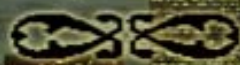


Loose Id



Love's ALCHEMY



Ciar Cullen

Praise for the writing of Ciar Cullen

The Biggest Kahuna

Ciar Cullen has done an excellent job of bringing together fantasy and drama in a tale that is sure to go on the keeper shelf.

-- Angel, *Romance Junkies*

This book made me laugh, cry, and fall in love, all at one time! This book MUST be experienced!

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Ms Cullen has fashioned a very intricate novel that combines modern day with ancient Hawaii history. This story was fascinating and very fun to read. Once I started reading it I had to finish it!

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This is a sweet captivating romance that will grab on to you and hold on through out the book. Ms. Cullen crafts characters that are not only believable, but endearing. You'll fall for Kal and Nikkie hard and fast.

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The Biggest Kahuna is now available from Loose Id.

LOVE'S ALCHEMY

Ciar Cullen

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This book contains explicit sexual content and graphic language.

Love's Alchemy

Ciar Cullen

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Acknowledgments

Many thanks to my friend and editor, Lorri-Lynne Brown, for her heroic support. This story is dedicated to my extraordinary brothers, Bob and Tom.

One disclaimer: while the description of Sir Isaac Newton's scientific accomplishments is loosely accurate, and it is well documented that he experimented in the alchemical arts, the events described here, as well as the sketch of the great man's personality, are solely the product of the author's imagination.

Prologue

Cambridge, England 1668

Isaac brushed back his hair and stripped off his shirt, lest the sparks from the furnace set either aflame.

“More heat, I must have more heat,” he snapped to his young assistant, heart pounding in excitement. *Everything is perfect; I know it!*

“Master, we are sorely low on fuel. The substance churns and bubbles -- is that not sufficient?”

“You little fool!”

Isaac turned on him and the youth backed up in horror. *Blazes, man, stay calm. You need the boy.*

Isaac labored to soften his expression, unwilling to have the lad abandon him in fear again. It was difficult to find a closed-mouth assistant, no matter the pay. The executioner’s noose had recently snapped many a sorcerer’s neck, and Isaac did not intend to be the next victim.

He squatted and clutched the boy’s thin shoulders tightly, taking in a deep breath to calm himself. The child’s mouth quivered in fear, and his eyes grew huge.

“Marcus, I beg of you, do as I say. The time is at hand. Trust that my cause is noble, that my devotion is to a divine purpose beyond your wildest imaginings! Damnation, boy, fetch more fuel!”

Marcus stood still for a moment, frozen in indecision, then nodded fervently and scurried up the steps to the street with the coin Isaac pressed into his palm.

“Calcination, dissolution, separation, conjunction, fermentation, distillation, coagulation.” Isaac muttered the formula of the Emerald Tablet under his breath as he worked the heavy iron tongs, turning the large urn within the furnace. The heat scorched his face, but he ignored the pain, biting at his lip.

Thank you, God, for this reminder of the great inferno that awaits all heretics.

“Separate thou ye earth from ye fire, ye subtle from the gross sweetly with great industry,” he quoted the ancient text as the molten alloy frothed. “Where is the brat!”

A beam of great light suddenly pierced the night, cut through the dark empty streets of Cambridge, slicing through from the heavens to focus directly into Isaac’s dwelling. Isaac’s heart soared in hope and shock. *Have I truly accomplished my task? Is this the sign from above?*

A thunderclap slapped him to his knees and sent him skidding across the floor, the breath knocked out of him. He cowered in the corner of the room, covering his eyes against the blinding prism of dazzling colors that twinkled in the dark room like so many gemstones. The beam narrowed and sought its prize. The furnace flashed in brilliance. Isaac’s heart missed several beats, and he fancied for a moment that he had miscalculated God’s will for him and that his sin marked him for death.

However, after what seemed like an eternity, but must have only been seconds, the light retreated and the furnace calmed. With shaking hands and trembling limbs, Isaac crawled to the glowing opening of the furnace. Shielding his face with one hand, he reached tentatively into the crucible, and then pulled back in shock at the icy cold emanating from the opening. He peered in the furnace to see the outside of the urn speckled in ice crystals and watched in amazement as the crystals expanded to cover the whole surface. *This defies all the laws of Nature! It must be the work of God.*

Muttering a prayer for success, Isaac quickly snatched the small object left in the base of the urn. The cold burnt his palm, and he released the object into his lap. A glow within the stone gradually subsided, and with one last twinkle, flickered out.

Isaac fell prone on the floor, sobbing, clutching the emerald-colored gift from the Universe. Could it be the Philosopher’s Stone, the source of all holy and noble cures for the ills of the body and spirit?

A sudden terror shook him from his ruminations and he ran to the door and bolted it, lest Marcus return at this most inopportune time. Still shaking, Isaac studied the stone carefully, rolling it between his fingers before a candle. *Am I victorious where all have failed?*

A bang at the door jarred his nerves and he backed into the shadow lest the boy see him. Let Marcus think he had abandoned his work for the night.

“Master Newton, let me in! Master Newton! I have the fuel! Are you about?”

Isaac held his breath until he heard the boy retreat.

“Tomorrow, my Maker, I vow to test this Stone against the greatest of human foes.” He would visit the morgue, pay the keeper for silence and solitude, and breathe new life, God’s life, into a lifeless body.

Chapter One

Sidra glanced at her watch for the tenth time, wondering how long one should wait for a shot at redemption. *You're an idiot, Sidra. Go home. He's not showing; he probably never intended to. I'll give the son of a bitch ten more minutes.*

Laughter erupted from a trio of men across the bar. Sidra wondered idly what SLIman looked like -- certainly not like those guys. Hip, handsome, they fit the bar perfectly, everything about them screaming money and sophistication. All three wore shades of designer grey and black. Manhattan's finest, quintessential SoHo artsy types. *I would hate them if they weren't so hot. I hate them anyway.*

Sidra had met the likes of them too often -- vain, egocentric, and certainly not interested in anything more than a one-night stand. She'd taken a few men up on their offers of quick sex since Patrick dumped her, pretending she didn't know or care that they'd never call. Those nights left her feeling emptier, dirtier, and more hurt over the break-up. Sidra sighed and pushed down the familiar pangs of grief that surfaced every time she thought of Patrick, vowing again to put all her energy into her research and forget about men.

The bartender smiled sympathetically at Sidra as he vigorously shook a drink. She grimaced and looked away in annoyance. *Simply fucking fantastic. He's pegged me as a loser. It's not a goddamned date!*

She shielded her face by propping her chin in her hand, reassuring herself that the bartender didn't matter, SLIman didn't matter, nothing mattered but finding help. She never had to come in this bar or see these people again.

Her mother's nagging circled through her brain. "Why do you *care*, Sidra? Don't ever let others define you, especially men." Sidra wondered for what seemed like the millionth time how you made yourself stop caring about something. Weren't you *supposed* to care? Wasn't that part of being human, of living life to its fullest?

Sidra snorted and picked up her wine glass, silently toasting the memory of her mother. *Here's to you, Scarlet. I wish I had half your backbone.* At seventeen, penniless and pregnant, Scarlet Abercrombie had left her furious family and abusive boyfriend, changed her name, driven halfway across the country to New York in a death trap orange Beetle Volkswagen, and thrown herself on the mercy of her brother. Raising a child alone with nothing but guts and a little natural artistic talent, Scarlet had broken all the rules and triumphed, only to be cut down in her prime by a drunk behind a wheel.

How dare you feel sorry for yourself over a lousy break-up! Scarlet would tan your hide. Come on, Sidra, enough pity! Go home and face your demons.

With one last glance at her watch and one final peek at the bar door, Sidra reached for her jacket.

A sudden prickling at the back of her neck sent chills along her arms. Someone was watching her. Had SLIman shown after all? Sidra turned slowly to find one of the sexy trio of men eyeing her carefully. He narrowed his deep blue eyes, a trace of amusement pulling at his lips, and winked mischievously. Sidra turned away quickly, heart racing. He *couldn't* have been looking at her.

Sidra jumped when the waif-thin server set a vodka martini on the table.

"Compliments of the gent at the end of the bar." Sidra stared at the glass as if she had never seen a mixed drink before. *Hell! The bartender felt sorry for her, a sexy stranger watched her, and now some anonymous loser had bought her a drink.*

"Take it away, please."

How predictable, a vodka martini. Doesn't anyone in New York drink beer or wine anymore?

"You're sure? Did you get a look at your benefactor?" The server squatted close to Sidra and nodded behind her. Taken aback at the young woman's persistence, Sidra snuck a quick glance over her shoulder to three men talking low. *Impossible. Not the hunk!*

"Which one?"

"The Vampire Lestat."

Despite her nerves, Sidra laughed at the apt joke. He was dark and handsome, stylish, intense looking. She ran her finger around the rim of her wineglass, trying to seem nonchalant. *Sure, Sidra, act as if you aren't flattered, as if guys like that hit on you every night.*

"No, thanks anyway."

"You're sure?"

To Sidra's amusement, the slender girl slid into the booth across from her and propped her chin in her hands. She was young, maybe twenty-five, with delicate features, pale blue eyes, and dramatic eye make-up. Sidra imagined the girl waited for her big break, one of the thousands of aspiring models and actors just like her.

"Can I ask why? Married? Lesbian? Insane? I've been trying to get Van to notice me for a year or so, and you pull it off in five minutes. I've never seen him do something like this." She tapped on the side of the glass with a deep scarlet nail.

"Van?"

"Donovan. The one with short hair is Wentworth and Alexander is next to him."

"Of course, they wouldn't be named Tom, Dick, and Harry."

Stealing another glance, this time in the mirror behind the bar, Sidra watched as Van peeled off an expensive leather jacket to reveal an equally stylish thin black sweater hugging a slender, muscular physique. He pushed an errant strand of long midnight-black hair behind one ear and sipped at his drink. Sidra gasped in a quick breath when she finally got a clear look at his stunning face as he laughed lightly at some quip from his companions, his eyes flashing in genuine amusement. She *hadn't* imagined it -- he was the stuff of dreams.

A flash of lust set her skin tingling as Van's long fingers pushed sensuously again at his hair, and Sidra fell into a brief fantasy of what his hair might feel like in her hand, what his hand might feel like on her skin. Donovan shifted away from his friends slightly and leaned his cheek on his palm, as if posing for a portrait.

He knows I'm looking at him. The two other men, also probably in their late twenties, continued to talk in low voices.

Forget about him. He's way out of your league, and these types are all alike. He probably stands women up all the time, has a string of them waiting for his call -- the call that never comes.

The waitress cleared her throat and jarred Sidra back to reality.

"They're brothers, aren't they? Actors or musicians?"

The waitress leaned in conspiratorially. "Brothers. They work together, and to judge from their jaunts around the world, they're very rich. They come in a lot for a few weeks, then they're gone for months at a time. Very mysterious." The girl sighed in exaggerated longing. "I'd take any of them. Hell, I'd take all of them at once. But Van -- how *hot* is that man?" Her slight southern drawl and friendly manner helped Sidra relax a bit. The girl extended her hand and Sidra shook it.

"He's about as hot as they come. In my experience, the hotter they are, the worse you get burned. So my answer is still no. I'm Siddhartha."

"You're a what?"

"No, my name is Siddhartha."

"Really? Wow, that's ... unusual for a woman. For anyone, really, isn't it? You're a Buddhist or something?"

"No, not Buddhist. My mother was a hippie, which explains a lot more than my name, trust me. What's your name?"

"Terri with an 'i.' Pretty dull stuff, Siddhartha."

"Call me Sidra."

Terri held a finger up to acknowledge the bartender as he gestured for her to get back to her rounds. She ran a hand through her cap of blonde spiky hair and sighed.

"Back to work for me, then. You're sure about the drink? Waiting for someone?"

"I guess he's a no-show. At least I have a spotless record -- four dates, no men. Before you ask, yes, I met him on the Internet." It embarrassed Sidra less to pretend she searched for a boyfriend than to admit the truth -- she needed a savior, a middle-aged researcher to help free her loft of ghosts, to help rescue her from going insane.

"Why the hell would you need to meet someone online? I mean, you're a model or something, right?"

Sidra laughed and winked at Terri. "I'm a model citizen, depending upon your political leanings." She leaned in conspiratorially and whispered. "FBI."

"Really?"

"No. That was a joke, although there's an agent in the family."

Sidra kept her gaze fixed on Terri, afraid to look back at Donovan, feeling his stare drilling through her back to her soul. The small modern chrome chandelier that hung over the table suddenly winked out with a sizzle, and Sidra groaned. That made four lights in one day, a personal best, she thought wryly.

Terri looked at the lights and cursed. "Shit, not again. They're going to start taking these out of my tips."

"I think I did that." Sidra studied Terri carefully, wondering if she could be a SLider too, anxious at the coincidence. Could this Terri be SLIman? Anyone might claim to be a middle-aged man on the Internet.

Terri's demeanor changed, and Sidra wondered why she now studied her suspiciously. The girl narrowed her eyes. "I'm pretty sure I knocked out those lights, but who's keeping score?"

"Right. Must be a coincidence."

Terri sat up straight and smiled brightly. "Okay, you don't want to tell me why a girl like you needs to meet men online. Hey, everyone has his or her thing, if you know what I mean. Maybe you're after a special kind of relationship?"

Now she's changing the subject. What's going on here? "What -- a master? An orgy? Hardly. You're not trying to pick me up yourself, are you?"

Terri laughed good-naturedly. "Would I have a shot? No, but if your luck and mine doesn't change, maybe we should consider it."

As Terri stood and smoothed her minuscule black skirt and tank top, Sidra noticed a lacework tattoo on the girl's shoulder.

“I like that tattoo. Is it Celtic ...?”

Terri didn't answer, and seemed suddenly distracted. Sidra followed her gaze. A flush crept to her cheeks as the three brothers studied them. Her discomfort grew as Terri sauntered to Van, set Sidra's drink on the bar next to him, and whispered in his ear. He listened intently, and then nodded.

Quickly turning away, Sidra concentrated on her glass of wine. Damn it, why had she talked to the girl? She didn't look so innocent now, and Sidra suspected Terri was spilling everything she'd learned about her. Well, so what? It wasn't a crime to meet people over the Internet. She hated that hunky Donovan knew it, though. No doubt he'd have a good laugh about it. *I'd laugh if it weren't so damned serious. If this guy only knew the truth of why I'm here, he wouldn't be flirting with me. He'd think I'm a nutcase. Maybe I am.*

Disappointed and weary, Sidra wondered about SLIman's true identity. Maybe he'd have some good excuse. How could the man she'd chatted with nightly for a month have done this to her? He'd been ... a friend, a lifeline, or so she had thought. In her darkest moments, when she thought she might lose her mind to her visions or to her loneliness, she fantasized about him being more than the nerdy researcher he claimed to be. In her dreams, he was handsome, and worldly, and ...

A sputter of laughter from the brothers brought Sidra sharply out of her musings. *You're pathetic, Sidra. They're laughing at you. What a fucking mistake.* Her muscles tightened in anger, and heat rose to her cheeks. *Just don't cry. You always cry when you're pissed. Get out of here now, and never do anything like this again.*

She pulled on her jacket and scooted to the edge of the booth to get up when a strong hand pressed on her shoulder with just enough pressure to keep her seated.

Sidra gazed up into the face that must have launched a thousand fantasies. Donovan. The dark blue eyes that seemed so alluring at a distance mesmerized her up close. His spicy cologne filled the air between them, and Sidra labored not to breathe in deeply to fill her lungs with the wonderful, mysterious scent of him. Donovan oozed confidence and ease as he tossed back a stray lock of hair and crossed his arms. *Look at him -- he's posing so you can admire him! Vain son of a bitch. I'd like to knock you down three notches, hot stuff.*

“Listen, Lestat, I told your spy I'm not interested.”

