

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

CHAPMISTRES VIEW ADAM AND BEN

Carol Pedroso

Table of Contents

Love's Landscapes.....	3
Chapmistres View – Adam and Ben – Information.....	5
Chapmistres View – Adam and Ben.....	8
Author Bio	51

Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

CHAPMISTRES VIEW – ADAM AND BEN

By Carol Pedroso

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved worldwide.

This eBook may be distributed freely in its entirety courtesy of the Goodreads M/M Romance Group. This eBook may not be sold, manipulated or reproduced in any format without the express written permission of the author.

Chapmistres View – Adam and Ben,
Copyright © 2014 Carol Pedroso

Cover Design by Goodreads M/M Romance Group
Photographs from Public Domain Pictures.net
[Sunset](#); [Sunset on the beach](#); [Smooth sunset](#);
[Morning mist background 6](#);
[Blue sunset and boat](#); [Sunset](#); [Sunset 15](#)

This ebook is published by the *M/M Romance Group* and is not directly endorsed by or affiliated with Goodreads Inc.

CHAPMISTRES VIEW – ADAM AND BEN

By Carol Pedroso

Photo Description

This is a color photo of a muscular man with tattoos down his left arm. He is doing push-ups facing forwards to the camera, and he has a baby lying on his back. The baby is looking at the camera and looks happy to be where it is.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This scene has been going through my head for a few months now; if it calls to your muse use it 'cause I seem unable to put my stories on paper and would rather someone with talent give it a try. ;D. Please no BDSM; light bondage and sensation play is fine. I really love witty dialogue and spunky characters. Paranormal of any kind is fine, I said vampire but anything will do; the mpreg would be nice if you can work with it. I want children, and that's it— I won't bother you anymore! :D.

The sound of the door banging open had every male in the room at the ready in case of attack until they saw my pregnant mate standing there looking like an avenging angel, all beautiful and disheveled, with his thick dark hair escaping the complicated braid he always weaved it into, his usually deep chocolate eyes had a coppery shine to them and the flames in there could burn entire cities, he looked so beautiful it was almost painful, but he also looked quite pissed, which is why I assume my men were pressing against the walls trying to disappear into the woodwork.

“There you are, you bastard! You're never around when I need you, always doing business!” he snapped angrily while he strode into my office.

“What's wrong my love?” I asked worried.

“What's wrong? This is what's wrong!” he ranted, pointing at his belly where our children were growing inside him. “You did this to me! My back aches, my feet are swollen, I look like a

cow, I need to pee every twenty minutes.” He sucked in another breath and continued to vent, even if a little softer. “I have food cravings I can’t fulfill because of your stupid vampy DNA, and I’m horny and I can’t sleep if you’re not there!” He finished on a sob, the wind having gone out of his sails.

Thankfully he let me gather him in my arms and carry him to our room to a few chuckles from my men.

“I heard that! Don’t laugh at my mate, ’cause he’s getting laid and you’re not!” He yelled over my shoulder, which made me laugh as silence spread over the room, Yep! He was pretty scary when he wanted.

I’m sorry, mate, I embarrassed you he said through our bond as he snuggled further into my shoulder.

Don’t worry, love, it’s okay I smiled into his sweet-smelling hair and as I looked down on his face I noticed the dark circles under his eyes.

My poor mate looked at the end of his rope, dark circles stood out against his pale skin and I could feel his exhaustion through our bond, which made me feel like a piece of shit for not noticing he needed me sooner.

I apologize, my love for not paying enough attention I said, choosing to keep up the most intimate form of communication and cuddling him closer to me.

Finally, I got to our room, the bed was a tangled mess, the comforter lying on the floor as if he had kicked it off of him in his sleep, which made me feel worse because he could have slept better if I had been here. *I’m taking the whole month off, damn it! No one needs me as much as him.*

Sincerely,

Alecto

Story Info

Genre: paranormal

Tags: m-preg, vampires, witches, abuse, bonded, weddings

Content Warnings: some violence and reference to past abuse

Word Count: 19,318

CHAPMISTRES VIEW - ADAM AND BEN

By Carol Pedroso

Adam rushed down the street frantically flipping through the folder in his hands. He had already sacked his personal assistant for forgetting such an important elder's council meeting. If his second, Tim, had not rung him at his home office to ask when he was arriving, he would not have known the meeting had been called at all. He continued to rant to himself as he turned the last corner by the council building, and he ran straight into a figure coming the other way. The figure went flying through the air, landing on its back then rolling onto its front, before coming to a stop.

Adam went running over and saw a young man painfully trying to get up off the ground. He reached down and gently but firmly helped the man up and set him on his feet. As their hands met, Adam felt a shock go through him, and a voice in his mind said *mine, my mate*. The man was definitely not a vampire, so that made him one of the witch half of Chapmistres View community. The man was about a foot shorter than Adam's six feet ten inches and had long blond hair tied back in a tight braid. He had a slim build and was currently trying to wipe rather ineffectually at a large coffee stain that covered the front of the tired, ratty coat he wore.

"Please accept my sincere apologies," Adam stated, smiling in what he hoped was a friendly way. All he wanted to do was take the man in his arms and make sure he was safe and protected. However, they were strangers to one another, and although vampires recognized their mates instantly, a non-vampire may take exception to having a complete stranger trying to seduce him in the street. He just needed to get the man's name and maybe get him to agree to another meeting. Meeting! He had nearly forgotten the meeting! Damn, he needed to get going, but he was not willing to rush off without having some way to see the man again.

While he had been having his internal conversation, the man had undone his coat to try and assess any damage to his shirt. Adam recognized the uniform as that of the healing clinic. He smiled; well, he knew where to find the man now and knew he would use that knowledge as soon as he could. "Sorry again, my name is Adam. Whom do I have the pleasure of knocking over today?" He hoped the joke might break the ice.

The man looked at him warily but finally answered, “My name is Ben, and apology accepted. If you’ll excuse me, I need to get to work.” He made to turn away, but Adam stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. Ben instantly moved away from the hand, as though it had burned him.

Adam held his hands out in front of him in a non-threatening manner. “I mean you no harm. I just wanted to make sure you’re okay and to give you my card so you can send the cleaning bill for your clothes to my office.” He held out a business card, but Ben refused to take it.

“That’s fine; I’ll throw this lot in the washing machine at work. I really must go.” He turned and walked away as quickly as he could.

Adam stood for a moment watching him walk away. He could catch him if he wanted to, as vampires were fast when they wanted to be, but he had the sense that would only make the situation worse. He continued on his way into the council building deep in thought.

Adam hurried into the meeting, over half an hour late, and took his seat beside Tim.

“Nice of you to take the time to join us,” Jackson, the senior elder, called from the head of the conference table.

Adam made a polite apology, and the meeting resumed. Tim quietly filled him in on what he had missed, and they both joined in the rest of the meeting without incident.

Back in his council office later, Adam had his secretary take the evening off so he could work in peace. First he went online to order some flowers as an apology to Ben. He had them sent to the clinic with a dinner invitation and all his contact info.

He then finished all his backlogged paperwork and headed for home humming a tune.

The next night Ben arrived at the clinic to see all his colleagues crowded around one of the staffroom tables. As he entered the room everyone went quiet, and he had to fight the urge to turn around and run.

Jamie came over and slung an arm around his shoulder. He had to hide the wince of pain as Jamie’s arm hit a bruise from his fall the night before. He had

a lot of practice hiding pain, and last night no one had noticed he was in any pain. He had gotten to work, slung his dirty clothes in one of the staff washing machines and used a spare uniform for his shift.

“What have you been hiding from us?” Jamie asked with a grin.

“What do you mean?” Ben asked warily, as he was led nearer to the table. As they approached, people made way for them, and he saw a large bouquet of flowers on the table. There were all different colors and so many different types that Ben couldn't name them all. Ben was staring at the flowers, when Jamie handed him a sealed card with his name on it. With shaking hands, he opened the card and read the message inside:

To Ben

Please accept these flowers as another apology, and I hope you are okay. I am hoping you will allow me to escort you to dinner at your convenience so I can apologize again in person. My contact information is included.

From Adam Rickman

A business card was tucked into the card with an office number, a home number, and a mobile number on it, as well as a home address for ‘Elder Adam Rickman’. *Elder?* Ben stared at the card not knowing what to do with it.

“Wow,” Jamie said from behind him, where he had been reading shamelessly over Ben's shoulder. “What did Rickman do to have to apologize like this?”

Ben stared at the card a moment longer before replying. “He ran into me last night, literally, on my way to work. Knocked me flying through the air and spilled my coffee all over my coat and uniform.”

“Why am I only hearing about this now?” Jamie demanded, frowning. “I looked over all the records from last night, this morning when I had finished at the guards' clinic. There was no examination report for you there. I would remember.”

Ben blushed and started to stammer that he was okay, but Jamie was already dragging him by his collar into an examination room.

As the blood-bonded mate of a vampire, Jamie was stronger than a normal witch in the community, so Ben did not even try to get free. He knew it would be useless. In addition, Ben did not try too hard as Jamie was also pregnant, and Ben would never want to risk hurting the baby.

Jamie let go of him and fixed him in place with a glare. “Strip,” he demanded. “You can keep the underwear, but all the rest comes off.”

When Ben just stared, Jamie growled at him. “Either you strip, or I will strip you. Just ask Andrew if you don’t believe me!” Ben smiled at that comment; Andrew was Jamie’s vampire mate. He was shy, sweet, and loved by everyone at the clinic.

Ben sighed and started to undress. He heard Jamie catch his breath as he uncovered the bruises on his chest. He put the shirt on a chair and removed his pants. As he stood, he heard Jamie muttering spells under his breath. He felt the pain from the bruises fading, and he knew the bruises would soon disappear. “Turn,” Jamie demanded between spells. Ben turned without thinking but went still when he heard Jamie’s indrawn breath.

“What the hell happened to your back?” Jamie asked in a shocked voice. Ben knew what Jamie was seeing. He had used two mirrors to see his back a few months ago and had seen the damage. There were old burn scars on his sides and down the middle of his back. There were also long thin white scars crisscrossing each other over his back from his neck down to his ass.

Ben took a deep breath and hung his head before starting his story for Jamie. “I met Ian four years ago when I turned twenty-one. We attended the same healing conference. We found we lived in neighboring clans, and we really hit it off.

