



REVAMPED

By
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Chapter One

The things women did for money. Elaine crossed her legs, gripped the arms of the imposing high-back chair she'd been directed to sit in by her tight-lipped host, and sighed. She couldn't exactly lump all women into her financially crippled category.

"Perhaps you should sit down, Mr. Overkill, so that we can get started." She bit her lip to keep from laughing at the name. She hoped the man would at least allow her to call him by his first name, Seth.

The décor of his home epitomized his surname. She peered down at a sea of white carpeting surrounding her well-worn white walking shoes. Vacuum tracks all facing the same way streaked the carpet. A carved crystal vase sat in the center of a huge mahogany wood coffee table. She sat in one of the two matching white chairs that flanked the couch. And a crackling fire flickered in the fireplace.

Sure it was the middle of October. It was also Virginia Beach, Virginia and the weather hadn't turned into the nice, autumn temperature it should have yet.

He jumped as though he'd forgotten she'd been sitting in his chair for over five minutes. "Sit? No. Not yet." He kept his gaze on the floor.

Trying to look interested, she feigned a genuine if not concerned smile. She'd been called to this mansion for what the woman who had called her office had described as an emergency.

When Elaine had started her psychiatric practice in Virginia Beach she thought for sure that neurotic narcissists wouldn't be as abundant here as they were in California or New York. After tonight, she knew they were everywhere.

"In my line of work, it's better if you sit. Or would you prefer to lie down?" she asked.

Before he could respond, she reached into her bag and pulled out a notepad and pen. As her gaze followed her financial benefactor pacing back and forth in front of her, she wondered if the special after-work trip to his home was even worth it.

With the money she would receive from this one house call, she'd be able to pay up at least two months of her office lease, three months on her medical equipment rental and renew her subscription to Oprah's magazine. It wasn't her fault that every time she tried getting him to make a daytime appointment he upped the payment to her, unusual for a new patient.

No use waiting. Tomorrow's lineup proved to be just as hectic. Who was she kidding? She didn't have a full schedule at work. That's why she was there now.

"I don't mean to be rude, Mr. Overkill, but I've come to your home after hours. I would like to address what your wife described as urgent." She wanted to appear in control but it was hard to pull off that appearance in Hush Puppies.

"Wife? You talked to my wife?" It was the first time he stopped his trek and looked directly into her eyes.

The commanding gesture even behind his black-rimmed glasses made Elaine avert her gaze. No matter his quirkiness, he exuded a power that bowled her over. To mask her uneasiness with the stare, she wrote Seth's name on her notepad.

"A woman called. I assumed she was your"

"Not my wife," he said, cutting her off.

“All right. Then it was your ...”

“Assistant.” He shuffled his weight from one side to the other and mumbled something she couldn’t quite catch.

He hung his head like it burdened him to carry it above his neck. The nervous energy he must have surging inside of him made him wring his hands, one over the other until he transformed his walnut-colored skin as crimson as his sweater.

Even with his shoulders hunched, he carried an impressive height. His back curved forward as though he wanted to swallow himself up into his own body, disappear without a trace.

When he did bring his head up, Elaine caught his expression. Although hidden behind glasses, his skin tone made his nearly black eye color more prominent. And his short black hair was carefully brushed down with clean edges.

He looked like an Aztec warrior plucked from his time and plopped down into the twenty-first century. Elaine fanned her face just thinking about him conquering her.

One thing did catch her eye: a ring, more like a band. A wedding band on his left ring finger. His wife hadn’t made the appointment. His assistant had. Code for having an affair with the assistant, Elaine thought.

“Please, sit,” she asked again.

He stared at her for a while as though studying her face, trying to pick up all of her laugh lines around her eyes thanks to her mother and her frown lines around her mouth thanks to nights crying over the memory of her father.

As though coming to peace with her request, he nodded and made his place in the matching chair opposite of where she’d sat.

She sighed, relieved she wasn’t with a complete psycho. The man harbored some issues apparent from the way he tapped his fingertips on his thumb over and over again, from index finger to pinky and back again.

Agoraphobia had been the excuse given to her receptionist for why this man couldn’t come to her office. Elaine was nothing if not accommodating.

She rubbed the back of her neck, relieving the tension headache mounting her head. A tiny part of her wished he would take those large hands of his and rub her shoulders until the headache disappeared.

What the hell was she doing? She could not be thinking that this man, her future patient, could be a suitable partner. It was unethical. It was wrong. He was married. However, it was fun to think about.

She crossed her legs then opened her mouth to speak when he sprang to his feet again. It was going to be a long, long night.

“I do not know what you have been told, but I’m fine.”

She detected a slight accent that she couldn’t place at the moment. Definitely Latin. If she couldn’t pick that up, her dear abuela would have tanned her hide.

Perhaps his culture found it demeaning or disrespectful for a woman to question a man’s personal life. She’d heard other non-traditional beliefs before.

Then again, she’d grown up hearing all about the unusual, things that went bump in the night, thanks to her dear Abuela Celia. Her grandmother spouted stories about how Elaine was destined to help people on the other side. All voodoo talk that Elaine didn’t believe then or now. Grandmothers like that ought to be committed.

“If you feel there’s nothing wrong then this session will not take long at all. Please, sit.” She patted her hand on the sofa and smiled. The move mixed professionalism with a little bit of

flirting. “My assessment of you, Mr. Overkill, will be quick. I promise. I would like to ask you some questions to get a general idea of what’s troubling you. Besides, a big, strong guy like you shouldn’t be afraid of a little, ol’ me.” Elaine stopped short of batting her eyelashes.

It must have worked. Seth returned to the chair although his knee bounced so much it looked like Seth had a jackhammer in his pants.

“So have you lived here long?” she asked, trying to relax him.

“No.”

Not a big talker but at least he stopped pumping his knee.

“I detect an accent. Where are you from?”

When he didn’t answer right away, she gazed up at him. The way he stared at her made her think that he was imaging she was someone else, someone he knew from his past.

Seth stood again, which forced a sigh from Elaine. This time, though, he sauntered to her.

Elaine swallowed but kept her ground. She’d never been physically attacked by a patient, and she hoped today wouldn’t be the first time for such an occurrence.

Reaching his hand forward like he wanted to remove a stray curl from in front of her face, he stopped when she gasped. When he whirled to go back to his chair, she picked up his unmistakable scent. A mixture of sandalwood, citrus, and a touch of vanilla emanated from his body. Unable to stop herself, Elaine took in a deep breath, implanting his aroma into her memory.

He proved her assumption when he said, “I did not think you would look like this.” His low voice surrounded her like a hug.

Her tension headache worsened when she furrowed her eyebrows together. “What do you mean? Because I’m a psychiatrist?”

“No. All, um, developed.”

Developed? What did he mean by that? Elaine pulled her cardigan sweater closed.

Seth averted his gaze. Calming himself involved tapping his fingertips on both hands to his thumbs and mumbling something incoherent.

“Perhaps you would feel more comfortable taking off your shoes and socks while you lie down, Mr. Overkill.” Now nothing seemed funny to Elaine, not his name, not this job, not this night.

He reached forward to undo them but stopped and sat back. “I would have to wash my hands afterward. Then cleanse them again when I put the shoes back on my feet.”

Elaine sighed. Sure he was cute but he was also nuttier than a squirrel’s home. “Perhaps you should have your assistant call my office in the morning to make an appointment there. Maybe you’ll be more comfortable in that setting. Your primary care physician can prescribe something to calm you enough to make it to my office.”

“What?” he asked and sat up straighter as though something she’d said was inappropriate.

“An appointment.”

“Cute? You think I am cute?”

This time Elaine blinked and sat up straighter. She hadn’t said that out loud. How did he know what she’d been thinking?

“What?” she asked.

“What?”

“Hello!” The third voice made Elaine whip her head around to find a woman lurking in

the shadows.

Having someone else in the home shouldn't have surprised her. The house could have accommodated the Washington Redskins team and their coaching staff to boot.

As a giggly youth, Elaine used to proclaim that one day she would live in this very house that sat on the oceanfront and have servants wait on her hand and foot. Things always seemed different from the outside.

The cocoa-colored woman sauntered in the room as though she owned it, the house and the universe. Her straight auburn hair curtained her back and framed her face. Her piercing green eyes demanded attention. And in her tiny tank top and toddler-sized shorts, she looked like a model with all legs, arms, and breasts.

The woman's confidence made Elaine scan her conservative outfit and question her sex appeal. She smoothed her hand over her mousy brown hair then sighed. Yes, this would be a very, very long night.

"Well, well, well," the woman began. "What an interesting little set up. A woman in your home and you in your chair. Looks like old times. I'd never thought I'd see you prowling again. Very nice."

She must have been the assistant. Yep, Elaine was sure the woman typed her heart out in an outfit like that. Definitely affair material.

Not sure of what to think of the suggestive if not odd statement, Elaine rose to her feet. "I'll leave you my business card. Just call me when you're ready to make another appointment at my office."

"You are open during the day." The man shook his head. "Not a good time for me."

Elaine cleared her throat. As much as she needed the money, this man had too many problems that he needed to deal with first before seeking assistance.

"Perhaps the best thing for you to do is to inquire about a different type of professional help before requesting my services." She shoved her pen and pad back into her bag.

"Different type of help?" he repeated like a parrot.

The model wannabe sauntered to the couch and sat on it, crossing her legs gracefully if not with the full theatrics of a Rockette doing a fan kick. "She's trying to say you're crazy and you need to be medicated before she can work on you." She laughed.

Elaine had to save face. "Of course I didn't mean to imply"

"Cut all of this nonsense and just tell her why she's here." The woman huffed as though *her* time was being wasted.

"Quiet, Mina," he barked and sprang to his feet. The pacing started again.

Elaine wondered how he hadn't worn a hold in his rug from the constant marching.

He glanced at her a couple of times before he spoke. "I have been rude. Let me do introductions." He nodded toward the woman. "Dr. Puro, this is Mina, my assistant. Mina, this is Dr. Elaine Puro, daughter of Olivia and Alex Puro, first born on the night of a monsoon-type rain that cleansed the land and brought forth a new era in our world."

Mina sucked on her teeth and turned to Elaine. "Wow. All that printed on your business card?"

The creepy yet odd statement triggered Elaine's heart into a solid pounding. "How do you know my mother and father?"

"Your family and mine are irrevocably linked over several generations," Seth said

"What are you talking about? I've never seen you before." Or had she? The more she stared at him, the more familiar he became to her. Why was that?

“Your family offers an invaluable service to mine. You offer something special that I need.”

Elaine stared at the man, trying to see if she knew him, remembered him from her childhood although most of that was a blur.

“My name isn’t Puro anymore. It’s Shrink.”

“As in psychiatrist?” Mina howled with laughter. “How appropriate. Shrink and shrink.”

He stared at Elaine and didn’t break his gaze this time. “I didn’t know your family name had changed.”

He tilted his head and furrowed his eyebrows. “Your mother must have remarried after your father, um, passed.”

‘Um, passed’ was a nice way of saying brutally murdered. Elaine’s eyes widened. “How the hell did you know that? How do you know so much about me?”

He crossed his arms then dropped them down to his waist. His arms settled into a number four position, one arm straight down in front of him while the other crossed in front of his body to grip his elbow.

Fidgeting. Had she met this guy in a bar his apparent nervousness would have been adorable. As it was, the gesture annoyed her, triggering anxiety within her.

Elaine put things together and she didn’t like the end result. “Did your family have something to do with my father’s death?”

Seth remained quiet, but he kept his eyes on hers. He appeared remorseful and looked close to mouthing the words ‘I’m sorry.’

She released a small cry as she grabbed her bag and purse. “If this is supposed to be some sort of joke, it’s far from funny!”

“Please, sit down,” Seth requested in a calm tone.

Instead Elaine marched to the door, ignoring his appeal. As soon as she got out of the house that ‘crazy’ built, she would call the police about his involvement in her father’s murder. The murder had been almost thirty years ago. Would they even listen?

In the blink of an eye and before Elaine could touch the doorknob, she felt a slight breeze then found Mina standing between her and the door.

No way could that woman, who’d had her legs crossed as she sat on the sofa and had to have been at least five feet away from where Elaine had been standing, could get to the door that fast. Elaine wasn’t that swift on her feet, but God, this woman should have been in the Olympics.

“I was nice to you before,” the woman said with a fake smile. “Rest assured, I will hurt you if you try to run.” She shoved Elaine backward.

Even though Mina was model-thin, she possessed a strength that surprised Elaine. Elaine nearly tripped over her feet as she stumbled back to the chair. These people were serious. All Elaine could hear in her head was her racing pulse, pounding away.

No fear. No fear. No damn fear.

“Stop frightening her,” Seth said. “All of this is a little overwhelming.” He stared into Elaine’s eyes. “Right?”

She blinked hard, shocked the guy had come to her aid. What were these two playing, good psycho/bad psycho?

“Please, sit.” He motioned to the chair she’d been in originally.

Not wanting to be manhandled again, Elaine eased down in the chair and kept a careful

eye on the two of them. To calm her nerves, she thought of a prayer that honored the dead while acknowledging heaven. It'd been a while since she'd done that but she needed some extra strength to get through this situation. She even put her hand to her chest to touch the locket with a picture of her father inside hidden under her blouse.

In her mind she thought up plans to get out of this situation that included the heavy-looking vase on the coffee table and someone's head.

"What I know is not important at the moment," he began. "What is of the utmost importance is what you know, or rather what you are able to do." He paced but this time as he walked back and forth and tapped his fingers, she finally heard what he'd been mumbling. It sounded like he was repeating 'dogma' under his breath.

The cautionary tone in his voice started her racing heart until she thought the internal organ would bruise slamming itself against her ribcage. Elaine peered out of the window by the doors. Shadows floated by and she couldn't tell if they were of trees or people the way they morphed into so many different shapes. The night never used to scare her before.

"Who are you people? What's going on here?" Her hands clutched her bag until her knuckles felt tight.

Before Seth explained anything, he volleyed his gaze from her to Mina.

"Mina, move to this chair." He pointed to a chair opposite from Elaine.

"Why? I'm comfortable on the couch." Mina kept her attention on her fingernails instead of on the control freak.

"Symmetry. I need the room to be balanced." He spread his hands out, splaying his long fingers as he pointed to both chairs.

Elaine felt there was something about him that was masterful, something deep-seeded within him that he hadn't released, or maybe was afraid to release. His authority may have had something to do with the fact that he knew so much about her and her family and hadn't explained how.

"Don't you think I've been inconvenienced enough?" Mina's words seemed to have another meaning the way they stared at each other.

Elaine could have sworn she heard a low, rumbling growl. She scanned the room to see if a dog hid in the shadows. To channel her fear, she bit the inside of her bottom lip.

Seth brought himself up to his full height. He loomed over his assistant, still seated. With the venom of a million cobras he said, "Know your place."

The way he spoke to his assistant sent shivers up Elaine's back. If this was Seth slightly peeved, she had no interest in seeing him angry.

Mina swallowed hard and with great reluctance from the way she exhaled accommodated his request and moved to the other chair.

When he started pacing once she sat down, Mina folded her arms again. Fear coursed through Elaine's body making her head feel near explosion. She had to get her thoughts together so she could make a plan to get out.

"You don't have to explain anything," Elaine said, keeping her voice low and even. "Besides, I'm sure I have people looking for me right now so I should go soon."

Since she lived alone in her cramped condo, she knew no one would go look for her. These two didn't know that. At least she hoped they didn't. Perhaps her party-animal grandmama or her hermit-like mother would try to find her. Or maybe she could count on her brother who was across the country right now.

Elaine muttered a silent prayer.

“Funny,” he said. “I like the way you think.”

Damn, she was playing this too aloof. Her gaze cut to the door then back at the duo. Maybe she had to play them against one another.

“Look at him.” Mina pointed. “He’s obsessed with cleanliness. He’s afraid of bugs and the small animals.” She folded her arms and huffed. “And spoons? I don’t get that. He has a ritual for everything. Now he’s got this germ-phobia that’s really killing us, and I do mean killing us!”

Mina jumped from her seat and sauntered over to Elaine. Preparing to be grabbed again, Elaine kept her fist at the ready on her lap. Instead Mina pulled up the hem of her shirt and exposed a large bandage on her side. After removing the gauze, she showed Elaine an oozing open wound. It looked like an animal had torn her flesh.

“Can’t really style in a two-piece anymore.”

Elaine felt her stomach churning and her throat closing. “You need help. Have you seen a doctor for this?” Seeing grotesque sores like this had prompted Elaine into psychiatry instead of internal medicine.

“Why do you think you’re here?”

“I’m not that type of doctor.” Elaine’s voice quivered. “I could refer you to someone.”

Mina lowered her shirt. “Trust me. If he starts doing what he’s supposed to do and you help him, then I won’t need a surgeon.” She put her hands to her hips. “If he doesn’t feed soon, we’re all going to disintegrate into a pile of mush. But he’s afraid the next person he feeds on will have some germ or something.”

“Hold your tongue, woman.” Once he stopped moving, Seth said to Elaine, “For generations your family has assisted mine in our survival. One would not think that hunters such as our kind would need the assistance of anyone else, especially a mortal.”

Seth and Mina laughed in unison. The sound curled Elaine’s toes.

“As times changed,” Seth began, “your gift is needed again. I have not fed in several months.” Looking pointedly at Elaine, he said, “I need you to help me feed again.”

Clearing her throat first, Elaine tried digesting what he’d said. “What are you people?” she asked again.

“Sanguinarians. Life-force extractors. Human predators.” He adjusted his glasses on his nose.

“Vampires?” Elaine asked, deducing his politically correct statements. Sweat trickled down between her shoulder blades and for a brief moment her gaze became blurry like she wanted to pass out.

Mina huffed. “Come on. It’s the new millennium. Call us plasma connoisseurs.”

Elaine sat in disbelief. These people claimed to be vampires, blood suckers in this day and age. She wrung her hands this time and tried swallowing down her sandy dry throat.

“You’re obsessive-compulsive and you want me to help you so that you feel comfortable enough to kill again?” Moving to the edge of her seat, she prepared to leap from it soon and head to the door.

“It is your duty.” His tone made it seem like she couldn’t turn him down.

Seth appeared a little paler than before. A strange but instant pang in her wanted to help him, cure him of what ailed him. It had nothing to do with his sullen look.

She wanted to help *him*? She couldn’t be feeling this way. However, she couldn’t deny the stirring in her stomach and the guilty feeling that swarmed in her head. The feeling went beyond the empathy she would feel for her patients in need and in pain. It was as though his

pain was now her pain. The hell she would feel that way for this cruel stranger.

Elaine shook her head. He and Mina personified evil. She had to worry about getting herself out of the house.

“I can’t do that. I can’t aid a serial killer to kill again. You all need help.”

In a whine that rivaled any child’s, Mina said, “I knew we should have fed from her. What good is she to us? And now she knows our secret.”

“Mina, not another word.” Seth’s voice echoed off the walls but even with his commanding voice he kept his arms folded over his chest.

“Or what?” Mina strolled to the fireplace. “What are you going to do to me?” She stretched her arms across the mantle and smirked.

Seth snorted and charged toward her. If Elaine hadn’t known better, she could have sworn he flew. She didn’t remember hearing footsteps pounding the carpeted floor but the throbbing in her head muted most sounds so she could have been mistaken.

When he reached her, Mina placed her hand flat on the mirror behind her head. The man split his attention between her and the palm print on the glass.

Mina.

Mirror.

Mina.

Mirror.

Then he directed his full attention to the mirror. He grumbled and darted from the room into another. For a big man, he glided. Elaine knew he would have caught her for sure if she tried running away. Didn’t mean she still wouldn’t try.

Mina slipped back to her chair and reclaimed her position. As soon as she took her seat, Seth returned to the room with a bottle of blue liquid cleaner and a roll of paper towels.

“The oils in your hand can ruin this antique glass,” he muttered as he cleaned the mirror. The scent of ammonia wafted over to Elaine as he sprayed the reflective glass.

She suppressed a sneeze, clamping a hand over her nose and mouth. The emission of her germs would probably send the man into a frantic tailspin.

“This came over from Mexico with the family,” he said. “It has managed to get through wars, burnings, and customs. I want to make sure it outlasts you.” He sneered at Mina.

“Very funny.” Mina cocked her head.

Mexico. Elaine had been right about his accent. Good info to remember when she talked to the police. Holding her in this house against her will was definitely a crime even if she couldn’t prove his involvement in her father’s death.

As Elaine watched him she noticed something strange, something shocking, something unreal. The reflection only showed the paper towel moving over the mirror but nothing else. Not this Prince of Darkness. Not even Mina. The police wouldn’t understand that.

Mina must have noticed her observation. When Elaine glanced at her, the woman winked.

Elaine forgot about acting cool and found her breath to scream. She sprang from her chair, stumbled to the side, her hands grasping at air. Her otherworldly scream burned her throat and squeezed every bit of air from her lungs. She ran to the door, making it this time without Mina’s intervention.

“Why do they always run?” Mina screamed after her.

Elaine yanked the door open and a rush of wind almost knocked her backward.

“Do not walk out that door!” Seth pointed at her with yellow gloves covering his hands.

This man lived on another plane of insanity. He talked to her like she worked for him. Seeing Mina race toward Elaine like a gazelle gave Elaine the motivation to keep running. If she hadn't closed the door in time, Mina would have had her.

As Elaine ran down the long driveway, she scanned her surroundings. Woods lined the path. Her car. Thank goodness she had decided to park it in the street instead of inside his gated property.

In between the trees, she spied glimmering lights, or maybe they were eyes peeking through the leaves. She took a deep breath and inhaled the salty sea air with a mixture of a rose scent coming from the rose bushes that lined the perimeter of the expansive front yard.

"You can be food for me or something else!" Mina screamed from the open doorway as Elaine kept up her jog down the brick way.

As though the cryptic line cued it, something large sprang from the woods and pounced on top of Elaine, knocking her to the ground and pinning her already sore shoulders to the hard surface.

Chapter Two

Elaine's achy legs thrashed about as she tossed her head from side to side as though the motion would erase the demon looming over her face.

The massive monster that pinned her had long, scraggly hair that hung down around its hard, snarling face. His teeth glowed in the moonlight.

Elaine uttered a quick prayer. She hoped it wouldn't be the final words she would ever express. Her chanting matched her thudding heartbeat. God, help her. She didn't want to die.

The entity with drool coming from his mouth, stared at her with his head cocked as though trying to understand her Spanish prayer.

Her life flashed before her. Vampires. Her father's death. And now this mutant was going to take her, sexually, or mortally, or both.

As his face lowered to hers, Elaine could smell death creeping from his mouth. After a year of working in a morgue, she had learned to recognize the putrid stench that smelled like rotting meat, spoiled eggs, and soured milk. Her stomach roiled. In a minute, this beast would be wearing her beans-and-rice dinner all over him.

She held her breath trying not to take in any more of its scent. It didn't help. His grotesque look was enough to make her vomit. She clamped her eyes shut.

"No!" Seth screamed from the front door of his house.

The thing peered up but still held Elaine down. She cracked open her eyes then craned her head back to get a glimpse of Seth. He looked like he wanted to step outside of his house, but hesitated.

"She is the Ayudante." Seth pointed to Elaine.

Elaine recognized the word. Helper. Protector. Her grandmama used to tell her their family had a duty to help the dead. Protect them. Guide them where they needed to go. Abuela Celia called Ayudantes angels on earth. Elaine didn't believe it then. And even with Seth confirming her dear Abuela's claim, Elaine continued to stick by her beliefs.

The strange man hopped off Elaine and crouched next to her like an obedient lap dog. She struggled to her feet and scurried toward the gate that opened on its own.

Elaine had no intention of looking back. She never wanted to see this place again because she knew she would be seeing this house, Seth's face, in her dreams, or rather her nightmares. Curiosity made her turn, take one last glimpse before getting through the gates.

Seth's frame took up the doorway although still in a hunched over position.

Keeping his arms crossed over his sunken chest, he said, "I have allowed you to go. Remember that. See your grandmother and come back to me."

As soon as Elaine got in her car, she sped down the private street toward the bright lights of the main drag at the oceanfront. The only way she would be coming back was with a team of police. Forget family legacy and this supernatural nonsense. She'd been attacked, twice. Someone was going to pay.

* * * *

Elaine had been here in his house, Seth thought. He paced the marble floor in the hallway behind his carpeted living room. The clicking of his shoes against the hard floor calmed his nerves sometimes. Sometimes.

“She stood in my home. Dogma, dogma, dogma,” he mumbled. “So strong. She is strong. Like I thought.” He tapped each fingertip with his thumb.

As he passed another mirror in the hallway, he sighed in relief in not being able to view his reflection, see what he had become recently.

How had he gotten this way? Had he always been like this but his dear wife, Charlotte had looked beyond his quirks and ticks to see him? Maybe it was a good thing her death prevented her from seeing him now.

He groaned. There was nothing good about his wife’s murder, especially now.

He balled his hands into fists. After closing his eyes, he concentrated on Elaine, trying hard to pick up her thoughts. Her body language had proven easy to read.

When she feared for her life, she had balled her delicate hands into fists. Seth peered down at his own hands, now in the same position. Then again, in Elaine’s confusion, she had also made fists. And in her frustration, she had done the same. Seth figured Elaine could hold her own.

A strong woman. He liked that. A lot. He also liked the curve of her neck, the way her maple honey hair cascaded down her face, her full mouth and deep, chocolate eyes.

She could not be a potential partner. Prophecy forbade it and they existed in two separate worlds. If the Master knew Seth had even entertained the thought, it would put Elaine in jeopardy. Letting her go put this whole plan into danger.

Seth cleared his mind. He needed to know what filled Elaine’s thoughts right now. Without feeding, his strengths faded. It took him a while to churn up her thoughts, hear Elaine’s voice. Like a radio station not quite tuned in properly, Seth caught some key words.

Police. Attack. Help. Seth Overkill.

Catching his name in the rant made him tremble. If Elaine had contacted the police, it meant they would be swarming down on his home at any moment. He pulled a handkerchief from his pants pocket. As he wiped down a hallway table, he thought up a plan.

Mina bounded through the backdoor of the mansion and made her way to Seth. “What are we going to do now? She was our last hope, and you just let her go.”

“For a reason. She will be back.” He held out his hand but did not touch her. “I need you here.” As he stared at Mina in her revealing outfit, he knew she would be a perfect distraction for any police. In situations like that, Mina had proven to be invaluable.

“Police are coming,” he said.

Mina smiled. “Then I’ll get changed.” She turned to the back door to go to her apartment behind the house.

Seth hoped whatever Mina had planned for the officers that Elaine did not witness it. As her introduction into this world, a feeding up front would not do to keep her around to help him. As much as he hated to admit it, he needed her.

* * * *

Elaine’s leg twitched as she sat in the backseat of the police car staring at the house she’d sworn not to come back to ever again. The haunted house, as her brother and his friends used to say when they were younger, made her shiver. She didn’t want to believe this massive white mansion with its pillared front and fountains decorating the grounds could be anything but heavenly.

Sitting in the backseat proved to be anything but divine. It reeked of urine and vomit mixed with a disinfectant scent to cover them up. She shifted. Her aching body quivered from the slight move.

“Ma’am, are you sure this is the house that you ran from?” the officer asked from the front seat without turning around.

“Yes.” A new level of frustration rose in her voice. He’d asked her that three times already. “Seth Overkill had his assistant restrain me and when I did manage to leave, something in that yard attacked me.” She pointed toward the house but the officer still kept his gaze down on his clipboard on his lap.

“Dementia,” the cop said and snickered.

Elaine rubbed her already raw hands out of anger. “I am not crazy. It’s those people in there.” She poked at the cool glass toward the structure again.

“I’m not talking about you.” He scratched his head under his cap. “It’s a club or bar or something down at the beach. Overkill owns that place and nearly half of the oceanfront properties.”

“He owns that club on Atlantic Avenue?” Elaine didn’t know why it surprised her that the Prince of Death could own a hip, happening after-hours club on the strip. Guess even evil needed an occupation.

“Yes, ma’am.” The officer set his clipboard on the seat next to him and opened his door. His partner had already gone up to the gate and was waiting for him. “Stay right here. We’re going to question him and have you identify him from here.”

“Okay.”

The officer slammed his door and stomped toward the gate. She couldn’t tell if determination filled him or if pissed off best described his demeanor. No matter how the officer felt, her claims were real. The knot on the back of her head the paramedics had bandaged still throbbed. She leaned her head onto the seat, careful not to aggravate the sore spot.

People stumbled outside of the gates as though they had way too much to drink or sniff or injected. It had nearly slipped her mind that people actually went outside of their homes to have a good time.

Man, when was the last time Elaine had gone out just for fun? The more she thought, the more her head throbbed until she had to stop.

Wait. Seth’s house stood alone on a deserted street. Why would anyone be walking outside down here? Elaine stared into the partiers’ faces. As they peered over at her, each one of their expressions changed from happy-go-lucky to something twisted and evil. Dark lines and gleaming eyes replaced smiles and laughter. Did they protect Seth’s house?

Elaine pulled her locket from under her shirt and held it in her fist. Not one to believe in superstition, something in her told her she needed to keep this family heirloom close. She hoped her father watched over her now.

Elaine eyed the officers banging on the front door. *Now* they seemed ready for business. She couldn’t wait to see them haul Mina off in handcuffs.

If Seth had to be handcuffed, Elaine wanted to do that herself. Her body tingled at the obscene thought.

For a moment when he had talked about her family, she felt a connection when he looked into her eyes. She felt like she’d known him all of her life.

As she waited in the running police car, her mind drifted back to prophetic words Abuela Celia used to tell her. She’d told Elaine how she was her father’s daughter. Her life would be filled with honor and duty to protect and serve.

Elaine thought the woman meant for her to join the police force just like her father. She thought her grandmama would have been happy that Elaine at least got into medicine. Her

mother and stepfather seemed thrilled.

Elaine's thumb caressed the gold heart-shaped locket. She wished her father could have been there to help her. And if Abuela Celia's words proved true, if Elaine and her father shared destinies, would her fate be to die the same way he did?

A knock on the glass snapped Elaine from her wandering thoughts and accelerated her heartbeat. She found both officers outside her door. The questioning hadn't lasted very long.

One officer opened her door then leaned over to her. "Ms. Shrink--"

"Dr. Shrink, please." She'd worked too long and too hard for that title.

The officer smirked and cleared his throat. "Ma'am, we've talked to Mr. Overkill and his lovely assistant."

Lovely? The woman wanted to chew on her not too long ago and now she was lovely?

The officer continued. "They explained that what happened was a misunderstanding. They said you were jogging outside of the house tonight and tripped on a cracked sidewalk slab, which is how you got that bump on your head. Mr. Overkill's assistant brought you in the house to tend to you. But when you became conscious you were disoriented and ran from the home."

"Are you kidding me?" Elaine sprang from the car and pointed to the house. "These are multi-million dollar homes. Do you see any cracked sidewalks anywhere here?"

The officers looked around but didn't answer. Only crickets chirped their answer with crashing ocean waves chorusing behind them.

"I don't even live in this area. Why would I be jogging here?"

Again, no answer.

"And if I fell, why is my bump on the back of my head and not the front? Why didn't they call for an ambulance? Why didn't I have a bandage on my head? And did it escape your attention that I'm wearing slacks and sensible shoes, not running shoes? Did you two ask any of these questions?"

The second officer stepped forward. "They explained what had happened was a misunderstanding. You were jogging outside of"

She waved her hands in front of him to stop his rant. He spouted the same rhetoric as the first officer like the dialogue had been spoon-fed. Their glassy eyes held blank stares.

She had to get the truth. Seth and Mina deserved to rot in jail. After taking a deep breath, Elaine decided to take the bull by the horns.

"I'm going back in there." She ran to the gate with the officers behind her. With each pound of her step, her head felt closer and closer to exploding. As she approached the door, the realization that she faced a losing battle, if not something worse, hit her. With a little difficulty, she managed to swallow until it almost made her cough.

These people didn't play with a full deck. They'd attacked her. Then told a crazy story about her assault. And now they'd lied to the police. Or maybe they just bought them off. Everything had its price ... except her. Who was she kidding? She had accepted this damn call because of the money.

When Elaine reached the door, she pounded on it with her fists. "Open up! Get out here, you freaks!" She turned to find both officers behind her and struggling to catch their breaths.

"Ma'am, what are you doing?" one officer asked.

"Getting some answers." She pounded on the door again.

"Please stop. We can arrest you for disturbing the peace." The other officer reached to his side for his handcuffs.

"What? These people attack me but you're going to arrest me for making them tell the

truth? Unbelievable.” She pounded on the door again until this time it flung open.

Mina, dressed in nothing more than a short slip dress and the highest pair of stilettos Elaine had ever seen, stood on the other side with a cat-that-ate-the-canary smile. Elaine shook her head.

“Did you forget something, officers?” she asked and tapped one on the tip of his nose.

“That’s assault on an officer. Are you going to arrest her for that?” Elaine asked, sarcasm dripping from her every word.

“I apologize for disturbing you and your boss again, Miss--”

“No, no. What did I tell you earlier?” She wagged her finger.

The officer gazed down and smiled sheepishly like a lovesick teenager. “I’m sorry, Mina.”

“Much better.” Mina turned her gaze to Elaine. “Names are so important in establishing close, personal ties, don’t you think, Elaine?”

She didn’t speak. Nothing she could say would make a difference. Obviously Mina had some sort of hold over these men. Ah, the power of cleavage and a short skirt.

The door swung open wider revealing Seth. He had a strange hold over Elaine that she couldn’t explain either. She cleared her throat.

“Is there a problem, officer?” Seth asked. “I thought we answered your questions.”

One officer spoke after removing his hat. “This woman ran away”

“What are you doing?” Elaine cut him off as she stared at Seth. “What have you done?” She jutted out her chin to appear stronger.

Seth scanned the outside and peered at their feet.

“Please come inside so we can talk about this.” Seth stepped aside allowing the three of them passage. He halted them at the foyer. Elaine guessed it had to do with tracking any dirt into his house. Or maybe he didn’t want them finding something incriminating.

“What are you doing? Controlling their minds or something?” she asked pointedly.

The assumption didn’t make any sense, but she wanted to soft-shoe the next obvious question, which was how much he’d paid these law enforcement officials to believe his story.

“Yes,” Seth answered as though she had asked if he lived in Virginia Beach and enjoyed the weather.

Crazy but confident. Something in the way he answered, Elaine knew he was either telling the truth or believed in his own madness.

“So you paid these people? Money can’t buy everything.” She wanted to hide the defeated sound in her voice, but she couldn’t.

Seth sighed almost as though he felt sorry for her. She didn’t want his pity. She wanted him and his assistant to pay for what they’d done to her.

“No. Not this time,” Seth said.

In the short time she’d been away from the house, she noticed that Seth had changed his clothes too. He now wore an all-black outfit that included another cardigan, black slacks, a white shirt starched to the nth degree and black loafers with the glossiest shine. Had this man raided her ex-fiancé’s closet? He had the accountant look down pat.

For a man intimately related to death, he did smell wonderful. A heady, sexy scent she’d never encountered before. He still had on the ring and now she wondered if he was married, where the missus hid?

“Whether you want to believe me or not, we are destined to be together.” Seth motioned between the two of them as he walked around the group. “To work together.”

The officers remained quiet and stared at Seth in awe.

“Your family did not prepare you at all for this.” He moved around to her face. “For me.” Seth said, “I can read minds as well as control them.”

Elaine blinked, unprepared for that answer. “Can you bend spoons with your mind, too?”

Why weren’t the officers slapping cuffs on this clearly insane man and hauling him off to psych ward?

Seth glanced over at the officers who still looked stunned. “Tell me, gentlemen. What do you two think of this woman here?” He pointed to Elaine.

One officer piped in. “She’s hot. Cute with a slammin’ body. What an ass!”

Elaine put her hand to her chest and her jaw dropped. Did this fifty-something, straight-laced, by-the-book officer with gray hair and a pot belly bigger than Santa’s just say she had a slammin’ body?

“He is right, you know,” Seth said. He straightened the badge of the first officer. He retrieved a handkerchief from his pocket and shined the silver adornment, as well.

The other officer said, “She’s okay. The hair is kind of mousy but she’s working those baby brown eyes. But I’m gay so she does nothing for me.”

Elaine covered her mouth to suppress her shock. “You put them up to this.”

“Nope. Fortunately they will not remember any of this. Officer Beckwith does not need to get in trouble with his co-workers.” He tapped his fingertips on his thumb as he shifted his weight from one side to the other.

“If you can do that, control them, why didn’t you do that to me to get me to help you?” Elaine asked. If he could read her mind, which he must have to know that he fascinated her, then he could have forced her to help him.

“I can read your mind ... sometimes.” He smirked like he hated not knowing her every thought.

Better men have tried and failed.

“However I cannot control it. It is part of your genes.” He eased close to her. Though tentative, Elaine stood her ground.

He brought his hand up, a motion that should have made her flinch since the man had clearly fallen off of the crazy train. However, she remained still.

He picked at her shirt directly over her breasts. Her breathing quickened as she balled her hands into fists and kept them down by her sides. Seth wanted to cop a feel? Locking her knees together, Elaine struggled not to tremble, a gesture Mina must have noticed. The woman giggled, staring right at her. Even then Elaine didn’t move away. Instead she leaned back, a motion he must have picked up on from the way he pulled away.

“Sorry. Piece of lint.” He held it in his hand instead of flicking it away. “It has been bothering me since you walked in.”

“Would you like to know what’s been bothering me?” She came forward and squared off her shoulders.

She watched him touch his fingertips to his thumb over and over again. She wondered if that was a part of his genes.

“You really need to know your heritage.” Seth crossed his arms over his chest. He stared into her eyes. “Yes, this is all real.” He said it as though she’d audibly asked the question. She hadn’t.

“This mind reading thing is really creepy.” She rubbed her head, wishing that the bandages blocked his skills. “I still can’t believe all of this.”

Mina sauntered to the older officer. "Believe it, honey. It's all real." She slid her hand up his chest and snaked it around the back of his head. "And it's all good." She leaned in and pressed her lips against his, kissing him hungrily.

In the short time Elaine had known Mina, she knew the woman had to be up to something. No way could she have found this man to be to her liking. For a fleeting moment, she wondered if Mina ever kissed Seth that way. She allowed the thought to be brief for fear that Seth might read her mind. When she peered at him, he wrung his hands together.

Mina moved down to the side of the officer's neck. She winked at Elaine and then sunk her extended canines into his soft flesh. The officer's body stiffened, but he didn't utter a word. Mina sunk in deeper and let out a long moan. Her leg curved around his like a black widow devouring her prey.

Elaine cemented herself to her spot. As much as she wanted to avert her gaze she couldn't. She kept thinking, *Please just be giving the man a hickie*. She clutched her locket and closed her eyes as she whispered a silent prayer.

"That is enough, Mina," Seth demanded.

Elaine opened her eyes to catch Seth staring at Elaine then glancing away as though he had been embarrassed by Mina's actions and felt sorry for Elaine. She hoped that that wasn't supposed to impress her. He should have stopped Mina if he knew her plans.

When Mina pulled back, she licked her tongue over her blood-drenched lips. "Oh, I love the taste of fresh blood. It's so warm and thick." Mina glared at Seth. "Don't you miss it?"

"Oh God." Elaine covered her mouth. Her stomach bubbled and her head felt light. "Is he going to be all right?" She glared at Mina. "What did you do to him?"

Mina wiped the sides of her mouth with her index finger and licked the excess blood from it. "It's no different from taking an apple from a tree. Maybe it hurts the tree. Maybe it doesn't. But one thing's for sure. It'll grow more apples." She tilted her head to the stunned officer. "He'll regenerate more blood. No harm. No foul."

Seth repeated 'dogma' three times and moved over to the officers. "It is time for you to take Dr. Shrink back home. I am sure she is in need of some rest."

Elaine shivered. Someone must be stepping over her grave, a saying her grandmama would tell her. "I can drive ... unless you send your goons after me again."

Seth nodded. "I expect to see you tomorrow at this time." He opened the door. "Do not be late."

"I'm not going to be anywhere near you tomorrow or any time in the future." Elaine stomped out of the house with the two bewildered officers behind her.

"Yes, you will," Seth said.

Elaine pivoted and planted herself on his walkway. "You cannot control me and what I want to do." She stormed off feeling pretty confident. She wouldn't spiral into some strange world because destiny said so.

"You are at least half right," Seth said. "And it may not be what you want to do, but have to do."

This time Elaine fought her instinct to glance back at Seth. She damn sure wouldn't be predictable. She would fight him and whatever he had planned. First, she needed to have a little talk with Abuela Celia.

* * * *

Elaine had tried calling her grandmama and her mother and neither answered. What would she say? Would she admit that she'd met someone who claimed to be the Prince of

Death? A vampire? One with psychological problems.

“Dr. Shrink, are you okay?” Mrs. Ketterman asked. “You’ve been awfully quiet since I told you about my father. Did I say something startling?”

Elaine heard the concern in the woman’s voice. She didn’t need to look into her face to catch the elderly woman’s worried expression. Not that Elaine could anyway. Giving her patients good eye contact still eluded her.

“My mind is on something else. Family problems.” She should have stayed at home. She still had to recover from the bump on her head. Running a private practice crushed her chances of taking off much time.

“You’re lucky, Mrs. Ketterman.” Elaine adjusted her seating position then crossed her legs. It wasn’t until she heard her patient gasp that Elaine glanced at her notes and decided to rephrase her statement. “Sounds like before your father’s untimely death when you were a child that you two had a great relationship.”

And at least the woman had gotten to know her father. Elaine would pay any amount of money demanded just to get one more minute with her slain father.

“Yes, you are right about that. I do treasure those times. I remember when he used to toss me in the air when I was a little girl.” She let out a long cackle and patted her rotund belly. “Then again, I haven’t been little in a long time.”

“In some cultures, size signifies success.”

“Then they must think I’m rolling in it.” Elaine’s patient chuckled. “What about you, Dr. Shrink? What was your relationship like with your father? Is he still around?”

Elaine closed the file. “These sessions are about you.” A great excuse to get out of talking about a painful subject. “Until next time, Mrs. Ketterman. Have a lovely afternoon.”

The slow hiss signaled the woman sliding off of the couch.

“I don’t know how lovely it will be with all this rain. I knew my knees were acting up for a reason.”

Elaine followed her patient out of the room, finally taking a look at her. The zaftig elder wobbled to the door. The hem of her flowered skirt flounced back and forth and her white multi-pocketed and zippered purse hung in the crook of her flabby arm.

Mrs. Ketterman covered her bluish-gray hair with a clear rain bonnet and pushed her way through the door.

Elaine scanned her waiting room. The gray and pale pink walls blended in nicely with the multi-colored berber carpet and white cushioned chairs. She’d read somewhere that patients based their return visits to a doctor’s office on the friendly staff, office décor, and magazines.

“Did any new magazines come in today?” Elaine asked her receptionist who had only been with her for a few months. For a six-month old practice, she’d practically been with Elaine from the beginning.

“Mailman hasn’t come yet,” the young woman said and snapped the gum in her mouth.

Elaine’s eye twitched when she heard the pop. “Please dispose of the gum, Twyla. This is a business, not a club.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Twyla spat the pink wad into a crumpled piece of paper and disposed of it, hopefully, in the trash can under her desk.

Seth’s club, Dementia, entered Elaine’s thoughts and she shook them away. She peered at her watch. This time of day, the man probably slept. Oh God. She had actually bought into this whole vampire thing.

“Do I have anyone else coming in?”

“Some woman just called and said she was coming by to see you, but I don’t think she was a patient.”

“Did she give a name?”

“Nope. Hung up before I could get any of that.”

Elaine sighed. “I’ll be in my office. If anyone shows, call me.” She turned back to her office next to her examination room and closed the door behind her.

She loved her office. Cream colored walls with dark mahogany furniture and a black leather sofa. The sofa broke her budget, but she didn’t care. Even if she had a problem giving patients that emotional connection, she wanted them to have the best.

She opened her blinds and stared at the traffic below. One thing she couldn’t get was an office by the oceanfront. That would have been prime. What a dream to be able to look out and get an ocean view every day. However, she would work hard to get recognition and eventually build it up. Everything took time. And she certainly wasn’t going to resort to getting dirty money from Seth to boost her business. Her pride meant more.

Elaine heard raised voices outside of her door. She jumped to her feet just as her door flew open.

Abuela Celia burst through with Twyla right behind her. It wouldn’t be her grandmama if the woman didn’t cause some commotion every time she entered a room. The breath Elaine had held when she’d heard the screams released on its own accord.

“Sorry, Dr. Shrink,” Twyla began. “She ran past me. Do you want me to call the police?”

Oh that would have been great. Calling the police for her own grandmother. Her mother would never let her live it down.

“No. She’s my grandmother. Celia Puro, this is my receptionist, Twyla Perkins.”

Abuela Celia scanned Twyla from her braided hair down to her strappy shoes and said, “Fire her. She’s no good.”

Twyla held up her hand. “Oh, no she didn’t.” She whipped around to the door. “It’s lunch time. I’m taking my break.” With an overly dramatic gesture involving a head toss, braid flipping and a hand in the air, she slammed the door behind herself.

“Abuela, you can’t insult people like that.” Elaine hugged the short woman. She smelled of roses as if she’d been out in her garden again. It was a wonderful scent, brought Elaine back to the days when she would spend summers helping her grandmama in the garden. For a brief second, she thought about Seth and his garden. He had roses, too.

Celia squeezed her before releasing her. “You know it’s true. She’s rude and disrespectful and dresses like a hoochie.”

Elaine had to laugh at her for that. “Hoochie? Where did you hear that word?”

“I’m hipper than you think, Lainey.” Celia stared at Elaine for a moment, her eyebrows furrowed before she continued. “Something’s happened. What is it?”

“Did you finally get my message?”

“Honey, I haven’t been home yet.” She winked at Elaine.

Damn! Even her grandmama had a better love life than she did.

“I guess you can read minds too, huh?” Elaine laughed, but Abuela Celia didn’t.

Her grandmama dropped her purse on the floor. “What did you say?”

Abuela Celia approached Elaine and took her hands. She stared into Elaine’s eyes before glancing at the palms of her hands.

“Are you okay? What happened to you?” Celia crossed herself and put her hands in

prayer form.

"I'm okay, Abuela. I was attacked. But the cops couldn't even do anything. They wouldn't even arrest them. I guess when you're Seth Overkill and you own half of the Beach you can get away with treating people like dirt."

Celia crossed herself about three times before kissing the crucifix that hung from her necklace. "It's happened. He's sought you."

"You know a club owner too?"

"Did he tell you about the family?"

So Abuela Celia did know something.

"He told me to talk to you. What's going on here?"

"The man you met yesterday is"

Elaine cut in. "A vampire. Yeah, he tried telling me that story last night."

Celia shook her head slowly. "No story. True. He comes from a long line of sanguinarians that go as far back as recorded history."

Elaine knew her grandmama partied a lot. The woman even grew some 'herbs' that she never used in her cooking. This went too far.

Celia continued. "As the years go on, they become more powerful and stronger."

A snicker puffed through Elaine's lips. "I know you're talking about the wrong guy now. This guy looked like he thinks his shadow is stalking him. He was no leader of the Underworld."

"Tell me. Was he able to read your mind?"

Elaine gasped. Her smile dripped from her face. "How did you know?"

Celia crossed herself again. "*Dios mio*. I should have told you sooner."

Elaine held up her hand. "What are you telling me? This is all true? There's a real life vampire living in Virginia Beach?"

Celia shook her head. "Not vampire. *Vampires*. I should have told you sooner so you could protect yourself."

"I don't know if I would have believed you." She turned her back on her. "I still don't believe all of this."

Abuela Celia touched her shoulder. "Believe it. I didn't think to tell you because you're practically safe from them."

"Practically?"

"My family has had a long history with vampires. We're Ayudantes."

Elaine turned around. "That's what he called me. What does that mean?"

"We're savers. We help them."

"Help them? We're aiding murderers? Is that what you're telling me?"

"It's not like that, Lainey. Sure there are some bad vampires."

Mina being one of them.

Celia continued. "But overall, and especially with Seth's family, they provide a balance to life and death. As much as they are feared and hated, they do have a purpose here. And what we do, what my family has done for many, many years, is help them when they are in a crisis."

"What? You mean like bringing them more victims or disposing of bodies?"

"Not like that. More like making sure their secret stays hidden. We keep them safe."

"We keep *them* safe? Who protects us?" She showed off her scarred hands from when she had fallen on Seth's front lawn thanks to whatever that thing was hiding in his bushes. Now her bump on her head was throbbing again. It hadn't bothered her all morning especially after she had put an icepack on it.

“They wouldn’t hurt us. Not the good ones, anyway. They need us as much as we need them.”

“I don’t need a freak of nature like that in my life.” Elaine straightened out some papers on her desk. “Sorry, Abuela, you’ve had some pretty strange stories in the past but this one”

Abuela Celia cut her off. “He called you Lainey. He knew about your father. He called you the Ayudante. He knew what you were thinking before you said it. He asked you for help. What other proof do you need?”

Elaine turned to her grandmama. “Why me?”

Celia put her hand on Elaine’s cheek. “Because you’re it after your father was killed. I was only blessed with two children, your father and your Auntie Vera. Vera did not get the gift. But your father did and he passed it on to you. I knew the day you were born that you had it. It was in your eyes. The birthmark helped, too.”

Elaine shook her head. As the story sunk in, she tried piecing it all together. Elaine and her family enabled killers. And worse yet, in all of her thirty-one years, her grandmama and the rest of her family had kept the secret from her. She crossed her arms over her chest. Even standing in her office with Abuela Celia, she felt so alone.

“Does Mama know?” Elaine asked.

Abuela Celia nodded. “Do you remember when your mother stopped talking to me when you were little? You may have been too young to remember.”

“No, I remember.” Elaine couldn’t forget about the tense holidays and barbeques when her mother had ignored her grandmama. She hadn’t understood it then. And after years of pleading, her mother and grandmother had finally reconciled.

“She blamed me for what happened to your father, my baby boy. I tried to tell her that it was nature’s way.”

Elaine shook her head. “No, there’s nothing natural about any of this. You waltz into my office, tell me we’re savers or something”

Abuela Celia cut in. “Ayudantes.”

Elaine continued, “And that my fate in life is to help some psycho attack people?”

Celia shook her head. “I shouldn’t have waited so long.”

“I have a lot of work to do.” Elaine rushed to her door and opened it. “Maybe you should go.”

Abuela Celia sighed and strolled to the door, picking up her purse on the way. She put her hand to the side of Elaine’s face. “I’m so sorry, Lainey. But please let me give you this piece of advice before I go because if I know the Overkill family, Seth will not stop until you have agreed to help him. To block him from reading your mind”

Elaine turned away. She couldn’t believe that after all she’d said that her grandmama would still go on about this.

“Listen to me,” Celia pleaded. “We have the gift to block him from reading our thoughts. You’ll have to cross your fingers.”

“Cross my fingers? That’s a gift?” Here Elaine thought she was going to tell her to chant some mystic prayer and roll her eyes to the back of her head. But no. To block a demon from reading her mind, all she had to do was cross her fingers. So the mystic birth control must have been to cross her legs.

“Goodbye, Abuela.” She kissed her grandmama on her cheek.

Before Celia left, she made a quick stop in Elaine’s bathroom. Meanwhile Elaine tried making sense of all the events in the last twelve hours.

“God, give me strength,” Elaine muttered and tilted her head back.

Minutes later, Celia reemerged from the bathroom.

She patted Elaine’s arm. “Please believe me when I say that I never meant to hurt you.”

“Well, you did.” She couldn’t even look at her grandmama. “I’ll talk to you later.”

Elaine closed the door behind her and leaned against it. It’d been enough that she had to worry about keeping her practice afloat. Now she had to save the world?

After looking at her watch, Elaine decided that she would make it an early day today. She could reschedule any appointments she had left that day for the next. She had hurried to her desk and cleaned off the papers when she heard her door squeak open behind her.

“Abuela, I said we would talk later,” Elaine said without turning around. She heard the leather crumple on the couch like someone had just sat on it.

“Grandmama, I told you I don’t have time to talk. I’m going home.” Elaine turned around and dropped her briefcase on the floor, narrowly missing her feet.

“Is that any way to greet your patient?” Seth asked.

Chapter Three

“Get out!” Elaine barked.

She had so many other questions in her head. Why are you following me? What do you want from me? What’s your thing with cardigan sweaters and sensible shoes?

“I saw your grandmother leave. I am assuming you two talked,” Seth said, ignoring her demand.

Elaine crouched down and retrieved her bag, careful to keep an eye on the mysterious Seth, but not willing to answer him.

He must have taken her silence as an affirmative response. He said, “Good because we do not have a lot of time and I do not have many options.”

He snaked his tongue over his teeth. A motion like that shouldn’t have made her shiver but it did.

“As much as I’d like to continue this warped conversation, I’m on my way out. Again, I want you to leave. Now.” Trying hard to keep her cool demeanor, Elaine moved around her desk to her chair. With one hand, she moved it back then opened the drawer located closest to Seth to get her purse. Why the hell wasn’t he moving?

“I do not think you understand the gravity of this situation.”

After Elaine swallowed, she answered, “And maybe I don’t want to know.”

Now that she thought about it, the afternoon sun should have been hanging high about now. If Seth really was a vampire, shouldn’t he be in flames?

He must have read her thoughts because he looked out of the blinds. “Rainy days and snow days are the best. The clouds hide the sun.”

Elaine scanned her office for something to protect her against this lunatic. She eyed a small wooden tray table next to the couch. If provoked, Elaine could break off one of the legs and use it as a stake. Damn. Did she actually believe in all of this?

“You cannot hurt me,” he said.

She clutched her hand around the front of her shirt to close the collar around her neck. If this guy wasn’t the real deal, he sure enjoyed playing the part.

“Just stay away from me,” Elaine said, her voice trembling more than she liked.

“That is another part of your genes.” Seth spread a handkerchief over the arm of the chair and carefully placed his hand on top of it.

“Just leave my office and I won’t call the police.” She held her hand up to him to keep him back if he decided to lunge after her.

“Yes, because calling the police worked so well for you last night.” He looked around her office. “Not a very big office, is it?”

Elaine would not allow Seth to knock the one thing she liked.

“I said leave!” She stomped her foot to illustrate her point.

Seth leaned forward. “Did you raise your voice to me?”

Elaine stepped back. Time to put her plan into action. She toppled the small table to the floor, knocking over a vase of flowers and her business cards in the process. The tray and the vase shattered into pieces.

Elaine’s skin pricked like it had been bathed in electric sparks. Her hands trembled as

she grabbed a table leg and stomped on it, breaking it off and making a nice sharp point. She wouldn't use the stake but maybe holding it up to him would make him see that she wasn't some scared victim.

Control the fear or the fear will control you. Control the fear or the fear will control you.

“Just get up slowly and leave my office or I'll”

Seth cut in. “What?”

Before Elaine could form a thought on what she would actually do if Seth were to approach her, he stood. Even with his head hung low, he seemed taller, bigger, than he had last night. Maybe because she'd seen him in his huge mansion and now he was in her small and incredibly cramped office. Why in the world had she allowed Twyla to go to lunch?

Seth stalked Elaine, approaching her methodically as he stared into her eyes. As much as she wanted to, Elaine couldn't break the gaze.

In the light of her office, she noticed the dark circles around his eyes. With sunken cheeks, his body defied how ill he must have been. And despite his naturally honey-glow skin tone, he looked pale, damn near green.

“It is not in you to kill me.” Seth, with his gloved hand, wrapped it around Elaine's that held the stake. His hand swallowed hers as he positioned the stake over his chest. With an abundance of confidence, he pushed the pointed end against his chest over his heart. “As much as you want to, you cannot do it. Try.”

Was this maniac actually daring her to end his pathetic life? He truly defined insane.

Her hand continued shaking. She wanted so much to push the stake into his chest, pierce that evil heart of his and make him dead, especially when she let the idea that he could have had anything to do with her father's death enter her mind. Every time Elaine thought about shoving in the weapon, her stomach heaved and her heart raced.

She made one valiant effort to shove the stick and a sharp pain struck her head. Nausea overcame her until she had to drop the broken table leg in order to race over to her trashcan by her desk to heave out her bagel and coffee she'd had for breakfast.

Seth leaned over and whispered, “I told you so.”

This couldn't be right. Elaine felt physically ill if she tried hurting these people? Outrageous. As much as she'd wanted to stop Seth's twisted life, even if she could she wouldn't have done it.

Seth handed Elaine a few sheets of tissue. “Are you feeling better?”

She accepted the soft tissue and wiped her mouth. “Believe me. If it was in me to kill, you would be dead right now,” she said almost in as low of a growl as when Seth spoke.

He cleared his throat. “Not a comforting thought but good to know.” He remained standing as he stared at the mess she had made on the floor when she'd knocked over her table. “I do not have a lot of time like I said before. I need you.”

“You need Jesus.” Elaine tossed the wad into the trashcan and sat in her chair. “You need a Valium. But me? You can take me out of the equation.”

“You are the Ayudante.”

“Stop calling me that. If you want to label me, call me a psychiatrist. Call me Latin-American. Call me a Trekkie. But stop with all this Ayudante stuff.” She pushed her hair back from her face. “For one thing, I'm not ever going near that house again. Point two; I don't care if either you or Mina die. I'd probably be doing the world a favor if you did die. And finally, I don't know what it is you want me to do.” Elaine stomped to her office door. “Now if you'll please leave.”

When she didn't hear a reaction, she turned back to see Seth crouched down on the floor. He picked up her business cards and placed them all back in the gold holder her grandmama had given her when she first opened her office. With a surgeon's precision, he set them on her desk, moving them back and forth until satisfied the items were in their proper places. Then he cleaned up the broken vase pieces.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He bundled the flowers into a bouquet and meandered to the door. "Habit. I cannot help it." Then he handed her the bouquet, which she reluctantly accepted. He stared at her as though he were in a trance before she stepped back from him and looked away.

"Looks like the rain is letting up anyway. I should head back to the house." He stopped at the door. "I tried to do this civilly, but you are being difficult. I could have easily detained you last night, but I did not. I allowed you time to get answers. I am telling you now so you are not shocked. You will be retrieved at two."

Elaine looked at her watch. It was already a quarter past one. "You'll be back in forty-five minutes?"

"No. Two o'clock in the morning."

"What? Here at my office?"

He adjusted his hat. "No, your house."

"Yeah, like I'll let you in."

"You will not have to."

"Is this like *A Christmas Carol* where I'll be visited by three ghosts?"

"Except I am not a ghost." He leaned in closer. "I am not really mortal either."

Placing a hand to her chest, Elaine's breath caught in her throat. Seth didn't smell like death, like the creature that had jumped on her the other night. The idea that he could be some sort of walking dead stopped Elaine's heart.

Seth walked out of the office. "Two o'clock. Be ready."

"Ready for what?"

Seth had already disappeared from her office. First the argument with her grandmama ruined her day and now she had some 2:00 AM standing appointment with the Prince of Death. She wondered about the protocol for that.

Elaine needed to go home to lie down for a while and settle her spinning head. First she had to splash some cool water on her face.

She turned to her bathroom. Leaning over her sink, she doused her face with the chilly water. Her senses felt alive and what she wanted, what she hoped, was for all of this nonsense to wash away down the sink.

After drying her face, she crumpled the wad of paper towels she'd used then reared her hand back to toss it into the trashcan when her gaze fell on something on top of the tank.

A book. An old journal, it looked like. She glanced around to make sure Seth hadn't mysteriously popped back into the room.

She tossed the paper ball and picked up the journal. Her grandmama had been the only other person who had been in her bathroom. Her abuela must have put it in there for her to find.

Curiosity plagued her as Elaine opened the front cover and found a loose notepaper. After unfolding the paper, she read the note written by her grandmama.

I hope this explains everything and makes you understand what it is you have to do.

Love, Abuela Celia.

Explain what? That she had to help someone who claimed to be a vampire? It didn't

make any sense.

As she held the worn, leather-bound book, she felt a powerful flood rush over her. It felt like the weight of the world had been placed on her shoulders. Then she opened the first page. This book belonged to her biological father. Her eyes widened when she saw his name, Alex Puro.

Instinctively, she touched her locket as though she wanted to let her father know that she had the book and thought about him. If only she had a sign that he knew how much she'd thought about him her whole life.

When Elaine felt a hand on her shoulder, she screamed and dropped the book on the floor. With gazelle-like quickness, she pivoted around and immediately got into her Tae Bo attack stance, one fist jutted forward and the other pulled back against her side at an angle. Seeing the hand had belonged to her shocked receptionist Twyla, she dropped her fists.

With her hands covering her face, Twyla screamed, "What are you doing?"

"I'm so sorry, Twyla. I didn't know it was you," Elaine said and tried to comfort the poor woman.

"If I wanted to be treated like this I would have stayed in banking."

"I thought you were someone else." Elaine touched Twyla's shoulders, but she pulled away.

"Yeah, well I thought I could be happy here at this job. But months and no raise and now my boss is trying to take me down ninja style, oh no. I'm getting out of here." Twyla rushed from Elaine's office to her receptionist desk. Elaine followed her.

"I'm so sorry, Twyla. I can do your performance review now."

"No thanks. It's time for me to stop. I should be working in a real doctor's office. Cardiologist or something. Not some head shrinker. Hell, I would even work for a chiropractor before working for you again." She snatched her knockoff Gucci purse and headed to the door. "Mail my final check. You have my home address." In a fury, she stormed out the door.

Elaine put her hand to her head. "This was the last thing I needed." She snatched her mail from the receptionist counter. In a clean sweep, she went back to the bathroom and lifted her father's journal from the floor. Then she continued packing her briefcase.

None of this was supposed to happen to her. At this point, she should have been enjoying her career, keeping control of her life, not being besieged by a vampire with phobias.

She shoved the book into a pocket of the case and sifted through her mail first before packing them. At a letter from OVK Financial Services, the lending company that had bankrolled her business, Elaine stopped.

She didn't even have to open it. The red stamped 'final notice' glowed through the thin white envelope. How in the world could she promise to give Twyla a raise if she couldn't even afford to pay for her office lease? She sighed. Her head felt heavy and throbbed with an oncoming headache.

She threw the envelopes inside and closed the case. Before leaving her office, she checked through her appointment book to see if she had any late arrivals. She didn't. Not that that fact shocked her.

She locked up her office. For now, she could still call it her office and mean it.

* * * *

As soon as Elaine got home, she tore into her father's journal. She wanted to know more about the man behind the legend. What did he love? What did he hate? Did he know his fate the night of his murder?

Just like with a good novel, she wanted so much to skip to the end to read his last entry. She decided against it. To know the true man, she would have to start from the beginning.

And like a good book, she would start this one in a hot bath with a glass of wine. She ran hot water into her claw-foot tub, the whole reason she bought the condo in the first place, making sure to add extra white linen bubble bath to it.

She sauntered into her bedroom. Running late for work as usual, her bed remained unmade with clothes strewn on it and the floor. She could only imagine what Seth would have thought of the mess.

As soon as his name, his face, entered her thoughts, Elaine immediately crossed her fingers. She felt silly doing the childish gesture, but it couldn't hurt. Anything to keep him from knowing her secrets, her desires. Fact of the matter, she found Seth Overkill creepy but fascinating.