He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. “Lestat? Oh, Terri's nickname for me. Sorry to disappoint you, love, but I'm not one of the undead.” His light British accent surprised her, and added more charisma to an already charming man. *Of course, he wouldn't be from Brooklyn, would he? That would be too ordinary.*

A smirk pulled at his full lips as he sat across from Sidra and pushed the martini across the table as if in challenge, watching her intently. She struggled to pull her gaze way from his, the sexy pools of deep blue that caressed her soul. *God, what a face.* As if he heard her thought, his smirk broadened into a full smile that made her heart skip a beat. *Has that smile ever failed you, hot stuff?*

"So if you're not the undead, you're dead?" Sidra tried to sound as sarcastic as she could, hoping to shake off his growing allure.

He winked mischievously. "Aren't you a clever girl?"

"Evidently not quite clever enough. Goodnight, Van." *Oh, Sidra, you're going to walk out on this guy? Are you sure?*

"I'll simply follow you onto the street if I must."

"I beg your pardon?" Something in Van's voice belied the twinkle in his eyes. Was he serious? Certainly such a suave, affluent man didn't need to stalk women down the streets of SoHo.

"You heard me. I have no intention of letting you slip away, Siddhartha."

"Follow me and I'll shoot you."

He arched a thick dark brow and eyed her with amusement. "I can't imagine where you'd hide a piece in that dress. Armani, isn't it?"

"What? Yes ... What has that to do with ..." Sidra lost her trail of thought as his stare intensified.

"Besides, you don't want to get away from me."

His gaze slid down her body in an open sexual appraisal, heating her skin, sending her blood coursing through her veins, taking her breath away. *Damn him, he's good at this.*

"Bank on it, *love*. I'm armed." Proud that her sarcastic imitation of his accent made him blink in surprise, Sidra found the nerve to return his sexy stare.

"Armed and dangerous. I like that in a girl. Although my bet is, you aren't armed and probably never have been. At least I'm willing to take that chance."

"Listen, Van, it's clear you're a guy who doesn't know how to take no for an answer. Probably never had to. So let me make it clear for you. Fuck off."

Sidra stood quickly and fumbled for her purse, cursing silently that she let his looks and manner unnerve her.

"Sidra, it's me. SLIman."

She froze in her tracks, her blood turning icy. *No, impossible. He had said he was forty, a little heavy, and balding.*

"I don't know what you're talking about." Sidra heard the quiver in her own voice. Had she told Terri the name of her mystery date? No!

"Please allow me to introduce myself properly. My name is Donovan Barlowe, AKA SLIman. We made an appointment last night to meet here to discuss our shared interests and experiences."

Turning back toward him, Sidra reached for the back of the booth to steady herself as she slowly sat down, clutching her purse to her chest with trembling hands. *It can't be him.*

We've written to each other every night. I told him so much. All the time this man, this god listened, consoled, counseled her?

He nodded seriously. "Please call me Van. Before you ask, you have some explaining to do yourself. I really didn't think a disabled grandmother would want to meet in a SoHo bar at midnight. Not such a sophisticated cover, SLIgirl."

"I suppose not. It's only that ..."

"A girl can't be too careful. Especially one that looks like ... you." Van ran his gaze slowly down her body again and settled on her eyes, shaking his head slightly.

"Like what? What do I look like?" Sidra cursed silently for asking, for hungering to know what he thought of her. "There you go again," she heard her mother's voice.

"Ah, you're on a fishing expedition, then? Surely you're used to stopping traffic with that face and body? Trust me, I'm as surprised as you are, love. Very pleasantly surprised."

I hardly think so.

Sidra finally sipped at the martini while she concentrated on the beads of moisture running down the sides of the glass. *Look at anything but him. Don't do anything stupid. Don't say a word.*

"Of course, you've been on the site, in the chat room, seen the nonsense the others write. Half of them are nuts, don't have the power at all."

"The power?"

Van suddenly extended his hand, and Sidra shook it as forcefully as she could. "I'm happy to finally meet you in person, Sidra."

Sidra pushed her hair behind her ears and fumbled through her purse for cigarettes, sighing in relief as she found one crumpled stick in the pack. She pulled it out with a shaking hand, but Van grabbed the pack from her.

"I wouldn't have guessed you smoke."

"I don't."

Van arched a brow and waved the pack in front of her.

"Maybe one a week. Give me that," she snapped.

"Don't watch the news? Smoking is illegal in bars now, love. I try to stay one step ahead of the law." He nodded in mock seriousness. "In any case, it's not good for your abilities. We'll need you sharp." He crushed the pack in his palm.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Not here. Come on, we'll discuss this at my place."

"At *your* place? You're out of your mind. I agreed to meet to talk about problems I thought we shared, not to hook up for a quickie. How many women fall for this, Mr. Barlowe?" Sidra wondered if it were possible Van stalked women on the Internet to lure

them into meeting him. Why would a guy who looked like him need to do that? For kicks? Then he really was a deviant.

"We do share those problems, as you call them. I prefer to think of our powers as gifts. Of course, one person's gift may be another's curse."

"It's clear you prey on vulnerable women searching for help with their ... issues. I find that revolting. I'm not vulnerable, and you'll have to find another sucker."

Van reached across the table and cupped both her hands in his. A sudden jolt of energy shot up her arms and she flinched, but he clutched more tightly, leaned close to her, and lowered his voice to a sensuous whisper.

"When you leave, what will be different? Where will you go? Who will help you?" His voice wound into her chest and squeezed until she was breathless.

"I don't need your help," she muttered.

"There are more of them all the time, aren't there? You see them more clearly with each appearance. You're frightened, and it's not easy to frighten you. It's your choice, Sidra, but I can help you."

Sidra closed her eyes to steady herself. The electricity from his hands made her feel slightly faint, and the flutter of butterflies in her stomach turned to a wave of nausea as she thought of *them* -- the spirits. More of them all the time, yes. At home, on the street, in the park, even in daylight now. The shapes, the horrifying, threatening, grey phantoms. Sidra fought back tears as she met his eyes. He looked so sympathetic, so concerned. Perhaps she could trust him? She had been ready to trust an aging researcher, but not someone young, sexy, and confident.

"Unless you're a psychiatrist, I don't think you're going to be much help."

"They're called wraiths, or daemonia. You're not insane either. You're simply a SLider. I recognized it the instant you came into my bar."

"Demons? Ridiculous. *Your* bar?"

He nodded dismissively. "My bar, along with a nightclub in the Village and a restaurant up the street. We were discussing the demons."

"I don't want to discuss them." *I don't even want to think about them. Please stop. The more I think about them, the more often they appear.*

"They're slender, grey, the size of tall children, and they scream silently at you."

Sidra's limbs trembled and she shook her head in denial. *How could he know that? She'd never mentioned her visions in their online chats!*

"How many street lamps did you blow out walking here tonight, Sidra? How many bulbs do you stockpile at home? TVs come on when you walk by. Radios change stations without you touching them -- you told me as much online. You didn't mention the wraiths, didn't dare. I've seen this all before -- you think you're going insane, and you're isolating yourself, afraid no one will believe you. I believe you, Sidra, and I can help. Let me."

Sidra closed her eyes against his dark sensuous stare. He ran his thumb along her wrist briefly before letting go of her hands, sending fire coursing through her veins. *Don't fall for this Sidra, it's not safe. He's not safe.*

"Yes I am."

Her eyes shot open in disbelief to find him smirking darkly, full lips pulled to one side in amusement. How could he have read her mind?

"What?"

"I'm safe if you're in my corner. If you cross me, things get ugly rather quickly." He sounded serious, and Sidra bristled that he might be threatening her.

"I didn't say anything ... you heard my thought? You're a mind-reader?" Sidra grabbed her purse in a panic and swiftly edged out of the booth, slapping Van away as he reached for her wrist. "*You're* the demon. Don't come near me again, or I'll have you arrested so fast it will make your pretty head spin!" She pulled her arm away and ran on wobbly legs past the Barlowe brothers and Terri and out onto the cold dark street.

Heart pounding fiercely, Sidra scanned the night for any sign of a cab, but saw only a few couples ducking out of restaurants far down the block.

Damn. Van would follow her, she was sure, and she wouldn't have a chance outrunning him. "You'll be okay, Sidra, calm down." She reassured herself as she ran toward the Village, past the closed galleries and expensive shops she knew like the back of her hand.

Why weren't there more people out on a Thursday night? The click of her heels on the sidewalk echoed eerily in the cool fall air. A fine mist of rain dampened the street, making the surface shimmer from the ghostly reflections of the streetlights overhead. A sudden light breeze picked up and sent an art gallery pennant flapping, chain hitting a metal pole in a hollow rhythm. The sound grated on Sidra's already sensitive nerves.

Come on, Sidra, pull it together. You've walked down this street hundreds of times.

She hurried toward a coffee bar she thought might be open, hoping to lose herself amidst the crowd to gain a few moments to think. Her heart sank as the proprietor turned off the lights and locked the door just as she approached, shrugging in apology at her.

God, this isn't good. When she allowed herself a brief glance over her shoulder, she didn't see Van and slowed down to a fast walk.

Should she call Uncle Fred immediately and file a report? And say what? That a guy had offered to help her rid her life of demons? Sidra pushed down panic and tears, wondering where to turn. Home? Van didn't know where she lived; she hadn't been that stupid in their online chats. Still, it didn't make home safe.

They would be there. Barely a night went by without one or two of them hovering near her bed at night, horrific threatening faces screaming in a deafening silence.

A group of late-night diners exited a restaurant, laughing loudly, startling her momentarily. Sidra slowed to walk closely behind the foursome, glancing again behind her at the empty street. One of the men heard her steps, slowed down, and turned to face her.

"You okay, lady?" Sidra recoiled at his British accent, so like Donovan's.

No. I'm not okay at all. Please help me.

"Yes, thanks. I'm fine."

"Do you need us to see you into a cab? You shouldn't be out alone on a night like this."

"A night like this?" Had all of Manhattan gone mad?

The whites of his eyes shone brightly against the smooth black sheen of his skin, glistening with the mist of rain. They were soulful eyes, Sidra noted, as he stared intently at her. Sidra thought she detected a bit of pity in his gaze. *You're imagining things. He doesn't even know you.*

"Don't you watch the news, love? A killer's on the loose, last seen in the Village. Two young women." He made a slashing gesture with his hand across his throat in a comical fashion, but Sidra shivered. He pulled back his long braids and pushed them over his shoulder in a gesture that reminded Sidra of Van. She pushed aside the irrational thought -- massive, handsome, and very dark-skinned, the man looked nothing like Donovan Barlowe.

His pretty, diminutive red-headed companion nodded eagerly as she laced her arm through his. "Definitely not a good night for a single woman to wander the streets."

Sidra glanced at the second couple, a man and a woman, both blondes, both attractive. They studied her with interest and she wanted to hide from their scrutiny.

A streetlight burnt out overhead, and Sidra bit back a groan as she stared up at it, wondering for the thousandth time if she had the power to turn it back on, and how.

The red-headed woman laughed wryly. "Ugh, I hate when that happens." The foursome chuckled and whispered, and Sidra caught the murmur of the blonde woman. "Fucking SLIders."

The black man shot them a nasty look to shut them up. A finger of dread traced a straight path up Sidra's spine. "You hate when what happens?" She tried to sound nonchalant. The four strangers stared impassively at her.

"I said, when what happens?" Sidra tried to sound more forceful, but her voice shook. She backed up and bumped into a large body. Panic turned her legs to jelly and she nearly crumpled to the ground, but a strong arm wrapped across her chest and pulled her in tightly, protectively against his warmth. She knew without looking that it was Van. He leaned in close and whispered into her ear.

"Brave heart now, Sidra. Don't struggle." His long hair brushed her cheek and he tightened his grip. Sidra squirmed in his embrace for a moment and nearly pleaded to the strangers to help her when she realized her terrible predicament. Who was her enemy?

The foursome glared at Van in mixed loathing and fear, as if he were Satan himself. The tall black man acted like the leader of the foursome, waving the others back as he stepped closer to Van and Sidra.

"Four to one, Van. Think about it."

Van snickered. "Your math is bloody awful, always was. It's two to four. I can live with those odds. You can't."

"The woman's just a SLider. Unless she's the One, she's certainly not useful to you, and she can't harm us."

Van's breath warmed Sidra's neck and despite her anxiety, she backed up closer to his body, craving his touch and protection. Sheer instinct told her to cling to him as the stranger's demeanor grew more threatening, fists clenching tightly and eyes narrowing.

"Time will tell. I don't yet know her power, but I know you aren't getting your hands on her. As I've told you before, Defon, there's no such thing as a useless SLider, only an untrained one. You get a free pass tonight, but only to keep her safe. You have precisely three seconds to disengage."

"Bullshit."

"Three. Two. One."

What the hell is going on? Is this some kind of strange cult? Am I caught in the middle of a turf war?

Before Sidra's eyes, the four shimmered for a moment and disappeared into the night, leaving a trail of grey where they had stood, leaving her alone in the arms of a strange man with stranger powers. Van squeezed her tightly and then turned her gently to face him. His eyes shone brightly, and Sidra tried to focus on them as the rest of the world spun in a blur. She tried to speak, but couldn't form a word, as if in a dream. *This must be a dream.*

"I'm afraid it's quite real, love." Van grabbed her tightly as her knees buckled and she fell into a black abyss. Her last thought before passing out was how wonderful Donovan Barlowe's strong arms felt on her waist.

Chapter Two

Isaac pressed a stone into the hand of the morgue's night caretaker. The pale spindly man stared stupidly at the tiny ruby. He looked a bit like one of his silent patrons. Greyish-blue shadows rimmed his sunken eyes and deep depressions highlighted his cheekbones. A hideous scar marred the man's skin from forehead to chin. The man's lifeless eye socket drew attention away from his rheumy good eye. I wonder if the Stone could restore the man's vision? No, be true to your vow. You may not practice your art openly.

"Hain't you the great Master from the college, the one wot lives with Mr. Wickens, then? Makes all those writings the grand folk talk about so much?"

"What gave you a clue as to my identity, Sir?" Isaac did not imagine this ghoul could know a single person of note in Cambridge or the entire world. Then, he mused; at times, those lowest in life held the secrets of a town better than anyone. Whores, tavern keepers, surgeons, mercenaries -- they didn't find their keep among beggars.

The caretaker tapped at his temple. "Twasn't born last night, Master Newton. We've seen you in the streets with the likes of Master Boyle and your students."

"You know Master Boyle!"

"Aye, a regular customer, so to speak. Mind you, he don't ask that I keep his purchases secret, or I would, may the Lord strike me blind in me good eye if I be lying!"

"Chivers, is it? Well, Chivers, I have the same purpose as Master Boyle. I, however, require your sworn oath that no one learns of my own purchase."

"Slit the dead open to see how they works inside, does you? Like Master Boyle?"

"Indeed. To see how they works." Isaac smiled and pointed to the ruby. "Will that buy a new corpse?"

"Be it glass, Sir? I've heard tell of the tricks the mighty play on the lowly. Not that a great man like yourself..."

"You hold a precious gem, Chivers. What will it buy?"

"Take em all!" Chivvers laughed hideously, coughing up dark bile. Isaac said a quick prayer for the soul of the man. He'd be dead within a month.

"I need but one. Someone who met with a premature death, perhaps. Not otherwise ill. The victim of a knife wound might be best."

Chivers rubbed at his grizzled beard. "This be a fortunate night for you, Sir. I watched them bring in a man of prime age and good stature, much like yourself. Five and twenty, perhaps a trifling older, he looked to me. Nothing wrong but a deep gash in his gut. I hear they caught him ..."

"No!" Isaac held up his hand and worked to soften his tone. "No, Chivers. I must not know about his life, or his death. Say no more, but point him out to me." I don't want to judge him for the sins of a life cut short. God will give this man a new beginning.

Chivers shrugged and led Isaac to a cold dark room. Isaac's stomach rolled with the smell of rotting flesh and he held his arm over his nose. Chivers held a lamp high and Isaac's blood turned to ice in his veins at the sight of twenty naked corpses lined up in two rows of ten on the floor, one a more gruesome sight than the next.

"God in Heaven, preserve us."

"Well, not much in the way of preservation here, Sir." Chivers coughed again with laughter.

Isaac nearly lost nerve, then stopped cold as he spotted the young man. Long hair fanned out behind him in a midnight halo. His face reminded Isaac of the sacred paintings of Rome, with a sensuous mouth and long, dark lashes. His body was lean and muscled. Isaac glanced away from his private area. Even in death, the man deserved some dignity, did he not?