“He was a vampire—tall, strong, and dashing. He treated me like a prince, taking me out to dinner and buying me gifts. I moved in with him after only six months and things started to change. He was very possessive and controlling. He chased off all my friends, and I don’t have any family left, as my parents died after I moved. Ian didn’t allow me to attend their funerals.

“All the compliments stopped, and nothing I did was right. I was not allowed out during the day, and to ensure I stayed put, he locked me in the bedroom with him while he slept. I had to give up healing and stay at home, sticking to a schedule of chores that he would lay out for me. If the chores were not done to his satisfaction, which they usually weren’t, I would get punished. He would sometimes do this himself, usually with a whip. Sometimes he would give me to one of his guards who could use anything including fire to punish me. The only rule was that they could only scar my back as he wanted to be able to see and touch my smooth skin when he tied me to the bed to fuck me.

“I lived with him three years before I managed to squirrel enough money away to escape. The local shop owner, where I went for groceries, usually

escorted by a guard who waited outside, figured out what was happening. Each week he would add a few fictitious items to my shopping receipt that I gave Ian, and then he would keep the money safe for me.

“Finally I had five hundred dollars, and one day, after Ian had decided I was too weak to try and escape any more so he took the guard off me, I made my move. The shop owner gave me a backpack with supplies, and I just left and started walking. It took two months of running to arrive here. I shortened my name, which is Bennett, to Ben and used a simple spell to make my hair grow and change color. I used a spell to fix my eyes and got rid of the horrible glasses that Ian made me wear. I think my appearance is different enough that he wouldn't recognize me if he saw me now.”

By the end of his tale, Ben had silent tears running down his face, and Jamie had gathered him close to allow him to cry.

When he finally cried himself dry, he felt like a small weight had been lifted. Sharing his story with Jamie seemed to have helped, and it felt good not to be bearing it alone anymore.

Jamie held Ben at arm's length and looked into his eyes. “I am only going to say two things, then I won't mention this again unless you do. One, if you ever want to talk, I'm here, night or day. Two, if you want those scars removed, Casey and I will do it for you. We've done that sort of magic before and can leave you with a nice smooth back again.”

Ben looked at him and swallowed several times before answering, “Thank you for both offers. I may want the scars removed some day, but at the moment they are my reminder to be careful who I trust, especially if it is a vampire. I know in my head that not all vampires are like Ian, but my heart may take longer to catch up. Till then I'll keep the scars. As for talking, I am very grateful to have a friend again, and maybe one day I will take you up on both the offers.”

Jamie gave him a hug then left him to dress.

The rest of the shift passed quickly with only a few comments about the flowers. Ben assumed that Jamie had warned people to lay off him, and he found he did not mind that thought at all.

At the end of the shift Ben had thought long and hard about Adam's offer of dinner, but decided he wasn't ready for socializing again. He gave the flowers to a female colleague and dropped the card in the trash before leaving for the

day. He couldn't explain the slight feeling of loss when he walked away, but he kept walking till he arrived home.

Adam was sitting in yet another 'important' council meeting trying to pay attention. Tim had noticed how distracted he was, and he had been taking more notes than usual so he could try to keep Adam up to date on what was going on.

A week had passed since he had 'bumped' into Ben, and Adam had not heard from him at all. When he had called the clinic to see if the flowers had been delivered, he had been told by a female nurse that, yes, the flowers had been delivered, but that Ben was not available to talk. He had gotten the same response every time he had called, and he got no answer when he left messages or sent more gifts.

He was starting to get desperate. At almost two thousand years old, he thought he would never meet his mate, and now he didn't know what to do.

At the head of the table, Jackson's second, Andrew, winced and put a hand to his head. He then rolled his eyes and scribbled a quick note to Jackson. Jackson looked at the note and raised an eyebrow at Andrew, before looking directly at Adam.

"Adam, there seems to be some guests outside who wish to speak to you and Andrew. Please, can you make this as fast as possible and make sure Tim has any instructions before you go."

Adam frowned, as he had a whispered conversation with Tim before meeting Andrew at the door.

Outside, he found Jamie and Casey waiting for him, both wearing identical annoyed expressions. Andrew went straight to Jamie and greeted his mate with a long kiss that wiped the annoyed expression off his face. Casey rolled his eyes as Andrew stood behind Jamie with his hands on his mate's pregnant belly. Adam found himself feeling jealous of Andrew and quickly looked away. Jamie looked over his shoulder, and after a moment, Andrew nodded and turned to Adam. "This conversation would be better in private so why don't we head to your office, Sir?" he asked respectfully.

Adam shrugged. He could guess what this might be about and Andrew was right—it would be better in private. He led the way down the hall to his council office and sent his secretary home for the night. Once everyone was seated in the office he turned to Jamie, who seemed to be leading the group. "What can I do for you?" he asked, in what he hoped was a polite tone of voice.

Jamie looked at Casey who nodded, and Jamie turned back to Adam. “We want to know why you’re harassing one of our nurses. You have been calling the clinic and sending him gifts for days now. He’s been getting more and more agitated and scared. We’re worried he’s going to move away if this continues, and good witch nurses are hard to come by.”

Adam stared at Jamie in shock. “But why would gifts and a few dinner invitations scare him?”

Jamie looked at him as though he was an idiot. “You’re a stranger to him, and you’re basically stalking him. He is only twenty-five years old, and if I remember correctly, you’re nearly two thousand years old. What do you expect? Why won’t you take no for an answer?”

“I just want to get to know him, but he never answers any of my messages.”

“But why?” Jamie persisted, fearing he knew the answer. “You have lots of men to choose from, why pursue him, when he has made it clear with his behavior that he is not interested?”

“He’s my mate!” Adam muttered, almost too low for the others to hear.

Jamie stared at the powerful vampire before him, who now looked so lost and upset.

Shit! What do we do now? Jamie asked Andrew and Casey through their mind link.

After a hurried silent conversation, Jamie turned his attention back to Adam. “Okay, here’s what we’ll do. I will talk to Ben and try to convince him to meet you. But you must stop calling and sending things until you hear from me again.”

Adam looked at him with hope in his eyes. “I can do that if it will help,” he said almost eagerly, then he stopped and added, “But I want to hear from you within forty-eight hours, or I will call you!”

Jamie nodded, and after looking at his companions, they exited the office.

Adam sat thinking about Andrew and his mate. As an elder, he had been filled in on the peculiarities of his joining with Jamie. Jamie had turned out to be the first non-vampire mate in a long time to be able to get pregnant; actually it hadn’t happened in five hundred years. Also, because Jamie and Casey were twins and had shared a mind link since birth, that same mind link was now shared with Andrew. So Andrew and Jamie had a private mind link and a

shared mind link with Casey. He shook his head; he did not think he could share his mate like that, even with a sibling.

He decided to stay in his office instead of rejoining the meeting, as he knew he wouldn't be able to concentrate. Tim came looking for him about two hours later to catch him up on what he had missed and try to get him to tell him what was going on. He got rid of Tim, only to receive an urgent summons from Jackson. So he locked up his office and headed out.

In Jackson's office, he found himself on the receiving end of a lecture about his responsibilities and how he should take care of them.

After over fifteen minutes of lecturing, Adam finally snapped, "Look, I've found my mate, and I'm trying to get to know him. But I've just been told by his friends that all I'm doing is scaring him so much he is starting to think about moving. So I'm sorry if council business takes second place at the moment."

"You've found your mate?" Jackson asked, after a few moments of stunned silence.

"Yes, but he's afraid of me." Adam said bitterly, putting his head in his hands.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. "I know a little about how you feel. I still haven't had the courage to approach my mate even though I know who he is."

Adam looked up into Jackson's face and saw the torment in his friend's eyes.

"Why haven't you approached him?"

Jackson stared off into space. "I've known my mate since he was a baby, and I was waiting for him to become a man first, before dropping the bombshell. But as he matured I found myself very protective of him, and he saw this as being bossy, and now we can rarely be in the same room with each other without arguing or me saying the wrong thing."

Seeming to shake off his mood, Jackson focused back on Adam. "Give Tim all he needs, then take the week off. Talk to your mate's friends, who I assume include Jamie and Casey, or Andrew wouldn't have been on the receiving end of a summons earlier. Trust them, and they will help you."

Adam nodded as he rose. "I will speak to Tim tomorrow, and thank you, my friend."

As he walked home, he thought back over all that had happened that night. He supposed he could see what Ben's friends meant, that in his enthusiasm he may have come on a bit strong.

He got to his home just in time for the security to engage and seal the house up for the day.

Jamie cornered Ben the next night and took him to the office he shared with Casey.

"Look, we need to talk," he said, as he guided Ben to some comfy couches in the corner of the room.

"Casey and I spoke to Rickman last night, as we noticed how his attention was affecting you and your work. There's no need to be scared," he added quickly, as he saw Ben go pale. "But I need to tell you what he said. First though, I would like to know what you have been taught about vampire mates."

Ben frowned at what he thought to be a random question that had nothing to do with what they were discussing.

"Well, I know a vampire recognizes his mate instantly. I also know it is unheard of for a vampire to harm their mate as they have a strong protective instinct. They are also very single-minded once they recognize their mates. They want to claim them and be with them all the time, at least until they are blood-bonded. They will keep after them until..." His voice trailed off, and Jamie saw a slow realization dawning behind Ben's eyes.

Ben started shaking his head. "I can't be, can I? He must be mistaken." His eyes were fixed on Jamie's, pleading for answers.

Jamie placed a comforting arm around his shoulders and pulled him into a hug.

"As hard as it is to believe, Rickman believes you're his mate. He is almost two thousand years old, and if you had seen him last night, you would have seen a very lonely, desperate vampire. He couldn't understand how his behavior could be mistaken for anything other than genuine interest. When I agreed to speak to you he looked so hopeful, and even agreed to lay off the calls and gifts for forty-eight hours."

Ben sat in thought for a few minutes when suddenly he felt movement against his side. He looked up, but Jamie seemed to have dozed off with his

head tilted back against the wall. He felt the movement again and realized it was the baby inside Jamie, moving and kicking. Without thinking about it, he put his hand on Jamie's swollen abdomen and grinned when the baby pushed against his hand. He jumped when Jamie spoke. "He keeps me up half the day when I'm supposed to be sleeping, and then when I try to catch a nap during a shift, either we have an emergency, or he starts up again."

"He? Have you found out the gender then?"