He intrigued her. Why would a man who seemed to have everything, rich beyond her wildest imagination, have all of these phobias? Was he really a vampire? And what did he do with his wife? Maybe she stayed somewhere in the house. A la Norman Bates, her corpse spread out on a bed in one of many bedrooms in his maze of a house. A shiver went up her spine as she sat on the edge of her bed.

She had a few messages on her answering machine that she played as she took off her white walking shoes. Not sexy but good for the feet.

The first message came from her brother. He'd made it to Seattle okay and would be hanging out with his boys the rest of the summer. He had left his contact phone numbers and address, but Elaine knew her party animal brother would not be anywhere near a phone while he stayed with his pals.

Elaine slipped off her top and tossed it into her laundry basket. Apologies from her Abuela Celia played back-to-back in the next two messages.

Elaine would let her grandmama wait. Celia had waited thirty-one years to reveal this family secret. She would have to wait until Elaine felt good and ready to talk.

The last message came from the bank asking that she call them as soon as possible regarding her business loan. That call she couldn't put off until later. After mustering the nerve, she made a plea to Mr. Smithson, the bank's loan officer, to give her until the beginning of November for full payment.

"Two weeks," he'd told her. She wished she had some of Seth's ability to sway people. She probably would have gotten anything she wanted.

Once stripped of all clothing and with a glass of Chianti in her hand, Elaine immersed herself in her balmy bath. The aroma of fresh, pressed white bedroom sheets filled the air. The scent soothed her senses as she settled into the water. The bubbles crinkled and popped around her as she opened the journal to the first page and devoured the words.

At twelve, I did not believe my mother when she told me of my duty to The Dark Ones. Then I saw my best friend killed in front of my eyes and knew of my legacy. Even then, I knew.

The words chilled her even as the steam rising from the hot water made her sweat. She took a sip of the blood red wine. She licked the excess from her lip and set the glass on the floor next to the tub.

Her father's words contained sadness but had strength as though he knew there would be no end to this warped cycle and yet he knew he could handle the task. If this would be her lot in life, her task to bear, Elaine doubted her ability to be stronger than her father's.

Elaine continued reading until her bathwater turned icy cold and she ran out of wine.

Rubbing her wrinkled fingertips together, Seth's constant finger tapping invaded her thoughts. She shook her head to remove him as if she could reset her mind.

"Time to get out." She set the journal on the counter next to the sink. Until her stomach growled, Elaine had almost forgotten to eat.

Eating. Feeding.

As much as she tried fighting it, she thought of Seth again. What it must be like to deny that one necessary craving. It couldn't have been like her giving up chocolate or carbohydrates. The situation reminded her of her decision to give up on relationships, men really.

When Alvin had vanished almost ten years ago, she hadn't thought of looking for another man to fill his spot. Although she had coped with him disappearing, especially when the police and the detectives she'd hired couldn't get any leads, getting into a relationship did not have a top priority.

Elaine dried herself and dressed in a loose-fitting t-shirt and shorts. She had a lot more reading to do because so far what she'd read enraptured her. Her father had a way with words and what he'd gone through amazed her. What she'd read actually seemed like he'd written the journal not to get his thoughts down on paper but rather as sort of a manual for the next generation of savers, Ayudantes.

Don't befriend them. It's a job, not a social gathering. Don't trust all of them. Some will want to hurt anyone that crosses their path. Don't fall in love. They are soulless creatures with no capacity to return the affection.

Elaine held the book close to her chest as she strolled into her kitchen. At least she kept the kitchen neat and tidy. Stainless steel sink, refrigerator, stove and microwave gave the place an almost sterile feel to it. Dark gray ceramic tile covered the floor and a cobalt blue shade covered the walls. Her mother called the kitchen a mausoleum decorated by Maytag. Elaine had explained that she had enough brightness at work. At home, she wanted dark, calming colors.

On the middle of her glass topped table sat a clear glass vase with a myriad of multi-colored flowers trumpeting from it. She loved flowers. Fresh, colorful flowers that reminded her of Spain in the summertime. She smelled the fragrant open bud of a calla lily, sweet and innocent in aroma, before heading to the refrigerator.

She opened the door hoping to find leftovers from something and instead found a half empty bottle of ketchup, a squeeze bottle of mustard, the obligatory box of baking soda and a jug of water. The empty fridge quickly reminded her she hadn't gone to the store in a while. Why should she when she worked such long hours?

Elaine snatched her cordless phone off of the counter and punched in the phone number for the Chinese place that delivered and usually pretty quickly. She made her usual order of sweet and sour chicken, and a shrimp stir-fry for lunch the next day.

While she waited in her living room, she curled up on the end of her couch with the journal. Before delving back into the pages, she took a quick look at her surroundings. They weren't as posh as Seth's place. She didn't own half of the oceanfront like he did. She had a simple, tan couch with a matching loveseat, and a coffee table given to her by her grandmama. The off-white carpeting went with everything.

She sighed and opened the journal where she'd left off. Her father had turned twenty-eight when he'd written the entry she was up to.

I just met the angel I'm going to marry. Olivia Vargas. I want our children to look like her. Long, thick hair, brown eyes, soft skin, and a compassionate heart. I just hope I can live long enough to marry her, have our children and watch them grow

Elaine choked back her tears. Her itchy eyes and her tight throat didn't compare to her quaking legs. Her father had known even before Elaine had been conceived that he wouldn't make it to see her become a woman, become a doctor, become what her father had been, a protector.

Tears flowed down her cheeks and she felt no shame in leaving them there. She didn't even know the man. Had no memory of ever touching him, looking into his eyes, telling him her fears. But she missed him.

Her doorbell rang and broke her reverie.

Dinner. Elaine wiped the tears from her cheeks. No reason to bring the delivery boy down.

Grabbing the twenty she'd left by the front door, she flung open the door. The young man on the other side was not the usual delivery person.

This new one had a different feel about him. He had on slacks and slides and a tight-fitting iridescent tee shirt. He looked more like a club kid than someone who should be delivering Chinese food. His dark, spiky hair made him look dangerous. Looking on the side of his face, she saw a long scar that went from his eye to his chin. Now, that made him appear dangerous.

"Fourteen-thirty-five," he said, his eyes cut low and a sneer at the corner of his mouth. "If you let me in, I'll set it up for you."

The wind kicked up and that same howling she'd heard the night before at Seth's house, she heard again.

She handed the man the twenty and attempted to take the white plastic bag with 'Thank You' in red covering the outside.

He slid the bill from her hand. The touch from his icy fingers froze her to the bone.

She clenched her jaw and reinforced her grasp on the bag. Her pulse raced and although every inch of her wanted to scream at him, something inside of her begged that she be the aggressor. Stand up to him and he would eventually back down. He had to see she was no pushover.

His sneer turned into a devilish grin and in an exaggerated motion, he let the bag go, splaying his fingers as he held it in the air.

"Enjoy your meal, Lainey," he said.

At the mention of her rarely used nickname, Elaine backed from the door. He had to be one of Seth's goons.

"You know what they say. After you eat Chinese food, you'll be hungry again at, say, two AM." He laughed as she slammed her door and locked it at the doorknob and deadbolt.

She darted into her dining room and grabbed one of the chairs. Planting it under the knob, she kicked it tighter and tighter under it until convinced nothing could get through it. Then she scurried to every window in her condo and made sure they were all locked. Frantically twisting the rod on each of the window blinds, she shut them all and closed the curtains.

Her back door. She had to make sure the locks had been secured. Elaine checked the lock three times before convincing herself that it would hold out any wayward intruder or vampire. Peeking through the blinds, she caught a figure lurking behind her fence. It reminded her of the shadows that had glided across Seth's front yard. Had he sent his minions to watch her condo, too?

If he had, they were friendly. The shadow waved at her then made its way to her backyard. Hitting her light switch to spotlight the approaching intruder, Elaine breathed in relief

once she saw it was her neighbor, Charles. Not Chuck or Charlie. Charles. Sweet man who always seemed to lose his cat every night.

Once he was in her backyard, she unlocked the door and poked her head out. "Sweetums lost again?" she asked.

"Maybe I should take it as a sign she doesn't want me as her owner." Charles, in his usual black suit with a skinny black tie, scanned her backyard area before settling his gaze on hers.

A young looking man with a shaved head, Charles always seemed happy even as he looked for his cat night after night.

"Put out some food for her. I'm sure she'll come back." Flashing a reassuring smile, she got him to smile, too.

"You say that every time."

"And does it work?"

Charles smiled even wider. "I have to go. If you see Sweetums---"

Elaine cut him off. "I'll keep her in here with me until I see you."

Charles cocked his head. His smile slipped for a moment. "Stay in tonight. I don't like the atmosphere."

Atmosphere? That was a strange turn of phrase. Most people would comment on the clouds or the wind or even smelling rain.

She watched him walk away until he was a shadow. With a swift motion, she slammed her door and locked it again.

God, she had started to believe this stuff could be real. Elaine picked up her phone and called the Chinese takeout restaurant again. Anything other than an order, an address, or a phone number, the woman who answered didn't understand, certainly not her questions about the new delivery person. The woman asked, "You need egg rolls? You no like shrimp? Okay, call again."

Elaine turned on every light in her condo. Vampires hated light, right? If they saw how sunny and bright her place looked, they would leave her alone. Damn it, why did paranoia grip her now? Looking at the clock over her entertainment center, she saw it read eight o'clock. Six more hours until that fateful first meeting.

She wouldn't let it happen. By hook or by crook she would get through this night unscathed and come away with a funny story to tell her Abuela Celia. Right now she needed resources.

After kneeling down in front of her TV, she opened the cabinet. She didn't particularly care for horror movies, but she had to have one somewhere in her vast video and DVD collection.

Ah! 'Interview With The Vampire.' She'd gotten it as a gift from her brother only because Antonio Banderas co-starred in it. It couldn't hurt to watch it now to use it as a guide to what to expect from these things.

She popped the DVD into her player. As it set up, she ran back into her kitchen and threw open her cabinets. She twirled her Lazy Susan full of spices until she found her target, a bottle of garlic powder. No, it was garlic salt. If they were slugs it would be perfect. She could just toss it on them and they would shrivel and die. Then again, even as a powder, what did she expect to do? Throw it on them and make them sneeze?

No matter. She would have it with her just in case. She grabbed as many of her wooden spoons that she could find and one of her best knives. She'd never whittled before but she would

learn today. All she had to do was make a cooking utensil into a pointed stick. A stake.

When she ran back to the living room, she peered at the bag of food she'd left on the foyer floor. Who knew what that strange deliveryman could have put into her food? Drugs, poison, blood. No, she would leave the bag there and take it out with the trash in the morning. She would lose her money but twenty bucks for her life seemed pretty cheap.

Elaine watched the movie in between reading excerpts from her father's journal and holding onto her locket. She caught a few things from the movie. They remained the same age at the time of the vampire bite. Aversion to sunlight. Fast, very fast. Drinking rat's blood to get by? Her stomach gurgled as bile rose into her throat, burning it and making her cough.

As soon as the movie ended, she played it again and again. If she planned to use this as her guide, she had to know it backwards and forward. At the third go around though, and at the entry in the journal where she had been born, Elaine felt sleepy. As hard as she tried, she couldn't keep her eyes open.

She slipped into an easy slumber. Her dreams wandered from seeing herself as a child with her biological father to herself now as a doctor. Voices in her dreams whispered to her to kill Seth Overkill.

"He is weak," one raspy voice said. "See him tonight. Take the stake. Kill him!"

Then he appeared in her dreams. His image in her slumber wasn't of the shy, timid man she'd seen. It was Seth in all of his glory. He had on a white pullover top with matching drawstring pants. He stood barefoot in an all white room. Did he really look like this outside of a cardigan sweater? In the simplest of clothes, he appeared regal, strong. In her dreams, she stood a few feet from him wearing a silver slip nightgown, her hair piled on top of her head.

With ease, he approached her, taking her hand in his. "You know what you need to do," he said.

She glanced over to the side and suddenly in this all white room sat an all red bed. A red velvet covering blanketed the round bed with red satin covered pillows adorning the headboard. He led her to the crimson monstrosity. After sitting on the bed, Seth put his hands to her waist and pulled her toward him. He leaned his head on her stomach with his hands moving up her back.

Elaine's body tingled with desire. Her breathing increased to a pant. She wanted him. In dreams and in life, she had to have him. Then her father's words haunted her. *Do not make friends with them. They are soulless creatures.*

At the moment, she didn't need love. She wanted pulse-pounding sex. Under his commanding hand, he pulled her gown down her arms so that she stood naked in front of him. He dusted over her body with his fingertips, starting at her shoulders then going down her arms and back up to her breasts.

With his middle fingers, he circled her nipples, hardening them to a painful extent. Elaine gripped his shoulders. Wanting to feel his flesh, she pulled off his top and tossed it to the floor. This had to be a dream. The real Seth would have folded the clothing on the floor. The real Seth would have never let Elaine touch him like this either.

He gazed at her with his smoldering eyes. Then he dragged his tongue over her protruding nipple. A shiver zipped up and down her body as she caressed the back of Seth's head. The tip of his hot tongue twirled around her nipple until the tense feeling she felt accumulating in her stomach threatened to explode.

"Seth, please," she cried in her dream.

Obligingly, he pulled back from her after kissing her chest between her breasts. Then he

reclined on the bed, allowing her to pull his pants down and remove them. His erect penis reminded Elaine of Seth. It was long, impressive, thick and had a slight bend to the left.

She crawled on the bed and held his shaft in her fist. As though she'd done it before, Elaine impaled herself onto his cock. Though only in a dream, Elaine felt how he filled her inside. She undulated her hips, riding him slow at first.

Her speed increased when he held her hips. She arched her back. Seth, in turn, raised his hips to penetrate her deeper. The motion was enough to release the climax Elaine had been staving off to enjoy more of Seth's incredible body.

"Oh God, Seth! You're incredible!" She leaned down and kissed him.

When she sat up, he'd placed something in her hand. A stake.

Seth said, "You know what you have to do."

No, he couldn't want this. Why would Elaine dream this grisly end?

"If you kill him, all of the vampires will die. You'll restore the world to the way it was, the way it should be," the raspy voice said with urgency this time. "Do it! Do it!"

Elaine screamed, "No!" She held Seth's shoulder down with one hand. With a wooden stake in the other, she raised it in the air. She swallowed uneasily as Seth closed his eyes as though accepting his fate. And in one swift motion, she brought it down but woke up harshly from the dream before the stake could pierce Seth's flesh.

She'd never had a dream like that before. No, now that she thought about it, yes she had. She remembered dreams of making love to a sexy stranger. Something in this dream felt so familiar. Was it Seth in her dreams before?

She wiped the sweat from her face. The journal had toppled to the floor and set up in a teepee fashion. The DVD had stopped playing and was now at the menu screen. And her eerily quiet condo gave her the creeps. She glanced up at the clock. Five minutes to two.

In a fast leap, Elaine sprang from the couch and turned off the DVD player. With her belief system rooted in scientific facts, she didn't want to believe her dream. This time her dreams told her something. If Mina broke down, dying because Seth stopped feeding, then maybe if she did kill him the rest would die too. No more vampires in Virginia.

Elaine had to see Seth tonight. And she would have a surprise. All she would have to do would be invite him into her place. That way when she staked him she could claim he attacked her in her own home. Self defense.

She hurried to her bedroom to change. She didn't know where she would be going but she knew she had to wear something comfortable and loose. As she went through her dresser drawers, she caught the gentle scratching of her rose bushes, care of Abuela Celia, outside of her window. Some nights, that lulled her to sleep. This time the scratching noise sounded different. It tapped against the glass pane. Tap, tap, tap until it became a full-blown knocking.

Elaine whipped her head to the blind-covered window. In a scary movie, this would have been the scene that would have made Elaine scream, "Don't open that window!"

Her heartbeat pounded in her head. She balled her sweaty hand into a fist then spread her fingers, wiggling them around to get them loose.

No fear. No fear.

Once at the window, she peeked through the slats of the blinds. She saw green eyes staring back at her.

"Peek-a-boo!" Mina screamed.

Elaine shrieked and fell back onto the floor. Her heart had never worked or pumped so hard in her life.

“Hey, I know I’m a little early,” Mina continued. “Open up.”

Elaine stood and hoisted up her blinds. She opened her window so that a thin piece of gray screen separated her from a perky Mina.

“You ready?” Mina asked as she danced around by the bushes.

“Ready for what? Where are we going?” Elaine asked. “Where’s Seth?”

“Why don’t you let me in so we can talk about it?” Mina asked. When Elaine got silent, Mina swooped in for the kill. “You don’t believe in that ‘don’t-invite-a-vampire-into-your-house’ thing, do you? It’s just me. Sure I grabbed you a little too hard. I apologized. And sure I almost fed off of you the other night. I was a little hungry. Come on. Let me in.”

It might have been a sixth sense. It might have even been her father whispering in her ear. Elaine knew better than to trust this woman.

“You stay out there. I’ll see you in a bit.” Elaine went back to her closet and tossed some clothes onto the bed.

“You’re not wearing that, are you?” Mina asked through the screen.

Mina wasn’t about to criticize Elaine’s fashion sense, too.

“I’ll see you outside.” Elaine closed the window, locked it and lowered the blinds.

Besides, if Elaine wanted to execute her plan, she didn’t need Mina seeing her hide the stake. She might warn Seth.

Now, what outfit goes with a wooden spoon with a spike at the end?

Chapter Four

Elaine stood outside of Dementia. She had known it existed, having heard about it from her younger, hipper co-workers when she used to work in a hospital. However, she had never dared venture out to this club.

The club, a former mental hospital, looked awesome from the street. A four-story building, now painted red with black trim, sat on top of a hill so that even from far off it could still be seen. 'Dementia,' in white jagged, neon letters, graced the front of the building.

Mina had picked Elaine up in a chauffeured black Bentley. Elaine might have felt like royalty stepping out of the classic and expensive ride except that in her plain white tee shirt and purple walking shorts with sneakers, she felt more like the janitorial staff than an invited guest. The fashionistas posed in the line outside that went all the way down the street. A red velvet rope lined the front and two huge bodyguards pillared the door.

"Evening, fellas." Mina whisked past the crowd and into the loud club. Elaine attempted to do the same but the bodyguards moved together like Buckingham Palace guards. Her head bounced off of their massive wall-like chests.

"Can we have this dance later?" Elaine attempted some humor.

Their hard, stoic faces proved they didn't get Elaine's sarcasm. And if these guys were this guarded over Seth for just his *club*, she could only imagine what they were like when there was a real threat to his life. Elaine twitched up a smile to mask her heinous intentions.

Mina tapped each man on his shoulder. "She's with me. Seth asked to see her."

As though Mina had said a magic word, the two giants moved to the side to grant her passage, snorting for good measure. Elaine eased past them and followed Mina through the crowd on the dance floor.

The air reeked of cigarette smoke and another strange but familiar sweet smoky scent, which made Elaine hold her breath until she could escape the room. She'd grown up around Abuela Celia's herb-smoking days.

As soon as she stepped inside of the club, Elaine kept her fingers crossed. She didn't need Seth knowing her thoughts, especially for what she had planned.

Twirling colored club lights illuminated the darkened club where straight jackets and wrist-and-ankle straps dangled from the ceiling. Cute.

Mina punched in a security code by a doorway and pulled it open. Elaine followed her up a set of stairs and let out her breath. Mina glanced back briefly.

"I knew I should have helped you get dressed," Mina said. "You look like an old lady."

Elaine kept her shirt untucked to keep the stake hidden in the back of her shorts. The stick poked her back whenever she moved. She wouldn't have it back there for long. She had to get Mina out of the room and have Seth alone.

"I think I look fine," Elaine said as soon as they reached the top to another door and another security punch pad. Mina opened that door and ushered Elaine inside.

With his back to them, Seth gazed over the crowd out of a window like an efficient accountant noting the number of people funding his lavish home.

The huge dark room, his office, covered the length of the club. The walls appeared black

or maybe dark purple. Only candles and the light from the club lit the area. A picturesque window stretched from one side to the other and offered a view over the entire club.

On one side of the office, colored monitors displayed every angle of the outside of the club, from the front door to the alleys on both sides to the back of the club that butted against the beach.

Other than a few couches, white of course, the office had little furniture or adornments. And it smelled like apple pie.

“You did not bring her?” Seth asked without turning around.

“Of course. She’s right here,” Mina said.

Seth turned. He had on a white cardigan and flat front slacks. Still hard to believe in looking at his bookish demeanor that he could be a vampire. Weren’t vampires supposed to be sexy beasts? No matter. She would stake him and take him out of existence.

“I, um, could not” He stopped and crossed his arms. “Your grandmother must have told you the secret. I cannot read your mind anymore.”

Whoa! Crossing her fingers *did* work. She hid her hands behind her back.

“I’m sure you’ll dazzle me with some other parlor trick,” Elaine said. “I liken mind reading with reading someone’s mail or going through someone’s pockets.”

She hoped he wouldn’t do that. Her father’s journal hid in her front pocket of her shorts. If Seth found it, he would probably burn it and make her watch.

He smiled. The Prince of Death smiled. Despite what her head said, Elaine’s stomach lurched and her heartbeat accelerated. She shouldn’t have felt this way for a man she was about to kill, especially one who dressed like Alvin.

Elaine had a job to do. She shivered at the thought. Could she do this? Could she stop a person’s life especially with her being so afraid of death?

Seth glanced over at Mina. “Go.”

Without a word, Mina left them alone. With half of her obstacle out of the way, Elaine could get down to business.

Seth meandered around Elaine before facing her. “You know, if you were standing in line, I would not let you in to my club. You look too plain.”

She blinked. “*You* are calling *me* plain? No offense, Mr. Overkill, but you aren’t the epitome of what a traditional vampire should look like. Besides, I’m comfortable.” She poked her chest out and kept her eyes on his.

He scanned his outfit, smoothing out the front of his sweater and adjusting the cuffs on his sleeves. “These clothes are very efficient. But you? I would have thought you would dress more provocatively. Are not all single women of a certain age looking to marry eligible bachelors?”

Her eyes narrowed at the implication. “No, not all women are looking to marry and pop out babies. What century did you come from?”

“Do you really want to know?”

No, she didn’t. What story would he tell her?

“I would never come to your club. I’m a grown woman. I prefer the symphony and a quiet dinner than this chaos.”

“Are you requesting my company?” Seth joked.

She coughed, which made him laugh.

“Of course not.” She took a step back from him.

“I am kidding. Lighten up. Even though I am who I am, does not mean I do not have a

sense of humor. I mean, I am the head vampire and I cannot bite anyone because I am too afraid of catching germs. How can I not have a sense of humor about that? A normal person would have probably terminated his life by now.” He walked away from her. “Have a seat.”

“No, thank you.” She preferred to stand. Besides, how in the world was she supposed to sit with a stake resting in the crack of her ass?

“I was not being polite. It was an order.” He tapped the tips of his fingers. “I do not like people standing in my presence.”

Now she was pissed. “I don’t follow orders. I’m not an officer, soldier, or short order cook. You want to boss someone around, talk to your followers, like that guy you sent to my condo to deliver my dinner. Thanks for ruining my appetite, by the way.”

He stared at her. The candle flames made his skin glow like warm honey. She tightened her crossed fingers and had impure thoughts about the man in white.

“You did not eat? I have pie. Would you like some pie?”

Not exactly what she thought she would hear from a vampire. None of this made much sense to her. Elaine wrung her hands together but immediately stopped. She didn’t want to appear anything like this paranoid freak of nature.

“No, thank you.”

He went over to what looked to be a kitchen in his office. It didn’t even classify as a kitchenette because he had a full size refrigerator, stove, microwave, dishwasher and blender. One of these sofas probably pulled out into a bed.

“I have whatever you want.” He opened his refrigerator, showing off shelves full of food, of course, all facing in the same direction. And as she looked closer, he even had the food alphabetized. From applesauce to zucchini.

Ravenous best described Elaine’s state. However she didn’t trust this man. How could she eat anything he presented to her without question?

“I baked these myself.” Seth seemed pretty proud. And as cute as the image was of having this hulking Adonis in his kitchen baking a pie, she had a mission to accomplish.

“You asked me here for a reason.” Elaine had to get down to business. The faster she got on with this, the faster she could get on with her life, her normal life.

With a confident gait, he strolled to Elaine, who had remained in the same spot since coming into the office. The closer he got to her, the stronger she felt. The reaction seemed odd. Shouldn’t she have been afraid? Terrified? She took a deep breath.

“Since talking to your grandmother, do you now understand our families’ histories?” He tapped his fingers on his thumb several times again and shifted back and forth. She wished she had been around him long enough to know what his quirks meant. Was this nervous tension or was he restraining himself from wanting to rip off her head and suck out her blood?

“Some.” The journal helped more.

Seth broke his gaze to scan the room. “I used to have black lighting in here. However, the illumination showed off too much lint and that drove me to distraction. I spent the majority of my night picking and vacuuming.” He brought his gaze back down to hers again. When she didn’t move, he continued, “Come here.” Seth walked over to the window, looking back only once to make sure Elaine remained close behind him.

With careful steps, Elaine followed. She hoped he didn’t plan on pushing her through the thick glass. She stood a few feet away from him and looked over into the club. The soundproof glass and carpeted floor vibrated with the thud of the bass from the dance songs.

“I used to look over this crowd and pick a woman or two,” he glanced at her, “or three.”

Elaine squeezed her crossed fingers until a bolt of pain shot up her arm. He probably would have killed her if he knew she thought he typified a macho asshole right now.

Seth moved on. "I would have one of my other minions bring them up here. Ply them with wine and song. Maybe a little dancing. Then"

He must have noticed her disgusted look from the way he stopped his story. Her stomach churned and the appetite she had, disappeared.

"You are new to this so I will spare you the details."

"Thanks." She meant that but it came out smarmy.

"Gradually, I suppressed my need to feed. After a while I only fed from one or two women. Then one. Then one every couple of days. Then one a week. Then one a month. Until eventually, I just stopped." He repeated 'dogma' three times under his breath and turned away from Elaine.

"So you want me to help you attack people? Is that my role here?" Elaine asked, this time intentionally sounding smarmy.

"That is your role in life. I am sure your grandmother told you."

"I don't believe you or any of this. It's all crazy." She backed away from him.

"You were named after your great grandmother on your father's side."

Elaine stopped in her tracks. Her heartbeat jumped as she listened to him.

"You were born inside of your grandmother's house with a midwife while vampires stood guard. And when you came into the world, the skies opened and dropped this heavy, cleansing rain. It was magnificent."

Abuela Celia used to tell her that story too. How did he know? He couldn't have been old enough to remember or even stand guard. He looked to be her age, maybe a couple of years older. But the way he talked gave him away. It was way too formal for this day and age.

"Your great grandmother blessed you in a ceremony," Seth pointed to her, "and placed that locket you are hiding under your shirt in your crib. Your family never wanted to be a part of this world. Who would?"

Sweat formed on her forehead and upper lip, but she wasn't about to wipe them. She couldn't believe the knowledge this man had of her life. She felt like a raw exposed nerve.

"They could not deny their heritage. And now you have been adorned with the family birthmark proving you are the one to continue the tradition."

"It's a blemish, not a calling." Elaine shifted uneasily, placing a hand at her hip where her birthmark hid.

Seth approached her. "The heart-shaped mark is a clear sign."

Her eyes widened. She'd never talked about it. How did he know?

"That doesn't prove anything."

Seth sighed. "I do not know how else to prove it to you." He paced back and forth. "I remember when you tried out for little league because your brother was doing it and you did not want to feel left out. I know you got braces in the seventh grade and got teased by that boy, what was his name." He snapped his fingers, trying to remember. "Oh yes. Arnold Nerdlinger. With a name like that, you would think he would not have teased anyone. But he only did it one day." He gave her a knowing wink. "He did not do it after that."

"Have you been following me my whole life?" Elaine asked. How else could he have known all of these little details?

Instead of answering, Seth continued, "You went to the prom with a Rudolph Valentino-looking guy that your mother and stepfather disapproved of because of the rumors they had

heard. They thought he was after one thing and he was. You lost your virtue that night.”

“Okay, that’s enough.” She held her hands up finally, revealing her crossed fingers. She drew her hands behind her again and hoped Seth didn’t catch them.

“Where do you get off spying on me? And just how old are you? No one compares men to Rudolph Valentino.”

“I’m older than you think.” He wrung his hands together. “I think you are missing an important aspect of my story. As much as you look out for us, we look out for you. I have protected you.”

“Oh yeah? You didn’t protect me against Adam Rogers.”

He furrowed his eyebrows.

“He was the Brad Pitt wannabe.” She huffed. “Rudolph Valentino.”

He nodded. “We cannot do everything.”

“And you couldn’t protect my father.”

Seth looked down and this time repeated ‘dogma’ five times. She must have struck a nerve. He turned himself around in circles three times. She’d put him in a tailspin.

“I could not. Could not stop it.” He mumbled. Stammered. “He was mixed in with bad vampires. I felt it. He had to go.”

Elaine gritted her teeth. Anger coursed through her body and spilled into hate-filled words she hoped would pierce Seth’s crumbling façade.

“You knew nothing about my father.” Now she wanted to push him through the window. “He was a brave and honorable man. He loved me and my brother. It’s this goddamn legacy shit that killed him. Why don’t you people just leave us alone? Leave me alone!”

“Stop being insolent and do my bidding.”

“Forget it. See another psychiatrist. I’m not your woman.” She backed up to the window. *Wrong direction, kiddo.* She needed an easy escape route. She needed to be by the door when she finally staked Seth, the same Seth who now looked at her with such compassion in his eyes that she could barely look at him.

“You are. You are the only one who can understand all of this.”

“But I don’t. I don’t get it at all. In one day you want me to believe that there are vampires in Virginia Beach and that I’m some chosen one to help you get through traumatic experiences? Who will help me? Who am I supposed to see after all of this is said and done?”

Seth’s hand wringing increased until Elaine thought he would rub them raw.

“What is this new breed of Ayudante that would make such a request? Your lot in life is to do what I ask. Considering the alternatives, you have had it pretty easy.” He sounded like he had done her a favor.

“Easy? This is supposed to be easy?” She shook her head. “I’m out of here.” It was time. She’d gone back and forth with him long enough. Time to put this baby to bed.

“Capitalist mortals. What is it you desire? Money, clothes, a new house? I will pay you a million dollars a day.” He brought his hands up and shook his head. “No. Two million a day for a week of your services. This is my last and only offer.” He jutted out his strong chin.

His masked control covering the desperation in his voice along with the potential to make fourteen million dollars weakened her resolve. He reminded her of her patients who’d begged to be helped.

Seth put her out of her realm of expertise. Even though he knew her family history, she couldn’t deny the fact that this man exhibited some unusual behavior. Most importantly, this man had cowardly watched her father die.

“There are three options you can consider,” Seth began. “Cure me to help me feed again. Kill me, but you know you cannot do that.”

Damn if she wouldn't try it again.

“What's the third option?” she asked.

Seth tapped his fingers and shuffled from one foot to the other. “Never mind. There is only the one option available to you. In order for you to fulfill your duty, you will move into my house.”

Oh yeah. This man fell off of crazy truck and right onto Delusional Boulevard.

“You don't actually think I'm going to move in with you?” Elaine slipped her hand up the back of her shirt. She had to be ready.

“There is no other way.”

“Oh yes there is. I'm not doing it.”

Seth stormed toward her. She untwisted her fingers long enough to grab the stake. Before he could even see it, Seth stopped in his tracks and stared at her. In a swift move, he covered his chest and face with his hands in defense.

Damn! He'd read her mind.

Elaine didn't have time to bargain or think. She raised the stake in the air causing her to stumble backward toward the window. Falling on the glass, she braced her hand against it and pushed herself off. Seth looked beyond her then back at her again.

Window.

Elaine.

Window.

Elaine.

Until finally he darted to his desk and opened a bottom drawer.

Seth pulled out a set of yellow cleaning gloves. This man cleaned while he killed? Elaine would make this a messy experience.

He approached her again but this time Elaine wanted to be the aggressor. She closed her eyes and ran toward him with the stake. She felt it stop as it slammed against something hard then heard a rip but she couldn't open her eyes to see the damage.

“Damn it!” Seth screamed. She must have made her target. The nauseous feeling she'd had the entire time in his office escalated to needing to find a trash receptacle or bathroom quick.

Elaine opened her eyes long enough to find the door. She bolted through just as Seth asked her to wait.

She hadn't killed him. Or maybe she'd wounded him enough. Either way she wouldn't stick around to find out.

She'd never attacked anyone before. What could she have done? He looked like he wanted to wring her neck or something. She had to strike first.

Sweeping down the stairs from Seth's office, Elaine's feet barely touched the steps. She backstroked and flew through the sea of dancers, peering into their faces and finding odd expressions.

The thumping bass beat matched her pounding heart. And the flashing lights blinded her momentarily before she finally found the red exit sign.

She shot through it, letting the door slam behind her. Her hand touched the front pocket of her shorts. Knowing her father's journal still remained with her slowed her breathing.

Elaine scanned her surroundings. She looked down the alley toward the beach. Fresh salty sea air swirled around her, masking the horrid stench of urine. Through a high wrought

iron gate that separated the alley from the beach, she saw the crashing waves. A dumpster sat against the wall.

Elaine put her hand over her mouth and backed up until she heard giggling. In the shadows, she caught a figure. The person's head leaned back and in the light from the streetlight Mina was revealed. She had someone pressed against the wall.

Mina glanced over at Elaine and gave her a wicked smile. She pulled the person forward and Elaine saw it was a young man but dark shadows masked his face.

"Come join the party," Mina hissed.

She brought the man into the light and without warning, crooked his head to the side and took a healthy chomp from his neck. This time the man screamed. He scared birds from the top of the building and even managed to drown out the waves and music.

Elaine screamed and turned to run toward the street. At the sight of a man at the alley's entrance, she screeched to a halt. Darkness masked his face as he stood motionless. His arms dangled at his sides and his shirt hung out of his pants as though he'd been partying way too much. It was only when he took a step forward that she became suspicious of this stranger.

His stiff-legged walk reminded her of the drunken sailors she used to attend to when she interned at the hospital. Gazing over her shoulder, she saw Mina taking a deeper bite into the man's neck until blood squirted from the newly opened wound.

Elaine couldn't match Mina's strength or speed. She turned back to the drunk. She could surely get past this guy. She raced toward him, just looking to make it to the main street. When she got a good look at him, she screamed again.

The left side of his body, from his head down to his feet, appeared smashed in like a Mac truck had hit him. His head was flat on one side with one eye missing and his pinkish brain spilling from behind his head through his open scalp. The shoulder from the same side of his crushed head hung lower than the other. More than likely his collarbone and shoulder were broken. He dragged his left leg. From that foot, his shoe was missing.

He reached his right hand out to her and said, "I didn't see the train. Did it hit me?" He sounded like he talked through oatmeal but certainly didn't smell as pleasant. "Help me."

Elaine bolted in the other direction toward Mina. Her body shuddered as she rolled the implication around in her head. Was this man really the walking dead? Vampires she could deal with but not death. She'd had enough of it.

She didn't notice the door opening until she smacked into it. She remembered her head bouncing off of the steel door before everything went black.

* * * *

"Dogma, dogma, dogma," Seth said as he waited at the triage counter at Beach General.
Breathe, man. Just breathe.

"What?" the nurse asked.

"My friend needs help." He held Elaine in his arms. He had seen in his camera that one of his vampires had fed right in front of Elaine. Just like with mirrors, cameras could not pick up the vampire's image. When he had found it was Mina, anger had raged inside of him. Anger he had not felt in years. He had to protect Elaine. Even as rude and stubborn as she had been, he had made a promise to Alex Puro to protect his baby girl.

The nurse pushed a clipboard with forms on top to complete.

As he stared at the clipboard, he could almost see the microscopic germs crawling all over it through his glasses. Of course, if he fed he would not need to wear these mortal contraptions to see better.

He needed to focus. He could control her mind like he had done with the officers before. Seth's breathing staggered and he swallowed. Could that nurse not see him suffering? He had had to pick Elaine up from the dirty ground covered with trash and used condoms.

Obviously the nurse did not know what he could do to her. As long as he could not hone his power, his strength, she would never know. He glared at her though, rage building inside of him. From the way the woman stepped back, he knew she must have seen his fury.

He glanced into the full waiting room. He saw depressed-looking people hunched over, homemade bandages covering wounds, disease and a sick stench everywhere.

He had to take Elaine somewhere safe. Filth hung thick in the air like smog. His chest tightened as he struggled to breathe.

As he made his way through the waiting room, the patients stared at him. Some looked away but others glared.

"Help me," one woman moaned.

"So much pain," a man said as he reached out for Seth.

Seth broke his gaze and kept looking straight ahead.

"Angel of mercy," a man screamed after Seth.

"I do not do that any more." Seth hurried back through the automatic doors to his waiting white Bentley, but not until he walked back and forth through the doorway three times.

He told his driver to take him home.

With moistened wipes he kept in his car in case of emergencies, he cleaned the dirt from her face. The streetlight captured a glimmer of light under her chin. Seth could not help but to retrieve that shiny object.

The locket. She still had it. It still had the same shine it had the day he and Alex had purchased it. Alex had such love in his eyes for his soon-to-be arriving baby daughter that his excitement could not be contained. Seth remembered he had warned Alex that night against having another child.

"The Council will not turn a blind eye to it," Seth had warned.

So many years ago. So many lives. He tucked the locket back into Elaine's shirt.

Except for the stake. He did not think she would have pulled a stunt like that again.

Seth gazed into her face. Even with the goose egg-sized bump forming on her forehead, she looked pretty. Something in her simple dress, her plain clothes, charmed him. He did not want to give up his vampire lifestyle. He wanted to be the old Seth Overkill again.

Her head fell back, exposing her neck. Looking down at the smooth skin going from her chin to her collarbone, he felt the familiar feeling, the hunger, the need. He squeezed his hands into fists then opened them in slow motion. His breathing increased.

He swallowed hard, licked his dry lips and squeezed his stomach begging for a warm, liquid meal it had not had in a long time. It would have been so easy. And he would not have to kill her. Just a pint or two. All he needed.

No. Not from her. Not only did tradition prevent him from attacking an Ayudante, he could not do it to Elaine. Not to Lainey. He cradled her head to lessen the temptation and make her more comfortable.

"Drive faster," he said to his driver. Not only did he have to tend to her, he had a nice gaping wound on his arm that throbbed and ached courtesy of the woman in his arms. He did not have time to patch himself up. Just enough time to throw on a long-sleeve shirt so that nurses would not tend to him without getting to Elaine.

Seth's plan did not work anyway. His frazzled mind could not even concentrate hard

enough to control their minds, a simple task not so long ago. And now? He shook his head. He felt himself getting weaker although he had strength enough to read Elaine's brief thoughts before she attempted to stake him.

'Kill him. Kill him.' The words had jumbled in her head as he had approached her. Had she not known he wanted to clean the glass she had so adorned with her handprint? He guessed that when she saw him as a monster then he would always be that monster.

His driver finally pulled into Seth's gated driveway. The garage door slowed to open and made Seth's leg jump. Elaine moaned like she wanted to come to but still kept her eyes closed. As soon as the car pulled into the twenty-car garage, Seth opened his door, not even waiting for the driver to do so.

The driver jumped out of the car and hurried to Seth's side. His thoughts came through clear. The driver thought he had done something wrong.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting, sir. I can carry her for you." Seth's driver reached for her.

"Get the door." Seth headed to the door that led to his house. Outside the door, he kicked off his shoes that had touched the ground in the alley and the hospital floor. Whenever he stripped out of his clothes they would go too.

"Burn those," he said to the driver who nodded obediently.

Good thing about being the Prince of Death. No one questioned anything he did.

Seth descended into his area of the house, the basement. Three floors, ten bedrooms, twelve bathrooms, two formal dining rooms, a ballroom, an Olympic size pool inside of the house and an elevator and he stayed in the basement.

In a fireman's carry, he slung Elaine over his shoulder. He clapped his hands twice to light up his room.

Impeccable. It still smelled like lemons and bleach, as of late, his favorite scents.

He moved swiftly to his private bathroom and carefully placed Elaine inside of the empty whirlpool bath. She looked so tiny inside of the huge, boat-like container. With the morning sun just moments away, he could not chance putting her in any other bathroom.

He stripped off his shirt and glanced at the dried blood on his arm. Not until he viewed the wound had the throbbing pain presented itself. No time to worry about that now although every inclination in him wanted to scrub up first before he took care of Elaine. He had to take care of her first. Without her there would be no him.

He undid the laces of her shoes and slipped them off. He pulled her tee shirt over her head without jostling her. After a deep breath, he undid her shorts and pulled them down. If he planned on putting her in any one of his beds, she had to be cleaned first.

His gaze washed over her in her white cotton bra and panties. Her caramel-colored skin looked smooth. Another familiar stirring churned in Seth, a feeling he had not felt in years.

It had been a long time since he had wanted to be with a woman. However, he had no possibility with this one ... even if it could save him.

Why was it that he could not tell her of the third option, marriage? It would have been perfect and easy. Seth had to be strong enough on his own for Reckoning Day or be accompanied by his princess, his wife. No one but Mina knew of Elaine's Ayudante status. As long as he could get through Reckoning Day without anyone else figuring it out, especially the Council, the plan could work.

Still with the gloves on, he reached behind her and undid her bra. He tried to keep his gaze averted from staring at her chest but occasional glances occurred even as he slipped off her panties. He almost fell from the side of the tub in amazement when he saw her heart-shaped

birthmark on her lower abdomen. He wanted to touch it to test its validity but he refrained.

He turned on the water and took off one glove to test the temperature. Perfect. Not too hot and not too cold.

Seth stood and took in her full nude body before turning his back and repeating 'dogma' until he lost count. He slipped off his other glove. They would not do to clean her. They had been outside of his office and had touched the ground. He shuddered. He needed his bathing gloves. He tossed the old pair into an empty trashcan in his bathroom.

He yanked open a bottom drawer under his sink and pulled out a pair of surgical gloves. After slipping them on he positioned Elaine's arms on the rim of the tub so that she would not slide down and drown while he went to the kitchen to make her an icepack.

He tossed that pair of gloves into the trash since now that they had been used. And he scrubbed his hands. His gaze caught the blood on his arm again. He had to take care of himself before he could care of Elaine. He washed his arm up to the wound, careful not to touch it.

She had done a job on him. Sliced through a good chunk of his upper left arm. Good thing she had her eyes closed and he could read her mind. Otherwise he would not have seen it coming and she would have gotten his heart instead. Also good to see her formal training had not gone to waste.

He cleaned around the gash and covered it with a thick piece of gauze. Then he wrapped bandages around it to keep it secure. He needed to sew it shut but he did not have time.

Seth washed his hands thoroughly again and slipped on another pair of gloves. He turned off the water to the tub once it reached the level of her breasts.

All right, ice pack. He removed those gloves and rushed to his private kitchen. He washed his hands again. He could not use the hands he washed in the bathroom in the kitchen. These had to be kitchen-cleaned hands. It all made sense to him.

Seth gathered some ice cubes into a pack and closed it. When he returned to the bathroom, Elaine moved her head from one side to the other. It would not be long before she regained consciousness. That relieved Seth. She would be okay.

He slipped on a third pair of gloves before placing the pack on her forehead. She moaned but still kept her eyes closed. Now he had to clean her. He kept his face straight. He needed to think about this like a job not a fantasy. Looking at her body, she seemed like a gift.

Seth cleaned her as though he would himself, a washcloth for each portion of the body. Face, neck, chest, each arm, stomach, each leg and foot. He hesitated on cleansing between her legs but she would not be completely cleaned if he did not do that.

Grow up, man. It is not like you have not seen a naked woman before.

Seth made sure to be very delicate with her. He did not want to rouse her with his hand precariously positioned on her vagina. He also did not want to hurt her.

He blinked a few times when he started getting some thoughts from her. Seth could read her mind again and her dreams contained ... him! The thoughts appeared blurry at first, like static on a television channel. Then her thoughts came in clear and it seemed like pornography.

In her dream, Seth had her, naked, against a wall, making love to her in such a primal way that this time he had to sit back on the white tiled floor. Sweat poured from their bodies in her dream. Her legs wrapped around him, one hand on the back of his head, the other clawing his back. Her dream felt so real he could almost feel her fingernails digging in his flesh.

Seth arched his back the deeper she clawed him in her dream. So real her vision, he could feel his penis sliding in and out of her tight vagina. He crushed his lips on her in a passionate kiss. Seth cringed when in dream he slid his tongue into her mouth. The old Seth

would have done that. The man he had become now ...

“Mmm, Seth,” Elaine moaned.

In her dream, an orgasm was eminent. Seth felt himself get hard in only sharing her vision.

He had to wake her or at least stop reading her thoughts. He removed her ice pack. No more dreams. And as soon as she woke up, he would have to put her straight. No matter what she dreamed, it could never happen. Not between them. Ever.

“Ahh!” the dream version of Seth moaned and came deep inside of Elaine.

His reaction prompted her to respond in kind, coiling her arms and legs around him while the climax shook her body.

The eerie aspect about the dream was that Seth wanted to be like that again. He wanted that prowess and power that he had had before. He should have thanked Elaine for making him feel like the man he used to be.

He would have to put her in the furthest portion of the house to keep away from her. His thoughts did not appear to be any different than Elaine’s. He had to be controlled.

Seth retrieved a long white bath blanket from his linen closet to dry her. After letting the water out of the tub he lifted Elaine’s limp, wet body and swaddled her in the cotton towel. He carried her to his bedroom. It was almost five o’clock. He had to get to bed soon himself.

Elaine’s arms wrapped around his neck and she nuzzled against his chest. In the middle of his room, a few feet from his bed, he stopped. No one had held him like she had except for Charlotte.

Elaine felt so warm. And now that she was cleansed, her aroma matched her beauty. Delicate, flowery, exotic. Closing his eyes for a moment, he leaned his head down and brushed his cheek against the side of her face.

Touch. Oh how he missed touching a woman. He would not open himself up to that type of heartache again.

After setting Elaine on his California king-size bed, he pried her arms from around him. Elaine immediately curled herself into a ball. She had had a rough day. How would anyone else react being told they held the key to saving the planet and had to associate with sanguinarians?

Seth opened his closet and chose the perfect tee shirt for Elaine to wear. He slipped the white shirt on her and tucked her into his bed. As he gazed at her, surrounded by red satin sheets freshly ironed that night and a black velvet comforter, something felt right about seeing her in his bed.

He shook his head. This would be the last time she would sleep on his bed. Then he would put her in Charlotte’s old ... no, in the spare bedroom that Charlotte used to occupy. Charlotte had not been alive in almost ten years. He had to put her to bed, too.

* * * *

Elaine woke up when her throbbing head wouldn’t allow her to continue sleeping. She peeked open one eye and saw nothing but red around her. She opened both eyes and found herself in a room so dark it reminded her of the inside of a coffin.

She jerked up, a mistake considering the knot on her head and also if she were in a coffin she would have knocked herself out again.

Scanning the room lit by a floor lamp in the corner, she couldn’t figure out where she’d ended up or what had happened. She looked on one side and found a large screen TV. On the other side of the room sat a large oak dresser. She knew she hadn’t made it home. And it didn’t have a hotel feel to it. She remembered kissing that steel door in the alley.

Eight-forty read the digital clock next to her. At night or in the morning? She couldn't have imagined that she'd slept all day. Then again with two head wounds it might have happened.

Elaine peered down at herself. Who put this white tee shirt on her? And where did her clothes go? Most importantly, where had her father's journal gone?

"Looking for this?"

Seth's voice startled her. She twisted her head to look behind her. Like a guard, he stood rigid behind her, her father's journal in his large hand. He handed her the book.

"Did you read it?" she asked.

He stared into her eyes for a moment before he answered. "No."

She wanted to believe him, but his somewhat guilty expression told her that he must have skimmed a few pages.

"Is this your house?" She brought the sheets up to her neck when she realized that she had nothing on under the t-shirt. What else did the man do while she slept?

"My room, yes. I tried taking you to the hospital. Too many sick people there."

She wanted to laugh at his serious but simple statement until it hit her that it would bother him to be ridiculed.

She curved her legs over the side of this comfortable bed. Funny. She thought he would have had a coffin.

"Where are my clothes? I need to get out of here. I have to get to work."

"You cannot go to work." Seth glided to the wingback chair next to the bed then sat. He looked almost regal.

"Don't tell me what I can and can't do."

"Far be it from *me* to do that. However, there are several problems to your request." He crossed his legs. "One, it is after eight at night. Unless you have changed your office hours, you do not have to get to work."

She had slept the whole day. She put her hand to her head and groaned.

"Do not worry. I had one of my associates post a note on your door explaining how ill you are and referred them to a sister practice until your return. Shows good faith so that you do not lose any patients."

Elaine remained quiet and balled her feet into the white carpet.

"Secondly, while you are here, you can help me. Think of it as payment for me getting you out of that alley and cleaned up."

"*You* cleaned me? Did you get a good show?" She pounded her fist into his bed.

"I did nothing inappropriate. I would not *dream* of doing anything like that."

The way he said 'dream' made her think about her own dreams last night and if he could read her mind. From the sly look on his face, she suspected he had. Fire rushed to her cheeks and she couldn't look at him.

"I have to get out of here." She stood, still with the sheets wrapped around her body.

"Before you make that decision, I think you should see something." Seth turned on the TV to the twenty-four hour local news network.

The overly made up news anchor gave a chilling account of a young man murdered outside of Dementia sometime in the early morning. Witnesses reported seeing Elaine running out to the alley at the time of his murder. Elaine had been named the number one suspect.

Chapter Five

Elaine sat back on the enormous bed, her mouth hung open, wondering at what point did she lose control of her life. She'd never gotten a traffic ticket let alone been accused of something so heinous as taking a person's life.

"I didn't murder anyone." She wrenched the red satin sheets in her fists to match the twisted fury burning in her belly. Anger blurred her vision, but she couldn't take her eyes from the TV screen.

Seth cleared his throat. "I know that. You know that. However, the general public does not and this has been running all day." He tugged on the sheet, probably to straighten the mess she'd made.

Elaine had faced more than one woman should be allowed to handle within a twenty-four hour period. And since Seth embodied everything against what she wanted, her life from that point wouldn't improve.

Because of her involvement in his world, she would be missing out on work. And as far as a relationship? She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. Not even if he was the last single vampire in Virginia. Not that she had been thinking about a relationship.

The news flashed the most current picture of the victim. Her eyes widened when she saw the young man with his blue-tipped hair spiked, leaning on the side of a building, smoking a cigarette. She recognized the man as the Chinese deliveryman who had come to her house.

"That was the man in the alley? I know him. I mean I've seen him." Elaine pointed to the TV hoping to make sense out of all of this. Her mind hummed with screaming thoughts of the whole situation. "I didn't think vampires could feed from other vampires."

He rolled a baritone chuckle. "That man was no vampire. He must have thought himself as a living vampire, dressing the part and acting what he believed vampires would act in every day situation. In reality, he was no more than walking feed. A blood doll. Mina drank from him until she grew tired."

"Talk about your one-night-stand."

So he wasn't a vampire. She still didn't understand how police could relate her to his murder.

"They found your hair on him. DNA sample," Seth said, answering her thoughts.

Must have been when she touched him in the tug-of-war match to get her food. Why didn't they find Mina's hair, skin, or saliva on him? She tongue wrestled with him before she took her big chomp.

"I have to clear my name. Mina did this not me."

"Who are they going to believe? A doctor who showed disdain for the man when he showed up at her condo. You called and complained about him to his employer. The police will say you stalked him by showing up at a club your friends and associates know you do not frequent. And suddenly he is dead. Or will they believe a beautiful young woman with no record and an ability to charm the pants off of anyone? Not to mention her incredible strength."

Elaine hated to admit it, but Seth had a point. How convenient for these chains of events to occur when he needed her.

“My offer still stands,” Seth said.

“How did I know that was going to be the next thing you were going to say?”

Seth continued. “You would be foolish not to accept.” He glanced at the TV. “I can make this all go away. If not, you can leave and fight your losing battle. You will lose your practice, your freedom, and your family. Do not forget. Virginia has a death penalty.”

Elaine glanced at the TV again.

“... any information leading to the whereabouts of Dr. Elaine Shrink, please call the Virginia Beach police hot tip line at ...”

She peered back at Seth. Which disaster held less trauma? No. She wouldn't give up. Her father wouldn't have given up.

“I'll take my chances with the police. There's a death penalty if I stay with you, too.” She attempted to stand when Seth bolted from his chair, toppling it to the floor.

He stomped toward her. “You ungrateful, little” He stopped and gritted his teeth.

Elaine leaned back on the bed, trying hard to scurry to the other side. She slipped on the satiny sheets. She felt like a salmon swimming up stream. And with this hulking man leering over her, Elaine seemed to be in over her head and drowning. She gasped like a swimmer, taking in a needed breath.

As Seth glared at her, he said, “I saved you.”

With a shaky voice she said, “Yeah, for yourself. You didn't do it for me.”

“I could have let you die in that alley. Instead I picked you up from the dirt and filth in the street. I cleaned you. I allowed you to sleep in my bed and I do not let *anyone* do that.”

“Am I supposed to feel appreciative?” She braced herself on her elbows as Seth hovered over her. Her heart beat so hard against her chest she thought it would leap from her ribcage.

“Yes!” Seth pounded his fist into the mattress.

Elaine shook but kept her gaze directly on Seth's. “Considering you were going to attack me?” She did remember that part, seeing him methodically slip on his rubber gloves as soon as she pulled out her stake. He had a murderous intent in his eyes. No question.

He huffed. “I was going to clean the window you touched with your hand. You, however, *did* attack me.”

As he spoke so passionately, Elaine flinched when she caught something on his sleeve. Red. Streaks of red staining his white shirt. She must have gotten his arm instead of his heart.

“You're bleeding.” She sat up higher, her face close to his. It must have been too close for Seth's comfort. He jumped back and off of the bed.

“That is what happens when someone tries to stab you.” He looked down at the sleeve. Repeating dogma wouldn't clean the shirt or stop him from bleeding, but he said it anyway.

Elaine reached for his arm but stopped and pulled back. She had to fight the urge to take care of him. The hell if she would help him especially since Seth had had the opportunity to help her father and hadn't.

Seth bolted up. “I will tell you what you want to know about your father if you help me.” He unbuttoned his shirt.

Elaine crossed her fingers, convinced that Seth must have read her mind again. He hit on exactly what she wanted, that link to her past. Her hand smoothed over her father's journal and a spark of electricity surged through her palm again, up her arm to her head. Her father would want her to see this through.

If Seth was going to offer her the missing piece, then maybe she would consider his deal. The journal offered her a touch of her father. She needed to know it all, from beginning to the

grisly end. She knew her mother either wouldn't know the full story or wouldn't want to tell Elaine about it. Like it or not, Seth held the link. She needed to fill that void in her heart.

She struggled to her feet. Hopping away from him with the satin sheet tightly bound around her body and her father's journal in her hand, she said, "Two days."

"Two weeks." Seth removed his shirt and eyed the wound on his arm.

Elaine couldn't stop eyeing his massive chest and muscular arms. Sure, it'd been a few years since she'd been with a man. If not, she wouldn't be mixing her need for male flesh with the reality that the male flesh contained a supreme psychotic with a taste for blood.

Her mouth hung open and she tried mouthing an objection but ended up looking like a water-deprived fish.

She finally blurted out, "Okay. And I get my own room and bathroom with locks and I have to have access to a computer so I can go on-line, and a phone."

He threw the shirt in the fireplace. The flames engulfed the blood-stained article until the scent of burning cotton flooded the room. The sight chilled Elaine, causing her to shudder. If he tossed an item away like that, how would he treat her?

"Do you think you can cure me by then?" He put his hands on his hips, bringing attention to his phenomenal abdominal muscles.

She had to keep telling herself, *he's crazy. He's crazy.*

Yeah, but crazy looked really good right now. So that's what he was hiding under those stuffy cardigans. Not bad. Not bad at all.

"No, but I can make you at least functional, which seems to be what you need for your situation. I'll need some help. I'll need my abuela here to"

Seth cut her off with his raised voice. "No! I want no one else knowing about this."

Elaine remained planted in her spot. She tightened the sheets around her body as though it were some child's security blanket. "She already knows you've contacted me so she knows you have a problem. I'm new at this. I don't know what I'm doing."

"Figure it out." He said it like a scout leader admonishing a girl scout learning how to pitch a tent. Curing someone of a disorder, not to mention a vampire with a disorder, did not fit in her realm of expertise.

"You're not being reasonable about this." She lifted the sheets from around her feet to walk better. "I'm offering to give up a couple of weeks of my life, my job. But that doesn't seem to matter to you."

Seth approached her, his eyes red with anger and the muscles in his arms flexed. Instead of running, Elaine put her hand on the bandaged wound on his arm. From what she was able to touch of his arm, his skin felt smooth and soft but hard underneath because of his muscle. But his frigid flesh alarmed her. She drew her hand back.

"And I haven't washed my hands yet. Who knows what kinds of germs I could be carrying." She wiggled her fingers in front of Seth's face.

He jerked back, stumbling to a doorway at the corner of the bedroom, more than likely the bathroom, so that he could wash his arm twenty times.

Seth flicked on the light and Elaine heard water running.

"You have to stop coming at me like you're going to attack me all of the time," she said as he continued to curse and clean.

When he emerged, he had gloves on his hands. Before Seth positioned the bandage over the wound, Elaine got a good look at it. She had done a number on him. The skin had a deep gash. Muscle and layers of skin tissue oozed through the wound. He needed stitches, quickly.

A lesser man would have been into the emergency room to get sewn up right away. Hell, The Incredible Hulk would have begged for morphine and a lollipop. At least Seth didn't complain too much about it. At least not to her.

She swallowed. "Show me to my bedroom and I'll take a look at that." She pointed to his arm.

He held his hand over the bandage. "It is fine. I will take care of it." He smoothed the gauze over the cut three times before removing his gloves and tossing them into a trash receptacle.

"You'll get it infected and I'll have to amputate your arm in a week." She squeezed her crossed fingers tighter so he wouldn't know she'd lied. His wary stare made her know that he didn't buy her story.

She shrugged her shoulders and averted her gaze. "It's your body." And what a body. "Just show me my room."

He took cautious steps toward her, careful to keep his injured arm from her reach. She fought to keep from smiling. At least now she had something over him. He messed with her, it would be a smudge here and a fingerprint there. She would have to cure him, though, and eventually those types of tactics wouldn't work.

"Follow me," he said as he made his way up the short flight of stairs to the main house.

Elaine hopped on each step and tried to keep up with the long-legged vampire.

"So tell me," she began, "you live in this big, fancy house. You have drivers and minions and money. Why is it that you live in the basement?"

Seth continued his trek through the lit house. Without turning around, he answered, "Perhaps you have forgotten who I am. Hi, I am Seth Overkill, the vampire. Prince of Death. The evil doer."

"I guess that means you can do what you want."

"Among other things."

"Can't you use contractions?"

His formal speech had started to get to her. Couldn't he relax for a moment? Guess since he controlled death, an awesome task in itself, letting down his guard wouldn't be possible.

"Contractions?" he asked.

"You know. I'm, you're, can't, shouldn't, wouldn't--"

"Will not."

"Maybe you should think about compromise. It'll help in your treatment."

Except for the grumble, Seth said nothing else. Maybe he knew when he'd been defeated.

Elaine scanned the classic and gorgeous paintings on the corridor walls that Seth led her down. The portraits contained regal people on horseback and against sweeping backdrops. The home felt more like a museum than an actual home one could lounge in, watch TV, eat popcorn, snuggle, make love.

Her feet smacked against the cold hardwood floor, a sound not lost on Seth who turned and stared down at the cause of the offensive noise. To ease his discomfort, Elaine lightened her steps, barely making a sound as she walked on the balls of her feet.

A life-sized portrait of Seth wearing a white fencing outfit complete with the jacket, knickers, and gloves, with a lethal looking saber took up residence at the end of the hallway. The portrait did nothing to ease her fears about Seth's power.

She noticed the picture hung crooked. Glaringly crooked. So bad that Elaine wanted to

straighten it. When she'd reached for the frame, Seth screamed as though she had poured paint on his antique carpet.

"Do not touch it!" he said. "It is the way I want it to be."

So she didn't question him. Enough tests.

Seth climbed a flight of stairs to the second floor. They reminded Elaine of something out of *Gone With The Wind*, wide, expansive and seemed to go on forever. She reached out for the railing but forgot that her free hand had her fingers crossed. She ducked them behind her back before Seth turned to her.

"You will be safe on the second and third floors," he said before turning back around.

The word 'safe' bounced around in Elaine's head. Her heart started beating faster, but Elaine convinced herself the reaction came because of the aerobic workout in walking up the steps than fear.

"What do you mean, safe?" she asked.

"Sometimes guests come over." He stopped at a door at the top of the stairs. "Things can get out of hand. It would be better if you did not witness it." He opened her door.

She glanced at his face as she walked through. "I'm tougher than you think." It wasn't like she wanted to witness the gruesome massacre of innocent and not-so-innocent people. That didn't turn her on. She would need to know how these people operated to protect herself.

Elaine's breath caught at the sight of her new digs for the two weeks, hopefully less. The gorgeous room had a warm feeling to it, mainly due to the burgundy wall color. Her bare feet sank into the plush carpet, which matched the wall color. She felt like she was walking on wine-colored rose petals.

The huge bed demanded attention. The four-poster monstrosity with canopy top draped in multicolored scarves sat in the middle of the room. A white comforter covered the top while burgundy and green pillows adorned the head of the bed. A cedar chest with an embroidered cushioned top sat at the foot of the bed. Elaine couldn't wait to be alone to open up that Pandora's box of secrets.

An antique looking vanity flanked one side of the bed while two tall dressers stood guard outside of a door in the bedroom.

Seth walked to the door and opened it. After turning on the light, he said, "This is your bathroom. Keep it clean." The order came out like a demand from a Catholic school nun.

"And if I don't?" Elaine sort of enjoyed testing Seth's limits.

He snorted like a bull. "It is not an option."

The chill returned to her spine. She wouldn't be testing him a lot. Turning back into the bedroom, which smelled of sweet gardenias, she noticed the second focal point in the room, a large portrait of a woman, a nude woman. An ornately carved, gold-colored frame housed the painting. Reclined on a chaise lounge with different types of flowers covering her breasts, the woman appeared open, free. Her midnight-colored hair flowed freely with large curls down the sides of her face and over her shoulders.

She smiled. Not a demure Mona Lisa smile or even a camera, say-cheese smile. The smile seemed to be an earnest, happy, I-love-you-so-much-it-hurts smile.

Elaine stared into the woman's eyes, captured by her brown-eyed gaze. She couldn't take her eyes off of the painting until Seth stepped in between her and it.

"Do not touch the painting." He breathed heavily like a dog guarding its food dish.

Elaine nodded. She wasn't about to make fun of something that seemed to be very important to him. Maybe she was the mysterious missing missus.

“Clothes. Where are my clothes I wore last night?” Elaine asked.

“Burned.”

Elaine’s mouth gaped open. Did Seth have a touch of pyromania in him, too?

“That was my favorite outfit. What gave you the right to . . .”

“It touched the ground. Did you really want them back?” He screwed up his face in disgust and shook his head.