"That one, Chivers. Will you bring him to my house?"

"Aye, Master. That's the one. Beings they brought him in only today, I'm to keep him three more days, of course."

Isaac trembled in fear. Three days? No! The man must be his!

Chivers shook his head sagely. "Don't think a soul will come to claim this one, though. Have a feeling about it, and I hain't been wrong as of yet."

"I claim him, Chivers. The ruby buys him and your silence."

"One less hole to dig, that's wot I think, Sir."

* * * * *

Van closed the bedroom door quietly after ensuring Sidra still slept, and then tapped his brother on the shoulder. "Knock it off, Alex. Leave her things be." Alex arched a brow as

he studied Van, who looked away in embarrassment. He should be helping Alex, not reprimanding him.

"Bugger off, Van. You're dying to learn more about her. I don't think it's worth the time. She's bloody uninteresting, and that's a shame, because she's damned sexy. Wouldn't mind some private time with her, but I suppose you've already claimed her for your own? Is that what's eating at you?"

"When did my claim on a woman ever stop you?"

Van wandered through Sidra's modest loft, admiring her taste in modern art and photography, the sparse but carefully placed pieces of eclectic furniture, unusual trinkets from around the world. The room smelled faintly of vanilla candles and coffee, making it feel homey. *A woman's touch. That's what our place lacks, the subtle scents and reminders that a house is a home.*

Van stopped to examine a photo of a woman in her twenties wearing a tie-died t-shirt and bell-bottom jeans. Her long honey-blond braids fell nearly to her waist. She leaned on a beat-up Volkswagen and pointed proudly to a sign on the edge of the Grand Canyon with an open smile. An inscription on the photo, blurred with time, read "Darling Sidra, wish you were here! Love, Scarlet." Scarlet had drawn a little peace sign under her name. Van wondered for a moment if Scarlet still lived, but his sixth sense told him otherwise. How unlike her mother, Van thought. Sidra's eyes were anything but happy and open.

Dying to look into those beautiful, sexy eyes again, Van chided himself for his sympathy for Sidra, scolded himself for letting her allure catch him off guard. *Losing your edge, Donovan. It won't do, not now.* His first sight of Sidra in the bar had floored him. He'd known, without Terri's confirmation, that the elegant bright woman sitting alone was his target. Under any other circumstances, Van would have flirted and cajoled until she agreed to meet him again, but after the unfortunate meeting with Defon, he would have a hard time getting her to agree to anything. *She does like the look of you, though.* Van smiled to himself smugly, remembering her nervous gaze into his eyes, the way her cheeks flamed in embarrassment as she surveyed him head to toe. Oh yes, she'd be putty in his hands, no doubt. Of course, she did have a bit of bite, a quick wit and sharp tongue. Van's body heated up at the fantasy of sparring with her in bed before taking her.

Alex pushed the desk drawer closed only to turn to Sidra's living room closet, where he rifled through boxes stacked on a high shelf, and on the floor.

Pull it together, Van. You're here to test her, not to screw her. Alex and Wentworth were on track, trying to gain any clue to her true nature, and for a change, he drifted off course. In a way, Sidra's appeal could prove detrimental -- they didn't need the distraction.

Van poured a round of drinks from Sidra's extensive liquor collection and handed them off to his brothers, then recommitted himself to their purpose. He grabbed Sidra's handbag and emptied the contents onto the coffee table, sorting out any potentially important objects.

The driver's license had provided her address, and he still had her keys pocketed. Now he had time to sort through the rest.

Wentworth poked through her make-up clutch. "Champagne taste, beer budget."

"What?"

"Modest apartment. But the cologne, the make-up -- expensive stuff. Tiffany bracelet thrown into the cosmetics bag like rubbish. One earring -- it's real." He held up the diamond stud to the light and then rubbed his hand along his shaved head a bit sheepishly at Van's scowl.

"Is there something you'd like to tell us, Went? Taken a fancy to women's trinkets?"

"I've bought gifts for women. Sue me." Wentworth held the earring tightly in his palm, and Van watched carefully. Went searched for any visions of the future Sidra's possession might evoke. Glancing at Van, he shook his head subtly.

Van sighed and he opened Sidra's wallet. He'd lied, cheated, and womanized his way through the centuries, but he hated spying. Desperate times called for desperate measures, he reassured himself, and the quicker he learned about Sidra, the better. She'd be in no mood to divulge secrets when she woke to find three strange men in her apartment. Not after what she saw on Prince Street. Could he blame her?

Fanning the contents of the wallet on the glass coffee table like playing cards, he searched for any key to her life, her essence. "Macy's, Nordstrom, Lord & Taylor, American Express. She evidently likes to shop. Sexy dress she has on tonight. Got to like a girl who wears skin-tight black Armani. Not many can pull off that style." Van imagined that Sidra would look good in just about anything, recalling with a flush of heat the press of her body against his as he carried her home, as he laid her in her bed.

Went smirked. "You missed your calling, Donovan. Anyway, there's no way she can afford designer clothes. Bet she picked it up in a secondhand shop."

Van snorted. "I'll take that wager. At least she has taste. You could take a lesson from her, Went. You can afford the real stuff, yet wear crap like that shirt."

"What's wrong with this shirt? Alexander gave me this shirt!" Went sighed at Van's tongue-in-cheek look.

"You're such an easy a target, Wentworth."

Van picked up Sidra's license and studied her image again. He'd seen enough beautiful women in nearly three centuries to practically numb him to the sight. Then why did this woman's image set his body tingling?

"She's a Leo." He wasn't sure he believed in such nonsense, but Terri would no doubt have lots to say about Sidra's forecast.

Alexander groaned. "Has it occurred to you that we're not here to learn her lucky numbers? Astrology." He snorted.

"The Master believed in the power of heavenly bodies, Alex. I wouldn't be so dismissive."

"The Master believed. The Master believed," Alex imitated with sarcasm. "Well the bloody Master isn't here, is he? We don't even know our own fucking birthdays. The Master didn't think to keep track of that, did he?"

Wentworth looked up, troubled at the brewing tension. "Alex, don't talk about Isaac like that. It's not proper."

"Oh, stuff it, Went. We're in this bloody mess because of Isaac, or had you forgotten that little detail?"

Van held a hand up to calm Wentworth's nerves, worried how much the three had been bickering lately. Their deadline looming large, each seemed to revert to their worst traits. Alex had grown more impatient, Wentworth fretted over everything, and Van ... *I'm just tired. Tired of searching, tired of hoping against hope.*

Van turned back to Sidra's belongings. "New York Public Library card. Voter registration card. Who the hell carries that around?"

"She's a model citizen. Or so she told Terri." Alex paced again, examining photos, glancing through stacks of books. "Ah ha. Here we go. *Into the Light. The Spirit World. Exorcisms and the Catholic Church. Lives of the Saints. Art and Archaeology of England. The Dummy's Guide to Demons.*"

Wentworth snorted. "You made that one up."

"Ya think, Einstein? Come on Van, wake her up and get this over with."

Van sipped at his glass of Scotch, regarding Sidra's serious image again. Lovely, she was simply lovely. Medium-length dark blonde hair, artfully cut and highlighted. Big brown eyes, full lips pulled into a serious straight line. Wide, high cheekbones.

"She doesn't look like she has a drop of Greek blood, but with a last name like Patmos, she must. I can picture the Maker choosing a Greek. What do you think?"

Alex laughed. "You're hopeless. We're in New York, and she's probably from Chicago if she's Greek. I suppose you think she has the Philosopher's Stone hidden in her apartment, perhaps in the tin of stale biscotti on the top of the fridge."

"One never knows. You're the finder of lost objects, Alex, and you haven't been much help finding the Alchemist."

"Things, I find things. People don't register on my psychic radar. That's *your* department, Donovan, and you're bloody terrible at it."

Van shrugged. The chances were about a million to one against her being the Alchemist, but Van had learned a lot in a few hundred years of searching -- most notably, never underestimate anyone, especially a woman with as much psychic ability as Sidra.

Van flipped open her cell phone and scrolled through her address book. "David, Fred, Josh, Dmitri. Damn, doesn't she know any women?"

Alex flopped onto the couch and rubbed at his chin, now sporting a bit of a shadow. “Is that a tinge of jealousy, big brother? What do you think, Went? Van has a wee crush on the girl. Poor thing, frightened of the bad demons, doesn’t understand what’s happening to her. In comes Van for the rescue. Sound familiar?”

“You’re going to wake her up. I don’t *do* crushes.” Van stood and paced the length of the carpet. Of course, he wanted to help Sidra. In a matter of hours, he’d turned her life upside down. They were responsible for her state. *What’s wrong with caring what happens to her? Alex is wrong, it’s simply common courtesy. A crush. Asshole.*

“Good! Let’s wake her up!”

“I can’t figure out what she does for a living.”

Van paused, sensing a feminine presence. Sidra.

“That’s none of your damned business!”

Van turned and held his breath at the sight of Sidra, clutching onto the frame of her bedroom door with a death grip, white as a corpse. Even in her terrified state, her beauty shone through.

Alex arched a brow. “You *are* our business. If it missed your notice, big brother rescued your pretty little ass tonight. Those were the bad guys. We’re the good guys.”

“Shut up, Alex. You too, Went.”

Went threw his hands in the air in frustration. “I didn’t say a word!”

Van pushed past his brothers and reached to help Sidra to a chair, but she pulled away and he backed up, one palm extended in calming surrender.

“We’re not here to hurt you. It’s in your best interests to believe that.”

“It’s in your best interests to get the hell out of my apartment! Stop talking to me like I’m a child.” Sidra pounded her foot on the floor in frustration.

Van saw her quick glance at her cell phone, the contents of her purse spread out on the table, and the mixed fear and fury that warred on her face. He waited for her tirade, or perhaps even a crying jag, and was shocked when she finally spoke, her voice steady, low, and threatening.

Sidra pointed to Alex, lips drawn into a tight line, eyes narrowed. “I don’t like you.” She gestured to Wentworth. “I don’t think I like you, either. By the way, I did *not* buy this dress secondhand.”

Van winced, quickly reviewing what they’d discussed while she obviously had spied on them. She turned quickly to him. “But I *hate* you. Posing as a friend, as someone ... Get out, all of you!” Sidra pointed to the door, arm shaking.

Van took in a deep breath and tried to send calming energy to her. “I’m afraid we can’t do that, love.”

Sidra clenched her fists in fury and brushed at a stray tear that slipped down her cheek. "What the hell do you want?" She slid down the wall to sit on the floor, arms curled around her legs protectively as she glared at Van with a loathing that cut through him like a knife.

Does she really hate you? Van wished he could read minds at will, but Sidra wasn't sending out a clear enough thought. No doubt her emotions were a jumble. Well, he didn't need her love; he needed to test her abilities. *Then why does it feel so bloody awful that she hates you?*

Sidra swiped at her tears again and lifted her chin defiantly. A rivulet of eye make-up made a crooked path down one full pale cheek, and for no reason Van understood, it made him want to hold her, cup her face in his hands, and kiss away her fears. His body tensed as he fought the urge to go to her. Instead, he braced for the inevitable -- the disbelief, shock, and endless questions, only some of which he'd be willing to answer. The same old drill.

Alexander took a sip of his drink, then held it up in toast to Sidra. "Dear, you must learn to relax. We're not rapists, thieves, or murderers. At least not in this life."

"Who are you? What do you want with me?"

Alex set down his drink and strode to her side, pulling her to her feet a bit harshly. "You're not in Kansas anymore, sweetheart. Have a seat." Van bristled as he watched Alex usher Sidra to the sofa, hand gliding subtly along the pale skin left bare by her sleeveless dress, eyes wandering over her hips and ass.

"You know, Donovan, it might be helpful to write it all down and hand out a flyer once they start asking questions. What do you think? Save a bit of fucking time. Which we do not have."

"Alexander, you son of a bitch. I'm warning you ..." Van wanted to throttle him, his arms tensing up in fury. Sidra needed a gentle touch now, not Alex's biting wit and leers.

Wentworth shook his head in disgust. "Have a little heart, Alex."

If Sidra happened to be the prize they sought, this approach would doom them all. Van decided to get rid of Alex, and quickly. "I'll answer her questions, Alex. It might be best if the two of you leave for a bit."

Sidra pulled her arm away from Alex with a frustrated cry. "It might be best if you *all* leave for a bit. A very long bit." She edged herself to the far side of the couch, eyeing the cell phone. Van shook his head slowly, and she clenched her teeth in anger.

"Sorry, Sidra. You'll want to leave the phone be for now. You can use it later, after we talk."

Wentworth pulled at Alex, who shrugged him off. "Donovan, I'll give you an hour. Don't screw up." Alexander bowed in mock formality to Sidra and left the apartment with Wentworth.

Sidra studied Van nervously, but with less panic on her face now that they were alone. Perhaps there was a chance. A chance to talk to her calmly, take in her lovely face, feel her

spirit. Van breathed in deeply, suddenly longing for the impossible -- to talk, to chat, perhaps flirt, maybe even try a kiss. Instead, he'd be describing his mystical world, his unbelievable existence. It never got things off on the right foot, he thought wryly.

Sidra's color returned a bit and her breathing steadied.

"Feeling a little better?"

"Compared to what? Watching four people vanish into thin air and fainting from shock?"

"Yes, compared to that."

"Your company ranks somewhere between that and surgery without anesthesia."

She may as well have slapped him across the face. *So much for a night of flirtation, Van. What the hell did you expect her to say?*

"Lovely then, glad you find me so charming. I'm usually a bigger hit with the ladies." To his surprise, the tiniest hint of humor pulled at her mouth.

"I imagine so. Spit it out, Lestat. Are you here to suck my blood or steal my soul or simply molest me?"

"Do any of those hold appeal for you? I hoped you might have a bit of a dark side. Mind you, that's a personal preference of mine, not a requirement." He saw his joke fell flat and he sighed.

Van reached for her hand and she tried pulling away, but he caught it and held it steadily. Warm, her energy vibrated at the rate he expected -- his own. Van rarely connected to someone at the level only the gifted could experience. She was full of psychic ability -- supercharged with it.

Her eyes grew large at the contact, and Van suspected she experienced his energy in much the same way. Of course, it would probably shock her rather than excite her.

"SLiders resonate with one another. Feel it?"

Sidra nodded reluctantly. Her body warmed and the heady smell of her perfume filled the air between them. Expensive cologne, Wentworth had said. Lovely. He watched her face carefully and inched a hair closer, hoping she'd accept him a bit more. Needing her to allow him into her life. She'd have to rely on him now, trust him. Van hated that he had to use his looks, use his appeal, but it worked every time. He smiled subtly and brought a finger to her cheek. She flinched, but he gently brushed his finger against her pale skin.

"You understand from your online research that Street Lamp Interference isn't all that rare? A lot of people, especially women, claim to have experienced SLiding."

"That seems like the least of my problems now."

"It is."

"Tell me." She squeezed his hand involuntarily.

"SLiding, in fact electrical interference of any kind, is actually rather common. Some claim it's a special power; most pass it off as coincidence. It's usually the latter. A small percentage of SLiders seem to be supercharged, so to speak. A small percentage of those can affect electrical currents at will. I can; so can my brothers. I believe you might have that ability as well."

Sidra nodded for him to go on. "What does that have to do with the visions? What are those things?"

"They aren't visions. They're sightings. It doesn't have much to do with SLiding, except that most people who can see wraiths, or what we call daemonia, are also SLiders. The reverse isn't true. And we aren't sure why the ability to see daemonia comes on suddenly ...?"

Sidra nodded again. "Suddenly."

"... but it generally comes on after a traumatic experience of some sort -- a car accident, a terrible shock to the system, illness, deep sorrow. I won't ask which it was for you, it's not my business." He saw it clearly, though -- profound sorrow, bubbling to the surface, held back by a hair's breadth and a strong will. Part of him wanted to know more, but his duty was his duty, and getting intimate wasn't part of that. He steeled himself to turn on his charm. Sidra breathed in deeply and stared into his eyes.

"Sidra, you have strong psychic abilities, probably more than you realize. While the wraiths may seem to have appeared out of nowhere recently, my guess is that you've lived with the paranormal for many years."