"No, I just like winding Andrew up, because he thinks it's a girl. We haven't even had a scan yet, as the ultrasound machine is broken, and we've had to order a replacement, which is being sent, but will not be here for a few more days. Meanwhile, I keep getting bigger and having weird cravings. At the moment it's chocolate, but since I've been pregnant if I eat my favorite chocolate, which is milk chocolate, I am sick. I have to have dark chocolate, but it's just not the same." He sighed and got up to stretch his back. "Think about what I've said, and let me know what you decide, so I can call Rickman."

"I'll meet him." Ben blurted out quickly before he could change his mind. "But only if you and Andrew are there too."

Jamie thought about it. "What about going out for a drink or a meal, and Andrew and I will sit at a table close by. That way you can meet Rickman, but you'll know you're not alone with him."

Ben thought for a moment, and then nodded.

Adam was sitting in his home office trying to catch up on paperwork but couldn't concentrate. He jumped when his phone started to ring, and he didn't recognize the number. "Rickman," he said, as he put the phone to his ear.

"Hi, it's Jamie," the voice on the other end said. "He's agreed to meet you with a few conditions. You free tonight?"

It took a minute for Adam to process what Jamie had said. *He wants to meet me? Conditions? Tonight???* All these thoughts ran through his mind before he heard Jamie calling his name, and asking if he was still there.

"I'm here. When, where, and what are the conditions?" he answered Jamie all in one breath.

"When is as soon as possible, as he's nervous and doesn't want to wait. Where is up to you, but trust me and please do not pick anywhere expensive,

and don't try to show off your money, which I know at your age you probably have plenty of. And as for the conditions, he has asked that Andrew and I accompany you and sit at another table so he knows that friends are nearby."

Adam thought about it for a moment. At his age, he remembered the times when women went everywhere with a chaperone, and therefore he didn't have a problem with that, at least if it meant Ben would meet him. As for the inexpensive place, what was that all about? He shrugged to himself, remembering what Jackson said about trusting Ben's friends. "I have no problem with you and Andrew playing chaperone. I can meet you all in one hour at Molly's Diner in the night district."

The night district was the part of town that was open all night for the vampires and the night-workers in the community, while another section of town was open during the day for the day-working witches. Molly's Diner was a small place that sold simple homemade meals at a reasonable rate. It was very popular with the midnight lunch crowd.

He was pulled from his thoughts again by Jamie saying they would be there and hanging up. He stood staring at his phone for a while before he snapped into action. Looking down at the comfortable sweatpants and ratty T-shirt he was wearing, he started heading for the bathroom as he shed the old clothes. After a quick shower, he donned some tan slacks and a button-down shirt in dark brown. He shoved his feet into some dress shoes and made for the door, barely remembering to grab his keys on his way out the door. He lived a fair distance from Molly's, but with his vampire speed he arrived there with fifteen minutes to spare. He saw he was first to arrive so he settled at a corner table where he could see the door and ordered himself a coffee.

Jamie turned the speakerphone off and looked at Ben. "Right, now let's get you dressed in something other than your work uniform and get over to Molly's."

He looked at Ben critically then muttered a complicated spell under his breath so fast Ben couldn't have followed it even if he could have heard it. Suddenly his uniform of a blue T-shirt with the clinic logo on it and his navy pants were replaced with an emerald green button-down shirt and black slacks. He raised an eyebrow at Jamie. "Green? Really?"

Jamie shrugged. "It sets off your dark eyes."

Ben rolled his eyes and was smiling as Andrew walked into the room. “Hey guys,” he said, as he wrapped an arm around his mate and greeted him with a long kiss. Ben was just about to clear his throat when they broke apart. Andrew looked at Ben’s red face and laughed. “You know you remind me of myself before I met Jamie. I was so shy I would blush at everything.” Ben fought the urge to point out that, even when he was not with Jamie, Andrew still could be made to blush at the drop of a hat.

Andrew looked at what Ben was wearing and nodded. “I see you’re ready, so let’s go. We don’t want to be late, now do we?”

With that, he led Jamie out the door with Ben trailing at the rear.

They arrived at Molly’s just as Adam was being served his coffee. When he saw Ben, he shot to his feet, nearly knocking over the waitress who was serving him and trying to give him a look down her top at the same time. When she saw what had his attention, she rolled her eyes and pasted on a smile before heading back to the counter.

“Hi,” Ben offered shyly, standing looking at his feet.

“Hi,” Adam returned, smiling, and then he gestured to the seat opposite him. “Please sit. What do you want to drink? Are you hungry?” His speech got faster as he spoke, until he was babbling, and Ben was staring at him. He stopped suddenly and took a breath before letting out a low laugh. “Sorry, I’m so happy you agreed to meet me that I don’t know what to say or do.”

Ben smiled at him. “That’s okay. I’m nervous too. I’d love a coffee and seeing as you can’t eat, I’ll give food a miss. Besides,” he continued quickly before Adam could insist he eat something, “I had something to eat not long ago and won’t be hungry for a while yet.”

Adam nodded and signaled for more coffee to the waitress who was hovering at the counter.

“Thank you for agreeing to Jamie and Andrew being here.” Ben said quietly after the waitress had delivered his coffee. He looked across the room where Jamie and Andrew were apparently engrossed in one another, but Ben could feel a spell around him and guessed that Jamie wanted to be able to ensure he knew where Ben was all the time.

“I still remember a time when women required a chaperone just to speak to a man, so trust me, I have no problems with them being here. As long as they’re not eavesdropping!”

He held out his hand and offered it to Ben. “As I neglected to introduce myself properly when I knocked you off your feet, I’m Adam Rickman. I’m an elder on the Vampire Council, and I would like to get to know you better.”

Ben looked at Adam’s hand for a few moments before cautiously taking it. He smiled at the warm feeling that spread from the small connection. “I’m Bennett Glenderson, but I go by Ben Smith at the moment, and I’m a nurse at the healing clinic.”

“Why the name change if I may ask?” Adam smiled at their joined hands, but then he felt the instant tension his question caused, and he cursed himself for not thinking before he spoke. “You don’t have to answer that if you don’t want to. It was a very personal question.”

“No, I think you should know because it will explain a lot about how I am. The short version is my ex-boyfriend was a vampire who thought I should be chained to his bed, and I do mean that literally, and that I should only do what he said when he said it. If I broke the rules then I was punished. His favorite was a whip, or if he was busy, he would give me to one of his chosen guards to punish.” Ben jumped when he felt Adam’s fingers wiping the tears that he had not felt running down his face. When he looked at Adam’s face, he saw the suppressed rage there and went to pull away, but Adam carefully tightened his grip on Ben’s hands so he couldn’t move.

“Don’t be scared. I’m not angry with you, but if I ever catch up with your ex, he will wish he was never born.”

Ben saw the sincerity on Adam’s face, and he smiled when he realized that his past wasn’t going to chase away this person. He frowned again, and then took a deep breath.

“You do realize that if you want to get to know me you are going to have to deal with a lot of baggage in relation to this? I panic at silly things sometimes, but to me they’re real, and the panic attack they cause is real too. If I have an attack, there is a possibility of me passing out if I can’t calm down. Are you ready to deal with that?”

Adam smiled reassuringly. “Ben, you’re my mate. I will look after you whatever happens. I will be there whenever you need me, and if it’s during the day I will ensure there is someone you can call that you trust to be with you if you need them.” He moved over to Ben’s side of the booth and pulled lightly on one of Ben’s hands.

“Come here and get used to me. Your friends are still just over there so you know you’re safe.” He kept his voice soft and low and was pleased when Ben slid nearer to his side.

Very slowly, Adam put his arm around the smaller man and gave him a soft hug. Ben melted into Adam’s big frame. He could feel muscles rippling as Adam breathed and a sense of peace seemed to flow from Adam and straight into Ben. He snuggled closer to the warmth Adam’s body offered.

Ben hadn’t realized how much he missed being touched. No one but Ian or one of his guards had touched him in over three years, and those hadn’t been loving or caring touches. Other than Jamie, of course, but he didn’t count that, as this felt so much better.

Adam smiled down at the top of Ben’s head. He hadn’t expected Ben to actually move when he asked, but he had thought he had nothing to lose, and it appeared he had everything to gain. As he felt Ben cuddle closer, he ran his hand slowly up and down Ben’s arm, soothing away the nerves he could still feel coming from his mate.

Thinking on what Ben had told him about his ex made Adam mad, but also explained a lot about Ben’s behavior so far. He was going to have his work cut out for him, winning this little witch’s trust, but it was a challenge he was looking forward to winning.

Ben felt so good cuddled up next to him, and it took a moment to realize that Ben’s breathing had evened out, and he had dozed into a light sleep.

He saw Jamie’s approach from the corner of his eye, and he smiled at him.

“Wow, you really won his trust quicker than I thought, but then the mating call is hard to resist even for us non-vampires. We just hear it in a different way.” When he saw Adam look at him with questioning eyes he continued. “We feel it more as an attraction to start off with, and when we are around the vampire in question, we feel drawn to them but don’t know why. We also feel safe with the vampire even if we don’t know them well. I think you’ll find that now he’s met you properly and has touched you willingly, he will trust you instinctively. Seeing as he knows more about vampire mates, because of being a healer, than other non-vampires usually do, he will come round more quickly now. But that doesn’t mean you can rush him.” They both looked down as Ben stirred and looked up at them both, blinking before blushing.

“I can’t believe I fell asleep. I’m so sorry. What must you think of me? I have not had much sleep the past few days.” He tried to move away from Adam

in embarrassment, but Adam kept him close and resumed rubbing his arm in comfort, and he found himself relaxing again. He didn't notice Jamie smiling approvingly at Adam.

Adam winced at Ben's words about sleep. "Well, since I'm guessing I may have had something to do with your lack of sleep, I can honestly say you can sleep with me any time." He grinned with his last statement.

Jamie rolled his eyes as Ben blushed again at the double meaning.

Jamie coughed. "Well as much as I hate to cut this short, we have to get back to the clinic, as we only got cover for just over an hour, and we still have to get back there."

Ben reached out impulsively and pulled Adam down so he could give him a small peck on the cheek. While Adam was still staring at him in shock, he slipped out of the booth and followed Jamie out the door with Andrew bringing up the rear.

Adam sat there for a few more minutes before paying the bill for the coffees and heading home.

When he arrived, he found he couldn't concentrate on his work anymore, so on an impulse, he rang the clinic. He spoke to Jamie and, after a few minutes, he had a plan in place. He finally managed to get a few hours' work done before going out again and heading for the clinic. He stopped on the way and picked up what he and Jamie had spoken about and then waited by the staff entrance for Ben to emerge.

