

# 1

IT WAS THE middle of November. I was supposed to be out jogging, but instead I was sitting at my breakfast table talking about men, sex, werewolves, vampires, and that thing that most unmarried but sexually active women fear most of all—a missed period.

Veronica (Ronnie) Sims, best friend and private detective, sat across from me at my little four-seater breakfast table. The table sat on a little raised alcove in a bay window. I did breakfast most mornings looking at the view out onto the deck and the trees beyond. Today, the view wasn't pretty, because the inside of my head was too ugly to see it. Panic will do that to you.

"You're sure you missed October? You didn't just count wrong?" Ronnie asked.

I shook my head and stared into my coffee cup. "I'm two weeks overdue."

She reached across the table and patted my hand. "Two weeks—you had me scared. Two weeks could be anything, Anita. Stress will throw you off that much, and God knows you've had enough stress." She squeezed my hand. "That last serial killer case was only about two weeks ago." She squeezed my hand harder. "What I read in the paper and saw on the news was bad."

I'd stopped telling Ronnie all my bad stuff years ago, when my cases as a legal vampire executioner had gotten so much bloodier than her cases as a private eye. Now I was a federal marshal, along with most of the other legal vamp hunters in the United States. It meant that I had even more access to even more awful shit. Things that Ronnie, or any of my female friends, didn't want to know about. I didn't fault them. I'd rather not have had that many nightmares in my own head. No, I didn't fault Ronnie, but it meant that I couldn't share some of the most awful stuff with her. I was just glad we'd made up a long-standing grumpiness in time to have her here for this par-

ticular disaster. I was able to talk about the bad parts of my cases with some of the men in my life, but I couldn't have shared the missed period with any of them. It concerned one of them entirely too much.

She squeezed my hand hard and leaned back. Her gray eyes were all sympathy, and apology. She was still feeling guilty that she'd let her issues about commitment and men rain all over our friendship. She'd had a brief, disastrous marriage years before I met her. She'd come here today to cry on my shoulder about the fact that she was moving in with her boyfriend, Louie Fane—*Dr. Louis Fane*, thank you very much. He had his doctorate in biology and taught at Washington University. He also turned furry once a month, and was a lieutenant of the local wererat rodere—their word for pack.

"If Louie wasn't hiding what he was from his colleagues, we'd be going to the big party afterward," she said.

"He teaches people's kids, Ronnie; he can't afford to find out what they'd do if they found out he had lycanthropy."

"College isn't kids, it's definitely grown-up."

"Parents won't see it that way," I said. I looked at her, and finally said, "Are you changing the subject?"

"It's only *two weeks*, Anita, after one of the most violent cases you've ever had. I wouldn't even lose sleep over it."

"Yeah, but your period is erratic, mine's not. I've never been two weeks late before."

She pushed a strand of blond hair back behind her ear. The new haircut framed her face nicely, but it didn't stay out of her eyes, and she was always pushing it back. "Never?"

I shook my head, and sipped coffee. It was cold. I got up and went to dump it in the sink.

"What's the latest you've ever been?" she asked.

"Two days, I think five once, but I wasn't having sex with anyone, so it wasn't scary. I mean, unless there was a star in the east I was safe, just late." I poured coffee from the French press, which emptied it. I was so going to need more coffee.

Ronnie came to stand next to me while I put more hot water on the stove. She leaned her butt against the cabinets and drank her coffee, but she was watching me. "Let me run this back at you. You've never been two weeks late, ever, and you've never missed a whole month before?"

“Not since this whole mess started when I was fourteen, no.”

“I always envied you the regular-as-clockwork schedule,” she said.

I started dismantling the French press, taking out the lid with its filter on a stick. “Well, the clock is broken right now.”

“Shit,” she said, softly.

“You can say that again.”

“You need a pregnancy test,” she said.

“No shit.” I dumped the grounds into the trash can, and shook my head. “I can’t go shopping for one tonight.”

“Can’t you make a quick stop on the way to Jean-Claude’s little tête-à-tête tonight? It’s not like this is the main event.”

Jean-Claude, Master Vampire of the City of St. Louis, and my sweetie, was throwing one of the biggest bashes of the year to welcome to town the first ever mostly-vampire dance company. He was one of their patrons, and when you spend that much money, you apparently get to spend more to throw a party to celebrate that the money was helping the dance troupe earn rave reviews in their cross-country tour. There was going to be national and international media there tomorrow. It was like a Big Deal, and I, as his main squeeze, had to be on his arm, smiling and dressed up. But that was tomorrow. Tonight’s little get-together was sort of a prelim to the main event. Without letting the media know, a couple of the visiting Masters of the City had snuck in early. Jean-Claude had called them friends. Master vampires did not call other master vampires friends. Allies, partners—but not friends.

“Yeah, Ronnie, I’m riding in with Micah and Nathaniel. Even if I stop, Nathaniel will insist on going in whatever store with me, or wondering why I don’t let him go. I don’t want any of them to know until I’ve got the test and it’s yes or no. Maybe it’s just nerves, stress, and the test will say no. Then I won’t have to tell anybody.”

