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“Ah, hell, V, you’re killing me.” Butch O’Neal mined through his sock drawer, looking for black silk, finding white cotton.

No, wait. He pulled out one dress sock. Not exactly a triumph.

“If I were killing you, cop, footwear’d be the last thing on your mind.”

Butch glanced over at his roommate. His fellow Red Sox fan. His…well, one of his two best friends.

Both of whom, as it turned out, happened to be vampires.

Fresh from the shower, Vishous had a towel wrapped around his waist, his chest muscles and thick arms out on display. He was pulling on a black leather driving glove, covering up his tattooed left hand.

“Do you have to go for my dress blacks?”

V grinned, fangs flashing in the midst of his goatee. “They feel good.”

“Why don’t you ask Fritz to get you some?”

“He’s too busy feeding your jones for clothes, man.”

Okay, so maybe Butch had recently gotten in touch with his inner Versace, and who’ve thought he’d had it in him, but how hard could it be to get an extra dozen silkies in the house?

“I’ll ask him for you.”

“Aren’t you a gentleman.” V pushed back his dark hair. The tattoos at his left temple made an appearance and then were covered up again. “You need the Escalade tonight?”

“Yeah, thanks.” Butch stuffed his feet into Gucci loafers, bareback.

“So you’re going to see Marissa?”

Butch nodded. “I need to know. One way or the other.”

And he had a feeling it was going to be the other.

“She’s a good female.”

She sure the hell was, which was probably why she wasn’t returning his calls. Ex-cops who liked Scotch weren’t exactly good relationship material for women, human or vampire. And the fact that he wasn’t one of her kind didn’t help the situation.

“Well, cop, Rhage and I’ll be throwing back a few at One Eye. You come and find us when you’re done—”

Banging, like someone was hitting the front door with a battering ram, brought their heads around.

V hiked up the towel. “Goddamn it, flyboy is going to have to learn how to use a doorbell.”

“You try talking to him. He doesn’t listen to me.”

“Rhage doesn’t listen to anyone.” V jogged down the hall.

As the thundering dried up, Butch went over to his ever-expanding tie collection. He chose a pale blue Brioni, popped the collar of his white button-down, and slipped the silk around his neck. As he strolled out to the living room, he could hear Rhage and V talking over 2Pac’s “RU still down?”.

Butch had to laugh. Man, his life had taken him to a lot of places, most of them ugly, but he’d never thought he’d end up living with six warrior vampires. Or being on the fringes of their fight to protect their dwindling, hidden species. Somehow, though, he belonged with the Black Dagger Brotherhood. And he and Vishous and Rhage were an awesome threesome.

Rhage lived in the mansion across the courtyard with the rest of the Brotherhood, but the troika hung out in the gatehouse, where V and Butch crashed. The Pit, as the place was now known, was sweet digs compared to the hovels Butch had lived in. He and V had two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a galley kitchen, and a living room that was decorated in a win-some, postmodern, Frat-House-Basement style: a pair of leather couches, plasma-screen high-def TV, foosball table, gym bags everywhere.

As Butch stepped into the main room, he got a load of Rhage’s ensemble for the night: Black leather trench coat fell from his shoulders to his ankles. Black wife-beater was tucked into leathers. Shitkickers topped him out at six-eight or so. In the getup, the vampire was flat-out, drop-dead gorgeous. Even to a certified hetero like Butch.

The son of a bitch actually bent the laws of physics, he was so attractive. Blond hair was cut short in the back and left longer in the front. Teal-blue eyes were the color of Bahamas seawater. And that face made Brad Pitt look like a candidate for The Swan.

But he was no mama’s boy, in spite of being a charmer. Something dark and lethal seethed behind the flashy exterior, and you knew it the minute you saw him. He gave off the vibe of a guy who’d smile while he set the record straight with his fists, even if he was spitting his own teeth out while he took care of business.

“What’s doing, Hollywood?” Butch asked.

Rhage smiled, revealing a splendid set of pearlies with those long canines. “Time to go out, cop.”

“Damn, vampire, didn’t you get enough last night? That redhead looked like serious stuff. And so did her sister.”

“You know me. Always hungry.”

Yeah, well, fortunately for Rhage, there was an endless stream of women more than happy to oblige his needs. And sweet Jesus, the guy had them. Didn’t drink. Didn’t smoke. But he ran through the ladies like nothing Butch had ever seen.

And it wasn’t like Butch knew a lot of choirboys.

Rhage looked over at V. “Go get dressed, man. Unless you were thinking of hitting One Eye in a towel?”

“Quit clocking me, my brother.”

“Then gitcha ass moving.”