Ben smiled when he saw Adam, and his smile widened when he saw the single red rose Adam held out to him. "Thank you. It's beautiful," he said, taking the rose and bringing it to his nose to smell. "To what do I owe the honor of a second visit tonight?"

"I thought you may like company on your walk home," Adam replied, holding out his arm like an old-fashioned gentleman, with what he hoped was a winning smile. "I can even protect you from any vampires that aren't looking where they're going."

Ben smiled at the gesture and words. He took Adam's arm, feeling the same warmth and sense of safety as when they had touched earlier.

They walked along the dimly-lit streets chatting about where they grew up, and Adam kept Ben entertained with stories from throughout history. In his lifetime he had seen so much, Ben wondered how Adam dealt with it all.

Nearly two thousand years of memories that included love, hate, greed, and loss. When they arrived at Ben's door, Adam turned to look at him. "May I kiss you?" he asked, with the need evident in his eyes, but in no way trying to force Ben into anything he wasn't ready for.

Ben nodded and reached to put his arms around Adam's neck as the bigger man leaned down to him. Their lips met, and they both let out a moan of pleasure. The fire of arousal started at their joined lips and spread throughout both their bodies.

Ben tried to pull Adam closer, and Adam backed him into the wall by his front door and deepened the kiss. Ben felt Adam's tongue demanding entrance and opened his mouth to allow him to explore. Adam's hands fell to Ben's waist and he pushed up tight against Ben, feeling Ben's hardness poking against his thigh as his own pressed into the smaller man's stomach.

Ben ran his hands over every bit of Adam that he could reach. Adam was big and muscular. His shoulders were wide, and as he bent to kiss Ben, he completely covered the smaller man. Ben felt safe and protected all at once. He was also very turned on and was harder than he could ever remember being before.

With what little control he still had, Adam slowly pulled back from the kiss but kept Ben pressed into the wall. When he was sure Ben was stable on his feet, he stepped back, and noticing the rose on the ground, he picked it up and returned it to its owner.

"I'm sorry, that was a bit more than I bargained for. I didn't know your touch would do that to me. You'd better get inside and, looking at the sky, I'd better go, as it's getting near sunrise. Can I walk you to work tomorrow?"

Ben smiled. "I'd love that. I leave around seven p.m."

"I'll be here," Adam said, stealing another quick kiss that left Ben panting again, before disappearing in a whirl of vampire speed.

Ben went inside and got ready for bed. He then fell into a deep sleep that was filled with dreams of a big vampire who was intent on making sure he never ran out of flowers and kissed like a god.

Adam arrived fifteen minutes early the next night, thanking god for early sunsets in the winter. He then really thanked whoever was listening when Ben answered the door in only a bathrobe. His hair was damp, and he had obviously only just gotten out of the shower.

Ben's eyes widened when he saw the heat in Adam's eyes as they raked down his body. Adam seemed to shake himself, and then he grinned. "So, is this the new uniform for nurses at the clinic?"

Ben blushed at Adam's comment, and then shook his head ruefully. "I can see I'm going to spend a lot of my time with you blushing."

"Oh, but you blush so prettily," Adam grinned.

Ben laughed and waved for Adam to follow him inside, but then stopped when Adam didn't follow.

"You have to verbally invite me in, or I can't enter," Adam reminded him.

"Sorry. Please consider yourself welcome inside my home at any time," Ben quickly said formally, wording it in such a way that he wouldn't have to repeat it every time Adam came around.

Adam happily followed Ben into the small house and Ben directed him to a compact living room. "The kitchen is just over to your left there. If you want some coffee, just help yourself." Ben pointed to a doorway in the corner of the room. With that, he hurried from the room to dress for work.

Adam looked around the room but saw it was very bare and had no personal touches at all. He made a note to himself to rectify that situation as soon as he could.

Ben came back in the room, fully clothed and ready to leave, but before he could pick up his keys, Adam stopped him with a hug and then a deep kiss. "Good evening," he said with a grin, when he broke the kiss.

Ben grinned back at him. "Good evening to you too."

They left the house and walked toward the clinic. "May I ask you a sensitive question?" Adam asked cautiously, not wanting to offend Ben now that he had him talking to him.

"Of course, you can ask me anything. I will always answer."

"Well, it's just that whenever Jamie speaks to me, he makes a big deal about how expensive something is. First he insisted I choose an inexpensive café—By the way, Molly's happens to also be my favorite diner anyway—and when I asked what your favorite flowers were, he told me to make sure whatever I got was not too expensive. So what gives?"

Ben frowned for a moment, then he realized what Jamie had been doing. "I think Jamie was trying to help you because my ex seduced me by buying me

expensive presents and taking me out to fancy restaurants. He probably thought if you tried that, I'd freak out."

"Ah, I see. Well, I'll try to keep that in mind, but I make no promises. I've waited for you for nearly two thousand years. I want to spoil you."

They arrived at the clinic and parted ways with a kiss and a promise to meet later for lunch.

Ben headed in for his shift with a smile on his face and feeling happier than he ever remembered feeling.

The next week saw Adam walking Ben to and from the clinic every day. He found out when Ben's day off was, and asked if Ben would spend the day with him. When Ben agreed, Adam said Ben could choose the activity, if he got to choose the restaurant they went to afterward.

He was surprised when Ben chose bowling as their first date but kept his promise and rang the lanes to make a reservation for the evening. He then called a small restaurant that wasn't expensive, but wasn't cheap either, and made dining reservations as well.

At the last minute, Adam called Jamie and asked if he wanted to make up a team, so Ben would feel better than if they were alone. Jamie agreed and said he would bring Casey too.

Adam was surprised, therefore, when he and Ben arrived at the bowling lane, to see Jackson standing with the group.

"What are you doing here, my friend?" he asked Jackson, who looked supremely uncomfortable.

Jackson glared at Jamie before answering. "Apparently vampire elders don't have enough fun."

Jamie was laughing, and Adam guessed he was the reason that Jackson was there. But as he turned back to Ben he caught a look in his friend's eyes and continued turning to see what he was looking at. The only person he saw was Casey, who was bending to hear something a small child was saying. He turned back to his friend and saw him watching Casey with a wistful expression on his face. Adam raised an eyebrow in question, and when Jackson looked up he nodded almost imperceptibly. Adam realized that Casey was the mate Jackson had been speaking of in his office.

He remembered Jamie and Casey's mother had died when they were eighteen, and they had taken over from her, running the clinic as joint healers. Jackson had taken them under his wing and had been their go-between for the council. He had done everything he could to protect them, especially last winter when a nearby clan elder named Samuel had tried to kidnap Jamie and Andrew to force Casey to follow. Adam remembered how frantic Jackson had been when Casey had used magic to take himself to Jamie. He thought it had been paternal worry, but now he saw it for what it was—a vampire trying to protect his unclaimed mate. He also remembered how Casey had laid into Jackson on more than one occasion, not realizing that Jackson was trying to protect him. He thought Jackson was trying to replace their mother and control him and his brother.

Adam shook his head at the situation and offered Jackson a small smile before turning back to Ben who had started to look at him with curiosity.

“What's up, Adam?” Ben asked, seeing the sadness on the older vampire's face and hoping he was not upset about going bowling.

Adam seemed to shake himself and smiled down at Ben as he drew him into his arms. “Nothing little one, just realized something and was trying to see if I can help at all. But I can't, so...” He reached down and kissed his mate softly and moved back before he could be tempted to keep going and embarrass them in public. Ben blinked and looked up at him with such an open expression of desire that Adam almost reconsidered the dinner reservations in favor of just taking Ben home.

“You guys ready?” Jamie's amused voice came from behind them.

“We're coming,” Adam replied automatically, not realizing what he'd said till Jamie started laughing, and he saw the grin on Ben's red face. He groaned and buried his face in Ben's neck till the laughing stopped.

The games went well, with the vampires competing against the witches. Jamie got pounced on at one point when his ball went zigzagging unnaturally down the alley.

He had used a spell to ensure he would get a strike, and the vampires claimed that was an unfair advantage. Casey agreed and got his brother to agree to behave.

Ben had a wonderful time and even got a strike on his last throw of the game. As he turned with a yell, Adam grabbed him and swung him around in a circle. When Adam set him down, he also gave him a kiss that made him wish

they were alone. Adam was always so careful about how far he pushed, but Ben was ready for more. He was not ready to go all the way yet, but he wanted more time alone with Adam, and he definitely wanted more of Adam's kisses and touches.

The game ended, and the witches came out on top by a small margin. Jamie declared that since the vampires had lost, dinner was on them, and when Adam mentioned he had reservations, he offered to expand them to include everyone.

The restaurant was not busy so they were able to get a bigger table with no problem, and the witches ordered a dinner each while the vampires settled for a glass of blood each and some wine.

Conversation flowed nicely and so did the wine, except for Jamie, as he couldn't drink because of his pregnancy, a fact he moaned about off and on all evening. By the time everyone was ready to leave, Andrew and Jamie were propping up a tipsy Casey who was telling everyone how everything was *just lovely* and how everyone was his *bestest friends in the whole world*.

"Here hold him a sec," Jamie said to Jackson as he passed Casey over to Jackson. Jackson froze as he found himself with an armful of drunken witch. Casey turned to snuggle into Jackson's embrace, and as he inhaled, he seemed to slowly go limp. Jackson swung him fully into his arms and held him cradled against his chest. Casey was completely asleep, and Jackson couldn't help but smile.

"I'll get him home," Jackson told Jamie. "You can't carry him in your condition, and I have a car that he can sleep in on the back seat. I'll meet you back at your house." With that, he strode off towards the parked cars.

Adam shook his head and turned towards Ben to find him smiling in a way that sent his libido skyrocketing, and he fought it back with a silent groan. On their walks to and from the clinic, Ben had opened up to Adam with all the details of his relationship with Ian, and he was wary of trying to push too hard, too fast.

Ben had other ideas. The wine had helped him to relax, but he knew he was still thinking and making his own decisions.

On the drive home, he snuggled next to Adam and ran a hand up and down his leg. He could feel Adam shaking from trying to control his reaction, and wondered how long it would take to get him to lose that control.

"Ben, you need to stop." Adam's voice sounded strangled, and Ben couldn't help but grin at the effect he was having on this big bad vampire.