“Where are your two handsome housemates?”

“Jogging. I was supposed to go with them, but I told them you’d called and needed me to hold your hand about moving in with Louie.”

“I did,” she said, and sipped her coffee. “But suddenly me being nervous about sharing space with a man for the second time in my life doesn’t seem like such a big deal. Louie is nothing like the asshole I married when I was young and stupid.”

“Louie sees the real you, Ronnie. He’s not looking for some trophy wife. He wants a partner.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I don’t know much today, but I’m sure Louie wants a partner, not a Barbie doll.”

She gave me a weak smile, then frowned. “Thanks, but I’m supposed to be comforting you. Are you going to tell them?”

I leaned my hands against the sink, and looked at her through a curtain of my long dark hair. It had gotten too long for my tastes, but Micah had made me a deal: If I cut my hair, he’d cut his, because he preferred his hair shorter, too. So my hair was fast approaching my waist for the first time since junior high, and it was really beginning to get on my nerves. Of course, today everything was getting on my nerves.

“Until I know for sure, I don’t want them to know.”

“Even if it’s yes, Anita, you don’t have to tell them. I’ll close up my agency for a few days. We’ll go away on a girls’ retreat, and you can come back without a problem.”

I pushed my hair back so I could see her clearly. I think my face showed what I was thinking, because she said, “What?”

“Are you honestly saying that I don’t tell any of them? That I just go away for a while and make sure that there’s no baby to worry about?”

“It’s your body,” she said.

“Yeah, and I took my chances by having sex with this many men on a regular basis.”

“You’re on the pill,” she said.

“Yeah, and if I’d wanted to be a hundred percent safe I’d have still used condoms, but I didn’t. If I’m . . . pregnant, then I’ll deal, but not like that.”

“You can’t mean you’d keep it.”

I shook my head. “I’m not even sure I’m pregnant, but if I was, I couldn’t not tell the father. I’m in a committed relationship with several of them. I’m not married, but we live together. We share a life. I couldn’t just make this kind of choice without talking to them first.”

She shook her head. “No man ever wants you to get an abortion if you’re in a relationship. They always want you barefoot and pregnant.”

“That’s your mother’s issues talking, not yours. Or at least not mine.”

She looked away, wouldn't meet my eyes. "I can tell you what I'd do, and it wouldn't involve telling Louie."

I sighed and stared out the little window above the sink. A lot of things to say went through my head, none of them helpful. I finally settled for, "Well, it isn't you and Louie having this particular problem. It's me, and . . ."

"And who?" she said. "Who got you knocked up?"

"Thanks for putting it that way."

"I could ask, who's the father, but that's just creepy. If you are, then it's this little tiny, microscopic lump of cells. It's not a baby. It's not a person, not yet."

I shook my head. "We'll agree to disagree on that one."

"You're pro-choice," she said.

I nodded. "Yep, I am, but I also believe that abortion is taking a life. I agree women have the right to choose, but I also think that it's still taking a life."

"That's like saying you're pro-choice *and* pro-life. You can't be both."

"I'm pro-choice because I've never been a fourteen-year-old incest victim pregnant by her father, or a woman who's going to die if the pregnancy continues, or a rape victim, or even a teenager who made a mistake. I want women to have choices, but I also believe that it's a life, especially once it's big enough to live outside the womb."

"Once a Catholic, always a Catholic," she said.

"Maybe, but you'd think being excommunicated would've cured me." The Pope had declared that all animators—zombie raisers—were excommunicated until they repented their evil ways and stopped doing it. What His Holiness didn't seem to grasp is that raising the dead was a psychic ability, and if we didn't raise zombies for money on a regular basis, we'd eventually raise the dead by accident. I had accidentally raised a deceased pet as a child, and a suicidal teacher in college. I'd always wondered if there had been others that never found me. Maybe some of the accidental zombies that occasionally show up are the result of someone's psychic abilities gone wrong, or untrained. All I knew was that if the Pope had ever woken up as a child with his dead dog curled up in bed with him, he'd want the power controlled. Or maybe he wouldn't. Maybe he'd believe that it was evil and he'd pray it into submission. My prayers just didn't have that kind of punch to them.

“You can’t mean you’d actually have this . . . thing, baby, whatever.”

I sighed. “I don’t know, but I do know that I could never just go away, get an abortion, and never tell my boyfriends. Never tell them that one of them might have made a child with me. I just couldn’t do it.”

She was shaking her head so hard that her hair fell around her face, covered the upper half of it. She ran her hands through it sharply, like she was pulling on it. “I’ve tried to understand that you’re happy living with not one, but two men. I’ve tried to understand that you love that vampire son of a bitch, somehow. I’ve tried, but if you actually breed . . . actually have a baby, I just don’t get that. I won’t be able to understand that.”

“Then don’t, then go. If you can’t deal, then go.”

“I didn’t mean that. I just meant that I can’t understand why you would complicate your life this way.”

“Complicate, yeah, I guess that’s one way of putting it.”