Van tried to appear calm as he waited for her to speak. SLiding wasn't enough, not by a long shot. Deep in his heart, he was convinced Sidra was a reincarnated spirit, an avatar.

She frowned. "Well, I don't know exactly what you're looking for, or why, but I don't think I'm anything special in that regard." She looked away for a moment. *She's lying.*

"Just run of the mill stuff?"

"What's run of the mill?" Sidra shuddered and rubbed at her arms. "The lights, the wraiths ... isn't that enough?"

"But there's more."

Sidra shrugged. "Everyone gets that déjà vu thing once in a while, right?"

"Sure."

"Sometimes ... sometimes I get the déjà vu thing, but it's a little different."

His heart pounded in his chest, because he knew what she was going to say, even though she didn't understand it. "You can tell me, Sidra. This is my profession, I'm a paranormal researcher -- nothing will surprise me. That's why you contacted me in the first place, remember?"

Sidra took in another deep breath. "It's gotten worse. I always chalked it up to my research, my reading, my fantastic imagination. At least my assistant says I'm a romantic. Now I'm not so sure."

"Your research?"

"I write about history. I lived abroad for a short while. Occasionally, I'd sense that I'd been to a place before, even though I hadn't. I'd turn a corner and the view would be familiar -- a church, the cobbled streets ... I'm not making sense, am I?"

"Perfect sense. Go on."

"It stopped for a while when I came back to New York, but resumed again recently, about the time I saw the first wraith. The visions are like someone else's memories, but very cloudy and vague, as if I'm dreaming. I'll close my eyes and see a building, a farmhouse, sometimes a person."

Sidra looked at Van and held her chin up as if she waited for a smart comment from him.

"Do you believe in reincarnation, Sidra?"

"It's not that."

"I asked a very simple question."

"I don't know what I believe. I only know that my life has been a living hell since these damned grey things decided to move in. I thought of changing apartments, but then I started seeing them everywhere. At work, on the street. They're following me. What *are* they? Please tell me."

Longing to reassure her, to tell her that the wraiths were harmless, Van looked away, lest her frightened eyes make him betray his cause.

"I'm sure I'll be able to help you. As I said, that's my profession."

"How do you get rid of them? Why won't you tell me what they are?"

"That's my little secret. If I gave it all away, you wouldn't need me, would you?" *If you only knew what I need from you, love.*

"Is it money? Is that what you're after? I have a little squirreled away. I could get more. What's your price, Mr. Barlowe?"

Salvation. "My services are free of charge."

"Nothing's free. I see you're not ready to tell me what you want. What about the men and women on Prince Street? You know them, the ones who vanished. They aren't like the wraiths. The big guy, you called him Defon. Please tell me the truth about yourself. I've never ... *felt* anyone like this."

Van's heart flopped in his chest, startling him out of his emotional distance, the magical aura he created to lure her. He could barely form a sentence, and heard his own hushed voice as if from far off.

"You *feel* me? What do you mean?"

"Like I've known you for a very long time. You're not ... completely different from those people on Prince Street, are you?"

"No, I'm just like them. You could say that we are cut from the same cloth, but have a different philosophy." He hoped this would be explanation enough.

"A philosophy of what?"

"Of how to save the world."

"From the demons?"

"Yes." For the first time, the lie clenched at his gut, squeezed at his heart. *Save the world from demons, Donovan.* He could hear Alexander and Wentworth howling with laughter, and muttered a silent chant of thanks that he had sent them off while they talked. No doubt Alex would have uttered the truth, and simply. *We are the demons. We aren't interested in saving the world. We want to survive it.*

Van waited for Sidra to go on, but to his surprise, she stood and poured herself a drink, and almost nonchalantly gestured to him with the bottle. "Refill?"

"Sure." Watching her curiously, he let his gaze feast on her entire figure for the first time. Even in bare feet, she was tall, with long toned legs, soft curved hips, and the most exquisite back and shoulders. The sort of New Yorker consumed with measuring up. She probably spent as much time working out in a gym as she did at work. Pilates and yoga, no doubt, and a strict diet. She could use a few more pounds, he thought, staring at her narrow waist as she turned toward him. His gaze wandered to her cleavage, the swell of her breasts and smooth skin drawn taut over her collarbones. The shadows of the darkened room danced across her skin as she moved toward him.

"Stop staring at my boobs, Mr. Barlowe. I'm in shock. I think that makes you doubly rude."

"If you didn't want men to stare, you wouldn't wear that dress."

She set his drink on the table and lifted hers in a toast. "Touché." Her body language changed suddenly, hips swaying as she sat closer to him on the couch, back arched slightly, arm draped close to his. She crossed her legs provocatively, and gazed deeply into his eyes, pursing her full lips as she sipped at her drink.

"Why Sidra, I do believe you're trying to distract me. Perhaps find an opportune moment to grab that phone or pry the truth from me?" Van let a chuckle escape and saw the strain it brought to her eyes. Her whole countenance dropped and she shrugged. *Oh damn, she's so adorable, not nearly as tough as she'd like you to think. Now you've hurt her, Donovan. What an idiot.*

"I thought it might be worth a try. Didn't really expect it to work."

"It was working all right." Van shifted on the couch to ease his erection. He brought his finger against her cheek again, then ran it down to her jaw-line, traced a light path to her neck and along her collarbone. Her skin was like fine velvet, and he couldn't bite back a groan at the fantasy of running his hands slowly over every inch of her. *Damn it, why does she have to look like this? Where's your normal indifference, mate? Don't get distracted.*

She slapped at his hand and he grabbed her wrist and held tightly. "You're something else, love. Now, let us make a truce. You are not my prisoner. I can see you need a bit of time to take all this in. I'm here to help, and to convince you to help me with a certain pet project of mine -- that price you mentioned. If you'd like to know how to rid your home of wraiths, I'm willing to assist. If you decide you hate me more than you need me, I'll leave and never return. You'll be on your own."

"I don't see how I can be any help to a mind-reading demon-killer. How many of you are there, anyway?"

"Precisely a dozen."

"Including your brothers and the four on Prince Street."

"That's right."

"Can you read my mind now?" Sidra squeezed her eyes shut and bit at her lip, waiting nervously.

"You're desperate to get me into bed?"

Her eyes shot open in horror, and he chuckled.

"Lucky guess. It doesn't work that way. Only when you're very, very unguarded and you project your anxiety for anyone with a healthy dose of psychic ability to pick out of the air."

"Oh. Well, that's not what I was thinking." She blushed and looked away.

"You're quite sure?"

Her eyes twinkled to life for a moment in response to his flirtation, and leaning in, he pressed his lips briefly to her forehead. "You're awfully sweet, despite that sharp tongue, and beyond lovely. You make me wish I were in a different line of work."

A tentative smile pulled at Sidra's mouth, but she grew serious again. It was too much, too soon for any mortal to take in. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out her keys and placed them on the coffee table. He punched his number into her phone address book and handed it to her.

"As much as it pains me to do so, I'll be taking my leave now. You have my number. Take two aspirin and call me in the morning."

Van pulled on his jacket and saw panic wash through her. *She doesn't want you to leave.* He felt triumphant for a brief moment, then reality quickly replaced the thrill. *It's not because of you, Van, but because of the wraiths.* A stab of regret pierced the triumph, and he made a note to keep his libido and ego in check. This was all business, the business of staying alive. Well, it didn't matter much. The chances of her being the Alchemist were ridiculously small, even though he was certain she was an avatar. He pulled on his jacket and turned to take a last look at Sidra, still curled up on the couch, clutching her purse and cell phone for dear life.

She was just as he needed her -- frightened, confused, and desperate. One more night of terror and she'd come begging for his help, offering anything in return. *She's at the breaking point, and that's good. I wish it felt good.*

He turned to the door and was halfway out of the apartment when he heard her soft sobbing. A dull ache spread through his chest, and he tried in vain to shake off the feeling. Her plight shouldn't have touched him. If he didn't know better, he'd think he actually had a soul.

Chapter Three

Sidra stared for a moment at Van's number, then carefully shut down her phone, afraid she'd do the unthinkable, and call him back to her apartment immediately.

You're in shock, Sidra. Don't do anything.

Holding her palm to her cheek, still feeling the burn of his finger against her skin, the press of his lips to her forehead, she fell back on the couch and stared at the ceiling, begging God to help her. What kind of man -- no, creature -- was Donovan Barlowe? With each moment that passed in his company, with each word from his mouth, Sidra craved more from him, and she had good reason to fear everything she craved.

She closed her eyes and pictured his strong lean body, his beautifully chiseled features, burning dark blue eyes, luxurious hair, sexy accent. If she could create a man from scratch to fulfill all her hopes, longings, and desires -- he would be Van Barlowe. With one exception -- he wouldn't be a demon-killer, or whatever he was. Every fiber of her being warned her that Van might be dangerous. Maybe ... not even human. The thought sent chills to her bones. He wasn't telling the truth about much of anything. The smirk on Alexander's face had spoken volumes.

What could they possibly want with her? "A pet project" Van had said. He needed her help with a project. Did he know she was a historian? What could he need from a professor of Medieval and Renaissance studies?

"Oh my God!"

Terri, the waitress! She had said something to Terri about being FBI, said she carried a gun. Could that be the key? Maybe they were searching for government secrets? Maybe he thought she was like Agent Scully from The X-Files, a ghostbuster or alien hunter?

"Shit, where's Mulder when you need him?" It hit her suddenly that her own Mulder was only a phone call away. Had Fred left Quantico for Afghanistan yet? Sidra sat up and snapped open her cell phone, quickly scrolling for his number.

An operator answered. "Mr. Abercrombie's secretary. How can I help you?" Sidra nearly lost heart as she recognized the clipped, cool voice. What would he think? Fred was the polar opposite of his sister, Scarlet. Impassionate, logical, trained to reason, prone to question anything that he couldn't categorize properly, Fred would think she was nuts. Sidra nearly hung up, then realized the woman probably already saw it was her calling and would alert Fred.

"Pass code 579342. Please, this is Mr. Abercrombie's niece, Sidra."

"Yes, Ms. Patmos, I know. Good morning. Is this an emergency? Mr. Abercrombie is not currently in the office."

"I know, but he won't answer his home phone at this hour. Can you page him for me?"

"Again, Ms. Patmos, is this an emergency? May I ask the nature of the problem?"

Is it an emergency, Sidra? What is the nature of the problem? You're insane, have a crush on a demon, see flying grey screaming things ...

"Yes, it's an emergency. Please."

"I'll put in the call. Can he reach you at this number?" The secretary read off her cell number briskly and coldly.

"Yes, thanks."

"Ms. Patmos, would you like me to contact the Eighth Precinct? There's little Mr. Abercrombie will be able to do from Virginia if you're in immediate trouble ..."

"No police! It's not that kind of problem. Just call him, please."

Clutching the phone, Sidra made her way into bed, still in her dress. She didn't dare glance around, didn't dare look before turning off the light. *Not tonight, please God, not tonight.*

"*Tu autem effugare, diabole; appropinquabit enim judicium Dei.*" She chanted the demon-quelling Latin repeatedly out of habit. It had never worked before, but the mantra soothed her somehow. Exhaustion pulled her into a half-sleep when the cell phone jarred her nerves.

"Fred?"

"Who's Fred?" Van's smooth voice sent a thrill to her core and a chill through her veins. "I said, who's Fred?"

"Leave me alone. I'm expecting a call."

"Whoever Fred is, he won't be able to help."

"What do you want?"

"I want to know you're all right. No visitors."

"No wraiths tonight. At least so far. Goodbye, Mr. Barlowe."

"I was referring to Defon and his cronies."

"They'd come here?" Sidra cried out in fear.

"Unlikely, but possible." He sounded distant, and anger replaced Sidra's fear.

"You're trying to scare me. I don't like this game, Van. It's cruel. *You're* cruel."

"Now, love, you don't even know me. I can be very kind when the spirit moves me. Speaking of spirits ... have you thought about becoming my client yet?"

Van hung up. Sidra's hands trembled and she clutched the phone to her chest. *Please come back*. She nearly jumped out of bed when the phone rang again.

"Sidra, what's wrong?"

She let out a deep breath and labored to keep her voice steady. *Remember, this is Fred the Fed. He'll want facts. Be cool*. "Uncle Fred, I ... I need your advice."

"Darling, what is it?"

"Oh, God, where do I start? I think I'm in over my head."

"Drugs, Sidra? Is it drugs?"

"Fred! You know me better than that!"

"Well, Scarlet was no stranger to experimentation. Calm down, tell me what's wrong."

"I'm not like Scarlet." *What would Scarlet do?* Sidra snorted. Scarlet would probably be in bed with Van Barlowe by now, having the time of her life.

"I've had some problems recently. I'm not sure if I'm imagining them. I thought of ... hiring a psychic, but that seems to have backfired."

"A psychic! What are you talking about?"

"I'm seeing things, and meeting weird people, at least I think they're people. Actually, I'm pretty sure they *aren't* people. This one guy in particular. I saw the most unbelievable thing tonight, and I simply don't know where to turn." Sidra caught her breath and waited nervously.

"Has anyone hurt you, Sidra? Threatened you?"

"Nothing like that."

"Tell me exactly what happened."

Sidra tried desperately to sound as rational as possible as she explained the night, the visions leading to the night, the pain that seemed to lead to the visions ... She dreaded what Fred would say.

"Darling, you need to speak with someone, do you understand? Someone who can help you through this. I know a wonderful man, went to Harvard with him. He's right Uptown, and he's a wonderful counselor. You aren't thinking of hurting yourself in any way, are you?"

"Counselor? You mean a shrink?"

"It's that break-up, isn't it, that Patrick fellow? Too soon after Scarlet's death. You've had a rough few years."

"It's not about Patrick." *The two-timing son of a bitch.*

"Isn't it, honey?"

Sidra's heart fell. It wasn't about Patrick, it simply wasn't. She'd come to accept the marriage that never happened, the sight of Patrick hovered an inch above his secretary as Sidra came home ill from work. No, it wasn't about that. Van was real, Defon was real, the wraiths were ... real?

"This man Barlowe, how do you explain him?"

"Sounds like a nut surfing the Net for vulnerable women. Sidra, we must contact NYPD about him immediately. I'll do it for you ..."

"No! Look, if I give you his number, maybe you can figure out who he is?" Sidra rolled through her address book and went numb, dropped the phone, heard her Uncle calling her name from two feet away. *Gone.*

She picked up the phone and bit back a sob. "I must have erased his number somehow. I don't understand ..." Her uncle was silent for a moment, and her nerves intensified. *He didn't believe a thing she said.* "Honey, I want you to take down Dr. Guntar's number. Promise me you'll call him in the morning. I'll give him a call too; explain things a bit, about Scarlet's death and your fiancé. Don't be hard on yourself. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder can sometimes take a while to kick in fully. Understand?"

"I'm *not* making Van up! Stop patronizing me! You've known me my whole life -- am I the sort of person to ..."

"Here's the number, Sidra. Got a pen? I'll see if maybe I can push this trip out a few days, come up for a visit?"

"No, you don't have to do that, Uncle Fred, honestly."

"I want to. Scarlet would have wanted me to. You know she counted on me to look after you. I guess I haven't been doing a very good job since she died ..."

"You're all the family I have, and you're a wonderful uncle. Look, I'll take the number, okay? I'll call you after I see the doctor." Sidra repeated the number back, not writing a thing down, and hung up.

She stared at the ceiling again, waiting for the tears to come, wondering why they didn't. The room spun and a piercing pain sliced through her head. The absolute last fucking thing she needed was happening.

They were here.

"No, God damn it! Not tonight! Leave me alone!"

As the first materialized two yards away, casting no reflection in the mirror behind it, she thought of only one thing. *Van*. She wanted him near, needed him. He would know what to do; he would keep them at bay. It didn't matter if he were Satan himself -- she simply couldn't stand one more night of terror.

Sidra stood and braced herself for a battle. She'd done everything she could think of but face them down.