“That’s why they make washers and dryers.” She plopped down on the bed, the most comfortable bed ever made. Maybe she should reconsider staying for six months.

No. She had a life. She’d almost forgotten about it.

“What am I supposed to do for clothes then?” Elaine asked.

Seth sauntered to another set of doors, still shirtless and looking amazingly sexy. Elaine stared at his wide back. She fanned her face and swallowed hard.

After opening the two doors, Seth showed off a woman’s dream. “I took the liberty of having a personal shopper pick up some items for you.”

The walk-in closet, bigger than her living room, held racks and shelves full of brand new clothes still in their bags. From where she sat, Elaine caught the labels of Prada, Gucci, Versace and Calvin Klein on the bags. The closet floor couldn’t be seen for all of the boxes of shoes.

“How did you get these clothes here in Virginia?” she asked without taking her eyes off of the items.

“A few phone calls and personal jets.” He took a step to the side. “I suggest you try these on to make sure they fit properly.”

She tiptoed to the closet. Elaine had never claimed to be a label whore. She owned Calvin Klein underwear and had once bought a knock-off Prada bag from a vendor at a flea market. To actually see the clothes, touch them, it amazed her. Most women drooled over such a bounty. Her mouth went dry.

“Of course you will keep the clothes after you have done your job.”

Elaine ran her hand down the bags, looking at the outfits through them. Such colors. Such detailing. Such beauty.

“I can’t accept this. I don’t wear clothes like these.” She backed away from the merchandise. She would help him out but no way would she fall into Seth’s world.

“You can and you will take the clothes. You will be with me at the club. I expect you to dress accordingly.” He reached into the closet and retrieved a white terrycloth robe. “Put this on. I am tired of seeing you wrapped up in that sheet like a sausage.”

She accepted the robe but paused before dropping her sheet. She had a tee shirt on underneath the sheet. Seth wouldn’t see her nude body.

She set her father’s journal on the bed then took a deep breath. In one swift move, she dropped the sheet and slipped on the robe, skillfully avoiding looking into Seth’s eyes. When she had it closed around her body, she finally looked up to see him peering down at her feet. She gazed down and figured he must have been looking at the crimson, crumpled sheet at her feet.

“Don’t tell me. You want to burn this too because it was on my body?” She reached down and picked it up.

“No. That can be cleaned.” He crossed his arms then dropped them down to his sides, looking more nervous than she’d seen him be before. “Your body is exceptional. I mean fine.” Keeping his gaze from hers, he took a deep breath and blurted, “I know you are clean.”

Elaine struggled to keep from smiling. She wondered if he thought about her the way she had about him. No man should be as good-looking as Seth Overkill *and* be a killer. The concept

went against the laws of nature. She held the sheet up for him to take, but he backed away.

He pointed over his shoulder to the door. "Just leave it on the floor outside of your room. I will have the maid get it."

Elaine snickered. "Fine." She meandered around the room, taking in its exquisite beauty. "So tell me. How long have you lived here?"

"My family has owned this property for centuries. This house has been here for a hundred years. I keep renovating it to keep it up with the times." Seth shifted his weight back and forth.

"So how long have *you* lived here?" she asked again after he had skillfully avoided the question the first time. She wanted him to reveal his age.

"Do you believe in vampires?" he asked.

She turned to him but remained silent. She wasn't a true believer yet. He'd made some convincing arguments but right now she still held her doubts.

"Until you do, then I won't tell you."

Before Seth could leave the room, Elaine stopped him with her question. "That man. In the alley tonight. Was he dead?"

Before answering the question, he repeated 'dogma' three times. "He probably walked away from the accident that took his life. He did not come from a grave. The dead in the ground are too weak to burrow through six feet of earth."

"I hope you're not telling me this to make me feel better."

"I tried to warn you."

She let her breath out. "So will you at least tell me who she is?" She pointed to the portrait. "I figure if I'm sharing a room with a naked woman I should at least know her name."

"Charlotte." He started tapping the tips of his fingers again.

Elaine's heart started up on its erratic pounding again. She'd mined into something deep.

"I'm assuming from the pose that she wasn't your mother, grandmother, aunt, cousin or sister." Elaine stared into the portrait's eyes again. "She's very beautiful whoever she is."

"Was." Seth spat the word out like a curse. He headed to her bedroom door with quick, deliberate steps. "She was my wife." He kept his gaze to the floor for a beat then looked up. "Dinner will be served in an hour. I suggest you bathe and get dressed for it. I want you downstairs promptly at ten." He closed the door before Elaine could ask any more questions. At least one mystery had been solved. Cool, creepy Seth had had a wife. Next mystery to solve-- what had happened to her?

* * * *

Seth looked at his watch again. Ten minutes after ten. Elaine was late. Ten minutes late. Unacceptable. Not only rude, but annoying.

Surveying the room, Seth made sure the setting met his standards before Elaine showed. The white silk curtains had been pressed. Perfect. He had personally cleaned each window that day so he knew they met his expectations. Unless someone had come behind him and touched the glass. No. All of his people knew not to touch anything.

The long dining room table had two place settings on at each end, one for Seth and the other for Elaine--if she ever showed up. Looking at each dish and utensils, he made sure no water spots or smudges marred them. Perfect.

He looked at his watch again. After he thought he saw a fingerprint on it, he shined the glass faceplate on his watch with the handkerchief he kept in his pants pocket.

"Dogma, dogma, dogma," he said in a mutter.

His butler lowered his head close to Seth. "Did you say something, sir?"

"Where is she? She was supposed to be down here," he looked at his watch again, "twelve minutes ago."

The hairs stood on the back of his neck and that never happened. Never. He also never breathed heavily or rolled his eyes but Elaine had made him do all of those things since he had met her. She also made him think about her naked body and having her next to him. His leg bounced under the table as he tapped his fingertips.

He bolted from his chair. When he passed each window on the way to Elaine's place setting, he scanned them for prints. Thoughts filled his head that someone might have touched the glass. It did not make sense. He could not stop himself from obsessing over little things.

I cleaned it. I fixed it. I made it right. I made it right.

Seth reached Elaine's place setting. It all looked good. Shiny, clean, sparkling. It just needed its diner to sit down on time and enjoy it.

Before the elderly butler could answer, Elaine cut in. "I would have been here earlier if someone had bothered to show me around this place."

Seth lost his voice when he saw how beautiful she looked.

"I wandered somewhere around the pool and garden area." She sauntered into the dining room. "I swear you should get those arrows with the room names on them like they have at theme parks. This way to the scary roller coaster." She pointed to one side. "That way to the water slide." She pointed the other way.

She had opted not to wear the flashier clothes he'd gotten her. Instead she came dressed in a simple shirt and skirt ... but had bare feet. Who would come to a dinner table with no shoes on? He muttered 'dogma' as she made her way to him.

When he looked at her feet, he could not help but smile, an unusual reaction. Before he would have yelled at her, demanded that she put shoes on and come to the table in an appropriate manner. Now her free-spirited attitude loosened some of his inhibitions.

"Are you sitting here?" she asked.

Instead of answering, he pulled her chair out for her. He still had good breeding regardless of his mental state.

Elaine thanked him as he helped push her chair up to the table. Then he returned back to his chair. Before sitting, he stepped up and back from the chair three times. Elaine brought a bad vibe to the table. He had to get rid of it before he sat down.

Seth snapped out his white napkin and draped it on his lap. "Do your patients find you amusing when you are late for their appointments?"

"I'm sorry. Did I ruin dinner by being a few minutes late?" She seemed sincere.

The warmth in her voice melted his heart.

Seth cleared his throat. Mortals should not be able to get to him, get to his heart. The Prince of Death had order to keep, minions to rule over, an image to uphold. Some bare-footed psychiatrist should not be able to make him want her, take her, ravage her body. He kept his gaze from hers.

"Twelve. Twelve minutes," he said stoically.

Elaine squeezed her eyes shut and looked like she wanted to scream. No one screamed out of frustration nowadays.

Looking at her, he saw she appeared so well put together. She had decided to go with a cobalt blue blouse and black skirt. Simple but still a lot better than the tee shirt and shorts, which was fit for yard work but not for Dementia. Her hair, wrapped in a chignon, still looked wet. He

imagined what it must have looked like down around her face.

He shook his head at the thought and tapped a fork against his glass three times.

“Yes?” Elaine asked as she placed her napkin on her lap.

“I was not trying to get your attention.” He counted in his head as he tapped each of his fingers, always starting from his index finger to his pinky then back again.

“But you tapped your--”

He cut her off. “It is something I do.”

She nodded as though she understood, but he could tell she did not. How could she understand? He did not even get it. He had gotten this way over a ten-year period. Almost ten years without Charlotte, without love. Ten years of restricting his movements and lifestyle. Ten years without any woman. And now he pinned his hopes of normalcy on a doubting psychiatrist.

The butler, who had disappeared into the kitchen when Elaine arrived, returned with a soup tureen and a handful of silver spoons. He served up the red soup into Elaine’s bowl first.

She peered at the butler. “Excuse me. What is this?”

He set the ladle back into the large bowl. “Gazpacho.” He made his way over Seth.

“Oh, so a cold soup.” She glared at Seth. He did not have to read her mind.

Seth waited until his butler served his soup before he tore into Elaine. “You should have been on time. I do not care if we were having salad tonight.”

“You could ease up on me just a little. Don’t you think I’ve had it a little rough within the last couple of days?” She picked up her spoon and dipped it into her soup. “You’ve asked me to give up my job, my family, my lifestyle to be your on-hand psychiatrist and I’m not supposed to complain?”

He had not thought about her feelings in all of this. Although he found it to be a great twist of fate that she would get accused of murder and would have to hide out for a while, he did find it unfair that her career might be in jeopardy because of the story.

“You should have worn shoes.” He reached for his spoon then stopped. He wanted to prove to Elaine that he could compromise. Mina had announced to Elaine that first night that he had a fear of spoons. He balled his hands and took a deep breath.

“I don’t like any of the shoes you’ve gotten for me.”

He furrowed his eyebrows. What woman did not like shoes? “I got you the best”

“Stilettos. They’re all stilettos. I don’t wear those.”

That might have been a good thing for Seth. With legs as incredible as hers, he did not need the temptation of seeing her in shoes that would accentuate her shapely calves.

“You cannot go to the club with me tonight without shoes. I forbid it.”

She blinked and set her spoon on the tablecloth. Seth’s stomach crunched into a compact wad, staring at the reddish-orange stain forming around the bottom of the spoon, slowly spreading over the white tablecloth. He fought the urge to rip up the tablecloth and clean it immediately. He swallowed hard, hid his hand under the table and tapped.

“You forbid me? That’s it. I’ve had it.” She slammed her napkin on the table in a crumpled ball. “I don’t know what I’m doing here but it’s obvious that I don’t belong here.”

He had angered her. And he needed her. Worse yet, she needed him. Walking out his door could get her killed, and he did not mean by electric chair, courtesy of the state.

Seth took a deep breath and kept his gaze from the spoon as his mind tripped over ideas to clean tomato stains from a cotton tablecloth.

“You cannot go.” He did not do well with apologies. He would muster one for her. “I have upset you. It was not my intention.”

She sighed then picked up her napkin again. She draped it in her lap and said, "I don't care how you treat everyone else around you. I'm not going to take it. You keep forgetting who needs to be here and who doesn't."

"So you are able to handle the police on your own? The jury will not convict you? Or maybe you do not mind the dead walking among us." He balled his hands into fists. "And you do not want to know about your father?" He knew that that would get her. It was an emotional leverage he was not afraid to use. Once he told her the full truth, the awful truth, she would be gone. And hopefully by then, he would be cured.

"What happened with that man from the alley?" Her voice held fear, real fear. Seth saw her irises get so wide it made her normally brown eyes look black.

"I had Mina take care of him, put him somewhere where no one will find him," Seth said, not trying to scare her but to clue her in to the reality of this arrangement. "I can stop it."

She picked up her spoon and placed it inside of her soup. Her hand trembled so much the spoon tapped the bowl. She twirled the utensil in the thick red goop. "So is there garlic in this?"

Seth shook his head. "What?" Not the follow-up question he was expecting.

She gazed at him. "Garlic. You guys can't do garlic, right?"

He chuckled. Movies. They could never get anything right. "Myth."

"So what is and isn't a myth?" She tucked her leg under her voluptuous backside.

Her foot was on the chair. Seth tapped his fingers until he felt like he would lose feeling in the tips. She must have picked up on his anxiousness. She eased her foot back on the floor.

He let out a long breath. "Garlic. Crosses. Changing into a bat."

"You can't do that? I thought that that would be the best part of being a vampire."

"Movies exaggerate a lot. But there are some things that are true."

"So you are gay?"

Seth gasped. Her assumption was hard to swallow.

"Where did you hear that?" he asked.

"Movies." She smiled sheepishly and nodded her head toward him. "Not that it matters. I have a lot of gay friends who"

"I am not a homosexual. Did you forget that you are in the bedroom where I have a naked portrait of my wife?" And did he miss her naked body. He missed every curve. He missed her scent. Her hair. He missed women.

"I thought that it might have been an arranged marriage. You know. Something staged for the general public so that they don't think you're"

"I am not. Let us not further this conversation."

Elaine twirled her spoon in her soup again and kept her head down. She brought her gaze up. "I should have known you weren't gay. You didn't introduce me to your butler."

The elderly butler held up a different spoon. "How about this, sir?"

Seth, barely even looking at the offending utensil, ushered the man away.

After the butler retreated to the kitchen, Seth said, "I do not know his name."

"And your maid?"

He shook his head. Seth had too many other things to do and think about. He did not need the names of his help cluttering his mind.

"And me? Do you care what my name is or"

He cut her off. "Elaine Shrink. Dr. Elaine Puro Shrink." He placed his hands on the table. "I know you."

Elaine held his stare until she had to look away. The unmistakable sexual energy swirled

in the room. This time Seth had not intended to be flirtatious. He needed Elaine's help. Had he known that the beautiful baby that she was would have grown up into a gorgeous woman, he would have done without her help.

Elaine revealed a sweet smile after each taste. He wondered what it must feel like to eat. He had not had the pleasure of eating food, food as mortals would call it, in centuries. He always enjoyed the look of food. He liked what food meant to some people.

As Seth watched Elaine, he felt his own hunger rising. He needed something to warm his insides. A feed. A good feed to get him by. He glared at Elaine. She was so close. So very close.

"So now what?" Elaine asked.

Seth slid his chair back, scraping it against the hardwood floor. He stood and strolled toward her. Her eyes had a mixture of fear and bravery, a strange combination, but Elaine pulled it off with great strength and vulnerability.

Once by her side, he lifted her wine glass and rolled up the tablecloth to expose the bare mahogany table. Then he did the same with her soup bowl and utensils until he had the tablecloth rolled up.

"Now, we set down some ground rules." Seth slid the white cloth back toward his seat. He turned back to her. "Rule number one: do not stain the fabrics." He removed the tablecloth from his side of the table, summoned his butler and handed him the offending fabric. "Rule number two: do not drop your guard around me."

Chapter Six

If Seth was trying to scare Elaine, he was doing a hell of a job. He skulked around her until she didn't know how to react to his camouflaged threat. She would have been offended ... if she weren't so frightened out of her mind.

But where could she go? She couldn't call the police because then she would have been arrested for a murder she didn't commit. She couldn't go home or resume work for the same reason. And she couldn't leave the house because of the things Seth had in his yard guarding his place plus the creepy dead people stumbling around.

"You can't attack me," she said, trying desperately to keep her voice even and controlled. "You said so yourself."

"Doesn't mean I don't want to." Seth eased down into his chair. "When I brought you home last night," he began with his head down, "you were in my lap. Your head tilted back and I watched your vein pulsate." He brought his head up and his eyes held a different look. They were black and devoid of any emotion except for desperation. "I smelled your blood. So sweet. It would have been so easy to take the necessary drink."

She swallowed, coating her now dry throat. Clasp her hands together, she placed the union on her lap. She bounced her knees until her hands knocked against the bottom of the table. She had to stop. Calm herself down. He was a man with weaknesses like any other man.

"So why didn't you?" Knowing what turned Seth off from her would help Elaine know how to keep doing it in the future.

He sat back. "Because I would have done myself more harm than good. Yes, I need to feed. But not at the expense of an Ayudante. It would be like being a vegetarian stranded on an island and eating a seagull. It fulfills your need for food but the ends do not justify the means."

So Elaine had her legacy to protect her. Having a gun or baseball bat by her bed would have reassured her more, but it would have to do. She would have to hope his commitment to legacy held strong.

"Your whole agenda for feeding is for your minions so that they don't die, right? Or are they already dead?"

Before Seth answered, he had his butler remove their soup dishes and bring out their entrees. Seth had a huge rare steak that would have walked if it had legs.

The butler served Elaine grilled lobster with side dishes with three names in them. She couldn't wait to dive into her exquisite meal.

Strange. Seth had a steak, dripping with ruby red blood, and he only stared at it on his plate. Occasionally, she caught him sniffing the meat.

"When I don't feed, it does a lot more than just give my minions bad skin." Seth repositioned his plate, moving it back and forth, getting the angle just so.

"Speaking of bad, where is Mina?" Not that Elaine missed the woman.

"Probably in the guest house out back. She likes to, um, entertain there." Seth tapped his fingers again. "We can talk about my life after dinner."

"And then you can tell me a little something about my father." Forget about clearing her name and getting her life back. Elaine's brass ring revolved around the mystery about her father.

Elaine asked, "Why aren't you eating?" She pointed her fork toward Seth's plate.

Seth took a deep breath. "Later," he responded.

After dinner, Seth led Elaine to his private library. From floor to ceiling all around, old, leather-bound books covered the shelves. Maroon leather couches sat in the middle of the room facing each other with an impressive carved oak coffee table separating them. The Oriental rug under Elaine's bare feet seemed too delicate and expensive to walk on. A fire roared in the fireplace. The charred wood stench almost covered the scent of leather that wafted in the room.

Seth offered her a seat. After she sat on the couch, he made himself comfortable on the other, sitting on the side closest to the fireplace. He had on another crisp white shirt, starched to the nth degree, a blue cardigan and khakis that hugged his thighs nicely when he sat down.

He placed his arm on the arm of the chair. "Comfortable?" he asked.

The butler entered the library carrying a silver tray with a bottle of dark liquor, probably bourbon, and two short glasses. He set the tray on the coffee table on one side closest to Seth.

"No," Elaine answered. "I want so much to put my feet up but I it makes you nervous."

"I want you comfortable in my home." He flashed a reassuring smile that made her head swoon. "I'm not as bad as you think with my problem."

The butler started to leave when Seth cleared his throat. The elderly gentleman turned to face him. Without a word, Seth eyed the tray then peered back at the man. The butler poured the drinks into the glasses, began to leave but halted when Seth grunted. With an exasperated exhalation, the man returned. If wrinkles hadn't already masked the butler's face, making him look like he had a permanent scowl, he would have looked incensed at Seth's silent demands.

Seth made the same eye motions from the butler to the tray. The man must have understood what Seth wanted this time. He moved the tray to the center of the coffee table, positioned the bottle on the center of the tray and made sure the two glasses flanked the sides of the bottle. Even Seth's help knew how to appeal to his strange behavior.

In light of what had just happened, Elaine decided to push his limits. She curved her leg under her butt and let her other leg dangle from the couch, swinging it back and forth.

Seth stared at her leg and began tapping his fingers and repeating dogma like a cadence.

"So this does bother you." Elaine didn't move. She watched Seth slowly self-destruct. He now tapped his foot.

"No. I'm fine with the foot. The foot you used to walk barefoot across the dining room floor, the hallway, in here." He unbuttoned the top button on his shirt. "Just fine."

If the key to getting this man naked was making him uncomfortable then Elaine had to keep it up.

She continued with the conversation as though she didn't notice Seth unraveling before her. "So garlic doesn't bother you. Crosses are in. No shape-shifting. But no reflection."

Seth rubbed his hand on the back of his head, his gaze fixed on her lower half. With shaky hands, he adjusted his glasses on his noble nose. She would have to break him before he could get better. The treatment was all a part of therapy.

"No reflection. Much like a mortal's Sickle Cell Anemia, our blood is different. It flows within us at such an accelerated rate that neither reflective glass nor camera lenses can capture our image." He broke his gaze to look into her eyes. "It is a pain when you are trying to get ready for a dinner party. That is when you need to trust the people around you."

Elaine smiled. She hadn't expected for him to make a joke. She removed her leg from under her and placed her foot on the floor. Relief waved over Seth, evident from the way he slowed down his breathing, relaxed his hunched shoulders and stopped the finger tapping.

“What about sunlight?” she asked.

The smile dropped. “No sunlight. That is one thing the movies got right. It is poison to our blood and skin.”

Her stomach flipped when Elaine briefly thought about Seth going out into the sunlight and having him fry like an ant under a magnifying glass. Her stomach didn’t tighten like it had when she’d seen the wound on his arm. Could she actually be caring about this man?

“And the stake through the heart?” she asked.

Seth smirked. “That one makes no sense to me. Would you not die if someone pounded a wooded object through your chest, piercing your heart? Movies make it seem like this was some sort of great secret. Yes, vampires would die that way. So would mortals, dogs, cats, fish.”

“So why the big deal?” There had to be a reason.

Turning his gaze before he answered, he said, “I do not know.” The light from the flames in the fireplace made his pale complexion look warm and healthy. “You brought up the way I talk,” Seth began. “When my family came to America, it was not even called America yet. My family and I lived with several types of people from Native Americans to French Canadians when we lived close to the border. I speak several languages but my native tongue is Spanish. When I learned English, my father told me to respect the language. He did not like shortcuts or slang.” He made eye contact with Elaine. “Out of respect for my father and for this country, which has given me great opportunities, I stay loyal to the language. This is how I learned it.”

In a strange way, Seth embodied the old world patriotism that her grandmama had taught Elaine as a child.

“So why haven’t I seen someone like me, an Ayudante, in the movies?”

Seth leaned forward and picked up one glass. “Vampires are still a story writer’s and film maker’s staple horror tale. No one believes we exist because we’re supposed to be fabricated. Therefore we can go and do what we want.” He cleared his throat. “You cannot have evil without good. You cannot have lawmakers without the lawless. There is a balance. A yin and yang if you will.” Seth closed his eyes and took a deep whiff of his drink.

“Sanguinarians existed further back in history--before people labeled us vampires. We did not kill for sport or pleasure. It was out of need, a need to survive. It is all we know.” He took another sniff as he bounced his knee. “Ayudantes recognized our need, our desire to survive. They help us. When our secret is about to be discovered or we are in trouble, they run interference.”

“So we’re like your public relations rep with an attitude.”

“And less flippant. I do not think you understand how important you are. When I do not feed, the balance of death is thrown off, hence the walking corpse by the club. They gravitate to me as their leader.”

Elaine understood the gravity of the situation. She hoped Seth didn’t notice her trembling hands. *Dead walking among us?* The world would be in chaos.

Elaine handled tough situations by making jokes. “Elvis will come back?”

Seth set his glass back on the tray. He must not have shared in her humorous philosophy.

“Reckoning Day is approaching. If I do not feed, the world, as you know it, will not be the same. And I will not be able to reverse it.” He stared at her intently. “No one can.”

Elaine stared at Seth. What the hell had she gotten herself into? The world rested on her shoulders?

“And when is this Reckoning Day?” she asked.

“Day after Halloween. All Souls Day.”

Elaine blinked, her heart pounding harder than it ever had. “That’s less than two weeks. Cutting it kind of close, aren’t you?” She put her hand to her head. “What if I can’t help you?”

“That is not an option.”

Her head felt heavy, so heavy she had to lean it back against the couch and cover her eyes. She needed a drink.

Elaine sat up straight and poured the dark liquid into her mouth, downing it in one swallow. The drink blazed a fire path down her throat and caused her to cough and gag. She set the glass back down and beat on her chest to regain composure. The drink didn’t help her cause but it got her mind off her impossible mission.

Seth’s voice cut through her rattled thoughts. “May I ask you for a favor?”

Elaine jerked her head up. No. Seth couldn’t be asking her for something else after dropping the bombshell of a lifetime. What in all that was good and holy could this man want?

He continued. “Will you please fill your glass with more bourbon?” He pointed down to the filled glass on the silver tray. “You’re throwing off the symmetry.”

Suddenly her headache disappeared and she laughed. How absurd for Seth to be thinking about symmetry of glasses when the fate of the world rested on their shoulders.

The leather cushions squeaked when Elaine stood. She padded over to Seth.

“Let’s start slowly.”

Seth stared at her warily, tapping his fingers in anticipation of something against his regular routine.

“Your arm. I want to see it.” As much as she wanted to squelch that nagging feeling of wanting to help the man, she couldn’t shake it. She chalked it up to her Hippocratic oath.

“I told you. It is fine.” He couldn’t look into her eyes.

“Show me.” Knowing his proximity phobia, Elaine took a step back from him. Besides, the heat from the fireplace licked at her legs. She had to get to some place cool.

Seth filled Elaine’s glass, being careful to make sure one glass didn’t have more than the other.

He smiled then stood. “Now they are even.”

Elaine snapped her fingers comically. “I should have asked your butler for an extra glass. I would have loved to see you work with three glasses.”

He furrowed his eyebrows as though thinking about the concept. “I would have put two glasses on the side and one in ...”

“Never mind. Are we going to your bathroom?”

“No.” He walked out of the library with Elaine following closely behind him. Through the labyrinth corridors where it seemed anything could pop out, Elaine scanned her surroundings one moment and kept her gaze on Seth the next.

Seth finally stopped at a door near the pool area. Elaine remembered seeing it when she’d gotten lost in the house on her way to dinner. At the time, she didn’t dare peek inside. Now she would know what hid behind the mysterious door.

He opened the door, stepping in and out of the room three times before turning on the light. Elaine hadn’t imagined she would see a smaller version of an operating room in Seth’s house, complete with an operating table, stirrups, IV’s, scalpels, overhead lighting and syringes.

He turned to Elaine and said, “Great grandfather was a doctor and performed many surgeries here at the house. I’ve kept up the room just in case.”

She strolled inside, scanning it from one side to the other. The bright lights and white

walls and floors blinded her.

“Most people hide money in mattresses or keep their resumes updated in case they lose their jobs. You? You have a functional operating room in your house.”

Seth sat on a stool by a sink. “I also have an aversion to sunlight and can run down to the corner store and back in the time it would take you to sneeze. In case you have not surmised, I am a little different than most people.”

Elaine stepped over to the sink. “You can say that again.”

She had to wash her hands. Normally it wouldn't bother her but that meant undoing her crossed fingers. Seth would be able to read her thoughts, which had been bordering on obscene since she saw him without his shirt on in his bedroom.

Okay, Lainey, you can do this. Just keep your head clear.

She started the water with the push pedal under the sink. Her bare foot pressed against the grated metal as she pumped liquid soap into her hand. Elaine took a deep breath and slowly undid her fingers.

“So, are you going to take off your shirt?” she asked tentatively. If her thoughts didn't give her away, her actions would. She would have to straighten so as not cause suspicion. “I don't have all night.” She toughened her voice to sound slightly peeved but ultra-professional.

Seth unbuttoned his shirt slowly. Elaine stole a peek at his chest. Thank God the man didn't wear a t-shirt underneath. If ingesting blood made a man's body look like that, then she would personally spearhead the ad campaign for ‘Got Blood?’

She licked her lips. As soon as he exposed one dark, hard nipple she sighed. She missed men. She missed feeling the weight of them on top of her, their musky scent, their physical strength. Again, why did all the good-looking men have to be married or vampires?

Seth stopped taking off his shirt and glanced at her. Elaine stared at her hands.

Clean under the nails and scrub the back of the hands. Up the arm to the elbow.

Seth took off his shirt. A spot of blood had soaked through the thick bandage. Normally blood and wounds didn't bother her. On Seth, it felt monumental.

Elaine stopped the water and dried her hands thoroughly with a few paper towels. She discarded them in a lined trashcan then turned her attention to Seth.

Okay, no sweat. He's a patient just like your other patients. Not a problem.

She looked around for another stool.

“There's one under the counter there.” Seth pointed across the room.

Damn. He had read her thoughts. Or maybe her body language clued to him that her hunt involved a stool.

After retrieving the chair, she set it down next to him. Seth pointed out where he kept the surgical gloves and she quickly donned a pair. Elaine rolled in close. His cologne overtook the sterile alcohol aroma of the room.

She could do this. She could do this. Just make sure he kept his head straight ahead.

“Now, let's see what's going on here.” With shaky hands, Elaine touched his arm. He flinched but then settled down without looking at her. She eased off the bandage.

Elaine's mouth dropped open at the sight. The once gaping wound he'd had just hours ago didn't look as bad now. Earlier when she'd glanced at it, Seth looked like he would need stitches. Now he only needed ointment and bandages.

“How did this happen? This cut was worse than this before.” Elaine stared at it.

He turned to her. Why did he have to do that? His eyes melted her resolve. All she could think about had to do with what the rest of him looked like naked. And she made a

personal connection to him that she couldn't establish with her patients.

"I am a fast healer. Well, I used to be. Months ago I would have healed from a wound like this in a matter of minutes. Since I am not feeding, it takes longer. That is why I require spectacles to see." He removed his black-rimmed glasses and threw them on the counter.

His low voice struck a nerve in her. She could see now how he could get two and three women a night.

She swallowed hard. Now she needed another drink. "I'll just clean the cut and patch you back up then." She threw away the old bandage. Before she could reach for the cabinet for a fresh bandage, Seth popped up and stopped her. His bare chest heaved in her face. She leaned against the counter to brace her weakened knees.

"If you don't mind, I would like you to get another pair of gloves. You've touched an old bandage with these." He pointed to her hands.

She smiled and nodded. With a snap, she removed the gloves and tossed them in the trash. As she slipped on another pair, she sat down next to him again.

Seth had the medical supplies laid out for easy access and, of course, in some logical order, either alphabetically or by use or both. Cotton balls, iodine, tongue depressors. A place for everything and everything in its place.

Elaine pulled out a couple of cotton balls and picked up the iodine. She knew how she would react to the brown stuff. She didn't want to think about what Seth would do when she put the liquid, sure to sting, on his cut. She'd heard him growl before. This time he might roar.

"This is going to sting a little," she said. Prepping him might make him calmer ... she hoped. She poured some of the iodine on the cotton and set the bottle on the counter. After a deep breath and a silent Spanish prayer, she dabbed the medicine-soaked swabs on his arm.

"You do not have to use that on ..."

Too late. Elaine placed the wad on his cut. Seth flinched, gritted his teeth and even growled, but never voiced an objection.

"It's okay." Elaine instinctively blew on the cut as she dabbed away.

"Did you just blow on me?" Seth asked. He didn't sound shocked though. He almost sounded impressed.

"It's something I picked up from my abuela. She used to treat my cuts when I was a little girl and blow on them to make them feel better. Old habits die hard."

"Your father was a great Ayudante," Seth began. "He took care of a lot of vamps. Made sure we were okay, living in places where the sun could not get to us. He was very smart."

"Were you a child when you knew him?"

Seth gazed into her eyes. A smile crept up. "No. I was not."

She didn't realize how close she'd moved toward him, cooing over his cut, until she peered up and saw him staring at her. Then she caught his heavy breathing, his parted lips and felt the tension in his arm.

"I lied to you before," he began. "The stake through the heart. It kills vampires because it prevents us from repairing ourselves as quickly. Eventually we would bleed to death."

Elaine licked her lips. Before Seth could suck her in any deeper with his intense stare, she broke the gaze. She tossed the used cotton balls away. Prior to unwrapping the new bandage, she threw her gloves away and put on a new pair. She was starting to get the hang of Seth's methods. Following them would be a snap. Then she would have to break him of his habits.

"There's something else I need to tell you," Seth said. "Something about Ayudantes and vampires that I didn't share with you before but that I need to right now."

Elaine removed the strips over the sticky portions of the gauze. "What is it?"

"Ayudantes and vampires are kind of like a Catholic school nun and a single father."

Elaine scrunched her forehead. "This is a new analogy I've never heard before." She slathered some Vaseline into the cut.

"Both the nun and the father want what's best for the child. No matter how the father feels about the nun, they can never have a relationship beyond parent and teacher."

"So what are you saying?"

Seth blurted, "We cannot have sex."

Elaine's mouth dropped open. She didn't know what got her more, the fact that he'd read her mind and knew that's what she wanted, or that they couldn't have sex.

"Of course we wouldn't have sex. That would go against my doctor-patient relationship." She slapped the bandage on his arm and smoothed it on hard. Take that, Seth Overkill.

He rolled away from her. "There is a legend that Ayudantes and vampires cannot lay in the bed as one and bring forth new life. I forget the exact saying. Bottom line, we could shake up the world's existence by having sex, not as bad as when I do not feed but in the same league."

Elaine stood. "Are you trying to tell me that earth-shattering sex between us could actually be earth shattering?"

Seth threw on his shirt. "In a manner of speaking, yes. So you need to start taking cold showers or reading the Bible or doing whatever it is that you need to do to remove those thoughts from your head."

Elaine snapped off the gloves and then she snapped. "Now hold on there. I think you might have misinterpreted something you saw in my thoughts."

"You mean the image of you pouring honey on me? Yes, I can see where I could misunderstand that." He buttoned his shirt in a hurried pace. "I guess you were thinking of ways to test my OCD limits, right?"

Seth actually saw that image? Why couldn't she ever have visions of helping children to read or saving the rain forest? No, she had to have porn thoughts about her patient.

She crossed her fingers.

"Don't bother crossing your fingers." Seth looked down at his shirt. He'd buttoned his shirt wrong, missing a button so that it appeared skewed. "I knew you were doing that trick before. An oldie but a goodie."

"But it works so I'm going to keep doing it." She turned to the door but stopped. "I don't know how to get back to my room in this freaky fun house."

"I will lead you back. And you may want to stay in your room tonight. I am feeling better than I have felt in a long time. Tonight, I am going to feed."

When he took a step, a hard thud crashed against the door that led to the backyard area. The sound demanded their attention as they darted their gazes to it. Elaine's mouth dropped open as she saw a woman with sunken eyes and blood trickling from her mouth. She slammed her hands against the door and moaned in such a sinister way that Elaine had to cover her ears.

"Do you believe me now?" Seth asked as he pointed to the unexpected guest.

"Get me out of here," Elaine said as she backed away.

Before he could take another step, Seth froze in his spot at the doorway. His hand gripped the frame. Thinking he was preparing himself to walk in and out of the doorway three times, Elaine didn't think his actions were odd ... until he collapsed into a hulking heap on the floor.

Chapter Seven

Run. Elaine stared at Seth. With his skin so pale and his lips parted, something tugged inside of her to help him. If she could have gotten her abuela to give her the secret of how to turn that special feature off in her body, Elaine would have jumped on that one.

“Seth! Get up!” Elaine crouched over his petrified body.

In the bright lights of the room, his eyes looked recessed. She parted his eyelid to get a good visual on his pupil. They were dilated.

The corpse at the backdoor pounded on it again. She moaned something that sounded like, “In.”

The dead were walking around his house. Mina wandering somewhere around his home. Police looking for Elaine. And a vampire down on the floor. Elaine wanted to scream.

“Seth, can you hear me?” Grabbing his chin, she shook his head back and forth to rouse him, but it didn’t help. And she wasn’t sure exactly how to help him.

Seth, being a vampire, would not have the same problems as mortals, would he? She held his wrist to get an idea of his pulse. Big mistake. When she felt two beats ten seconds apart under her fingertips, she dropped his cold hand to the floor with a thud.

Cold hand. She pinched his skin. After letting go, she saw how his skin remained tented. This man was severely dehydrated.

Lowering his head to the floor, she made sure he was comfortable before she ... before she what? She couldn’t call nine-one-one. They would declare him dead.

After jumping to her feet, she scanned the room to find a container to fill with water. It would be a quick fix until she could drag his body to an IV to get fluids into his system. Or would that work for him?

She flung open every cabinet and door, looking for a proper receptacle. His moan grabbed her attention. He needed her help and she felt helpless.

Elaine’s attention went to the backdoor. She couldn’t forget about the unwanted guest that had crashed this party. The doorknob giggled and it sent Elaine’s senses into overdrive. Her head pounded in rhythm with her heart until she thought the organ would explode. Sweat covered her so that her new designer shirt clung to her body. As much as she hated to admit it, she needed Seth and she needed him now.

“What the hell am I supposed to do?” Elaine pounded her fist onto the counter.

The vibration from the slam must have caused an object on the countertop to fall to the floor. She heard a clink like a fork hitting the tiled floor. She bent to retrieve the item. A scalpel.

She held the cutting device in her hand then gazed at Seth, still opening and closing his mouth like a baby bird looking for a worm. He needed blood and fast.

Scurrying back to Seth, Elaine contemplated what she needed to do. Would it even work? And why did she care? As she stared at his massive form looking so helpless, she knew the answer. She didn’t want to end up trapped in the house with a dead guy and with even more dead people surrounding them by the minute.

Returning to her kneeling position, she placed his head on her lap. Her hand, slick with

sweat, trembled as she held the blade.

“God, I hope this works.” She took a quick slice down her lifeline in the middle of her hand. “And I hope I don’t awaken a monster.”

At the first sign of blood from the thin cut, Elaine placed her palm over Seth’s mouth. Squeezing her hand, she milked plasma from her palm. The first few drops calmed his moaning. Then the blood seemed to stir a deep-seeded need. His head jerked up as his mouth clamped down over her hand, sucking and extracting as much blood from her as he could.

His smooth tongue swept over her palm in a way that made her imagine he was using that tongue on other areas of her body. She moaned at the thought and, as though Seth had been reading her mind, he moaned in response. His frigid body became warm in an instant.

Even as fear swept over Elaine, she could already tell it was helping. Color filled Seth’s cheeks. The darkness that circled his eyes disappeared. He was getting better while she was becoming fearful and now weak.

Her head felt light. She blinked to try to refocus her vision. Didn’t help. He was taking too much from her and she didn’t know how to stop him. With hard tugs, she attempted to free her hand from his mouth.

“Seth, please. You’re taking too much,” she said in her loudest voice, which still came out like a hoarse whisper.

It wasn’t until his canines pierced her flesh that she found her voice to let out a long, howling scream. With the cry, Seth opened his eyes. Like a dog dropping its master’s shoe, he released her hand from his mouth and sat up. Blood covered his lips. He looked healthy but horrifying.

“Back ... door.” She barely had enough strength to point to the door where the dead woman remained banging on it.

Seth--with his shirt still buttoned incorrectly and the cruelest scowl on his face--glared at the door and let out a horrifying scream. It shook the cabinets and floor. Elaine used all of her strength to hold onto the doorframe to keep from falling over.

When she gazed at the door, the corpse had disappeared. Elaine sighed and eased her shoulders down.

“What did you do?” he asked when he turned to her.

Elaine slid to a set of cabinets and rested her head against the cool wood. “You passed out. Dehydration. I gave you my blood.”

Now she would be able to go home. Seth was cured. He could feed again and keep the dead in their graves.

His now inhumanly gray eyes returned to their normal black color. “You fool.” With one thrust, he hopped to his feet. With each pounding step as he paced, he jiggled the floor.

Fool? She had saved his miserable life. How could he call her a fool?

“You had no right to force me to feed. And I told you I could not drink your blood.”

“But”

“Go to your room!” he snapped like an angry father. “We will discuss this later. For now, you have unleashed my hunger. I will feed tonight.”

* * * *

With the help of Seth’s butler, Elaine made it to her new room only to fall into bed. The bloodletting she’d endured had taken more out of her than she’d imagined. All at once during the ordeal she felt afraid, empowered, weak and sexy. Strange combination.

She hoped that her stay here wouldn’t be for long. She missed her business. She missed

work. Hell, she missed mocha lattes at Starbucks. Now Seth was mad at her. Who knew forcing a vampire to drink blood would be a bad thing.

She heard the front door slam. Had Seth left, or had he actually invited his next feed over? His threat earlier in the quasi-operating room swirled in her head as he led her out of the room, saying nothing on the way. He'd ushered her out and closed the door, all the while muttering 'dogma' under his breath.

"Screw dogma!" she'd screamed after him. He hadn't returned a remark so either he hadn't heard her or he had but didn't care.

Elaine didn't understand anything that went on in the house. She knew this. No matter what, she had to run. She would rather face his gruesome beings in the bushes than to put up with any more of Seth's neuroses.

Loud voices rose from the living room. Elaine crept to the door, the index and middle fingers on her right hand cramping as she kept them crossed. She unlocked the door, twisting the knob so delicately that she wasn't sure it turned until she heard the tumblers catch.

The door opened a sliver. Cool air wisped through the crack and the voices became more distinct. Elaine distinguished three voices, two female and one definitely male. Deep, primitive. Seth's.

Elaine took careful steps out of her room. Thankfully Seth left the upstairs hall lights off. Slipping into the shadows, she crouched by the railing to watch the action in the living room.

Seth now wore an orange cardigan, another white shirt and black slacks. Mina appeared from the direction of the kitchen carrying two glasses. She handed one of the glasses to a woman Elaine had never seen in the house before. Didn't mean she hadn't already been there. People seemed to spring from everywhere in the house. Butlers, maids, drivers. She could have been the help--if Seth allowed his people to dress in a miniskirt and a tube top.

"Are we going back to the club soon?" the woman asked.

Nope. Seth Overkill wouldn't dare go to a club, his club, with the help. He didn't even know his employees' names.

"Yes." Mina stroked the woman's black hair. "Drink up."

The young woman tugged on her white tube top before taking a sip. She brought the glass down and coughed. Seth stepped back from her, probably careful of staying away from the spray. Elaine wanted to laugh. He wasn't ready. Whatever this woman had been brought here for Seth wouldn't take part in it.

"Are you sick?" Seth asked.

Elaine bit her lower lip to stifle the chuckle.

"Too strong," the woman sputtered, waving her hand in front of her face and holding the drink away like it was a glass full of acid. "What is this?"

"Nothing you are accustomed to drinking apparently." Seth meandered around her. He pointed to Mina. "Take her glass."

Mina snatched the glass from the woman and disappeared into the kitchen, out of view. What would Seth do in the room alone with this woman in her miniskirt and mile-high strappy sandals? She must have been his type, someone Mina brought back specifically for her boss.

"What is it that you do?" Seth asked.

She pointed to herself. "Tina."

"I asked you a question," he pressed.

"Uh, I'm a student. I want to be a"

Seth cut her off. "You will never make it as a physician's assistant. You are not smart

enough.”

God, that was harsh. Anger rose up to the top of Elaine’s head. How dare he destroy that woman’s dream! He had no right to do that. Arrogant son-of-a-bitch!

He had the gall to continue. “I know doctors. Intelligent, great doctors.” He lowered his voice but Elaine still heard him. “She blows on your wounds to soothe you.”

Elaine gasped and almost uncrossed her fingers. How could Seth go from a complete jerk to someone who recognized, and more importantly appreciated, compassion? Her heart pounded. She hoped he couldn’t hear it from upstairs. Who knew what other skills he had besides reading minds.

“Can you do that?” Seth asked the stunned woman.

“Uh, I guess. If I had to.” She shrugged her tanned shoulders.

Mina returned to the room. Her hair, which was down before she’d walked into the kitchen, was now up in a loosely held bun. On anyone else, a hairstyle like that would look sloppy. On Mina, she looked like she’d just walked off a runway in Paris.

“Shall we get started?” Mina asked, making a point to stare at Seth.

Elaine’s heart pounded faster. No, Seth couldn’t do it. Would he?

Elaine should want him to feed. When he fed, Elaine would be able to leave. Return to her life of mounting bills, an absent receptionist, and a grandmother with a better social life than she had.

Sweat formed on her upper lip and forehead. She wrung her hands together as well as she could, considering two of her fingers intertwined like vines wrapped around a tree trunk, and she had a bandage on her other hand thanks to the cut and the punctures.

“A few more questions,” Seth said. He planted himself in front of her, towering over the petite woman. “Do you do drugs?”

The woman smiled. “Why? You got some?”

Elaine stared at Seth’s hands. If he started tapping, she knew that meant he had reached an uncomfortable point. He rubbed the pad of his thumb against the undersides of his fingers on both hands. He was warming up to a boiling point, but he hadn’t made it there yet.

“What drugs have you done?” he asked.

“Pot mainly. Some X.” She giggled and tapped her foot on the floor. “One time I did heroin.”

Mina giggled with Tina but from Elaine’s vantage point Mina looked more like she was mocking the woman. Tina had been outnumbered and outsmarted by the devil’s cousins.

“How did you do it?” Seth’s voice rose to a thunderous boom.

Tina looked dumbfounded. “Well I didn’t smoke it. I shot it.”

Seth grimaced. “Needles. Did you share it with someone else?”

“A friend of a friend of mine. I’m sure he was clean. I’m not stupid.”

Seth waved his hand in front of her, his disgust obvious. And the finger tapping started right away.

He directed his attention to Mina. “Get her out of here.”

“No.” Mina stomped her stiletto on the floor. “She’s good. We won’t catch anything. You know that.”

“I do not want any part of her.” Seth paced in the living room. Elaine couldn’t hear him but she was sure from the way his lips moved that he was chanting ‘dogma’.

“I’m hungry.” Mina wasted no time in grabbing Tina by her hair and yanking her head back. Mina’s extended incisors gleamed in the bright lights in the living room. Tina wailed,

tossed her purse onto the floor and cried.

Mina's mouth covered the side of Tina's neck. An audible chomp echoed in the house. The sound horrified Elaine as she let out a small scream. Seth peered up to the stairs. Shadows or not, Seth's eyes were black like coals, different from when he'd fed from her earlier.

Elaine crawled backwards on her knees into the bedroom and closed the door. After locking it, she pressed her face against the oak door, panting like a scared rabbit. She covered her face with her hands.

He'd warned her. She had no one to blame for what she had seen but herself. Seth had told her that what happened on the bottom floor would shock her. She should have believed him.

"Yes, you should have believed me."

The sound of Seth's voice in her room almost made her heart leap from her chest. Elaine turned, still seated on the floor, her back pressed against the door. She saw Seth standing in her room as though he'd been there the whole time.

She screamed. It had to have been an optical illusion. He couldn't have made it from downstairs to her bedroom in the millisecond it took her to back into the room and shut the door. Hummingbirds couldn't fly that fast.

"I told you I was quick. I have not lost that ability." He continued toward her. "Thanks to your blood, I am even faster."

Elaine had no time to think. Sure he was fast. Yes, he could read her mind. And definitely he was stronger than her. However, she still had her wits.

She crossed her fingers. A lost cause considering he had probably already read her mind. She brought her arm back at an angle, the Tae Bo stance. He snickered.

"I do not want to fight you." He continued tapping his fingers. "And you know I will not hurt you. Again."

"But I don't want to be here. Forget about the payment. Forget about telling me about my father."

He reached out for her but before he could touch her, Elaine did the one thing that even disgusted her. She spat on the floor. Her brother and his sophomoric friends would have loved the stunt. Elaine only did it to survive.

Seth's eyes widened. He kept his gaze squarely on her, his shoulders slowly drawing up around his neck. The room became deathly quiet.

Seth's neck tightened. Veins bulged on his forehead. His hands balled into fists, damn near ready to explode. His mouth compressed into a tight line until he had to finally let loose.

"Damn it!" He glared at the offending spot. "What woman does that? No one spits."

Elaine opened the door. "I had some candy so there might be some sugar in that spot." She pointed to the wet spot on the carpet.

"Dogma! Dogma! Damn dogma!" He ran past her, probably getting a bucket and sponge to clean up her mess. Elaine didn't have time to think about his plans. She grabbed her father's journal and ran barefooted down the stairs. The only place she knew how to get out was the front door. If she had to go by Mina to get there, then so be it.

Her foot smacked the cold marble at the bottom landing. Elaine turned to the living room to see Mina crouched on the floor with Tina, her arms and legs sprawled out like a toppled mannequin.

As soon as Elaine entered the room, Mina turned her attention to her. Elaine glanced at her briefly until the shock of Mina's twisted countenance made Elaine look away. Mina's eyes glowed red instead of being bright gray like Seth's when he'd fed. Her teeth, all of them,

appeared pointed and jagged like shark's teeth. Her chin receded in the way that newborn babies have no chins to help them breast and bottle feed. Her body had morphed to accommodate her bizarre feeding habit. Had Elaine more time, and more interest, she would have loved to study this anomaly. For now, she needed to escape and fast.

"Where are you going?" Mina asked in a hiss.

"Getting a suitable victim for Seth. He wants a clean virgin and I know where to find them." Elaine stepped over Tina's body and made it to the door. Mina tilted her head like a confused dog, not sure if she should believe Elaine or go after her.

By the time Elaine had gotten the door open, Seth had returned to the living room, yellow gloves on his hands, a buckle in one hand and a sponge in the other.

Elaine didn't give him a chance to say anything. She ran from the house. Her only defense this time would be to appeal to the creatures lurking in the woods.

"Ayudante! I'm an Ayudante! Helper! Saver!" She didn't know if it helped but she kept screaming it until she reached his gate. His locked gate. She pounded on the iron wrought door and cursed.

She glanced back at the house. Seth stood in the doorway. He looked gigantic. He looked ticked off. He also appeared afraid to take another step. She wouldn't stick around to have a heart-to-heart with him.

Elaine shoved the journal down the front of her skirt, securing it right at the waistband so that it didn't drop. Then she did something she hadn't done in over twenty years. She climbed the fence with her bare feet. The metal felt cold against her hands and feet but it didn't bother her. She positioned her foot on top of a curve that hadn't been smoothed out all the way. A jagged edge cut into her foot.

"Get down from there!" Seth screamed from the doorway.

His screams prompted her to climb faster. Adrenaline pumped through Elaine's body until she forgot about any cuts. She had to get out, fast. Now.

At the top, she threw one leg over the spikes. It brushed against her leg but she made it. She twisted her body over and attempted to haul the other leg over. The spike scraped her calf causing her to yelp in pain. She got the leg over and tried to climb down when she felt something catch.

Oh no. The spike pierced her skirt so that she was dangling on the gate, her backside exposed and facing Seth. She didn't know what was worse. Dying at the hands of Seth and Mina or dying of embarrassment that the head vampire and his minions had front row viewing of her exposed ass through the thong she wore.

Elaine didn't care the designer skirt probably cost thousands of dollars. It would be fringes in a second. She braced her feet on the gate, put one hand on a bar above her head and yanked on the skirt with her other hand. The fabric ripped until it gave way and so did she.

Elaine fell to the hard, cobblestone sidewalk with a thud. She did a mental body injury inventory. Feet. Check. Sore but not broken. Ankles. Check. Legs. One cut but not that deep. Butt. Definitely hurting but passable. She would be okay.

Elaine stood. She dusted off the dirt from her hands. She'd made it. Escaped in one piece. Take that, Prince of freaking Death!

Elaine turned up the street and put her hand to her waist. She felt her stomach. Not good. Where had the journal gone? She looked on the ground outside. Her hands felt around her waist as though it could have slipped into the front of her thong. An impossible thought but she had to check.

Then her eye caught something from the moonlight. She peered through the gate. The book had fallen on the ground on the stone pathway that led back up to the house ... on the other side of the gate.

She wouldn't leave without that journal. She crouched on the ground and reached her hand through the bars. The posts cut into her shoulders and the side of her neck but she didn't care. She needed that book. She needed her father. She couldn't get through this without him.

Her fingers stretched out as far as it could go. The tips brushed against the book. She pushed her feet against the ground as though she could push the gate just an inch closer. When she touched it again she heard something.

Growling stopped Elaine. She froze. She scanned the backyard. Bushes sat on either side of the gate. Sure, she had the clout of being the Ayudante inside of the fence. No one could touch her. Outside of the fence, she had no power or recognition.

The hairs stood up on the back of her neck. A cold chill wrapped itself around her spine. And her fingers trembled as though the temperature had changed to below freezing outside. She didn't know if instinct had taken over, or if she had a sixth sense, but she pulled her hand out of the gate just before a snarling Doberman leapt from the bushes. It stood over the book as though Seth had summoned it to do so.

Elaine fell back on the sidewalk. Her breathing slowed along with her heart rate. Peering up at the house, she saw Seth still stood guard at the door.

"You want your book, you will come back," Seth said.

Elaine didn't answer. She ran down the empty street. She didn't know where she would go but anywhere had to be better than here.

* * * *

Five miles. Elaine had walked five miles from Seth's house to her office in the middle of the night. She should have kept going, walked right into the ocean and gone head high and deeper. A letter from her bank had been nailed to her office door. Two weeks they'd given her to pay on her loan. And they'd posted it a couple of days ago, which meant she had twelve days. Oh wait. These were business days, which meant she had eight days.

Thousands of dollars in less than two weeks. How had she ended up like this? She'd ripped the letter down and held onto it like she wished she'd held on to her father's journal. How had she let that book slip away from her? She should have just thrown it over the fence and gotten it when she came over. Then if she didn't make it over, the book would have been on the outside. Woulda, shoulda, coulda ... but didn't.

Elaine figured that the police would have tapped her family's phone and staked out her condo. She needed help. She needed clothes. And looking at her bare, sore, throbbing, and now dirty feet, she needed shoes.

She called her brother Vic in Seattle. He was staying with friends so she figured, and hoped, the police wouldn't have tapped his friend's phone. Once Vic's friends stopped complaining about how Vic's sister had called his place collect, Elaine quickly asked him to call their mother so that she could meet her.

Without question, Vic obliged and even tipped her on an apartment at the beach that belonged to an old girlfriend who didn't mind him crashing there when he rolled into town. His ex regularly left her apartment key in a ceramic frog's butt that sat in a huge flowerpot outside of her door. Thankfully the woman was a flight attendant and wasn't home.

Elaine let herself into the apartment. At least his ex was tidy. The place, bathed in beige, looked tame in Elaine's eyes. Beige carpet, beige couch, beige lamps. The woman truly showed

her wild side though in her bedroom. Elaine stepped into the room searching for the bathroom.

The bedroom looked like a rainbow had gotten caught inside of it and twirled around, trying to get out. Each wall contained a different color. Blue, yellow, red, green. The bedspread in purple and gold did not go with the multicolored scarves that hung down from the four-poster bed. At least the bedroom she had stayed in at Seth's had been done tastefully.

And suddenly the taste went out of her mouth. Had she actually thought about Seth just now? The man condoned murder. He was a vampire, for goodness sake. And now he had her father's journal along with a taste of her blood.

Elaine stepped into the bathroom to run herself a bath. She needed to soak away the dirt and grime of the city. She peered into the large mirror over the sink. Vic's ex had left him a note on the reflective glass in red lipstick.

If you drink all of my beer, Vic, you had better replace it next time, asshole!

And yet she still left her key in the same place so that Vic could come there any time he wanted. A match made in Heaven.

Elaine took a quick bath, being sure to attend to her wounds on her feet and leg. She looked at her knees to see how the scratches were healing. The scratches had disappeared. Her skin appeared healthy and smooth, actually in better condition than before she had scrapped them.

Elaine stared at the heels of her hands where she'd had scraps from when that thing in Seth's yard had knocked her down. It couldn't be. They had healed also. Her healing process defied medical logic. She couldn't have healed this way in a couple of days. Did being in Seth's house have something to do with it?

She blocked him from her thoughts. Nothing good could come from Seth.

After her bath, Elaine took a quick nap on the couch. Morning approached so it wouldn't take her mother long to call or come to the apartment.

Before Elaine fell deeper into sleep, a knock startled her. She got up from the couch and crept to the front door. She winced when the floor squeaked under her feet. When she reached her destination, she peeked through the fisheye lens.

Elaine's mother stood on the outside wearing dark, round sunglasses and a scarf around her head, her way of going incognito. Elaine smiled and opened the door, being sure to hide herself behind it. When her mother came through, Elaine closed the door quickly and locked it.

Elaine's mother said nothing. She wrapped her arms around Elaine, making her feel so good to be in her mother's arms. Taking a deep breath, she inhaled her mother's aroma of cumin and pepper, a scent that meant the woman had been cooking all day. She rocked Elaine as she hugged her and hummed a Spanish lullaby like when Elaine used to have nightmares as a little girl. The soothing vibration of her chest calmed her.

"What is going on, Lainey?" her mother asked. "I see on the news that you're being accused of murder. This can't be, right?"

Elaine shook her head. "Of course not, Mama." She pulled back from the hug so that she could look her mother in her eyes. "I've been set up."

Her mother held Elaine's face in her hand. "You look tired. I brought some clothes and food. I don't know about Vic's friends. She may not have anything here for you."

"I know his friend has beer but don't you dare touch it." Elaine smiled to reassure her mama that everything would be okay, though she was far from sure of that.

"Go get cleaned up. I'll fix you a plate."

Good ol' home cooking from the best damn cook in the world. Olivia Vargas Puro-

Shrink knew her way around the kitchen.

Elaine changed into the clothes her mother bought. She and her mother had about the same taste in clothes. Olivia brought her a pair of gray sweat shorts, a white tee shirt and a pair of white sneakers. Ah, comfort. This was living.

Elaine devoured her mama's cooking. Her mother treated her to homemade paella and bread. She even made flan. The woman must have known how horrible Elaine felt.

Elaine told her of the amazing story of Seth Overkill and the night she'd spent in his house. Her mother listened intently, not interrupting or looking shocked. The more Elaine told this amazing story, the calmer her mother looked.

When Elaine got to her father's journal, though, her mama sat up.

"I lost it going over the fence." Elaine finished her food and pushed the bowl away. "The only way I can get it back is if I go back to that house and, Mama, I can't."

Mama sighed. She'd let her scarf dangle around her neck. "Did you read the whole journal?"

Elaine shook her head. "I only got up to when Vic and I were born."

When her mama took Elaine's hands, she knew she would tell her something heavy. Good thing Elaine was sitting down.

"You've always been strong-willed like your father." She glanced down as though she thought up a wonderful memory about him. She brought her gaze back to Elaine's. "He always knew to do the right thing even though it felt wrong." Mama squeezed Elaine's hands. "Now I know you don't want to go back to that house."

Elaine groaned and rolled her eyes. She knew what came next.

"But, Lainey, you have to go."

"For what? The journal? You can tell me about my father and I'll feel closer to him. Please don't say for the money. I would rather lose my practice triumphantly than to take blood money from Seth Overkill. There's nothing that would make me go back to that house."

"Nothing?" Olivia slid off of the bar stool and walked over to Elaine.

Elaine shook her head. "This is too much. I can't save the world."

"Then how about your mother?"

Elaine blinked. Her hand gripped a glass of water as she watched her mother undo the scarf around her neck. Elaine held her breath, waiting to see what her mama would reveal.

When Olivia leaned her head over and exposed her neck, Elaine gasped and instinctively squeezed her hand, shattering the glass into pieces.

Her mama had two small crescent-shaped wounds in her neck.

"Oh God." Elaine covered her mouth with her free hand. "You're a"

"Was. Yes, I was a vampire."

Chapter Eight

In a matter of seconds, Elaine's world had turned upside down. When she looked at her hand with shards of glass covering it, blood dripping from her palm, she felt compelled more than ever to clean it up so as to not tempt her mother, her mother the vampire.

It couldn't be. The woman had baked cookies for Elaine's Girl Scout troop. She used to lie in bed with her to make bad dreams go away. And Elaine felt that she never even knew this woman. What story would Olivia tell this time to make this nightmare go away?

Elaine, stepping around the breakfast bar to get to the sink, kept her head down as she spoke. "If this is some joke, Ma, to make me feel better"

Olivia cut her off. "Look at me, baby. Does it look like I'm joking?"

Elaine could barely glance at her mother let alone stare into her eyes.

The eyes.

Windows to the soul. Elaine had heard that line so often it sounded cliché. Then she had looked directly into her fiancé's eyes right before he dropped out of her life without a word. Elaine had never wanted to experience absorbing that much pain from a loved one or even a patient again. As long as she kept her gaze from theirs, she would be all right.

"Lainey?" her mother pressed.

"What am I supposed to do with that information? Am I supposed to be thrilled, or sad, or afraid?" Elaine picked the shiny glass pieces from her hand until she had retrieved all of them. Then she submerged her hand under the water and let it cleanse her wound, hoping the rushing water would drown out her mama's voice.

Her mama snickered. "You? Afraid of anything? You could stare down dragons."

Not this time. This time with the world crashing in around her, monsters chasing her, her livelihood practically gone, her identity vanishing by the moment, all Elaine wanted to do was curl up in her mama's lap, have the woman stroke her hair and tell her everything would be okay.

"I can't do that this time, Lainey."

Elaine jerked her head up, not afraid, this time, of staring her mother in her eyes. "You can read"

"Sometimes." Olivia smiled like she'd just revealed that she'd been the parent who'd eaten all of her 'good' Halloween candy each night after Elaine had slept. Elaine had always blamed Vic but now, she couldn't be sure.

"I think we," Olivia motioned between the two of them, "got along so well during your teen years because I knew what you were thinking. I really knew you. Except for that boy in high school that you let take your virgini"

"Okay, Mama! I get it." Elaine held up her hand. Did the whole vampire world know about her first time? What? Did they have some vampire/Ayudante newsletter?

Elaine turned off the water then wrapped her sore hand in a wad of paper towels. Now she didn't want to show her where Seth had fed from her. A shiver crawled up her spine. Had she become a vampire now because he bit her hand?

Olivia stepped around the bar, closer to Elaine. Elaine kept her gaze down to her wounded hand. She wanted to walk around the woman to get to the bathroom but the small

kitchen did not provide adequate maneuvering space.

Olivia, still trying to gain some sort of eye contact, began cleaning up the broken glass pieces left on the counter.

“I didn’t start off this way. But from the bites I guess you can tell that.” Olivia smiled but Elaine continued patting her hand. At least the blood was starting to clot. Now pink slits covered the palm of her hand. Nothing to temp her mother now.

“I wouldn’t feed off of you even if I wanted to,” Olivia said.

“Damn! This mind reading thing is creepy! Can’t you turn it off for a second?”

If Olivia’s answer was no, then Elaine would cross her fingers. Her hand cramped from the gesture.

“First thing’s first. I would never feed off of my children. Ever.” Olivia’s brown eyes glared in an almost blood-brown color. The woman still had a bit of the vamp in her. Elaine had to be careful.

“You can’t feed off of me. I’m an Ayudante.” Elaine poked out her chin and made her way past her mother.

“Oh, does that mean you’re starting to believe us now?” Olivia put her fist on her hip in that I-told-you-so way that parents lord over their children.

Elaine wanted so badly to revert to her teenage self by sucking on her teeth and rolling her eyes. That had pissed off her mother then. Now that Olivia had admitted being a former vampire, who knew what the woman could do.

“Just because you’re an Ayudante doesn’t make you invincible.” Olivia wagged her finger at Elaine. “Sanguinarians have made a promise not to attack any of you. Doesn’t mean that it can’t happen. Believe me. I know.” Olivia got a far off look in her eyes as she cleared off the last of the broken glass from the white Formica counter.

“Dad?”

Olivia glanced at Elaine then turned away. “I was young. Very rebellious. I got into the wrong crowd, literally. I thought I would be losing my virginity to this one boy. While we were in his car, something came from the woods. It attacked us. Killed my date. Fed from me and forced me to take a drink of blood. My first feeding. I was hooked.”

To hear her mother talk about becoming a vampire was like listening to parents talk about having sex for the first time. A feeling of disgust and embarrassment waved over Elaine.