“Why? I’m enjoying touching you. Or is that not what mates are supposed to do?” he asked, trying to look innocent. The breeze from the open window had dispelled most of the effects of the alcohol but had left him feeling relaxed. He cuddled up to Adam, and before Adam could answer any of the questions he had asked, he had fallen asleep.

When Adam looked down, he couldn’t help chuckling; and shaking his head, he continued the drive to Ben’s house.

Moving carefully, he picked Ben up, cradling him gently in his arms and made his way up to the house. He managed to open the door with Ben’s keys and headed up the stairs to the bedroom. He had only seen the room once, when Ben gave him a swift tour of the house a while back, but he remembered the way and rapidly had Ben naked and tucked up in bed. He glanced at the time and realized he needed to move fast if he was going to get home before sunrise. He found a pen and paper on the bedside cabinet and scribbled a hasty note before giving Ben a swift kiss on the forehead and heading home at top vampire speed to beat the daylight.

Ben woke in the morning and was surprised to find he was naked in bed. As the events of the previous night started to return to him, he saw the note on the bedside cabinet.

Hope you know how cute you look fast asleep. Had to rush to get home before sunrise but will pick you up usual time for work this evening.

Love, your mate.

Ben blushed when he finished reading, and glancing at the clock, dragged himself out of bed and into the shower. As he washed, he recalled his plans and how he had fallen asleep before he could implement any of them. Thinking about his plans for Adam had the effect of making him painfully hard, but he found the idea of jacking off in the shower didn’t appeal. However, it did give him some ideas about what did appeal, and as he was rinsing himself off, he formulated a plan for when Adam arrived.

As usual, Adam arrived early, no doubt hoping to find Ben only half dressed, just out of the shower. This time when Ben heard the doorbell, he opened and looked out the bedroom window to ensure it was Adam and not a neighbor, before calling down, “The door’s unlocked, Love.” The endearment slipped out before he could think better of it.

When he heard the front door open and shut, he then called out, "I'm upstairs. Can you give me a hand with something?" He hoped his voice was steady because his heart was beating double-time. This was the first time he had tried something like this.

Adam opened the bedroom door and stopped in shock on the threshold. Ben was lying on the bed with not a stitch of clothing on. His hard cock was pointing straight up at the ceiling, and he was watching Adam's reaction with a very vulnerable look in his eyes. Adam started to grin, and with startling speed he pounced on Ben for a hot and steamy kiss.

When they came up for air, he asked with a smile, "Now what can I help you with?"

Ben grinned with him while running his hands over every bit of Adam's hard body that he could reach. "Well you see, I have this hard problem I thought you could help me solve before work, but first you have too many clothes on," he replied, trying without much success to keep a straight face. His giggling turned to gasping as he saw Adam shedding his clothes, and he got his first proper look at Adam's body.

Adam was big *all* over, his whole body was rippling with muscles, and there wasn't a spare inch of fat on him anywhere. He also had tribal tattoos all over his left shoulder, and there was a sun tattooed on his right shoulder.

Ben moaned at the sight, and he felt himself getting harder than he could ever remember being.

He moaned again as he felt Adam's hands find his hard cock and start to stroke it with strong, slow strokes. His head fell back, and his body arched into Adam's expert touch, while he felt kisses being feathered across his face and down his neck. He felt Adam's fangs lightly scrape his neck, and he cried out at the sensation that shivered down his spine at the contact.

"Yes, please bite me," he pleaded, as he writhed beneath Adam's caresses. He felt Adam pause. "Please remember I work for Jamie. He had told me all about the effects of being with a vampire," he added, and before he took another breath he felt a sharp pain in his neck. Then he experienced an orgasm so huge his vision went black for a few moments, before all the colors came rushing back. He screamed his pleasure at the top of his lungs as he felt Adam sucking gently on his neck, drawing Ben's blood into himself.

As soon as Ben stopped shuddering, Adam withdrew his fangs and licked over the spots to ensure they healed. Adam panted to catch his breath. Just

tasting his mate's blood, and hearing him cry out in completion, had been enough to make him come just as hard as Ben had. He searched Ben's face worriedly, until he saw Ben's sated smile and the look of pleasure in his eyes.

"Are you okay?" he asked, just to be sure. "I didn't want to take too much and leave you too weak to work tonight, but your blood tastes like a fine wine that I can't get enough of."

Ben caressed the side of his face reassuringly. "I'm fine. I don't feel weak from blood loss, but that orgasm should have come with a health warning. Being told the effects of a vampire bite and experiencing it for myself are two different things. I never dreamed I would react so quickly or strongly." He dropped his head back to the bed with a contented sigh.

Adam went to the bathroom to fetch a wash cloth, and as he cleaned Ben off, he explained.

"You reacted so strongly because we are mates. If we had not been mates, the effect would have been less, and your reaction wouldn't have happened so fast. Have you never been bitten before?" Adam held his breath, waiting for an answer.

"No" Ben answered, "It was the only thing I retained control over with Ian. He knew if he tried to force a bonding, or even a bite on me, that it would eventually strip me of all my personality, and as much as he wanted me to obey him, he also wanted me to resist. As a healer, I know that the bite of a vampire will begin a short bonding process, and if repeated enough on an unwilling participant, will give the vampire control over that person. I also know that a bite between mates just reinforces the bond that is already there. So I am safe with you." By the end, he was smiling at Adam.

"I am glad that I am the first and will be last to taste your sweet blood. I am also grateful to call you my mate. You're beautiful, smart, and so giving. When we fully bond, I would love it if you would consent to take my last name. That way everyone will know we belong to each other." Adam leaned down to kiss his mate's tempting lips.

Ben had closed his eyes for the kiss, but opened them to answer. "Of course, I will take your name. It will be an honor. Is that your way of proposing?"

Adam stared at him, then scrambled off the bed and fell to his knees. "Would you do me the greatest honor of becoming my blood-bonded mate as soon as possible? I can promise to honor you, be faithful to you, and do

everything in my power to keep you safe and happy for the rest of our lives.” By the time he had finished, Ben had tears running down his cheeks.

“Yes, yes, yes, and a thousand more times, yes,” Ben cried, leaning towards Adam at the edge of the bed.

Adam swooped in for a long kiss, but Ben had seen the time, and after a few moments he turned his head away to tell Adam they had to go.

Adam, however, had an idea. While Ben was dressing upstairs, he quickly called Jamie and told him Ben needed to be a little late and asked if he could cover as a favor to them. Jamie teased him about *why* they were running late, but agreed as long as it did not become a habit.

When Ben came down dressed and ready, Adam pulled him out the door and turned in the direction of the night district. Ben tried to slow Adam down, but the bigger man kept walking steadily. “Where are you going? I need to get to work,” he called, as he tried to pull his hand free.

Adam pulled him up next to him. “Don’t worry. You won’t be too late, and I already called Jamie. I cannot let you go to work without giving you something to show that you just agreed to be my blood-bonded mate, now can I?”

Ben hadn’t thought about having a symbol of their pending joining; he knew women usually got an engagement ring, but what would a man get?

“Remember, as a healer I can’t wear rings with stones in them, just in case you were thinking down the engagement ring route.”

Adam tilted his head as he continued to walk fast enough that Ben had to trot to keep up.

“I had a neck chain in mind that would be long enough to be tucked into your clothes for patient safety. What do you think?”

Ben thought a moment. “That could work,” he agreed.

They entered the night district and Adam headed straight for a specific jewelers shop he knew. It was run by a fairly old witch couple who were known for their exquisite work.

As they entered the small shop, a smiling man came bustling out of the backroom.

“Elder Rickman, I didn’t expect to see you again so soon.” He turned to look at Ben. “And you must be Ben. Adam told my wife and me about you, and

how you were his mate. I must say I wasn't expecting you both to come together. I assumed this present would be given to you privately." At his last comment, he looked pointedly at Adam, who managed to look sheepishly at the floor.

"The question came up unexpectedly, and I didn't want to wait."

Ben laughed at the expression on Adam's face. He could see that Adam was a bit annoyed with himself, and he guessed that Adam had probably had a romantic setting in mind for his proposal. However, Ben thought it could not have been more perfect. He squeezed Adam's hand, and when their eyes met, he smiled reassuringly.

The man had disappeared into the backroom again, and he returned with a medium-sized velvet jewelry box which he handed to Adam. When Adam opened it, he found the gold circular pendant with a crest on the front, that he had ordered. As Ben watched, Adam lifted the pendant, revealing a long gold chain. He pressed his fingers to the edge of the pendant, and it opened. Ben realized it was also a locket; inside there were two engraved pictures. On one side was an engraving of Adam, and on the other was an engraving of Ben.

"My idea was that this would keep me close to your heart at all times and remind you of me while we are apart. The crest on the front is my family crest, and it would honor me if you would wear this as my promise to you."

"Put it on for me?" Ben requested, looking into Adam's eyes as he lifted his hair out of the way.

As the clasp closed, Ben felt a warm tingle go through him. He knew this would be the start of the rest of his life.

Both men thanked the jeweler and set off at a brisk pace towards the clinic. Ben kept one hand in Adam's and one hand over his heart where the pendant rested under his clothes.

Arriving at the clinic, Adam insisted on escorting him inside to ensure Jamie didn't try to lecture him. As Adam predicted, Jamie was waiting for them, and Adam held up his hands to stop the lecture before Jamie could even draw a breath.

"Before you start, we are not late for the reason you think." He gestured to Ben, and Ben drew out the pendant.

Jamie looked at it, and then looked at Ben, a silent question in his eyes. Ben smiled and said, "Adam gave this to me after I agreed to become his blood-bonded mate."

Jamie's eyes widened, then he cheered loudly, drawing lots of attention. Jamie looked around at all the people, before shouting out, "Listen up everyone; pass the word. We have a newly engaged couple here." The crowd cheered, and the people nearest to them clapped Ben and Adam on the back.

After a while, Jamie broke up the crowd and sent Adam off with instructions to be back to pick up his *fiancé* after his shift. Adam took the teasing with good grace and went off to his council office, no doubt intending to spread the word from there.

The arrangements took two weeks, and by the end of that time both Ben and Adam were going mad. All they wanted was to be bonded and to start living the rest of their lives together, but the community had decided that an elder getting bonded was a big deal, and that they had to have a big celebration.

Adam had explained to Ben that the actual blood-bonding was very simple; each of them had to drink some of the other's blood while making love to seal the bond. There was nothing else to it. The community, however, wanted a whole ceremony with vows and an exchange of rings, which made it more like a wedding service. The actual blood-bond would be forged afterwards on their 'wedding night'.