"Come on, then, give it your best. Wooooo! Wave your little grey arms around in the air, Butt Face!" The wraith hesitated for a moment, then moved a little closer, and Sidra backed up. His deep scarlet eyes, balls of blood and pus, bulged and rolled as he opened his mouth to howl his silent howl, revealing a gaping chasm of blackness, a bottomless pit of hopelessness.

"Blah blah blah. That's right, you heard me." Sidra cast off the chills running up her arms and knelt on the bed, waving her arms in imitation of the wraith. It backed up again and tilted its head to the side, hesitating.

"Is that all you have, Mo? Where are Larry and Curley tonight? Oh, here they are!" Two more misted into the air above her bed, forming a triangle, her at the center. They moved in slowly, and Sidra lost nerve as they gathered strength from each other. She cowered down onto the bed in a fetal position, arms and legs trembling, heart racing.

"And here you were doing so well. Tsk, tsk." Sidra cried out at the sight of Van, leaning against her doorframe, arms crossed casually. "Did I hear you call one Butt Face?" His eyes twinkled in mischief and Sidra fell back on the bed.

"Oh my God! Van, please, make them go away! I'll do anything. I can't handle this anymore!"

"What will you do for me, Sidra?"

"Are you hard of hearing? I said I'll do *anything*, you idiot!" Sidra ducked as one of the wraiths swooped down closely, mouth wide as if it screamed to her in agony. Her hand passed through the grey mist as she swatted it away. "Do *something*, damn it!"

Van laughed and pulled off his jacket. "Now you sound like Alex. Give me a bloody minute to get my coat off, would you?"

Van faced the wraiths and rubbed his hands vigorously. "Come here, fellas. Leave the nice lady alone." The wraiths circled around Van and Sidra's heart raced, relieved for herself and fearful for him.

"Be careful!"

Van opened one eye and glared at her. "Kindly leave this to the professional, love." The wraiths circled about Van, ducking in and out to hear his soft whispers. Sidra struggled to pick out his words, but the chant seemed like gibberish.

"They seem to like you. What are you saying?"

"Can you shut up for one minute, Sidra? Bloody hell!"

"Well excuse me for caring."

Van bit back a smile and resumed his chant. Within five minutes, the wraiths slowed down and floated toward the ceiling, becoming more ephemeral. Then with a startling crackle, they blinked out of view.

Sidra fell back onto the bed trembling. One of her lamps blinked out as she sighed in relief. "Swell."

"Now, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

"This has been the second worst day of my life."

Sidra regretted the remark instantly, noting Van's grimace. "I didn't mean you, exactly."

"Yeah, right. What was the worst day?"

Sidra closed her eyes and shook her head. *No, don't give him any more of you. He'll use it somehow.*

"Let me guess. The day that lovely woman who drew little peace signs under her signature died. Scarlet. Your mother. How long ago?"

"How do you know she's dead?" Sidra bit back the pain his tender voice evoked.

"It's my job to know such things. Is that when the wraiths first came knocking?"

She nodded ruefully. Maybe Van was the real thing, a bona fide psychic, a ghostbuster. "What are they? It seems like they wanted something from me. I prayed, I read every book I could get my hands on ... nothing worked. Until you."

"Then the day wasn't a total wash, was it?"

Van approached her in the low light and sat by her on the side of the bed. He held his hand out and she hesitated, not ready to feel the thrill of his skin on hers, not able to resist. She put her hand in his and he brought it to his warm lips. A wave of relief poured through her. *Who are you, Donovan Barlowe, and why do you make me feel things I've never felt before?*

"They know you're in touch with the eternal, Sidra. I can sense it, and if you're honest with yourself, you'll admit it's true. Your memories of another person's life, your SLiding ... the wraiths recognize an avatar with the power."

"An avatar with the power?"

"A reincarnated spirit who has psychic gifts. They're attracted to you, because they believe you can help them. So am I."

Sidra shook her head in confusion. "What help?"

"They're lost, caught in limbo, trapped between realms, unable to let go of both life and death. They have been more terrified than you have, trust me. They were asking you to tell them how to get home."

Home? The truth of what he said finally hit her. “I don’t know how to tell them to get to Heaven. That’s what you mean, isn’t it?”

Van smiled and nodded. “It takes a little practice, a little patience. You’ll catch on.”

“I don’t want to catch on! You mean there will be more?” Weariness overcame her and she lay back on the bed, suddenly exhausted to her soul. *Please, God, I don’t want this.*

Sidra curled up in a tight ball against the fear clenching at her gut. Van rubbed at her back, his broad warm hand the caress of an angel, soothing her tense muscles, making her feel safer. Van chuckled softly.

“Butt Face?”

“I try not to curse.” Sidra rolled toward him. His tender smile took her breath away. He lay next to her, running his hand along her arm. “You’re freezing. Come on, it’s three in the morning. Let’s tuck you in. Time for you to go to the land of Winkin’, Blinkin’, and Nod.”

“Scarlet used to say that.” The sexiest man in the world was treating her like a five-year-old, and it was fantastic. She’d turned away comfort so many times she’d forgotten how wonderful it could feel.

“Are you the devil, Van?”

“Never even met the guy. Trying to avoid that, in fact. Shush, no more thinking tonight.”

“You’ll stay?”

“I’ll stay. But don’t for a moment expect me to get in the habit. I’m not *that* easy.”

He ran his hand over her eyes and a heavy, heavy mist clouded her consciousness, and the pain, fear, and exhaustion slipped away into the darkness.

Chapter Four

Sidra pulled the covers over her head, trying desperately to fall back asleep and reenter her wonderful dream. Van led her down a narrow cobbled street that opened onto a picturesque open piazza. She walked toward the central fountain, but he pulled her back into the shadows and kissed her feverishly. Pulling her by the hand, he guided her to a hotel and carried her to a grand suite, slipping with her into bed, taking her on a dark journey of body and soul, his passionate whispers burning to her soul. She could picture him clearly, naked, propped a hair's breadth above her, eyes darkened with lust, mouth hungry, body hard and ready. Her skin tingled from the breathtaking phantom contact.

The banging in her head grew louder, and she reluctantly left her trancelike state, realizing that someone was pounding at her door and calling her name repeatedly.

Sidra opened her eyes and sighed at her ordinary bedroom, wondering how much of the previous night was real. Had Van stayed? He said that he'd spend the night, that he'd look after her. A glance at the clock shocked her -- it was noon! Perhaps he'd simply grown bored waiting for her. On the other hand, she thought wanly, perhaps Uncle Fred was right, perhaps he'd never existed at all.

"Sidra, for God's sake, open the damned door!"

Groaning and climbing from bed, Sidra stripped off the dress she'd slept in, pulled on her robe and padded to the door after quickly checking the apartment for Van. Yes, he was gone. *You should be relieved, Sidra.* Her disappointment troubled her. After all, he was simply a psychic who had done his job. No doubt he'd come back to collect his payment, whatever it was.

Sidra peered through the peephole, even though she suspected Josh was alone. Josh was always alone, even in a crowd.

"Calm down, Josh, I'm coming!"

Sidra unbolted the door and stared at the chain, wondering in shock how Van had left and secured the door from the inside. She numbly unchained the door and groaned as Josh stared at her in concern, confusion, and finally anger.

“Oh, honey, don’t be cross.” Sidra patted his cheek and he growled as she turned to the kitchen and started preparing coffee. She wanted desperately for Josh to leave, needing time to sort through her thoughts and shake off the erotic craving left by her dreams. *Don’t turn him away. He’s your only friend, and you need a friend now.*

“You skipped class! I’ve been calling all morning. My God, Sidra, you look like hell!”

“What day is it?”

“What? It’s Friday! I lectured on DaVinci, but the kids were bored senseless. You know what a terrible lecturer I am!”

“You’re a fine lecturer. You’re great on DaVinci. Don’t try to guilt me out over that.”

Josh pulled off his wire-rim glasses and sat on the couch, pinching the bridge of nose in a gesture Sidra recognized well.

“Go ahead, Josh, let me have it. You’ll end up with an ulcer if you don’t learn to express yourself.”

His big brown eyes strained as he eyed her head to toe. Sidra turned away and stared at the coffee maker as it drizzled into the pot.

“You’re cute when you’re pissed off, do you know that?”

“Don’t try to distract me with compliments, Sidra. I’m cute like a damned puppy dog, not Brad Pitt cute, and we both know it.”

Sidra turned and eyed Josh curiously. He *was* cute, with shaggy dark brown hair and huge sensitive eyes, a long aquiline nose and a tall lean body. He’d gotten over the crush on her he’d never admitted to, and Sidra wondered for the hundredth time if she wouldn’t have been better off dating him than throwing herself into her stormy relationship with Patrick. No, Josh was her friend, her one true academic soul mate. An affair would have botched things up terribly.

“Look, Sidra, something’s wrong. I know I’m only your research assistant ...”

“You’re also my friend. Go ahead; get it off your chest.”

“What’s happened to you these last months? It’s probably none of my business, but I’m worried.”

Sidra nodded. What could she tell him that wouldn’t drive him away, or worse, make him go to the Department Chair? He’d think he’d be doing her a favor. Maybe it would be best, she thought anxiously. Maybe she wasn’t fit to teach anymore. What would she do? Where would she go? She loved her research, her job, New York. She had to fix this somehow, get herself together, get her life together. Well, Van had gotten rid of the wraiths; maybe there was hope that she could work and live in peace now.

You skipped a class, Sidra. For the first time in your career. Choking back tears of shame and anger, she poured coffee for them both. *I have to make this right with Josh.*

They sipped coffee in silence at the kitchen table, Sidra wondering what she could possibly share, knowing he needed and deserved an explanation.

"Josh, you've been there for me through so much. When Scarlet died, when Patrick dumped me ..." The tears slipped out, and she brushed them away quickly. Josh grabbed her hand and squeezed it shyly for a moment.

"Patrick was an asshole. I wanted to tell you that from day one, but you wouldn't have listened. He didn't deserve you. This isn't about him, though. Tell me what's going on. You walk around like a ghost. What happened to the book? We're weeks behind schedule now."

How do you tell someone you aren't crazy when you feel like you are? Well, if I can talk to anyone, it's Josh. The least judgmental person, Josh was her Rock of Gibraltar; his faith and devotion in her never wavered. At least Sidra hoped so, because she was going to put it to the test.

"Well, that's close. I mean the part about walking around like a ghost." Sidra thought for a moment, choosing her words carefully. "I see ghosts. At least I think they're ghosts."

Josh sat back in his chair and ran his hand through his hair. "Huh. Weird."

"Huh? I was expecting more than a 'huh.'" Sidra tried a smile, but Josh narrowed his eyes.

"Real ghosts? Like, 'I see dead people'?"

"Yeah, like that. Except much, much creepier."

"Here, in the loft?" Josh looked around the kitchen as if he expected a ghost to materialize.

Sidra nodded, waiting for his reaction. A sharp tap on the door made them both jump, and before Sidra could make it to the door, she *felt* him -- a strong, warm, familiar presence. It made no sense. The connection to this stranger grew with every thought of him. Van was back. She panicked, glancing quickly at Josh, wondering what to do. Van wouldn't go away without a fight, and she could only hope that he had the sense to keep the wraith and mysticism talk to a minimum in front of Josh.

"Honey, I'm home," Van called out in a bad sing-song Ricky Ricardo imitation.

"Honey?" Josh's eyes grew huge. "Is that one of the ghosts?"

"He's just a pal." Sidra ran to the door, unbolted and unchained it, and left it ajar. She backed into the kitchen. Josh arched a brow at her quizzically.

"You're really acting strangely, Sidra."

She tensely watched as Van pushed against the door, his arms loaded down with bags. He stopped dead in the living room and stared at Josh coolly.

"I beg your pardon, Sidra. Evidently my timing isn't all it should be." Van's eyes flashed in annoyance, and he kept his gaze focused on Josh.

"Hi." It was all she could manage, as her cheeks flushed under Josh's examination.

Van smiled wryly. "Hi yourself. You look terrible."

Josh glanced back and forth between the two as if he were watching a tennis match. "I just told her she looks terrible."

"You should have seen her last night. This is an improvement." Van unpacked the bags on the counter, unloading bagels and spreads, pastries and juice.

His comment was a jest, but it stung, nevertheless. Sidra pulled her worn robe more tightly around her and ran her hand through her hair. *Hell, I must look terrible.*

Josh pinched at his nose. "I'm afraid to ask, but does this involve alcohol? Please tell me it was only alcohol."

Van turned suddenly to face her. "Are you a lush, Sidra? I wondered, with that liquor cabinet outfitted like a proper pub ..."

Sidra gaped in horror as the two continued to discuss her, their banter escalating into teasing.

"You should have seen her at the department Christmas party!" Josh held his stomach as he laughed. "She's no lush. Two glasses of wine and she starts singing at the top of her lungs. Trust me, it's a sight."

"Stop it, both of you! What's gotten into you, Josh, my God!"

"You certainly hit a nerve!" Van laughed with Josh, extended his hand, and shook Josh's in a cordial manner. Sidra rested her head on the table and mumbled her introductions.

"Josh, this is Donovan Barlowe. Mr. Barlowe, meet Dr. Joshua Asimov, my research assistant."

"Dr. Asimov? I won't be boorish and ask the obvious question." Van smiled and poured himself a cup of coffee. "If you chose to volunteer the information, however ..."

"No relation to the writer by blood or inclination. I have no imagination, as Sidra reminds me almost daily. In turn, I remind her that she makes up for that with her overly active imagination. What's your line of work, Mr. Barlowe?"

Sidra sat up straight, crossed her arms stubbornly, and stared squarely at Van. "Yes, Mr. Barlowe, do tell Josh how you earn your keep. He'll find it fascinating."

"I'm a demonologist."

Josh cocked his head and rubbed at his chin. "Huh."

"That's usually the response. It's a conversation stopper all right." Van regarded Josh with amusement. "You don't seem very shocked."

Josh shrugged and glanced at Sidra. "Is this national paranormal day? Someone forgot to tell me. Well, in our area of study, we do cross paths with researchers in a lot of fields. Psychics, astrologers, chemists, physicians, linguists ... we've even run into an exorcist or two ..."

Van was listening intently now, and Sidra wanted Josh to shut up, but there was no getting him to stop. Once he got going on his passion, it was useless.

"I don't think Mr. Barlowe is interested in such an arcane topic."

Josh stared at her as if she'd said the Earth was flat.

"Quite the contrary, Sidra, it's fascinating. What, exactly, is your area of study, Dr. Asimov?"

"Call me Josh. Well, it's really Sidra's area -- she's the world's expert."

"Josh, honestly, drop it." She desperately wanted to keep her work from Van, and she wasn't sure why. Did she think he would ridicule her research, her fascination with the mystics of the past?

"Don't be modest, it's true! Sidra is writing the definitive reference on medieval alchemy."

Van paled visibly. Sidra watched in amazement as he struggled to keep his composure, sitting down slowly, with one hand on the table to steady himself.

"I'm a bit of a Latin whiz kid with a background in chemistry. I know -- an odd marriage. I was in the seminary for a bit, and abandoned that for science, then got involved in the history of science. That is, after taking one of Sidra's courses. She's a brilliant lecturer! In any case, my odd combination of qualifications led me to the job of Sidra's assistant, then an appointment of my own."

"Medieval alchemy?" Van's eyes bore to her heart, his tone incredulous.

Sidra shrugged, wondering what he found so shocking. "It's a living. I'm a professor at NYU. I mostly teach Medieval and Renaissance history, write on bits that interest me most."

"You're an alchemist?" Van placed both hands on the table as if to stop it from moving, as if to stop the room from moving.

Sidra laughed lightly. "No, I'm not an alchemist. I study history. I'm not searching for the Philosopher's Stone."

Josh touched Van's arm lightly. "Hey, are you okay? You look a little funky."

"I'm fine." Van snapped out the words and then glanced at Josh. "Sorry, I'm fine, really."

"You don't look fine. Can I get you some water?"

Van's plea was nearly audible, even though he didn't say a word, his deep blue eyes begging her for help. *He wants to be alone with you. He needs you now.* The pull to help

him warred with her common sense. It would be much more sensible to make Josh stay and ask Van to leave.

Sidra stood and pulled Josh up by the arm. "Honey, why don't you go back to campus and I'll meet you there in a few hours."