Olivia continued. “Then I met your father. He wanted to save me. He wanted me as his wife. I wanted him as my next victim.”

Hearing her mother talk about her father like he was nothing, a piece of meat, horrified Elaine. He’d been more than that. He’d seen Olivia as someone special.

“But I couldn’t feed from him. The more we talked, the more I fell in love with him. We married and had you and Vic within the first couple of years. Then he” Olivia stopped her story. Elaine had too many questions.

“But I thought all vampires were essentially dead. If that’s so, how could you have had children?” Elaine hoped the woman wouldn’t confess that she stole her and her brother from the hospital to make a family.

“I was. Your father had to sacrifice a lot to make me the woman I am today. He had to make promises.”

“What promises?” Elaine ducked into the bathroom to see if Vic’s flight attendant friend had any band-aids or gauze.

“It involved you kids.”

Elaine found some band-aids and stretched two across the palm of her hand. It would have to do until ... until what? Elaine couldn't go home. She couldn't even get into her office. With that thought in mind, she grabbed some more band-aids and shoved them in her pocket. She had to be prepared.

She reemerged from the bathroom. "What deal did you have with us? Is there a third child that you gave to the vampires as some sort of offering?" Elaine covered her mouth.

Olivia shook her head. "No. Of course not. But in order for me to revert from the vampire world back to mortal, I had to go through a lot of, um, procedures. Your father and I promised that we would stop at one child. But our love was so strong that we had Vic. That's when it all came crashing down on us."

"Are you trying to tell me that the vampire mob snuffed Dad?" Elaine didn't want to make light of the situation but it didn't sound possible.

"Don't make jokes, Elaine Vargas-Puro." Olivia had used Elaine's full name, except for the Shrink part. She meant business.

"I am mortal in the sense that I am able to die in the same ways you can. But I still have some vampire in me. In the way that a recovering alcoholic will always be an alcoholic and will want to drink, I will always be a recovering vampire. I suppress the urge to feed."

"So if you're like me, why do you care if Seth feeds or not?"

Olivia's eyes brimmed with tears that held on to dear life on her bottom lids until they finally rolled down her round cheeks. She took a deep breath and lifted her shirt. She revealed a bandage wrapped around her waist. Before Olivia could remove it, Elaine stopped her. It had horrified her to see the open wound on Mina. Elaine would have crumbled see her mother in any type of pain.

"Like I said, I am still a vampire but I've stopped feeding. I still have it in me. If Seth doesn't feed by Reckoning Day, I'll die along with the other minions but I'll still walk the earth, disintegrating each day until I'm a pile of dust. It's a painful and horrible existence, Lainey." Her mama took Elaine's hands, which made her jump. Elaine didn't jump out of pain because Olivia held her hands gently. She did it because the compassion and need her mother now had for Elaine. Olivia needed her.

"As much as you don't want to, you need to go back to Seth. There are only two ways out of this, kill him or help him. As you and I know, *you* can't kill him. Help him, Lainey." Olivia drew Elaine in closer to her. "Help me."

The awesome responsibility on Elaine's shoulders weighed more than the earth. She couldn't let her mother down. She'd already lost one parent to this thing.

Elaine nodded then hugged her mother. If she couldn't accomplish what she needed to, it would be the last time she would be able to hug her mother like this. Who knew what undead dead Olivia would be like?

"I still don't understand something." Elaine pulled back from her mama. "If you were a vampire when Dad met you, why did he write in his journal that all vampires are soulless creatures with no capacity to love?"

Olivia smiled and put her hand to Elaine's face. Olivia's hand felt warm. No way she could have been a cold, blood-sucking vampire in her younger days.

"You had a feeling about that journal when you read it. You said it sounded more like a manual than a journal, right?"

Not concerned about how her mother knew what she was thinking, Elaine nodded.

"Your father was trying to warn you, teach you. The type of sacrifices you would have to

make for our type of relationship is not worth it. There's always pain. And, Lainey, there is *always* loss. Don't think you're an exception. Although I'm glad I have my children, I so dearly miss my first husband. And I do love your stepfather. But there's nothing like your first love."

Elaine realized she was being selfish. If she didn't go through with this, then people would die, lives would be irrevocably changed, the world would be turned upside down. All she had to do to prevent that involved curing a neurotic. If she could make herself stop biting her nails then she could help Seth.

"Lainey, I know you have a lot of other questions. But we don't have much time." Olivia peered at her wristwatch. "There's a lot I need to teach you before they come to get you."

"How do you know they'll ...?"

Olivia cut her off. "They always do." She offered a smile, but it didn't reassure Elaine. "Let's start with the mind reading thing. I know your abuela taught you the quick fix for that. But you have the ability to do it without gimmicks."

Finally, Elaine would be able to give her poor fingers a rest. Olivia told Elaine that concentration would prevent it also. Crossing her fingers just got Elaine's mind off of what she had on her mind and on to her fingers, in the same way people tied a string around their fingers to remember something. So Elaine tried. She cleared her mind while doing Lamaze-type breathing as though it would help her.

Olivia laughed but confirmed to Elaine that her technique had worked.

"Could you read Vic's thoughts? That must have been disgusting." Elaine shuddered.

"No. I could never read Vic's. He's not an Ayudante though." Olivia smiled, but it quickly dropped. "Elaine, there's something else I need to tell you. I'm sure it won't change what you're about to do, but I wanted you to know."

Elaine cleaned the dish she'd used earlier and set it in the drainer. She walked over to her mama sitting on the other side of the bar. Her feet throbbed reminding her of her long walk just last night. As another night approached, Elaine wondered when the cavalry would arrive for her.

"What is it, Ma?"

Olivia took a deep breath. "How I became a vampire. I"

Before another word could be said, the front door was kicked open. Mina stomped inside. Pure venom shot from the vampire's eyes. If Elaine didn't know better, she would have sworn that Mina wanted her head on a platter.

"Your little act of defiance set Seth back." Mina approached Elaine.

"I didn't like what I saw last night." Elaine put her hands to her hips to look just as indignant. Against Mina, it didn't work.

"Tough. Get over it or get used to it." Mina glanced at Olivia. She cocked her head at her before returning her attention back to Elaine. "The car is waiting for us downstairs. We have to get out of here."

"But"

"Move it!" Mina grabbed Elaine's arm. Her strong grip felt as though she could snap Elaine's arm in two without any effort. So Elaine didn't want to give the woman any reason to squeeze just a little tighter to prove it.

Elaine peered back at her mother. "Thanks for the help. If you talk to Vic, thank him for me, too. I love you, Mama."

Elaine barely caught her mother's 'I love you' before Mina yanked her out of the door and dragged her down the stairs. Once they got to the ground floor, the driver opened the car door just before Mina pushed Elaine through. Mina followed her inside and the driver slammed

the door behind them.

As the Bentley pulled off, Mina muttered curses under her breath.

“Where are we go ...?”

“Home,” Mina spat. “You need to change.”

“Change for wha ...?”

Mina cut her off again. “Club. Seth wants you to meet him there.”

Elaine remained silent. She should have been happy. At least there were witnesses at the club in case Seth wanted to try something. Yeah, drunk, stoned, high witnesses.

Mina sighed, plastered a fake smile on her face then turned to Elaine. “I know this is a little much for you to take. Why, just about ten years ago I was a struggling college student at Norfolk State University when I was attacked and became who I am today.”

Elaine tried picturing this seductress as some co-ed wearing sweats and tee shirts. The picture appeared fuzzy especially since Mina smelled like money, expensive.

“Did Seth make you into a vampire?” Elaine concentrated hard to keep her mind clear in case Mina could read her thoughts, too. No use for Mina to know that the thought of Seth putting his lips on Mina’s neck made Elaine a little jealous.

Mina snickered. “Oh please. He’s a leader. At this point he’s only making vamps for mates. No, I became Seth’s right-hand woman because I knew I could get further with him.”

“Head to the top,” Elaine said, relief tingeing her voice.

“Oh, Seth is pretty high up there. But he’s not Numero Uno. That’s where you come in.”

The driver turned onto Seth’s street. Mina closed the black glass partition that separated the backseat from the driver.

“The task of curing Seth is kind of daunting. From what I understand he’s been this way for quite some time now.” Mina patted Elaine’s hand.

Elaine extracted her hand from Mina’s cold touch. Mina smiled even wider.

“If you can’t cure Seth, don’t beat yourself up about it.” Mina folded her arms over her lap. In the darkened car, the diamonds hanging from Mina’s neck and ears and her piercing green eyes glittered.

“Why? You and your goons plan on beating me up if I don’t cure him?”

Mina laughed. Had Elaine said something funny?

“Of course not,” Mina said. “As a matter of fact, when Reckoning Day comes and Seth is not cured, it’ll be good for me.” She looked at Elaine. “Good for us.”

Elaine moved back. She didn’t know what Mina was planning but from her tone and demeanor she wanted to enlist Elaine in her scheme.

“I’m a natural leader. I can kill and have no remorse about doing it.”

“I think Donald Trump gives that same speech at all of his board meetings.” Nerves were getting the best of Elaine.

“Cute.” Mina shook her head. “Seth shouldn’t be our leader anymore. He can’t take it. Excuse the pun, but it’s time for some new blood. I should be leading the vampires. I should have that huge mansion and all of the help bowing at my feet.” She stared intently at Elaine.

“And I need you to help me. All you have to do is act like you’re helping Seth and by Reckoning Day when he’s still the same finger-tapping-dogma-chanting babbling idiot that he is now, I can swoop in and take over. The Master will be so pleased with my work.” Mina clapped her hands in front of her. “And I promise you, I will never contact you again, you will get paid handsomely and Seth Overkill will be a thing of the past.”

The car pulled up to the mansion and into the garage. To say Elaine felt caught between

a rock and a hard place would have been an understatement. She could either help one evil being or a different evil being. But Mina had said the magic words: *I will never contact you again.*

Mina asked, "So what do you say?"

Elaine's mouth hung open. Before she could respond, Mina interjected another point.

"Or if you want this to go faster, there is a slayer after him. Let the slayer kill him."

Chapter Nine

Elaine tugged together the plunging neckline of her black jumpsuit as she stood in Seth's office at his club. How in the hell had she let Mina convince her to put on this monstrosity? Making deals behind people's backs didn't sit well with her either.

Elaine felt convinced to make the deal with the Devil's little sister when Mina told her that all Reckoning Day needed was a leader. Mina could stop the dead from walking around.

When Elaine watched Seth tonight, she knew Mina suited the leadership role better. Mina had a stone for a heart, but she had a lot of strength.

In his usual cardigan and saddle shoes, Seth paced. He now had black leather gloves on his hands and a surgical mask over his nose and mouth. He had spiraled down into the depths of his neuroses even further.

With Seth this out of control, Elaine didn't know what he would do. Had she known a drink of her blood would do this, she would have just given him a couple of drops. And he had a slayer after him, too. No wonder the man was on edge.

"You ran," Seth muttered on one pass in front of her. "I do not understand how people make promises then dismiss them like a sneeze." He stopped in front of her, peering down into her eyes. "You promised to help." The mask muffled his voice, but Elaine understood every word. "You said if I got you what you wanted you would stay. I got you your own room with a bathroom and locks on the doors, which by the way, will neither keep me nor Mina out of your room if we wanted you."

Elaine swallowed.

Seth continued, "A new computer has been installed and I have provided you with a laptop for when you are with me at the club." He pointed to a shiny but tough looking flat, silver case on the coffee table in front of his black couch. "There is a phone in your room and a cell phone there." Next to the industrial strength laptop sat a small, silver flip phone. "Fifty million will be deposited into your account on the first. I did everything you wanted and, trust me, I jump through hoops for no one. I even warned you about going downstairs after hours and you still ran. And I told you about feeding from you. I cannot do it."

Elaine opened her mouth but nothing came out. He'd warned her about everything and gotten her what she'd asked for and then some. Fifty million was way more than what he had originally agreed to pay her. Why the extra money?

"Sorry. I've tried to help." Bottom line. Elaine craved her freedom. "Just because you warn me about it, doesn't mean I won't be scared and run."

"But you promised. An Ayudante never goes back on her word. Never."

"But vampires do, right?"

Seth broke his gaze from hers and paced again. He still hadn't confessed anything about her father to her yet. Was this her punishment?

"I can't even read your thoughts anymore." His finger tapping became frantic. Seth was headed for a mental meltdown and if Elaine didn't do something quick, she would be the unfortunate recipient of his erratic behavior.

"Don't worry about my thoughts. If I'm here, just know that there's a reason for it." Yeah, her own agenda. Keep the world safe. Keep her mama alive. Get the hell out of Dodge.

Seth peered over at Elaine. His face twitched in a way she hadn't noticed before.

"Why do you keep tugging on your clothes?"

Elaine looked down. Her hands balled the top of her low-cut jumpsuit into a tight fist. No matter what she did, Elaine spied her cleavage, even as small as it was. If she could see it then she knew everyone else could.

"It exposes too much." And her shoes were killing her feet. They weren't as high as the sandals Mina normally wore but the thongs Mina shoved at Elaine to wear had a low but spiked heel. The heel pierced into the heel of her feet, causing an intense pain to go up the backs of her legs to the top of her head. However sitting down would show weakness. She wanted to be face to face--well with Seth more like face to massive chest--with Seth.

Seth shifted his weight from one side to the other. Elaine stood so close to him she heard him uttering 'dogma' under his mask. The ticks got progressively worse until Elaine's skin started to crawl. She felt as anxious as he acted. She shifted her weight and her breathing increased. What was this man doing to her?

"Stop fidgeting!" they said to each other in unison.

As though it cued something in both of them, Seth lowered his hands. The tick slowed itself down to a constant blink. Elaine let the top of her jumpsuit go and watched as Seth's gaze dropped to her chest then floated back up to her eyes.

"We've wasted enough time." She scanned his office for some writing equipment then her eyes settled on the laptop.

Good. An excuse to sit down.

"If I'm going to help you, we need to talk about it. We don't have much time." Elaine sat on the couch and flipped open the case.

"Would you like something to eat or drink?" He rushed to his kitchen. Even in the candlelit room, his tight backside looked wonderful in his pants. As Elaine fired up the laptop, her imagination went on a wild ride.

Seth as an exotic dancer. Maybe put him in some black leather pants and nothing else. *Yeah, baby, take them off.* She kept concentrating to keep him out of her head. Just because they couldn't have sex, didn't mean she couldn't think about it. In her mind, she had a better sex life than most women.

He opened his refrigerator. "I have regular apple pie." He set one on the counter. "And Dutch apple pie." He set another pie with a crumbly top on the counter next to the first. "And a pie with a lattice top. My first." He set it on the counter.

"No. Thanks." She held up her hand. When Seth made his way back to her, she asked, "What is it with you and these pies anyway?"

"What? They are just pies." He wrung his hands together.

"Yeah. But I don't think Betty Crocker has these many pies in her fridge." And considering the man didn't eat made the pie fetish even stranger.

"We are wasting time." He pulled up a chair in front of her, sat down and nodded. "Do your magic."

What did he expect? Did he think she would just read from some ancient incantation and make him better? Healing the mind required a lot of work. She hoped Seth had understood that when he snagged her.

"You do not look bad in that outfit," Seth said, breaking Elaine from her thoughts.

"I never said I thought I looked terrible in it. I just didn't think it was appropriate for me to wear." She felt the heat rising from her naked chest up to her neck. Never had she gone out

of the house in an outfit that didn't require a bra.

"It is very appropriate for my establishment." Seth finally removed his mask down from his mouth. His lips curled into a tight line.

"Yeah, well I don't come here. And no one sees me but you and Mina." She kicked off her shoes and balled her feet slowly. The bottoms of her feet felt tight.

"Your shoes are off." Seth balled the surgical mask into one hand and tapped his fingers on the other.

"People do that when their feet hurt. Perhaps if you had a heart and could feel and know pain, you would understand." She didn't mean for the statement to come out so harsh and cruel but no way was she going to accommodate his quirks.

"Are they at least clean?" He couldn't stop staring at her feet.

She huffed. "Do you want to inspect them?"

He laughed and averted his gaze. "Do not be ridiculous."

Elaine returned her attention to the laptop screen until the weight of his stares bore down on her again. His gaze returned to her feet. Seth bounced his knee.

Elaine couldn't take it. She lifted her foot in the air and hovered it in front of Seth's face. "See. Look at it. It's fine. No dirt. I stepped out of your shower, dried my feet on your towel and put my feet in the shoes you bought me. I have nothing of my own here. I have no life. I have a task. And no one around me seems to understand what I'm going through. So if you will just back up off me and give me a break, I can do what you've kidnapped me to do and get on with my work."

Wow! It felt good to finally get that off of her chest.

With his gloved hand, Seth grabbed her ankle. Elaine gasped and braced her hands on the couch, attempting to pull her foot away. Seth set the mask on the coffee table with his free hand then reached into his pocket. After retrieving a white handkerchief, he did something Elaine would have never thought he would do. He dragged the cloth over his tongue. This must have been another one of his rituals. Why was he holding on to her leg?

"What are you doing?" she asked, fear lacing her voice.

Seth glanced at her then ran the cloth over the bottom of her foot.

She jerked her leg. "Whoa! You get disgusted when I spit on your floor, but you just put your saliva on the bottom of my foot?"

Seth set her foot down. He held out his hand in a silent request for the second foot.

"Tell me what you're doing." Elaine brought her foot up and twisted it over to look at the underside. Just what had Seth done?

Without warning, he reached down and picked up her other foot, causing Elaine to tip back against the couch. He repeated the process for her second foot then he set it down as easily as he'd done with her other one.

"I am a fast healer," he began. He stood and strolled to a trashcan where he deposited the handkerchief and surgical mask. "I have properties in my body that can heal wounds." He walked back to her and reclaimed his seat. "It is genetic."

Elaine's breathing quickened as she lowered her foot to the floor. "That's impossible. It's not medically sound."

"I defy modern medicine." He smiled. "By the way, how are your hands and knees?"

She gasped and slammed her foot down too hard, sending shockwaves of pain pricks through her foot and leg. She winced and blinked back a tear. So much for his fast healing properties. What she needed was a nice long bath in her tub at home with a good book.

Book. Her father's journal. Seth hadn't mentioned it since her return. She hadn't found it in her room when she'd changed earlier that evening. He hadn't even mentioned it when he rattled off his list of items he'd gotten for her while she was out.

Knowing Seth, he had probably burned it like everything else in his life. The journal had touched the ground and a dog stood over it. Double whammy in Seth's book.

Elaine shook her head. She should have given her life for that book. It held the link to her past, her history. It felt like she'd lost her father twice and this man was responsible.

She did nothing to hide her thoughts. She wanted Seth to read them, hear them loud and clear. His bullying tactics wore on her resolve. She hated that she needed him so much. And she would never forgive him for whatever role he had played in her father's death.

"I take it from your silence that they are both fine now." Seth sat back, satisfied that he had just trumped her.

"So when did you start this thing?" She stared at the computer screen.

"I do not know exactly when. Five, six years ago maybe." His low voice rumbled. It made Elaine's insides quiver when he spoke.

"What happened then?" She typed notes. "Normally when there is a shift in behavior, it can be attributed to a single catastrophic event." Her mind went straight to her father.

Guilt? Had guilt of what he had done to Elaine's father propelled him to this state? If so, would she want to cure him right away? The man needed to suffer if he had caused her father to die in the prime of his life.

"It wasn't because of your father's death," Seth said as though responding to her thoughts. Since she had stopped concentrating on keeping him out of her head, he could have been. He didn't need to keep visiting. She focused hard to keep him out of her thoughts. If he knew what she was thinking, he would have torn out her heart.

"Good to know you can help kill a man and have no guilt or remorse over taking him away from his family." This time she meant for him to feel her venom, her hate. How could he be so cold? That's right. He was a vampire. How else was he supposed to be?

"I considered Alex to be a friend."

To hear Seth call her father by his name rattled her more than having to wear the low cut jumpsuit. She stopped typing, but she kept her gaze on the computer screen.

Seth continued. "All Alex ever wanted was a normal home life. He wanted the wife and children and"

"White picket fence?" Elaine remembered that they had that at their house. Now that she thought about it, the fence could have been there to stake intruding vampires. Her childhood memories would never be the same, starting from her mother to her childhood home.

"Yes, especially the fence. I never understood why he would have wanted a life that sounded so boring."

Elaine jerked her head up. She flashed Seth a death stare.

"Just had to put him out of his misery, huh?" She stared into his eyes. She forgot about treating a patient. She stared down a bully.

"When you understand your father's full story, then I will tell you how he died."

"He was murdered." She gritted her teeth until her head pounded. Elaine returned her attention to the bright laptop screen. Seth would never understand her pain or even care.

As she typed, she heard a slow, hissing sound on the table. She peered over next to the computer to see Seth pushing her father's journal toward her. Her heart stopped as she eyed the worn, brown leather cover with its frayed edges. She put her hand over her pounding heart.

“I know you were worried about this.” Seth kept his gaze down. “I did not read it.” Then he looked into her eyes. “I promise.”

And she believed him. Elaine lifted the book. How can an inanimate object hold warmth? She held the book close to her chest. The tear that had bubbled up in her eye earlier had now rolled down her cheek and over the journal. She now had someone who understood her experience. Seth had given him back to her, if only a small part.

She looked up, knowing her face must have looked like hell. The pounding bass of the music downstairs didn’t even bother her. With this one act, Seth proved he could be human.

“Thank you,” she said.

He started to tap his fingertips again but then balled his hand into a fist. Maybe he was trying to be a little decent himself. If he could give a little, then so could she.

“And thank you for my hands, knees, and feet. I appreciate it even though I may have sounded like a spoiled brat just a minute ago.”

She balled her toes. The bottoms of her feet no longer felt tight. She glanced at the bottom of one. The slight tears and cuts had closed. Seth had healed her.

Elaine took a deep breath. “So you said you noticed the compulsive behavior started about five or six years ago?” She brought her hand up to wipe her face when Seth shoved a tissue toward her in his gloved hand.

“For your face.” He pointed to her eyes and nose then sat back. With his feet planted wide apart on the floor and his broad shoulders straight, he looked like a king on a throne.

She accepted the soft facial tissue and dabbed her tears from her cheeks. Elaine didn’t get emotional, especially in front of a man, and especially since Alvin.

Her emotions came for her father not because of Seth. She cried because she had her father’s journal back. And she wouldn’t have had it if it hadn’t been for the kindness of Seth.

“I don’t know the exact date,” Seth began. “All I know is one day I realized I had a ritual for everything and I had never done that before. I had to brush my teeth a certain way and have things arranged in a way that calmed me down.”

“There’s nothing wrong with good dental hygiene and people would pay big bucks to have you arrange their houses in a way that calms them down. It’s called feng shui now.” Keep it simple. Maybe if he didn’t think he had a problem then he would go back to feeding.

“I am always washing my hands. I cannot touch anything.” He held up his large hands that could easily fit around Elaine’s neck and crush her windpipe with one squeeze.

She cleared her throat and returned her gaze back down to the screen. “That’s a compulsion dealing with germs.” She crossed her legs. “I’m a firm believer in that if you understand your problems, you’ll know how to fix them. That thing you do with repeating that word. You’re thinking about harming yourself or others. I wouldn’t be surprised if all vampires aren’t a little obsessive-compulsive.”

Seth didn’t look amused by Elaine’s humorous conclusion.

“Moving on. If you’re constantly touching yourself or others, you have a compulsion about sex.”

“That sounds more like you.”

Elaine’s mouth hung open and she knew her cheeks flushed red from the heat she felt.

“You are always thinking about sex.”

And since the man could read her mind, she couldn’t deny the fact. “If you want me to stop, then don’t walk around me without a shirt.” Before Seth could refute her requests, she moved on. “If you have a need to tell, ask or confess something, you pray a lot.”

“But you’re the one who prays all of the time.”

Elaine furrowed her eyebrows as she stared at him.

“You do. I’ve heard you do that Spanish prayer a couple of times.”

Elaine continued. “Constant ordering and arranging means you have forbidden thoughts.”

She thought about her demeanor in her office. How meticulous she’d been in picking out the office wall color scheme and the furniture. How Elaine had to have the right types of magazines in the office. Down to the black leather couch, a lot like Seth’s, in her office.

Elaine didn’t read the last compulsion out loud, the need to have things ‘just so’. She could allow for some imperfections in her life. Many days she’d forgotten to fix her bed before rushing off to work. It didn’t bother her one bit. And she’d never sent her food back in a restaurant if it didn’t meet her standards.

She knew what Seth planned. He wanted to make it seem like they had a lot more in common than she thought. Elaine didn’t act like Seth no matter what she knew about the disorder or what Seth thought.

“The good thing about this disorder”

Seth cut in. “There is a good thing?”

“... is that you can be cured. There are some new drugs out there that can”

Seth whipped his head back and forth. “I cannot take medication of any kind.”

Elaine’s shoulders slumped down. “Is it because you can’t stand the feel of a pill going down your throat? You think the pharmacist is trying to kill you?”

Seth bolted up from his chair. “I am not exactly human. Medications will not work on me. I will throw it up as soon as it hits my system.”

Elaine leaned back into the couch and folded her arms. This time Seth’s erratic behavior didn’t scare her. She listened to him.

“Perhaps you need a crash course on what it means to be a vampire.” Seth started pacing.

Oh no. She’d triggered something in him.

“I do not get sick. Ever. No sniffles, no allergies, no sore throats. Nothing. If I feed regularly I can heal pretty quickly. See.” He unbuttoned his shirt, took the arm that she’d speared a couple of days before out of its sleeve and crouched down next to her. The open gash that had looked like Seth would have needed stitches had completely healed.

As a doctor, she couldn’t believe it. She wanted so much to run her hand over the flesh and see how he could heal so quickly. She didn’t want to chance getting him worked up again.

“I thought you promised not to go around shirtless in front of me.” Elaine tried to lighten the moment even though she tried to come to grips with the fact that Seth admitted to not being exactly human. Superhuman. Immortal. A vampire.

Seth tucked his arm back into its sleeve. “At dawn, I go right to sleep.”

A longing in Seth’s voice squeezed Elaine’s heart. He wanted exactly what Elaine wanted. He wanted his life back.

Seth said, “At dusk, I wake up in a jolt. I do not eat food or drink water. My system will not tolerate a lot of it. That was why I tried stopping you yesterday from putting that ointment on me. It did not help.”

Seth picked up a trashcan and brought it over to Elaine. With a nod of his head, he motioned for her to toss away her tear-soaked tissue. She did, not needing it anymore. He returned the can to its spot then removed his gloves and threw them away too.

It would have been too much to think that he had made progress. She knew that he’d

thrown them away because one had touched the trashcan and now considered them dirty. And he couldn't just throw one away because that would make the set uneven.

Oh no. She thought like him now. Her stomach heaved at the idea.

"What is it that you dream about?" Elaine asked.

Seth paused for a long time. He reached into his desk drawer to retrieve another pair of black leather gloves. Although he pulled them out, he never put them on. He put them back into the drawer and slammed it shut.

After taking a deep breath, he said, "My wife."

The mention of Seth's wife started the pounding in Elaine's heart. What was that? Jealousy? No. Couldn't be. Seth was a patient and definitely off limits. Even if she obsessed over his body, she didn't want him. Why would she want a man who picked her up when she knocked herself out in an alley, cleaned her up, gave her great clothes, paid her an incredible sum of money and could heal her?

"Were you like this with her?" she asked. If his wife had stuck by him in this state, the woman deserved sainthood. Maybe the woman left him to get away from his quirks.

Seth repeated his comfort word again. Elaine knew repetition meant the patient felt like he might have harmed himself or others. Had Seth hurt his wife? Had he killed her?

"What happened to your wife?" Elaine pressed.

Seth looked at her. "It is not what you think. Yes, she is dead."

Elaine's mouth dropped open.

"I did not kill her. You have to believe me."

Elaine stood from the couch. Her first instinct to run filled her head. Get away from this man and his mysterious past filled with death. It was apparent that no matter how far she ran or where she went, he would find her.

"So what happened to her?" Elaine folded her arms over her chest.

"Someone killed her."

"Was she a vampire like you?"

"Yes."

"Did you change her into one?"

"Yes."

At least he had been honest.

"We lived in New York. The heart of Manhattan. There were some killings going on in Central Park about ten years ago. No leads. All of the victims were drained of blood, their hearts pulled out of their bodies. They called the killer Thief of Hearts. I hate when the media names the killer like a celebrity."

Elaine remembered hearing about that serial killer. As a graduation present to herself she and a few of her friends were going to go to New York for a week but then the killings had started. She decided against it. When she'd changed her mind about going, Alvin had disappeared. Not even his family knew where he'd gone. At least that's what they told her.

"Charlotte and I had nothing to do with the killings. A rogue vampire did this in New York and he or she was trying to set us up. The bodies were left close to where we worked and lived. No one knew we were vampires but the police snooped around us. We had made plans to move back to Virginia Beach."

Elaine's heart thrummed with anticipation.

Seth said, "At dawn the day before we were to go to Virginia Beach, I had gone home and Charlotte wanted to make one last stop somewhere before we left. She would not tell me

where and to this day I still cannot figure out where she would have gone. I sat in that apartment, the shades all drawn, in the dark until I could not stay awake. When I woke up that night and Charlotte never showed, I called the police. They said that they had been investigating a crime scene in Central Park where they found the charred remains of a woman, chained around a tree with a stake through her heart. A homeless man reported it. I knew in my heart and in my gut that it was her. If I had made her come home with me, she would be with me today.” Seth stomped over to Elaine. “Make no mistake. I would have traded my life for hers. She was my wife.” Seth made his way over to the large window that looked out over the club. “Please forgive me, Charlotte, because I could not save you.”

Elaine’s heart wrenched. He possessed that ageless love that Elaine hadn’t thought existed.

Seth had made Charlotte into a vampire. As a result, she had limitations. And he didn’t try to bring her in away from the sun the day she died ... was murdered. He must have blamed himself on different levels. No wonder he was always trying to boss her around. Part of it was his OCD. The other part, Elaine wanted to think, was because maybe he liked her just a little.

Elaine crept to the man. Seth had his head bowed and chanted ‘dogma’-like a mantra. “It’s not your fault.” It was all Elaine could say. “Things happen for a reason.”

Seth lifted his head and glared at Elaine. “So if I told you that your father’s killing happened for a reason, would you be fine with that?”

That wound cut her deep. She took a step back.

Seth stepped closer to her. “If I told you that your fiancé’s disappearance had to happen, would you be so accepting?”

Elaine shook her head. “You son-of-a-bitch.” If she hadn’t thought the man could knock her back into next week, she would have hit him. It wasn’t a natural reaction, but it would have made her feel good at the moment.

“Exactly. I am a son-of-a-bitch. I hurt people. This is my comeuppance.” He looked out into the crowd. “In a couple of weeks, I will right the wrong and apologize to her.”

Elaine thought about his cryptic statement until she realized what he’d meant by it. “Seth, no! You’ve stopped feeding to bring Charlotte back from the grave? You can’t! You ...”

He got into Elaine’s face, snorting, his eyes black and cold, full of hate and anger and vengeance. Elaine trembled, not because of Seth’s awesome presence or that he could hurt her, but more of what he had planned. He had sacrificed his natural need to feed for redemption.

“Do you not want to see your father again?” he asked. “I can make it happen.” He glanced out of his window and into the crowded dance floor. “The one feeding didn’t help. Look. They are still coming.” He pointed to one partygoer.

Elaine nervously broke her gaze from Seth’s to look into the crowd. She saw a woman who seemed to have lost control of her neck muscles from the way it toppled back and forth. The crowd parted for her as she stumbled her way across the floor. She wore a dated, flowered dress complete with white, lace trim around the neck. Her skin held a yellowish tinge. Her hair, obviously a wig, drooped to one side. But she looked too young to wear a wig. Maybe she was a cancer survivor and wore it to cover her head. Any excuse would be better than the alternative.

“The dead are among us.” Seth confirmed her suspicions.

Chapter Ten

The offer tempted Elaine. For as long as she could remember she had wanted nothing more than to talk to her father, give him a hug and one last kiss. Plus, it'd be interesting to hear how the afterlife treated him.

This whole situation didn't involve her. It involved saving her mother, saving the planet, keeping the dead from walking the earth. She would be willing to suspend belief and exist in this parallel dimension until Seth fed again or Reckoning Day came, whichever ever came first. But she wouldn't be bought off with human souls.

"Thank you, but no thank you," she said as she took another step away from Seth. "I've made my peace with my departed loved ones. I suggest you do the same."

Thank God Seth couldn't read her mind. She had a headache from concentrating so hard. He would have known she'd lied about making her peace with her dearly departed.

Her father's death still vexed Elaine. And while Seth held the key to what had happened to him, she would never truly trust him.

Seth turned back to the window, staring down at the colorful, dancing bodies. "It is not that easy. You get used to a lifestyle. You cannot turn it on and off."

Elaine stared at Seth as he people watched. She wondered if he was watching a lifestyle he wanted again or if he hungered for a feed. Or maybe he was looking for his slayer. She shook her head and walked back to the couch.

"Who is that woman down there? Do you know her?" she asked.

"Not personally. I smelled her when she came in. Another gift." He chuckled.

"She has to be buried. She can't exist like this."

He faced her, his expression stoic but open.

"Do you have a slayer after you?" she finally asked.

With a slight smile, he answered, "Yes. He comes to kill me every day. Or I guess I should say every evening."

She blinked. "This doesn't bother you?"

"Of course it does. He is very messy."

His response caused her to rut her eyebrows. "Messy. Right. Doesn't it scare you to know a man has made it his life's work to having you killed?"

This question made him laugh heartily as he stared down at the partiers. "If you met him, you would understand. As a matter of fact," he strolled to the door, "he is here, too."

Elaine balled her hands into fists as soon as Seth opened the door in a grand, sweeping motion. The shrieks that came from outside the door didn't help to keep her heart from rocketing out of her mouth. As soon as she saw a nebbish of a man barrel through his office, nearly slamming against the window, her heartbeat slowed.

"You knew I was here because you read my mind, didn't you?" the man asked as he paced back and forth.

Standing about five foot tall, what was most noticeable about the man was his outfit. A football helmet adorned with spikes covered his head. Around his neck hung a necklace of garlic bulbs as well as a three-inch long crucifix. In his black skin-tight, long-sleeved shirt and black tights, he looked like a slug, full-bellied and ridiculous. He capped the getup wearing the old

black-and-white Chuck Taylor sneakers.

Yes, she understood why Seth did not see this man as a threat.

“I saw you walking, or rather sneaking, across the club. Please tell me you did not Mace my doormen again.” Seth crossed his arms over his chest.

“No one can keep me from my destiny.” His gaze darted to Elaine, which made Seth step possessively closer to her. “Who are you? Are you one of them?”

“Leave her out of it and concentrate on me,” Seth said, this time rising up to his full height. “I am the one you are after, correct?”

“Fine.” The man struggled to retrieve something from a satchel. “Hope you’re ready because this will be your last day.” From his bag, he pulled out a wooden stake, the pointed end in his hand and the blunt end facing Seth.

Elaine had to bite her bottom lip to keep from laughing. Seth, on the other hand, started tapping his fingers. She thought this guy didn’t bother him.

“George, turn the stake around.” Seth twirled his finger in the air.

“Oh.” He flipped the stake around, dropping it once before holding it up, shaking it in his grasp. “You ready to die, demon?”

“Seth, stop him.” Elaine bolted from the couch. She’d only seen George for two minutes and he was pissing her off. She wanted to kick this guy in his family jewels.

“You do not want to do that, dear,” Seth said, reading her open and angry thoughts.

“Are you talking to me?” George asked.

“Did it sound like I was referring to you?” Seth cocked his head. “Too late.”

Through the door burst in two large bodyguards, also clad in all black but they didn’t have that slug-like look.

“Gentlemen, he got up here again,” Seth said, less amused than before.

One guard rubbed his red eyes, swollen and oozing with tears.

“Take George to the usual.”

The other guard wrenched the little man’s arms behind his back. George winced and gritted his teeth.

“Same time tomorrow?” George asked as he was pulled past Seth.

“I will be here.” Exhaustion filled Seth’s words.

“And don’t think I don’t know what’s going on. I saw her. I saw that dead woman. You’re nothing but a monster!”

Elaine’s eyes grew wide. George had seen the dead woman walking around in the club. Well, she was hard to miss. And from the way the crowds parted around her, her scent was probably hard to miss, as well.

“Sorry, sir. This won’t happen again,” his guard said.

When the door closed, Seth began pacing. Even though he seemed completely annoyed by the little man, he was the only person Seth ever mentioned by name. Perhaps he was Seth’s only friend, or the closest thing to a friend. This was an unhealthy relationship. And the room was filled with too much tension.

“You know, I’ve met a vampire before,” Elaine began.

Seth turned to her.

“Actually he was a janitor at one of the hospitals I worked at a couple of years ago. Said he loved the night shift because he couldn’t stand the daylight. He and his lady, as he called her, Dita, liked to cut each other and drink one another’s blood. Then they would have sex.” She felt the heat rising to her chest at the thought of bloody sex. Why had she told him the sex part?

“That is not being a vampire. That is just perverted youths trying to be kinky.” Seth stared down at his left hand. “Being a vampire is more than wearing all black, hanging out at night, drinking blood, human preferably, and filing down your teeth.” He smirked, his canines shining in the reflective disco lights. “Being a vampire takes dedication. It is a life not a lifestyle. It is a commitment.” His wedding band shimmered off of the lights. He peered over at Elaine. “You do not wear your fiancé’s ring. Why?”

“Why do you still wear your wedding band?” she asked.

“It hurts too much to take it off.”

“It hurts too much for me to leave it on.”

Seth nodded. “Alex, your father, used to be a wonderful cook.” A smile crept up as Seth meandered around his office. “So I was told.” The flicker of the candlelight made his skin glow. “I never ate any of it, mind you. But the smells.” Seth took a deep breath as though he could smell it right now. “The best thing about being a vampire is all of our senses are heightened. Smells, tastes, hearing, sight.”

“Touch?” Elaine’s body tingled at the thought of what sex must be like as a vampire. Did they even have sex? They must. Seth said it had been forbidden, which meant it had been an issue. Then there were her parents. They had crossed the line.

“Yes, touch.” Seth peered into the packed club again and snickered.

“What’s so funny?”

He pointed into the crowd. “Your father could dance.” Seth clapped his massive hands in front of him. “Salsa king. Oh and the tango was his specialty. That is how he got your mother’s attention.”

“My mother danced the tango?”

If straight-laced Olivia Vargas-Puro Shrink, president of the Beach Ladies’ League, former PTA president, soccer mom in every sense of the word and avid gardener, had once shaken her hips and kicked her leg up higher than an inch, then Elaine would strip down naked and run through the club with a rose stem in her mouth.

“Olivia loved to dance.” Seth got that faraway look in his eye again but the smile remained. Thank God Elaine hadn’t said out loud that she would run through the club naked. Seth might put her up to it.

Elaine wanted to imagine what life must have been like for the trio back then. Were they all best friends? Was Charlotte in the picture by then? When had it all gone wrong?

“So do you dance?” Seth asked.

Elaine shook her head. “Absolutely not. I jog for exercise.”

Seth walked back over to Elaine. She didn’t have to look up to know he stood right by her. His huge presence overwhelmed her. He sat down on the couch next to her, which forced Elaine to finally face him.

Under his unsure demeanor stirred a fiery, sexual being that had so much confidence that it would have knocked Marilyn Monroe, Madonna, and Lil Kim down with a single wink.

“I have an idea of how to be the man you once were.”

“I would like to hear it.” Did his voice get even lower?

Elaine rubbed the back of her neck. “I find that with some of my patients who are like you find comfort in replaying themselves before they got to this point.”

“You want me to play myself before I started being compulsive?” He scratched his head. “How does one do that?”

“Sometimes starting from the outside can help the inside. So the first thing we need to do

is work on your wardrobe.” Elaine scanned his safe duds. “Have you always worn cardigans and saddle shoes? Doesn’t seem like the usual attire for a vampire.”

Seth cocked his head. “And what kind of attire would that be? I am starting to enjoy hearing the stereotypes for my kind.”

She cleared her throat. “You have the classic vampires that wore the capes and the black suits. Then you have your modern vampires in, well, uh, leather pants and stuff. You know.” She waved her hand in the air to see if Seth would complete her statement.

He sat back and smiled at her. “You would like to see me in leather pants?”

“Yes. Well, no. Yes, if that’s what you used to wear before you became obsessive.”

Seth moved closer to her. “What else should I do in this, um, revamping process?”

Elaine stared at him. She couldn’t help but laugh at his cute if not astute statement.

“Yes, I guess we are revamping the vampire, huh? It would help me a lot if you told me what’s expected for All Soul’s Day. You’re supposed to be one-hundred percent healthy, which means what exactly?”

“I have to make sure I am able lead my people through the next millennium. For those with an especially harsh transition, I am a conduit for those passing from life to death. A ceremony is performed using an ancient amulet handed down from generation to generation.”

“Where’s the amulet?” Elaine scanned the office but in its darkened state, she doubted she would be able to locate it.

“In a safe place.”

She nodded. Seth must not have trusted her as much as she didn’t trust him.

He continued. “So changing my clothes is a start. What else should I do?”

“What else did you do? What were you like before your metamorphosis?” Elaine concentrated on the laptop screen, waiting for Seth to say something. When he didn’t she returned her attention to him.

“Sex.”

Her skin prickled. “What?”

“I fornicated as often as possible with as many women as possible. You women are like narcotics.” As though he’d done it before, Seth brushed a stray curl from Elaine’s face.

She remained still but her insides screamed in pleasure at his gentle touch.

“I cannot get enough of the way you women smell, taste, feel.” His hand brushed down her arm, coasting over the fine hairs on her arm making them each stand on end.

“But then something changed, right?” As much as she should have wanted to pull her arm away, Elaine kept her body still, craving for the next touch.

“Something changed. We were talking about what I was like before. I like recalling my behavior from that time period.” Something in Seth had changed.

Had one simple request released the animal inside of him? Elaine had experienced glimpses of Seth’s hidden rage. She didn’t know which side scared her the most, scary Seth or sexy Seth.

She darted from the couch and padded over to the window. “Those people down there don’t know what they’re in for.” In the crowd she spotted her neighbor, Charles.

Standing in the middle of the dance floor, looking impeccable in his dark suit, he stared up at the office. She waved to him, hoping he could see her. His smile let her know he did.

So straight-laced, cat-chasing Charles was a clubber. Why not? Stranger things have happened.

“Let’s not talk about them,” Seth said.

Elaine heard the couch crinkle behind her. Seth was on the move. She continued staring out of the window, trying to find the dead woman walking. She had disappeared somewhere.

The cinnamon-and-apple smell wafted to her. The feeling of home swept over her. Elaine wrapped her arms around her body.

When Seth stood next to her, Elaine longed to feel the warmth of his body. However he emitted no heat.

“I can teach you.” Seth growled in her ear.

Clamping tighter around her body to ward off the chill, Elaine kept her eyes straight ahead. He’d made her lose focus more than once with his bag of magic tricks. If she didn’t look at him, he couldn’t convince her to do something she didn’t want to do.

“Maybe we should concentrate on making you well. If we heighten the treatment, maybe we can make it in a week. We’ll just concentrate on the germ thing since that’s what’s keeping you from feeding, right?”

Now Elaine tried to gain eye contact but Seth kept his gaze on the partiers below. He blew his breath out against the glass, leaving no visible moisture on it then walked past Elaine to his desk. He picked up the receiver and punched a key on the pad. Seth stood too far from Elaine to hear what he told the person on the other end.

He hung up the phone and reclaimed his position by her, still looking out of the glass as though he had never left the spot.

“I would like to dance again,” Seth proclaimed.

Elaine blinked, leaving her arms around her waist. As though he had cued it himself, the bass line of the music below changed. Seth strolled to his sound system at the other end of his office. He pushed in a button, lighting up the display with colors of blue, green, and red. Rolling his finger over a large, silver knob, he turned up the music that must have been playing in the club. The beats matched.

The song sounded like an up-tempo hip-hop version of a tango. Seth couldn’t have been thinking of dancing that with her. The dance required a lot of touching and close body proximity. So far, Seth had managed to remain at least three feet from Elaine all night long. Not that she minded. Not that much.

He walked back to her. “Let me teach you to tango like your parents.”

Ah hah. Adding the parents’ angle at the end of his statement was going to be his way to get her. She wasn’t going to waffle.

“Why don’t we talk about Charlotte and figure out what it is that you can’t let go.” She stood strong at her spot.

“Why is it that you can let go of love so easily?”

Her jaw flinched. She brought up her finger to yell at him and he held up his hand.

“You want to yell at me you will have to dance.”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t. I don’t have to do anything you tell me to do. I am my own woman.” She turned to the door. She’d had it up to her head in his mind games. If he didn’t want her help, fine. Mina was ready, willing and more than able to take over as a leader.

“And you have a problem with men,” Seth called after her.

That was it. She spun on her heels, steam coming from her nostrils and ears. As she approached him, Seth pulled out a pair of latex gloves and slipped them on. The last time he’d done that, he was preparing to clean the window and she panicked. This time she hadn’t touched anything except for the laptop. Was he going to clean that? Yeah, that’ll show her.

Instead he presented his hand to her. “May I have this dance?” he asked.

Confusion seemed an inadequate way to describe how she felt. Angry, flattered, lost, hopeful, sad, sentimental. He wanted to dance with her but not touch her bare skin. And in looking at his blank expression, he must not have realized what donning gloves before touching her had meant to Elaine. She felt no more important than the nameless help at the mansion.

“Come on.” He goaded. “I will not bite.”

She couldn’t help but snicker. “Good for me. Bad for the world.”

She brought her hands up and touched his. Although still cold through the gloves, his strong hands held hers tightly. He put his other hand on her waist. Her stomach lurched. She wanted nothing more than to run the other way, get out of his grip. She felt compelled to stay.

“Normally you would put your hand on my shoulder,” Seth began.

When she raised her hand, he flinched back. Her heart sank at his disgusted response.

“But I am not there yet,” he concluded. “With your help, maybe I will be.”

Her heart slowed. “So what do I do with my hand?”

“Just keep it down and to your side without touching me.”

She dropped her hand down to her side, letting it dangle like a dead fish on a hook. Nope, that wasn’t strange at all.

“Why don’t we just forget this? It’s silly anyway and we’re not getting anywhere with your treatment.” Basically, she wanted to be out of the arms of a man who apparently didn’t want to touch her in the first place. If she had wanted that, she would have searched for Alvin.

“Because I want to show you that I am willing to try.” Seth took a step forward, which made Elaine take a step back. “See, you are a natural. It is in your blood.”

She swallowed hard again when he mentioned blood. “So tell me. At what point did you stop following me around?”

Seth cocked a smile then dipped her back. “Who said I ever stopped?”

Elaine cleared her throat. “You know. I wish I had thought of this earlier,” she began hastily. “I have friends at a blood bank. Maybe I can come up with a plan to”

Still dipped back, he cut her off and said, “It is not the feed but the hunt I am after.”

The words from her father’s diary echoed in her head. *Don’t trust vampires.* Perhaps this was all an elaborate scheme to get Elaine to his office so Seth could feed off of her.

Elaine struggled to keep her head forward, her chin to her chest to lower Seth’s temptation. She planted her free hand on the floor to steady herself and kept a tight hold of Seth’s gloved hand. His cold, hard hand felt like a mannequin’s. Except a mannequin didn’t move the way Seth did.

“Lesson over. I think I got the tango down,” Elaine said, struggling to get upright.

“I never thanked you for what you did for me last night.” His brown eyes transformed into a lighter shade. How long would it take for them to turn gray? “It was brave thing you did. Stupid. Risky. But brave.”

“That’s what I’m here for. Risky, stupid gestures.” Her breathing increased into a pant as he lowered his head.

“And you tasted so”

The door of Seth’s office crashed open and Mina rushed in like a military leader taking over a hostile land. “Seth, we got a dead one in the club. I heard about George and ... hello.” Mina smiled as she looked at the duo. “I see training is going well. Too well, huh?” She stared pointedly at Elaine.

Seth, nearly dropping Elaine when Mina came in, pulled her up and let her go. He popped the gloves off of his hands. “What are you doing in my office?” He tossed the gloves in

the trash and smoothed his hand over his hair.

“I was going to tell you what was going on in the club. But I see you have your hands full with your treatment so I’ll leave you two alone.” She winked at the two of them but gave a knowing nod to Elaine.

Elaine didn’t know what that look meant. She knew it had something to do with how well Elaine got Seth on his feet.

“Whatever is going on, take care of it for me.” Seth waved Mina away. “And the next time you need to tell me something, knock first. I am going through treatment.”

“Treatment. Right.” Mina cut her eyes between the two of them then backed through the door. “I’ll just take care of everything.” She closed the door behind her.

Elaine let out her breath, glad that Mina had kept their deal a secret. After Seth’s little dance, Elaine wasn’t so sure that her allegiance should necessarily lie with Mina. Seth was slowly revealing himself to be a compassionate person. Just because he had a few quirks didn’t make him all bad, right?

Elaine sat on the couch. She’d left her laptop on too long and an aquarium scene with multicolored computerized fish swimming around popped on as a screensaver. What? No skulls bouncing from one side to the other? No vampire bats flitting around a black screen? What kind of vampire was Seth Overkill anyway?

“So, Mina. What’s her story?” Elaine asked. She tapped her index finger on her mouse pad to return to her screen. She’d heard Mina’s side of the story. Now she wanted Seth’s.

“When she came to the club, she pulled a lot of interesting people in here with her. She seemed to have her head on straight so I made her my assistant. Other than being a little sarcastic at times, she is good to have around.”

Elaine kept her head down, careful to keep her gaze from Seth. This man trusted Mina, the woman who wanted to betray him. Why did Elaine even care? Seth only cared about himself.

“So do you only make vampires those who you are in love with?” Her skin tingled waiting for the answer.

“No. Only once.” He strolled to the kitchenette to put the pies back in the refrigerator. “Sometimes I would do it for sport. Make them a vampire but not give them the tools to protect themselves. They would fry within the first day going out into the sun.”

Elaine cringed at how cold he sounded. He cared nothing about people.

Seth said, “That was the first year. I was a little bitter then and in love with my power. Then I was making perfect soldiers. Vampires who did not look the part who could recruit others. It was not often that I did that. As a matter of fact, your mother was the last one I did.”

Elaine’s heart slammed against her chest and for what seemed like several minutes, she stopped breathing. Seth was the one who had made her mother a vampire? Seth now held the key for her mother’s survival? Seth was the reason for Elaine’s twisted existence now.

“I don’t believe this.” Elaine turned off the computer and jumped to her feet. “You attacked my mother? You’re the one that made her into a freak?”

Seth’s mouth hung open. “Your grandmother did not tell you?”

“No. She probably doesn’t know since I didn’t find out about my mother being a vampire until earlier this evening.”

“Your mother saw you today?”

“Yes. And she showed me her wound. She’s disintegrating just like Mina.” She slid on her uncomfortable shoes. She needed to head home. Seth could go to hell. And to think, she

had almost felt sorry for him. He almost had her believing that he had a heart.

“Where are you going?” Seth came after her, muttering his comfort word with each step.

“Home. I mean your house. It’s two o’clock in the morning. I’m tired. And since I can’t go home because the police are there and I know you’ll send your goons after me, I might as well go to your place.” She snatched her purse off of the coffee table.

“Wait. Will you hear me out?” Seth reached out to touch Elaine’s arm but immediately pulled back. He tapped his fingertips in a machinegun succession. “I was not in love with your mother when I made her a vampire. She meant nothing to me.”

Elaine balled her hands into fists. “You bastard! That’s my mother you’re talking about. How can you stand there and tell me my mother meant nothing? How is that supposed to make me feel?” Her face felt hot. The top of her head felt like it would erupt in a matter of moments.

“You are angry.”

“Yes, I am angry.” She opened the office door. “Haven’t you figured it out? I don’t want this so-called gift. And in one fell swoop you’ve just admitted that because of you, I am who I am, you made my mother into one of you walking dead, and because of you my father is dead. Do you think I should be jumping for joy right about now?”

Seth looked pensive as though he actually had to weigh the options. “So you are angry.”

This time it was Elaine’s turn to growl. She let out a roar that made Seth take a step back. He’d been there when her father was murdered. He’d changed her mother into a vampire. Then a thought hit her.

Turning to him, she asked, “How did you know Alvin disappeared before I told you?”

A nervous smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. “What? You did tell me.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You did not? Perhaps I picked it up in your thoughts.”

“You’re lying. Did you have something to do with his disappearance?”

Seth tapped his fingers.

“Answer me!”

“He was not good enough for you.”

His admission made her blink.

“So I made him an offer and he took it.”

“So he’s alive?” she asked.

He nodded. “Although I do not think you should know where.”

“All this time I thought he dropped out because of me. I thought he hated me.”

“I made it easy for you. You did not like him. I saw it in your thoughts. You kept saying, ‘I can make it work. I can make it work.’ Relationships should not be that way. They should work or they should not. Yours would not have worked.”

Elaine’s breath caught. Turning back to Seth, she said, “Damn you, Seth Overkill. This is not a game to me, my life. You can’t keep meddling in it like some god.”

She took a step out of the door, stopped and turned back to Seth. “I put a handprint somewhere in this room but I’m not telling you where.” That’ll keep him cleaning for hours.

She bounded down the steps to the back entryway.

Seth called behind her, “That is not very conducive to my treatment!”

Just like the spitting, Elaine’s one-fingered goodbye to Seth was so unlike her. If she were really part vampire, then she needed to embrace her badass side.

After having one of Seth’s drivers take her back to the mansion, Elaine made a slow ascent up the stairs to her new room. She just hoped she could remember which room it was.

Once she got to the top of the stairs and strolled down the hallway, she caught the crooked portrait of Seth. That landmark signaled her room.

She stood in front of the cock-sure picture. She wanted so much to straighten it but Seth seemed to get bent out of shape when she'd mentioned it before. She didn't need or want him jumping down her throat again.

"Have your crooked painting," Elaine said as she stared into the painted Seth's eyes. "Matches your crooked life anyway."

Elaine opened the door to her room. Feeling on the wall for the light switch, she flicked it on then screamed until her voice went hoarse.

"I didn't think I looked that bad." Mina sat on Elaine's bed. "We need to talk."

Chapter Eleven

Elaine stepped cautiously around Mina. The vampire paid her a visit for a reason, probably not to give her an *atta girl* and a pat on the back. From the way Mina kicked her bare leg back and forth, she meant business.

“Interesting position I caught you and Seth in today,” Mina sucked on her teeth. “How exactly are you treating him?”

When Elaine heard the sucking noise, she swallowed hard. She couldn’t show fear. Elaine slid out of her shoes and set them in the huge closet. *Be smart, but be casual.*

“The dance was Seth’s idea. He wanted to teach me. He wants to improve. He wants to get himself better.”

And if the man had wanted her out of that jumpsuit, he could have gotten that, too, that was until she realized he was using her.

“Need and desire are two different things. We need an effective leader now. I have no desire in waiting. He’s been like this for far too long. You can’t teach an old vampire new tricks.” Mina sprang from the bed, making Elaine take refuge on the other side of the bed. “Probably why he’s trying to sweet talk you into marriage. But even that won’t save him.”

Elaine wouldn’t show fear, but she wouldn’t be a sitting duck either. “Marriage? What are you talking about?”

The tactic to put a barrier between them proved futile. If Mina wanted to get her, she would. She’d seen how fast Seth could move and he hadn’t been one hundred percent. Mina could probably snap Elaine’s neck and be back at the club before Elaine’s body hit the floor. The thought chilled her.

Mina’s eyes widened. “You don’t know, do you? He hasn’t told you? He is a clever vamp, isn’t he?” she stalked Elaine with the ease of a panther. “Seth has three choices to make by Reckoning Day: die, my personal choice, go through the Council’s ceremony with that damn amulet he keeps hidden, or marry a mortal and turn her by Halloween. If I can get that amulet before that day, I’ll have the power.”

This time Elaine felt her eyes widen as she backed away from this witch.

“Don’t fall for his poor-me charms. You think I’m devious? He’s the master at it.”

Elaine didn’t know who or what to believe. Thinking back to an earlier conversation, Seth had mentioned there was a third option to helping him but then hedged and never mentioned it. “If I stop helping him, then he’ll know something is up.”

Elaine’s mind filled with the many obstacles facing her. Help Seth and it would help her mother and the world. It would also be helping the man who had probably killed her father and made her fiancé go to God knew where. Or don’t help him and get to talk to her father for once in her life. Or just get Mina the leader position by Reckoning Day and stop the dead from rising.

Elaine felt ill again. Something must be wrong with Seth. She could feel it. The nauseous feeling hit her so hard that she had to put her hand to her stomach to calm it.

“You’re right. So I’d suggest this. Keep up the flirty thing,” Mina strolled around Elaine’s room.

“I’m not flirting with him. It’s just”

“I don’t care what you call it. Just keep it up.” Mina glanced at Elaine. “His fight or

flight instinct will kick in. He'll either go into a mad tailspin into more cleaning and chanting, or he'll take you up on the offer. If he asks you to marry him, say yes."

Elaine blinked. "What? You want me to offer myself as some sort of sacrifice?"

Mina pointed to something behind Elaine. "See that bitch there?"

Elaine turned and looked at the portrait of Charlotte. A strange surge of anger pumped through Elaine's body. She wanted to defend the woman who'd captured Seth's heart. He spoke about Charlotte in such a glowing way Elaine couldn't see Charlotte as a bitch.

Mina continued. "I know his problems are because of her. If I know Seth, he won't do anything with you for fear of betraying his dead wife." Mina cackled.

Elaine never heard anyone cackle except for in cartoons and bad B-movies. She'd also never seen someone as cold and calculating as Mina. Not only did Mina want Seth's position but she also wanted him completely insane. The man might have done some things that Elaine wasn't happy with, but she wouldn't destroy him.

The laughter stopped and Mina stared at Elaine, a hungry look in her eyes. Elaine concentrated hard to keep Mina out of her head and stepped back toward the wall.

"I have an even better idea." Mina wrapped her hand around a bedpost. "I could make you into a vampire."

Elaine went cold. Her head felt light and her vision clouded when she needed it to be crystal clear. Her hands, also cold, wouldn't move. Her feet seemed to be planted in their spots. It was as though Mina turned into a Medusa and changed Elaine to a statue. Mina couldn't have been thinking her plan would work or be feasible.

"What are you thinking?" Elaine asked. "Why would you think I would want this?"

"You wouldn't be a mortal by Halloween." Mina slithered around the bed.

Elaine backed away from this mad woman. "Seth said that vampires and Ayudantes couldn't be together. It was forbidden."

Mina cocked her head and smirked. "You two are peas in a pod. You deserve each other." Mina sauntered closer to Elaine.

Elaine finally found the strength to move back until the wall stopped her. No where else to go but up. Knowing Mina, she could probably fly too.

"It wouldn't hurt. Trust me." Mina slid her fingers down the side of her neck. "Just one bite, and then one drink from you. There's nothing like it. Besides, if you really want Seth's attention, being a vampire is the only way."

So even in this surreal world, Elaine would have to change herself for a man. Not that she was even interested. She'd done her dance with the devil. But damn was it nice.

"Get out of my room." Elaine approached Mina. "I need to sleep and think. But mainly I need you out of my room."

Mina stood her post, almost in a challenging position. Then she sighed and retreated. She strolled to the door. "Think about it. Immortality. Cool clothes. The ability to control people." Once outside of Elaine's door, Mina turned back at Elaine and said, "And all senses are brought up to ten times what they normally are. Like being on a drug but everything's so clear."

"I don't do drugs."

Elaine slammed the door in Mina's face then locked it. She stood on the balls of her feet to see if she felt the same pain as before. Gone. Her feet felt fine. Better than fine.

She bounded to her bed and sat with her legs crossed. Turning her foot over, she examined the bottom. The little cuts and scrapes had all healed. She ran her hand over the flesh to make sure she hadn't experienced an optical illusion. Smooth.

Her hands slid over to her knees. Healed. All healed. She turned her hands over to view the palms. Why had he done it? It couldn't have been just to help her. Could it?

She didn't need any more distractions. Not from Mina, not from Seth, not from anyone. She needed to clear her head, figure out why it was that she had even considered for a millisecond Mina's proposition.

Elaine didn't want to be a vampire. She enjoyed the sun, being out on the beach. Besides, she couldn't prey on innocent people. Her mother had been a vampire and changed back. She had even had children afterward.

Scanning her room, her eyes settled on her new computer. She missed her family. Elaine wanted to connect with them. Her mother wasn't Internet savvy but Elaine knew Abuela Celia surfed the 'net at a regular basis.

After Elaine fired up the computer and started the e-mail letter, she stopped. The police probably had her family's computers all monitored. They would find her at Seth's. If the police showed up during the day, Seth couldn't save her.

All of these modern conveniences and Elaine couldn't use any of them. She decided to use her time wisely by searching for more information on Seth's condition. She printed pages and pages of helpful tips.

So why hadn't Seth told her he could control the dead if he'd gotten married?

Was he afraid Elaine would have offered that option instead of trying to cure his OCD? Maybe that's why he looked at her so strangely that first day like there was a possibility.

Elaine was doing it again, still thinking about him. She sprang from the desk. Maybe a nice bath would clear her head. Then she needed an ally. She would have to talk to Seth when he got home. And maybe the hot bath would soothe her queasy stomach.

* * * *

Seth had waited until about four-thirty in the morning before he felt comfortable enough to go home. Since Elaine had walked out, angry after hearing that he had changed her mother into a vampire and about Alvin, he felt something he had not felt in years: guilt. Sometimes he hated his mortal side.

Why did he feel guilty about being himself? He had changed Olivia before she knew Alex. And once Olivia and Alex became serious, Seth had spearheaded the initiative to change Olivia back to mortal. What happened to Olivia afterward was not his fault or doing.

He also felt guilty about his feelings, feelings he was developing for Elaine. Why did she have to look so delectable? Why did she have to show so much emotion in front of him? Why did he have to dance with her? And why had she cut her own flesh to feed and save him when he had become so weak?

As he sat in the backseat of his Bentley, he stared at his hands. He smoothed the pads of his thumbs over his fingers, marveling at the grooves in each fingertip. He wanted to touch Elaine, be intimately aware of each of her curves, smooth his hands over her body.

He could do that. He could make Elaine a vampire. As soon as the thought entered his mind he shooed it away. Although he wanted Elaine, he could not find it in his soul to change her into something she did not want to be because then he would want to marry her. And she would end up like Charlotte had, dead. Murdered.

He had read her thoughts all morning. Words and phrases like 'don't want to be a vampire' and 'enjoy the sun' popped into his head. Besides, Seth did not want to convert someone who did not want to be converted, a rule he had adopted many years ago. He wanted Elaine but she would have to want it, want him. He did not know if she wanted him.

The Bentley rolled into the garage. Seth stepped out of the backseat, whisked past his driver then stopped.

Seth opened his mouth.

“Yes, sir?” the driver asked.

Seth had almost asked the man for his name. Elaine had gotten into his head. He struggled to hold back his smile.

“Clean the car.” Seth stomped to the door. A pang of guilt wrenched his stomach. He did not want to learn this man’s name until he knew more about the woman who kept him up at day. What made him want to know more about this woman, this mortal?