She crossed her arms tight over her chest. She was tall, slender and leggy, and blond. Everything I’d wanted to be as a child. She was small-chested enough that she could fold her arms over her breasts instead of under them, something I couldn’t have done. But her legs went on forever in a skirt, and mine did not. Oh, well.

“Okay, then if you’re going to tell them, tell Micah and Nathaniel and get a test and test yourself.”

“I told you, I don’t want anyone to know until I know for sure.”

She looked up at the ceiling, closed her eyes, and sighed. “Anita, you live with two of them. You sleep over with two more of them. You are never alone. When are you going to have time to run in and get a test, let alone have the privacy to use it?”

“I can pick one up at work on Monday.”

She stared at me. “Monday! It’s Thursday. I’d go fucking crazy if I had to wait that long. You’ll go crazy. You can’t wait nearly four days.”

“Maybe my period will start. Maybe by Monday I won’t need it.”

“Anita, you wouldn’t have told me if you weren’t pretty sure you needed a pregnancy test.”

“When Nathaniel and Micah get back, they’ll jump in the

shower, we'll get dressed up, and go straight to Jean-Claude's. There won't be time tonight."

"Friday, promise me that Friday you'll get one."

"I'll try, but . . ."

"Besides, when you start asking your lovers to use condoms, won't they figure something out?"

"Jesus," I said.

"Yeah, I heard you say if you'd used condoms you'd be safe. Don't tell me that you're not going to want to use them for a while. Could you really have unprotected sex right now, and enjoy it?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Then what are you going to tell the boys about this sudden need for condoms? Hell, Micah had a vasectomy before you even met him. He's like super-safe."

I sighed again. "You're right, damn it, but you are."

"So pick up the test on the way to the thing tonight."

"No. I'm not going to rain all over Jean-Claude's meeting. He's planned this for months."

"You didn't mention it to me."

"I didn't plan it, he did. The ballet isn't really my thing." Truthfully, he hadn't mentioned it to me until they were coming to St. Louis, but I kept that part to myself. It would just give Ronnie another reason to say that Jean-Claude was keeping secrets from me. He'd finally admitted that the Masters of the City all coming here had been something he hadn't planned, at least not from the beginning. He'd just negotiated it so the vampire dancers could cross many different vamp territories without problems. Jean-Claude agreed the meet was a good idea, but he was also nervous about it. It would be the largest gathering of Masters of the City in American history. And you don't bring that many big fish together without worrying about shark attacks.

"And how will Mr. Fang-Face feel about being a father?"

"Don't call him that."

"Sorry, how will Jean-Claude feel about being a daddy?"

"It's probably not his."

She looked at me. "You're having sex with him, a lot. Why isn't it his?"

"Because he's more than four hundred years old and when

vampires get that old, they aren't very fertile. That goes for Asher and Damian, too."

"Oh, God," she said. "I'd forgotten that you had sex with Damian."

"Yeah," I said.

She covered her eyes with her hands. "I'm sorry, Anita. I'm sorry that it's weirding me out that my uptight monogamous friend is suddenly sleeping with not one, but three vampires."

"I didn't plan it that way."

"I know that." She hugged me, and I stayed stiff against her. She wasn't being comforting enough for me to relax in her arms. She hugged me tighter. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm being a jerk. But if it's not the vampires then who else but your houseboys?"

I pulled away from her. "Don't call them my houseboys. They have names, and just because I like living with someone, and you don't, don't make that my problem."

"Fine, that leaves Micah and Nathaniel."

"Micah is fixed, remember? So it can't be him."

Her eyes went wide. "That leaves Nathaniel. Jesus, Anita, *Nathaniel* as the father-to-be."

A moment ago I might have agreed with her, but now it pissed me off. It wasn't her place to disparage my boyfriends. "What's wrong with Nathaniel?" I said, and my voice was not entirely happy.

She put her hands on her hips and gave me a look. "He's twenty and a stripper. Twenty-year-old strippers are the entertainment at your bachelorette party. You don't have babies with them."

I let the anger seep into my eyes. "Nathaniel told me you didn't see him as real, as a person. I told him he was wrong. I told him you were my friend, and you wouldn't disrespect him like that. I guess *I* was wrong."

She didn't back down or apologize. She was angry and staying that way. "Last time I checked, Nathaniel was supposed to be food, just food, not the love of your life."

"I didn't say he was the love of my life, and yeah, he started out as my *pomme de sang*, but that doesn't . . ."

But she interrupted me. "Your apple of blood, right, that's what *pomme de sang* means?"

I nodded.



“If you were a vampire you’d be taking blood from your little stripper, but thanks to that bloodsucking son of a bitch you have to feed off sex. *Sex*, for God’s sake! First that bastard made you his blood whore, and now you’re just a—” She stopped abruptly, a startled, almost-frightened look on her face, as if she knew she’d gone too far.

I gave her a flat, cold look. The look that says my anger has moved from hot to cold. It’s never a good sign. “Go on, Ronnie, say it.”

“I didn’t mean it,” she whispered.