Jamie teased both men unmercifully by commenting frequently on how he was glad that he and Andrew had not had to have all the fuss, as Andrew was only an administrative assistant at the time of their bonding.

The night of the ceremony started clear; the moon was full, the stars were bright, and the air was crisp. Ben, however, didn't notice any of this because he was too nervous. He and Adam had discussed the ceremony, and they had decided that Ben should use his full proper name. Ben had suggested it because, as he told Adam, he didn't want their new lives to start out with any lies.

He was also not in his home tonight, as he had given up his home in preparation of moving in with Adam. Instead, he was staying with Casey and Jamie at their house that adjoined the clinic. The last few days had been busy with work, preparations, and writing his vows. The ceremony was taking place at midnight, as that meant they would start a new day as bonded mates. He couldn't wait. He had so much energy he knew he wasn't going to get any more sleep.

He was just thinking about getting out of bed when there was a knock on the door.

He pulled the blankets around his body before calling out for the person to enter, guessing it would only be Casey or Jamie this early in the morning. Proving him right, Jamie poked his head around the door before stepping inside.

“Hey, you’re awake.” Jamie grinned. “Ready to tie the knot?”

Ben rolled his eyes. “Hello to you too, and yes, I am ready to be *bonded* tonight.”

“Good.” Jamie paused before continuing more seriously, “Look, Casey and I discussed what to give you and Rickman as a bonding gift, and I remembered our first conversation together after your run-in with Rickman.”

Ben frowned, trying to think back, and then he remembered the conversation he had had with Jamie about Ian and the scars on his back. “You’re offering to get rid of my scars for me?”

Jamie nodded. “That, and Casey thought you may like to have your hair color done too, so you look like yourself for your joining.”

Ben smiled his agreement. “Sounds great, but I would like to keep my hair long. I’ve gotten used to it now.”

“Well, why don’t you grab a shower while I get Casey? Only put a robe on after you’re clean, as we will have to be able to see all the scars to remove them all.”

Jamie left, and Ben headed for the bathroom down the hall.

After his shower, he returned to his room as requested, only wearing a robe. Jamie and Casey were waiting for him there, and as he had done last time, Jamie grinned at him before ordering him to strip.

Ben rolled his eyes as he removed the robe and dropped it to the floor; Jamie then guided him to lie on his front on the bed.

He heard an indrawn breath from Casey when he saw the scars, but before he could comment, the brothers had started to chant in unison. He felt his back getting warm, and a feeling of relaxation spread through him, leaving him in a magic-induced haze. He came out of the haze to find himself still lying on his bed with Jamie and Casey sitting on either side of him.

Jamie smiled, and offered him a hand to get up, while Casey repositioned two mirrors so Ben could see his back. The first thing Ben saw when he looked in the mirror was his hair; it had been blond for so long, he had forgotten how different he looked when it was jet black. His eyes then moved to see the reflection of his back in the other mirror. He gasped as silent tears ran down his cheeks. His back was smooth again; there were no marks to mar his skin at all.

“Thank you both,” he said, when the tears finally slowed. Jamie handed him some clothes, and once he was dressed, he joined the brothers downstairs for some food.

He spent the late afternoon going over his vows and getting ready. He decided to leave his hair out of its usual braid, because he knew Adam preferred his hair loose, and he hoped his mate would like the new color. He put on a new suit that he had bought specially for the occasion with his meagre savings; it consisted of light-grey pants and jacket, with a white button-down shirt and a silver tie.

Andrew had found him the day before and handed him a gift box which contained a pair of gold cufflinks with the initials B and R on them. Ben still smiled when he looked at them; he liked the thought that his name would soon be Bennett Rickman.

When he was dressed and ready, he made his way downstairs to find the brothers and Andrew waiting for him. As a group, they left the house and headed for the town square. As they got nearer to the square, people seemed to multiply. It seemed the whole community had turned out to see the ceremony. The crowd made way for the small group as they moved towards their designated spot near the council building. Starting at the council building, there was a trail of red rose petals leading him to the center of the town square.

Andrew had left them a while back to join the other vampires. Jamie and Casey took up positions on either side of Ben as music started to sound out into the night. Staying in that formation, they followed the rose petal trail, walking in time to the music.

As they got nearer, they saw Adam being escorted in the same way by Andrew and Tim, coming from the opposite direction. They all met in the center of the square, and the ceremony began.

Jackson presided over the ceremony as the Senior Elder. He started by telling everyone how rare mates for vampires were becoming, and how proud he was that now two vampires from this community had found theirs. He went

into detail about what a mate meant for a vampire, how the bond was for life, and how the mates would always put each other before anyone or anything else.

Next came the vows Adam and Ben had written; Adam went first.

“Bennett Glenderson, I had all but given up hope of ever finding my mate. After nearly two thousand years, it seemed to be almost an impossibility. Running into you was the best thing that could have happened to me. I cannot change your past, but I can promise to do everything in my power to give you a long and happy future.”

By the end of his vow there was not a dry eye in the audience. Ben had to take a few deep breaths to calm himself down before beginning his.

“Adam Rickman, you have accepted me and my past without question or reservation. I cannot promise that we will never fight or hurt each other. But I can promise to love you for the rest of our lives. Today I give up my past; Bennett Glenderson no longer exists. I am now, and will always be, Bennett Rickman.”

When Ben had finished, everyone in the square was openly weeping for the couple.

Jackson said a few more words before proclaiming that it was midnight, and this was a time of celebration. Their four escorts took Adam and Ben to the edge of the square; they were then escorted into the council building that had been lavishly decorated for the occasion. There were flowers and candles at regular intervals around the room, and some big doors had been opened to allow the party to be taken outside. There was food for the witches and a bar serving drinks and blood.

When Adam and Ben finally got away from the party, they made their way quickly to Adam's house, now their house. Ben gasped when he saw the bedroom. The sheets on the bed were red silk, and there were lights strung all around the room giving the effect of candles.

Outside the door of the house, they had found a parcel left for them; and Ben now opened it and started to laugh. In the parcel was a bottle of expensive lube, a bottle of champagne, and two glasses, carefully wrapped in tissue paper.

Adam looked in the parcel and grinned. “I should have known Jamie would do something like this.”

Adam pulled Ben into his arms, and he came willingly. Their lips met, and the passion exploded. Both men knew this first time was going to be fast, the

buildup—that had started when they met—had almost reached breaking point. As they came up for air, Adam whispered in his ear.

“I love you more than anything, and I need you now.” Ben moaned at the words and melted into Adam’s body. “Can you use that spell you told me about that Jamie taught you?” Adam asked in a seductive tone, while running his hands over Ben’s cloth-covered erection.

Ben pushed into Adam’s hand and started to mutter rapidly under his breath. Their clothes disappeared, reappearing neatly folded on a nearby dresser.

Adam took swift advantage and swept Ben up into his arms. He strode over to the bed and laid his mate in the middle, on his back.

Ben looked up at Adam and saw the hunger he felt, mirrored in his mate’s eyes. He held his arms open, and Adam prowled up from the bottom of the bed until he was leaning over Ben, propped on his hands with his body wedged firmly between his mate’s legs. They both moaned as their hard lengths rubbed together and sent shocks through both of them.

Adam reached for the lube he had snagged from the parcel, and after slicking up his fingers, he leaned forward to kiss Ben, while his hands fondled his mate’s balls and inched lower till they found their target.

Adam leaned back to assess his mate, before running a slick finger over the hidden entrance. He felt the ring of muscles give slightly under his touch and slowly started to push one finger into the hot heat of his mate’s body.

Ben arched into the sensation of being penetrated after so long, relishing the slight burn and the feeling of Adam being inside him.

“More. More, please,” he begged, but Adam refused to be rushed and took his time adding more lube and increasing to two, then three fingers.

“Please, Adam, I’m going to come if you keep doing that, and I want to come with you inside me. Please hurry!”

Adam took pity on his mate and reached again for the lube. After slicking up his rock-hard shaft, he positioned himself at Ben’s entrance. He looked into Ben’s dazed eyes, and as he pushed forward he said, “I claim you now as my mate; I will always protect you and will make it my life’s work to ensure you are safe and happy from this moment on.”

He started off slowly, but quickly gained speed and strength. Soon he was pounding into Ben, and Ben was meeting him thrust for thrust.

When he felt his climax approaching, he sank his fangs into his own wrist and pulled them out so that it was bleeding. He then sank his fangs into Ben's neck while bringing his bleeding wrist up to Ben's mouth.

As they both took the other's blood, he sensed the bond snap into place and Ben's emotions enter his mind in waves. He read Ben's pleasure, and as they both climaxed together, the effect on both himself and Ben at the same time was transmitted through the new bond. The connection prolonged their orgasms till they both collapsed, Adam on top of Ben.

When Adam finally seemed to come back to reality, he quickly rolled off Ben, afraid he was crushing him, but when he looked down at his mate all he saw was love shining back at him.

The next month passed slowly, and Ben felt like he was in heaven as he lived with his perfect mate and worked at the clinic. Jamie had a baby girl. They named her Elizabeth, or Beth for short, and the whole community celebrated with another midnight party to welcome the new addition.

Ben talked to Jamie, and Jamie explained that Beth would have traits from both her parents. She would be able to bear the sunlight till she hit puberty, but then would have the same restrictions as any vampire and only be able to go out in the dark. She would be tested as she grew, to see what magic she had inherited from Jamie, and she would then be trained in that magic by either Jamie or Casey, so she could decide what she wanted to do.

Ben and Adam had settled into a routine, and they were happier than either of them could have imagined. The only cloud in Ben's silver lining was the fact that two weeks after their bonding he had started to get dizzy spells. He assumed it was due to his system getting used to the new changes in his body from the bonding. He already knew he was stronger and could try and give Adam a run for his money when they got into a wrestling match now.

He had also seen an improvement in his sight and hearing. That was taking some getting used to, as he often ended up listening to things that he wasn't supposed to by overhearing his colleague's conversations.

The best improvement had to be the increase in his libido. It meant that whenever Adam wanted to seduce him he was more than willing, and sometimes he even tried his hand at seducing Adam.

Ben was doing inventory, and he blushed as he remembered how his mate had woken him up that morning. He had woken from an erotic dream of Adam

sucking him, to find it wasn't a dream. Adam had sucked him till he had come twice and then made love to him till they both came.