"Are you sure? Is everything okay here?"

"Positive. I'll be there by three, promise. Well, make that four. We'll work for a bit and then maybe grab a bite, catch up, how would that be?"

Josh nodded reluctantly and offered his hand to Van, but withdrew it, seeing he was lost in deep thought. Sidra walked him to the door and patted his back with a reassurance she didn't feel.

"Sidra, do you promise that you're okay?" He lowered his voice. "Alone with him?"

"Promise. See you later." She shut the door behind Josh and hesitated a moment before returning to the kitchen. *What did I just do? I don't want to face him.*

Van looked up at her quickly. Sidra thought he struggled desperately to look calm, that his weak smile was forced. The tables were suddenly turned, and Sidra wasn't sure she wanted to know the reason for his uneasiness. *What could possibly rattle smooth, sure Van Barlowe?*

"You know, Professor -- I suppose that's your title? -- I wouldn't have guessed in a million years that a serious researcher was hiding inside that swimsuit model body of yours. Had you pegged for a shopgirl."

"Swimsuit model? I'd need implants."

"Not only your body. Your smile, what I've seen of it. I wish I'd seen more of it. I don't expect you to smile much around me."

Sidra poured herself a second cup of coffee and picked at one of Van's pastries. "You went to Dean and DeLuca's. I love these."

"Thought you might."

"Why?"

Van shrugged. "You're a cinnamon kind of girl. I don't know, it's doesn't matter." His tone was impatient and Sidra bit back questions, a little frightened by his tone.

She sat and they guardedly watched one another in silence for a moment.

"You're awfully thoughtful for a ... whatever you are. Demon-guy."

Van shrugged sadly.

"What's wrong, Van? I mean, besides the wraiths and your demon enemies, and the fact that the whole world seems upside down. You seem a little ... unnerved."

"Have you ever wanted something your whole life, and then found it?"

"Not really. But I imagine I'd look happier than you do now."

He was staring into space, a deep frown furrowing his brow.

"You're not in love with the kid, Josh?"

Sidra's heart raced. Did he care if she were single? "No. He's my assistant. He's also a good friend. I don't think you're older than him, in any case. He wouldn't be very pleased to be called a kid."

"Slept with him?" His eyes narrowed to deep blue slits under his thick dark lashes.

"I beg your pardon? What gives you the right to ...?"

Van held up his hand to ward off her anger. "You're right; it's none of my business. I actually like the guy. Reminds me of Wentworth a bit."

"So glad you approve of him. May I have your permission to have dinner with him later today? Or am I under house arrest?"

Ignoring her sarcasm, Van walked into the living room, kicked off his shoes, pulled off his jacket, and stretched out on the couch. Sidra followed into the doorway and stared incredulously at him.

"What are you doing?" *My God, look at him.* He was more beautiful with each passing moment, and Sidra tried desperately to ignore the butterflies that danced in her stomach. *That happens when you want someone, when you're falling for him. You don't even know him, Sidra, and he wants something from you. He's not interested in dinner and a movie.*

"I'm resting. I'm suddenly tired. Perhaps because I've searched for you for many, many years, and now that I've found you ..."

Found me? What the hell?

"I don't know what you're talking about. Please, can we get this sorted out so I can go on with my life?"

"Come sit by me and I'll tell you everything. I need you near."

"I can hear you perfectly well from here."

"I don't bite. Come on, Professor."

Sidra made her way to the couch and sat gingerly next to him, struggling to keep an inch between their bodies. He rolled onto his side and propped his head on his palm as he let his gaze wander from her eyes to her lips, and down to her chest. He may as well have licked a path down her body, and she shuddered.

"Jesus, Van. Stop that."

He snickered and nodded. "Force of habit. Exquisite women bring out the regular guy in me."

What a flirt. Ignore what he says about you, Sidra. He's no "regular guy."

"What would you say if I told you I'm under a spell that only a beautiful woman can undo with a kiss?"

"That you're full of it."

“Damn.” Van grabbed her arm and pulled her down to lie alongside him. Sidra wanted to fight him, meant to fight him, but the warmth of his hand on her bare forearm, the desire in his eyes, his spicy cologne created an ache in the pit of her stomach, weakening her will.

His face was a few inches from hers. She could make out the tiniest mole at the corner of his full lips, flecks of gold in his deep blue eyes, tiny wrinkles between his brows. His breath was warm and his hand like fire as he grabbed firmly onto her hip. Sidra groaned and his eyes flashed with heat. *This is nothing to him; you’re nothing to him.*

“I dreamt of you last night, Sidra. Do you want to hear about it?”

Yes, oh my God. It couldn’t be like my dream. “Not interested. Let’s cut to the chase, Van. Why are you here?”

“I’m under a spell of sorts, and unfortunately for the both of us, it’s going to take a lot more than a kiss to dig me out.”

“What will it take?” Sidra knew, deep down, that it would mean her life would change. That her world would change, and he meant to convince her to do something beyond her imagining. Something she wasn’t sure was for the betterment of anyone, including herself. What price would this demand of her, this helping him?

“Sure you don’t want to try that kiss?”

“I don’t trust you.”

“You don’t trust yourself. Because you’re afraid if you kiss me, you’ll fall in love with me.”

“Nonsense. What an ego.”

“Then what would it hurt?”

“Tell me first what you want from me, then I’ll kiss you.”

“Kiss me first and then I’ll tell you.”

“Wait a minute. You’re the one who wants a kiss and who wants me to do something magical for you ... something I’m sure I’m unable to do ... it’s probably illegal ...”

Her train of thought drifted into the air, conjured away by the need in his eyes, his glance at her lips, the smallest shifting of his body so that he was angled perfectly, poised to capture her mouth with his. Sidra made the paramount mistake of looking at his lips, betraying an intense desire that filled her to overflowing.

Van laced his hand around her neck and pulled her in ever so slightly, pressed his lips to hers in the sweetest touch, and then pulled back and stared into her eyes with a challenging smirk.

“Now you kiss me.”

“That wasn’t much of a kiss.” It was the kiss of shy youth, but it set her body burning in desire.

His smirk widened to a grin. "I was hoping you'd say something like that." Van rolled her onto her back and with one hand still around her neck and the other pulling her hips up to meet his, he captured her mouth in a lavish, earth-shattering kiss. His tongue pressed deeply into her mouth, circling and exploring in a suggestion of promised sex. The electricity between them stunned Sidra for a moment. Sidra's skin tingled in excitement and her body tensed against his onslaught. The sensations reminded her of SLIding, the sizzle that coursed through her veins right before she'd blow out a light, but this time, the sizzle was strong, as if all the lights of Manhattan were about to flicker out at once.

"Kiss me back, damn it." His voice was a growl, an unquestionable order mixed with a desperate plea.

"I can't." Her protest sounded feeble and she moaned as he pulled her robe away from her shoulders.

"You can, you will, but most importantly, you *want* to. When is the last time you did what you wanted, Sidra? For the love of the Maker, kiss me."

What do you want, Sidra? A fling with a man you don't know? A man who may not even be a man, a guy who gets around? I want so much more, but this man won't care about you a minute after you sleep with him.

"You're wrong. Now kiss me." Van assaulted her mouth with a hunger that drove away all reason. He slid his hand down her shoulder and ran his palm along her collarbone, then moved lower to cup one breast firmly in his large palm, rubbing his thumb over her hardened nipple, setting her body trembling, aching.

"Oh, God." How long has it been? A year, nearly to the day. Fear and longing warred in her body. Then the realization he'd read her thoughts again pulled her out of the moment.

Sidra sat up quickly, pulled her robe tight and extracted herself from his grasp.

"No!"

Van closed his eyes tightly. "God, you're aggravating! All right, then." He opened one eye and regarded her intently. "For *now*. Don't think for a moment we're not going to become lovers, Sidra. And soon."

"Thanks for the warning." Sidra stood and straightened her robe, regarded Van's glorious face and body, and the prominent hard-on that betrayed their short make-out session. Pulling her gaze away from him took all the strength she had.

"Mr. Barlowe, it's time we get down to business."

"Lovely, get back here."

"Funny. What do you want with me? I'm giving you one last chance before I tell the authorities that you're stalking me."

"The authorities? How frightening." He snorted derisively and sat up. "What will you tell the *authorities*? That you picked up a guy in a bar you met on the Internet, that he rescued you from four goblins on Prince Street, you brought him home, and he scared off the

ghosts that have been haunting your loft. He spent the night, but didn't lay a hand on you. Then he bought you breakfast and you shared a rather brief kiss. Shall I dial the police for you?"

"I've already called them."

"You did what?"

"I called the FBI."

"What the hell did you do that for?"

"My uncle is an agent. I didn't know where to turn last night, before you came back." The disdain on his face mixed with hurt. *What did he expect?*

"And did your uncle come and rid your home of the wraiths? I did that for you. Some gratitude!"

"They're gone for good?"

"If I want them to be."

"What will it take, Van? Spit it out, for God's sake! I'm just a history professor, a regular woman with some bad luck."

"Because you lost your mother?"

"And the freaking wraiths. I guess you're used to them, but trust me, I haven't had a really good night's sleep in nearly a year. If I don't pull it together, I could lose my job, my apartment ..." *I wouldn't have anywhere to go. I have no one.*

"There's another hurt, isn't there?"

"No."

"Hmm, let's see. You're a beautiful woman, living alone in New York, probably a workaholic, passionate about everything older than a few hundred years, but steadfastly avoiding finding a boyfriend. Don't you remember? I asked you online if you were married. Even though you claimed to be a grandmother, you slipped and wrote that you were finished with men. Why is that, Sidra? You're not a lesbian; that much is clear."

"Drop it. It's none of your business."

"What was his name? Whoever he was, he didn't deserve you." Van's intense stare drove to her brain and Sidra felt his pull on her thoughts.

"How original. Josh said the same thing a few minutes ago."

"No one deserves you, except for me. How long ago did he leave you?"

Oh, God, I wish it were that simple. That you wanted me that badly.

Sidra glanced away and willed herself not to cry. "I left him. It's not relevant."

"I'm terribly sorry." Van stood and walked to her quickly, looking sorry, the anger and smirk gone, the flirtation tucked away. He folded her in his arms and pushed her head to his shoulder, enveloping Sidra in warmth and strength, in comfort she'd not felt in so long. Gradually relaxing into his embrace, Sidra tentatively hugged him back.

"I like your cologne." *Stupid, Sidra. You sound like a teenager.*

"I don't wear cologne."

"No one smells that good naturally." Sidra pulled away from his embrace and held him at arms' length.

Van grimaced and rubbed at his chin for a moment as if weighing his choices. He finally raised his hand to Sidra's face and placed one finger under her chin, forcing her to look into his eyes.

"The Maker's children carry a special scent."

"The Maker? You mean God?" A chill ran up Sidra's spine. *The Maker. Why did the name ring in her ears and her heart, as if she'd heard it a thousand times?*

"No. We call our father the Maker."

"And who is your father?"

"Was. He is called the Last Sorcerer, and he's been dead for quite a while."

"I don't understand? You don't mean Sir Isaac Newton? Historians call him the Last Sorcerer." Something in Van's tone offset his ridiculous statement. *He really believes this!*

"Why do they call him that Sidra? How much do you know about him?"

"Why, I guess I know more about him than just about anyone, save a handful of my colleagues. I wrote my dissertation on his studies of alchemy."

"You're quite serious?" Blood drained from his face and he stared at her in amazement. She nodded, wondering what puzzle was unfolding.

"But you've dismissed Newton's brand of alchemy as nonsense, the useless ruminations of a brilliant mind?"

"No, I wouldn't put it that way. In addition to his mathematical brilliance, he performed many experiments that we'd call chemistry in modern times. Of course, he did get a bit sidetracked trying to create the Philosopher's Stone ... the source of life ..."

Van arched a brow and sighed deeply. "You might want to sit down for this one."

"What's this about Newton? Is that why you tracked me down?" The fragile trust that had built over the last few minutes deteriorated rapidly.

"I had no idea what you did for a living. This is our fate, Sidra. To meet and stand here together, discussing the Last Sorcerer and his children."

"You don't mean biological children, do you?"

Van shook his head seriously.

Sidra reached out for a chair and lowered herself slowly, staring into Van's eyes.

"Impossible. You aren't telling me that Newton created life? Only God ..."

"He didn't create life. He captured its essence from the elements and the ether, then distilled it into form. One example of which," he bowed dramatically, "you see before you."

Oh my God, he's insane.

"Okay, that's it. Game's over. It was nice to meet you, and I hope you have a swell life, or whatever it is you claim to have." Sidra grabbed Van's jacket and shoes, shoved them into his hands, and pushed him toward the door.

Van stopped cold and stared her down. "Don't do this. Look deep into your heart, Sidra. You're the One, I know it!"

"The One what? The one lonely woman in New York willing to believe any crap you peddle simply because you're hot? I can't deny the wraiths exist, and I can't deny what I saw on Prince Street. I'd like to, but I can't. I have no idea why you've dragged me into this ridiculous tale of yours, or even if you believe it yourself. What I do know is that you are history."

Van narrowed his eyes and stared up at her as he bent over to slip into his shoes. "Mark my words, love, we are *not* through. Not by a long shot. You need me as much as I need you, and you'll turn to me in desperation when my brothers -- and I'm not speaking of Went and Alex -- come calling. They want you dead, you see."

"Why?" *Dead? Someone wants me dead?*

"Because they'll come to the same conclusion I have -- that you have the power to rescue us from death. After nearly three hundred years, they're ready to die. I am not. That makes you a target."

"That's absurd! Why would I be able to rescue someone from death?"

Van smirked slyly and left her apartment through the closed door in a shimmer of mist. Sidra nearly fell to her knees in shock, but ran to the door and watched as he walked down the hall, waving to her without looking back.

"Why do you think I can stop you from dying? Why are you dying? Tell me, damn it!"

He was gone, leaving a trail of shimmering air and the faint smell of his essence lingering behind.

Chapter Five

Defonsius watched the first glimmer of sunlight cut through the concrete, brick, and glass forest of lower Manhattan. He'd always loved the early hours the best, the time of renewed hope, or so he liked to think of it. Occasionally, the dawn would inspire him to imagine being on deck of a great clipper ship, scanning the horizon at sunrise for land or enemies. While Defonsius knew very little about his first life, he'd learned that he'd been a criminal, a pirate, knew he'd been born of a different land than Isaac's other children, knew he didn't belong with them.

It was so ironic that he'd been unofficially elected the leader of all but the Barlowes. He'd never asked for the job, never wanted anything but peace, and more recently, death. Perhaps the captain in him hadn't quite died with his body.

More than the deep color of his skin, the width of his nose, the texture of his long hair, and the faintest of exotic accents that stayed with him for nearly three hundred years, Defonsius stood apart mostly because of his faith. The Maker singled him out; indeed, cast him aside as a heretic, and the pain of his excommunication from Isaac haunted him still.

Only Van's acceptance and love pulled him through the centuries of self-doubt and pain, the loss of spouses, children, grandchildren ... Van had been there, holding him up with an iron will and strong arm through every loss, including the day Isaac disowned him.

Defon's greatest shocks had come on the same day, very early in his immortal lifetime.

Walking down a narrow alley in London, a heavy canvas bag filled with goods for his Maker slung over his shoulder, he'd made his way to the edge of the city to find transport home to Cambridge.

A weathered old salt stopped dead in front of him, staring in shock.

"What is it, Sir? Have we met?" The man drew back in further shock.

“Oy, Captain, at be you? Cannot be, no Sir, it cannot be! You was run through, bled like a pig, you did. Saw it wit me own eyes!”

Defonsius had bit back his own shock and excitement. Here was someone who’d known his first life, before Isaac had brought him back from the grave. A Captain?

“Captain, you said? In his Majesty’s service? I think perhaps you mistake me for my brother. What was the name of this Captain?”

The man studied Defonsius curiously. “A twin then, you must be? Separated for many years if you think he served the King!”

Defon nodded patiently, wanting to shake the information from the skinny sailor.

“We called him Blackie.” The sailor rubbed at his own cheek and nodded enthusiastically. “The skin you see. A right fine man, your brother was, at least to those who followed his orders. I never crossed him. Twasn’t born yesterday.” He cackled lowly. “Of course, the captains of the ships he raided didn’t favor him much, but then, they never lived to care, now that I think about it.”