“Yeah,” I said, “you did. Now I’m just a whore.” My voice sounded as cold as my eyes felt. Too angry and too hurt to be anything but cold. Hot anger can feel good, but the cold will protect you better.

She started to cry. I just stared at her, speechless. What the hell was going on? We were fighting—she wasn’t allowed to cry in the middle of it. Especially not when she was the one being a cruel bastard. I could count on one hand the times I’d seen Ronnie cry and still have fingers left over.

I was still angry, but I was puzzled, too, and that took a little of the edge off. “Shouldn’t I be the one in tears here?” I asked, because I couldn’t think of what else to say. I was mad at her and I’d be damned if I would comfort her right now.

She spoke in that breathless, hiccuping voice that serious crying can give you. “I’m sorry, oh, God, Anita, I’m sorry. I’m just so jealous.”

I raised my eyebrows at her. “What are you talking about? Jealous of what?”

“The men,” she said in that shivering, uncertain voice. It was like she was someone else for a moment, or maybe this was just part of Ronnie that she didn’t let people see. “All the damned men. I’m about to give up everybody. Everybody but Louie, and he’s great, but damn it I’ve had lovers. I hit triple digits.”

I wasn’t sure that being able to number your lovers at over a hundred was a good thing, but it was something that Ronnie and I had agreed to disagree over a long time ago. I did not say, *Look who’s the whore*, or other hurtful remarks I could have made. I let all the cheap shots I could have made go. She was the one crying.

“And now I’m giving it all up, all of it, for just one man.”

She leaned her hands against the cabinet as if she needed the support.

“You said sex with Louie was great. I think you’ve used words like *fantastic* and *mind-blowing*.”

She nodded, her hair spilling around her face so that I couldn’t see her eyes for a moment. “It is, he is, but he’s just one man. What if I get bored, or he gets bored with me? How can just one be enough? The last time we were both cheating a month after the wedding.” She looked up at that last remark, her gray eyes wide and frightened.

I made a small helpless gesture, and said, “You’re asking the wrong person, Ronnie. I’d planned on monogamy. It seemed like a good idea to me.”

“That’s exactly what I mean.” She wiped at the tears on her face in harsh, angry motions, as if the touch of them made her even more upset. “How is it that you, my girlfriend who had only three men in her entire life, ends up dating and fucking five men?”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I tried to concentrate on the hard facts. “Six men,” I said.

She frowned at me, her eyes taking on that look that meant she was counting in her head. “I only count five.”

“You’re leaving someone out, Ronnie.”

“No”—and she started counting on her fingers—“Jean-Claude, Asher, Damian, Nathaniel, and Micah. That’s it.”

I shook my head, again. “I had unprotected sex with one more man last month.” I could have said it differently, but maybe if we got back to my personal disaster, we could stop talking about Ronnie’s penis envy. She needed more therapy than I knew how to give lately.

She frowned harder, then she got it. “Oh, no, no,” she said.

I nodded. Happy to see from her expression that she got the full awfulness of it.

“You just had sex with him once, right?”

I shook my head no, over and over again. “Not just once.”

She was looking at me so hard that I couldn’t hold her gaze. Even with the tear tracks drying on her face, she was suddenly Ronnie again. Ronnie had a good hard stare. I couldn’t meet it, and was left looking at the cabinets. “How much more than ‘not just once’?” she asked.

I started to blush and couldn't stop it. Damn it.

"You're blushing—that's not a good sign," she said.

I stared down at the countertop, using my long hair to hide my face.

Her voice was gentler when she said, "How many times, Anita? How many times in the month you've been back together?"

"Seven," I said, still not looking up. I hated admitting it, because the number alone said louder than any words just how much I enjoyed being in Richard's bed.

"Seven times in a month," she said. "Wow, that's . . ."

I looked up, and the look was enough.

"Sorry, sorry, just . . ." She looked as if she wasn't sure whether she was going to laugh, or be sad about it. She controlled herself, and finally sounded sad when she said, "Oh, my God, Richard."

I nodded again.

"Richard." She whispered his name, and looked suitably horrified. It was worth a little horror.

Richard Zeeman and I had been off-again, on-again, for years. Mostly off. We'd been engaged briefly until I saw him eat someone. Richard was the leader—Ulfric—of the local werewolf pack. He was also a junior high science teacher, and an all-around Boy Scout. If Boy Scouts were six foot one, muscled, amazingly handsome, and had an amazing ability to be self-destructive. He hated being a monster, and he hated me for being more comfortable with the monsters than he was. He hated a lot of things, but we'd made up just enough to have fallen into bed in the last few weeks. But as my Grandma Blake told me, once was enough.

Of all the men in my life, the worst possible choice to be the father would be Richard, because he of all of them would try for the white picket fence and a normal life. Normal wasn't possible for me, or him, but I knew that and he didn't, not really, not yet. Even if I was pregnant, even if I kept being pregnant, I wasn't going to marry anyone. I wasn't going to change my living arrangements. My life worked the way it was, and Richard's idea of domestic bliss was not mine.