He had lain on the bed trying to catch his breath, and Adam had collapsed next to him. After kissing and touching for another few minutes, they felt able to get up.

Adam had then pounced on him in the shower, but Ben had managed to keep him to just horsing around, as he thought if he had come again he wouldn't have been of any use to anyone at work that night. He had promised to make it up to Adam when they got home from work.

Ben shook his head to shake off the memory and returned to his chore of inventorying the supplies in the medicine cabinet so that Jamie could order anything they needed. As he climbed the short stepladder to see the top shelf, he felt a wave of dizziness and had to cling onto the shelf to avoid falling. He managed to get back on the ground and headed out the door to get a glass of water from the staff room, but as he walked along the corridor another wave of dizziness hit him too quickly for him to grab anything, and he fainted on the floor.

Luckily for Ben he was outside the office, and Jamie heard him hitting the floor. Jamie came running out of the office to see what the crash had been, and when he saw Ben, he rushed to his side. Ben was just starting to come to as Jamie reached him and was looking around, trying to work out how he had gotten on the floor.

“What happened?” Jamie demanded, as he helped Ben to prop himself up against the wall.

“I had another dizzy spell; they've been driving me mad since two weeks after the bonding. When will I settle into this feeling of Adam always being a part of me? I can feel him in the back of my head, not what he's thinking or doing, but I can feel his emotions all the time, and it's disorienting.”

Jamie frowned at him, when he heard this wasn't the first time. “Feeling your mate's emotions will stay with you always; that's the mind link. But you shouldn't be having any dizzy spells. Have you told Adam?”

Ben shook his head. “He has been busy with catching up on the work he postponed when we took that week-long honeymoon at home. He saw me having one spell during that week, but we both put it down to my body settling down after the bonding ceremony.”

Jamie rolled his eyes. “You need to communicate with him. He’s probably been able to feel you’re hiding something, you know? And he has probably been wondering what it is.”

Ben stared at him. He hadn’t thought about the link and how Adam would have known he was worried about something. Adam would never press Ben to tell him anything he didn’t want to, but he had been asking how Ben was feeling, more often than he usually did.

Jamie helped Ben get up, and before Ben could argue, he was being guided to an examination room and being helped up onto a bed. Lying back stopped the room from spinning so Ben was grateful to be horizontal for a while. He heard Jamie muttering spells that would show him if anything was wrong with Ben, and then he heard Jamie give an indrawn breath.

Ben opened his eyes to see a surprised look on Jamie’s face, and he started to worry. “What’s wrong with me? Is it bad?”

He was starting to panic as Jamie didn’t answer straight away, but Jamie seemed to shake himself and smiled before straightening out his expression and looking down at Ben.

“Well there’s good news and bad news. Which do you want first?”

Ben swallowed, not sure what to expect. Jamie looked so serious, but there was something in his eyes. “The bad news first,” he replied, a slight quaver in his voice.

“Well the bad news is you’re probably going to be dizzy and maybe even sick for at least another eight and a half months or more.”

Ben frowned as something in the back of his mind tried to scream at him, but he couldn’t quite think what he was missing. “And the good news?” he asked.

Jamie beamed at him. “You’re pregnant!”

Ben’s mouth fell open. If he had been standing, he would have collapsed again there and then. After a few moments his face split into a smile, and his hand fell to his stomach. Suddenly, he felt Adam’s voice in his mind. *What’s going on, Love? I felt your mind go blank for a few moments, and then you felt shocked, and now you’re projecting so many different emotions I can’t separate them.* He sounded confused and very concerned.

Ben considered waiting till they got home, but he knew Adam would be worrying for the rest of the night if he did that, so he took a deep mental breath.

I have a bit of news for you. Firstly my mind went blank because I fainted. Before Adam could respond to that, he quickly added, Don't worry, I'm fine, but be warned it may happen a few more times in the next eight months, and I may be a bit sick too.

Adam was quicker on the uptake than Ben, and as soon as Ben had said about being ill for only eight months, he asked tentatively, *Eight months? Does that mean what I think it does?*

Ben smiled and answered, *We're going to be fathers, Love.*

He could feel Adam's happiness through their link, and he made sure Adam could feel his.

He looked up as Jamie handed him a note. On it, he said he guessed Ben was talking to Adam, so he was going to leave, but he said Ben was to have something to eat and drink and then go straight home to rest. Ben nodded, and relayed the information to Adam, who said he would meet him at home as soon as his current meeting finished, which should be within the next hour if he had anything to do with it (and he would).

Jamie checked Ben again before he headed home and pronounced him fit to go unescorted. Ben was very grateful for that, as he wanted time alone to process what was happening before talking to Adam. He couldn't believe he was pregnant. Of course, he had known it would be a possibility because of Jamie's pregnancy, but he had not thought that it would happen so soon.

He was nearly home and starting to speed up in anticipation of seeing Adam. He wanted to get started on some dinner before his mate got home. As he passed a side road, he didn't see the other person coming out until it was too late. He felt an arm around his neck and then the prick of a needle, before the world went black.

Adam was just finishing up his meeting when he felt Ben's mind blank out again. A check of the time told Adam that Ben should be home and would be alone.

Panicking, he rushed out of the building and used his vampire speed to get home in record time. Arriving home, he found the alarm system still set and no one in the house. He immediately called the clinic only to be told by Jamie that Ben had been fine, and he had sent him home in good time to meet him there.

By this time Ben's mind had been blank for over forty-five minutes, and Adam was starting to really get worried, when suddenly he felt a sharp pain going through his head, and then Ben's voice came through clearly.

ADAM, HELP ME. IAN HAS ME IN THE WOODS. COME QUICKLY. I NEED YOU!

The shouted words roared through his head and brought him to his knees. He immediately got up and started talking to Ben.

Ben, calm down, and tell me where you are. You need to help me find you so I can get to you quickly.

Ben's mind quieted, and he replied, *I'm in the woods south of the community border. I'm near that clearing we found when we went for a picnic last week.* Adam could feel Ben starting to panic again. *NO. Please I can't take this again. What about the baby?*

Adam was already grabbing his phone and talking to Jackson, while trying to send calming thoughts to Ben and trying to stay calm himself at the same time. He drew on his training as a soldier to block off his emotions. He knew he needed to think clearly and act quickly, but not without thought first. Acting without thinking things through could get Ben and their child killed.

Adam raced back to the council building and met with Jackson and the other vampires that had been contacted. Others were still arriving at top speed, and he was surprised to see Casey and Jamie appear out of thin air near Andrew.

Jamie came straight up to Adam, but Adam cut off his apology before he had really started.

“This is not anyone's fault but that bastard Ian's, and trust me when I say he will not live to see the sunrise.” Then he added as an afterthought, “Or maybe he will see the sunrise, tied to a tree.” With that comment, he turned and made his way to Jackson.

As Adam joined the group, he saw that Jackson had a map of the community grounds and was giving out orders.

Jackson looked up at him. “Can you show us the location Ben told you?” he asked holding out the map.

Adam skimmed over the map till he saw the area he and Ben had picnicked in. He fished a pen from his pocket and marked the area. As he handed it back to Jackson, he asked what the plans were.

“The fastest vampires are heading out now. Come on. We’re going too.”

Jackson took off at top speed, and Adam followed. Being two of the oldest living vampires, they were also the fastest, strongest, and most people agreed, the meanest when crossed.

They arrived at the edge of the woods; and with the other vampires, they fanned out to cover as much ground as possible and hunt out any lookouts or planned ambushes.

Andrew arrived, and immediately Jamie and Casey appeared at his side. Jackson cursed and turned on Casey.

“You and Jamie are to stay here and not move.” He then turned on Andrew. “Why did you let them follow you here? This is not the place for non-vampires.” Andrew started to hang his head, but Casey stepped between them and faced Jackson.

“We are here because you will need us when you get Ben back. Unless you have medical knowledge of pregnant blood-bonded mates that are non-vampires?”

Jackson was going to interrupt but stopped as soon as Casey mentioned pregnant mates.

“Ben’s pregnant?” He turned to Adam and saw the torment on his friend’s face.

“Yes,” Adam said. “We only found out an hour ago. I was heading home to see him when he contacted me to say he had been taken.”

Ben had awoken to find himself tied by his hands to a tree in a sitting position; his feet had been tied together, as well, to prevent escape.

He looked around groggily and started to panic when he saw Ian talking to a group of men not far away. He reached out for Adam and managed to tell him who had him and where, before he started to panic in earnest. Adam tried to calm him, and he could feel his mate was trying to coordinate with other people while still talking to him. He took a deep shuddering breath and focused on staying calm so his mate could focus on finding him, instead of dividing his attention.

Ben tried to stay composed when he saw Ian walking towards him with his guards in tow. Ian looked like a predator stalking its prey. Unfortunately, Ben

knew he was the prey, and he was already caught. He knew he had to stall for time until Adam could get to him, so he steeled himself and put on what he hoped was a blank expression.

“Well pet, you have led me on a merry dance haven’t you?” Ian sneered, as he approached.

“Don’t know what you mean.” Ben answered with as much of a shrug as his tied hands would allow. “I led you nowhere. I left you. I never asked or wanted you to follow me, and I never wanted to see you ever again. Actually, that’s not true. I would have liked to see you, dead with a stake through your heart. Oh, sorry, you would have to have a heart first wouldn’t you?”

Ian’s face would have been funny in any other circumstance. It went red then seemed to swell with his anger. Then his eyes caught on a glint of gold showing at the ripped edge of Ben’s shirt. His hand whipped out, but when he touched the pendant, he howled in pain and snatched back his hand which was rapidly blistering.

“What is that?” he demanded of Ben, even as his hand stopped blistering and began to heal.

Ben thought about lying, but then he thought that the threat of his mate might just give Ian pause and at least would keep him talking. “*That* is a bonding gift from my mate. His name is Adam Rickman. Maybe you’ve heard of him?” As he said Adam’s name, he had the pleasure of seeing Ian and most of his guards flinch. Seemed Adam was well known!

“Why would a powerful vampire like Rickman want to take a scrawny wimp like you for a mate?”

“Being a vampire, you should know that you don’t get to choose your mate. The bond is there before the blood-bonding. The blood-bonding just strengthens it,” Ben replied scornfully. “Then again, it never was your brains that attracted me. I realized quite quickly you didn’t have any.”