When he reached his bedroom, Seth took a deep breath. Another day of not feeding. He glanced at his sparkly watch. He had just a couple of minutes to shower, floss, wash his hands, iron his clothes for that night, take another shower, clean the bathroom and get to bed. In his sleep, he did not dream. He was safe there.

Seth opened his door and froze at the top step. Elaine stood by his bed wearing a sheer negligee, her back to him. He controlled his breath so as not to alert her to his presence.

He should have known Elaine was somewhere close. He smelled her. Picked up her scent as soon as he hit the door. She carried a rose-jasmine aroma around with her like she had been born that way. He took in a long, deep breath, inhaling all of Elaine. He wanted her. He wanted her to notice the man, not the myth, not the monster.

He folded his arms and watched her smooth her hand over his comforter, tugging out the wrinkles. Was she mocking him?

He clenched his hands into fists and took a step down into his room until he saw her lean down, examine something on the bed covering and pick it off. She held her find in her hand and scanned the room.

“The trashcan is in the corner,” Seth said.

Elaine whipped around. Her lingerie had lace barely covering her perky breasts. The matching tan satin robe fell off of one shoulder and exposed a thin strap that slipped down as well. Only one strap stood between Seth sweeping this sex kitten into his arms, pressing a kiss on her so hard that it would take her breath away and easing down her neck.

Elaine lifted her robe to cover her shoulder then shifted from side to side. “I saw this lint on your bed. I know it bothers you.” She darted to the trash receptacle and tossed it inside. “And I didn’t sit on your bed. I promise. I know that bothers you, too.”

So she hadn’t been making fun of him. He could tell from looking into her brown eyes that she exuded sincerity. And even though she blocked him from reading her mind now, there were things he could tell about her by reading her body language. His heightened perceptions came in handy when his other gifts failed him.

Her body heat emanating from her glowed a warm pinkish color. Considering how she had reacted to him before, with horror and distain, she seemed relatively calm now in his presence. Did that mean she was now comfortable with him?

Seth surveyed her, paying special attention to her bare feet.

She must have noticed because she said, “My feet are much better. Thank you.”

Seth brought his gaze up to meet hers. He heard her slow, rhythmic heart beat. He breathed a sigh of relief knowing that her fear of him had subsided.

“You’re a modern day miracle, you know that?” she said with a smile.

Miracle? He had been called a monster, Satan, Death. He had never been called or thought of as some sort of savior.

He broke his gaze as he sauntered into his room. “You wanted something?” He had to be cold and aloof otherwise she might get comfortable in his room, in his life. He could not get close to another woman only to lose her again. It hurt too much.

“Your help,” Elaine said. The softness of her voice melted his cool countenance. He kept his back to her, too afraid to read her body.

“How well do you know Mina?”

Seth turned to Elaine. She folded her arms over her chest and her breathing quickened. He heard her heart beating faster. Elaine was afraid of something even if she had not said it.

“Mina has been loyal to me. There are some days I could not get by without her,” Seth answered. “Why do you ask?”

Elaine sighed. She turned her head away and balled her toes into the carpet. She was worried about something. Was it for him?

“I just think you need to watch your back, especially around her. I don’t think you should trust her.”

If this was a game she was playing, he did not like it.

“This coming from a woman who tried to kill me. Why should I trust you?”

The aura around Elaine flamed bright red. Now she was angry. Her quick emotions fascinated Seth.

“Because I’m the only one in your life who doesn’t need something from you.”

He laughed. “You do not need anything from me? You need money for your practice. You need me to keep the dead from strolling around us.” He stepped closer to her. She flamed brighter. “You need me for your mother.”

Her flame extinguished and an icy blue glow surrounded her. He had struck a sour chord inside of her. The pit of his stomach felt hollow. How was it that she could raise so many emotions in him? Not even Charlotte could do that. Elaine was no Charlotte.

“What was I thinking? Here I thought I was doing you a favor. But I guess I was wrong.” Elaine made her way to the door.

Seth wanted her to go, needed her to leave. For one, the sun was about to rise and he had not gotten any of his pre-dawn rituals out of the way yet. And secondly, her anger bothered him. She had come to him with a concern but he pushed her away. Maybe it would be better if she left him completely. In order to do that, he had to give her the one thing that made her stay.

Elaine continued. “I can’t believe you made me feel sorry for you when you told me about Charlotte. I actually believed you had a heart. But I guess I was wrong.”

Seth’s breath caught. Elaine had understood him. She knew of his deep love for his departed wife. What was he doing? Maybe she had cared about him and his well-being. Maybe there was some merit to what she was saying. Why else would she be standing in his bedroom in the slinkiest nightgown he had ever seen? He should not have let Mina pick out Elaine’s clothes. The getup did not suit Elaine’s style ... but it certainly looked good on her.

When Elaine reached the steps to leave, she buckled. She grabbed the doorframe and held onto her stomach. He rushed to her, recognizing that a sharp pain had hit her.

“What’s wrong with you?” she asked with a panting breath. “I’ve been feeling sick all morning and I’ve only felt this way when you’re hurt.” She turned and met his gaze as he stood next to her, careful not to touch her. Confusion covered her eyes. “Didn’t your cut heal?”

He knew why she felt nauseous. Guilt. His guilt. He felt like a heel trying to push her away and not hear her concerns. He was not sure why she would say bad things about Mina. Sure, Mina was not the most pleasant person in the world. When the chips were down, Mina had

been there for him, though. She brought him victims. She kept up his day-to-day operations at the club. She had even helped bring Elaine into his life. If anything, he should be thanking Mina.

In looking into Elaine's eyes, he felt a bigger pang of guilt for wanting her so much. He wanted her in his bed. He wanted to make her his. Not since Charlotte had he felt this way.

Elaine bent over, squeezing her stomach tighter. "What's going on?"

Seth started to tell her how he felt about her when his clock chimed. Time had run out. He needed to get her out of his room.

"Tonight. I will tell you tonight." With a not so gentle nudge, he pushed Elaine out of his room.

She stumbled to the floor and whipped her head back to him.

Before his automatic steel door slid shut, bolting him in his room, Seth said, "I did not kill your father."

The look in Elaine's eyes before the door closed, a look of fear then confusion, did not go unnoticed. He hoped though by tonight, she would understand him.

Seth rushed to his bed. He did not have time for a shower let alone undressing. He managed to pull his shoes off before reclining back. By the time he clapped his hands to turn off the lights, his head hit the pillow and his mind went clear.

* * * *

Damn Seth. Damn him and the horse he rode in on. Not only had he dismissed her claims about Mina, but he had also shoved her out of his room right before dropping a huge bomb on her. Why wouldn't he hear her out? And what was it about him that had made her so sick moments before?

As she stood outside of the steel door that nearly shut on her foot, she felt the sick feeling go away. Whatever Seth had been going through or felt was gone now. Her stomach eased down and the tightness in her throat had vanished.

Existing like this was too hard. She couldn't feel this type of pain every time Seth felt it. He wasn't her child. He wasn't even her lover. And from the way he had shoved her out of his room and looked at her like she was a liar, he didn't want to be her friend. And if he didn't want to believe her, her only answers had to come from her father's journal.

Elaine hurried through the house to get back to her room. As she passed the living room, she caught a glimpse of the pinkish sky.

Morning. No wonder Seth had been so forceful to get her away from him. Who knew what he would have been like at dawn? Worse yet. What was he like at dusk? Most men wake up with erections. Did Seth wake up with need for blood?

The more Elaine thought about it, the faster she ran. She climbed the steps, taking them two at a time and amazed at how quick her feet moved. Her knees, which usually ached after a good run, felt like they could do a squatting Russian dance with no problems. Seth wasn't only a healer. He contained the fountain of youth.

When Elaine reached her floor, she scurried down her hallway. She didn't know why she was running now. The house was still. No rustling outside. No howling wind noises. Not even a ticking clock to cut through the silence. The servants were all gone. They were probably told to do their work at night so that Seth could observe them.

When Elaine got to the end of the hall, she found it hard to stop her momentum. She put her hand out to halt herself and it landed on the wall next to the crooked portrait of Seth.

Elaine left her hand at the spot and looked at the picture. Maybe the way the picture

became off-center in the first place was because someone was running away from Seth. Maybe Charlotte. Her room did sit next to the picture. Maybe Charlotte had seen the cruel intent in Seth's eyes that Elaine had seen tonight right before Seth ushered her out of his room. And perhaps Charlotte ran away from him and fell against the painting as she'd tried to reach her room. And maybe ...

Elaine drew her hand away from the cold wall. She knew Seth would never hurt her. Something inside of her told her he wouldn't. She didn't know what he was like years ago. Maybe he had it in him then.

Elaine darted into her room and slammed the door behind her. She locked it. Keeping her face pressed against the cool wood, she panted.

"Please, God, let me be safe," Elaine whispered.

"God can't help you now, kid."

Elaine screamed as she turned. Mina stood behind her. Her face had changed. She almost looked like she did when she'd fed off of that woman the night before. Her chin had receded and her eyes glowed red.

Elaine scrambled to unlock the door as her heart beat against her ribcage. Her slick hands slipped off of the antique knob. She chanted her prayer. That normally calmed her. Before she got to the 'amen' part, she was grabbed, yanked back and thrown across the room so hard she bounced on the bed and fell on the floor next to it.

As Elaine propped herself up on her knees, a shadow loomed over her. She didn't want to turn around. Instead, she tried sliding herself under the bed.

Elaine felt something clamp around her ankle. She knew Mina must have put a shackle on her because it sent a painful jolt up her leg. She kicked and thrashed about hoping to free herself.

"Stop it," Mina demanded. "You look like a fish." She dragged Elaine from under the bed and flipped her over with one hand. "I don't have much time." She peered up. Obviously, she was looking out of the window.

Sunlight. That was Elaine's only hope. Maybe if she kept Mina with her, then the sunlight would kill her.

Mina let Elaine's ankle go then grabbed a handful of her delicate nightgown to pull her to her feet. In a desperate attempt to save her life, Elaine clamped her arms around Mina. Maybe if she could hold this beast for a few more seconds until the sun made its way through her window, then she would be rid of Mina once and for all.

"What? You want to dance with me now?" Mina laughed and raised her arms, breaking Elaine's hold. Mina clamped her hand around Elaine's neck then pulled her forward. "I don't have much time, but I guess you figured that out."

Elaine swallowed hard. She punched and kicked Mina, executing every Tae Bo and karate move that she could to break away. However, Mina was way too strong.

Mina removed her hand from Elaine's neck and snatched her hair. Pain engulfed Elaine's face and down her neck. She knew Mina must have grabbed her hair and scalp.

Mina pulled her hair to the side, exposing one side of Elaine's neck. "I think I'm going to go with Plan B. That way if I die, you'll die too."

Before Elaine could scream, Mina pulled Elaine to her and bit down on her neck. The immediate punctures into Elaine's flesh sent a shockwave of excruciating pain throughout her body, so much so that she lost control of her limbs. Her legs felt weak and her arms dangled at her sides. She was held up by the harsh hold Mina had on her hair and by Mina's canines

embedded into her flesh.

Elaine's mouth hung open as a tear rolled down her face. She felt powerless to do anything. And when Mina took another heaping drink, Elaine knew Mina wanted to kill her, not simply turn her into a vampire.

Suddenly the feeding stopped and a shrieking shrill of a scream cut through the quiet house. Mina pulled back from Elaine and threw her back like an unwanted toy.

"Sun! Damn it!" Mina screamed.

Elaine struggled to open her eyes. When she managed to peek through the slits, she tried focusing on Mina. Through her blurred vision, she only caught a swirling smoke cloud around a frantic Mina, who darted out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

If Mina had made Elaine into a vampire, then she would suffer the same fate as Mina if she didn't seek refuge soon. Still weak from the bite, Elaine clawed her way under her bed. The huge bed would protect her from the sunlight and the coolness would keep her somewhat comfortable.

Too drained to let out a hearty cry, Elaine curled into a ball on her side and let the tears run down the bridge of her nose and over her cheek. Her life would never be the same. She would never be the same.

Chapter Twelve

Elaine woke up with a jolt. She bolted up, a mistake since she had fallen asleep under her bed. She met face first into a wooden slat that sent her careening back onto the carpeted floor.

“I thought I would be smoother as a vampire,” she mumbled.

She turned her face to the side to see what time of day it looked to be. Darkness surrounded her except for the light that appeared under her doorway.

Feeling safe to emerge from her under-the-bed sanctuary, Elaine rolled then propped herself up on her knees. She pulled herself up by grabbing a handful of the bed comforter. Once on her feet, she rubbed her eyes. With a stumbling gait, she made her way to a window. Darkness met her after she pulled back the heavy curtains. She'd slept the entire day.

Elaine padded over to the bathroom. She had to know what she looked like now. Her mind raced with ideas of what her new vampire appearance would be.

Her hand flipped on the light switch in the bathroom and she took in her reflection. Her disheveled hair covered her face. Her face looked the same. No. Maybe a little different. Her cheeks seemed pinker and her eyes seemed a bit brighter. Maybe she had changed.

Elaine reached up to smooth her hair back but stopped. If Mina could get away with looking like a marvelous mess, then so could she. Elaine spied her outfit, the negligee-and-matching-robe ensemble she'd put on the night before that she had wanted to rip off and replace with a nice, warm flannel nightgown. Now the outfit suited her. She shook her head. She pulled off the robe and threw it to the floor. Now it suited her.

Elaine felt free and alive. She felt more than sexy. Everything in her body throbbed and ached for touch. She wanted to experience life.

Elaine laughed and twirled around in the white bathroom. “What a difference a bite makes.”

The tingling sensations that wracked her body surprised her the most. Leaning against the counter, Elaine curved her shoulders inward to allow her gown to drop from her shoulders. She stepped forward to let the fallen garment hit the floor.

Until today, Elaine had been satisfied to pleasure herself using Big Rick, her trusty vibrator. Even if she had the purple pleasure stick now, she would have left it in the drawer. Today she wanted to make her body soar.

After spreading her legs apart, she closed her eyes and let one hand glide over her breasts. Her fingertips circled her nipples, making them harder under her manipulation.

With her other hand, Elaine boldly let it travel down her body, over her stomach, down her thigh and over to her aching pussy. Just like with her breasts, she let her fingers lightly feather over her labia. Her body stiffened. Her pounding heart couldn't be stopped. Her breathing came out in harsh pants.

In order to get better access inside, Elaine rounded her back. With the ease of a patient lover, her middle finger explored the inside of her vagina. Her slick, thick walls clamped around her digit, needing it, wanting her to explore further, pleasure it, make her body tremble in ecstasy.

A moan whispered through her lips. To heighten her pleasure, she pinched her pebble-hard nipple. The sensations all felt wonderful. Elaine knew what she had to do to get herself to

come.

Seth. Thoughts of him filled her head. Seth without his shirt. Seth dancing the tango. Seth in tight leather pants.

“Oh God!” Elaine tilted her head back as her digit pumped faster inside of her.

In her fantasies, she imagined Seth whispering in her ear how much he wanted her. No other woman could satisfy him but her. And she believed every word. Then she imagined him naked. What his body would look like outside of the cardigan.

“You are mine!” he would growl.

“Yes!” The thought alone prompted a much needed orgasmic release.

The energy accumulating in her belly exploded in a body-rocking climax. She chewed her lower lip as her body wound down from its high.

Maybe that’s what Seth did when he woke up every night. Perhaps he masturbated to start his day. She smiled at the thought.

Twirling around on her wobbly legs, Elaine glanced at her reflection again. Perfect. She looked absolutely perfect. When she turned her head to notice her profile, she gasped when she caught sight of the two crescent-shaped wounds on the side of her neck.

The morning all came rushing back to her. Mina. The attack. The screams. Her cries. How would Elaine live her life now?

A knock on her door startled her. She peeked around the bathroom door.

“Who is it?”

A heavy sigh preceded the response. “Seth. You are late for dinner.”

Elaine smiled. “I am not hungry.” She purposefully didn’t use a contraction to sound more like Seth. The proper language made her feel old world but in a good way.

Elaine hungered for touch. She ran her fingertips up her arm. Her flesh tingled. She rushed to the door, wanting to open it, grab the very sexy, if not very clean, Seth Overkill, take him and dirty that good-boy image.

Her hand hovered over the knob. Perhaps Seth was the type that wanted to be the aggressor. It was all about the hunt he’d said. She closed her eyes and opened her mind to him. Then she filled her mind with images of her and Seth making mad, passionate love. If she didn’t stop, she would have to have another session in the bathroom again.

“Oh, uh, why don’t I meet you at the club?” Seth didn’t wait for a response before stomping down the stairs, evident by the way the floor shook.

Elaine smiled harder and bounded to the bathroom. She wanted to take a nice long bath and get ready for the seduction of a lifetime.

* * * *

Seth and Elaine were definitely having sex. Seth could not deny the visions. Since picking up the images when he tried to retrieve Elaine for dinner, her thoughts had become more and more graphic.

He could tell at times she must have been reading her father’s diary because images of what he and Alex had done over thirty years ago appeared in his head from Alex’s point of view. Seth felt relieved that his friend portrayed Seth in such a good light. He had been a good friend to Alex. And he missed his friendship.

The next thoughts to enter Seth’s mind were almost like the ones he had seen when he had bathed Elaine. These visions made him take a seat. Not even the thumping sounds of the music or the sparkling lights at his club could distract him from the scenes.

In Elaine’s vision, she emerged from a bathtub that almost looked like the bathtub in his

bedroom except wildflowers adorned the shelves and ledges of the room. Elaine's body, sleek with water, looked tempting.

In a low, seductive voice, she said, "Dry me."

Then Seth appeared, wearing only black, silk drawstring pants. He dried her with a white towel, dabbing her delicate body with small pats.

Once dry, she held up her arms. "You must carry me into your bedroom. My feet shouldn't touch the floor."

"Should not," Seth had told her in her thoughts. It made him laugh that even in Elaine's thoughts, the contraction thing still bothered her.

Seth swept her up into his arms and carried her to his round bed. At least in Elaine's dreams, his room looked exactly the same. He placed her on his bed.

As she stared into his eyes, he told her, "Before you can become my princess, you must first learn how to pleasure your prince."

"Yes, Seth." Elaine undid the drawstring and eased his pants down.

Why was Elaine not blocking her thoughts now? He had already told her they could not have a sexual relationship. He thought she had understood that.

He bolted from the white leather couch in his office and paced.

"I paid the help," he began. "I have gotten the reports from the business offices. I signed off on the businesses to foreclose. I have selected my outfits for the next month."

Then the visions came back. Elaine's thoughts took over Seth's until he could no longer fight them. He stopped pacing.

Now Elaine had his pants down around his ankles. The fact that Elaine left them around his feet in a messy pile bothered Seth. This was her dream, not his.

She held the base of his shaft. Seth could almost feel her fingers coiling around his now pulsating penis. And when in her dreams she lowered her mouth on him, tickling his tip with her tongue, he leaned back and moaned. Now that he had changed the pass code on his office door, he knew Mina could not barge in on him like she had before.

When Elaine finished pleasuring Seth orally in her thoughts, she slid herself on his bed then eased herself back.

"No. No!" Seth stomped in his office in a circle. "She cannot. We cannot. She should stop. Why does she not stop?"

The dream Seth crawled over Elaine's body. Seth implanted her scent automatically to make the scene seem real. When she had Seth thrust inside of her, he nearly fell to his knees.

This was worse than not being able to feed. Here Elaine thought about Seth. Left her thoughts open for him to see. And she was there for the taking.

Even in the dream, Elaine felt wonderful. This was sweet torture. He put his hands to his head. He brought his hands down when she revealed something strange in her thoughts, something more horrifying than a vampire making love to an Ayudante.

Elaine cocked her head then whispered, "Feed from me. Take what you need. Make me your true vampire princess."

He had to stop her. What was she thinking? She was looking to get them both killed. Seth rushed to his office door. When he pulled it open, he stopped short of running over Elaine, who stood on the other side.

"I was just about to knock." She strolled past him.

"You have to stop." Seth slammed the door behind her.

Usually Elaine would have jumped. He noticed that about her. Now she seemed calm,

serene.

“Oh, you want me to stop so you can check out my outfit?” Elaine meandered around him.

She exuded a sexiness that went beyond her X-rated thoughts. Even in her red slip dress and black, strappy stilettos, Elaine oozed a beauty that went beyond what she wore. Her curly hair looked wild and unruly. Her makeup appeared dark, almost harsh. She was not the same simple woman who used to walk around without any shoes.

“Why are you thinking the things that you are thinking?” he asked. The question came out like a riddle but he did not know how else to phrase it.

“Thinking what?” she asked coyly. “You mean about me, you and a bed made for two?”

He furrowed his eyebrows. “What is wrong with you? Why are you acting this way?”

“What’s wrong with *me*? What’s wrong with you? Didn’t you like my little fantasies? I know I did.” She snickered as she sauntered away from him and toward the window.

He stared at her legs as she walked. His assumptions were on the mark. Her calves looked incredible in high heels. And with the short dress, she looked too tempting to walk around the streets unescorted.

While her back was to him, she said, “Maybe I should have had dirty fantasies. By that I mean something with some dirt. Mmmm, sex in a mud puddle. Or with food.” She stretched her arms over her head, shortening the hem of her dress so that it almost showed off her incredible backside.

Chanting his comfort word did not help him.

“You could have whipped cream and I could have the honey and” She stopped herself and instead envisioned the scenario.

As soon as Seth caught a glimpse of her pouring honey on his body, he ran toward her.

He grabbed her shoulders. “Do you not understand that sexual intercourse between us has dire consequences? We cannot have sex, ever. So you will have to stop these thoughts immediately.”

“Or what?” she asked, almost daring him to take some action.

“Or I will tie you to a chair and pour ice in your lap until the mere thought of sex turns you off.” He would never do that and he knew that she knew it.

She stepped closer to him. “You’re touching me.”

Seth glanced at his hands, still grasping her bare shoulders. Her smooth skin felt like soft velvet in his hands. He resisted the urge to smooth his thumb over her skin.

“I apologize. I did not mean to get physical with you.” He tapped his fingertips on his thumb until that seemed wrong to do.

“You call that physical? Boy, you weren’t paying attention to my thoughts, were you?” She made her way over to his kitchen. She opened a few cabinets until she found her target, a bottle of fifty-year old brandy. She poured herself a glass and took a healthy gulp.

Then she opened the refrigerator door and picked up a plump, red strawberry. Tilting her head back, she dipped the berry into her mouth, sucking on the tip for show, he was sure, then took a healthy bite. She drove Seth insane.

No, Elaine was not the same simple woman he had met a few days ago. She had changed. Although he liked her confidence, her attitude reminded him of someone else. Mina. One thing he liked about Elaine was that she was nothing like Mina.

“You ready to get started?” Elaine set her glass down and made her way back to Seth with intent in her eyes.

“What do you mean?” Seth took a step back. This was a first. He had never felt intimidated by anyone.

Elaine smiled. “You said this morning that you didn’t kill my father. Who did? What happened?” She sat on the couch and crossed her legs.

Seth got a glimpse up her dress and found she had on a pair of red lace panties that matched her dress. He could not do this. She was too close to give up this temptation. Maybe *he* needed the ice down his pants.

Seth cleared his throat. He paced his office to get his thoughts together.

“Take your time,” Elaine began. “I have all night.”

He peered at Elaine. Something about her had changed from that morning. He could not put his finger on what it was. Her body heat registered a bright, red hue. She was not angry this time though. It was a sexual heat, evident by her steady heartbeat and her throbbing sex. He could hear it even over the music.

“Your father’s death has a lot to do with your mother,” Seth said. He needed to phrase this carefully. He had already angered her when he talked about when he had changed Olivia into a vampire. This news might send her over the edge.

“I know,” Elaine said. “She and my father weren’t supposed to have my brother and they did. I knew there was a reason my parents shouldn’t have had my little brother.” She laughed.

“It is a lot more complicated than that.” Seth huffed and paced the floor again. “This would be a lot easier if we bonded.”

“What? You mean a beer, some stories, a cabin in the woods type thing?”

“No.”

Elaine really was green at all this.

“You can see my thoughts.”

Elaine perked up. She sat up straighter and her eyes gleamed. “Really? How? Tell me.”

Something in him told him he should not have shared that news with her, especially after the thoughts she had just had. He would not be able to contain his fantasies about her.

“It requires that you touch me.”

“Oh?” She leaned closer to him. “You mean sex? I thought you said that wasn’t possible.”

“It still is not. I do not mean sex. I mean exactly what I just said. You can see my thoughts.”

“Okay, and how do I do that?” She folded her arms over her chest.

“Like I said, you touch me. And look into my eyes.”

Elaine eased back on the couch. “Oh.” She could not mask the disappointment.

“Is there something wrong?” he asked.

“Yes. Means I’ll never get to know what’s in your head because you won’t let anyone touch you.” Elaine stood then crossed her arms over her chest. “I’ve never had anyone look at me the way you do.”

Seth’s eyes widened. Had she figured out that he wanted her for much more than just an Ayudante? Had he been that obvious?

“You look at me like I’m dirty, like I’m so beneath you. I’m not. I’m a clean, decent human being.”

Seth walked toward her. “I know.”

Elaine did not know how much he longed for her touch. He knew all about her. He was there when she was born. He knew how strongly she wanted the relationship to work between

her and Alvin. He knew how crushed she had been when he made Alvin leave. And even with all of her swagger, she was afraid to open herself up emotionally to another man.

“I mean, you would think that you would see me differently, especially now.” Elaine walked toward the window and looked out at the dancers.

“What do you mean, especially now?” Seth followed and stood next to her.

Elaine shook her head but kept her gaze from his. Seth peered over at her and was about to look back out into the crowd when something caught his eye. Something on Elaine’s neck.

Puncture wounds.

He held her arm and brought her close to him.

“Hey, what are you doing?” she asked, almost tripping on her spiked heels.

“Who did this to you?” Seth asked. His minions all knew to keep their hands off of Elaine. Even if she were not the Ayudante, he would want to protect her.

“Did what?”

“No games. Who fed off of you? Tell me.”

The wounds looked fresh.

“Does it matter? What matters is that I’m one of you now.” She turned her head, her face mere inches from his. “I’m a vampire like you.”

“Did you feed?”

From the way her face froze, Seth knew his answer. He asked her again to make sure she understood where he was going.

“Did you drink blood?”

Elaine grimaced. “No.”

“The one who did this to you did not make you drink their blood afterward?” He had to be sure.

She covered her mouth. “I’m going to be sick.”

Seth took a deep breath and let it out in a long stream. “You are not a vampire.”

“What are you talking about? Yes, I am.”

He pulled her to his bathroom. Once there, he turned on the light. He positioned her in front of him.

“Look at us in the mirror. Notice anything?”

From Elaine’s horrified expression, he knew she had figured it out. She stared at herself for a while and looked all around the mirror, like she was trying to find Seth’s image.

“You consumed something other than blood.”

She turned to him.

“The strawberry,” he said. “If you were a vampire, you would not be able to see yourself in the mirror. You would have vomited the food. And you would not have heat around you.”

She blinked.

“I can see your aura.”

“But the way I look,” Elaine pressed.

“Although unique, it has nothing to do with being a vampire. I am sorry.”

She bowed her head. “I feel like such a fool. I thought”

“What?” Seth asked.

Instead of answering, Elaine pressed her face into Seth’s chest and sobbed. Seth held his hands up, shocked that she was touching him and, worse yet, crying on him. Yet he could not resist comforting her.

He lowered his hands, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. Whenever her body

trembled, he held her tighter. She felt good in his arms, like she was meant to be there. Maybe she was. He did not even think about germs or rituals when he held her. Actually, he did not even think about Charlotte. That was a first.

“Clean yourself up and I will take you home.”

Elaine lifted her head. Dark rings circled under her eyes. Without makeup, she appeared pure and natural.

She sniffed and tried catching her breath. Seth reached behind her to retrieve a tissue. With careful touches, he patted under her eyes to wipe away her tears. His hand slid down her smooth cheek. It seemed like electric sparks shot through his fingers and through his body. He felt renewed, revived.

When his fingers slid down to her neck and touched those puncture wounds, he felt sickened. His stomach twisted in knots. It reminded him of the one time he had tried eating. He had discovered very quickly he was not like a true mortal.

Elaine slipped her small hand into Seth’s and removed it from her neck. “Now I feel like a piece of beef. I can’t believe Mina was able to feed off of me.”

Seth gritted his teeth. “Mina did this to you?”

Elaine must have caught the intense anger in his eyes. She turned her gaze down and stepped back from him.

He shook his head. “You were right and I did not listen to you.” He turned her face back to him. “I am sorry.”

Seth read her open thoughts. She appreciated his ability to admit his mistake. She also thought he looked adorable and wanted to give him a hug. Seth was about to warn her against her thoughts when a knock at his office door stopped him.

“I will be back,” Seth said as he washed his hands.

“You know even Arnold Schwarz can say ‘I’ll.’ You should try it. He made a career with that one line. ‘I’ll be back.’” Elaine blew her nose.

“I hope you do not make a career out of doing that.” He pointed to her nose then walked out of the bathroom. When he reached the door, he realized that he had not counted his steps like usual. He was on the road to getting better. It just took a strong woman like Elaine to bring it out of him.

He opened the door and the anger boiled inside of him.

Mina.

It took the evilness of a cowardly woman to bring out his ticks.

“Humph. I see Elaine’s 666 Step Program is no help to you at all,” Mina said. She attempted to walk into Seth’s office when he stepped in front of her, blocking her passage. She hustled to the other side and he moved there, too.

“What?” She looked down at her feet. “The shoes are brand new. I took a shower. What is it this time? Is this some new quirk of yours that I have to get used to again?”

“No. I do not want you in my office ... or my life for that matter.” He turned to the side when he caught Elaine thinking a prayer in her head.

Please don’t let Seth and Mina fight. Please don’t let him get hurt. God, he’s still one of your children. Watch out for him.

As much as he wanted to hurt Mina, he would not, not in front of Elaine. She softened him like no one had before. She did care about him and that made him feel special, almost whole again.

Mina craned her head into Seth’s office and caught a glimpse of Elaine. “Oh, is she the

reason why I'm not allowed in now? Are you showing her another dance lesson?"

Seth glared at Mina. "You fed from her and you know that is against the rules."

"Not my rules." Mina snickered and crossed her arms over her chest. "Besides, you fed from her. And don't deny it." She lifted the hem of her top. Her once grotesque flesh appeared to be healing.

That was it. Mina pushed him beyond irritation. With a swiftness that stunned her, he reached out and grabbed her around her neck. Mina gasped and sputtered as he pushed her back into the hallway then he held her up over the stairs.

"I want you out of my house. Do not come back to retrieve your belongings. They will be left for you on the curb. Do not return to my club."

"Seth, please!" Elaine screamed from the doorway. "Put her down."

Elaine's warm voice blanketed his heart. He would not disappoint her. She had been through enough. She did not need to see more pain, more horror.

With great reluctance, he set Mina on the second step from the top.

"You crazy son-of-a-bitch!" Mina said as she struggled to catch her breath. "You won't survive without me. You'll crumble and take the whole world down with you."

Seth took one step down to get closer to her. "If you do not leave my establishment right now," he glanced at Elaine before turning back to Mina, "I'll kill you."

He had struggled with the phonics of the contraction but he had done it. He caught Elaine giving him a 'way to go' in her thoughts. She was proud of him. As much as he wanted to smile with her, savor the moment, he still had a witch to banish.

Mina looked past Seth. "I should have killed you when I had the chance."

Seth took another step toward Mina and the woman took the hint. She scurried down the stairs and burst through the door once she hit the landing.

For such a big step in his life, Seth felt amazingly calm. He had gotten rid of some dead weight thanks to his new angel. He turned back to his office. Elaine stood in the doorway, her shoes now off and most of her tricked-up makeup removed. She was back being his special lovely.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked.

"We don't have to leave if you don't want to. You have a business to run here. I understand how important that is."

He liked that she thought of his needs. He knew she must be one hell of a doctor.

"No, we should go. You need protection."

"Protection? Protection from what?" Elaine followed Seth into his office.

He packed his essentials into his briefcase. "Not what. Who. Mina is pretty upset. She will come after you. The safest place you can be right now is with me."

Chapter Thirteen

The news that Mina had Elaine on her hit list didn't sit well with Elaine. She'd never made an enemy in her life. Now she had a pissed off vampire after her. As she stepped into Seth's bedroom, she felt the solution was more than acceptable.

Seth would be her guardian. If he could drop his fears for a whole morning, she might be able to spend several quality hours nestled in his strong arms. That did not bother her one bit.

In his white, crisp button up shirt and black slacks, Seth was halfway there to being a Secret Service agent. All he would need would be the black tie, black jacket, sunglasses and that earpiece contraption. Then he would look like Charles. Maybe besides looking for his cat and partying at the club, that was *his* job.

"Make yourself comfortable," Seth said as he pushed some buttons on a keypad by the door.

"What are you doing?" Elaine asked, wary of sitting anywhere until Seth okayed it. He was getting better. He had touched her and that was a huge step for him. Then he had washed his hands directly afterward. A small part of Elaine was hurt by that gesture. He didn't completely trust her.

"You remember the other morning when I escorted you out of my room?" he began, not looking back at her at all.

"You mean when you shoved me out the door?" She would never forget that harsh treatment.

Seth bowed his head. "I am sorry. I should have told you what was going on before I did it. My room is set up on a timer. At dawn, I have my room rigged to become completely sealed so that no sunlight gets through. At dusk, it opens back up. I am setting it up so that it closes early for tonight."

"Oh. So I'll have to stay in your room with you all day." The thought hit her quickly. What would they do in all of that time? Did she feel completely safe with him?

"I do not know where else you can go and be safe. Besides, I sleep most of the day. I am really no fun after five AM."

"And who is?"

Seth smiled. The expression weakened her knees until she had to sit down, fast. She sat on the edge of Seth's bed. She wouldn't last a minute alone with him if he kept up that smile.

"Wait!" Elaine remembered something important. "Before you lock the door, I want my father's journal."

Seth gazed at her.

"I have to have something to do while you're sleeping."

He nodded. Elaine blinked and Seth was gone, disappeared in a flash. He couldn't have gone away that fast. Could he?

A green light on his keypad chimed and Elaine heard the rattle of the door about to close. She stood. She knew nothing about Seth's alarm system but she would try to figure it out so as not to get locked in this tomb alone. As she reached the pad, Seth appeared next to her. The door closed and locked behind him with a loud clunk

"How do you do that?" Elaine asked.

Seth handed her Alex's worn journal. "It is too complicated to explain."

"We have time." She walked back into the room and set the journal on a coffee table.

"Besides, my thoughts are all rooted in science. For it to be true, it has to be proven."

"I would rather talk about something else." He followed her into the room.

"Like what?" Elaine was pretty much open to all topics.

"Why did you come to my room yesterday morning in that outfit?" He kept his back to her.

She had to think for a while to remember what outfit she had been wearing. Then she remembered. The negligee. Her cheeks flushed with a prickly heat. She was thankful he wasn't looking at her now.

"I didn't have many wardrobe choices as far as pajamas are concerned. That was the only one that covered up the most. It even came with matching pumps."

She thought she heard Seth growl but then he cleared his throat.

"Did you want something to eat?" Seth headed to his kitchen.

"That's another good question." She followed him and sat on a barstool as he poked his head in his refrigerator. "Why is it that you have all of this food but you can't eat? And what's up with the apple pies? I don't get that."

Seth sighed. After scrubbing his hands in a method a surgeon would envy, he sat a pie with a lattice top on the counter. He slid a knife out of his drawer. Elaine hoped she hadn't touched on a sore subject with him. She put her hand to her chest to steady her pounding heart and kept her eye on the knife.

"I am over three hundred years old," he finally proclaimed.

"You look good for your age. I wouldn't have put you over thirty-two, thirty-three."

Seth smirked. "My visual age is thirty-five."

Elaine breathed out heavily in relief. He was older than her, in real age and in visual age. It was stupid for her to think about but she liked her men older. Even Alvin was a year older.

Seth said, "When my family came to this country from Mexico almost two hundred years ago, all I wanted to do was fit in." He sliced the knife into the pie and cut off a small slice.

"What is that saying? As American as white picket fences, apple pie and Mom." He set the pie on a small white saucer. "Mom died when I was born. The only picket fence I had ever seen was at your parents' house when you were a baby. So I turned to apple pies." He pushed the slice to Elaine. "Alex taught me how to bake. He told me how to measure out ingredients. He knew I could not taste my finished work."

When he handed Elaine a fork, she took it tentatively. She scooped up the yellowish, gelatinous goop onto her fork. After taking a deep breath, she popped the dessert into her mouth.

"Breathe then chew," Seth requested.

She let out her breath and bit into the pie. Her eyes widened.

"This is actually pretty good." She took another hefty forkful. "And you say my father taught you how to make this?"

Seth smiled, obviously relieved she enjoyed his pie.

"Yes. He was a very patient teacher. He had to be to teach me this stuff at two o'clock in the morning."

"Why is it so important for you to be normal? Don't you like who you are?" she asked.

Seth put the pie back into the refrigerator. "I love being a vampire. I would not trade it for anything. It affords me a lifestyle I have become accustomed to living. However, mine is a lonely existence. There are some days I long to simply blend in with the rest of the world." He

stepped around the bar.

Elaine caught him tapping his fingers. He was anxious about something.

“So tell me why you are having all of these fantasies about me,” he said.

Elaine blinked as she pushed her empty plate away from her. “You really do move fast, don’t you?”

Seth made his way back over to Elaine. She didn’t know what to expect, but she wasn’t going to move. Instead of going to her, he made his way around the bar in the kitchen and retrieved her plate. He donned a pair of yellow cleaning gloves and he cleaned her plate. The man was faster than Elaine’s mother at picking up a dirty dish.

“You’re going to think my reasons are silly so I’m not going to tell you.” She jumped down from the stool. “And I’m blocking my thoughts so you can’t read them.”

“So I only get your naughty thoughts. Anything clean is off limits to me.” Seth dried the plate as he stared at Elaine.

She had to stop looking at him. She wilted every time she made eye contact.

“I feel so stupid now. I can’t believe I let you in on those thoughts.”

Seth put the dish away and made his way back to Elaine. She tried putting as much distance between them as possible. The closer he got, the further she moved until she was on one side of his bed and he stood on the other.

“But there was a reason for it. Why?”

“You’re not going to let up on this, are you?”

“Not when I have you hostage in my bedroom.” Seth strolled to his couch and sat down. He motioned for her to sit next to him. When Elaine didn’t move, Seth said, “I am tired of chasing you. Please, sit.”

Elaine had to laugh at him. She made her way to the couch and sat at the furthest corner away from him.

“For a vampire, you can be a halfway decent guy,” Elaine began.

“Thank you, I think.” Seth smiled.

She turned her gaze to her father’s journal. Nothing sexy about that.

“Fantasies are the safest sex you can have.” She kept her gaze away from his. “You think you’re lonely. I found it very hard to trust men after Alvin disappeared.” She gazed up briefly wanting Seth to feel the sting of her hurt since it was because of him that Alvin had vanished.

“So now I am curious.” Seth folded his muscular arms. “Why me?”

“Come on. Every woman wants the bad boy, right?” She laughed a little to cover her true feelings.

“So I’m the bad guy again?”

In his eyes, Elaine found a mixture of pain and anger.

“I didn’t mean it that way.” She reached for him.

Seth pulled away from her and sprang to his feet. “We cannot be together no matter what. Just remember that.”

“I guess that makes it convenient for you to be so cold to me.”

Instead of responding like she thought he would he said, “You need to be able to defend yourself.” He stomped toward a set of double doors next to his bathroom. In a sweeping motion, he flung the doors open, which automatically triggered a light inside.

Elaine rose to her feet and stared at the contents behind the door. Swords of all shapes and sizes were mounted from a red wall. Fencing outfits hung off to the sides. She should have

been afraid. In looking at the dangerous blades, though, she felt more like she was viewing an art exhibit than a serial killer's dream.

Seth scanned the shiny metal weapons. "When we're not together, you will need to be able to defend yourself beyond that yowling and hand waving motion you do."

"It's Tae Bo." Elaine folded her arms over her chest.

"It is annoying." Seth selected two sabers. "Now this is the way one should fight. Dignified." He held one sword at the hilt and thrust it forward, one leg jutted back and the other bent forward.

"Do you expect me to walk around with that?" She pointed to the thin sword. "It won't fit in my purse."

He glanced at Elaine, a smile hitched up at the corner of his mouth. "You are being funny again, right?"

Elaine licked her tongue over her lips when she noticed his thigh muscle straining against his pants and the way his backside looked so firm and round.

The man exuded perfection. Perfect hair. Perfect teeth. Perfect body. And so far, except for the shove the night before, he'd been the perfect gentleman. She had also noticed he had started to let go of his nerdy look for something more sleek and appealing. Had one feeding done that to him?

"Should I change?" she asked as she ran her hand down her dress.

Seth glanced at her then returned his attention to the blades. As he capped the tips, he said, "You will have to. It is not safe for you to be dressed that way."

"Not safe?" She tugged at the hem of her dress.

Seth set the swords carefully on a table. "Your body should be guarded against accidental contact."

Elaine shivered thinking of her another kind of accidental contact. It involved Seth brushing against her, his hard thigh against hers, his hand on her arm, his lips...

Seth continued. "I do not want to hurt you by mistake."

She sighed. Her shoulders relaxed. "If only all men were that considerate."

He gazed at her without a word. His intense stare gripped her. Her body shook, not from fear. She wanted him. She wanted him to stroke his hands down her body, whisper in her ear like she'd imagined in her dreams.

He strolled toward her. No finger tapping. No mumbling. He looked more together than she'd ever remembered. His smoldering stare, which would have normally reduced a person to a quivering mass, drew her to him. She sucked in her lower lip between her teeth, dropped her arms to her side and waited for him.

"I have spent the last few years of my life protecting you. I will not let you down now," he said in a tone so low it came out like a moan.

Elaine gasped but with her lower lip still in her mouth, the sound was barely audible. She clasped her hands into fists but hid them behind her. Seth stood so close to her she smelled his heady, male scent. He didn't smell of cologne. Not now. He smelled like the night, a night on a beach to be exact. He carried a strange mixture of the salty ocean scent with honeysuckle and fresh cotton. He felt so much like home that she wanted to nuzzle her face into his massive chest and have him hold her again like he had in his office bathroom.

He turned back to his weapons closet and pulled out a white fencing outfit. It looked too small for Seth but just big enough for her.

"You will wear this." He handed her the garment. "Besides, I do not think I can

withstand seeing you in that outfit much longer.” He offered her a smile, a seductive smile, to assure her that he intended his statement to be sexual not foreboding.

Elaine accepted the outfit, allowing her fingers to gently brush over Seth’s. He didn’t move. Didn’t flinch.

“I think you’re getting better,” Elaine said as she held the outfit close to her body.

“I tend to drop my guard around people I am comfortable with. Do not get ahead of yourself. I still need you.”

She flashed him a surprised smile.

Seth continued, “To cure me.”

Elaine nodded. So he did have some feelings for her. She didn’t know how to react to that. How should she react? Flattered? Disgusted? Scared? Overall she felt relieved to know that there was at least one thing Mina had said that was the truth.

* * * *

Seth watched Elaine fidgeting in her fencing outfit. She tugged at the strap between her legs. He wondered if her scent would remain in the garment. He wanted it to linger. If he could not have her in his life, he wanted her essence.

After he allowed her to take a shower in his private bathroom then showered two times himself, he began his fencing lesson.

“I feel really weird in this,” Elaine said.

Seth looked down at her bare feet. “Where are the shoes I offered you?”

She shrugged. “I would rather go barefoot.”

He wanted to see her naked ... again. This time her nudity would be her choice, her doing. All of his fantasies included her stripping down so slowly that it was as though time stood still. He wanted her flowery scent to overtake his senses. And her touch. Damn, he wanted her to touch him.

“Fine,” Seth said of her choice to go shoeless. “Wear this.” He handed her a mask.

The grimace on her face screamed what she must have thought. “Are we going to be that intense in this first lesson?”

As much as he wanted her face to remain uncovered, he wanted her protected. “First lesson?” He set the masks back on a shelf in his weapons closet. “You do not remember much of your childhood, do you?”

She shook her head. “What are you saying? I learned this as a child?”

Instead of answering, he assumed the opening stance. How she would react would let him know the answer.

Her aura shone a bright pinkish color. She was hesitant but willing. After releasing a long breath, Elaine lifted her sword and fell into the same stance. The jacket covered her chest but the tight knickers showed off her great legs and rounded backside wonderfully. She wore an expression of confidence but her thoughts, the ones she could not block, ranged from fear to excitement to confusion.

“Very good,” Seth said. “You’re standing perfectly. Now the first move is this.” He took a slow and exaggerated swing toward her, which she blocked with her sword in the correct manner. She was remembering. Excitement zipped through his body and Seth tried hard not to smile.

Each move he made toward her, Elaine blocked expertly. Some moves she missed, but overall she was doing well.

“How do I know this?” she asked as she parried and thrust.

Seth moved forward, clinking his saber against Elaine's. The steel blades clanged together. He almost missed the sound of metal against metal. For years, he had practiced this art, become an expert in this craft.

"You were taught this when you were very young," Seth answered. "As soon as you were able to walk, a blade was put into your hand."

Elaine then moved forward and went on the offensive. "And who was my teacher? It couldn't have been my father."

Seth swirled his blade around hers and brought her sword down to the floor. "No." He met her gaze and stared intently. "Me."

Elaine's mouth hung open. He had already admitted he was over three hundred years old. This news should not have fazed her. He picked up her weapon and handed it to her, handle side first.

"Take your weapon. I will see if you remember everything."

"You mean you fought a two year old child?" Elaine took it and adjusted her hand on the handle. After assuming the opening stance again, she asked, "Why don't I remember you?"

Seth launched a more aggressive strike, which she blocked with a quickness that would have qualified her for the Olympic team. She was a natural, in talent and in beauty.

"Your parents. Specifically your mother. I am sure she explained me away like a figment of your imagination." Seth lowered his sword. His shoulders slumped. He wished Olivia had allowed him to stay in Elaine's life. He found some relief, though, in that his identity had remained a mystery until now. Now he could start fresh with Elaine. They could start over.

"Why would you teach fencing to a child?" Elaine slammed her sword into Seth's. Her eyes flamed red in rage. The color matched her aura.

Seth defended himself but did not retaliate. "I taught you simple moves. I never worked with you like I am doing now. However you are doing well. You have not lost your innate skills."

Elaine aggressively approached Seth again, backing him to a wall. Not only had she picked up the craft, she had also developed a tough side.

"So you stayed in my life until ..."

"I physically stayed until you were four." Seth tried to gain some eye contact but Elaine kept her gaze on the blades. "After that I mainly hung off in the background. You could not see me, but I could see you."

"Sounds kind of creepy." Elaine stopped her attack and backed away from him to give them more room to practice.

"I promised your father I would always look out for you. I missed out on a few years of your life when I met and married Charlotte." Specifically, the night he had met Charlotte was the night Elaine had lost her virginity. He had arrived in vapor form to the car too late.

Although he had not felt his heart beating in centuries, he knew it had broken on that night. It was a silly fantasy but he had wanted Elaine's first time to be with him.

"Story of my life. Always passed over for another woman." She whacked his blade. "No wonder you seemed so familiar to me the first time I saw you."

Seth smiled. "You used to ask me to stay over until morning to have breakfast with you. When I told you no, you would get this mean look on your face, kind of like now."

Elaine scowled even harder but to Seth, she got more adorable. Her brown eyes squinted and her perfect, pouty lips scrunched together.

"You would say, 'Will you have *juevos rancheros* with me?' Your mother wanted my

real identity kept a secret so it was the only time in my life that I had ever lied to you. I would tell you that I had business in the morning. I always made it to dinner.”

“I don’t trust a man who can’t stay for breakfast,” Elaine said. “Means he’s either got a secret to hide or he has a problem with intimacy.”

“In my case, you were right on one count.”

“So why did the lessons stop?”

The aura surrounding Elaine turned white. Curiosity suited her. She looked like an angel bathed in the glowing light.

“Your mother said I was a bad influence on you. I told her that I was only doing what Alex wanted. He wanted you to be tough. He wanted you to know straight away about your destiny. I tried very hard to fulfill that wish for him. Your mother banished me from the house. I could not return. Not in a physical state.”

Changing into vapors took a lot out of Seth. There were nights he could barely get out of bed to feed. But a promise was a promise.

“What do you think changed in Mom so that she didn’t want you involved in my life?” Elaine slowed her assault against Seth. She must have wanted to be able to hear his response.

“She did not want me to reveal the truth about your father to you. She knew I had wanted to as soon as I thought you would be able to understand. She blamed me for a lot of things.” Seth lowered his blade. “It all came after your brother was born. When the punishment came down, she blamed me.”

“Did you kill my father?” Elaine raised her sword again and assumed her attack stance.

“No,” Seth said coolly. How could Elaine still think he had had anything to do with Alex’s death?

“Did you kill my father?” Elaine went after him, slamming her blade against his until the clanging sound overtook the room.

“No!” He held his sword to the side to shield his face.

Seth slid his saber around hers to immobilize it, held her wrist and raised it above her head. She was too good. Better than anything he had ever taught her. She was going on emotion and that could be dangerous ... for her.

Seth pulled Elaine close. With her head turned upward, her parted lips were only a few inches from his. She panted. Her chest heaved up and down against his. His head swirled as soon as her rosy aroma wafted up to his nose.

“Alex was like a brother to me,” Seth began. “But he got involved with the wrong people.” He felt Elaine’s pulse pounding against his fingers.

“I’m tired of your riddles and games. Just tell me.”

Seth yanked her sword from her hand. Instead of throwing it to the floor, he took it and Elaine to his weapons closet. Without letting her go, he set the sword on its shelf and put the other in its place.

“Come to bed with me.” Seth pulled Elaine toward his round bed. He felt some resistance from Elaine but it was not great resistance.

“What do you think you’re doing?” She stumbled behind him.

“Please sit.”

She plopped down on his bed as Seth stepped out of his fencing shoes. He made sure they were set properly under his bed, toes pointed under the bed, the heels even, laces crossed over the top.

“I need your head on the pillow.”

“So basically you want me to lie down. Is that it?” Elaine moved away from him on the bed but kept her legs tucked under her body. She looked so small and fragile sitting by herself he instantly wanted to protect her. As it stood at that moment, she wanted no protection. She wanted answers.

“Yes, lie back and on your side.”

Elaine hesitated but then complied. Even on her side, she kept her arms crossed. When Seth assumed the same position, facing her, she bolted up.

“What kind of game are you playing?” she asked as she looked back at him.

“No game. You want to know the truth about your family, about your father, this is the best way to get it.” Seth patted his hand on the bed, inviting Elaine back down with him.

She mumbled a silent prayer then returned to her reclined position. This time, though, she was on her back.

“You will need to face me.”

After waiting for a minute, Elaine flipped her body over and faced Seth. She was now surrounded by a yellowish light.

“I will not hurt you,” Seth said, trying to reassure her.

“I know.” She swallowed hard. The yellowish light slowly became lighter and lighter.

Elaine kept her eyes down.

“I need your hand.” Seth held out his, hoping she would trust him enough to offer hers.

She raised her hand that she had folded over her chest and placed it in his hand. His large hand nearly swallowed hers. Her hand felt soft.

When he brought it to his face, she nearly leapt out of her skin. His hard jaw flexed under her as her fingertips touched lightly on his temple.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her voice much softer this time.

“Bonding. I want you in my thoughts. I want you to know what happened to Alex.” He pressed her palm against his cheek. It was not necessary for the bonding procedure. He liked feeling her hand against his skin.

“So what happens now?”

“My thoughts will fill your head. You will have to do one thing.”

“Besides touch you?”

“You will have to look into my eyes the entire time.”

Elaine jerked back but Seth kept a strong hold on her hand. He had noticed she had a hard time looking him in the eyes sometimes. She could not do it when she tended his arm. And now she was practically running away from him.

“I can’t do it. Why can’t you just tell me?”

“Why are you not able to look me in the eyes?”

When he saw tears welling in her eyes, he knew it had nothing to do with fearing him. She was afraid of something else. Seth moved closer to her. When she did not back away, he felt comforted, almost relieved.

Elaine let her thoughts slip. Even in her thoughts, Seth heard her crying. The words came out jumbled and muffled. *I, uh, can’t, mmm, see you lie to me!*

Seth curled his hand around hers. “I am not going to lie to you.”

She met his gaze. Huge teardrops fell down over her nose and her cheek. “I’ve spent my career avoiding looking anyone in the eyes. I can’t do this.”

Seth gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “Yes, you can. If you can hold a sword against me then you can look me in the eyes for a couple of minutes.”

Seth, uncharacteristically, wiped the tears from Elaine's face. He let the droplets remain on his thumb and fingers. Her tears were the closest things he had gotten to real life. He discovered he liked the feeling.

After taking a deep breath, she slowly opened them and made direct eye contact. Her fingers pressed lightly on his temple. Now he had to let go. She had to know the truth.

Chapter Fourteen

Seth's thoughts came in like a cloud at first. Elaine wasn't sure if it was just her own imagination or if indeed she was bonding with him. One thing she couldn't deny was that touching Seth was like being given a day pass into heaven.

His skin, although cool to the touch, felt smooth. No razor stubble. No bumps or cuts. He was like marble, carved out by God Himself. Staring into his eyes felt almost sinful.

The intimate touch pushed her boundaries. They were both fully clothed. Their genitals were still strapped down in their fencing getups. Just touching him and staring into his eyes seemed more sexual than in her best fantasies about Seth.

Elaine stared deeper into Seth's eyes and in an instant, a vivid picture flashed in her head. Seth winced as his breathing came out ragged.

She wanted to ask him if he was all right until a distinct image of her mother appeared. Olivia, over twenty years younger, looked like a great-looking body double. In her then petite frame, Olivia was thin, only a slight belly showing through her pullover sleeveless plaid top and black Capri pants. In her arms was a small baby. She must have just had her brother Vic.

Olivia bounced her new bundle of joy as she stared at someone ... or something. Whatever it was, it was in all black, including a hood, and stood at least seven feet tall. It could have been the Grim Reaper but it wore wingtips. So much for the gristly look.

"You know the deal," the Reaper said. Its voice came out raspy with an echo undertone to it. When it spoke, people had to listen.

"Yes, I know," Olivia said. She didn't seem afraid. She hushed her baby and kissed his forehead but she wasn't scared to have this thing in her baby's nursery.

Even as a thought, Elaine felt her heart pounding. Her fingers trembled as she touched Seth's head. She tried to be careful of not losing the contact made to his flesh. She became entranced in the images he shared with her.

"Lainey! Come into the nursery, sweetheart," Olivia called.

Why would her mother bring a four-year old child into a room with this thing? Elaine opened her eyes wider as she continued staring into Seth's luscious brown gaze. He didn't blink. He'd winced a few times in the process but said nothing.

In her thoughts, Elaine saw herself as a small toddler tiptoeing into the room. She looked at the strange man then over to her mother.

"Are we playing Halloween again?" Little Elaine asked.

Elaine clearly remembered the blue lacey pajamas she used to wear as a child. They were her favorite because she'd imagined she was a child movie star like Shirley Temple. She definitely had the curls back then.

"No, no games this time, sweetie," Olivia said. She looked over to the Reaper as she rocked back and forth. "He's going to take you to a fun and faraway place."

Elaine gasped and it made Seth moan as though he felt her pain. Take her away? Her mother had offered her four-year old baby to this thing? What was going on here?

"Will Daddy come with me?" Little Lainey hopped up and down in her bare feet, clapping her hands like this was a game.

"Maybe," Olivia answered coolly as she kept her eyes on her precious boy. No wonder

Vic got to do whatever he wanted. He was Mama's favorite. Elaine gritted her teeth as anger bubbled inside of her. She didn't break eye contact with Seth.

"Yeah! I'm ready! I just want to pack Mr. Teddy and tell Abuela Celia goodbye." Little Lainey turned to the door but was halted by her mother's voice.

"No, Lainey!" Olivia screamed. "Grandmama knows you're leaving. No need to say goodbye. Besides, if I had my way, she'd be going too."

Little Lainey looked disappointed. Her little mouth turned up. Then she nodded. "I guess I'm ready then."

The Reaper reached his black gloved hand out to her. Before Lainey could take it, Alex appeared in the bedroom doorway.

The tears Elaine had been holding back throughout this memory freely flowed. Her father was more handsome in thought than in the pictures she had of him. His dark, wavy hair danced wildly on his head. His light brown eyes flashed in horror and anger. In his boots and dirty denim jeans, he looked more like a renegade cowboy than some vampire protector.

"Livy, what are you doing with our babies?" Alex asked. He turned his gaze to the Reaper. He immediately crossed himself.

If her father feared this thing, then Elaine didn't feel so much like a wimp when she felt afraid of it.

"What is The Master doing here?" Alex asked.

"The deal," Olivia said as she made her way next to The Master. "We broke it, remember? Now we have to make good."

"Seth warned me about you, about this. But I didn't believe him." Alex pointed directly at his wife.

Olivia's face held no remorse or surprise or even regret. Her conservative den mother now looked like a cold, calculating monster. She couldn't be. The woman had come to her rescue only a few days ago. She'd cooked for her. Cleaned up after her. Listened to her. Tended to her wounds. Seth was lying. He was making all this up. He had to be.

"That meddling vamp." Olivia paced. "Why can't he find some other family to cling to? Why the hell is he always here?"

Seth appeared in the doorway. Except for his hair being slightly longer and a little unkempt, which for Seth made him look even sexier than he already was, he appeared exactly the same as he looked now. Could it be possible that this man never changed? He had always been this sexy for centuries? The idea boggled her mind. He must have had centuries of women throwing themselves at his feet.

Seth put his hands to his hips. "I am here to look out for my friend. It is obvious you do not have his or your children's best interest at heart." He also had on jeans and a black tee shirt that clung to his chest.

Lainey peered up at Seth and smiled. She looked at him like a hero, her knight in great fitting jeans. Even as a child she'd had a crush on him. Why couldn't she remember him now? It was apparent he had been a significant part of her life from birth.

The Master hissed, part cat and part snake, before backing away from Seth.

"Alex, we broke the rules. We had a second child. We should be punished," Olivia said, holding on tighter to Vic. Her body language said she wasn't giving up her son. Her daughter, however, was definitely up for grabs.

"No, we will stay a family. Seth is helping me make a deal with the Council."

The Master turned to Olivia. "No deals. You promised me the Ayudante for the

vampire.”

“What?” Elaine said to Seth in real life. “My brother is a vampire?”

Seth said nothing. He must have wanted her to see it all. Elaine continued staring into his eyes to see the whole drama play out. Her stomach tightened in anticipation of what would happen to her father. She knew it was coming.

“No! You cannot have any of my children!” Alex ran toward The Master. It grabbed her father by his neck and raised him off of the floor more than four feet into the air. His dangling feet twitched. Alex gasped for air, spitting and sputtering.

Elaine cried as hard now as she had as a child in that moment. She thought she saw Seth mouth the words, ‘I am sorry.’ Tears clouded her vision.

“Put him down! Let them be parents to their children.” Seth stood in front of a frightened Lainey, protecting her against this thing.

“Mind your business, Seth. This has nothing to do with you,” Olivia said, making her way to the door towards Seth and Elaine.

Without answering her, Seth reached for his friend. He tried pulling Alex down but was knocked back roughly by The Master with his free hand. Seth stumbled, almost hitting Elaine. He bent over and quickly apologized to her. The gesture, then and now, comforted Elaine.

The next thing she saw horrified her.

“A sacrifice has to be made,” the Master said.

Seth started to say, “Let it be me.”

Then Alex cut him off. “Take me. Leave my wife and children alone.”

Before anything else could be negotiated, Alex let out a scream that shattered one window in the nursery. The Reaper shoved his hand through her father’s body. Lainey saw the large, gloved hand come through Alex’s back, blood and organs dripping and hanging from its fingers. The Reaper pulled its hand out of her father and dove in again. This time it pulled out Alex’s heart. The monster dropped Alex into a heap on the floor at his daughter’s feet. When he ended up in a pile of blood and guts, Seth covered Lainey’s face.

The Master wiggled his fingers, removing the few traces of blood and entrails from his hand. “I’ve gotten rid of the obstacle. I still want the girl.”

Lainey cried and held onto Seth instead of her mother. Even then the child knew her mother could not be trusted.

Seth put a reassuring hand to the girl’s back and stroked her. “No. This is a matter to be decided by the Council. If you touch her, you will be severely punished. And make no mistake, I will make it my life’s work to make sure nothing ever happens to her.”

“Your new Ayudante. Your new protector.” The Master laughed, shaking the entire house.

“Yes, and if you touch her I will make sure the Hell you came from will be worse than the Hell I send you to.” Seth stood guard in front of Elaine like a Pit Bull.

Without trepidation, Elaine stroked her thumb on the side of his face.

Seth had held a special kind of love for Elaine even as a child. Could he love her now as an adult? Could he see her more than just an Ayudante? Could she see him more than just a vampire looking for his next feed?

Damn, what was she thinking? Love? Elaine needed to be concerned with survival. No matter what, Seth had to get over his fear of germs to feed or the dead would rise from their graves in a matter of days. Love had nothing to do with her mission. And love wouldn’t cure him.

“You are making a mistake.” The Master then said something in a language Elaine didn’t understand or had even heard of in her life. Seth blinked in response but kept a firm hold of Lainey.

The Master twirled and in a smoky dust cloud, disappeared from the nursery.

Elaine relaxed her shoulders and breathed evenly.

Seth lifted Lainey in his arms. “I’ll take her to bed,” he said to Olivia. “Then you and I will need to talk.”

“No. There’s nothing to say except goodbye.” She yanked Elaine from Seth’s arms making the child scream in fright and in pain.

In life, Seth winced again.

Olivia continued, “You will not touch my child again because everything you touch turns to shit. You are a plague. A disgusting cretin without thought or remorse. I want you out of my house and out of our lives.”

Seth reached for Lainey but her mother blocked him.

Elaine could tell Seth didn’t want to leave her. In essence he hadn’t. He had protected her like a guardian angel. And to see the pained expression on Seth’s face, she knew losing his friend and letting this child go crushed him.

Lainey’s chest squeezed tightly seeing Seth retreat down the stairs. She reached out for her hero, begging him to come back to her.

“I’m not leaving you, Lainey,” Seth began. “I will always be around. Always.” He turned his gaze up to Olivia. “*Always.*”

Maybe that was the reason Olivia had become the perfect soccer mom, Seth’s unspoken threat to be only milliseconds away if Elaine were ever in trouble.

Even though that image faded, Elaine was slow in removing her hand from his face. When she caught flashes of a new vision, Elaine blinked her tear-filled eyes.

“No, don’t look.” Seth held her hand and attempted to remove it from his face.

Seeing Alvin through Seth’s eyes made her hold onto the vampire tighter. The sight wasn’t of her nerdy, dutiful fiancé working hard at his accounting job. Oh, he was working hard all right. He was having sex and with her best friend, too. Lying bitch. So much for moving to the Amazon to save the rain forests.