Vishous stood up from behind a table weighed down with enough computer equipment to give Bill Gates a hard-on. From this command center, V ran the security and monitoring systems for the Brotherhood’s compound, including the main house, the underground training facility, the Tomb and their Pit, as well as the system of underground tunnels that connected the buildings. He controlled everything: the retractable steel shutters that were installed over every window; the locks on the steel doors; the temperatures in the rooms; the lights; the security cameras; the gates.

V had set up the whole kit and caboodle by himself before the Brotherhood had moved in three weeks ago. The buildings and tunnels had already been up since the early 1900s, but they’d been unused for the most part. After events in July, however, the decision was made to consolidate the Brotherhood’s operations, and they’d all come here.

As V went to his bedroom, Rhage took a Tootsie Roll Pop out of his pocket, ripped off the red paper, and put the thing in his mouth. Butch could feel the guy staring. And he wasn’t surprised when the brother started in on him.

“So I can’t believe you’re getting all dolled up for a trip to One Eye, cop. I mean, this is heavy-duty, even for you. The tie, the cuff links—those are all new, right?”

Butch smoothed the Brioni down his chest and reached for the Tom Ford jacket that matched his black slacks. He didn’t want to go into the Marissa thing. Just skirting around the subject with V had been enough. Besides, what could he say?

She blew my doors off when I met her, but she’s been avoiding me for the past three weeks. So instead of taking the hint, I’m heading over to beg like a desperate loser.

Yeah, he really wanted to trot that out in front of Mr. Perfect, even if the guy was a good buddy.

Rhage rolled the lollipop around in his mouth. “Tell me something. Why do you bother with the clothes, man? You don’t do anything with your mojo. I mean, I see you turn down females at the bar all the time. You saving yourself for marriage?”

“Yup. That’s right. Got myself tied in a knot until I walk down that aisle.”

“Come on, I really am curious. Are you holding it for someone?” When there was only silence, the vampire laughed softly. “Do I know her?”

Butch narrowed his eyes, weighing whether the conversation would be over faster if he kept his mouth shut. Probably not. Once Rhage got started, he didn’t quit until he decided he was finished. He talked the same way he killed.

Rhage shook his head ruefully. “Doesn’t she want you?”

“We’re going to find out tonight.”

Butch checked his cash level. Sixteen years as a homicide detective hadn’t lined his pockets with much to speak of. Now that he was hanging with the Brotherhood? He had so much of the green, he couldn’t possibly spend it fast enough.

“You’re lucky, cop.”

Butch glanced over. “How you figure?”

“I’ve always wondered what it would be like to settle down with a female of worth.”

Butch laughed. The guy was a sex god, an erotic legend in his race. V had said that stories about Rhage were passed from father to son when the time was right. The idea that he’d downshift into being someone’s husband was absurd.

“Okay, Hollywood, what’s the punch line? Come on, hit me with it.”

Rhage winced and looked away.

Holy hell, the guy had been serious. “Whoa. Listen, I didn’t mean to—”

“Nah, it’s cool.” The smile reappeared, but the eyes were flat. He sauntered over to the wastebasket and dropped the lollipop stick in the trash. “Now, can we get out of here? I’m tired of waiting for you boys.”

Mary Luce pulled into her garage, shut off her Civic, and stared at the snow shovels hanging on pegs in front of her.

She was tired, although her day hadn’t been strenuous. Answering phones and filing papers at a law office just wasn’t taxing, physically or mentally. So she really shouldn’t be exhausted.

But maybe that was the point. She wasn’t being challenged, so she was wilting.

Could it be time to go back to the kids? After all, it was what she was trained for. What she loved. What nourished her. Working with her autistic patients and helping them find ways of communicating had brought her all kinds of rewards, personally and professionally. And the two-year hiatus had not been her choice.

Maybe she should call the center, see if they had an opening. Even if they didn’t, she could volunteer until something became available.

Yes, tomorrow she would do that. There was no reason to wait.

Mary grabbed her purse and got out of the car. As the garage door trundled shut, she went around to the front of her house and picked up the mail. Flipping through bills, she paused to test the chilly October night with her nose. Her sinuses hummed. Autumn had swept out the dregs of summer a good month ago, the change of seasons ushered in on the back of a cold rush of air from Canada.

She loved the fall. And upstate New York did it proud, in her opinion.

Caldwell, New York, the town she was born and would most likely die in, was more than an hour north of Manhattan, so it was technically considered “upstate.” Split in half by the Hudson River, the Caldie, as it was known by natives, was every midsize city in America. Wealthy parts, poor parts, nasty parts, normal parts. Wal-Marts and Targets and McDonald’ses. Museums and libraries. Suburban malls strangling a faded downtown. Three hospitals, two community colleges, and a bronze statue of George Washington in the park.