Ronnie gave an abrupt laugh, then swallowed it. I was glaring at her. "Come on, Anita, I'm allowed to be impressed that

you've managed to have sex with him seven times in the space of a month. I mean, you don't even live together, and you're having more sex than some of our married friends."

I kept giving her the look that makes bad guys run for cover, but Ronnie was my friend, and it's harder to impress your friends with the scary look. They know you won't really hurt them. The fight was dying under the weight of friendship, and of my problem being more immediate than her years of issues unresolved.

Ronnie touched my arm. "Oh, it wouldn't be Richard's. You're having sex with Nathaniel at least every other day."

"Sometimes twice a day," I said.

She smiled. "Well, my, my . . ." Then waved her hand as if to keep from distracting herself. "But the odds are that it's Nathaniel's, right?"

I smiled at her. "You sound happy about that now."

She shrugged. "Well, a choice of evils, ya know."

"Thanks a lot, Ronnie."

"You know what I meant," she said.

"No, I don't think I do." I think I was ready to be angry about her thinking the men in my life were a choice of evils, but I didn't get a chance to be angry, because two of the men in my life were coming through the front door.

I heard them unlocking the door before it opened, and their voices came raised and a little breathless from the run. They'd been able to run faster, and farther, without me along. I was, after all, still human, and they were not.

Standing between the island and the cabinets we couldn't see the door, but only heard them laughing as they came toward the doorway to the kitchen.

"How can you do that?" Ronnie asked, voice soft.

"What?" I asked, frowning.

"You were smiling."

I looked at her.

"You smiled just at the sound of their voices, even with everything . . ."

I stopped her with a hand on her arm. One way I knew I didn't want them to find out about the maybe-baby was by overhearing a conversation. Their hearing was a little too keen to risk it. And here they came, my two live-in sweeties.

Micah was in front, looking back over his shoulder, still

laughing, talking. He was my height, short, slender, and muscular in that swimmer sort of way. He had to have his suits tailored because he needed an extra-small athletic cut. You didn't get that off the rack. He'd come to me tanned, and stayed that way from jogging outside, mostly shirtless, all summer and autumn. He'd added a T-shirt to the short-shorts today. His hair was that deep, rich brown that some people get after starting life as very blond. His dark hair was tied back in a low ponytail that couldn't hide how curly it was, almost as curly as mine. He'd taken off his sunglasses, so when I moved into his arms I could look up into his chartreuse eyes. Yellow-green leopard eyes in his delicate face. A very bad man had once forced him to stay in leopard form until, when he came back to human, he couldn't come all the way back.

We kissed and our arms just seemed to automatically glide around each other, to press our bodies as close together as we could with clothes on. He'd affected me this way almost from the moment we had seen each other. Lust at first sight. They say it doesn't last, but we were six months and counting.

I melted against his body and kissed him fiercely, deeply. Partly it was what I always wanted to do when I saw him. Partly I was scared, and touching and being touched made me feel better. Not long ago I'd have been more discreet in front of company, but my nerves just weren't good enough to pretend today.

He didn't get embarrassed, or tell me, "Not in front of Ronnie," the way Richard would have done. He kissed me back with the same drowning intensity. His hands holding me like he'd never let me go. We drew back, breathless and laughing.

"Was that for my benefit?" Ronnie asked, and her voice was not happy.

I turned around, still half in Micah's arms. I looked at her angry eyes and suddenly was ready to be angry back. "Not everything is about you, Ronnie."

"Are you telling me you kiss him like that every time he comes home?" The anger was back, and she used it. "He's been gone, what, an hour? I've seen you greet him after a day's work, and it was never like that."

"Like what?" I asked, voice sliding down. If she wanted to fight, we could fight.

"Like he was air and you couldn't breathe him in fast enough."

Micah's voice was mild, placating, trying to talk us both down. "Did we interrupt something?"

I turned to face Ronnie, squarely. "I'm allowed to kiss my boyfriend the way I want to kiss him without getting your permission, Ronnie."

"Don't try and tell me you weren't rubbing my face in it, just now, with the show."

"Go get some therapy, Ronnie, because I am fucking tired of your issues raining all over me."

"I confided in you," she said, voice strangled with some emotion I didn't understand, "and you put on a show like that in front of me. How could you?"

"Oh, that wasn't a show," Nathaniel said from just inside the doorway, "but if it's a show you want, we can do that, too." He glided into the kitchen on the balls of his feet, showing both the grace of his dance training and that otherworldly grace of the wereleopard. He pulled his tank top off in one smooth gesture and let it fall to the floor. I actually backed up a step before I caught myself. I hadn't realized until that moment that he was angry with Ronnie. What little cutting remarks had she been making to him, that I hadn't heard? When he told me she didn't see him as real, he'd been trying to tell me more than I had heard. That I'd missed something big was there in his angry eyes.

He tore the tie from his ponytail and let his ankle-length auburn hair fall around his nearly naked body. The jogging short-shorts just didn't cover that much.