This time Elaine held back any tears. She watched at Alvin professed his love for this other woman. When their love making session ended, he went to the bathroom. There had to be a reason Seth had captured this image so she continued looking.

“Elaine, stop bonding,” a weak Seth pleaded. “You do not need to see this.”

She shushed him and continued to stare into his sorrowful gaze.

When Alvin went to the sink to wash his hands, his smug expression quickly disappeared when he turned to find a man dressed in all black standing in his bathroom. Like a teenager in a slasher flick, he screamed.

It was Seth. His short hair now looked like the way he kept it today. The angry expression he carried on his face made Elaine shudder.

“Who the hell are you?” Alvin asked.

“Let us just say I will be your worst nightmare if you do not pack your things and get out of town now.”

“What?” Alvin’s gaze split between Seth and the bathroom door. Guess the coward was looking for his new woman to save him.

“You heard me. I want you out of town today. And take that sorry excuse for a woman

with you.”

“Who the hell do you think you are coming into my home like this and demanding”

Before he could finish his rant, Seth crowded his space, pushing him back against the sink. He let his glowing red eyes speak for him as his canines grew. “Do not talk to Elaine Shrink again. Do not call her. Do not say goodbye. It would be easier for her to think you died than what you are doing to her. Do I make myself clear?”

Alvin nodded. His mouth hung open.

“If I hear of you coming near her again, I will make it my duty to make sure you hurt for the rest of your life.”

“I ... I ... I got it. Leave t ... t ... t ... town.”

Seth took a step back and crossed his arms. “Well? Start packing.”

Alvin scrambled to get out of the bathroom. That’s when Seth let out a long breath and disappeared into a fine mist.

Elaine removed her hand from Seth’s face like she was removing it from a burning stove eye. Seth blinked and struggled to catch his breath.

“Bonding takes a lot out of me.” He rolled onto his back and put his hand to his forehead.

Without thinking, Elaine straddled Seth’s body and rested her hands on the pillow on either side of Seth’s head.

“You saved me,” she began, her voice quivering. “In more ways than one.”

“You are on top of me,” Seth said as he glanced at her knees.

“You fought for me and my brother. You tried to save my father. You got rid of that lying, cheating dog from my life. Why didn’t you just tell me?”

He lowered his head to the pillow. “Your mother. You seemed so happy about your relationship with her now that I did not want to spoil it. I did not think you would believe me if I told you her intentions toward you as a child.”

“I wouldn’t have. I even doubted you seeing it in your head.”

“Had I known what was going to happen, I would have warned Alex a long time before. I am unable to read the minds of other vampires. We are all supposed to be looking out for one another. Theoretically there is no need to be able to read one another’s thoughts.”

All of the pieces were coming together now.

“No wonder you didn’t know what my mother was thinking and that she had seen me.” She slapped her forehead. “And no wonder my mother couldn’t read Vic’s thoughts. Who knew he was a vampire?”

“You cannot tell him. He has not grown into his powers yet although I am sure he has adopted the nocturnal lifestyle.”

“If you mean he’s a party animal, you’re right.” Elaine wiped her face. “I don’t want to leave him in the dark about this. He deserves to know and know now before he hurts someone.”

Seth shook his head. “You could be hurting him. He has the gene but it may never rear its ugly head in him in his lifetime. Do not push him into something he is not ready to be yet.”

Elaine sighed. “It’s not fair. I don’t think I’m at all ready to be this saver you want me to be and yet I was pushed into this world. I was so angry with Abuela Celia and Mama for not telling me about this all of my life. I don’t want Vic to go through the same thing. If I’m supposed to help vampires, shouldn’t I at least warn my own brother?”

Seth squeezed his eyes shut. He put his hand over his face and mumbled, “Dogma, dogma, dogma.”

It was the first time he had uttered that in a while. Elaine crawled off of him, suddenly aware that her presence had propelled him back into his insanity.

"I won't tell him. Not yet." She kept her head down, staring at the sea of red bed covering. "But the first hint that he's feeling a little strange or different ..."

Seth cut her off. "Then you may tell him." He removed his hand. "That would be best."

He captured her gaze. The softness of his expression tore at her heart. To know that he cared for her, not as a next meal, but as a valued human being made her wonder how he saw her now. Was she still just a kid to him in his mind? Or was she that cute girl-next-door who suddenly grew up while he was away at college?

"Now I see why you thought Mina was on your side." Elaine reached behind her and undid the top strap of her jacket. "You didn't know she was trying to take over your position."

Seth bolted up, his face mere inches from hers. "She is trying to do what?"

Elaine had to catch her breath before she spoke. Being so close to Seth made her extremely nervous. "That's why I asked if you trusted her. She wanted me to help her keep you from getting better so that she can be the ruler of death. She wants to overthrow you."

He caught Elaine's gaze. "And you defended me?"

She swallowed nervously. "I didn't at first. When I was afraid of all of this, I was going to side with her. But seeing how evil she is, I decided against it."

Seth said nothing. He stared at Elaine and this time she didn't feel uncomfortable with the stare. She licked her tongue over her lips and watched his gaze go to her mouth and back up to her eyes.

Putting her hands to the sides of Seth's face, Elaine asked, "Did I hurt you when we bonded?"

Seth shook his head. "No. I am fine."

Elaine peered over to his digital clock. It was only two a.m. Three plus hours was a lot time to be locked in a room with the sexiest man of several centuries.

"Thank you for, well, Alvin. I didn't know."

"I know. I never wanted you to know."

His protective nature warmed her heart. He was no blood-sucker or evil-doer.

"What are we going to do for the next few hours before sunrise?" she asked.

"I do not know. Talk?"

Her chest deflated. Talk, huh? She had thought all vampires were on the make.

"I cannot touch you. You know that," Seth said as though responding to her thoughts.

Elaine gazed at him. She should have removed her hands from his face, but she couldn't. Not yet. There was one thing she had to do. She didn't care if he knew it was coming or not.

"That's your rule not mine," Elaine said.

"Where have I heard that statement before?" Seth clicked his fingers. "Mina said it earlier when she admitted to feeding off of you. Breaking rules is not always a good thing."

Elaine thought about Seth's statement. If she gave into her impulse, she would be no better than Mina. One thing Seth said he liked about Elaine was that she was nothing like that backstabber.

Elaine dropped her hands from Seth's face. As she looked at him, she knew she couldn't let his act of heroism go without reward. He'd saved her *life*.

"I'm not like Mina," Elaine began. "So I am going to ask you first before violating your space and your rules." She took a deep breath then asked her question on the exhalation. "Just say yes or no."

“To what?”

Good. She'd blocked her thoughts in time. Seth didn't know her plan. Hell, she wasn't exactly sure what she was going to do.

“Do you trust me?” she asked.

“I trust you know my limitations. I trust you understand consequences, especially now.” Seth sat up and rested against the headboard.

Elaine's chest pinched, knowing he was talking about what had happened to her father. She'd always been a rulebook follower. She'd never broken curfew. She'd never cut class on Senior Cut Day. She would never even dream of taking the labels off of her mattresses because of that warning printed on them. So why was she even entertaining the idea of kissing Seth Overkill? Because from the top of her head to the bottom of her toes, she wanted to kiss him.

“Let us stop talking about nonsense and get back to work.”

As Seth was about to swing his legs over the side of the bed, Elaine placed one hand to the side of his face to keep him facing forward.

She hesitated for a moment when she looked into his eyes. So she closed hers before leaning forward and planting a soft kiss. She missed his lips but managed to connect to the side of his mouth.

There she was, kissing a vampire. Not bad. His lips, the small corner she'd managed to connect with, felt soft but firm. She closed her eyes but tried to keep her mind free of the possibilities like what it would be like to kiss him fully on his lips. Then her thoughts drifted on what it would be like to make love to him. When that thought entered her mind, Elaine didn't trust her own willpower to keep Seth from reading her thoughts. She went for the old standby of crossing her fingers.

When she noticed that Seth hardly reacted, or rather didn't react at all, to the kiss, she backed away. Her stomach wrenched when she caught his expression. She wouldn't exactly call it disgusted but he wasn't elated either.

“Thank you for my life,” she said in a whisper. “And see.” She looked around the room. “The world didn't end.”

Seth leaned forward. Oh God, would he kiss her back? Her skin prickled. She sat up straighter, preparing for a proper kiss. Her tongue moistened her eager lips.

“You are welcome.” Seth sat at the edge of the bed. He leaned down to put on his shoes.

Elaine deflated. Everything inside her that had once throbbed and pulsated came to a complete and painful stop. If it wasn't for the fact that she'd taken a deep breath, Elaine thought she would've stopped breathing, too.

“That's it? You're welcome? I don't get you, Seth. I thought we were getting closer. I thought we had gotten through some things. I mean we just bonded for”

Seth whipped his head around stopping her rant. His eyes, still brown, looked wide and harsh. His face seemed harder than before. She was more afraid of what he was going to say than what he could do to her.

“The first night you spent in my house, I came into your room and watched you,” Seth began. “I looked at the way you slept. I paid close attention to your neck, in particular that nice juicy vein going down the side.” His eyes drifted down briefly to her neck.

Elaine brought her hand up to it and swallowed. What was he trying to do to her? The same man who had offered his life for hers wouldn't have thought of her that way. Would he? Maybe his thoughts, the ones she observed, weren't real. He had made them up.

“You observed a small part of me. On the whole, I am a dangerous person. I am like a

shark in that the only thing I am made to do is eat and exist and ...”

“Mate.” Elaine found a vulnerability in Seth as he spoke that he probably didn’t want to reveal. His voice broke. He didn’t look at her. Maybe he couldn’t. And even as he tried hiding his hand in front of him, she caught him tapping his fingers again. She didn’t want him this way, but she couldn’t deny that she felt attracted to him.

Seth stood from the bed. “Is this another one of your delusional fantasies?”

“Why are you trying so hard to make me hate you?” She slid herself to the end of the bed and let her legs dangle off of the edge. “If you want me to help you then it may be in your best interest to have me like you.”

“It does not have to involve sex.”

Was the Prince of Death blushing? She had actually made the leader of the underworld embarrassed like some virginal schoolboy? Even that was sexy.

Elaine slid off the bed and stood next to Seth, trying to gain some eye contact. “It doesn’t. But it could be fun.”

“No!” Seth roared.

Elaine took a step back from him. If Seth was trying to scare her, he was doing a heck of a job. He made his way to the bathroom. Knowing what he must have wanted to do, Elaine chased after him. When she reached the door, she found Seth leaning over the sink, the faucet turned on full blast. Steam from the hot water rose to his face as he remained in the position, seemingly frozen to the spot.

Elaine held up her hand. “Fine. You’ve scared me. You won.” Tears brimmed on her lower lid. “Just don’t hurt me by washing me off of you. I get it. I’m not your type. You don’t want me.”

Seth turned his head to face her. After turning off the water, he approached Elaine. She remained grounded. She wouldn’t be bullied by this man. And no matter how hard he tried, he wasn’t going to crush her spirit either.

Seth planted himself in front of her. “You do not understand me at all.”

Elaine kept her gaze on the floor.

“The way I am has nothing to do with you. I do not know how to fix it. I do know this. I should not involve you any further in my life until I know what it is that has made me this way.”

He paused and shuffled his weight from one side to the other. That was all Elaine could tell with her head down. She didn’t want to look into his eyes, especially not with tears streaming down her face. She felt so silly getting so emotional about a bloodsucker. She should have been concentrating on getting him well and going back home. She couldn’t deny the fact that she enjoyed spending time with Seth.

“Will you please at least look at me?” Seth asked. He put his finger on her chin to lift it. “I am not used to carrying on conversations with the tops of people’s heads.” He chuckled until he saw her tear-stained face.

His smile fell. Elaine’s stomach lurched at the same time and she winced in pain.

“Sit on the counter,” Seth demanded. He helped her up then retrieved a clean, white cotton washcloth. He moistened it with water.

“I am getting better.” He squeezed the rag. “Look.” He held up his hands. “No gloves. I no longer wear gloves around you anymore. That is a step, right?”

Elaine nodded and tried to offer him a smile. She left her hand on her stomach, hoping the pressure would help calm it.

As Seth dabbed her cheeks with the soft cloth, she asked, “Why do I feel so sick all of the

time?”

Seth sighed. “It is my fault. Whenever I hurt, you feel it. Another trait of the Ayudante, I am afraid.”

“Why are you hurting?” she asked.

He folded the damp cloth and set it on the counter next to Elaine. He moved closer to her. “Because I cannot have what I want.”

“Oh.”

“What I want is to be the way I used to be.” He peered at something on Elaine’s neck. “I am sure you want the same thing, to return back to your home, no murder charges, your business the way it was.”

“Alone.”

“Alone.”

She had never thought about Seth and how he would be in his huge mansion all by himself when all of this was over. They would be in the same boat. Why shouldn’t they share that Titanic together?

“I can heal those wounds.” He pointed to her neck.

Elaine touched the puncture wounds and immediately felt disgusted and ashamed for letting her guard down even for a brief moment.

“I don’t want to look like a walking pin cushion,” Elaine said and covered the marks with her hand.

Seth pulled her hand down. After retrieving a sheet of facial tissue, he folded it into a tight square.

“I am sorry. I know this is not very sanitary.” He turned his head away but Elaine knew he dabbed the tissue on his tongue. She’d seen him do it in his office when he’d healed her feet.

“You remind me of my mother,” Elaine said and laughed. When she saw Seth’s serious expression, she realized quickly the error of her statement, especially with the memories Seth had of the woman.

She quickly amended herself. “My mother used to clean me and my brother off with her spit. Vic and I used to call it her Mr. Clean spit. No matter what was on us, dirt, candy, ketchup, Mama got it off with by licking her thumb and scrubbing our faces.”

“Now I do not feel as bad.” He touched her neck with the stiff paper, touching her carefully but slowly.

In any other situation, to have a man put his saliva on her would have grossed Elaine out. With Seth, she felt safe. Her body tingled. When Seth kept bumping into her knees, she decided to accommodate him by spreading her legs apart so he could get closer.

Seth was either getting better, getting comfortable with Elaine, or he was setting her up to feed off of her. Elaine ran her tongue over her dry lips. As easy as his touch was on her, she didn’t want him to stop.

“I told you part of what I had done when you were here,” Seth began. “Yes, I did want to bite you to feed off of you because you were so obstinate.”

“Is that another way of saying I was being a smartass?” Elaine turned her head to catch Seth’s expression.

“With remarks like that, it makes you look even yummier,” Seth said, but with a smile. He nudged her chin with his knuckle to tilt her head back over. “But now ...”

He stopped. His hand rested on his neck. Elaine raised her head.

“But now what?” she asked.

Seth brought his hand down. “But now I do not think it will work.”

Elaine moved her lips but nothing came out. Her heart pounded so hard she knew he had to have heard it. She braced her hands on the countertop.

“What won’t work?” she asked.

Seth laughed but there was a tinge of nervousness in the jovial expression. “This tissue. The wounds are too deep for me to just use that.”

Elaine touched the marks with her fingertips. “I guess it’s not too bad. I’ll just have to live the rest of my life in turtlenecks and mock turtlenecks. It’s a fashion trend that’s coming back into style, right?”

Elaine turned around to look at her reflection in the mirror. The bite marks were horrible. She knew she couldn’t live with them. What was she thinking? She was thinking that Seth already felt guilty enough for her kiss. She saw and felt it for herself. She didn’t want him feeling guilty for not being there when Mina had attacked her.

She’d felt Seth step back from between her legs. As she stared into the mirror, she couldn’t see his reflection at all. But when she felt the familiar pressure on her inner thighs, she knew he had returned. When she turned back to him, his expression had changed.

Heavy-lidded and lips looking juicier than Elaine had ever remembered, Seth had the bedroom look down pat. His honey-colored skin glowed in the fluorescent bathroom light. And now it didn’t bother Elaine so much to smell the overwhelming bleach aroma. Her full attention became directed straight at Seth.

“I know a way to heal you,” Seth growled.

“How?”

Seth put his large hand to the side of Elaine’s face. She instantly nuzzled in his palm. His other hand cupped her other cheek and he leaned her head over again, still supporting her head in his hand.

With her bites exposed, Seth leaned in. Elaine had no time to second-guess Seth’s methods. This man had saved her life on more than one occasion. If he could do that, then how could she think he could hurt her?

When his mouth covered her neck, Elaine gasped, not out of pain or shock or fear, but out of pleasure. For such cold skin, his mouth blazed in a warm heat. She put her hand on his arm. Her other hand rested on top of his hand that he’d placed on the counter. She closed her legs around him.

If this was considered medicinal, it sure felt like making out to Elaine. She closed her eyes. Her hand gripped at Seth’s sleeve. His tongue slid over the bites as light as a feather dusting over her skin. Elaine wanted more. Her body ached for more.

When Seth pulled back, Elaine didn’t let him go. She didn’t want to let him go yet.

“I have other wounds on my body you can heal like that,” she said, nearly breathless.

Seth smiled. Elaine’s eyes widened when she noticed a dangerous set of canines extended and ready to chomp.

Elaine touched her neck. The wounds now felt like two small bumps side by side on her neck. He had healed her, both physically and emotionally. He could have fed off of her easily but didn’t. It seemed obvious that his body wanted to. Like Pavlov’s dog, his teeth responded to touching her neck, in particular that nice, juicy vein Seth had mentioned earlier. But he didn’t take advantage of her.

“There is a way,” Seth began.

“A way for what?”

He glanced behind her then brought his gaze back to her. “Get naked and get on the bed.”

Elaine’s mouth hung open. It was what she wanted. So why wasn’t she moving?

“Unless you don’t want to try.”

Before Seth could back out, Elaine jumped off the counter and scurried to the bed. She needed Seth’s help to undo the buckles on her fencing outfit. Of course, he moved slower than a three-toed sloth.

At the last buckle, she stripped off the gear and the rest of her outfit. Once she was naked, she positioned herself in the middle of the bed. Every part of her pulsed and throbbed in anticipation of what he would do to her.

Before making any moves, Seth observed her body, scanning her from head to toe. He closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. A smile slithered across his face. He must have smelled her excitement. Even his air purifiers on full blast couldn’t eliminate her scent.

Seth sat on the edge of the bed facing her. He loomed his face over hers then put his hands to the sides of her head like when they’d bonded earlier.

“Now you’ll get to experience my fantasy.” Seth stared into her eyes.

This time Elaine had no fears. She welcomed the visual intrusion.

The image she saw came very quickly. Seth and Elaine were in a garden at night. Perhaps this was a garden on Seth’s grounds. Since she’d never been in Seth’s backyard, she wasn’t sure. One thing was clear. They were both naked.

Seth helped Elaine down onto a white blanket. The scene felt so real that in life, on the bed, she moved her hands over the satin sheets thinking she could feel the blanket.

In his vision, Seth spread her legs open then positioned his head between them. Gripping her thighs, he made one long pass over her pussy with his tongue. It all felt so real and so good. Dream Elaine arched her back and called out Seth’s name. The real Elaine grabbed Seth’s arms and wanted so much to kiss him.

Seth flicked his tongue over her clitoris, making sparks shoot through her body. Then he slid his tongue inside of her.

“Oh, Seth!” Elaine said and squirmed on the bed. “More! More!”

If the dream was anything like reality, Elaine wanted to drop all of the fantasy stuff and move on to real thing.

Seth used his thick thumb to rub her clit while his tongue moved in and out of her pussy. No wonder Seth had her get naked. Elaine was getting wet just bonding with him.

Seth moaned, vibrating her sex. The feeling was enough for dream Elaine to come hard and fast. She writhed on the blanket while Seth took no mercy on her. As soon as her body settled down, he pounced.

Seth positioned himself between her legs and teased her pussy opening by moving the mushroom tip of his penis up and down between her slick nether lips. Then in one surprising move, he plunged inside of her. Elaine in the vision grabbed Seth’s shoulders. Elaine in real life nearly leapt off the bed.

In a constant, pounding, steady rhythm, Seth proved why he was the prince. Elaine’s eyes widened when in the image, something strange occurred. Seth put his arm around Elaine’s waist and pulled her up. Then they floated off the ground.

“What the hell?” Elaine managed to ask.

Seth remained quiet.

Even as they were ten and twenty feet off the ground, Seth never stopped fucking her and

Elaine didn't stop enjoying him. He cradled her ass in his hand and wrapped his other arm around her body while she held onto his shoulders.

She knew Seth was different. If he could actually do this, he would have Elaine mind, body, and soul.

Seth pumped faster and harder into her until Elaine could no longer handle the pent-up energy inside of her. She nibbled his shoulder then let out a long scream that made dogs within earshot howl along with her. Seth made one last, hard thrust inside of her. He bathed her womb with his cool cum.

Both sated, they floated back down to the blanket. Elaine positioned herself on her side with Seth cuddling behind her.

In actual life, Elaine blinked and smoothed her fingers down Seth's face. "Is that possible? Could we do that?"

Seth, surprising Elaine again, kissed the tip of her nose before answering. "I am not going to deny the fact that I want you, Elaine," Seth said. He brushed her hair back from her face. "I have cared deeply about you as Alex's daughter. I have watched you grow up into an amazing woman. I am thankful in a way that I missed out on several years of your life. It was a happy surprise to see you now."

Elaine couldn't wipe the smile off of her face. Her stomach fluttered and she felt sixteen years old again. She leaned in for another kiss but Seth backed away.

"Don't do this, Seth." Elaine sat up. "Don't toy with my emotions."

"I do not want to see you get hurt."

Elaine crossed her arms under her breasts. "Get hurt? By who, this mysterious Committee that I've never seen?"

"Council."

"Whatever. If I don't see it, it can't hurt me."

A loud thud crashed against the steel door of Seth's bedroom. Seth immediately pulled her back.

"Go in my office and do not make a sound," Seth said between gritted teeth.

"What is it?" Elaine asked.

Seth stood at the bedroom door. He turned back to Elaine and said, "My guess is the mighty Council you believe does not exist."

Her and her big mouth!

Chapter Fifteen

Remedy, his left eye! Seth knew exactly what he was doing when he, essentially, kissed Elaine's neck. Sure, placing his lips on her started off as a way to heal her. Leaving them on her ended up as a way to be intimate with her.

Elaine had smelled like the finest perfumed soap and tasted so sweet, like nothing he had remembered even in his mortal days, but he licked his lips to recapture the flavor again.

And her face. Whoa. Those remarkable brown eyes. He could have drowned in them. Well, he could if he could actually be drowned.

When the second pound on his door sounded, he wasted no time getting Elaine to safety. He had waited years to see her again. He did not want to lose her after a good necking and some incredible bonding. Seth was sure it was the bonding session that brought about today's visit.

He ushered her to his office hidden behind bookshelves. "Stay in here. This will be safer than the bathroom."

"Wow. I didn't even know you had an office." Elaine surveyed the room. When she turned her back to him, Seth took great pleasure in taking in a great view of her backside through the sheet she had wrapped around her body.

"There are a lot of things you do not know about me," Seth said.

"And some things I'm slowly finding out about you." Elaine smiled.

Seth approached her. To even out the sheet, he tucked a top corner in the top in between her breasts.

"You keep it up and I'll be completely naked by the time you come back." Elaine put her hands to her tiny waist. His eyes immediately focused on her lower half. His former clear mind raced with thoughts of seeing her naked again, seeing her birthmark again.

Seth let his hand linger on Elaine's shoulder until the third hard rap stopped him. "I'll be back." Even saying the contraction made his tongue hurt. He strained his throat muscles to sound out the word that Elaine found such glee in hearing.

"Now you sound like Ahh-nold."

Before he could question who that person was, he closed her off in his office and raced to his door. He punched in a few codes in his security pad. The slightly dented door slid open.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, sir," Seth said with a bow.

A small, elderly man put his hand against the doorjamb to keep from collapsing. He panted, swallowing in between breaths, as he took careful steps into Seth's room.

His brown suit smelled of mothballs. The pants seemed ill-fitting, hanging low on his narrow hips, barely supported by a worn brown leather belt. His jacket dwarfed his miniscule frame. And his brown tie with yellow stripes spread across his stomach.

Seth held the man's shriveled hand and assisted him inside. He helped him sit in a chair then stood before him, hands clasped behind him in strict obedience.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Council Santiago?" Seth asked.

Santiago cleared his throat, which triggered a coughing fit. He braced his hands on his cane with a carved stallion on the handle.

Stop coughing. Stop coughing. Seth imagined that germs were now floating in his space. His space. These beings were powerful. Why in the world would this one choose to inhabit a

body like this? The outside did not match his power.

Seth had watched Santiago using only thoughts alone crush a man's windpipe. The high-ranking council member had been known to skin and fillet his victims in the same amount of time one could utter the word 'please.' Ordinarily nothing rattled Seth. Now he could not stop trembling.

"Anything I can get for you, sir?" Seth asked as he watched in horror. *A plastic drop cloth for your spray?*

Santiago's open-mouthed coughs continued. He shook his head and waved his hand in the air, turning down the offer. Seth's chest tightened when a large spittle bubble flew from Santiago's mouth and landed on his coffee table.

Seth's breathing rate tripled, quadrupled. *I have to clean it. I have to wipe it off, spray the area, disinfect it, wipe it again.* Would it have been so hard for him to just cover his mouth when he ...?

"Reckoning Day is upon us," Santiago said, interrupting Seth's manic thoughts.

Seth broke his stare on the offending bubble and turned back to the Council member. "Yes, sir."

Santiago's hand shook as he held it in the air. "How are you doing?"

Seth blinked. Not only was it rare for a Council member to make a visit to his home but even rarer to be asked of his well being. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled.

"I am fine, sir," Seth responded. Any other response would have gotten him severely punished. As his gaze dropped back to the clear bubble of germs resting on the coffee table, he felt that was punishment enough.

Santiago wagged his thin, bony finger at Seth. "I am not hearing such news from others. They say you are not well and may not be well enough for Reckoning Day. You have not hunted. Is this true?"

Mina. She was the only one close enough to Seth to know the truth. The minions who guarded his house knew nothing about his habits. They barely even knew the English language, let alone could convey thought in a cohesive sentence. And almost all of his servants in his home were mortal and knew nothing of Seth's other life. Elaine had been right about her assessment of Mina. She was doing well as an Ayudante in looking after his needs

"I am fine, sir. I will be able to get us through another Reckoning Day without"

Santiago cut in. "Good." He struggled to his feet. "If I hear differently, I have no problem in getting some fresh blood into your spot. I have several willing candidates."

Seth helped him to his feet. Under Santiago's brown fedora, his face and head were spotted with large brown marks. His pale skin almost looked translucent. *He* was questioning Seth's health.

"That will not be necessary, sir." Seth held onto Santiago's hand and supported his elbow as he led him back to the door.

Santiago stopped. He took in a long inhalation then glared at Seth. His once gray eyes clouded over in a blood red color. Seth knew the look all too well and it made him swallow hard.

"A fresh victim," Santiago said. "I can smell" he took in another deep breath, "... her."

Seth smelled her, too. Her womanly scent remained in the room. He even heard her steady heartbeat. He understood now how babies were comforted by the sound.

"Where is she?" Santiago asked, his fangs now protruding.

“She is an Ayudante, sir.”

No use trying to make up a lie. Seth was a terrible liar.

Santiago turned his gaze up to Seth. “An Ayudante? So you *are* in trouble.”

“Not exactly, sir. Just wanted some advice.”

Santiago’s eyes returned to their original color. He must have believed him. Seth’s shoulders relaxed. He just wanted to get Santiago out of his house. And he really wanted to get back to Elaine. Would she truly be naked when he opened the door?

Santiago snickered. “You and your obsession for all things mortal.”

Seth helped the elderly gentleman to the front door.

“Didn’t you learn your lesson before? You cannot fix their problems no matter how much you want to. There is an order to things. Follow them.”

“Yes, sir.” Seth tuned Santiago’s scratchy voice out of his head. He knew what he was doing. He would not allow Elaine to get hurt like her father had been.

“I hope for your sake that The Master does not find out.” Santiago gave Seth one last lingering look before coughing and leaving the house.

Seth took a deep breath. He did not have much time. He had to get well and soon. Then he had to get Elaine back to her own life. As long as she stayed with him, she left herself open to danger.

Before Seth opened the door to his office, he had one task to take care of first. He donned a pair of yellow cleaning gloves and scrubbed the coffee table with a disposable rag. Once that was cleaned to his satisfaction, he washed his hands. He wanted to shower and change but he did not want to leave Elaine alone too much longer in his dull, old office.

Seth pushed the bookshelf open and walked inside. He smiled, beaming from ear to ear. Elaine’s back was to him when he made his way inside, still covered, but still sexy. Seth strolled to her.

A new feeling overwhelmed him. He could not wait to touch her. Seth, who had been afraid to even meet new people, wanted so desperately to touch Elaine, hold her, talk to her. He wanted to stroke her silky, curly brown hair and tell her more about the Council. Not a very sexy topic. He wanted to share everything.

“I hope you were not too bored in my office,” Seth began.

He knew Elaine would have something cute or smart to say. He was starting to understand her humor and, better yet, like it. With only a mahogany and ivory desk in his office and shelves and shelves of books, Elaine could not have been too pleased with her new and temporary surroundings.

She turned around and her eyes were red, partly from crying but from the way her jaw was set in and her aura glowed a fiery red, he knew she was angry.

“I promise you. That desk is very old. We obtained the ivory way before elephants were put on the endangered list,” Seth said. He could not figure out why she would be so upset.

She held some papers. He had left some office foreclosure papers on his desk to be filed but nothing else.

“You’re OVK Financials?” Elaine asked.

Seth nodded. “Is there a problem with that?”

Elaine threw the papers she had in her hand at Seth. “Only that you’re the financing company that’s shutting down my office.”

Seth retrieved the papers from the floor and shuffled through them. He stopped when he saw Shrink Psychiatry. He had never looked at company names when he signed off on these

papers. He assumed that all business owners who could not pay their leases were deadbeats and deserved to be shut down. Looking into Elaine's tear-filled eyes, he knew he had to rethink his opinions.

"You give me the crummiest office in the entire building. Then you raised my lease rates until I couldn't afford to pay you and my equipment lease. And now I have to find out that you're shutting me down by seeing you sign off on it on your desk." She paced his office floor, her bare feet leaving small footprints in his Italian carpet.

"This is business, not personal."

Elaine stopped and glared at Seth. If she had had a sword in her hand, Seth knew she would have pierced his heart with it.

"Not personal, huh? Thank you. Thank you for reducing my life's ambition to nothing but whimsy to you." She pounded her fist on her chest. "It is personal to me. I worked hard to get the business off the ground. I was starting to get some repeat clients. All I ever wanted to do was to have an office by the oceanfront. And the small bit of ocean I can manage to see out of my window, you're taking that away from me." She made her way past him.

Seth reached out for her but she slipped by him.

When she noticed the locked, steel door, Elaine plopped herself down on the couch. "You have ruined my life. In one fell swoop I have lost all connections to my family. I have been told that my family has lied to me. I have been accused of murder. I no longer have a practice. And this one job I have, this Ayudante gig, I have no idea what I'm doing. You know, if I were a horse, I would have been shot by now." She glared at him. "And if we were dating, I would have poured bleach on your clothes and set fire to your car."

Seth furrowed his eyebrows. "Leaving me would hurt me enough."

Elaine put her hand to her stomach and crouched over in agony. Seth did not want to hurt her but in everything he did and was, it crushed her.

"No, this is not your pain to have this time," she said. "This is my hurt. I can't do my disappointment and yours at the same time."

Think of something happy, man. You see you are breaking her.

Elaine looked away. She turned so that her back was to him then she bowed her head. She mumbled, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference."

Seth sat next to Elaine. "What is that? I have never heard you say that prayer before."

She kept from looking at him even as she answered. "I was doing some research on-line for you. After Mina made fun of you, saying that you should be in a 666-step program, I decided to actually look up the 12-Step Program and see what it said." She glanced at Seth.

His hard façade melted when he saw how incredibly pained she was. She winced again and clutched her stomach.

"Sorry," Seth said. He hoped she knew he meant it.

Elaine continued, "I found that Serenity Prayer in my research. It just seemed appropriate for me right now." She wiped her face with the back of her hand. "Maybe I should accept the fact that I will always have this black cloud over my head. I can't change that. I can change my luck by walking out of that door and never seeing you again. And as much as I want to keep fooling myself, I need to realize that I make no difference in anyone's life." She stood from the couch. "Will you please open the door so that I can leave?"

Seth looked down at his hands, his bare hands. He had gotten better. He had changed because of Elaine. He still had more work to do and he desperately needed her help.

He stood up, gazed down at her and replied, “No.”

Elaine shook her head. “You are such a bully.”

“I want to be your friend.” And he meant that with all of his heart.

“A friend wouldn’t shut down my business.” Elaine struggled to her feet. She raised herself up to an erect position.

Seth held up her foreclosure letter. He tore it in half then in fourths and continued tearing until it turned into confetti.

“I will pay off the lease and your equipment rental along with the money I already promised you for assisting me.”

Elaine shook her head. “I can’t keep doing this. It’s too hard on me.”

As he looked at Elaine, her harsh, red aura lightened to a pink color until she was only surrounded by the palest pink color. The woman could hold a grudge.

Seth could not keep hurting Elaine. Not only did he hate himself for it, but Alex would have staked him to know his little girl was going through this pain. He strolled to the door, punched in the code to open it and let Elaine leave then stopped before hitting the last number. The Serenity Prayer bounced around in his head like a mantra.

Accept the things I cannot change. Accept the things I cannot change.

Seth turned to Elaine. “We are taking a trip.” He looked at his watch. Three o’clock. He did not have that much time. He had to make some phone calls because he wanted to do this now. He had to go back to where it had all started.

“What are you talking about? I’m not going anywhere with you,” Elaine said. She crossed her arms over her chest and stuck out her chin defiantly.

Seth ignored her stubborn stance as he whisked by her to retrieve his phone. “I should have thought of this before but until you said that prayer, I did not get it.”

“Thought of what before? What did you get out of the prayer?” Elaine watched Seth zipping from one side of his room to the other.

In his phone, he said, “Fire up the jet. We need to be out of here in thirty minutes. Not a minute more.”

“Where are we going?”

Seth smiled, relieved that she now thought of them as a ‘we’.

“New York.” Seth disconnected the call with his pilot and dialed his residential manager in New York. His manager took care of all of Seth’s properties in New York. He made sure the apartments were cleaned every day and the refrigerator stayed stocked.

“I can’t just get up and go to New York.” Elaine shook her head.

“If you want me to get better, this is the way to do it. I have fulfilled part of my bargain to you. You now know what happened to your father. Please complete your end. Let me heal so that I can”

“Kill again?” Elaine bit her lower lip and took a step away from Seth.

“Feeding is not always killing. You are still alive.”

“Whoopie for me.”

Seth barked orders to his manager about preparing his place in Manhattan. When he disconnected the call, he turned to Elaine and said, “We do not have much time. In the jet we can get there in about ninety minutes, right before sunrise. I need you to shower. I need you to change. I need you to pack. I”

“Wait, you can’t just”

He stopped her with a stare. “I need *you*.”

Elaine's jaw dropped. Her aura turned into a spicy shade of orange. Confused but open. Good.

"I will shower and change first. Then I'll wait for you as you do the same. I do not want to leave you alone. Not with Mina and the Council running around."

"Well, I never made my New York trip when I was in college. I guess this will be it."

Good. Seth would definitely make it worth her while. He even suspected that a huge personal and emotional hurdle of his would be overcome in the city that never slept. It was time for him to let go of the past and move on to his future.

* * * *

In the early morning, Seth did not look good. In the plane he seemed fine. They talked about everything from apple pies to life after death. When they touched down in New York, Seth's face became pale. He couldn't catch his breath.

"What's wrong?" Elaine asked as she helped him into his private limo.

Seth trembled. "Cutting it too close." He curled himself into a ball. "Sunlight."

Elaine peered out of the black tinted windows. Light appeared in between the skyscrapers. Thankfully the inside of the limo remained dark. It seemed to help Seth as he regained his breathing. To soothe him, she stroked the back of his head. From the way he moved closer to Elaine and placed his head on her lap, she knew that her gesture helped, too.

She took off the thin, gauzy blue wrap she had around her neck and placed it over Seth's head to shield any part of him from the sun.

When the car pulled up to Seth's Fifth Avenue digs, Elaine took a second to marvel at the incredible building. After asking the doorman and driver to retrieve their luggage, Elaine took on the task of hauling Seth to his penthouse.

When the elevator stopped, Elaine gently pushed Seth out of the car. Seth pointed down a long hallway in the direction of his place. She pulled him to his apartment.

Elaine reached into his shirt pocket, finding his key. She opened the door. Seth stumbled inside and kept stumbling until he reached a door. He pushed his way inside and slammed it.

She grabbed the knob but didn't have the guts to turn it. She didn't know that much about Seth. She turned to the side to a window that looked over all of Manhattan. The sun finally made its way through the buildings. Seth had risked his life and brought her to New York for a reason. She wanted to find out why.

* * * *

Seth woke with a jolt, cursing as he raised himself off the floor. *Damn it! Missed the bed again.* He knew he was pushing his luck coming here so close to sunrise. He didn't want to wait another minute. He had already wasted a lifetime. He did not have a second to lose.

He stood up from the cold hardwood floor. His eyes adjusted to the darkness as he made his way around the room. Another good thing about being a vampire. Light or dark, he could see everything clearly. He peered down at his watch. Eight-thirty.

He rubbed his eyes. Three hundred years of waking up like this should not be this hard on him. He turned on the light to get a good look at his room. He wanted to make sure the apartment had been maintained in the manner he had requested.

One wall of his bedroom was painted red. Battleship gray paint covered the other walls. Black-and-gray striped bed linens were on his king-size bed per his request. The antique dressers were positioned exactly where he wanted them to be, one by the bed and the other by the bathroom door.

As he walked toward the bathroom, he noticed something on top of the dresser. A

framed picture. It had been years since he had been in the apartment. He did not remember having pictures around. When he took a closer look, his eyes widened. It was a picture of Charlotte in her mortal state.

His stroked his hand over the frame. She was beautiful. So was Elaine. And Elaine had cared for him even when she did not particularly like him at the moment. He remembered her supporting him, carrying him to the apartment and ... and ...

Elaine. He had left her alone all day. He rushed to his door and flung it open. In the dark, he saw her lying on his overstuffed couch, her father's journal in one hand. Her brown curls fell into her face, covering her expression.

Seth did not want to wake her. Not yet. He ducked back into his room and took a shower. He had a lot of work to do and little time to do it.

* * * *

It was all a dream, right? Elaine hadn't really been whisked away in a private jet and brought to a stylish Manhattan apartment in a stretch limo, had she? She cracked open one eye. Seeing the bright, white leather couches and the stainless steel appliances, she knew it wasn't a dream. She was in New York with Seth.

She'd been trying to figure out all day why Seth would have come back to the place that held so many bad memories for him. His wife had been killed here.

Elaine took in a deep breath. The place didn't have the apple pie and disinfectant smell like Seth's other home. She kind of missed that.

She'd checked in all of the drawers to find some link to Seth. Except for utensils and dishtowels, there was nothing in the drawers. No papers, no pictures, no hint that an actual person lived here. It was almost like a hotel room, but she was sure the bill had to be astronomical.

Elaine was glad she'd left the light on before she dozed off. She knew she would have slept until night time and as much as she had trusted Seth, sitting in a dark room in an unknown place scared her.

She sat up, still holding her father's journal. She'd finally finished reading it. So odd that just glancing at the worn leather-bound book would trigger tears. Elaine cleared her scratchy throat then swallowed.

Just like your father, you are going to have to be strong, Elaine. You can do this.

Elaine made the mistake of touching her locket. As though it was the key to unlock all of her emotions, she wept with tears she hadn't known still existed in her. All of her life, she'd felt as though she'd cried all of the time for her father. Today she finally figured out the reason why.

What a complicated man Alex Puro was. He had wanted so much for his family and for his friend, Seth. Oddly enough, through Seth, her father's legacy survived.

Alex had recounted an incident where he and Seth were far from home and daylight was approaching. Much like what Elaine had done with Seth when they'd arrived in New York, Alex made sure Seth was covered and safe. He watched out for his friend all night long.

In a strange twist of fate, Elaine found herself wanting to protect the man she once suspected of murdering her father.

She wondered if Seth was awake now. She had some exciting news to share with him.

Elaine stood from the couch, still holding onto her father's journal. A lot of her good news had to do with what she had found in the journal. In her bare feet, she tiptoed to the door. Light peeked underneath it. Seth had to be awake now. She was sure the light had been off when he had collapsed in the room.

Elaine raised her fist and hit the door once. The solid oak door creaked open on its own. She crept inside, scanning the room to see if Seth was hiding somewhere. Unless he was in a closet, there was no place for him to hide. The room was as minimally decorated as the other parts of the apartment.

“Seth?” she called out.

No answer. She walked through his bedroom. His suitcase sat on a dresser, open and full of items in individual plastic baggies; toothbrushes, socks, handkerchiefs, shirts, pants. He even had trash bags in a baggie. She had to smile at that.

Elaine slumped out of Seth’s room and back to the kitchen. As soon as she set Alex’s journal on the breakfast bar, she saw a note. She picked it up and read it:

Elaine, I will return shortly. With your help, I have figured out what I need to do. Make yourself at home. Eternally yours, Seth.

Elaine smiled as she held the note. ‘Eternally yours.’ Her eyes fixed on that phrase. She would make sure that he meant that.

Chapter Sixteen

Seth knelt down next to Charlotte's grave. He had never been to the site. He had seen them dig it out the night before so he knew where she would be buried. He could never muster enough strength to go to the grave.

Guilt had a lot to do with it. Why had he allowed her to go out alone? Allowed? A laugh squeezed through his nostrils. Charlotte was not the type of woman to wait for a man or anyone for that matter to do what she was more than capable of handling. Still, he should have gone with her. He should have not denied that nagging feeling inside of himself, telling him something was wrong.

The October air swirled around him. He felt it. In the darkness, he saw the hairs stand up on his arm. He was not cold. He had not felt temperature changes in centuries.

As he stared at Charlotte's tombstone, reading the caption he had picked out himself—*Here lies a saint. May she find peace*--he recognized the foreign emotion. Fear.

He placed the bouquet of yellow roses on her grave. The deep green grass covered the small mound.

"I know how much you love yellow roses," Seth said to the stone. "You remember I had tried giving you those pink roses. I thought pink suited you best. You pulled off the petals and left me a trail to the bedroom. I do not know if you were trying to deter me from buying you pink roses again but from that day on I gave you a nice mixture. Yellow for love. Pink for"

He trailed off, but smiled. His hand smoothed over the cool marble stone, brushing against her name, Charlotte Francesca Overkill.

"I am sorry it has taken me so long to come see you. I felt ashamed and guilty for a long time about your death." He shook his head. "Why did you go, Charlotte? What did you have to do that morning? And who did this to you?"

He paused, half expecting Charlotte to rise from the grave and answer him. That was nearly as impossible as his plan to stop feeding to bring her back.

"I have made some mistakes. I denied my hunger. At first it was because I missed you so much. I could not imagine life without you. I missed you more than I missed the desire to drink fresh blood and keep myself healthy." He licked his tongue over his lips. He could almost taste the metallic flavor of blood.

"I thought if I held out until Reckoning Day then you could come back and tell me what happened to you that night. I figured out that plan will not work. As much as I love you and miss you, I cannot change the past. I learned that from a special woman." A woman with blood as sweet as nectar and eyes as dark as vanilla beans.

Seth smiled as he moved closer to the grave. "You remember the family I protected?" He laughed. "What am I saying? Of course you do. The girl, Elaine, is now an Ayudante. She will be with me for a week to help me feed again. Charlotte, she has done much more. I feel again. I feel like I felt when I was with you. She makes me laugh. And she is strong. She had this prayer about accepting the things I cannot change." Seth put his hand on the ground. His arm trembled like he had been struck by lightning.

"I cannot bring you back. I understand that now. You should rest as well as everyone else here." He looked up and scanned the dark graveyard.

“I cannot change the fact that you are gone. I can try to find out who did this to you and go from there. I would like to change the way I am. I am no longer the same person you knew. I have created fears for myself and I do not know how easy it will be for me to modify what I have done. I am going to try. My first step is to be able to accept your death and move on with my life. Moving on means finding a new love. If she will have me, I would like for it to be Elaine.”

Seth nodded and waved his hands in the air.

“I know. I know. Vampires and Ayudantes. Alex and Olivia made it work ... kind of. I can learn from their mistakes. I will not find anyone like her again.” Seth stood up, brushed off his pants and gazed at his wife’s grave. “I will always hold a special place in my heart for you. I need to move on. If I do not, I will die.” He placed the pads of his hand against his lips and placed the kiss on the stone. “Goodbye. I will not take this long to visit you again.”

When Seth turned around, he felt like a weight had been lifted off of him. He was not turning his back on his beloved, departed wife. He was giving himself his life back. He took in a deep breath as he made his way through the graveyard.

Now he could not wait to see Elaine. He had so many things to tell her. First he had to get down the street without touching any cracks in the sidewalk. Baby steps.

* * * *

Elaine had bathed, showered and bathed again. She wanted no excuses from Seth for why he couldn’t touch her. Tonight she wanted him to touch her, kiss her, heal her in a way no one else could.

She heard the door slam behind her. Elaine turned to find Seth standing at the door, a smile on his face, an honest to goodness smile. Her heart jumped as she faced him.

“You’re back,” she said.

It sounded silly but it was all she could say. Seth looked incredible. He wore black slacks and a white shirt. Something about his countenance changed his whole appearance. He radiated. If Elaine had known what the man looked like after feeding, she would have suspected he’d had a whole buffet of New Yorkers before coming back to his apartment.

She had two candles lit on the dining room table but the kitchen light lit up one half of the apartment.

“You are still here,” Seth said as he approached her. His eyes scanned her outfit.

Elaine had wanted to put something on that would catch Seth’s eye but not be too revealing. She had decided on a black Dolce and Gabbana slip dress that fit her tighter than the dance leotard she’d worn in her elementary school play when she took the stage as a lamb.

“You went outside by yourself?” Her eyes grew wide.

Seth smiled. “Open spaces. I wasn’t afraid. I did not even think about it until you just mentioned it.” Seth peered down at her feet. She’d worn the matching black stilettos.

“Take them off. I know you hate them,” he said when he stood in front of her.

Without breaking her gaze, she slipped out of the shoes and shrank down three inches. Seth hung over her like a giant.

“I made dinner.” Elaine pointed to the table. “I know you don’t eat, but I thought you could appreciate the spread.”

Seth turned to the table. She’d made two steaks and long-cut asparagus, rice pilaf, grilled onions and two glasses of red wine. His steak was very rare. The table looked fit for a king, or the Prince of Death.

Elaine began, “I know it’s your dinner time so I didn’t want to disappoint you.”

“How thoughtful.” Seth pulled out Elaine’s chair to summon her to sit. She did so then watched him sit on the opposite side of the table. Symmetry. It was all about symmetry to Seth. Elaine thought that until Seth moved his chair around the small table closer to her.

Elaine balled her feet and sat on her hands. She knew at any moment she would clap her hands and stomp her feet like a crazy woman.

“You look absolutely stunning tonight.” Seth moved a curl from her face.

And Seth looked good enough to eat.

Seth laughed and Elaine realized very quickly that she had forgotten to block her thoughts.

“I have never heard of that saying,” Seth said when he stopped laughing. “I will have to use that sometime.”

Elaine’s eyes widened. “Does that mean”

Seth took a deep breath and reached over to Elaine. He pulled one hand from under her and held it. She hoped he couldn’t feel it trembling. She tried hard not to sweat but it was too late. The water works had started.

“I am not ready for a lot of things but I am willing to try.” Seth patted Elaine’s hand. “I went to see my wife today.”

Elaine’s mouth went dry. Had Charlotte come back from the grave?

“I visited her grave. I realized that my unresolved issue involved her. I would not get better until I made amends to Charlotte.”

“Her murder wasn’t your fault, Seth.” Elaine put her hand on top of Seth’s. He looked at the union. Instead of pulling away from her like he normally would, Seth smiled.

“I know that now. And I know that my decision to keep from feeding has not only hurting me but can hurt millions of people. I cannot do that. I want to be here, healthy and happy. I know the reason for feeling this way.” Seth stared into Elaine’s eyes. “You. I would not want to keep going if it was not for you.”

Elaine beamed inside and out.

“So where do we go from here?” Elaine moved to the edge of her seat in anticipation of his answer.

Seth leaned in closer. “I want you.”

Elaine couldn’t focus for a moment after he made his proclamation.

Seth continued, “I feel like a new man, one you should experience.”

Elaine didn’t answer. She stood and encouraged him to do the same. Once standing, Seth placed his hands on the sides of Elaine’s face. He smoothed his thumbs over her cheeks. He leaned down and planted a soft kiss on her lips.

She gasped to catch her breath and Seth moved in harder. His once feathery soft kiss turned very passionate. She put her hands on his forearms and held them tightly. Her heart pounded a strange rhythm as she perched herself on her tiptoes to kiss Seth harder.

What a wonderful mouth. She’d waited almost ten years. She hadn’t been kissed by a man, gone on a date, or even exchanged numbers in ten years.

Being with Seth, this one amazing kiss, it was worth the wait. His fresh, clean cotton smell had been tarnished by the New York pollution. He now smelled of taxi exhaust and cigarette smoke. In her mind, she covered up the smell with her memory of apple pies.

Seth broke from the kiss, looking very satisfied.

“I have been doing some thinking,” he began.

“So have I.” She took Seth’s hand.

“I have not done this in a while, but I know it involves less talking than this.” Seth pulled her toward the bedroom.

“A lot could be said for a little dirty talk in bed.”

Elaine had never been so bowled over by a man’s actions before. Something in him had changed. He wasn’t that same man who paced incessantly and tapped his fingers like a pseudo-human metronome. He had changed. He had been revamped.

Seth halted at his bedroom door. “There are still implications with you and me and” He looked toward the bed.

“Don’t worry. I won’t bite. I wish I could say the same for you.” She approached Seth. “Why did you fang-up when you did that thing to my neck?”

“Fang-up? That is a new term for it.” Seth smiled. “It is just instinct. I was right there.”

“Oh. By the way,” Elaine lifted her hair on one side to show off her neck. “No bite marks. It worked.”

Seth nodded. With an obvious saunter, she headed to his bed and sat down. She crossed her legs, a feat in the tight dress and flashed a reassuring but alluring smile.

“Why don’t you come over here and take a closer look at my neck?” Elaine patted the empty bed next to her.

Seth stepped into the room. He paused then took a step back. He stepped in again. When he took another step back, Elaine’s heart sank. She had thought he was getting better. She had thought he was getting comfortable with her. And with the third pass, she jerked to her feet.

“Did you notice that?” Seth asked as he kept his eyes down. “The floor boards feel uneven here. And there is a definite squeak here.” He stepped back and forward again.

Elaine laughed. She ran to Seth and jumped on him. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she planted kisses all over his lips and face.

“You can be absolutely adorable when you want to be, you know that?” She hugged him tighter. When she felt his arms snake around her body and reciprocate the hug, she relaxed.

Seth walked into the bedroom with Elaine dangling from his neck. He set her on the bed and looked down at her like the prince he was. He broke his attention from her to glance back at the spot at the doorway.

“Will you remind me to call building maintenance about that?” Seth asked as he pointed to the offending spot.

“Sure. Of course.” She patted the bed again.

“Let me tell you what I read in my father’s journal.”

“So you finished it?”

“Yes.” She inched toward him. “What a wonderful man.”

“I agree.” He exhaled and brushed his fingertips over her bare arm.

Elaine stopped talking when she felt the sensual touch. Maybe she should wait until later to talk about the journal?

Elaine nuzzled Seth’s neck and kissed him. She placed her hand on his thigh. He moaned, nearly growled. She put her hand next to Seth’s face and leaned into his neck. He tasted salty. She pulled back from his neck to look into his eyes.

Seth smiled and jumped from the bed. He started undoing the cuffs of his shirt.

“Should I be doing that?” Elaine stood and sauntered to him. Seth held up one arm to her as she slowly unfastened his cuffs.

“You should really tuck the button in sideways in the hole before removing it,” Seth said. Elaine froze. “You cannot be criticizing the way I’m taking off your clothes.”

Seth shook his head. "You are right. I am being silly. Please."

She picked up his other hand and unfastened that button. She thought she heard him make a whining noise, a whimper like a dog. When she looked up at him, he had a smile plastered on his face. She started undoing the buttons of his shirt. With each button she heard that whimper.

Button.

"Oh."

Button.

"Geez."

Button.

"Oh God."

In not in a good way. These weren't moans of ecstasy but agony.

"Why don't you take off your shirt?" Elaine retreated to the bed. "I'll just sit and watch."

"I am sorry. This is what happens when you have not shared your life with someone in a long time."

"I know."

Seth nodded. His expression showed that he regretted his statement since he knew Elaine had been without Alvin for that long.

Seth methodically undid each button. Mina was right. He did have a ritual for everything. Not only did it take him a whole thirty seconds to undo a button, but he had a method to make sure each button was turned in the proper direction after undoing them. They were round buttons. How could they be turned any differently?

Once his shirt was opened, all of her questions stopped. Damn, the man looked good. His bare chest screamed to be kissed and nibbled. It was worth the wait to see him. Seth folded his shirt carefully, making sure the sleeves were even and the collar folded down properly, and then hung it on the back of a chair.

"Wow. Is this how you dress and undress every day?" Elaine asked as she watched him working on his shoes.

"If you are careful with your clothes, they will last you for several years. I have had that shirt since 19--"

"All very interesting. Will this happen before Reckoning Day? I have some news I wanted to share."

Seth took off his shoes and set them under the same chair. "So do I. I did a lot of thinking when I left the cemetery, thinking about us."

"I did the same when I was reading my father's journal. I read how much in love my father was with my mother, a vampire and an Ayudante. It could work."

Seth pulled off his belt. He slung it over the chair back.

"I said the same thing to Charlotte. Well, to her grave." Seth eased the button on his pants through its eye then pulled the zipper down so that Elaine got to hear each tooth pop on the descent. He really was torturing her.

When Seth pulled down his pants, she knew she had to make it work.

She'd never seen his legs. They were sculpted and toned like the rest of him. And in his silk boxers hitting just below his washboard stomach, she nearly slipped off the bed.

"Wow," she uttered.

"What?" Seth asked.

“Your body.” Her gaze never broke from staring at this specimen. Perfection. Pure physical perfection. “So you’ve been thinking about us?”

Seth reached for her hands and lifted her off of the bed. After giving her a soft kiss on her lips, he turned her around. With careful precision, he put his hand on one side of her then undid the zipper on the other side of the dress. Elaine pressed her back against him. She liked feeling his hard body against her.

He slipped her straps down her shoulders until the dress reached the floor. Thankfully she had on a black strapless bra and matching panties that matched Seth’s black boxers. That should have made him happy.

She stepped out of the dress and was going to turn around when Seth held her shoulders to keep her from doing so.

“I have been thinking about you, about us, about this, for a long time,” Seth began. “I did not want you to think that I was using you. I care for you so much.”

“I do too, Seth.” She wanted to turn around. A moment like this deserved to be done face to face.

“That is why I want you to have this.”

As though handed down from the gods, Seth crossed her arm over her body and wrapped a silver bracelet around her wrist. Large, square-cut diamonds were set between the links in the chain. As soon as it was on, Elaine wasted no time in holding up her wrist to get a better look.

The silver glittered. The weight of the diamonds was nothing compared to the emotional weight of this piece of jewelry.

“It is an heirloom handed down from several Overkill generations. I want you to have it,” Seth said in her ear.

Elaine couldn’t say a word. She just turned and hoped the big kiss she planted on him spoke volumes. Seth stumbled back but held her tightly in his arms. So the man did have one romantic bone in his body.

She pulled back. “What is that credo or warning or saying about vampires and Ayudantes?”

Seth furrowed his eyebrows in a pensive manner. Even thoughtful he looked sexy. “Vampires and Ayudantes cannot lie in the same bed and bring forth new life. I think that is how it goes. I do not quite remember. It is not exactly written in a book but something passed down from generation to generation.” He hung up her dress on a hanger and put the hanger on a hook in his closet.

Elaine’s eyes grew wider. “So all that means is that I shouldn’t get pregnant.”

Seth thought some more. “I believe so.”

“Problem solved. I’m on the Pill.”

Seth nodded.

“Come on. Don’t you want a chance to sleep with a dangerous killer?” she said jokingly.

Seth stood in front of her. He leaned down to give her a soft, wet kiss. After setting the boxes on the nightstand, he pulled Elaine off the bed. He pulled back the comforter.

“It is funny that you would say that,” Seth said of her killer comment. He undid her bra. “I was just thinking about that.”

When he revealed her breasts, Seth stared at them, marveling at them as though it was the first time he’d seen them. She stood on her toes and gave him a quick kiss on his lips.

Seth hooked his fingers into the sides of her panties and slid them down. “You have an exquisite body.”

Elaine knew he meant it. From his expression and the way he kept looking at her, Seth wasn't giving her a line. He truly wanted her as much as she wanted him.

When Seth folded her undergarments, Elaine slipped into bed and waited for him.

"Music. We should have music." Seth darted from the room.

"All I want is you," Elaine called after him.

Pretty soon something jazzy piped into the room. Anita Baker. Great choice.

Seth returned to the room with a wide smile. He nodded to her for approval. Elaine smiled back and held her hands up to him. Every nerve ending in her body ached for him to touch her.

"Candles. We should have candles in here." He left the room again.

"We have enough light. Just get your cute self in here." Frustration rose in Elaine's voice, but she tried hard to keep it down.

Seth returned with the two tapers she'd lit and left on the dining room table. "I just want this moment to be perfect."

Elaine stroked the locket on her neck. "Trust me. It is."

Seth set the candles on his dresser and dimmed the lights. He clicked his fingers like he was going to disappear again.

"Don't you dare leave again or I will scream."

Seth laughed as he made his way back into the room. He stood next to the bed then brought his hands up to his hips. "Before we can go any further, first you must learn to pleasure your prince."

Elaine had almost forgotten about that fantasy. She put her hand over her eyes. "You and this mind reading thing are killing me."

She did oblige the fantasy. She slid her fingers inside of the band of his boxers and eased them down. She kept her eyes fixed on his princely package.

She wrapped her fingers around the base of his shaft. Just as she leaned forward to taste the weeping bead of pre-cum at the tip of his penis, she stopped.

"Oh God." She released her grip.

"What's wrong?" Seth put his hand on her shoulder.

"Fantasizing about you and the bonding experience are okay. But I can't sleep with someone I consider to be my patient. It goes against my ethics."

Seth stood still. Then he took her hand and placed it back on his cock. When she gazed up at him, he said, "You are fired."

"This is one hell of a severance package."

Elaine wasted no time in licking the tip, tasting his salty essence. She covered the bulbous tip with her mouth and held him there. A quick intake of breath signaled how much Seth appreciated that move.

Not to disappoint, she eased her mouth down his wide shaft to about midway. Again, she held him there until he stroked the back of her head. Elaine slid her mouth up, pressing her tongue against the tip of his dick to extract more of his juices.

That's when Seth growled. This time she welcomed the noise. As though she'd done it before, Elaine brought her mouth down to the base of his shaft and held him there. Seth's legs trembled like he wanted to come already.

When she brought her mouth back up to the tip of his cock again, he held her shoulders and pulled her back.

"You are driving me insane," he said almost breathlessly.

“Get in here now,” Elaine said. She moved back on the bed to give him access. Seth put one knee on the bed but paused.

She rolled her eyes. “Go fold your boxers. I know you want to.”

He scooped up the silky ball and folded them. He set the garment with the rest of his clothes on the back of the chair. Some of his habits couldn’t be broken in one fell swoop. At least one had. He trusted her. He cared about her. And when she posed her idea, he would love her. And she could love him.

When he returned to bed, Elaine put her hand on his chest. “You’re cold.”

“I do not notice anymore. Hopefully you will not notice it soon.” He covered them with the comforter.

He kissed her, passionately. He wrapped his arm around her. In his embrace, she felt safe and wanted and needed, more than she felt with her family, more than with her patients and more than Seth’s original need for her.

“We can make this work,” Seth said between kisses.

“I know.” Elaine leaned her head back. “That’s what I wanted to tell you.”

Seth kissed her cheek then moved down to her chin. He ran his cool tongue down to her neck. She shivered and held onto him, digging her nails into his hard back. She had to tell him. This would be the only way they could be together.

“What is it, Elaine?”

“The journal. My father said his marriage would have worked out better if he and Mama were the same.”

Seth brought his head up and stared at her. A smile crept up at the corner of his mouth. “You and I are thinking alike.” He resumed kissing her neck. She wondered if he was fang-ing-up right now. She had to tell him, now.

“So you think it’s a great idea?” Elaine asked.

Seth positioned himself on top of her body. “Yes, only if you want to.”

She smiled and wrapped her legs around him. “Seth, I can’t believe you agree with me. That way if you don’t feel comfortable feeding yet by Reckoning Day, you and I can be married.”

“Of course. All you need to do is take one drink and you and I can be together forever.” Seth plunged deep inside of Elaine.

She didn’t know which was more jarring, the fact that Seth had just entered her or the idea that she would want to become a vampire like him. While he pumped his impressive cock inside of her, her mind was on one thing.

Elaine wrapped her legs around him. She suspended her worry while riding the wave of pleasure that Seth was giving her.

He hooked one leg around his arm and pounded into her, hard and deep. On instinct, she dug her fingernails into his shoulders, hoping not to extract any blood but needing to bear down on something.

Her pussy walls constricted around him, pulling him in further, wanting him to stay longer. She had a feeling that once she shared her bit of news, he wouldn’t be close to her any time soon.

“You feel magnificent. So hot.” He drove into her faster.

“Seth! Seth!”

“Now, my princess, now!”

Just as he came inside of her, Elaine screamed. Every muscle in her body tensed during

the orgasm. She thought for sure she would have gotten a cramp. She couldn't catch her breath.

As she was winding down, Elaine said, "I can't become a vampire. But you can become mortal."

She'd read the whole process in Alex's journal. It could work but it would have to be done by Reckoning Day or they would have to wait another one hundred years until the next Reckoning Day.

With Seth as a regular mortal, they could exist like normal people. They wouldn't have to sleep in the day and only venture out at night. Better yet, they could love each other and make love to each other without repercussions.

Seth raised himself up on his knees. "You have already experienced being fed from. I could do it again. All you will need is one drink of blood from me. Your process is easier."

And Seth needed a knock to his head if he thought Elaine wanted to go for that. Talk about a sexual downer.

Chapter Seventeen

Faster than Seth and Elaine had gotten their clothes back on, they were on his jet back home. He did not have to read her mind or even check her aura. Her body language proclaimed her feelings.

In her conservative cream-colored pantsuit she had buttoned to the top, Elaine sat on the opposite side of the cabin, her legs and arms crossed and not giving him a second glance. Her leg swung wildly like some manic field-goal kicker.

“Did I thank you for helping me yesterday morning?” Seth opened, trying to crack her shell. “I could not have made it to my apartment without you.”

“Humph.”

She squeezed the noise through her nose until it did not sound human. He wished she would turn around so he could see her face. As it was, the light offered by a couple of table lamps and some overhead lighting kept Elaine in the dark.

Elaine rubbed her hand up and down her arm as though a chill had nipped her.

