

“I am,” he said, “with everyone but you.”

I pulled back enough to study his face. “Love should make you feel more secure not less.”

“Yes,” he said quietly, “it should. But you love Richard, too. You try not to love him, and he tries not to love you. But love is not so easily slain—or so easily aroused.”

I bent over him. The first kiss was a mere brush of lips like satin rubbing against my mouth. The second kiss was harder. I bit lightly along his upper lip, and he made a small sound. He kissed me back, hands sliding to either side of my face. He kissed me as if he were drinking me down, trying to lick the last drops from the bottle of some fine wine, tender, eager, hungry. I collapsed against him, hands sliding over him as if even my hands were hungry for the feel of him.

I felt his fangs, sharp, bruising against my lips and tongue. There was a quick, sharp pain and the sweet copper taste of blood. He made a small inarticulate sound and rolled over me. I was suddenly on the bed with him above me. His eyes were one solid glowing blue, the pupils gone in a rush of desire.

He tried to turn my head to one side, nuzzling at my neck. I turned my face into his, blocking him. “No blood, Jean-Claude.”

He went almost limp on top of me, face buried in the rumpled sheets. “Please, *ma petite*.”

I pushed at his shoulder. “Get off of me.”

He rolled onto his back, staring at the ceiling, carefully not looking at me.

"I can enter every orifice of your body with every part of me, but you refuse me the last bit of yourself."

I got off the bed carefully, not sure my knees were steady. "I am not food," I said.

"It is so much more than mere feeding, *ma petite*. If only you would allow me to show you how very much more."

I grabbed the pile of blouses and started taking them off the hanger and folding them in the suitcase. "No blood; that is the rule."

He rolled onto his side. "I have offered you all that I am, *ma petite*, yet you withhold yourself from me. How can I not be jealous of Richard?"

"You're getting sex. He's not even getting dates."

"You are mine, but you are not mine, not completely."

"I'm not a pet, Jean-Claude. People aren't supposed to belong to other people."

"If you could find a way to love Richard's beast, you would not hold back from him. Him you would give yourself to."

I folded the last blouse. "Damn it, Jean-Claude, this is stupid. I chose you. All right? It's a done deal. Why are you so worried?"

"Because the moment he was in trouble, you dropped everything to run to his side."

"I'd do the same for you," I said.

"Exactly," he said. "I have no doubt that you love me in your way, but you love him, too."

I zipped up the suitcase. "We are not having this argument. I'm sleeping with you. I am not going to donate blood just to make you feel more secure."

The phone rang. Asher's cultured voice, so like Jean-Claude's: "Anita, how are you this fine summer evening?"

"I'm fine, Asher. What's up?"

"May I speak with Jean-Claude?" he asked.

I almost argued, but Jean-Claude had his hand out for the phone. I gave the phone to him.

Jean-Claude spoke in French, which he and Asher had a habit of doing. I was glad that he had someone to speak his native tongue with, but my French just wasn't up to following the conversation. I suspected strongly that sometimes the vampires spoke in front of me like you would speak in front of a child that doesn't have enough grown-up talk to follow the conversation. It was rude and condescending, but they were centuries-old vampires, and sometimes they just couldn't help themselves.

He switched to English, talking directly to me. "Colin has refused you entrance to his territory. He has refused entrance to any of my people."

"Can he do that?" I asked.

Jean-Claude nodded. "*Oui.*"

"I am going down there to help Richard. Arrange it, Jean-Claude, or I'll go down there without arrangements being made."

"Even if it's war?" he asked.

"Shit," I said. "Call the little son of a bitch and let me talk to him."

Jean-Claude raised his eyebrows but nodded. He hung up on Asher, then dialed a number. He said, "Colin, this is Jean-Claude. Yes, Asher told me what you have decided. My human servant, Anita Blake, wishes to speak with you." He listened for a moment. "No, I do not know what she wishes to say to you." He handed me the phone and settled back against the headboard of the bed as if watching a show.

"Hello, Colin?"

"This is he." His accent was pure Middle American. It made him sound less exotic than some of them.

"My name's Anita Blake."

"I know who you are," he said. "You're the Executioner."

"Yeah, but I'm not coming down there for an execution. My friend is in trouble. I just want to help him."

"He is your third. If you enter my lands, then two of your triumvirate will be within my territory. You are too powerful to be allowed entrance."

"Asher said you also denied access to any of our people, is that true?"

"Yes," he said.

"Why, for God's sake?"

"The Council, the rulers of all vampire kind, itself fears Jean-Claude. I will not have you in my lands."

"Colin, look, I don't want your power base. I don't want your lands. I have no designs upon you whatsoever. You're a master vampire. You can taste the truth in my words."

"You mean what you say, but you are the servant. Jean-Claude is the master."

"Don't take this wrong, Colin, but why would Jean-Claude want your lands? Even if he was planning some sort of Ghengis Kahn invasion, your lands are three territories away from us. If he was going to try conquering someone, he'd pick land next door."

"Maybe there's something here he wants," Colin said, and I could hear the fear in his voice. That was rare with a master vamp. They were usually better at hiding their emotions.

"Colin, I'll swear any oath you want that we don't want anything from you. We just need for me to come down there and get Richard out of jail. Okay?"

"No," he said. "If you come down here uninvited, it is war between us, and I will kill you."

“Look, Colin, I know you’re afraid.” As soon as I said it, I knew I shouldn’t have.

“How do you know what I feel?” The fear rose a notch, but the anger rose faster. “A human servant that can taste a master vampire’s fear—and you wonder why I don’t want you in my lands.”