I had time to say, "Nathaniel—" and he was in front of me. That otherworldly energy that all lycanthropes could give off shivered off his skin and along my body. He was five-six, just tall enough for me to have to look up to meet his eyes. His anger had turned them from lavender to the deeper color of lilacs, if flowers could burn with anger and force of personality. Nathaniel was in those eyes and with that one look he dared me, challenged me, to turn him down.

I didn't want to turn him down. I wanted to wrap his body and that skin-crawling energy around me like a coat. Lately almost any stress seemed to feed into sex. Scared? Sex would make me feel better. Angry? Sex would calm me. Sad? Sex would make me happy. Was I addicted to sex? Maybe. But

Nathaniel wasn't offering actual sex. He just wanted as much attention as I'd given Micah. Seemed fair to me.

I closed the distance between us with my hands, my mouth, my body. The energy of his beast spilled around us like being plunged into a warm bath that had a mild electric charge. He'd been one of the least of my leopards until a metaphysical accident had taken him from *pomme de sang* to my animal to call. I was the first human servant to a vampire to gain the vampire ability to call an animal. All leopards were mine to call, but Nathaniel was my special pet. We'd both gained from the magical bonding, but he'd gained more.

He lifted me up, using just his hands on my thighs. Even through my jeans he made sure I knew he was happy to be pressed against my body. So happy that it forced a small sound from me.

Ronnie's voice came harsh, ugly, like she was choking on her anger. "And when the baby comes, are you going to fuck in front of it, too?"

Nathaniel froze against me. Micah's voice came from behind us. "Baby?"

## 2

THAT ONE WORD fell into the room like a thunderbolt, except that afterward the room was quiet. So quiet that I could hear the blood pounding in my head. Nathaniel's body was so still against mine that if I hadn't felt his pulse against my hand, it would have been like he wasn't there. I was afraid to move, afraid to breathe. It was like a moment before a gunfight, when you know it's going to happen, that anything, any movement, will set it off, and you don't want to be the one that makes that happen.

Nathaniel looked down at me, and the look was enough. It broke the unnatural silence, and sound spilled around us. Micah said, "Did Ronnie say *baby*?"

“Yeah, I said *baby*.” Her voice was ugly with anger.

Nathaniel let me slide to the floor, his hands going to my shoulders. His eyes were so serious that I had to fight to keep meeting them. I did it, though my eyes flinched as if the force of his questions were a light too bright to meet.

“Are you pregnant?” he asked, voice soft.

“I’m not sure,” I said, and I gave Ronnie the glare she deserved. “I was going to wait until I was sure before I told any of you guys. But I had to tell someone. I thought, hey, I’ll tell my best friend, but I guess I was wrong.”

“The kiss with Micah may not have been for my benefit,” Ronnie said in that ugly voice that I didn’t recognize as hers, “but your pet stripper and you, that was for my benefit.”

I turned so that I was facing her, Nathaniel at my back. “You’re jealous of the men in my life, yeah, I get that now.”

She opened her mouth, closed it, and said, “I guess that’s fair. I tell your secret, you tell mine.”

I shook my head. “Me telling Nathaniel and Micah that you are jealous of how many men are in my bed, that isn’t the same as you telling them that I may be pregnant.” I had a mean idea, so I said it. “But it might be close if I told Louie that you were jealous of my boyfriends. Does he know that you can number your old lovers in triple digits?” Yeah, it was mean, but she’d earned it. Only family can fight as dirty as best friends.

She paled a little, and that was enough to answer the question. “He doesn’t know,” I said, and made it a statement.

“I think he deserves to know,” Nathaniel said, and again there was that tone in his anger that said it was more personal than it should have been between them.

“I’d planned on telling him,” she said.

“When?” he asked, and he moved around me, so that he was facing her.

I glanced at Micah, and he shook his head, as if he didn’t know what was going on either. Good to know we were both confused.

“When you’d moved in together, married him, or never?”

“We’re not getting married,” she said in a voice that was just a little desperate, as if her fear was washing her anger away. She rallied then. “You did that little show with Anita to rub my face in the fact that I’m about to become monogamous. You’re always doing shit like that.”

“And how many times have you said, ‘Oh, it’s Anita’s little



stripper,' or 'pet stripper,' or 'how's tricks,' or my personal favorite, 'you're damned cute for a walking, talking, beefsteak,' or is that 'beef cake'?"

"Jesus, Nathaniel." I looked at Ronnie. "Did you say all that to him?"

The anger faded around the edges as she finally looked uncomfortable. "Maybe, but not like he makes it sound."

"Then why didn't you say it in front of me?" I asked. "If there was nothing wrong with saying it, why not in front of me?"

"Or me," Micah said, "I would have told you if she'd been saying things like that to Nathaniel."

"Why didn't you tell me, Nathaniel?" I asked.

He gave me his angry eyes. "I told you she didn't see me as real, as a person."

"But you didn't tell me what she'd said; I needed to know."

He shrugged. "She's your best friend, and you'd just made up after a big fight. I didn't want to start another one."

"I was just kidding around," Ronnie said, but the tone in her voice said she didn't believe it either.