“Are you cold? I can get you a . . .”

She clicked off the lighting around her to mask herself in complete darkness.

“That is it.” He stood and stomped his way to her. “Why are you angry at me now?”

She looked at him like he must have grown another head. That trait did not run in his family. Seth crouched down in front of her.

“How could you think I would want to be a vampire?” Her body position remained the same. “I hate the night. And although I don’t mind the sight of blood, I don’t necessarily want to drink it, especially if it involves attacking people. I did think that you would want to be a mortal.”

“Why would you think that? I have always said that my lifestyle suits me.”

Continuing on like she had not heard him, she said, “Name me one thing that you think would make me want to give up my mortality?”

“I can name you three.” He held up his hand and ticked off each benefit. “You would have the ability to heal. You would live forever looking exactly the way you look now. And you would be with me.”

Her eyes widened. “Conceited much?”

“Conceited? You wanted me to be a mortal for what reason? Because you knew I love to bird watch, right? Or maybe so I can take up golfing.”

“You miss the sun.”

And he did. “Not that much.” He could not think of this as a selfish endeavor.

She smirked at him.

“I can see you in the dark.” He saw her screw up her lips and turn to the window. “Your mother never told you that your face could freeze in that position?”

She pointed at him. “Levity is my bit, not yours.”

He held her hand. “Fine. I will let you be funny.” He kissed her fingertip. Elaine was slow to pull her hand away. She placed her hand on her lap, but now she was glowing bright pink.

Seth liked arousing her. He smiled and moved closer when she stopped swinging her leg.

“I cannot become fully mortal,” he said.

“Why not? You told me you wanted that cheesy American dream, remember? Mom and apple pie. Don’t you want to be with someone you can grow old with? Don’t you want to be with me the way I am?”

When Seth heard her sniff and saw her wipe her face, his stomach twisted in a knot. He could not feel her pain, but he hated seeing her so hurt.

“Elaine, if I am not a vampire on Reckoning Day, all of the dead will continue to walk the earth. Do you really want that responsibility of letting the dead rest left to Mina or worse?”

“My mother did it for my father. Why won’t you do it for me? Am I not worthy enough?” She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

Seth had to be calm about this. As much as it pained him to see her this way, he did not want to give her more pain to absorb.

“You saw how that turned out. It would not work. Your mother desired the vampire life even as a mortal. She was willing to give you up to go back to that life.” He kept a firm hold of her hand.

“She didn’t. You stopped her. She’s been great ever since.”

When he did not respond, she continued.

“Are you saying that you wouldn’t want to remain mortal even to be with me?” she asked.

“I have been this way for over three hundred years. I do not know if I could just stop in one day. Besides, your mother was a mortal turned vampire. I am a bred vampire. It is in my blood, so to speak. But you ...”

“What? Since I’ve only been alive for thirty-one years it should be easier for me? I miss my family. I miss my work. I’m a morning person. I can’t do it. Besides, look at what happened to Charlotte. There are no guarantees for either side.”

Seth felt a pinch in his chest. He would protect her better than he had Charlotte.

“You know there is a way you can go back to the mortal lifestyle and yet the idea of trying this lifestyle my way so repulses you that you will not give it another thought? What happened to you caring about me?”

“I do, Seth.” Her voice lowered, registering a low hum like the jet motor.

“I guess you do only if I become what you want me to be.”

“I’m not asking you to give up Christianity for Judaism. I thought you wanted a regular life.”

“And I thought you wanted to be with me forever.”

Elaine slipped her hand out of Seth’s. She curled her body close to the window so that he could not see her face.

“I’m very tired,” she said.

Seth stood, exhausted himself after their argument. “We should be landing soon.” He pulled a thick, yellow cotton blanket from a closet and placed it over Elaine.

As he walked back to his seat, he suppressed the urge to utter ‘dogma.’ He had made changes in his life. What Elaine wanted was too much. He would lose everything he had if he became fully mortal. He had a growing business because he could control minds. People loved his nightclub because of the element of danger. Without his powers, he would not be able to tell the wolves from the sheep.

Without Elaine he had no life.

He did not want to be without her. She brought hope into his bleak existence. He was

not being stubborn. He had a destiny to fulfill. As he watched her form curled underneath the blanket, he was quickly reminded of how soft her body was underneath his. He wanted to spend eternity holding her.

An hour later and thirty minutes before sunrise, Seth and Elaine arrived at his home. Silence filled the home as he made his way down to his basement dwelling. Elaine, although not far behind him, did not go down with him.

“Maybe I should just stay up in my room for the remainder of the stay,” she said, keeping her gaze from his.

Seth made it back up the stairs. “No. I do not trust Mina. She will hurt you if you are out of my sight.”

“Then give me a sword and I’ll protect myself.” She looked tired. Dark circles ringed under her eyes. Seth hoped they were from makeup rather than exhaustion and tears.

“No. Please, stay in my quarters. You can have the bed and I will sleep on the couch, the floor, wherever. I do not want you out of my sight until Mina is properly dealt with and I know you will be safe.”

Tears brimmed Elaine’s eyes. “This is going to be very difficult for both of us.”

Seth took her hand. “I know. It does not have to be. I will try to make it as easy as possible.”

Before Elaine retreated down the stairs, she glanced at his portrait a couple of times then asked, “And why is that painting hung crooked?”

Seth sighed. “Charlotte.”

“She hung it that way?” she asked.

“No. I, um, was chasing her.” Seth heard Elaine swallow hard.

Her aura changed to a bright yellow.

So he continued with the story. “We were about to make love. She ran down the hallway and put her hand on the wall. She knocked the portrait to the side and I left it like that to remind me of her.”

Seth noticed Elaine’s color quickly changed to pink. She thought he was romantic even though she didn’t say it.

He helped her down into his room and set the timer to close the door.

He had her. For now he would have to be well enough to feed and convince Elaine to become his vampire bride. He had done it once with Charlotte. He wanted to do it again with Elaine. This time, though, it would be different.

* * * *

Seth could not be in love with Elaine. Could he? He had not thought about a woman in almost ten years except for Charlotte. He surely did not think he would fall in love with an Ayudante.

Lately every time he looked at Elaine, he had a curious feeling fluttering around in him. He smiled more when she was around. And he wanted to kiss her all of the time ... along with other forms of physical activities.

Seth shook his head, trying to erase his thoughts. Mina could not read his mind, but he knew the Master could. He would be putting Elaine’s life into danger. So he had to make sure that after this experience, after Reckoning Day, she would be able to walk out of his life and not want for anything.

On the orders of his daytime minions, Seth had them find out who Elaine paid her mortgage to as well as her equipment rental fee. Seth paid them both off and stopped the

eviction process on Elaine's business. Then he transferred five hundred million dollars into a Swiss account for her. It was more than he had agreed to pay her, but she was worth it.

Now that Elaine would have her life in order when this was over in a couple of days, Seth had to figure out a way to get to Mina. Mina was now considered a rogue vampire. Not good. Whatever code of ethics she had had before was now gone. He recognized that she was getting stronger in her powers, physically and mentally. That still did not mean he was not going to stop her. Even if it meant taking himself down with her, he would do it.

Seth closed his files and placed them neatly in the cabinet. This time he locked it. If Elaine came in his office and snooped around, he did not know what her reaction would be to see he had paid off her bills. As much as he liked her, Elaine was a confusing woman. Complicated. Seth smiled to himself. She was wonderful.

He rose from his desk and walked over to his hidden door to go into his bedroom. He had left Elaine alone for a couple of hours. Who knew what she was doing all in all that time. When he opened the door, Seth found that Elaine had cleaned his room.

The bed linens had been changed. Not a wrinkle on the top or the pillows. He would have to inspect it closer but it looked good from his vantage point. He peered down at the floor and found fresh vacuum tracks. They all faced the same direction. Taking a deep inhalation, he found that the familiar scent of bleach and disinfectant filled the air.

Seth smiled. Elaine, in her small way, was making things right for him. This pleased him.

When she emerged from the bathroom, bright yellow gloves adorning her hands and her hair pulled back in a ponytail, the smile dropped from Seth's face.

"I kept myself busy while you were in the office," she said as she removed her gloves.

Seth had made her into the same control-freak that he had become.

"I vacuumed. I washed the linens. I cleaned the dishes." Elaine scrubbed her hands in the sink. Steam rose to her face. "I even scrubbed the floor tiles with a toothbrush. You have so many around here."

Seth strolled over to the kitchen. He observed Elaine's outfit. Shorts, one of his T-shirts and shoes, little, white sneakers with a blue label on the heel of them.

"You are wearing shoes," Seth said almost in a dumbfounded way.

Elaine dried her hands in a paper towel then threw the wad into a trashcan. "I know it bothers you when I don't."

Right now something else bothered him. Seeing this mirror image of himself, frantically cleaning and tidying up, made him realize that he did not want to be this way. If this is what he had been putting people through, his stomach churned with regret.

"I made something for you," she said cheerfully. She opened the microwave door and retrieved a glass with a dark liquid inside of it. Holding it up to Seth's face, she said, "Drink this."

Seth put his hand on top of hers and lowered the glass from his view. He caught her gaze and saw the seriousness in her eyes.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Blood." She said it as simply as answering 'milk' or 'tea.'

"And where did you get it from?" He strolled past her. "Or do I really want to know?"

"I got it from the fridge."

Seth sat on one of his barstools. "No, you did not. I do not keep human blood in my refrigerator." At least, not anymore.

“I never said it was human.” Elaine followed him. She caught him by the arm as he stepped into the kitchen. “It’s cow’s blood.”

Seth swallowed hard and attempted to keep the disgusted look from his face. “You want me to ingest bovine blood?”

“I want you well.” Her eyes turned down. “As much as I love my father, I don’t want him suffering again to come out of his grave. And as much as I don’t understand what my mother was thinking when she tried to give me away, I don’t want to see her turn into a pile of mush.” Elaine brought her gaze back up. “And I want you succeed. I want you to be the leader I can see in you. Your people need you.”

And what about you, Elaine? Do you need me?

“I don’t want you to need Charlotte anymore,” Elaine said and cleared her throat.

Seth choked a response.

“I care about you, Seth.”

He stared at the glass. The familiar dark crimson liquid clung to the inside. He refrained from licking his lips, but he wanted to taste the salty beverage like his life depended on it. Well, actually it did.

“You had some steaks in the freezer,” Elaine began. “I thawed them out and got the excess blood from them. I even nuked it for you so it’s nice and warm.”

Seth took a deep breath. He reached out and held the receptacle, unable to feel the heat through his hand.

“You are not afraid?” he asked as he rolled the blood around in the glass.

“Afraid of what?” She took a step back then crossed her arms over her chest.

“Afraid of what I might do after I have had a taste of blood.” He glared at her. “What if I want more? Last time you were lucky. I was able to control myself. You are trapped in here with me.”

“I guess I’ll have to sleep with a sword in my bed.” She tried smiling to cover her fear. Elaine’s aura glowed yellow.

Seth was not trying to scare her. He was more afraid of what he would do to her. Would he lose control? Could he handle himself around her?

“Seth, I trust you. I know you won’t hurt me--not intentionally. But we don’t have much time. You have to be feeding. The one drink from me was not enough otherwise you wouldn’t still be worried. And I don’t think I can see you feeding from someone.” She shook her head then turned away. “I don’t want to see you like that.”

Elaine did not want to see him feeding? Then she did not want the real Seth. She only wanted the watered down version. The fluttering stopped inside of him. He did not want to be with someone who could not accept him for what he was.

Seth brought the glass up to his nose. The pungent almost metallic scent wafted up to him. He took a deep breath, closing his eyes as he savored the aroma. He did miss it. He missed the flavor and the way the thick liquid rolled around on his tongue.

Just as he brought the glass to his lips, Elaine turned to him. When he caught her scared expression, he stopped. He had to drink, for himself and to prove to Elaine that he was that monster she imagined him to be.

With one gulp, Seth poured the blood into his mouth but held it there, not swallowing just yet. He slammed the glass on the counter, sending a perfect, spider web-like crack up the side.

The blood was nothing like he had remembered. It tasted more bitter than human blood and the texture seemed watery. Certainly, it was not like Elaine’s rich blood. So sweet and

thick.

Seeing how disgusted Elaine looked at the sight of him drinking blood and the idea that he had somehow changed her into something even he pitied, the churning in Seth's stomach stopped. Now it lurched.

Seth ran to the bathroom and spat the blood into the toilet. He could not do it. As much as he wanted to be well, drinking beef blood was not the way to do it. It was not *his* way of doing things.

Elaine stood in the doorway. "I thought you wanted to get better," she said almost like a dare.

"I do." Seth flushed the toilet then wiped his mouth with a handy-wipe. He had boxes of them everywhere. "This is not the way. I should not be drinking non-human blood."

"I thought that's what you would say."

When Seth tossed the wipe into the trash, he turned his gaze to Elaine. The glinting knife blade caught his attention before the precarious position over the palm of her hand did.

"I can fix this, Seth. Just one cut."

Chapter Eighteen

Elaine didn't want to cut herself. Not again. Seth was no ordinary man. He was a leader. And when she had seen the concern and passion in his eyes when he demanded that she stay with him to protect her from Mina, she knew she had to help him any way she could. Seth had given up so much for her. She wanted to show him she could do the same.

"Don't worry," Elaine began. "I won't slice a vein. I'll just do the palm of my hand and you can suck it from there, just like last time. And with your healing powers, I'll be all healed in no time, right?"

Seth held up his hands. "Put the knife down. I do not want to feed from you."

Her heart sank. "You used to say you couldn't feed from me and you did. Now you just don't want to."

"You are overanalyzing this." He approached her slowly.

"I can't help it." She stood her ground but her hand trembled. Sweat poured from her face. Her hand felt too slick to keep a tight grip on the cutting tool. What was she doing? Did she really want to cut herself for Seth?

Looking into his eyes, seeing the fear mixed with confusion with a dash of concern, she wanted to do anything she could for him. She pressed the blade into her hand but before it could slice her, he grabbed her wrist and pulled it up.

"Stop it," Seth said. "What are you thinking?" Wrestling the knife from her hand, Seth threw the cutlery on the counter and pulled her toward the couch. He pushed her down then paced in front of her.

"I'm thinking that I can fix you. It was a part of our deal. You tell me about my father and I agree to help you," Elaine said. "So far I don't think I've helped you. You seem angry with me all of the time."

"And what do you hope to accomplish with your little blood-letting scheme and cleaning my room impeccably and wearing my, um, clothes." He swallowed uneasily. Seth's throat never went dry. Never. When it did this time, he felt confused, puzzled. "I am not angry with you. If anything, I"

"What?" Elaine asked, cutting him off.

Seth had also never sweated before. He felt a strange cool patch of moisture right above his eyebrows. How was that possible? He had no pulse to quicken and cause his body's temperature to change. He remained cold all of the time. There was something about Elaine that even he could not explain.

"Have you ever had a hunger, Elaine?" He put his hand out to her. "A hunger so intense that it consumes you until all you can do is satisfy it?"

She did not answer. She accepted his hand then stood in front of him.

"You wanted to know what it is like to feed." Seth removed Elaine's yellow gloves. "The hunger strikes hard." He let the gloves fall to the floor. Seth wanted to show her that he was trying to change ... for her.

She peered down at the gloves, tensed to reach down and pick them up, but then stopped herself.

He continued. "You realize that if you do not feed, you will go mad. You are willing to

do anything to satisfy that sensation. Let me put it in scientific terms. You know that you never lose energy. It can be transferred. That is what happens when vampires feed. We need energy, any and all kinds. Blood takes your physical energy. That is how we get stronger. Sex takes both your physical and mental energy. That is how we get into your heads.”

He stared into her eyes, waiting for her to make a move. It would have been too easy to lead her around. He had to know if what she wanted was him, the romantic Seth and the gruesome Seth.

“Have you had a hunger like that, Elaine?” he asked. Instead of answering verbally, she walked toward his round bed.

“I wanted to go to medical school so badly that I studied volumes of medical books before I ever got accepted into school,” Elaine began.

When she gently pushed Seth down onto the bed, it seemed like he had controlled her mind to have her do that. It felt good to know that he had not. All of her actions were her own.

“I wanted to find out about my father. You were the only person who held the key to that part of my life. And now I know.” She smoothed her fingers over his cheek.

Before if she had touched him without him seeing her wash her hands first, he would have pulled away from her and demanded that she follow his strict rules and order. He liked her this way. Raw, unflinching, dirty.

“Now,” she began, “I want to feel what it is like to enjoy someone’s flesh.” She moved closer to him and kissed the side of his face.

Seth closed his eyes, savoring the intimate touch. His hands rested easy on her waist as he pulled her forward. She kissed down the side of his face to his neck, an area no woman had ever ventured, not even Charlotte.

He kept his eyes closed until he felt something surprising. Elaine licked his neck. Her tongue dragged across his skin. Then she sucked his flesh, drawing in a small patch of his skin into her hot mouth and making Seth moan.

His hands slid down to her rounded backside. He squeezed her cheeks and pushed all thoughts of the Council and the Master out of his mind. Perhaps they would not be paying attention. He and Elaine could be safe in his room. Right now all he wanted, all he needed, was her.

After what seemed like an hour but must have been more like a minute later, Elaine pulled away from Seth. Staring down at him, not looking into his eyes but more at the side of his neck where she had done her handy work, she giggled.

“Now I have left my mark on you,” she said. “Too bad you can’t see your reflection.”

Seth put his hand to his neck. He felt nothing odd except that his skin was slightly moist from her kiss. “What is it?”

“A hickie. I haven’t done that since junior high school. But with you, I don’t feel like myself. I feel young and old and wise and naïve and sexy all at the same time. When I’m at my worst, you still look at me like I am a queen.”

He pulled her closer to him. “You are a queen.”

He heard her heart pounding. Being so hypersensitive worked to his advantage. The blood that rushed through Elaine’s veins sounded like a wild current. She licked her lips. Her breathing quickened. Her eyes appeared darker than normal.

Humans fascinated Seth. From her flaming red aura, he knew Elaine felt passionate. Looking at her basic signs, seeing her so full of sensual energy, stirred him. He felt like his old self again, prowling the streets late at night without fear. She made him fearless again.

Elaine undid the top button of Seth's shirt then glanced at him to catch his expression. Seth wanted her to keep going. He gave her backside another light squeeze and it prompted her to undo another button, then another.

Patience had always been a part of his make up. This time he felt different. Grabbing his shirt, Seth ripped it open, shooting buttons into all corners of the room. His immediate instinct to find each button hit him hard. But seeing Elaine look so impressed, he instead slipped the shirt off and tossed it to the floor.

"So you're cured?" she asked.

When she scanned his bare chest and made an audible 'mmm' in approval, his ego soared.

He shook his head. "No. But I want you." He stood and pulled her t-shirt over her head. In her white cotton bra with lace decorating the tops of the cups, she reminded him of how good she was with a hint of bad girl inside.

She reached for his pants and undid them. After pulling down the zipper she asked, "Is this dangerous?"

Seth did not want to lie to her. If the Council and the Master found out he had made love to an Ayudante, he and Elaine could be severely punished. Pleasing her made him want to flirt with danger.

Seth nodded.

Elaine bit her lower lip then a smile crept up. "Good. I've never gotten a ticket. I never ditched classes. I don't even take the tags off of mattresses because I think I'll get in trouble. It's good to be bad." She let his pants fall to the floor.

He stepped out of his shoes and pants. "Most women would tremble at the thought of what the creatures of the Underworld can do to you." He pulled down her shorts. Eyeing her matching white cotton panties, he truly felt like the devil tempting the virgin.

He continued. "They could hang you by the tips of your fingers until you begged for death. You could be stabbed and allowed to bleed out slowly while the Dark Ones imbibe your spilling blood as a treat. You could be carved up into pieces only after days, weeks, or months of torture."

He did not want to scare her. Not really. What he had told her was the truth. He knew of Ayudantes who were not spared and vampires who had experienced worse. Elaine seemed to take the news in stride as though he had been kidding about all of this.

"I am very serious," he said.

"I know." She reached behind herself and undid her bra. Curving her shoulders in, she allowed the delicate garment to slide down her honey golden arms. She tossed it on the floor on top of the other heap of clothing.

He stared at her rounded breasts. His tongue instinctively snaked over his lips. Now she had awoken senses in him he had not known existed. Putting a hand to his chest, he swore he felt his own heart beating.

"You could be hurt or killed and so could I." As though he hadn't heard his own words, he pulled down her panties. God, what a woman. She had a body an artist would love to paint. Perfect round breasts, a flat stomach, strong, long legs, even her toes were perfect.

"You know why I'm not worried?" Elaine asked as she grabbed the waistband of Seth's boxers. After shaking her head, she continued. "Because I know that you would never let anything happen to me and I wouldn't let anything happen to you."

She pulled down his boxers. Her gaze fixed on his erect penis. Just her look shook him.

He was in awe of her strength. He had known from the first moment she was brought to his house that she was strong. And she was right. He would defend her to the death. After watching her practice with swords and the way she held a knife over her hand to offer Seth a meal to tide him over, he had no doubt in his mind that she could hold her own.

He wrapped his arm around her waist and brought her down to the bed. He kissed her with such passion that he had felt transported to a different time and place. His hand glided over her soft flesh, caressing her breast and thumbing her nipple until she moaned.

With her arm around Seth's shoulders and her other hand placed on his cheek, Elaine held him closer. When he kissed down to her neck, her fingers dug into his back. He moved up and kissed her eager lips, probing her mouth with his tongue, an act he would have never done before. With Elaine, he felt completely safe.

Kissing her and touching her were not enough. He wanted more. He desired all of her. Seth kissed down her body, licking her hard nipples on the way down to her stomach. She writhed under his touch, undulating as she called his name.

And when he licked his tongue down her thighs to her feet, Seth thought he heard a rumble. Seth never had a foot fetish but with Elaine he could understand how some men could become afflicted with the desire. Perfect arches in both feet, appropriate sized toes with well-groomed toenail length.

He looked at her as he kissed her ankle. Instead of looking turned on like she had been, she gasped and nearly bolted upward.

"Your eyes," she said. "They're glowing."

Seth felt himself changing. He touched his chin to see if it had receded. It trembled under his touch but still felt the same. It wouldn't take long for his face to morph.

The hunger he had spoken about earlier he now felt churning inside of him. It was not a hunger to feed but rather a hunger for intimacy.

Looking at Elaine's expression, he was not sure if she wanted to keep going. He set her foot down and hovered over her. She remained perfectly still on her back underneath him. Her eyes were wide.

"Do you want to stop?" he asked.

She reached up and stroked his face from his forehead down to his chin. "Will your face change too?"

"More than likely."

"Does that mean you'll change the way you feel about me, too?"

He shook his head. "Never."

She pulled him down to her and kissed him. If this woman could overlook his demonic appearance then she was the right one for him.

With a nudge with her shoulder and hand, she flipped Seth onto his back. He knew she was strong mentally but physically she showed that she could be an intimidating force.

"Just to be on the safe side, I would like to be in a position where I can get away easier." Elaine crawled on top of his body. This time she kissed him then made her way down his body.

"I wish you weren't so cold," she said. "Your heart isn't."

With every kind word, he realized that she meant the world to him.

She climbed on top of his body. Holding his hard shaft, she positioned her body over him. With one motion, she eased Seth inside of her. She gasped and clawed his chest.

"So deep," she growled.

Her body moved back and forth. It didn't take long for Seth to fall into a familiar

rhythm. In another life they could have been husband and wife. And when Seth heard the rumbling sound again and this time a slight shimmy, he knew they were signs from the Underworld. The Council knew and apparently was not pleased with his decision to get physical.

He did not care. His body tingled. It was the first positive feeling he had felt in several years.

He grabbed her thighs as she moved up and down on him. She looked beautiful on top. He wanted so much to make her happy. His mind felt swept away into another world, a world where a relationship like this could exist.

Pressing his face against her chest, he took in her sweet scent. She emitted a vanilla-like aroma that prompted him to take a nibble like she was a delicious Christmas cookie. He allowed his protruding canines to drag across her tender flesh. She wrapped her arms around his neck and held him closer, tempting him in a way that made him shake. His fingernails raked her back as he took a quick nip of her skin. Seth would never bite her. Never. Never feed from her like he had on the others. Elaine meant more than just a feed or a fix. She had become his salvation.

“Seth,” she whispered. She dropped her head next to his, still grinding on top of him and making him feel like a whole man again. Then she raised her head.

Placing both hands to the side of his head and staring into his eyes, she said, “I have to have more of you. I need all of you.”

“I do, too.” Seth knew exactly what she desired and did not stop her. Staring into her eyes, he opened his mind to her, allowing Elaine to experience what he was feeling.

Her mouth dropped open as her eyes widened. “Jesus H. Christ. It’s like--oh God.”

Seth’s body flooded with sexual energy, a fever he had not felt in years. His head filled with flashes of moments where Elaine had looked especially enticing to him like the night he watched her sleeping in his house the first time. Or when he had bathed her and she dreamed about them making love in such a primal way. And especially now, not her being naked, but when she looked at him as though he looked the same rather than the hideous monster he had become.

He knew she could feel what he was feeling, which was overwhelming desire. Every part of his body pulsed. Every pent-up desire, his need to have her and no one else, filled his thoughts and his physical actions. In one motion, he rolled her onto her back with himself on top. Although Elaine gasped, she squelched his thoughts that she might be afraid of him when she wrapped her legs around his hips.

Seth thrust inside of her, feeling her tight, hot walls pulling him in and holding him. His chauvinistic thoughts immediately begged the question of how this sexy woman could be allowed to walk on the streets on her own at night. The thought must have been translated to Elaine who laughed. Her thumbs stroked his eyebrows. He turned his head to kiss the palm of her hand, the same hand she had offered to him moments before when she had planned to cut herself in the name of humanity.

If he was not careful, he could really grow to lo

Her eyes widened when the thought entered his mind. He brought his head back and shook her hands away from him, breaking free of her hold.

“Seth, what were you thinking just now?” Elaine asked. “Are you in ...?”

Before she could finish her query, he smothered her lips with a kiss. He cupped her breast, hoping to keep her mind off of his previous thought and more on their passion. It worked.

Elaine let out a long groan before digging her fingernails into his hard flesh. Her legs tightened around him until he truly thought the woman wanted to snap his body in two. He liked the captured feeling. She was not like the demure women he had been with in his earlier years. And she was not like Charlotte, a strong woman who kept secrets from him. She was simply Elaine.

He held her, not wanting to let her go or deal with what had rumbled his home just moments ago.

“Mmm, you made the earth move,” she said as she stroked his bare chest. Her dancing fingertips tickled his flesh.

Seth did not want to worry her. He knew that by now the Council was fully aware of what had just happened. He would now have to deal with it and they were not ones that could be reasoned with.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“Not myself,” Seth answered. “But much happier.”

* * * *

Elaine normally didn't sleep during the day. Making love to Seth wore her out in a very good way. Once she got over the idea that she'd just made love to the Prince of Death, a vampire, she only saw him as a loving man, a man who she could have sworn was thinking he loved her.

It was possible. After their trip to New York, she knew Seth had finally come to grips with Charlotte's death, which was great for him. Did that necessarily mean that he wanted a full-on relationship with her? Did he really love her or was he just in love with the moment, a moment of intense passion?

That mind-melding thing still shook her. She felt like she'd had two simultaneous orgasms. All of her intense sexual feelings doubled and everything she felt was echoed. So maybe she wasn't in Seth's mind. Maybe he was just picking up on her feeling and replayed it back to her. So did that mean he knew that she was falling in love with him? If so, how did he feel?

Elaine ran her fingers back through her unruly hair. A relationship between the two of them would be impossible. One or the other would have to make the ultimate sacrifice. And as much as she suspected Seth wanted her, she couldn't very well see him giving up his glamorous lifestyle for her. And Elaine couldn't see herself giving up her family, friends, and her practice. Or could she?

When she stared at Seth as he slept, she wondered if she did become a vampire could she from him. Could one vampire feed from another or was that like cannibalism? It could have been some unwritten code of ethics. Vampires with ethics. Well, at least one of them had ethics.

She stroked his face. She glanced around the room and noticed that the clothes they carelessly tossed on the floor the night before had now been removed.

Seth. He must have stayed up late to clean. And although she got him to forget about Charlotte, Elaine wondered if Seth could be cured in time to save the world.

Seth's eyes popped open, which made Elaine gasp. She removed her hand from his face and nearly scurried away from him when he grabbed her hand and sat up in bed.

“Did not mean to startle you,” he said. “I wake up that way.”

“All of the time?” she asked.

“Unfortunately. Sleep hard. Wake up even harder.”

“And I see you've been busy.” She pointed around the room. “You didn't have to clean

up so fast.”

“I am afraid I did.” He kissed her then got out of bed slowly. “I have packed some bags for us. We need to go.”

“Go? Go where?” She should have been relieved to be getting out of the house.

“The club. There is something there I need.” Seth paced the floor, but he didn’t count on his fingertips like usual. It must be something bad. He had abandoned old rituals for new ones.

“What’s there?” she pressed.

“My family’s amulet. I need it for Reckoning Day.”

Her heart raced. Mina had mentioned the amulet in relation to marriage. Did that mean he wanted to marry her? “For what? Part of a ceremony?”

“Yes.”

“So why do I have to go with you?”

Seth took a deep breath. “Did you notice the banging and tremors last night?”

“You mean besides the noises we made? No.”

“You remember I told you about the Council? I said that vampires and Ayudantes cannot be together.”

“Yes.” Elaine’s heart pounded when she noticed how worried Seth looked.

“They know.”

She swallowed hard. “Did they contact you?”

“No.” He shook his head. “But I know they know. The house shook. I heard noises. They are not happy.”

“So now what?” she asked.

“It will not take them long to send a messenger. We need to get out of here and head to the club. And that is where the ceremony will take place.”

“What kind of ceremony?”

“Let me put it this way. You will be pleased with the result.” He touched her face and gave her a reassuring smile. “You will be my wife.”

Chapter Nineteen

Elaine's reaction to Seth's news did not meet his expectations. During the day, as he held her in bed, initially unable to sleep, he thought about the possibilities. After making love to Elaine all night, he knew it was not possible to go through life without her. He could barely imagine what his life was like before.

He had remembered the way she looked at him, especially after he 'fanged up' as she had called it. Even now it made him chuckle. The more sexually aroused he had become, the more he had felt like his old self. It had been nothing for him in his earlier days to pleasure a woman then feed from her, much like the way some mortals smoked after sex. It was his equivalent.

When she had looked at him, looked at his grisly, morphed face, he had found no fear. He did not even see curiosity. He saw hope. Hope that he had felt as passionate about her as she must have felt about him. That must have been the reason.

Elaine had not been with another man since Alvin, by her own admission and from his observation. So why him? Why give up years of celibacy for a finger-counting, dogma-chanting, bloodsucking freak like himself? Probably for the same reason that he wanted this bare-footed, sword-fighting psychiatrist.

He had never felt so free in all of his years. He could be himself and know that Elaine would not turn him away, not now, not ever.

"You cannot be serious about marriage," she said. She blinked. Her brown eyes sparkled with flecks of gold.

Seth's smile dropped. "Of course I am. We do not have much time."

When he caught her disappointed look, he knew she had been serious.

Since making love to Elaine, he had felt sicker than before. Strange physical reaction since emotionally he had not felt more whole in his life, not even with Charlotte. His stomach tightened until he felt nauseous. His throat felt closed so even if he had fed, he was not sure anything would have gone down it. And his hands, they would not stop trembling. He had hopped out of bed and paced hoping the jittering came from nervous tension.

Not well enough to feed, Seth had to resort to his last option. Marriage. Although he was not nervous about being with Elaine, he had his reservations about taking on another wife.

"Not exactly how I wanted to be asked," Elaine said. She sat against the headboard and covered her beautifully nude body with the bed linens. It was like throwing a tarp over a Picasso. "Are you sure there's no way to become mortal?"

"Mortality? We would be sitting ducks to the Council." Seth muttered 'dogma' under his breath, but she must have heard him.

She cursed and banged her head back against the headboard. Seth grabbed the back of his head as though he had pounded his own head against it.

"It would be much more feasible if you became a vampire. You could protect yourself better." He had to convince her that his way was better. As it was, they did not have much time.

"But I thought you said the process is painful?" She swung her legs over the edge of the bed. Still nude, she covered her luscious body with his red satin sheets.

He stopped in front of her. Seeing her full lips, the gentle curve of her neck and her delicate hands, his mind raced with thoughts of them having wild passionate sex again. The four

times they had been intimate during the night had barely fed his need. He knew underneath her bookish demeanor hid a wildcat waiting to be unleashed. In return, he had drained himself. His body could not rejuvenate as it had before. Without the proper feed, he had become weak.

Seth fell to his knees. When he heard Elaine gasp, he played off his collapse by resting his head on her lap and wrapping his arms around her legs.

“I would make it painless for you. For you, I would do anything,” he said through gritted teeth. The pain inside tore through his body like a sword. Although he likened the pain to something the Council would have inflicted on him, he knew it was not their doing. This was all his fault.

His body had been asking, begging, for the iron and nutrients he obtained from the blood. Now on Reckoning Day, his body betrayed him. It could not hold out another day without sustenance.

Elaine curved her body over his, pressing her chest on his back and stroking his skin. Then her gentle strokes turned to clawing. She moaned and grumbled, curling her legs up into his chest until they were one tight ball.

“P ... p ... pain,” she stammered. “What’s wrong, Seth?”

He did not want to alarm her. With Elaine’s help he had learned to trust again. He opened his heart to a relationship. Giving up his birthright, his sanguinarian nature, his gift, and leaving himself and Elaine exposed to the beings of the Underworld seemed wrong. His body told him so. Elaine did not want to be a vampire. She had said so before. And one person had to be strong enough to conform to the other’s lifestyle. Vampires and Ayudantes could not be together.

Seth shook his head. “I am fine. Just nerves about tonight.”

“Don’t lie to me,” she said and held him tighter. “You’re so pale. You don’t eat. Do you have cramps?”

He hugged her legs tighter. He did not want to involve her in his pain but if he was serious about having her in his life, he had to be open, honest.

“Cramps. Yes.” He took a deep breath. “But I will be fine.” His breath came out ragged. “Maybe I should consider becoming mortal. That way I can stop hurting you.”

She took a deep breath and sat up straight. Placing her hands on the sides of his face, she lifted it so that he could look her in the eyes. Her hard but compassionate stare made him see that she was indeed the warrior he needed by his side.

“But you will not be the Prince of Death anymore,” she said.

Seth forced a smile to reassure her. “Someone else will be. It is not a position that can go vacant, much like your presidency. If he dies, someone will have to take his position. Do not worry about it.”

“It’s that someone else that I’m worried about. What if it’s Mina?”

Seth had thought about that, too. He wondered if The Master had been serious about appointing her to his spot if he could no longer do his duties. What if Mina let the dead become her army? Or if she decided to make her own vampire minions?

Seth shook his head. Mina was the least of his worries. He was more concerned about whether Elaine wanted him, needed him like he needed her.

“I want to be with you, Elaine,” he said and forced a smile through his pain. “I’ll do what it takes.”

She smiled at his attempt to form the contraction. “You want to make me happy?”

Seth held her hand and kissed the back of it as his answer.

“Then you should feed.”

His eyes widened at her statement. “What? What are you saying?”

“It kills me to see you in such pain, physically and emotionally. So I want you to feed. I don’t want to see you die.”

Seth kept his face straight but inside he felt conflicted. After so long, could he still do it? Lord knew he still had the taste for blood. There had been a method to his feeding habit. Only people in pain. Only the ones who wanted an out. No more random victims.

“And I have just one stipulation, one request.” Elaine slid back on the bed. “Feed from me to get you through.”

Seth’s eyes flared. “No.” He found his strength and bolted to his feet. Pacing the floor again, he shook his head. “I told you. I . . .”

She cut him off. “Yes, you at first said you couldn’t feed from me. Then later you said you wouldn’t. I’m supposed to help you. That’s my job as an Ayudante, right?” She dropped the sheet, exposing her perfect body. “I don’t know how this goes but I’m ready and I’m not scared.”

“You should be,” Seth said. “I have not fed since that last taste you gave me. I could hurt you.”

“I know you won’t, though. And you would hurt me more if after all we have been through you make your initial feed from someone else. This means something to me. I want you to be that leader I know you can be and I want to be the one that gets you there.” She lowered her eyes. “We’ll figure out us later.”

“You do not know what you are doing, Lainey.” Seth paced. He slipped and muttered ‘dogma’ three times again. He squeezed his eyes shut, hoping she had not heard him this time. From her thoughts, he knew she had.

“So tell me what I should do.” She snapped her fingers. “I know.” Elaine positioned her head on the pillows and threw the sheet from her body. “I should be still like this, right?”

With her arms spread, she truly looked like she had been put on a cross and made to pay for his sins.

She jerked up. “Or maybe, better yet, you would rather have me run away from you like a true victim.”

“Elaine . . .,” Seth began.

His futile attempt to stop her sad assumption about his feeding ritual fell on deaf ears. She jumped to her feet and ran around the bed like a lunatic on a day pass.

“Help, help. I have a vampire after me,” she said as she flailed her hands in the air. “Is that what does it for you?”

He caught wrist and pulled her close to him. “No. That is not how I do it.” Maybe he would be able to scare some sense into her. This was not a game to him.

Elaine put her hand to his bare chest. He knew her heart was pounding because he felt her blood rushing, pumping, in her fingertips. She stared into his eyes then licked her lips.

“First of all,” he began, “I would not have to chase my feed. They all come to me.”

She gasped. Her breath came out ragged. “I forgot. Mind control.”

“That is correct.” He licked his canines that were already starting to protrude. He blinked when he heard her clear thoughts.

I want you to feed from me, Seth. I want you to feed from me.

Why was she doing this? He knew she feared death. If he became overzealous in his feeding, he could kill her. The only way he could bring her back would be to feed from him and

that would mean making her a vampire. Was that what she really wanted?

“Do you want to become a vampire?” he asked pointedly.

Elaine shook her head. “No. Of course not.”

“You never came off as a victim. I am wondering why the change.”

“Because I ...”

He gave her no time to answer. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pressed her back against a wall.

“The element of surprise can lessen the pain,” he said, still wanting to scare her but also feeling aroused from this game.

“What else?” she asked. Her hands rested on his shoulders. Her legs snaked around his body.

“Sexual endorphins. The more aroused you are, the less painful it can be.”

Elaine must have felt his growing erection through his pants. She looked down then eased her hands down to his pajama bottoms and pulled at the drawstring tie.

“Theoretically, when I come I won’t feel a thing, right?” She pulled his pants down with her feet until it pooled around his ankles.

He did not answer. Instead, Seth crushed her lips with a kiss. His hands cupped her firm backside as he let his tongue probe inside of her mouth. Warmth. Heat. He felt it. After so many years of feeling nothing, he picked up on Elaine’s body heat. The feeling was intoxicating. Everything about Elaine elated him.

Her fearlessness and her openness made him want to go too far with her. Seth wanted Elaine, forever.

He allowed one hand to roam up her body, sliding over her stomach until he reached her breast. He massaged it as he kissed down her chin to her neck.

Elaine gasped. She put her hands on his head and held him close. Had the woman gone mad? He had smelled her blood, her sweet, spicy blood, the first time he had met her. The aroma had stayed with him but Seth had never acted on the impulse. Now she was not only giving him permission, it was like she was daring him to bite her, to take that one necessary drink that would put him back to the way he used to be.

He licked her neck. She trembled so much he thought she would drive a hole into the wall. When he moved her up higher on the wall and let his mouth cover her breast, he heard her groan. He was not sure if it was out of pleasure or frustration until she spoke.

“Do it,” she said. “Get it over with.”

Seth pulled back from her delectable flesh, looked up at her and said, “This is why I prefer to have mind control over my victims. Less talking and no direction.”

“And what about your women?” she asked in a breathy tone.

Seth did not answer. And he would not answer her, not with words. He was and had always been a man of action. No amount of facial ticks and chanting would take that away.

He slid her down the wall. With her legs still wrapped around his body, in one skillful move, he slid himself inside of her with one thrust. Again, Elaine gasped. She embedded her fingernails into his back, surely drawing blood in the process. In response, he felt a surge of strength. The weakness that had crippled him moments ago faded along with his staunch resolve. The more he was with Elaine, smelling her, feeling her, touching her, the more he wanted just that one drink.

Seth felt his face changing. He had never been conscious of it before. It just happened. With Elaine, he noticed everything. He dragged his lips over her shoulder. Without knowing it,

he took a nip of her tasty flesh. Most skin tasted like salty leather. It would compare to eating the fatty chicken skin when the true treasure was the soft, appetizing meat.

Elaine's skin had its own category. Soft, tantalizing, sweet. Seth thrust deeper. He thought he would lose his mind at how wonderfully wet and accepting Elaine's body was. He buried his face next to hers. A growl escaped his mouth into her ear. She responded by moaning with him.

Now that Elaine embraced his true self, Seth felt free to be himself. He kissed Elaine's neck hoping she wouldn't notice that they were floating off the ground. Once they hit the ceiling, Elaine glanced around. The realization hit her immediately.

"You can fly?" she asked.

Seth didn't answer. Instead, he twisted his body so that now Elaine had the ceiling against her back. He pumped into her faster.

It did not take Seth long for the peak of ecstasy to overcome him. His body shook with the release as he held onto her tighter. She let out a small cry, matching her orgasm with his.

He had to have her. Sucking her small earlobe into his mouth, Seth salivated. As though reading his mind, Elaine tilted her head like she was giving him access to her pulsating vein. It would have been so easy.

"I won't hate you," she said, breathlessly.

Seth jerked back. "No!" he snapped. He reluctantly pulled out of his Ayudante. Their bodies returned to the floor. Before he could start his pace, she stopped him.

"I'm trying to help you," she said, holding his wrist. "Why won't you take my blood?"

He rushed her, pinning her against the kitchen bar. "I am afraid I may not be able to stop." He knew his face appeared twisted and horrifying to Elaine. She never flinched. She still looked at him with that same compassion. How the hell did she do it? What was she seeing in him that he did not think he had?

"Do you not understand?" he began. "I do not want to hurt you. Ever. I want you in my life. Always." He put his hand next to her delicate face. His thumb stroked her cheek. "My irrational side will overtake my rational side. Instead of feeding"

Seth stopped but Elaine didn't want him to. She didn't know what she had been thinking before. Her blurting out that he should feed from her came from a place inside of her that was sure of one thing: she didn't want to be without him. She knew if he turned mortal, he would be left vulnerable and she couldn't have that. So he had to be that leader again. And as the leader, he could protect her. At least that was what she hoped.

"Instead of feeding you would be doing what?" she asked.

Seth's huffed like a charging bull. He grabbed her shoulders. "Do not look at me like that."

Elaine couldn't stop staring at him. Such a strange response considering just a few weeks ago she could barely look her own patients in their eyes while caring for them. And now she was staring down a vampire, a head vampire no less, and one she cared deeply about. Forget that. She loved him. Seth Overkill with his pacing, his finger tapping, his chanting and his wonderful way of making her feel special was the true love of her life. Not knowing how he truly felt about her kept her from revealing it. She strained to keep him out of her thoughts. If he knew how she felt, she wasn't sure how he would react.

He turned her around so that her back was to him. Then he moved close behind her. She felt his erection pressing against her backside. She trembled as he snaked his muscular arm around her waist.

“You do not know what you are doing, Elaine,” he said. His voice slurred from his receding chin. She didn’t see him as a monster as he must have wanted her to view him. The fact that he didn’t want to feed from her and fought his natural instincts proved to her that he must have loved her too. He, too, was keeping mum. Damn it. One of them had to say something.

“If I feed from you, I may not stop,” he began. “And you will not be able to stop me. Not with strength or with pleading or--or--by any means.” His voice softened at the end. She suspected that he was going to say by love.

“I *care* for you a great deal, Elaine Vargas-Puro Shrink.” The way Seth said ‘care’ Elaine knew he used that word to substitute for love. She felt it in her heart.

“Then what are you afraid of?” she asked.

He eased his hand up between her breasts and settled it around her neck, not squeezing it. It seemed more like he was trying to diminish his temptation.

“I am afraid of killing you and not by accident either,” he growled in her ear. “I would drink until you died. Then I would cut myself and make you drink to bring you back. We could be vampires ruling death together if I knew for sure that that is what you wanted.” He pressed his chest into her back. “Is that what you want, Lainey?”

She fought back tears. “I want you better.”

“No. Tell me what you really want. I cannot read your thoughts, but I think I know what it is. Say it.”

Her mouth quivered. Could she tell him she loved him? If she did, what would he do? Would he really make her into a vampire? The only thing she knew for sure was that she couldn’t do without him.

“I want you to take a drink.” She cocked her head. How Seth reacted would be the true test. If he knew her, he would do the right thing.

“Instead of marrying me.”

“I think we’re both afraid of that.” She sighed and it weighed heavily on his heart.

He removed his hand from her neck. She felt him lowering her down.

“I do this for one reason,” he said. When his cold lips touched her flesh, she jumped. She braced her hands on the counter and waited for the bite. Squeezing her eyes shut, she whispered a prayer. Her heartbeat pounded in her head until another harder beat snapped her out of her thoughts.

She knew the sound wasn’t imagined the way he let her go and ran to his steel door. Then it sounded again. Three hard raps to the door.

“Is that the Council again?” Elaine asked. She suddenly felt aware of her nudity and clamored to the bed for a sheet. She wrapped her body in the satin sheet and sought safety behind the bed.

Seth took a deep breath. “No.”

Over the intercom system, Mina’s voice sounded. “I know you’re in there with that whore.”

Seth put his hands on either side of the door. His back widened and Elaine could almost see him puffing up.

“You have two hours, Seth. Will you be bowing at my feet at that time?” Mina cackled.

He slammed his hand on the intercom. “You were to leave this house and never return. Now I will find you. I will hunt you like the dog that you are.”

“A bitch,” Elaine interjected. When he turned to her with a puzzled expression on his face, Elaine clarified herself. “A female dog is a bitch. Technically I’m right.”

“Good,” Mina said. “I’ve been looking for a fight. You have to catch me first, Count Punkula.”

Seth ran from the door and paced. Elaine’s stomach tied in a knot just watching him.

He stopped and pointed to her. “You. Stay here. I do not want you leaving this house.”

“And where are you going?” She hopped around the bed to Seth. She’d wrapped herself too tightly in the sheet.

“I have to take care of Mina. She will no longer be a threat to you or me.” He headed to the bathroom.

“Wait.” She followed him as fast as she could in her mummified garb. “I think I should have a say so here. I mean, she threatened me too and I think”

He stopped at the door and turned around, causing Elaine to ram her head into his wall of a chest. “This is not up for discussion.” He held onto her shoulders and stared into her eyes. This time his face had returned to its normal, terminally gorgeous state. God, she wanted to kiss him. She wanted him to finish what he had started against that counter, fulfilling one of her naughtier fantasies. She wanted him to say he loved her.

“I do not want any harm to come to you. I failed your father. I lost Charlotte. I will not fail you.” He kissed her softly on her lips. “I will not lose you.” When he pulled back, he stopped just inches from her face and said, “If I do not feed, we will have to marry.” Seth closed the door.

That little stinker. The gnawing feeling in the pit of her stomach wasn’t from hunger. It came from fear. Elaine had a feeling that whatever Seth did tonight, he might not come back. This was it. And it didn’t escape her that he conveniently skipped the part about saying he loved her. Did he? Was his determination to get Mina for Elaine or for himself?

Elaine tiptoed to the bathroom already billowing with steam from the shower. She opened the glass door and got inside. Standing in front of Seth under the showerhead, she wrapped her arms around his body.

“Just promise me you’ll come back in one piece,” Elaine said. Even through the roar of the shower she knew Seth could hear her.

Holding her, he replied, “I promise.”

When he’d bathed and dressed he paused on his way out and picked up a piece of paper he’d placed on the kitchen counter, handing it to her. “This is the code to get out of the room just in case.”

“In case of what?” Elaine asked as she took the paper.

He cut his eyes away from her. “You will know when it happens.” He kissed her quickly before leaving the room.

Elaine heard a strange rumbling. Could that be an earthquake? It wasn’t so unusual for the state of Virginia. An earthquake had rocked the eastern part of the state late 2003. It could happen again. And as though she had summoned it with her thoughts, the ground shook again. Maybe this was what Seth had talked about when he said the Council was not happy that they had had sex? Maybe this was the Council calling?

When the floor vibrated so much that books fell off of shelves, she sat on the middle of the bed and curled into a fetal position. It probably wasn’t the best position to be in but what did she know about earthquake safety?

She covered her head until she heard something strange. Her name. Elaine dropped her hands when the ground stopped shaking and listened.

“Elaine?” the tinny voice said through the intercom. “Lainey, are you here?”

She bolted upright on the bed. It was her mother. How did she get into the house and how did she know she was there? She snatched the paper with the door code written on it and punched it into the keypad. After the battered door cranked open, she bolted through it.

“Ma? Where are you?” Elaine called out. When she reached the living room, she spied someone sitting in a chair in the living room. She immediately ran to the person, knowing it had to be her mother.

“What are you doing here?” she asked before she reached her destination. When she finally came eye to eye with the guest, Elaine screamed and stumbled back.

“Couldn’t exactly go without saying goodbye,” Mina said with a toothy grin. “We have so much unfinished business between us.”

Chapter Twenty

Elaine trembled. She gasped, struggling to catch her breath as she stared at Mina sitting so regally in Seth's chair. Stumbling back to the front door, Elaine felt around for the knob while keeping an eye on the rogue vampire.

"Look at you," Mina began. "I guess you can't teach an old dog new tricks. Still think there's salvation outside of that door." She sat up straighter. "Just because you fucked the Prince doesn't make you indestructible. And marriage? Ain't happening."

"Where's my mother?" Elaine asked. Her heart pounded so hard, she was sure the beings outside could hear it.

Mina stood from the chair. Now wearing shiny, skin-tight black leather pants with a matching corset top, she looked even scarier than before.

"Oh, you mean, Olivia?" Mina asked.

Suddenly, Mina's towering frame transformed to a small woman. Elaine blinked during the transformation then rubbed her eyes. She couldn't be seeing this. She couldn't be in the room with something that changed shape, function and form. Mina now changed to ... Elaine's mother.

Elaine screamed again and pressed her back against the door. Seth had told her that he could not change into a bat or anything else. So how was it that Mina could?

"Because I'm not Mina, stupid," the thing that looked and sounded like her mother said. And in a blink of an eye, it changed again to a fragile-looking old man complete with plaid pants and a fedora. When the dust settled, a mothball scent wafted in the air.

"What are you?" Elaine asked.

The old man approached her, taking small careful steps as he walked with a cane. Elaine pressed her back against the door until pain stung her shoulders. She raised herself up on her tiptoes and turned her head away when the man held his hand up to her.

"I am part of the Council. In this state, most call me Mr. Santiago. I personally prefer the All Powerful One myself." It smiled, showing off a toothless grin. As though reading her thoughts, he quickly added, "But not God. I'm an elder."

This shriveled old man with a cane and no teeth was the Council member who'd banged on Seth's iron door before? He was the one who'd caused Seth to be so nervous? He was the one who could bring such misery and pain to her and Seth if they continued their relationship?

"In the flesh," Mr. Santiago answered as though her private thoughts had been spoken. Elaine did not shake the Master's hand. She didn't want to be that intimate with death. Instead, she scurried over to the fireplace to put some distance between the two of them. Then she concentrated on keeping him out of her thoughts and crossed her fingers for good measure.

Mr. Santiago smiled then let out a hearty laugh. It must have been too hearty since the All Powerful One began a hysterical fit of coughing that forced him to sit back down in the chair Elaine had found him in.

"Mortals. Always thinking they can outsmart death." Mr. Santiago pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his wrinkled lips. "Stop concentrating so much, dear. You'll give yourself a headache."

Elaine couldn't relax. How could she? She was face to face with the man with a lot of

power. He was no god. Elaine was sure he wanted to be.

“Please, Lainey, have a seat.” He pointed to the couch across from him.

With trepidation, Elaine padded to the couch and sat on the edge. Since Mr. Santiago could read her thoughts, she fought to keep her mind clear. She wouldn’t think of anything or anyone, especially not Seth. If the Master knew how she really felt about him, Seth would be hurt or killed instantly.

“I like you, Elaine,” the Master began. His silver eyes twinkled as he hitched up a smile. “I have liked you since you were a baby. So strong. No other Ayudante caused such a rain at birth like you did. I knew you would be the one who would shake up the status quo.”

She swallowed and wrung her hands together. “What do you want from me?”

The Master’s eyes lit up. “A direct woman. I love these modern times. No shrinking violets here. No, sir.”

“Are you going to kill me?” she asked during the elder’s babble.

He cocked his head. “Eventually,” he answered as though she’d asked if he wanted something to eat or drink.

She bit the inside of her cheek to keep reminding herself that all of this was real. The slight pain she felt from the bite wouldn’t compare to the pain she was sure he could put her through if he wanted. Elaine’s hands felt slick from sweat.

He tsked and wagged his finger at her. “Don’t be shocked. I know Seth bonded with you so I know you have seen what was supposed to happen to you when you were a toddler. A deal is a deal. I figured since Seth wouldn’t be feeding or getting married and, therefore, would no longer be the Prince of Death that I could collect what is rightfully mine and appoint a new leader.”

Elaine fought to keep her mind clear but it raced with questions and fears. Her head pounded and her stomach knotted. She wasn’t sure if the knotting came from her own fears of this thing sitting in Seth’s house or if it was from Seth’s own pain of not feeding.

“And what will you do to me?” Elaine asked.

“You will come to the Underworld with me and be surrounded by the thing that scares you the most. Death.”

* * * *

“Five, four, three, two. No.” Seth ran his hand over his head as he racked his brain, trying to remember that damn door combination at his club. “Why did I change it?”

Oh yes. Mina. He had not seen her yet. He felt her presence. The air weighed a ton as it pressed on his shoulders like a soaked blanket. Electricity buzzed through the empty hallway and cut through his thoughts like fangs through old, soft flesh.

Glancing at his watch, Seth knew his time was limited. He had to feed and soon. And now he wanted to. For Elaine. He kicked himself for not admitting to her before he left that he loved her. If he had, he would be admitting to himself that he might not be able to come back to take that wonderful woman into his arms and not only tell her that he loved her but also demand her hand in marriage.

Demand. No, not with a woman like Elaine. In these modern times, Seth suspected the spitfire would ask *him* for his hand in marriage.

The woman was like a rock. Not a hard, jagged one that would cut a hand if held too tightly. She was more like a smooth pebble, polished by rough ocean waves and constant tumbling.

She had had a hard time of it in her past. Although blocked from her memory, she had

been present when her father was killed. And he knew putting up with his idiosyncrasies had to be a daunting task. Seth had lost twenty assistants in the past and now had one bent on mutiny.

He sighed at the thought, relaxed and punched in the final number to the door code. When he opened the door, he stopped and felt rage building inside of him as soon as his eyes settled on Mina.

“I thought you would never make it,” Mina said. She pranced around the office in spiked heels and a black, sprayed-on latex look that set the feminist movement back fifty years. Mina was no lady. She was a cartoon character that needed to be destroyed.

Seth slammed his door behind him. “How did you get into my office?” he asked.

“Is that really what you want to ask me?” Mina sauntered toward Seth and stopped in front of him. With her hands on her hips, she leaned forward. “Don’t you want to ask if I’ll rule Death with you?”

“Never,” Seth hissed.

In a coy, playful way, Mina asked, “What? You’ll never ask me or ...?”

“Do not toy with me, woman. You are ill-equipped to match my wit and strength.”

“Wit?” Mina snickered and turned to the window. She placed her hand on the window leaving an indelible print on the clear pane. “You’re at your wit’s end.”

Seth kept his eyes fixed on Mina. He would not be swayed by the mark on the glass. The most important thing he needed to concentrate on now was making sure this woman, this thing he had created, did not harm Elaine and did not continue his reign.

Then he would tend to the glass.

“Come on, Seth,” Mina said. “Don’t you want to rush over here and clean this?” She strolled to his desk. “And maybe after you’re done cleaning the glass, you could get to this later.” With one hand, she tipped his desk over, toppling over his papers, pens, and moistened wipes.

Seth swallowed but kept his position. He clasped his hands behind his back so that Mina could not see him wringing them. He blinked. He counted in his head until he reached one hundred then counted down to one. Thank goodness Mina could not read his thoughts.

Seth tried to tap into Elaine’s mind. He needed some of her encouragement right now. She believed in him more than anyone. Any woman, not just an Ayudante, but any woman willing to put her life and safety on the line for the sake of humanity, or maybe it was because of love, deserved to be put on the highest pedestal.

“You will not destroy my office.” Seth managed to unfreeze his feet to move closer to this devil. “You will not destroy my life.”

“You are weak, Seth Overkill,” Mina said. “I’m over covering for you, fetching your feed, and cleaning your mess.” To punctuate her point, she stormed to his kitchen, opened his refrigerator, picked up one of his apple pies and threw it across the room, narrowly missing Seth’s head.

“You female dog.” Seth would not bring himself down to a denigrating level to use foul language at a woman. He was not raised that way.

As though his feet had wings, Seth flew across the room. He grabbed her around her neck, catching her off balance. He knew his burst of strength and energy would not last long without a feed. He just hoped Mina did not know that.

“I brought you into my intimate circle,” he began between gritted teeth. “And I will destroy you.”

Before he could make a move, the club did. It rumbled and shook enough to jostle the

straightjackets down from the ceiling and make the glass rattle. Seth glanced around his office without releasing his grip.

“Time’s running out, buddy boy,” Mina squeaked. “It’s do or die time.”

He dragged her to the window. Without touching the glass, he felt the club trembling. The vibrating floor tickled his feet and shimmied up his body, up his legs, and down his arms. Glancing down, he watched the dancers scuttling across the floor like roaches in a newly lit room.

“Earthquake,” Seth said.

“Bullshit.” Mina snickered. “More like an awakening. The dead want to come out to play. You’re too late.”

Seth squeezed Mina’s neck to shut her up. He gazed down into the darkened club. His sharp eyesight cut through the darkness and fog to spot the splitting floor. The concrete floor developed a deep crevice, so deep Seth spied a glowing, orange light. It could not have gone down to the center of the earth. Could it? Maybe his acute eyesight allowed him to see deeper than the crack actually was.

One thing was evident. Even through the thick, soundproof glass, Seth heard the howling, screaming cries from the patrons. He knew the sounds. It was not until he saw the ethereal wispy vapors rising from the fissure that his fears were confirmed.

* * * *

Elaine braced her hands against the arms of her chair, hoping that not-so-gentle rumbling was indeed an earthquake. From the sick, twisted smile that marred Mr. Santiago’s face, Elaine knew her hopes were dashed.

“I knew it,” the Master began. “I knew Seth would fail.” He leaned forward. “I won’t have to take you down to the Underworld to introduce you to death. They’re coming up.”

As though he summoned them, the marble floors cracked. The lights in the home blinked repeatedly like the strobe lights in *Dementia*. She flipped her head back and forth trying to capture what all was going on around her. While Mr. Santiago sat calmly, Elaine struggled to her feet. Was she indeed in Hell? Were the dead rising?

“Yes and no!” Mr. Santiago said over the chaos. “The dead are rising, but you are not in Hell. Not the actual place. Not that it will matter to you.” The elderly being struggled to his feet. “It’s time for you to go, Lainey.”

Seth, come home. I need you.

The Master shook his head. “Seth can’t read your thoughts while I’m here. I’ve blocked your thoughts. As long as the dead keep rising, it proves to me that Seth was too weak to fulfill his duties.”

“He’s not weak.” She stumbled to the fireplace. “But I know you are.” She picked up a poker. “And I’ll do whatever it takes to prove it including getting rid of you.”

She took cautious steps toward the man who remained seated as though she was joking. She couldn’t wait to smack that smug expression off of his face. She held up the black iron-wrought tool, ready to strike when the Master morphed.

Elaine nearly dropped the weapon when she came face to face with her mother again.

“You wouldn’t hit your dear mother, would you?”

The voice was Olivia’s but Elaine knew deep down it wasn’t her. This bastard knew she couldn’t harm her mother.

“Stop it,” Elaine said in a whisper.

“Oh, does this vision bother you? Maybe it’s not the fact that I’m your mother now.

Maybe you're remembering how I wanted to give you up to the Master so that I could keep your brother. You were always a disappointment to me, Lainey."

"Shut up." Elaine covered her eyes with her free hand. This thing wasn't going to play with her mind. Elaine loved her mother. This monster wasn't going to destroy that. It hadn't been Olivia that had wanted to give Elaine away. A Council member had posed as her mother and tricked Seth. Seth couldn't read their minds so he didn't know.

"Kind of makes you think, doesn't it? Was it really me there in that apartment with you when you ran away from Seth and Mina found you? Or maybe it was the Master toying with you and controlling your life."

Elaine's mind flashed back to that time in the apartment. That woman couldn't have been the Master. That person knew things about Elaine. She didn't harm her. Maybe the Master had manipulated the situation to get Elaine to go back to Seth knowing that Olivia's health was in Elaine's hands. Mina had looked at Olivia strangely when she'd confronted the two of them.

"Or how about this." Mr. Santiago as Olivia stood. In the motion, he changed into Alvin. In a look reminiscent of Seth's former attire, Alvin dressed in khakis, a white button-up shirt with a yellow sweater vest. Had she actually been attracted to a man like this? As she stared at him, emotions swirled in her belly.

The ground cracked open more and the walls crumbled around her. She wanted to fall into the earth and have the debris cover her body. She felt wrung out.

"If you had been more attractive I wouldn't have slept with your best friend," Mr. Santiago as Alvin said. "And you were lousy in bed."

Elaine's eyes widened at his declaration. Her hand shook and she closed them into fists to steady them.

"Seth made me leave to make you as miserable as he is." Alvin held up his hand. "You are nothing. You are worthless. And I never loved you."

No. Elaine knew she meant something. Although she didn't want to, she wept. Why was she even listening to this thing? It wasn't Alvin. And even if Mr. Santiago knew what Alvin had been thinking at the time, she knew she wasn't the horrible things he'd said.

She wasn't worthless. She had thought she was for the longest time after Alvin disappeared but now she knew better. She had a place in the world, a duty, an honor. Damn it, she was important. She'd stayed away from love because she felt unworthy of the returned affection.

Elaine wiped her eyes and focused on the monster who morphed itself into the cloaked being she remembered from Seth's thoughts when she'd bonded with him.

"Time for us to go." Mr. Santiago's voice changed to that growling, grumbling voice that stopped her heart.

This was the Death that had scared her before. She glanced away, making sure not to make eye contact with it. As she stared at the floor then looked at her bare feet, she remembered the dance she'd shared with Seth. He'd held her, looked into her eyes, made her feel more special than she'd ever felt. And when she tended his wound, a wound she'd inflicted on him, she sat up a little straighter.

The thing held out its gnarled hand. "No time for goodbyes."

Elaine brought her gaze up and looked directly under its hood. She saw nothing at first. She waited. She wanted to see his face, his eyes in particular. Windows of the soul her ass. She wanted to finally face her fears, here and now.

Elaine wouldn't go down without pushing her limits. This was her life she was concerned about. And as strange as it seemed, this hideous beast made her realize that there were worse things out there than not facing her fears. She could cower away like she had been doing and not living life. She took in a deep breath and stuck out her chin.