He knew he had said too much in his anger over Ian’s comment about Adam and himself when Ian barked a few words at a nearby guard and a blindfold was secured over his eyes.

Ben fought down his panic and forced his voice to sound even more scornful. “Well, I see some things never change. You never could handle me. You always had to tie me up to beat me, and you never could look me in the eye when you did it. I always knew you were a coward and now your guards are going to know the same.”

When he would have continued speaking, he felt a fist slam into his mouth. Knocking his head against the tree, he tasted blood, and he would swear he saw stars. Before he could shake the feeling from his head, he felt a foot connecting with his side. After that, he lost count of the punishing kicks and punches he endured. All he remembered was the sound of his mate's voice telling him he was near, and that he was coming. He just hoped Adam would get there in time. His last thought before he lost consciousness was *please help me protect my baby*.

Adam and Jackson arrived at the clearing first, with their men spread out to either side. With their vampire hearing, they could hear what was being said, and Adam tried to tell his mate to not provoke Ian too much, but his mate's fear had turned into anger, and he let his anger speak for him.

As soon as Adam felt the blows starting to fall on his mate, he signaled Jackson that they needed to move quickly. Both vampires used hand signals to pass instructions to their men, and as a unit, they all burst into the clearing. Adam and Jackson immediately pulled Ian off Ben while their men took on the guards. Ian tried to fight, but the elder vampires quickly subdued him, and while Jackson held him, Adam ran for his mate.

When he saw Ben was unconscious, he roared his anger and turned back to Ian. Jackson saw the killing anger in his eyes and quickly released Ian and moved away.

Adam lunged and grabbed the weaker vampire by his neck. "You touched my mate and for that you will die. Just be grateful that you have not managed to harm the baby, or I would make you suffer a lifetime of agony that would have you begging for death."

At the mention of a baby, Ian's eyes had widened in fear. He knew that to touch another vampire's mate in violence was forbidden, but to harm a pregnant mate? That was a much worse crime. He gasped for breath as Adam's hold on his throat tightened. He didn't feel the silver knife Adam had used to penetrate the flesh of his stomach, but he definitely felt it when Adam released his throat and yanked the knife upwards, splitting him open from stomach to throat. Blood poured out with no way for his vampire body to heal before he bled to death in seconds.

Adam threw the knife on top of the body and turned back to Ben to see that Jackson had untied him from the tree, and had him laid out on the ground.

Jackson looked at Adam. "I'll get Casey and Jamie," he said, before whirling off at high speed.

He cradled his mate in his arms. "Please Love, wake up and look at me. I can feel the baby's okay, but I need to see your eyes and know you're okay too," he begged, as he rocked back and forth.

Jackson returned with the brothers and made him release his hold so the healers could do their work.

"I can feel the life within him, so the baby is okay. Because the baby is part of both of us, I am bonded to it. I can't feel emotions yet, but I can feel its presence," Adam said to the healers, as Jackson made him stand back.

Jamie and Casey muttered spells between them and Ben started to groan. Adam quickly turned his attention back to his mate. He scooped up Ben in his arms and sent him reassuring thoughts, as Casey directed him to take Ben to the clinic.

Their men had either killed or subdued all of Ian's guards and were heading back to the community by a different route with their prisoners. Their prisoners would be turned over to the high council for trial and punishment.

It turned out Ben had escaped serious harm and had only suffered bruising with no cracked or broken bones. Adam was relieved, but he was also starting to get angry at Ben for provoking Ian, when he had been so near.

The two mates accepted the healer's offer of a room for the day and were led to a guest room at the back of the house.

After the brothers had left them, Adam turned to his mate who was laid out on the bed to help ease his still stiff muscles and joints.

"What were you thinking by antagonizing him like that? Calling him a coward? What did you hope to accomplish?" Adam was talking fast and getting progressively louder as he continued his rant.

Ben just lay there with his eyes shut. *I was trying to stall him long enough for you to get to me. I got angry when he called me a wimp. He had called me that many times before, and I had never answered back. This time I just saw red.* He used their mind link to speak as his jaw was still aching from the first punch he had received.

Adam turned to him; he could sense the ache of his mate's body and felt slightly guilty for laying into him while he was hurt and had only just been

rescued. He strode to the bed, and after stripping to his underwear and helping Ben do the same, he eased them both under the blankets. *Sorry, my love, I wasn't thinking. I was just scared that I would lose you,* he said through their link, and he pulled Ben gently till his head rested on his chest. *Just sleep, and we will talk when we wake.*

Needing no more urging, Ben snuggled into the warmth of his bigger mate's body and promptly fell into a deep sleep.

They returned home and life settled into a routine again. Ian's guards were charged with aiding a criminal but were given only a short sentence when it came out that Ian had been threatening their families to ensure their cooperation.

Ben had to give up work as he got nearer to his term, because the dizzy spells kept hitting without warning.

Because Adam still had council work to do, he moved to his home office so he could get his work done and still be near if Ben needed him.

The sound of the door banging open had every male in the room at the ready in case of attack until they saw Adam's pregnant mate standing there looking like an avenging angel. He was all beautiful and disheveled, with his thick dark hair escaping the complicated braid he always weaved it into. His usually deep chocolate eyes had a coppery shine to them, and the flames in there could burn entire cities. He looked so beautiful it was almost painful.

He also looked quite pissed, which is why Adam assumed his men were pressing against the walls, trying to disappear into the woodwork.

He assumed they were remembering the last time one of them had gotten on Ben's bad side. Ben had used a spell he now was very good at, to strip the offending vampire in front of his friends and then ordered him to serve drinks to everyone in the room, including going to the kitchen to retrieve the drinks with nothing on. All of Adam's men had walked on eggshells since then, and they all tried to avoid Ben as much as possible.

"There you are, you bastard! You're never around when I need you you're always doing council business!" he snapped angrily while he strode into Adam's home office.

"What's wrong, my mate?" Adam asked, worried.

“What’s wrong? This is what’s wrong,” Ben ranted, pointing at his belly where their child was growing inside him. He was now seven months gone and getting rather large for his small frame. “You did this to me! My back aches. My feet are swollen. I look like a cow. I need to pee every twenty minutes.” He sucked in another breath and continued to vent, even if a little softer. “I have food cravings I can’t fulfill because of your stupid vampire DNA. I’m horny, and I can’t sleep if you’re not there!” He finished on a sob, the wind having gone out of his sails.

Adam was thankful when Ben let him gather him in his arms and carry him out of the room to a few chuckles from Adam’s men.

“I heard that! Don’t laugh at my mate, ’cause he’s getting laid and you’re not!” Ben yelled over Adam’s shoulder, which made Adam laugh as silence spread over the room. Yep! Ben was pretty scary when he wanted to be.

I’m sorry, Love. I embarrassed you, Ben said through their mind link, as he snuggled further into Adam’s shoulder.

Don’t worry, my mate. It’s okay. Adam smiled into Ben’s sweet-smelling hair, and as he looked down at Ben’s face, he noticed the dark circles under Ben’s eyes.

My poor mate, Adam thought. Ben looked like he was at the end of his rope. The dark circles stood out against his pale skin, and Adam could feel his exhaustion through their bond, which made him feel guilty for not noticing it sooner.

I apologize, my dearest love, for not paying enough attention, Adam said, choosing to keep up the most intimate form of communication and cuddling him closer.

Finally, they got to their room—the bed was a tangled mess, the comforter lying on the floor as if Ben had kicked it off of him in his sleep, which made Adam feel worse because Ben would have slept better if they had been together.

I’m taking time off, damn it! No one needs me as much as my mate does, was Adam’s last thought as he lay his mate down on the bed and caressed him till they both fell into a deep sleep.

Four months later

Ben woke late in the night. He had not slept much since the birth of their son, Thomas, two months ago. Thomas, or more commonly called Tom, was a demanding child, and since Adam needed to sleep during the day to get enough sleep for work at night, it fell to Ben to get up and down all day.

Ben had taken paternity leave from the clinic so he could stay at home with Tom. After that, they had arranged that Tom would go to work with Ben during the night, and Tom could play with Jamie and Andrew's little one.

The two couples would split the cost of a nanny to watch the children, but Ben and Jamie would always be nearby if they were needed.

As Ben stretched in the bed, he noticed the bedroom was too quiet. Since bonding with Adam had enhanced his senses, he usually could hear Tom breathing in his sleep. Slightly panicked, he jumped out of bed and headed for the cot in the corner of the room. When he found it empty, he reached out for Adam.

Sorry to worry you, Love; we are in the training room. I have a later start tonight, and so I didn't want to wake you, came Adam's reply through their link.

Ben smiled at his mate's thoughtfulness and headed for the training room downstairs. The sight that met him had him stifling a laugh. Adam was doing some push-ups on a gym mat in the center of the floor. He had placed Tom on his back and was exercising while Tom looked around in interest at everything in the room.

Tom caught sight of Ben and started making lots of noise, causing Adam to look up, and when he saw his mate, he grinned.

"This is my version of babysitting," he said, as he continued his workout.

Ben shook his head and bent to pick Tom up off Adam's back. Adam sprung up and swept them both up in his arms. He peppered kisses over both their faces till both of them were giggling.

Ben set Tom on the floor, and he immediately started trying to eat his toes. Meanwhile, Ben wrapped his arms around Adam and drew him in for a long kiss.

"Feeding time," Ben said, as Tom had stopped playing and had started to whimper.

Ben bent and picked up the baby while Adam grabbed a towel and wiped off the worst of the sweat from his face and torso.

Together they headed for the kitchen, and Adam made up some vampire formula for Tom while Ben made himself a snack.

When Ben turned around holding his plate, he stopped at the scene before him.

Adam was sitting at the table with Tom in his arms. He was watching the baby as he suckled on the bottle he held with a tender loving expression. All Ben could think was: *This is my family now, the most important people in my life. Nothing and no one will ever come between us, and if they try, I will make sure they regret it. If Adam leaves them alive that is!*

He joined his family at the table, and Adam leaned over to kiss him swiftly on the lips before returning his attention to Tom.

Yes, this was the life they had both been waiting for, and now it was here to stay...

The End

Author Bio

Carol has not been writing long but has wanted to try her hand at it for a while. She has an ongoing story that is posted to Gay Authors and is hoping to submit a story for publishing in the near future.

She lives in the UK with her husband and nine year old daughter, who support her writing in any way they can.

She always loves to hear comments and suggestions from readers.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Blog](#) | [Gay Authors](#)