I looked at her. "How would you feel if I said stuff like that to Louie?"

"You can't call him a stripper, or an ex-prostitute, because he's not." The moment she said it, her face showed me she knew she shouldn't have. "I didn't mean . . .," she began, but it wasn't me that put her in her place, it was Nathaniel.

"I know why you call me names," he said, and he moved in closer, not touching, but invading the hell out of her personal space. "I see the way you watch me. You want me, but not like Anita does. You just want me for a night, or a weekend, or a month, then you'd be done like you're always done with everybody. I know why you don't want to commit to Louie." I'd never seen him like this, relentless. I actually made a small move, as if I'd stop him, but Micah caught my eye, and shook his head. His face was serious, almost grim. I guess he was right. Nathaniel had earned this, and Ronnie had, too. But it wasn't going to end anywhere I wanted to be.

He said again, "I know why you don't want to commit to Louie."

She said in a small, weak voice, "Why?"

"Because it torments you to know that you will never know how I am in bed."

“Oh,” she said in a voice that was almost her own, “so I’m not wanting Louie because you’re such a stud?”

“Not me, Ronnie, but the next me. The next guy you get obsessed about. Not love obsessed, but I-wonder-what-he’d-be-like-in-bed obsessed. And you’ve always been beautiful enough, hot enough, to get anyone you’ve ever wanted, right?”

She stared at him as if he were something horrible. He prompted her, “Right?”

She nodded, and whispered, “Yes.”

“You knew Anita wasn’t fucking me, so you thought if she didn’t want me maybe it would be okay, but I didn’t pick up on any of it. I ignored the hints, so you started to get mean about it. Maybe you didn’t even know why you were doing it.” He leaned in so close that she moved back until her butt hit the cabinet, and she had nowhere else to go. “You kept belittling me in front of Anita, and worse behind her back, as if you’d convince her she didn’t want to keep me. That I wasn’t good enough to keep. Real enough to keep. Have you ever set your sights on anyone and not fucked them, at least once?”

She gave a little trembling shake of her head. She was biting her lower lip, and tears gleamed unshed in her eyes.

“Then suddenly, Anita is going to keep me, and you don’t poach your friends’ guys. That is a rule. You thought I was just food, and you could have me, at least once. Suddenly I’m a boyfriend, and it’s against your rules to try for me, but you still wanted me. Just once. Just once to feel me inside you . . .”

I called it then. “Enough, Nathaniel, enough.” My voice was shaky. This had gotten so ugly, so fast. How had I missed it?

Nathaniel moved back from her slowly, and said, “I used to believe in women like you, Ronnie. I used to think that anyone who wanted me that badly must love me, at least a little.” He shook his head. “But people like you don’t love anyone, not even themselves.”

“Nathaniel,” Micah said, as if he’d been shocked by that one, too.

Nathaniel ignored him. “You need to find out what you’re running from, Ronnie, before it ruins the best thing you’ve ever found.”

She spoke in a harsh whisper, “You mean Louie.”

He nodded. "Yeah, I mean Louie. He loves you. He really, truly loves you, not just for a night, or a month, but for years. Part of you wants that or you wouldn't still be with him."

She swallowed hard enough that it sounded like it hurt. "I'm scared."

He nodded, again. "What if you love him? What if you give him your whole heart and then he dumps you the way you dumped so many others?"

She gave that trembling nod of hers again. "Yes."

"You need help, Ronnie, professional help. I can recommend someone."

I knew Nathaniel saw a therapist, but I'd never heard him talk about it with anyone before, not like this.

"I've been with her for a few years. She's good. She's helped me a lot." His face was gentler than it had been.

Ronnie looked at him as if he were the snake and she were the helpless little bird.

He went to the corkboard above the phone. There were business cards pinned to it; important numbers, notes. He took one of the cards down. He walked back over to Ronnie and held it out to her. "If she can't take you, she'll know someone good who can."

Ronnie took the card carefully, just by the corner as if she were afraid it would bite. She gave him wide, frightened eyes, but she put the card in her jeans pocket. She let out a deep breath, and turned to me. "I'm sorry, Anita. I'm sorry about everything." She looked at Nathaniel, then back at me. "And now I'm going to leave the mess behind and let you guys clean it up like I've always done. I am sorry." And she walked out. We all waited until we heard the door close behind her.

The three of us stood for a few seconds in silence, waiting for the shock waves to settle. But of course there were other problems than just Ronnie's issues.

Micah turned to me, and said, "Are we in a mess?"

"I'm not sure yet," I said.

"But you think you're pregnant?" he said.

I nodded. "I missed last month. I'd planned on finding out for sure before I told anyone." I sighed and crossed my arms under my breasts. "I haven't bought a pregnancy test, because I wasn't sure how to take it without one of you finding out."

Nathaniel came to stand beside me, but to one side so he wouldn't block my view of Micah. "Anita, you shouldn't have to go through this alone. At least one of us should be holding your hand while you wait for the little strip to turn colors."

I looked up at him. "You sound like you've done this before."