Seth had saved her before. Now it was her turn to save him.

"It's not my fault that Alvin cheated on me," Elaine began, her hand gripping the handle of the poker. "He had a weak character. You took away my father. I can never forget that although I have come to terms with his death. I've accepted his death. I've accept" Elaine stopped before she said it again.

She realized quickly that she wasn't afraid of death. She was afraid of facing the hard reality of the mystery behind her father's death. Knowing that noble father died to save her life relieved her.

"I'm glad you're so at ease with death." The Council member cackled, causing the walls to crumble even more.

She sidestepped, nearly getting crushed by a chunk of stone.

"You're wrong," Elaine said. She raised the poker. "I won't be okay with death until I kill you."

Elaine swung the poker at him. This time she kept her eyes open during the attack. It didn't matter. As soon as she'd swung the poker, it disappeared and reappeared across the room.

"This is what I mean," Mr. Santiago began. "Bucking the system. I like that. You will do well in the Underworld. You have that killer instinct."

She stormed toward the cloaked being. When she placed her foot on a section of marble flooring, it split under her foot. She felt the heat from the crevice burn the bottom of her foot. Hopping to another section of solid flooring, Elaine held out her arms to regain her balance, all the while the monster laughed at her valiant attempt to attack him and stay alive.

"I wish your father had fought me like this when I took him," the Council member said.

Safety, be damned! Elaine saw nothing but red when she looked at the monster. When it stared at her, she finally caught his eyes, or what were supposed to be eyes. Under the dark hood, two shiny orbs glowed like stars at midnight. Elaine imagined that not many people, living or dead, had ever stared this thing down. She hoped she was the first ... and last.

With skillful hops, Elaine jumped from one section of floor to another. A strange sulfur stench filled the air until it made her cough and gag. Once in front of Mr. Santiago again, she held up the poker, ready to swing, when a gruesome creature rose from a crack in the floor between her and the Council member.

Elaine screamed when she came eye to oozing eye sockets with the being with greenish-brown skin. Gray sprigs of hair covered half of its head that seemed to remain cocked permanently. Its three-piece suit, covered in dirt and grass, hung off of its skeleton frame like a hanger. Without much skin holding his face together, she saw through his cheek, which exposed his jaw and the few remaining teeth it had in its head. So much for the dead not being able to come out from under six feet of dirt.

"Two thousand was when I died," the corpse said as it made its way toward Elaine. "It hurts." He held up his hand to her. "Help me or suffer."

Elaine jumped around the dead man to get to Mr. Santiago. She took another swing at him and it disappeared and reappeared by the front door. The house jostled again causing more cracks in the floor that seemed to go as deep as the center of the earth. Steam rose through each fissure. The living room was now cloaked in a misty cloud cover. Elaine was alone, couldn't

see anything around her and could hear other corpses rising from the ground.

“Don’t make this harder than it already is, Ayudante,” Mr. Santiago said over the chaos. “You won’t win.”

Elaine reached into her shirt and held onto her locket.

Help me, father.

* * * *

Seth scanned his office. Books littered the floor. His entertainment center had toppled over. Pipes burst and water sprayed everywhere.

“Dogma, dogma, dogma,” he said.

Under his hand, he felt Mina’s neck vibrating, not out of fear. She was laughing at him.

“This has got to be your worst nightmare,” she said in between chuckles.

Seth threw her across the room using every bit of strength he had. Mina slammed against a wall and slid down to the floor.

Bracing one hand against the glass that looked over into the club, Seth said, “No. My worst nightmare is being in one of those day spas where you have to take a mud bath. Is that not an oxymoron? Mud bath?”

Mina stood and held her side. Crouching over, she struggled to catch her breath as Seth approached her.

“See you’re not completely disabled.” Mina unzipped the side of her corset top and dropped it to the floor. Wearing nothing but a black leather bra, she exposed her wound. The gaping sore now exposed her innards. His one time recent feed had only allowed her a brief repair. Her wound looked worse than before. He was sure it being Reckoning Day had a lot to do with her worsened state. Seth saw her intestines and muscles covered in a thin layer of blood. Even he winced at the sight.

“See what you’ve done to me.” Mina stomped toward him. “As though I’m not enough of a freak. You’re killing me, too.” With one swipe of her backhand, Mina slapped Seth across his face causing him to be hurled to the other side of the room. He landed with a thud on the floor.

Either Seth had been that weak or Mina was that strong. He knew he could not remain lying down. He had a fight on his hands. Planting his hands on the floor, he pushed himself up only to be sprayed directly in the face with water spouting from his now broken kitchen faucet.

The old Seth would have cringed at being brought down to the floor and then balked at being showered in his clothes. Priorities. Elaine was right. He needed to get his mind straight and worry about the task at hand.

By the time he got to his feet, Mina had reached him. She grabbed him by his shirt collar and with one shove, pushed him back to the wall on the other side.

The cool air from the air conditioning duct directly over him froze Seth’s shirt to his skin. As soon as his back hit the wall, he forgot about the knotting pain in his stomach. Used to be that such hits and falls did not bother him. He could not even feel them. Now he felt every bump and lump and ache.

Glancing at the large open window, he spotted a few spirits whizzing by and twirling around the shiny disco ball that hung from the ceiling. Those beings always enjoyed the light.

Seth shook his head and raised himself to his feet. He clenched his hands into fists as he glared at Mina. She was besting him and he could not have that. The reason had absolutely nothing to do with pride. Seeing his patrons running around like scared rabbits in a field reminded him of Elaine. Seeing all of this death must have petrified her. He hoped that she had

at least able to get out of his bedroom before all of the quaking occurred.

What if she had not? Seth paced the floor. He had to get out of this place. He had to make sure Elaine was safe. But first ...

“Aww, you’re pacing again,” Mina said. Her face twisted into its feeding position. “You must be cracking. Don’t worry. When I banish you to the Underworld I’ll make sure you’re in a clean room ... forever!”

Seth did not have to touch his face to know it had changed. And he did not need to examine his own self to know that he had changed inside. No longer was he crippled by the need to keep things just so. As chaos reigned around him, he kept his mind focused on one thing ... Mina.

“You must be hurting,” Seth said, stalking Mina.

She furrowed her eyebrows. Although she had been coming toward him, she was now retreating. “It’s your fault, you bastard. I’m turning into a pile of mush.” She smiled showing off her jagged teeth. “No worries. The Master will take care of me and the others when you step down as Prince of Death and I’m appointed.”

“Over my dead body,” Seth growled.

“Speaking of dead bodies, I wonder how Senior Santiago is doing with your little Ayudante.”

Seth stopped in his tracks. The mere mention of Elaine made him feel cold. Santiago had Elaine? Seth did not have to imagine the horrible things he could do to her if he had not already. How could he have left her alone? As strong as she was, she would not be able to defend herself against him.

“So now what?” Mina probed as she held her side. “You going to go running off to be with your mortal?”

“No. I am going to do something I should have done a long time ago.” He pursued Mina until her attention became distracted by something behind him.

“Shit!” she screamed. “I knew you had it in here.”

She pointed to the floor behind him. Initially thinking Mina was setting him up, Seth slowed to view what she was pointing at until she tried to make her way past him. He held his arm out, halting her and in the process getting her blood on his white sleeve. His stomach bubbled. He clamped his mouth shut to keep from vomiting.

When Seth turned, his eyes widened when he saw what Mina had seen. The family amulet. He had kept it hidden under his desk for fear that if anything searched his house, it would surely be lost. Aside from lineage, this amulet could grant the holder power over death. If Mina had it, and with the Master’s help, she would rule.

Seth could not have that. Mina wriggled from his grip and stumbled toward the round, ancient jeweled piece. Seeing her run reminded Seth of his first victims. When he came into his vampirism, they would all try to run. Then he would control them with his mind.

“I am feeling like myself again,” Seth began. “I feel the need to feed.”

Horror graced Mina’s face as she backed from him. “You can’t.”

“There’s no code that says one vampire cannot feed from another. It’s more of an unspoken rule, much like the way mortals do not eat one another.” Seth smirked. “But then you have those few who”

“Get away from me!” Mina darted to the door but Seth had her in his radar. His hunger overwhelmed him like never before. His canines dropped down lower until they rested over his bottom lip. Flying to the door, he grabbed Mina by her hair.

“Just think of it as me putting you out of your misery.” Seth yanked her head back.

“Son of a bitch! You’ll get yours.” Mina flailed her hands as Seth took her down to the floor. He watched her vein pulsate on the side of her neck.

Seth nearly drooled watching it. Since Mina could not read his mind, she did not know he would never feed from her. The fear in her eyes was priceless. Mina screamed so loud that his bulletproof and soundproof glass shattered.

Spirits swirled around in Seth’s office, hovering over him and wailing in a way that was cinematic and cliché but honestly something else the movies had gotten right for a change. Even that did not stop him.

Looking at Mina twirling about as he gripped a handful of her hair, he knew he had one more corpse to return to its resting place. Seth dragged her to the opened window, lifted her in his arms and held her over the steamy, open pit. With the club now empty, he had no fear of disposing of her body. Not that he would anyway. Now that he had beat his fiercest competitor, he felt invincible.

“Good night, Mina,” he said. “See you in Hell.” He dropped her into one of the crevices then held onto the window frame as the ground shook again.

“Now to get the dead back into their graves before midnight.” Seth shoved the amulet into his pocket. After unlocking his door, he bolted through it. He had to get home. He had to protect Elaine. He had

The sharp pain he felt piercing his back came as a shock. His body seemed petrified for a moment as his face froze into an anguished expression.

He had been staked. He did not have to see the protruding piece of wood to know it.

Grabbing the stair rail for support, Seth leaned against it, his head resting on the vibrating but cool wall.

Over his shoulder he felt a presence.

“I told you I would be back, demon.”

“Not a good time, George.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Seth groaned in pain from an excruciating wound so extreme he wanted to have the earth swallow him up too to stop the agony. After dragging his nearly lifeless body into Seth's office, George lorded over him, the stake still embedded in Seth's back as he lay face down on the floor.

"I did it. I didn't think I could but I did it. I vanquished a vampire," George said.

If Seth had taken that drink from Elaine, he would have been strong enough to get up, grab George by his skinny neck and toss him into the earth as he had done to Mina. As it was, he felt the spike of the stake behind his heart. It had not pierced it. That he could tell. It would not take him long to bleed out and die.

"So you have managed to attack and possibly kill a local business owner," Seth began. "Now what, George? What will you do?" He tried to keep his voice in a commanding tone, but he was weak and getting weaker by the minute.

"What? Uh, I don't know. If I found you, I'll find others." George's pacing increased.

"What if I am not what you think? I am a good guy, George." He craned his head up to get a visual on his attacker. Blinking his eyes a couple of times, he finally got George in focus ... and his aura. Purple.

"Death is all around. You can't stop it." George fell into a fit of laughter that bordered on maniacal.

"You are right. So pull this stake out and tell me what is hurting you. What is killing you?"

George stopped. He stepped toward Seth, stopped, then stepped back. Then he repeated the process but this time he grabbed the stake and instead of pulling it out, he twisted it in Seth's back.

"You're trying to trick me! I'm not falling for it. Doctors." He huffed. "What the fuck do they know? They said I had a few months to live. They said the virus has made my brain into mush. What do they know, huh?"

"You are right." Seth felt something wet by his hand. He should not have been surprised. Water flowed from the broken pipes in his office. Only when he looked at his fingers, he saw blood. His blood. Weakness drained his body until he could barely blink let alone speak. He had to appeal to George's sense of decency. He was trying to do the right thing. He was just doing it at the wrong time.

"George," he began, purposely using his name over and over again, "take the stake out and let us talk like men."

"Why should I, demon?" George was not giving Seth the same courtesy with using his name.

"Seth. Call me Seth, please." He braced his hand on the floor and tried pushing up his upper body. "You should pull the stake out for several reasons." The ground trembled again. Seth would have to pick the best reason that would keep him alive. "I can stop your hurting."

It was a last resort. He had not stopped a mortal's suffering in years. George would be the perfect candidate to start. And he did not have much time.

"I know," George said.

"What?"

“You could have stopped my pain a long time ago. Why didn’t you? Why did you let me go through all of that treatment? The pain? You knew!” George reared his foot back and kicked Seth in his side.

Seth sucked in air and held his sore ribs. No way was he going to die by this man’s hands.

“I no longer did that. The whole Angel of Mercy ordeal. No one cared about my suffering so I decided that I should not care if anyone else did. I am a changed man, George. You have to believe me. I know you are in a lot of pain. I can see it. If you want, I can stop it.”

A long pause lingered before George finally grabbed the stake and pulled it from Seth’s back. He dropped it on the floor next to Seth’s face.

Not the greatest sight to behold, a stake covered in his blood. Relief waved over him as soon as it was pulled free. He willed his body to repair itself, but he knew the one thing that would do it.

“I need you to help me,” Seth said as he raised his hand.

George took his hand and pulled him over to the couch. Not being strong enough to lift Seth, he turned him over onto his back. Relief hit him again to be off of his chest and to be able to breathe in a full lungful of air.

Sitting on the couch then sliding down to the floor, George sat behind Seth’s head. “Are you dying?”

Seth swallowed. “Possibly. Are you dying?”

“Definitely.”

Seth heard the man sniffing until he bawled openly. “It is okay. We can get you to a hospital. Everything will be fine.”

From the tingling all over his body, Seth could tell his body was repairing itself, slowly but surely. A nice feed would restore him fully.

“It won’t be fine. You said you would put me out of my suffering. So do it!”

“Would anyone miss you?”

George hesitated before he answered. “You mean besides you?”

Seth chuckled. “Yes, besides me.”

Then George’s voice became low and serious. “No. No brothers. No sisters. No cousins or aunts or uncles. Mom died a year ago. That’s when I came looking for you. I told you I was in pain and you walked right by me. No one listens to me. No one.”

Seth wanted to hear this man’s story, but he did not have much time. Spirits swirled around the ceiling unbeknownst to George who obviously couldn’t see them.

“I am listening to you now, George.”

“Then make me happy. Let me be with my mother. Stop my pain. I’m going to die anyway. Might as well be by my own hands.”

Seth took a deep breath. “Give me your arm.”

George crawled next to Seth so that he faced him. Despair covered his face as he rolled up his sleeve and presented his wrist. Seth kept his gaze directly on George’s as he held the man’s arm and placed his lips over the man’s wrist.

His gentle pulse tapped softly against Seth’s tongue. Seth had half expected that his pulse would be racing. George was calm. This was the right thing for him. Seth would almost miss his bumbling slayer tactics. He took in a deep whiff of his blood. Almost.

When Seth’s canines extended, he pierced George’s thin flesh. The man yelped like a kicked dog, squeezed his eyes shut and braced his other hand on the floor while Seth drank his

blood hungrily. Not as sweet and spicy as Elaine's blood, George's plasma still fulfilled a deep need.

The more crimson elixir Seth swallowed, the stronger he felt. The gaping wound in his back closed. He felt alive again. Swallowing more and more blood, Seth's appetite became renewed. There was no way he could go to a mortal life. Elaine would have to understand.

With horrible gasping and gurgling sounds, George's face and eyes appeared sunken. His mouth hung open. His eyes rolled to the back of his head. Seth would not let him suffer. He continued drinking, hearing his heartbeat stagger until it finally stopped and George fell forward on his face.

Seth released the wrist from his mouth and sprang to his feet. Looking down at George, he could not help but feel remorseful. They had been friends of sorts.

"Sleep well, my friend."

"I will," a voice said from behind Seth.

He turned to see a wispy spirit of George glide by him, through him then out of his office and down to the ground. Seth gazed around his office. In one fell swoop, the other spirits zipped around in a line and plunged down into the ground again like pelicans diving for fresh fish.

Seth's shoulders slumped over and he hung his head down in relief. He had stopped the dead from staying on earth. They were all returning to their slumbers.

The earth closed again, forcing itself together like mismatched puzzle pieces until the floor became one jagged mess as opposed to one jagged *open* mess.

His whole club and office were in disarray. Dust hung in the air. Dirt covered every inch of the club. Seth's shirt was filthy, covered in dirt, blood, and soaked through. He did not care. The only thing he cared about was ... Elaine! He had to get to her. Lord knew what Council Santiago might have done to her.

Making sure the amulet remained in his pocket, he rushed out of his office and down the dust-filled hallway. Now that he had his full strength back, he could see clearly through the dust as he made his way to the door. He burst through to his waiting Bentley. Patrons of the club were sprawled on the ground outside of the club like bombing victims.

Seth made sure his bodyguards called for medical attention before jumping into his car.

"Home. Now!"

Seth held up his hand, prepared to tap his fingers on his thumb like usual. Then he stopped and turned his hand over. He stared at his left ring finger. A smile eased up as he thought about how great it would be to have a ring on it again. He had to reach her in time.

* * * *

"No!" Mr. Santiago screamed.

Elaine had to cover her ears to cut down the deafening sound. She knew something had happened. The steam cleared from the room, and when it did so did the corpses.

The floor moved again under her again. She yelped, scrambling to secure herself on top of Seth's white couch. Seth would have had a fit to see it stained with dust and the occasional decomposing body. This time the floor pushed together, shutting off the portal to the dead.

In the creepy silence, her pulse raced. She was left in the room with this monster. Mr. Santiago seemed flustered as he turned to and fro, searching for something. Maybe he wanted the dead to walk among the mortals. They were gone.

A smile slithered over Elaine's face when she took in the whole situation. The corpses were gone. The Council member said they would only go if Seth fed again. Seth had fed. Elaine had known he could do it.

The smile dropped knowing that he had fed ... just not from her. He'd pounced on some unsuspecting victim. How could he? Then again what had she expected? He was the Prince of Death. His priorities involved only him. Had she actually thought that he had changed? Or that she had changed him?

Elaine picked up the heavy iron poker. She gripped the handle, wringing it as though it were someone's neck. Not someone. Seth's. And she had almost admitted she loved him. She had begged him to feed from her, and he hadn't done it. She had wanted to help him, save him. He wouldn't even allow that.

Before she could approach Mr. Santiago, a figure appeared behind him. Elaine stopped until she saw who it was.

"Charles? What are you doing here?" She couldn't believe her neighbor was standing in the living room so close to this seven-foot monster and not seemed fazed by it. How had he known Elaine was at this house? How had he gotten in? And why was he still in the same clothes?

"This is bigger than you, Elaine," Charles began. "You need to get out now."

She blinked at his statement. "Who are you really? What do you know about this?"

"You can't win. No one ever wins." He gazed at the beast before it swung at him, almost hitting him ... if Charles hadn't vanished. He disappeared.

What the hell was going on?

Now her quiet neighbor who always searched for his cat was, what? A ghost? A guardian angel? Now that she thought about it, he did wear the same clothes every day. He never came into her house even after she'd invited him. She never even knew where he lived. If he truly was her angel, he'd warn her to leave. But she wasn't that scared woman she used to be.

Just because Seth couldn't change and trust women, Elaine wouldn't be stuck in that trap. Death? It picked a bad day to mess with her. Elaine stepped on the couch and launched herself at Mr. Santiago, taking a hearty swing at his head. This time she made contact. The poker hit the monster's head and knocked its hood off.

With its back to her, Elaine strained to see what it really looked like. "Turn around, you son of a bitch." She held up the poker, ready to swing again. "I want to look you in the eyes when I take you down."

What Elaine got was more than she bargained for. It swung itself around. The hood she'd knocked off changed into the fedora he'd worn when he was a human-looking Mr. Santiago. Was this thing actually mortal and could be taken down like one?

Its eyes flared, changing from silver to red to black. Snakes, worms, and scorpions crawled out of the Council member's orifices. Elaine swallowed. After taking another deep breath, she swung again. The pointed end of the weapon knocked off a chunk of its head, scattering worms and snakes on the floor.

A surge of power zipped through Elaine's body. "I'm not afraid of you." She took another swing, hitting its side and causing the monster to groan.

When she swung again, the being grabbed the poker. Elaine stared at the iron weapon. Her jaw dropped when she saw it turn bright orange in its grip. Steam rose from the poker as the orange color moved down toward Elaine's hands. Before it made it to the handle, she felt the scorching heat coming from it and let it go.

The poker disintegrated into dust before her eyes. As she lifted her gaze to the Council's eyes, he grabbed her around her neck.

“Are you afraid to die?” he asked after pulling her close to him.

Elaine gagged at the sulfur stench and at the loss of air from this thing crushing her windpipe. She grabbed its hand and tried pulling it from her neck. No way in the world would this be her end. She had a life to live after this. Seth couldn't have saved the world only to have her die before she could appreciate it. And she wanted to show that she could fight her demons, real and imagined, and win.

“What did I tell you before?” he asked as he pulled her forward. “You can't win.”

He lifted Elaine off of the ground with one hand. She held onto Santiago's wrist and kicked her feet. She remembered seeing this position before. This demon had killed her father like this. Elaine squeezed her eyes shut. She whispered her Spanish prayer that honored the dead.

Before she finished the prayer, she felt an intense pain cave in her chest when the monster punched its fist over her heart, hurling her to the other side of the room. Bits of her life from childhood to meeting Alvin to meeting Seth flooded her mind and the knowledge that she would not see her family or Seth again.

Her body hit the fireplace mantle. The crash against the stone ledge rang through her head as the last sound she caught before everything went black.

* * * *

Seth's knees bounced in the backseat of the Bentley as his driver carefully rolled into the garage. Instead of waiting for the car to come to a complete stop, Seth hopped out, startling his driver.

“But, sir, I thought you wanted me to drive into the garage like this,” his driver said.

“You are fine. Do not worry about it.” Seth opened the door to his house, turned back to the confused driver, and said, “It's okay.” To compress words like that seemed foreign to Seth. He was trying. He could not wait to tell Elaine what all he had accomplished. And it was all because of her, her encouragement, her belief in him.

As soon as he saw the inside of his house, Seth's heart fell to the floor. The mess, although jarring enough, did not concern him as much as finding Elaine. He ran to his room, half expecting to see her cowering under his bed.

On the trip over, Seth had heard the news on radio stations about the earthquake and reported sightings of ghosts and other inexplicable beings. He would have to worry about spinning that story to the news another time. Now that he could control minds, he felt as vital as he did when he was one hundred.

When Seth found the door to his bedroom open, he scanned the room, also a mess. “Elaine. Are you in here?”

Nothing. He dropped to his knees, being sure to place a towel down first, and checked under the bed in case she might have hit her head on the slat. She was not there either. Seth ran back into the main house. He allowed his mind to attempt to pick up her mental activity. Elaine was either blocking him or she was

No. She could not be dead. Panic filled Seth as he raced from her bedroom to the library to the clinic in the house. He ran his hand over his head. All he wanted to do was to feed Elaine a bowlful of ice cream. Yes, he had even gotten over the whole spoon thing. Now he could laugh at it.

When he walked into his living room, he saw nothing humorous with what he found. Just like in his club, the marble floors were crumpled together, tilted and jagged and slanted. Furniture was turned over. His walls had crumbled to the ground. In fact, the only thing that

withstood the rising dead was the mirror over the fireplace.

Seth walked toward it to inspect it closely and halted in his spot when he found Elaine crumpled on the floor. Dirt covered her hair and clothing. Her body was askew with part of it being on the step at the fireplace and her arm and leg on the floor.

Knocking over furniture to get to her, Seth rushed to Elaine and crouched down next to her. "Elaine. Elaine." Seth smoothed her hair from her face. It, too, was covered in soot and dirt and marred a beautiful woman. He could not stop his hands from shaking.

Scanning her body before picking her up, Seth noticed he could not get an aura reading. She had no aura. It was not black from disease or even purple from pain. Her light had been extinguished.

"No. No!" Seth turned her over and lifted her into his arms. She fell limp, her leg swinging by momentum and her arm dangling off to the side. Her head fell back. When it did, Seth noticed an indelible hand print on her neck. She had been choked, beaten, brutalized. And just like with Charlotte, he had not been there to protect her.

His stomach compressed into a ball. Sucking in his lower lip, Seth chewed it to ease some of his anxiety. When he struck blood, he released his lip and cursed. As though she could hear him, he quickly apologized to Elaine for his crude language.

Seth sat on the couch, cradling her limp body. "Please, darling, do not leave me." Not trusting his own hypersensitive abilities, he put his hand on her chest hoping to feel a heartbeat. He felt nothing. No rise and fall of her chest. No pounding. No breath.

Seth screamed at the top of his lungs until the house shook again. His insides burned like they had been sun-baked.

How could this have happened? Mina was at the club. She could not have had time to hurt Elaine and make it to the club. Glancing around the room, Seth's eyes settled on a brown fedora. The Council. He had more than half hoped Mina had lied to him about Mr. Santiago.

"Damn you!"

Seth rocked Elaine. He stroked her soft skin. He was tired of revenge. He was tired of seeking justice. All he wanted was Elaine back in his life.

"I have never had anyone in my life as wonderful and beautiful and annoying as you," Seth said to her still body. "I would move heaven and earth to make you whole. I would give anything to have you back with me."

Seth buried his face against the side of Elaine's face, inhaling her flowery scent that was tainted by soot and dirt. Her aroma still remained. When the thought of never touching her again or having her to walk around barefooted in his house crossed his mind, Seth hugged her body tighter.

He lifted his head and gazed down at Elaine. "I have failed you, my love." He stroked his hand down her face to her neck. Fishing her locket from around her neck, Seth clutched the jewelry in his hand. "I have failed you too, Alex. I should have been with Elaine, especially on this day."

The thought to cut himself and make Elaine drink his blood to transform her into a vampire crossed his mind. It would work. He could do it. But it was not what Elaine had wanted. She had told him that before.

Staring into her face, her soft, wonderful face, Seth did something very mortal. He cried. Frigid tears rolled down his cheeks. Twice in his lifetime he had lost great loves.

"I love you, Elaine Shrink." Seth would have thought the declaration would have stopped him short. He had not been in love in years. He should have figured that the crushing

sensation in his stomach and the cloudy feeling in his head stemmed from something.

“I would do anything for you.” Seth gazed at the mirror above the fireplace, the mirror that had been passed down through generations of Overkills. He surveyed the room to see if the Master lurked in the shadows. Seth knew it could hear him. It was probably relishing Seth’s human reaction at this loss.

“A compromise,” Seth said to the empty room. “Give me back Elaine. Roll back time for her as you did for Olivia.” He looked into her face. “No children. Ever. The Overkills stop with me.”

The offer surprised Seth when it came out of his mouth. He would much rather have Elaine than to be with another woman who could bear his child. As much as he wanted a child with Elaine, he wanted her more.

Seth sealed his deal with a kiss on Elaine’s cold lips. He was not used to that. He did not expect her lips to be as frosty as his. Usually her kisses warmed him, his heart and his lips.

He placed his hand over her chest. He kissed her again as his other hand cradled the back of her head. A wispy breeze blew across Seth’s shoulders and the back of his neck, enough so that goose bumps formed on his arms. The reaction made Seth blink.

He gasped when he felt a thump. When he pulled back from Elaine to examine the feeling, she gasped like she had been underwater for several minutes. She followed it with coughing.

Seth smiled so hard he knew his fangs had to have been showing. He did not care. He enveloped Elaine in his arms and squeezed her, not wanting to let her go.

“Seth,” she mumbled against his chest.

He still did not want to let her go. Not just yet. Although he had made a deal with the devil, he did not care. Not at the moment when he had been given a second chance with Elaine.

“Seth,” she said again.

“Elaine, I do not know what I would have done without you in my life. I waited for so long to find someone as special as Charlotte and you came. I do not want to let you go.”

“Air. I need air,” she gasped.

He pulled back from his hug and allowed her to take in deep breaths of air. Color filled her once pale cheeks. Her aura glowed a faint blue color.

“You are filthy,” Seth said with a smile. “You look wonderful.” This time he would waste no time in telling her how he felt. “Elaine, I lo ...”

Elaine cut him off, drowsily. “I--I don’t feel so hot. I need a hospital. Something.” She fainted before saying anything else. This time Seth would not let her down. Now that he could control minds, she could have anything she wanted. And once she was all better and the house fixed, she would marry him and move into the house. He had it all planned.

* * * *

Snakes slid over Elaine’s legs. She felt the cold scaly skin scraping against her flesh as she remained still, feeling powerless to do anything. When the worms crawled from her hair, Elaine shrieked.

She bolted upright in bed and wiped her arms down, thinking the creatures were really on her. She ran her fingers through her hair to shake out any unwanted crawly things. She sighed when she realized, again, she had been dreaming. She relaxed her shoulders and fell back onto the pillows.

Since Reckoning Day and her encounter with Mr. Santiago, her nightmares had become vivid and horrifying. Always with snakes and corpses and fire, and ended with her dying. The

death part always seemed real though.

She remembered the darkness. Black all around her. Then a light. A bright light that had called her toward it. When she'd reached it, she'd seen a man that looked like her father, like the picture she carried in her locket. Elaine touched it now through her hospital gown.

Her father had said, "It is not your time, Lainey. You have more work to do."

Then she had been pulled back harshly like she had gone skydiving and had opened her parachute. She hadn't been able to breathe. That act had been made even more difficult when Seth, seemingly had tried to smother her in a bear hug, crushed her against his chest. She'd wanted to know what had happened but felt too weak to talk.

Looking around the room, she gathered that she had been hurt somehow to end up in the hospital. Roses sat on every available space in the darkened room. Pictures of her family were displayed prominently on the nightstand beside her. If it hadn't been for the white tiled floor and the wide, rolling bed-accessible door, Elaine would have thought she was home, or at least in another wing of Seth's house.

She sat up then rubbed her head. What had happened to her? Was the world okay? Scanning the room as she ran her hands over the bed, she searched for the TV remote. She had to catch up on current events.

Screaming from the hallway stopped her search momentarily. She strained to hear the conversation through her closed door. As the person got closer, Elaine held the sheets under her neck.

"Like I said, clean sheets every hour. Clean the floor every two hours. And no one bathes her but me," Seth said from the other side of the door.

Elaine blinked at his orders, especially the last one. Seth wanted to bathe her? It wasn't like he hadn't done it before.

When her door opened, Elaine crossed her arms over her chest and stuck out her chin. She didn't want Seth to be the only one barking orders around here.

As soon as she caught sight of him, her heart pounded in a way that made her forget that she was lying in a hospital bed with tubes coming out of her arm. She had almost forgotten how striking Seth Overkill was. And although she hated to admit it, he looked much better since he had fed than before. His honey-colored skin glowed like the sun. Even his teeth seemed whiter than before. He appeared rested and virile. And God help her, she wanted him right here, right now.

"I will lock the door," Seth said and winked.

Elaine had almost forgotten that he could read her mind. Her face flushed in a warm, tingling heat as she strained to keep from smiling.

"Behave yourself," Elaine said. "I'm not as strong as I used to be."

Seth stood by her bed. "I would not want to further injure your foot." He stroked her leg over the sheet down to her ankle but she didn't feel his touch. Whatever pumped into her veins numbed her from knowing she had an injury. Flipping off the sheet from her leg, she peered at the thick bandage around her ankle. Not very sexy.

In his standard crisp, white shirt and black slacks, Seth still looked delicious. Too good. Since when did a pretty face buckle Elaine's resolve?

"You went toe-to-toe with one of the elders in the Council. I do not know many beings, mortal or not, who can say that." He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "You, my dear, are very strong."

Elaine's head swooned from his musky scent. She closed her eyes, inhaled deeply and

fought the urge to wrap her arm around him and drag him into bed with her. One thing she hadn't forgotten was the fact that Seth had fed from someone else.

When Seth brought his lips down to hers, Elaine turned her head away. She had some issues to get off her chest before Seth went any further. As far as she was concerned, she had already gone too far with him without getting him to say how he felt about her. She hadn't admitted her feelings either.

"Something wrong?" he asked. "I assure you. I have brushed and flossed my teeth."

Seth smiled. Seeing his pointed teeth reminded Elaine exactly why she needed to stay away from him.

"What happened?" Elaine asked. "That day."

Seth started to tap his fingertips to his thumb but instead tucked his hand under his arm to hold it down, like it had a mind of its own. "I am improving."

"That's good ... for you." Elaine moved away from Seth then covered her leg.

Seth sat on the bed next to her, very, very close to her. Why was he making this so difficult? Couldn't he understand that a clean break was what they needed? She'd done her job. Poorly, but it was done.

"When I got to the club," Seth began, "Mina was there waiting for me." He turned his gaze away from Elaine. "We fought. I threw her into the earth, to Hell. Hopefully we will not see her again."

"And you fed."

Seth nodded.

"I was here for you." Elaine's voice broke. She jabbed her fist into her thigh to focus her pain elsewhere.

"You know I could not."

"You mean wouldn't. Would not." She purposely broke down the contraction to show Seth how he hadn't changed. "You tell me I'm supposed to be your saver, your Ayudante. I felt more like I did nothing for you."

Elaine kept her face turned away from Seth until he walked around to the other side of the bed to capture her attention again. His midnight eyes drew her in until she weakened.

"You did exactly what you were made to do. You made me understand my true calling. So I fed from George."

Elaine whipped her head around to capture his gaze.

"He was sick. I had known since the first day I met him but could never find the strength to relieve his suffering. You made me realize what is important in life."

She smoothed her hands over her bed sheets, preparing herself for the inevitable: a declaration of love. She wasn't sure how it was supposed to happen, but she knew for damn sure it should happen.

She and Seth had gone through something traumatic. A portion of it she couldn't remember. In the hazy fog of coming to after her encounter with the dark side, Elaine thought she recalled Seth expressing something heartfelt. Elaine had never been one to make that giant first step. She might have been progressive in most areas of her life but in the area of love, she was like a bad party guest. She arrived early, ate too much and stayed long after all the guests had gone. It wasn't fun to put herself out on a limb. For a vampire, he had to be courageous enough to be that bold. Right?

"I have been doing some thinking," Seth began. He smiled again. The gleam of his teeth brightened the room.

Elaine's heart started to pound so she took deep, cleansing breaths to calm herself. She wanted to hear every word Seth said.

"And?" she probed.

Seth clasped his hands together and said, "I have decided that you would make an appropriate partner for me."

Elaine blinked.

"You will marry me. The ceremony will take place at my home in New York. It should be fine for me to return there without fear of my never-changing age being a problem." He started to pace and Elaine began to fume. "You will live with me there. I have scouted office space for your practice."

Elaine wrung a handful of sheets but stopped when Seth mentioned her podiatry practice. He had better make this good because so far he had two strikes against him. She certainly did not want to move from Virginia, at least not without her permission. And if that was his idea of a proposal, he needed to watch some more contemporary TV. It was more like a business arrangement.

Seth continued. "After an exhaustive search, I found no suitable location for your office. So you will stay with me. Shop all you like. Take up pottery. It is a big Broadway show town." Seth kept his head down and acted as though he were talking to himself as opposed to Elaine, the woman whose life he had just plotted.

"And you will have to become a vampire. That process should be fairly simple."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Elaine held up her other hand. Suddenly her ankle and foot throbbed but not as much as her head. "Can I keep my name or have you chosen a new one for me, too?"

Seth cocked his head and furrowed his eyebrows, looking strangely like her mother's cocker spaniel whenever it was admonished. "You will be Elaine Overkill." His eyelids lowered when Elaine's eyes widened. "I am sorry. I meant to say *Doctor* Elaine Overkill."

Oh yeah. That was much better.

"Or would you rather have it hyphenated?" he asked. "Personally, I do not care for women who do that. It seems like they love their old lifestyle too much to make that transition to something new. I find it disrespectful, really. She should be proud to have her husband's surname. You would never do that."

Elaine would also never spit on the floor. Uncharacteristically, she did just that, narrowly missing Seth's shiny, spotless Italian shoes. It had been the second time in two weeks that Elaine had spat on the floor but now she truly understood the saying, being angry enough to spit.

What she wanted was distance. Seth granted her that and more when he took a giant leap back. He looked at the floor then peered up to Elaine. The heart monitor beeped faster, audibly documenting her heightened anger. How dare he try to plan her life like that! He wasn't asking for her hand. He wanted her life and servitude.

"You are really going to have to seek help for that habit," Seth said then carefully stepped around the spot.

"What the hell was that?" Elaine asked.

"What?" Seth looked around the room as though Elaine was talking about an object. She kept her attention squarely on Seth, the obsessive-compulsive devil with an overactive day-planner.

"Was that supposed to be a proposal?" Elaine positioned the back of the bed higher. At that time, her door opened and a housekeeper walked in with a mop and rolling bucket in tow.

Seth must have summoned the woman telepathically.

"I came to clean the floor," the woman with a slight Jamaican accent said as she split her attention between the two of them. "You want me to start?"

When Elaine said, "No," Seth answered, "Yes."

"You spit on the floor," Seth said with a grimace.

"And you're crushing my life. We need to talk." Elaine glanced at the dark-skinned woman before turning back to Seth. "This is private."

Seth smirked and waved his hand at the woman. "Since I have started feeding, I have my powers back. She will not remember a thing."

"Lucky for her," Elaine said. "I won't be able to forget this." She lowered her head. Her heartbeat slowed. Grinding her teeth, she tried to keep from crying.

Seth gazed at the housekeeper, nodded and watched her exit the room with her cleaning supplies. "I have done something wrong."

Elaine snickered. "You just shattered another myth. I thought you vampires were all romantic. I guess I'm wrong ... again." She sniffed and yanked two tissues from its flowered box that set on the nightstand next to her bed. "For the second time in a row, you ruined another marriage proposal. What you proposed was a business deal, not a marriage. Not a life together."

"Most women would kill to be in your fortunate position." Seth jutted out his angled chin, making him look more powerful and regal than normal.

Right now Elaine viewed him as the pigheaded jerk he had just become. How could a man who baked pies out of sentimentality, danced like a dream, and looked like a stud have been so clueless?

"I'm not a pet." Elaine folded her arms over her chest. "I didn't wait for ten years to open myself up to a man only to be treated like an object. I have a mind. I have a career. I have a voice."

"Yes, and everyone on this floor can hear you," Seth said. Elaine peered down at his hand and noticed he had started his finger tapping ritual. She shook her head. He'd gone to a safe place because she made him feel uncomfortable. The pain that seared her heart hurt more than her battered and bruised body.

"I'm glad you are still the Prince of Death," Elaine began. "I'm happy that you're able to feed again because you look ...," she paused, not wanting to say the wrong thing, which would be how incredible sexy he was ... as long as he didn't open his mouth, "...healthy, relatively speaking."

"Then what is the problem?" Seth asked. He paced, or more like marched, at the foot of her bed. "You had financial problems. I took care of them for you."

"I didn't ask you to," Elaine countered.

"But is that not romantic?"

"No. It's being controlling. And the one thing I don't want is a man who thinks he can own me and have the right to tell me what to do with my life." Elaine swallowed. She found it difficult to get anything down her increasingly tight throat. "Take every dime you gave me back. I'll make my office payment somehow. If I don't, you have every right to shut me down."

"What are you saying, Lainey?"

To hear her nickname from him now twisted her heart. Elaine controlled her tears by looking up at the overhead lighting.

"I'm saying that our arrangement is over. You've accomplished what you needed to and we all made it in one piece." She looked at her foot. "Sort of."

“So this is the thanks I get for bringing you back to life when Mr. Santiago killed you?” Seth huffed and shook his head. “Mortals.”

Elaine gasped. Her breath escaped her body for a moment before she asked, “What do you mean? I ... I died?”

Seth’s face went blank. “You did not know?” He moved closer to her, but Elaine wasn’t feeling that chummy.

Her head felt light. If she didn’t get her breathing under control she was going to pass out. Opening her mouth, she gasped in some air.

“Calm down,” Seth said, patting her back.

She shrugged off his hand. “Calm down? Are you kidding me? You’re telling me I died.”

Seth must have noticed her angry, scared, pissed off expression. He reached for her hand, but Elaine moved away from him. The one thing that scared her, Elaine had experienced. She’d died. Her life had stopped for a period of time.

No wonder a lot of that night was a blank. And Seth stood there talking about it like Elaine had just burned their dinner or something. Now it was time for her to take control of her life. If Seth didn’t want to share her life, then she needed to go on without him. This was one party where she wouldn’t be staying over to help clean.

“I don’t believe this.” Elaine put her hand to her chest. “I was killed and that was your way of telling me.” She shook her head. “And this is what I mean, Seth. You laugh at me being mortal but you know what? So what? It makes me compassionate and loving. And I deserve to be with someone who wants what I want.”

“What is that? I am unable to read your mind. You are blocking me out.”

Elaine wiped her cheek before a tear had gotten too far. “If I truly meant something to you, you wouldn’t have to read my mind. Since it’s so difficult for you, I’ll make it easy.”

Elaine opened her thoughts.

Goodbye, Seth Overkill.

Seth’s eyelids lowered. Without a word, he stared at Elaine as though he were capturing her image in his head before he walked out of the room and out of her life.

Covering her eyes as soon as she heard the door shut, Elaine sobbed. She had just let the man she loved walk out of the door and it hurt like hell.

“Okay to clean now?” the housekeeper asked as she poked her head in the door.

Elaine didn’t even hear the door open. She gave the woman one nod then turned away her face.

Vampires are soulless creatures with no capacity to love.

Now Elaine understood what her father meant.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Mortals. Tapping his fingertips on his dining room table, Seth mulled over Elaine's words. He had not expected her reaction to feel like a sword through his heart. Months later, he had not managed to halt that feeling.

"The drugs made her say such things," he said to himself. He would have been convinced of his theory if the woman had not appeared so lucid ... and so hurt. And he could not deny that Elaine had been right.

You would make an appropriate partner for me. What kind of proposal was that? He sat up straighter. His words were honest. Elaine had to have appreciated that. He remembered the pain that graced her face and thought again. What did she want from him? He had given her money, security, her life.

Seth's butler strolled to him. He set down Seth's evening espresso. "Your drink, sir."

Seth kept his attention on the midnight-colored liquid swirling in the tiny cup. The bitter aroma stung Seth's nose but he took in a deep breath anyway, awakening his senses. Maybe a shock to his system was exactly what he needed.

At the table in this strange, new house, Seth's stomach flipped. He grimaced at the eggshell colored walls. Walls should be white. Pure white. And furniture for the living room should all be black. Not in a vomit-like pattern of tan and gold and green and mauve. Except for the bathroom and the kitchen, tan carpet covered every floor. If he needed to calm himself by pacing and listening to his steps, he had to go to the kitchen or the bathroom or to the garage. Seeing the huge oil stain on the garage floor drove him back into the house every time.

Seth could not wait until his home's repairs were done. He hated living here. It did not have his personal touches. No darkened basement to secure himself during the day. He had to hang blankets over the windows. Most importantly, this new rental home did not have Elaine. How was she expected to find him? Then again, was she even looking for him?

Seth had fought against the urge to go after her. With his powers he could have watched her like he had done when she was younger, lurking in shadows to make sure no harm had come to her. He had respected her wishes to be left alone. That did not mean he could not leave the occasional rose here and there.

Seth's gaze swept over the room. As hard as he had tried, he could not make this house look exactly like his home. Not baking pies prevented the house from having that sweet cinnamon-and-brown sugar scent he had grown to love. Even cleaning did not give him the same pleasure it once had.

He should be sharing his home with Elaine. She could bring that familiarity he had grown to love. Seth snickered. If he really thought about it, he concluded that Elaine would have been happier to have a slice of apple pie while sitting in the middle of his bed without any shoes on. The image, which would have sent him on a finger counting frenzy before, now made him smile.

God, he missed that woman, that stubborn, insufferable, beautiful, smart, brave woman. He slumped down in his chair. At least now he was not weak from lack of blood. Thanks to his renewed strength, he had convinced the hospital to deliver several pints of blood to his home every week without question. Mind control was a good thing. To keep up his strength, he

hunted occasionally, only feeding from those who had sought him.

If only he could control Elaine's mind. He could make her fall in love with him.

* * * *

"Dr. Shrink, are you okay?" Mrs. Ketterman asked.

The worry in the woman's voice made Elaine blink. She relaxed against the couch. "I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

The elderly woman shrugged. "You just seem different now."

Since that night in the hospital, Elaine hadn't been able to think about much else besides Seth. The rose she'd found on her desk when she'd arrived at work that morning had thrown her off, too. Unless the cleaning crew had gotten really friendly, Seth Overkill, Prince of Death, could not be far from her. The thought should have made her queasy. Instead she'd chewed her bottom lip in anticipation.

"Different how?" Elaine interlaced her fingers and rested her hands on her knee.

"It sounds weird but you're looking me in the eyes now. To be honest, Dr. Shrink, you hadn't done that before."

Elaine smiled. "I'm sorry if you felt I was a little aloof and standoffish. I was going through a difficult period myself."

The woman patted Elaine on her hand. "To be accused of murder. How awful for your reputation. I'm just glad your name was cleared in that whole mess." She smiled and gave Elaine a knowing wink. "I never thought you did it. I told Claude that when he told me not to keep you as my ... oh, never mind."

Elaine wasn't shocked to hear that people were still apprehensive about seeing her. She had to thank Seth for clearing her name. He'd used his mind control on the police to convince them that the murder had been done by a club kid named Mina who'd died in the mysterious but lethal earthquake Halloween night.

After Mrs. Ketterman's session, Elaine strolled into her office. Light cascaded through the blinds, creating a lined pattern on the floor and her desk. Slumping down in her chair, Elaine rocked back and forth. Her gaze settled on the rose she'd left on her desk. She picked up the flower. Stroking the velvety bulb, she inhaled the sweet scent. It reminded her of the rose bushes outside of Seth's home. The thought made her smile.

If any other man had continued sending her flowers after a breakup, Elaine would have thought the gesture creepy. With Seth, she felt safe. Certainly, if he wanted, he could have invaded her life on a regular basis without being stopped. He had respected her wishes to be left alone.

Without Mina and now her, Seth had to have been crawling out of his skin with nervous anticipation. Seemed like Mina had done everything for him. Now that she had been, well, eliminated, what was he doing? How was he handling his life? Did he still need her ... and not as an Ayudante?

Elaine jumped when she heard her main office door slam shut.

She screeched when a large figure in a coat and hat strolled through. If the hat had been a fedora, Elaine would have thought it was the elder. As it was, she wasn't exactly sure it wasn't the creepy yet powerful being. She scurried to the furthest corner of her office as the person closed the door behind him.

"Who are you?" Elaine asked. "I'm not seeing any patients."

In a long dark coat, hood over a riding cap on his head, and a scarf around his face, he appeared more sinister than if Elaine had seen his face. Black leather gloves covered his large

hands.

It wasn't until he closed the blinds that Elaine ran to the door with a symphony of her pounding heartbeat in her head. The Master had tracked her down again and come to finish what his Council had started. A steel-like arm clamped around her waist, pulling her back before Elaine could touch the doorknob.

"Get off of me!" Elaine pushed on his arm. She grabbed the coat rack next to the door. Turning in his grip to face him, she pushed the tip of the rack against the man's chest. The long pole proved too awkward to wield as a weapon. Where was a good sword when she needed one?

With one precise stomp, Elaine crushed the man's foot. He groaned but did not let her go.

The man leaned over and whispered, "It is me."

Elaine immediately recognized the voice.

Seth's.

She pushed off the hood, the hat, and unwrapped the scarf from his face. As soon as her gaze met with Seth's heavenly brown eyes, tears streamed down her face.

Dropping the coat rack to the floor, she wrapped her arms around his neck and held onto him so tightly that she lifted herself from the floor, her feet dangling as he held her. Seth's familiar scent swarmed around her, that strong musky smell that she could recall even in her dreams. Something was missing.

Leaning her head back so that she could look him in his eyes, Elaine said, "No pies?"

Seth smiled. "I told you I had changed."

"I liked the pies."

He set her on the floor. Seth had to tug on her arms to get her to release him so that he could remove his coat and other heavy garments. Now his outfit made sense. In the noonday sun, Seth had to protect his skin. Her heart pounded thinking of how huge a sacrifice Seth had made to come see her. This was exactly what she wanted a romantic man to do for her.

"What are you doing here?" Elaine asked.

Seth held up his hand. "I have so much to tell you." He backed away from her. "Siward."

Elaine furrowed her eyebrows and stared at Seth who had said the strange word.

"What?" Elaine asked.

"Siward. My butler's name is Siward. I talked to him last night and he told me."

Still confused about where this conversation was going, Elaine crossed her arms and allowed Seth to continue.

"My maid is named Julia. She has three children, all grown and living in different parts of the country. She showed me pictures."

"Okay."

"I allowed her time off to be with her family. She should be gone for about a year. And Siward has never been in love. He has devoted his whole life to me. So I have demanded that he take a trip, as well. He should be gone for a year also."

Seeing Seth beaming, Elaine finally put the pieces together. Seth had finally taken her advice about getting to know his staff. He had changed. To see it first hand, to see the smile that covered his face, made Elaine's heart drum harder. She smiled with him.

"For the first time, I will be alone in my own home. No servants to wait on me hand and foot." Seth peered down at the toppled coat rack. "I feel more independent than I have ever felt in my entire life. And it is all thanks to you." He cautiously stepped over the rack and made his

way to Elaine. Placing his hands on the sides of her face, he said, "I have changed. I am trying."

Elaine's throat pinched as she stared into his eyes. "You want to pick up the coat rack, don't you?"

"Very badly," Seth admitted.

She laughed and surprisingly he laughed with her. A stray tear rolled down her cheek. As though it was the elixir of life, Seth kissed her cheek, stopping her tear's trek and starting her emotional roller coaster.

Elaine melted under Seth's touch. A moan crawled from her mouth as he moved his lips down her face to her neck. She wrapped her arms around him, her hands kneading his flesh until she wanted nothing more than to have him take her in her office, right on the black leather sofa.

"If that is what you want, I will do it," Seth growled in her ear.

Elaine, for that brief moment, forgot to block her thoughts from Seth. She'd been good for the couple of months they had been separated. As soon as she saw him again, she wanted him, all of him.

"I want you so much, Seth," Elaine said as he lifted her in his arms and carried her to the couch.

"I have missed you more than I ever thought I could miss a person." Placing her on the couch, her head on the arm and her legs stretched out to the other arm, Seth sat next to her, stroking her hair. "You have made me a better person, a stronger man." He glanced behind him then turned his attention back to her. "In some respects. Excuse me."

Leaping from the couch, Seth went to the coat rack and set it up next to the door again. He positioned it and re-positioned it until he seemed convinced it was in its proper position.

"Guess you can't teach an old dog new tricks," Elaine said. Her heart slowed just a bit seeing Seth revert to some of his old ways.

"You will just have to love him," he said and returned to his position next to her. "I love you, Elaine Shrink. I love that you walk around barefooted. I love that you are a psychiatrist."

She held his hand. It felt good to have his large hand in hers again. It felt as though they had never been apart.

"I love you. You are beautiful even when you are at your worst. And you are strong even when you feel you are at your weakest."

She squeezed his hand. "I love you too, Seth." Admitting it out loud to him felt so wonderful and right. The butterflies that had taken up residence in her stomach felt like their fluttery wings were dancing over her skin.

Seth leaned over and kissed her. His lips brushed against hers until he pressed them against her mouth. The familiar sensation of his cool lips warming against hers made her toes curl. No doubt about it. She missed Seth Overkill.

"I will take care of you," Seth said as he positioned his body on top of Elaine's.

"I will take care of *you*," Elaine countered in between kisses. She felt his erection growing and pressing against her leg.

"You will never have to want for anything in your life." Seth unbuttoned her coat and snaked his hand under her shirt.

"All I want is you." Her skin prickled in anticipation of his touch against her breast.

"You will be a beautiful princess," Seth said as he kissed his way down her body.

Why did she have to pick today to wear slacks? She wanted to be out of her clothes now.

"I'll teach you to talk with contractions."

Seth laughed. "I will make sure to get you so sexually high that you will not feel me

feeding from you. I promise to make the conversion quick.”

Elaine’s blood ran ice cold through her body. She jackknifed upright, slamming her head against Seth’s in the motion.

“What are you talking about? I can’t become a vampire,” she said, rubbing her forehead. It throbbed from the sudden impact with Seth’s hard skull. He seemed unfazed by the blow, but looked more perplexed by her reaction.

“I thought you loved me,” Seth said.

“I do.” Elaine slid from under him and sat on the couch far from Seth. “I just don’t know if I’m ready to give up my mortality.”

Seth smoothed his hand over his head. “I cannot become mortal. Going through Reckoning Day, I realize I have an important responsibility to the deceased. I feel an obligation to protect them.”

“And I have a business that works during daylight hours. I can’t just change my hours to sunset to sunrise. And I don’t think my family would understand.”

Elaine couldn’t understand why she couldn’t just admit the truth to Seth. She had come to terms with death but still had issues with trusting a man in a relationship. Would Seth be faithful to her? Alvin hadn’t been.

Seth held Elaine’s hand. When she gazed into his eyes, she felt her chest tightening when she caught his sadness.

“What would it take to change your mind?” he asked.

Elaine opened her mouth to answer when her office door opened, allowing a stream of light to cut through the darkened office.

“Is there a Dr. Shrink in here?” a female voice asked.

“Close that door!” Elaine leapt from the couch when she saw Seth covering his face with his hands. She scrambled to the door, pushing the woman back and closing the door behind her.

“I’m sorry,” the woman said. “I was sent over by Interim Staffing to fill in as your receptionist. I didn’t realize you were sleeping.”

Elaine smoothed her hair back from her face. What God-awful timing to get exactly what she wanted at exactly the wrong moment.

“I wasn’t sleeping,” Elaine said to the young woman who wore an oversized business suit. “My head hurt. I needed to sit in darkness for a while.”

The woman nodded. “I understand.” She extended her hand and introduced herself. Elaine shook her hand but her thoughts remained on whether Seth was okay. Had any part of the sunlight gotten on his skin? Was he hurting? Except for a slight nauseous feeling, Elaine didn’t feel the pain she normally felt whenever Seth had felt it.

“If you give me a couple of minutes, I’ll be right with you to show you around the office.”

Before the young woman could respond, Elaine ducked back into the office. “Seth?” she whispered in the darkness. No response. She called his name again. This time she made it to the couch and felt around for him. He wasn’t there. Elaine went to her desk and turned on the small desk lamp to give the room some illumination.

Her stomach dropped as soon as she saw a pair of red stilettos on her desk with a note. Elaine sat down and opened the folded piece of paper. It read-- *We will dance soon. Love eternally, Seth.*

She gazed up and noticed the door that went into her examination room was now open. Seth must have slipped out that way in all of the confusion.

Damn.

* * * *

Not interested in going home right after work, Elaine had done some grocery shopping. She'd noticed how blank the cashiers' faces were as she pushed her cart around the vacant store. Maybe they had been tired of working. Or maybe they were all vampires.

Elaine couldn't drop the vampire thing from her thinking. She loved Seth so much. Could she give up her mortality to be with him forever?

Walking up to her door, Elaine gazed down on the front step, looking for her nightly rose. Her heart beat slower when she didn't find the flower. Maybe Seth had given up on her. He had given her so many chances. Each time her fears took over her senses. The decisions she'd made seemed like the right, scientific thing to do, but her heart suffered the consequences.

Stepping into her house, Elaine felt a breeze brushing the backs of her bare legs and across her neck. She turned and glanced around making sure Seth had not been outside waiting.

After taking a deep breath Elaine said, "Seth, if you're here, I invite you into my home." She scanned around. The wind kicked up again, blowing up her t-shirt and tousling her ponytail then the air stilled. "I want you to come into my house," she repeated.

She closed her door and locked it when she didn't get any type of response. Thank goodness her neighbors hadn't seen her talking to no one. They would have called the police on her for sure.

Elaine set her canned goods and other items on her kitchen countertop. The robotic motion allowed her mind to drift again. In her true scientist self, she decided it was time to weigh the pros and the cons of her dilemma.

Pro: She would look exactly the same for as long as she lived. Not a bad thing. She would be the hit of her class reunion at the twenty, thirty and even forty-year mark. She wouldn't be able to see her friends and some family members after a certain year when her unchanging appearance would strike up questions. That would be a big con for her list.

Pro: She would be with Seth forever. What if the person or people who'd killed Charlotte went after her? Being a vampire didn't guarantee immortality. Just like with life, as long as she ate right and lived right she could expect to live a fairly long life. Elaine just wasn't sure how many Minas there were out there who wanted to knock Seth off of his pedestal. Another con.

Pro: She would get to be with a man who made her laugh and think and care more than any of her past relationships. Seth wanted nothing but the best for her.

Elaine set her canned goods in her cabinet. It wasn't until her last can that she even noticed that she had been making sure to face them all in the same direction. Some of Seth had been rubbing off on her. She turned the cans in different directions.

"I'll allow you into my life, Seth. You won't change who I am," she said to herself.

The phone rang, startling her enough that she dropped one can on the floor. Cursing under her breath, she ran into the living room to retrieve the cordless phone receiver she'd left on the couch from that morning.

"Hello."

No response. Elaine held the phone away from her ear to make sure her battery hadn't died. She repeated herself and still didn't get a response.

She carried the receiver back to the kitchen and replaced it on its cradle. Her bracelet clinked against the phone base and Seth immediately flooded her thoughts.

What was she so afraid of? She'd confronted death. She'd been surrounded by it the

night of Reckoning Day. Hell, she'd even died for a short time and had been saved by Seth. He still hadn't admitted how he'd done that. She would have thought the easiest solution would have been to turn her into a vampire. He hadn't. He wanted her decision to be her own, not forced or coerced.

So what was she so afraid of? Losing her identity? She'd lost that when she delved herself into work instead of living life right after Alvin's disappearing act. Perhaps her life would be better than what her parents had gone through. Dead or alive, he wanted her. And she wanted him. Seth wasn't exactly alive and not necessarily dead either.

And there was nothing wrong with him either. Storming to her cabinet, Elaine opened the door. She wanted to straighten out the cans for Seth. Her hand froze in the air as she reached for the first can when she saw they had all been turned the right way and put in alphabetical order.

She pivoted around her kitchen, scanning it to find Seth. When she turned her head she caught his scent in the air. Her heart pumped as fast as her feet carried her to the living room.

"Seth?" she called.

He wasn't there. There was something there that hadn't been in her possession for over a month, her father's journal. She'd left it at Seth's house and assumed it got destroyed when the house was damaged.

She ran down her darkened hallway and ducked into her bedroom. She flicked her light switch. Instead of screaming with horror when she saw Seth reclining on her bed, she smiled and jumped on top of him.

Elaine kissed him all over his face, not allowing the man to speak let alone object. "I'm ready." She kissed him. "I'm ready."

Seth curved her body over onto the bed and positioned himself on top, probably to temporarily stop her barrage of kisses.

"What are you saying?" he asked with a low voice. "You want to become ..."

She cut him off. "A vampire. Like you." She stroked his face down to his strong chin.

"Are you sure?"

Elaine nodded. "I'm sure I don't want to be without you. I realized that my reasons for not wanting to become a vampire had to do with my real fear of changing. When Alvin left me and seeing the reason why, I didn't think I could love anyone again or that anyone could love me. I've changed. I feel so good about myself I want to shout it from the rooftops. Here I am telling you that you need to learn to compromise and I wasn't willing to do that myself. I love you, Seth. I'm willing to spend an eternity with you."

Seth beamed and he kissed her, sliding his tongue into her mouth. When he pulled back, he held his thick index finger over her face. An antique ring was lodged on the top portion of his finger.

"Marry me," he said. "No, wait." He slid from under her and off the bed. "I have failed you twice before. I must do this properly." Kneeling on one knee and holding her hand, Seth stared into her eyes.

"The answer will be yes," she said before he could get a word out.

"Let me ask." After taking a deep breath, he said, "In my three hundred years, I had never imagined I could be so fortunate to have found true love twice. A higher power has looked down upon me and graced me with a perfect woman, strong in character, true to her word, beautiful in every definition. I no longer have the need to see the sun as you are the brightest spot in my life."

Holding back tears, Elaine cut him off by saying, "Yes."

He kissed the back of her hand. "I have not asked you yet. Patience." He placed his hand on top of hers. He must have felt her trembling. "I know what it is that frightens you. I do not want you thinking you will only be the Princess of Death. Instead be my partner in life. Elaine Puro-Shrink, will you be my--"

"Yes." Crushing her lips against his, she wrapped her arms around his neck, not wanting to let him go. Elaine didn't need to see the ring or even have one to commit to Seth. All she wanted was him.

He pulled back briefly to say, "...wife?" Then laughed. "I guess your answer is yes."

And now her life would be complete with an all new family. She knew something had been going on with her body. She just assumed the sleepless nights and the loss of appetite came because of her separation from Seth. The real reason came as a happy surprise.

Elaine opened her mind to allow Seth to read her thoughts. He kissed down her neck and stopped. Froze was more like it. Lifting his head, he stared into her eyes. His face had begun changing but it didn't frighten her.

"Are you?" he asked.

Elaine simply put his hand on her stomach. She smiled but when she noticed Seth's stoic expression, her smile faded. "I know. I know. 'A vampire cannot lay with an Ayudante and bring forth life' or whatever that credo is."

Seth shook his head. "That is not it. I cannot change you into a vampire. Not now," he said. "Your brief death may be detrimental."

Elaine trembled from his words. She placed her hand on top of his as it rested on her stomach. When his face changed back to normal, she knew the erotic moment was lost.

"But I died before." Another scary thought but something Elaine had finally come to grips with.

"The Master changed time. Brought you back to the moment before you died and erased your murder. This is all the more reason not to test your body again."

Elaine hadn't thought of that consequence. From looking at Seth's worried expression, she figured it was a thing that should concern her.

"There is something else." Seth swung his legs over the edge of the bed, his back to her.

Elaine sat up and moved behind him. She wrapped her arms around his waist. "What is it?"

"Your life. The reason you were allowed to live was because I made a deal." Seth muttered 'dogma' under his breath three times and it made Elaine gasp. He hadn't said that the whole time she'd seen him. It must have been bad.

"What kind of deal?"

"I would not bring forth an heir."

Elaine wanted to be angry. How dare Seth make a decision like that without telling her! She was dead and in no condition to listen to the ideas. So he had traded in his own happiness to bring her back. That was true sacrifice. She fell deeper in love with him.

"I want you and I want this child." Seth turned around to her. "I will do everything in my power to keep you both safe."

The conviction in his voice convinced her. Seth had become stronger since the last time she'd seen him. If anyone could protect her, he could.

She flashed a reassuring smile. "I know." She kissed him. "Now, make me into a necrophiliac."

Seth snickered. "I am not dead."

"Role play, baby."

"Are you sure you are okay with all of this?"

Elaine put her finger to his lips. "I know I don't want to be without you. We'll be fine. I know it."

She put her hand to her stomach. Both Seth and this baby were gifts to her. New lives after so much death. She would do anything to protect them both. Anything.

Seth smiled. "Just one thing." He stood up, picked up her laundry from the floor and deposited the pile into her hamper.

"Well, at least one of us is okay."

With their overwhelming love, Elaine knew from her toes to her hair follicles on her head that she and Seth and their baby would be fine. One thing she did question was whether or not Seth would help change the baby's diaper.

"I heard that," Seth said.

So she thought, "I love you" so that Seth could pick that up too. It felt good to trust again. And it felt even better to love again and be loved. Her toes curled. Who knew loving a vampire could feel this good?

The End