Defonsius’s blood ran cold. The truth of his life, summarized in a few words by a frail old man who knew more about him than he did himself -- he had been a pirate, a thief, and no doubt a murderer. A dozen questions raced through his mind. *Did I have a wife, a lover, children? How did I die? Why did they take me to Cambridge? Did anyone care that I died?*

Instead, he had turned his back on the man and resumed his trek, unwilling to ask lest the answers pile more pain upon his soul. If he indeed had a soul, he mused wryly.

Heart weary and muscles sore from a long ride in the back of a tinker’s cart with too much time to brood, Defonsius was delighted to make his way down the narrow stairs to Isaac’s quarters. Anxious to present the goods he’d collected for the experiments, proud to finally be the one sent on the important errand, he pushed through the door with a hearty greeting. Instead of the warm response he expected, he’d found the entire family gathered in the main room, huddled around the fireplace, arguing and pleading with Isaac.

When Isaac turned on him as he approached, he’d held up Defonsius’s most prized possession as if the object turned his stomach -- a crucifix, purchased with hard labor done in secret, and hidden among his personal things. *How had Isaac come upon it?* Shame and anger fought for supremacy. The old man suspected him all along, searched through his belongings for evidence of a faith he considered anathema.

He’d snatched the cross from Isaac’s hand and scanned his siblings for their reactions. Of course, Donovan, the firstborn and Isaac’s favorite, was the one to try to calm Isaac, to reason with him.

Van had leaned in close and lowered his voice. “Defonsius, tell Isaac this is but a trinket, that it means naught to you. I beg of you, he will throw you onto the street, my brother.”

Defon had pushed Donovan away and approached Isaac, whose fury and disappointment had brought him to near tears. "Father ..."

"Do not call me so, Defonsius. For if you have accepted the Trinity, you have cursed your soul for eternity. I may have breathed life into your body, but I cannot save you from yourself."

With a long look at his siblings, Defonsius had turned on his heel and stormed out of Isaac's house, never to return. Donovan followed him onto the empty street and ran to catch up with his long strides. He'd shrugged Donovan's hand off his arm and quickened his pace. "Leave me be, Barlowe."

Donovan moved to block his way and Defonsius sighed deeply at the sight of his brother's look of concern. "I cannot say goodbye to you, Defon. You are special to me. Where will you go?"

"I know not. I care not!"

"There are others, are there not? Martin and Aloysius, are they not also Christians?"

"Do not tell Isaac! They are frail, frightened of this world, have not become accustomed to their second life."

"I swear, I will not betray them. On one condition, brother."

As Defonsius now looked at Manhattan coming to life, he thought wryly that he'd paid his part of the bargain in full many, many decades earlier. He'd sworn to stay close to Donovan, and he had, following him around the world, putting up with Alexander, and somehow, against his will, taking on the care of the weakest of the children of Isaac -- Martin and Aloysius, who had no psychic abilities of note.

Van stepped onto the street, glancing in both directions with characteristic care. Defon suspected Van looked for him or one of the other renegades, as Van called them. They threatened Van's cause -- to find the Alchemist, to lift the curse, to rescue his life. The renegades spent a large part of the last century shadowing the Barlowes, lest they achieve the impossible. With time running out, Defon felt renewed hope that he and his kind were finally victorious. It hurt a bit to know that the Barlowes were in such pain, so desperate to live forever, clinging against reason to their plan. This woman, the SLider -- she'd be another in a long string of disappointments for Van.

As if Van heard Defon's thoughts, he suddenly looked across the street and picked him out from the few passersby who stopped at the newsstand for their early morning coffee and paper. Defon rose from the step of a shop and waited for him, rubbing his numb hands against the early morning chill.

"So you spent the night with your pretty little SLider?"

Van patted Defon on the shoulder and sighed tiredly. "Jesus, Defon, don't you have better things to do? Did you sit there all night?"

“Don’t take my Lord’s name in vain, Donovan. It was bloody inconsiderate of you to spend the night with her. I’m cold and hungry. I hope she was worth it.”

“If you wouldn’t have scared the hell out of her last night, things might have gone a bit more smoothly.”

In silent consent, the pair walked along the street. Van stopped to buy a cup of coffee for them both. Defon felt a growing unease at Van’s energy, vibrating wildly. Something had excited him, and Defon understood Van well enough to be certain it was more than a roll in the hay with a pretty mortal.

“You know the drill, Van, so let’s get this over with. Is she the Alchemist?”

“Of course not. Sidra is a SLIder with some mild psychic ability. Nothing of note. You can rest that weary heart of yours -- you’ll die on schedule. Now run off and tell your sick little renegade group their death wish is safe.”

“Sick? Is it sick to want a natural end to a life, to ask for a shot at Heaven? I thought you understood me.”

Van nodded tiredly. “You know I respect you. I only wish we could both find our own peace. I’m not ready to die.”

“When will you be ready, Van? What will be enough of living? How many more women will you go through before you realize you haven’t loved or been loved? What daredevil adventures will you try, knowing they can’t harm you, disappointed because nothing thrills you anymore? You’re like a teenager, frozen in a state of irresponsibility and utter boredom. What are you living for?”

Van looked away, and Defon regretted hitting the mark so easily. It wasn’t the time to be cruel. *You’re getting your wish, Defon. He’s not. Show some sympathy.*

“I’m sorry, Van. It just frustrates me to watch the three of you.”

“You’d like me to have your faith in Christ, in an everlasting life. That’s it, isn’t it? Perhaps God has other plans for us.”

“Evidently not. Isaac’s curse is at hand, and you’re out of time. Unless this SLIder is the Alchemist, you *will* die. It might be time to think about your eternal soul.”

“I’ll let you pray for me, Defon. Who’s with you on this? The ones I saw you with last night? Where are the others?”

“Yes, just the four of us. Martin, Bernadette and Anne. The last I heard, the rest were scattered across Europe.”

“Do the others still assume the curse is real? Are they looking for the Alchemist?”

“They don’t have your powers. They wouldn’t know Isaac’s reincarnated spirit if it wore a name tag. I imagine they’re just waiting it out, possibly hoping you’ll pull off a miracle.”

"We'll all find out soon enough, won't we? Has it ever occurred to you that we've all been fretting over this curse for nothing? Perhaps it isn't real, it won't work?"

"For someone who has doubts, you've worked damned hard to find the cure."

"Insurance."

Defon let out a deep breath. "Then you're sure Sidra isn't the One?"

"I'm sure."

Van's lie spilled out into the cool air, mixing with his thought, clear as a bell.

"You aren't sure."

Van turned on him suddenly. "Leave her be, Defon. I'm *sure*. She's no threat. Look, I have to go. Let's meet up soon, before ... before the end. Just the two of us."

"I ... I'd like that." Defon choked back the lump in his throat. Van's affection always mystified him, always touched him deeply. While none of the Barlowes seemed capable of forming meaningful connections with anyone but one another, Van always reached out to him. *He'll die without ever knowing what it is to love fully*. Except for Isaac, Defon mused. Van had loved Isaac with a near religious devotion. He never learned what went wrong between the two, but it had gone so thoroughly wrong. Perhaps he'd ask him before the end came.

They hugged briefly and Defon watched Van hurry down the block in long strides.

"You're lying to me, brother. For the first time in 280 years."

His heart sunk, wondering if Van had the power, the expertise, and the time to damn him to eternal life on Earth. Short of killing Sidra Patmos outright, he could only watch and wait.

Chapter Six

Isaac squeezed his eyes shut against the horrors that invaded his rooms.

“Go away!” His voice rasped in fear. “What might I do to satisfy you?”

Was this the price for trying to serve God, for creating the Stone?

Since the night of Donovan’s metamorphosis from corpse to vital man, creatures of darkness and evil haunted Isaac, taunting him with howling, appearing from nowhere, retreating into the mist once they exacted their torture. Although soundless, the demons’ cries chilled his body and clutched at his heart. He held back tears and his own cries, and instead prayed to his Maker for release and forgiveness. Donovan was not to learn of the invasion from the spirit world, lest he think his creator mad, or evil. Isaac couldn’t bear to lose him now.

“Isaac!” He looked to the doorway, where Donovan stood in shock, moving a candle back and forth to examine the room.

“Flee, my boy! I believe they seek your ruin, which would be my ruin.”

“Nonsense! They are but poor lost creatures, calling out in anguish for your succor.”

“My succor? Why do they torture me?”

Donovan waved his hand, dismissing the misty grey creatures, and they shimmered into the night air. Isaac trembled at the magic Donovan wielded. What nature of creature was he?

“Isaac, why have you not come to me? I know of these things, of all nature of creatures caught between death and eternal life -- my own fate for a short while, until you pulled me back to this world.”

“They are not sent by God to punish me for my actions?”

Donovan smiled and sat on the edge of Isaac's bed. "Nay, good Maker. The wraiths see in you a man who communicates with the forces of Nature. They believe you are the cure for their ills. There, there, put your mind at ease. They will not return, not while I am under your roof."

Isaac's heart pounded in his chest, his fear of the ghosts replaced with an even greater fear -- the loss of Donovan.

"Then you will stay with me, my boy? I know that you long to see the wide world, and that my home must seem a veritable prison to you."

Donovan frowned and Isaac longed to grasp his hand, to press his cheek upon it and beg him to stay.

"Nay, you are my Father!" He snickered lightly. "Of course, to the world we are as brothers. Isaac, you must rest your mind on this subject. I enjoy this life, every day of it, and will forever be in debt to you."

Isaac nodded. If only there were no debt, if only his boy would remain because of love.

"I have not dared ask this before Isaac. I think the subject is abhorrent to you, and I would rather the doubt torture me for the rest of my days ..."

"Speak, my boy." Isaac grasped at Donovan's hand, relishing the warmth of his broad palm, pushing down the longing he believed God would deem a sin. "I can deny you nothing; you must know that by now."

"My life, before you saved me -- do you know what end I met? My occupation? I sometimes dream that I pursue a man down a narrow street, I believe here in Cambridge, but it may just as well be London, for all dark alleyways look alike. Fear chokes me, and I know I must catch the devil. I wonder at times if this event led to my death? Or was I simply a cooper or carpenter who never left my home?"

"Given your poor aptitude with tools, I quite doubt you plied such a trade."

Donovan sighed deeply and Isaac pitied the orphan, seeking his identity.

"I have no aptitude for any trade. I am simply your errand boy." He held up his hand to Isaac's protest. "It is true. I show no love of the numbers, the heavenly bodies -- any of your lofty ideas. I can barely help with your mixtures and simple calculations. You taught me to read and write. I was no learned gentleman; that much is certain. No one asked for me, no one cared that I lay cold on the morgue floor?"

"Donovan, do you fear you were a cutthroat, is that your worry? You had a terrible wound to your abdomen, perhaps the result of a drunken brawl, a jealous husband, a thief. I know not. Perhaps you were away from your home. Perhaps you had a loving family, a son who would have claimed your body, would he only have known your whereabouts. I would not hear of your identity, but the caretaker knew you not. God led me to my choice. Can that not be enough for you? Why would He lead me to a tortured soul?"

"Do I have a soul, Master?" A trembling of his lips betrayed his agony, and Isaac squeezed his hand to console him.

"Aye, Donovan. You have a beautiful soul."

"I see doubt in your eyes, Isaac. I will endeavor to live as though I have a soul, however. To make you proud."

"I am always proud of you." Isaac smiled in reassurance. Donovan usually brightened his spirits, and now he had to try to console this orphan of the world. "My boy, I do have one theory about your first life."

"Indeed? Tell me!"

"You have quite the affinity for fashion, do you not? It may point to a genteel life, Donovan, despite your lack of education. The two do not always go hand in hand."

Donovan snorted. "Admit it, Isaac, you suspect I may have been a tailor! There are worse lots in life, I suppose. Perhaps you would like me to sew you a new suit of clothes and test your theory?"

"Do I need a new suit of clothes?"

"Master, when is the last time you gazed into a looking glass? Your lovely pale curls are always in a tangle, your collars are torn, your cuffs are in tatters, and your shoes want cobbling. In short, Sir, you are quite dismissive of your Earthly beauty, which is significant."

"My work, my book ..."

"Yes, yes, I know. You let your work come before sleep and food, society and companionship. I worry for you, Isaac. You must rest more, enjoy your life!"

"You will buy my new suit of clothes and force me to take supper, Donovan. Perhaps we will go into London at the end of the month, the two of us. Would you enjoy such a trip?"

Donovan's wry smile lit the dreary room. "Aye, but you will not keep to that plan. On the appointed day, I will find you engrossed in your notes, and you will wave me off impatiently. I will, however, ensure that you have the proper clothing for such a trip, in case I find the way to pull you away from your labors."

The club music reverberated deep in Van's chest as he worked his way through the late-night crowd, shrugging off acquaintances, refusing offers of booze. A raven-haired buxom beauty slithered close to him, weaving her arms under his jacket to pull him close.

Bloody hell, what's her name?

Her heavy sweet perfume turned his stomach, already sensitive from the migraine threatening to incapacitate him. As she puckered her lips at him in unabashed invitation, he extracted himself from her embrace.

"You didn't call," she whined loudly over the music, pouting with a look he supposed she thought was sexy. What had he seen in her? With plastic breasts and artificially plumped lips, she now looked like a parody of beauty to him. *Karen, that was it!*

"Sorry, love, time's gotten away from me."

"Your nasty brother Alexander never called either. Does a girl have to do all three of you at once to get a second invitation?" Her abrasive voice drilled through his brain, grated on his nerves. Karen held her drink up to his lips, but he pushed her hand away firmly.

"Not tonight, Karen. Not ever." *Very suave, Donovan.*

Shock, hurt, and anger passed quickly across her carefully made-up face, and with a quick hand, she poured her drink onto his chest. The cold liquid soaked through his sweater, dripping to his pants. The group immediately around them watched in amusement as Van brushed at his sweater.

"I really wish you hadn't done that."

He knew she'd take a swipe at him, felt it coming a mile away, and reached up quickly to capture her wrist before her slap landed on his cheek.

"Love, it's time to call it a night." He motioned to the bartender, who gestured to a bouncer lurking quietly in the shadows. Not waiting to watch the bouncer escort Karen to the door, Van moved through the crowd again, which this time parted for him.

Was Defon right? Had his life become no more than seducing a string of nameless girls who lusted after him -- or was it his money -- and then grew quickly to hate him? Acquiring businesses that didn't interest him, escaping on trips to nowhere special? *Have you done anything meaningful in nearly three hundred years, Donovan?* The thought chilled him to his soul, that with all the time in the world, he hadn't advanced any cause, hadn't eased a pain, cured an illness, made a difference. Van would need Defon's prayers if there indeed were a Paradise, because he'd certainly not earned a spot there on his own.

He'd walked the streets most of the day, thinking of Defon, and hoping for another miracle -- a call from Sidra on his cell phone, a stroke of brilliance on how to convince her to help him, even a chance meeting in her neighborhood.

It struck him as cruel that he hoped Defon would abandon his high morals and find Sidra, threaten her, and perhaps force her to reach out to Van for help. Maybe she'd even decide she wanted to finish where they'd left off -- in the middle of a great kiss, with his hand cupping her gorgeous breast. She was so tentative and so hungry for him. The thought of spending an entire night breaking her down, helping her forget her pain, turning her to putty in his hands, was nearly as exciting as finding her at last -- the Alchemist. *There you go again. Mind in the gutter, putting pleasure before business.*

Now he had to face his brothers, explain that he'd failed -- at least temporarily. He edged his way behind the bar and grabbed a bottle of Scotch. The bartender said something to him, but he nearly had to scream over the music.

“What’s that?”

“Your brothers are waiting for you.” The bartender thumbed to the back room and Van nodded, mumbling as he forced a smile. “No fucking kidding.”

Van let out a sigh of relief as he escaped the crowd and blaring music, edged past a few couples kissing in the hallway as he pushed into the room marked “Office.”