"Once; she wasn't sure it was mine, but I was the only friend she had to hold her hand."

"I thought I was your first girlfriend."

"She found out I'd never been with a girl, so she took care of it." His voice made it seem utterly matter-of-fact. "I wasn't very good at it, but she came up pregnant. It was probably one of her customers, but it could have been mine."

"Customers?" Micah made it a question.

"She was in the game, like I was then."

I knew "the game" meant she'd been a prostitute, but "the game" usually meant when he was on the street. He'd been off the street by sixteen. "How old were you?" I asked.

"Thirteen," he said.

The look on my face made him laugh. "Anita, I'd never been with a girl, but I'd seen a lot of men. She thought I should know what it's like to be with a girl. She was my friend, protected me sometimes, when she could."

"How old was she?" Micah asked.

"Fifteen."

"Jesus," I said.

He smiled, that gentle, almost condescending smile that always let me know what a sheltered life I'd led.

"And she got pregnant," Micah said, softly.

Nathaniel nodded. "The odds were that it wasn't mine. We had sex twice. Once so I could see if I liked it. The second time so I could get better at it." His face softened in a way I'd never seen before.

"You loved her," I said, voice as gentle as I could make it.

He nodded. "My first crush."

"What was her name?" Micah asked.

"Jeanie, her name was Jeanie."

I almost didn't ask, but it was the most he'd ever talked about that part of his life, so I asked. "What happened?"

"I held her hand while the test turned positive. Her pimp paid for an abortion. I went with her. Me, and another girl." He shrugged, and the soft light faded in his eyes. "She couldn't

have kept it. I knew that. We all knew it." He looked suddenly sad, lost.

I wanted to take that lost look out of his eyes, so I hugged him, and he let me, and he hugged me back.

"What happened to Jeanie?" Micah asked.

He stiffened in my arms, and I knew then it would not be a good answer. "She died. She got into the wrong car one night, and the date killed her."

I hugged him tighter. "I am so sorry, Nathaniel."

He hugged me, one fierce, tight hug, then he moved back enough to see my face. "I was thirteen and she was fifteen. We were street hookers. We were both drug addicts. There wasn't going to be a baby." His eyes were so serious. "I'm twenty, and you're twenty-seven. We both have good jobs, money, a house. I've been clean for three, almost four years."

I pulled back from him. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying we have choices, Anita. Choices that I didn't have the last time."

My pulse was in my throat, threatening to choke me. "Even if I am—" and it took me two tries to say—"pregnant, I'm not sure I'm keeping it. You understand that, right?" My chest was so tight I could barely breathe.

"It's your body," he said. "I respect that. I'm just saying that we have more than one way to go here, that's all. It has to be mostly your choice."

"Yes," Micah said, "you're the woman, and like it or not, the final choice has to be yours."

"Your body, your choice," Nathaniel said, "but we need a pregnancy test. We need to know."

"We're running late now," I said. "You guys need to shower and we have to go to Jean-Claude's place."

"Can you really just go to the cocktail party with this hanging over us?" Nathaniel asked.

"I have to."

He shook his head. "It's fashionable to be late, and once he knows why, Jean-Claude won't mind."

"But . . .," I said.

"He's right," Micah said, "or am I the only one that thinks I would go crazy smiling and nodding tonight, and not knowing?"

I hugged myself tighter. "But what if it's positive, what if . . ." I couldn't even finish it.

“Then we’ll deal with it,” Micah said.

“Whatever happens, Anita, it will be okay. I promise,” Nathaniel said.

It was my turn to look into his face and realize how young he was. We were only seven years apart in age, but they could be an important seven years. He promised it would be all right, but some promises you can’t keep no matter how hard you try.

That tight feeling climbed up my throat and spilled out my eyes. I started to cry, and couldn’t stop it. Nathaniel wrapped his arms around me, held me against his body, and a moment later Micah moved in behind me. They both held me, while I cried my fear and confusion and anger at myself. Self-loathing didn’t even begin to cover it.

When the crying slowed, and I could breathe without hiccuping, Nathaniel said, “I’ll go out and get the test. Micah can shower while I’m gone. I should be back in time to clean up and we’ll only be a little late.”

I pushed myself away, enough to see his face. “But what if it’s a yes, I mean how can I go to the party if it’s a yes?”

Micah leaned over my shoulder, putting his face next to mine. “You don’t want to know,” he said, “because you’ll find it easier to pretend tonight, if you don’t know.”

I nodded, my cheek sliding against his.

“I’ll get the test,” Nathaniel said, “and we’ll use it later tonight, after the party. But we are getting one, or two, to take with us.” For someone who was supposed to be a submissive his voice held no compromise. It was simple fact.

“What if someone finds it in our stuff?” I asked.

“Anita, you’re going to have to tell Jean-Claude and Asher sometime,” Nathaniel said.

“Only if it’s positive,” I said.

He gave me a look, but nodded. “Okay, only if it’s positive.”

Positive. It seemed like such the wrong word. If I was pregnant it was definitely a negative. A really big, scary negative.