“I can’t taste your fear, Colin. I heard it in your voice.”

“Liar!”

My shoulders were beginning to tighten. It doesn’t usually take much to piss me off, and he was working at it. “How are we supposed to help Richard, if you won’t let us send anyone down there?” My voice was calm, but I could feel my throat tightening, my voice going just a little lower with the effort not to yell.

“What happens to your third is not my concern. Protecting my lands and my people, that is my concern.”

“If anything happens to Richard because of this delay, I can make it your concern,” I said, voice still quiet.

“See, already the threats begin.”

The tightness in my shoulders spilled up my neck and came out my mouth. “Listen, you little pip-squeak, I am coming down there. I am not letting your paranoia hurt Richard.”

“We will kill you then,” he said.

“Look, Colin, stay out of my way, and I’ll stay out of yours. You fuck with me, and I will destroy you, do you understand me? It’s only war if you start it, but if you start something, by God I will finish it.”

Jean-Claude was motioning for the phone rather desperately. We wrestled for the receiver for a few seconds while I called Colin an antiquated politician, and worse.

Jean-Claude apologized to the empty, buzzing phone. He hung the phone up and looked at me. The look was eloquent. “I would say I am speechless, *ma petite*, or that I don’t believe that you just did that, but I do believe it. The question is: Do you understand what you have just done?”

“I am going to rescue Richard. I can go around Colin or over him. It’s his choice.”

Jean-Claude sighed. “He is within his rights to see it as the beginning of a war. But Colin is very cautious. He will do one of two things. He will either wait and see if you initiate hostilities, or he will try and kill you as soon as you set foot on his lands.”

I shook my head. “What was I supposed to do?”

“It doesn’t matter now. What’s done is done, but it changes the travel arrangements. You can still take my private jet, but you will have company.”

“Are you coming?” I asked.

“No. If I arrived with you, Colin would be certain that we had come to kill him. No, I will stay here, but you will have an entourage of guards.”

“Now, wait a minute,” I said.

He held up his hand. “No, *ma petite*. You have been very rash. Remember, if you die, Richard and I may die, as well. The binding that makes us a tri-umvirate gives power, but it does not come without a price. It is not merely your own life that you are risking.”

That stopped me. “I hadn’t thought of it that way,” I said.

“You will need an entourage now that befits a human servant of mine, and an entourage that is strong enough to fight Colin’s people, if need be.”

“Who do you have in mind?” I asked, suddenly suspicious.

“Leave that to me.”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

He stood, and his anger lashed through the room like a scalding wind. “You have endangered yourself and me and Richard. You have endangered everything we have or hope to have with your temper.”

“It would have come down to an ultimatum in the end, Jean-Claude. I know vampires. You would have argued and bargained for a day or two, but in the end, it would have come down to this.”

“Are you so sure?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I heard the fear in Colin’s voice. He’s scared shitless of you. He’d have never agreed to us coming down.”

“It is not just me he fears, *ma petite*. You are the Executioner. Young vampires are told if they are foolish, you will come and slay them in their coffins.”

“You’re making that up,” I said.

He shook his head. “No, *ma petite*, you are the bogeyman of vampirekind.”

“If I see Colin, I’ll try not to scare him more than I already have.”

“You will see him, *ma petite*, one way or the other. He will either arrange a meeting when he sees you mean him no harm, or he will be there when they attack.”

“We have to get Richard out before the full moon. We’ve only got five days. We didn’t have time to do this slowly.”

“Who are you trying to convince, *ma petite*, me or yourself?”

I had lost my temper. It had been stupid. Inexcusable. I had a temper, but I was usually better at controlling it than that. “I’m sorry,” I said.

Jean-Claude gave a very inelegant snort. “Now she’s sorry.” He dialed the phone. “I will have Asher and the others pack.”

“Asher?” I said. “He’s not going with me.”

“Yes, he is.”

I opened my mouth to protest. He pointed one long, pale finger at me. "I know Colin and his people. You need an entourage that is impressive without being too frightening, and yet if the worst happens, they must be able to defend you and themselves. I will pick who goes and who stays."

"That's not fair."

"There is no time for fairness, *ma petite*. Your precious Richard sits behind bars and the full moon is approaching." He let his hand fall to his lap. "If you wish to take some of your wereleopards with you, that would be welcome. Asher and Damian will need food while they are away. They cannot hunt within Colin's territory. That would be taken as an act of hostility."

"You want me to volunteer some of the wereleopards as walking provisions?"

"I am going to supply some werewolves as well," he said.

"I'm Lupa for the pack as well as Nimir-ra for the leopards. You need to run the wolves by me, too." Richard had made me Lupa of the werewolves when we were dating. Lupa is often just another word for the head wolf's girlfriend, though usually it's another werewolf, not a human. The wereleopards came to me by default. I killed their last leader and found out that everyone else was pretty much beating the hell out of them. Weak shapeshifters without a dominant to protect them end up as anyone's meat. It was my fault, sort of, that they were being hurt, so I extended my protection over them. My protection, since I wasn't a wereleopard, consisted of my threat. My threat was that I'd kill anyone who messed with them. The monsters in town must have believed it, because they left the leopards alone. Use enough silver bullets on enough monsters, and you get a reputation.

Jean-Claude put the receiver up to his ear. "It is getting so that a person cannot insult a monster in Saint Louis without answering to you, *ma petite*." If I hadn't known better, I'd say Jean-Claude was angry with me.

I guess, this once, I couldn't blame him.