Alexander and Wentworth sat at a low table with feet propped up and arms crossed. Both stayed serious as he joined them, although Went forced a little smile. Van detected a strain in his eyes that usually meant he’d been fighting with Alex and had come up short. When would Went learn there was no such thing as beating Alex?

“So, how’d it go, Van? Been gone nearly a day. We tried calling ...”

“I got your calls, Went. I needed a little space.”

“You fucked up!” Alex stood and paced, running his hand through his auburn hair. “I cannot believe it!” He lit a cigarette and pulled on it deeply, disgust etched across his striking face.

“I can’t make her help us, Alex! What do you want me to do, hold a gun to her head? I’m not even sure what she’s supposed to do to lift this curse!”

Van sat and leaned his pounding forehead in his hands, knowing one of his killer headaches was coming on. Wentworth slid over a seat and pushed a pill into his hand. “Here. I can see you need it.”

Throwing back the pill with a sip of Scotch, Van nodded his thanks to Went. The headaches cursed them both, and in centuries of trying every natural remedy they could find, the brothers had finally surrendered to modern medicine.

Alex groaned. “Simply fucking marvelous. Washing painkillers down with whiskey. You’re at the top of your game, Van, sharp as a tack! You can’t seduce a woman who probably fell in love with you at first sight, you didn’t learn a damned thing about our cure, and now Defon and friends know who she is. *If* she’s the One.”

“Shut up. Just shut the fuck up! She’s the One. At least I think so.” *Give me some peace. I’m doing the best I can.* “You know, Alex, there are times I’m very sorry I chose your corpse for revival. You looked so bloody *normal* when you were dead.”

“Always bringing that up! My God, you sound like a woman complaining to her child about her labor. It’s tasteless. I didn’t ask for this life, none of us did.”

Wentworth sighed deeply. “I’ve rather liked this life, and for the record, I’m still appreciative of your choice of me, Van.”

Alex and Van eyed one another and laughed together at Wentworth.

“What? What did I say?”

“You’ve said that about a thousand times, Wentworth. I get the idea.”

“Just being polite.”

Alex threw his hands up in frustration. "We're going to have to go back there and force her to help us."

Van groaned and Wentworth put his arm on Van's to ease his anger, as he often did. "Alex, leave him be. Van's right, there's not much we can do to *make* her help us. We're not even certain what she's supposed to do! It was such a long shot, really."

Van studied Went blearily as he sipped at the bottle of Scotch. "No, it's not a long shot. She's an historian, a professor, and a specialist on the Maker. She has a sidekick who also studies alchemy and Latin."

"Bloody hell, you've got to be kidding?"

"She's a SLider with strong psychic ability, had a gaggle of wraiths hanging out at her place until I stepped in, but ..."

Went shook Van's arm gently. "But what?"

"She's very smart, and pretty tough, actually."

"But what, Van?"

"She's in pain. Psychological pain. It pours from her. Her mother died recently, and I'm certain she was jilted pretty badly."

Alex snorted and grabbed the bottle from Van's hand. "So bloody what! Boo-hoo."

"Let me finish, asshole. She's not in touch with her abilities. I think the grief pushed her into the ether, thus she SLides and attracts wraiths, but the grief is also blocking her from understanding her power. If she doesn't know what she can do, who she is, how can we get her to help?"

"That's why we left you alone with her, idiot! Get her in bed, make her fall for you, and guide her to our cure. I *knew* I should have handled this one. Well, it's not too late. I'll go to her place ..."

"You go near her, and I'll kill you myself." The irony hit Van that he couldn't kill Alex if he tried.

Alex's green eyes flashed in amusement. "You've *fallen* for her! Bloody hell, Van."

"Bullshit."

"I've known you for hundreds of years, mate. I don't care if you're our self-appointed leader, the most powerful, the brightest star of the Maker's brood. You're *soft!*"

No, he's wrong. It doesn't matter -- I only care that Sidra makes things right for us. It's not about her.

Alex cocked his head and studied Van in challenge.

"Bugger off, Alex. Speaking of soft, I ran into your friend Defonsius today. He sends regards."

"How is Fonzie? Still cursing me to eternal damnation for banging that girl? Jesus, what was that, a thousand years ago?"

"It was his wife, it was fifty years ago, and yes, he's still damning you to Hell. I endorse the sentiment. You should make amends before it's too late. I know you care about him."

Wentworth cleared his throat. Alex gestured to him with annoyance. "Yes, the peacemaker wants to weigh in?"

Wentworth spoke softly, and the two strained to hear him, the baseline of club music filling the background with nerve-grating rhythm. "Does Defon know about Sidra?"

"I assured him she's not relevant. He'll leave her be." *Will he? He wouldn't actually hurt her, he didn't have it in him. Did he?* Nerves rolled around in Van's tumultuous stomach. If he miscalculated Defon, Sidra might be at risk.

"Oh, and Alex, one of your whores took a swing at me out there. I gave her the boot."

"Which one?"

"Karen."

"Oh, that's all right. I'm done with her."

Wentworth shook his head in disgust. "You're both going to Hell."

Alex snorted. "Is that one of your premonitions little brother?"

"No more bickering! Just leave Sidra to me."

Wentworth put a warm hand on Van's shoulder and squeezed affectionately. "This is getting to you, and I think I know why. You've never let go of Isaac, have you? You were the Maker's first creation; you were alone together for years. You don't talk about that time much."

Van nodded, and pushed down the three-hundred-year-old longing that always surfaced at the memory of that glorious time, when he was an only child even though he was a grown man, loved, cherished, and nurtured by the brightest mind on the planet. Before the anger, before the bitterness, before the curse. Long before his life became so banal.

Alex scoffed. "So what? How does that relate to this Patmos woman?"

"If she's the Alchemist, if she's the One, maybe Van and Sidra would feel a connection with one another? I mean, it might feel like old times to her, even if she doesn't understand it?"

Van clasped his hands together, worried their trembling would betray the deep feelings Went's words evoked. Was that what he experienced around Sidra? A connection to the Maker? His desire to see her again was growing hourly, becoming overwhelming, unexpected, like nothing in his lifetime.

Went looked at Van carefully. "Maybe you feel the same connection? Do you, Van? It might tell us a lot."

"No, I feel nothing for the woman."

Went shook his head sadly. "You never lied very well, Donovan. Is she the One, or is she simply another pretty face? Is she the reincarnation of the Maker?"

Van covered his face with his hands. *For the love of God, don't cry.* "I don't know. I honestly don't know. She doesn't look like him," he laughed lightly, knowing he must sound deranged to his brothers.

God, how I want to see her again. God, how I miss him. Isaac, I miss you.

Alex's voice was uncharacteristically quiet, with a hint of solace. "Of course, she wouldn't look like him, it wouldn't work that way. However, you might recognize his essence in her. Perhaps Wentworth is on to something." Alex sat closer to Van and threw an arm around him. "Come on Donovan, don't get all teary-eyed on us. We know you loved him, and he loved you the best. Alchemist's pet." He winked, and Van loved him for trying to lighten the mood.

Van sensed Wentworth's silent question, the one that surfaced every time they talked about the early days, the question he chose to ignore. *Were you lovers, Van? Were you more than the Maker's first creation?* How could he ever explain the love he'd shared with Isaac? Beyond the needs of the body, beyond friendship, beyond father and son.

The Maker labored for years, day and night, in secret and solitude, risking ridicule and possible execution to create him -- to breathe life into a hollow corpse, to give it personality and charm. *Charm.* Isaac was so fond of calling him "my charming boy, my soul's work." Isaac would pull Van close and touch his face in wonder, run a strand of his hair through his fingers, and smile almost shyly.

Van would tease Isaac about his sentimental nature. "I am three years older than you, Isaac. Stop calling me your boy."

"You will forever stay but eight and twenty, keeping your beauty, wreaking havoc on the females of every century. I, however, will outpace you in due time. You will bury me and forget of my existence."

"Ah, you crave my oath to love you for all eternity, do you not, Isaac? You ask for that oath guardedly. Dare you not ask me outright and be done with it? You know I would refuse you nothing."

Isaac would turn away, feign sudden interest in one of his notebooks, and pick up his quill, brushing back his long disheveled golden hair. Fifty-five years later, Van *did* bury him, watched the soil cascade onto the wooden casket as he stood side by side with his siblings, knowing that he'd failed Isaac miserably. Why else would Isaac have turned away from his brilliant accomplishments in mathematics and physics to create more of his soulless children? Why else would he have cursed his children on his deathbed?

Isaac had craved knowledge, the divine, and power, but most of all, he'd craved love. Too brilliant, too eccentric to understand how to find companionship in the real world, he'd created his own.

Why didn't you ever tell him, Van? Why did you let him die without the comfort of your touch, your kiss, your oath of love? Would it have cost you so much to pretend that you

could want a man? Couldn't you have done it for him? He gave you life and a livelihood, food and shelter, taught you everything, asked for nothing in return.

Van sighed deeply and shut his eyes tightly, trying to block out the vision of Isaac's bright blue pleading eyes, staring at him with such deep affection, his hand reaching out to beg for devotion, but never demanding a thing.

Alex pulled him out of his musings. "Not this again. Van, the Maker didn't curse us because you shunned his advances. We've been all through this, and I thought we were agreed. He feared the likes of Defonsius, Aloysius, and Martin."

Van snorted and pulled a deep mouthful of Scotch from the bottle, the strongest wave of pain dissipating with Wentworth's magic little pill. "Sure, let's keep saying that, and eventually, it will become true. I'm not to blame for the curse. Our bad brothers are. What precisely, Alex, did they do that was such an offense to Isaac that he'd curse us all with his dying breath?"

"He feared their heresy, of course. Isaac couldn't tolerate that one of his own would turn against his solitary God. At least if we 'Barlowes' had doubts, we had the sense to keep our mouths shut!"

Van closed his eyes and leaned back, arm across his forehead to block out Alex's arguments. They'd been over Isaac's motivations too often.

"I once asked him why he chose my body from the morgue. At first, he joked, saying the others had rotted too badly. Then he grew quite serious. 'My charming boy,' he said, 'I could not fathom how God had fashioned such a creature as you -- a glorious specimen, part demon, part angel. Even with the rigor and pallor upon you, it mattered not whether you were cutthroat or pirate in your first life, only that I could have you in my company during your second life.' Can you imagine -- he was only twenty-five! He'd just finished the foundation of what would become the *Principia* and was in his glory. All he wanted was to share it with me. I wasn't smart enough to understand his physics, of course, but he'd read bits to me again and again, sharing what he found most precious in the only way he could. I'd fix him tea and porridge as he worked through the night, sometimes curling up at his feet on a rough pallet like a pet hound. I'd go whoring about town while he slaved away, come back to find him pale and exhausted, and lift him into bed like a child. Then ..."

Van bit back a curse, wondering how it could still haunt him daily.

Wentworth nodded. "Go on, please. He was our Maker, too. You never tell us about those days."

"He became a bit obsessive. About my women, whether my soul was in peril, whether indeed I *had* a soul. One night he uncharacteristically drank himself sloppy, and cried as I left the house, shouting after me that I was leaving him. After that, he worked on ... well, the rest of you. I suppose I'd been with him about ten years at that point. He turned away from his math and physics and threw himself back into alchemy. I even assisted him at times, but when it came to the point of formation, as he called it, he'd kick me out, not willing to share

his secrets even with me.” *Didn’t you trust me, Isaac? Or did you just want to hurt me back? It worked; it still does.*

“His beloved.” Wentworth’s whisper sent Van’s stomach turning.

“Don’t say that again.” *I never want to hear those words again.*

Alex threw his hands in the air in frustration. “Look, it’s clear you loved one another, but that you aren’t gay. Pretty simple, eh? We all loved the guy. He’s dead, and if we continue with this self-indulgent psychoanalysis, we’re goners as well. Might I remind you the clock is really ticking? Now here is the thing, my darling brother. There’s a woman a few blocks away probably pining over you this very moment. Perhaps she has some deep ancient feelings for you; perhaps she simply thinks you’re a hunk. Whether she’s the Alchemist or not, she’s brought up a lot of crap in you. This is not helping save our bloody lives! You need to figure this shit out, and quickly. What are you going to do?”

“Sorry, but I haven’t a clue. I don’t think it will help much to knock on her door, fix her a drink, and while we’re making out, ask her if she happens to be Sir Isaac Newton. Not what a girl expects to hear, you know?”

Wentworth shrugged. “Actually, it might be worth a shot.”

Alex groaned and stood, pulling on his leather jacket. “Let’s go home, Einstein.”

“I’m serious. Why not ask her? What do we have to lose at this point?”

“Fine. Take another shot at it, Van. Visit your girl and see what’s what. But this time, call us.”

Van’s heart sank. Torn, part of him dying to go back and see Sidra, part of him fearful of her reaction, he nodded. “If she acknowledges being the reincarnated spirit of the most brilliant man to walk the planet, I’ll be sure to put her on the line.”

Chapter Seven

Sidra sat on the couch, clutching her notes to her chest tightly, struggling fiercely to focus on Josh as he read Newton's notes aloud in Latin.

"This bit does make it sound like Newton thought he was onto something."

"He always thought he was onto something, Josh. He usually was -- gravity, optics, calculus, chemistry. What's special about that part? We've been over it a dozen times, at least. Let me see that." She snatched the paper out of Josh's hand, scanning the phrases she could recite from memory. *It's as if I'd written them myself. I'd love a break from this. A trip somewhere warm, with turquoise water and big fruity drinks with little umbrellas.*

Josh arched a dark brow and turned up his long nose. "You're uncharacteristically impatient tonight."

"I'm uncharacteristically exhausted. We need to focus on the facts, approach this scientifically. Let's leave the mumbo jumbo to the hacks. You're starting to sound like Van."

"Me? Might I remind you that I'm the scientist and you're the dreamer. By the way, that's about the twentieth time you've mentioned Van." Josh peeled off his glasses, threw them on the table, and picked up his glass of wine. "Spill."

Oh, God, I can't even hide this ... this obsession. Is that why I'm being such a bitch to Josh? I just want some time alone to think, to fantasize, to dream.

"There's nothing to spill. I don't expect to see Mr. Barlowe again."

"Lovers' quarrel?"

"Lovers! Hardly. The guy's a wacko." *God, what must it be like to be Van's lover? Does he have a lover? Of course, he's probably with a different woman every night. He may be with someone now. Of course he is.*

"Good looking wacko. You look different when you talk about him. You never even looked that way over ..."

"Patrick. His name was Patrick."

"Sorry, that came out wrong."

"It's okay. I was engaged to Patrick, even though he seemed to forget that particular detail. I don't even know Donovan Barlowe." *Don't you, Sidra? Why do you feel like you know him well? How is that possible?*

"Whatever you say. If you want to talk about it, I'm here to listen."

"I'm sorry, honey, let's get back to work. Maybe it will clear my head of all this ghost nonsense. Okay, let's talk through this piece. Shortly after Isaac recorded this experiment, he wrote his buddy Robert Boyle, warning him to keep 'high silence.' He asserts that 'the way in which the Mercurial principle may be impregnated' was known by the ancient alchemists, and he hints that this achievement may possibly 'provide an inlet to something more noble.' I read that to mean something beyond the transmutation of base metals into gold. Agreed?"

"Correct. He spoke much more openly about his attempts at gold before this." Josh rubbed his chin in thought. "He can only mean the creation of the Philosopher's Stone, in the allegorical sense."

"Right." A tingling sensation spread through Sidra's limbs. *Not the wraiths, please, not in front of Josh.* She scanned the room quickly, but her loft was still and quiet.

No, this is different, this is more like those times when I had the visions. Past-life visions, Van had said. Sidra closed her eyes in trepidation, testing herself. Nothing.

"What is it, Sidra? You've gone pale."

"Just a little weary." A sudden blurring of her vision robbed her of her breath. She closed her eyes again, this time catching the briefest glimpse of a hand, palm extended, holding a stone the size of a nickel. She heard the thought, felt the shock, as if it were her own. *My God in Heaven, I have done it!*

Josh shook at her arm. "Sidra, are you ill?"

She looked at Josh in wonder. "It's not allegorical. The Stone. It existed."

"Why have you suddenly changed your mind? I don't agree. What did he create? A bit of antimony mixed with lead and citric acid? It wouldn't have done him any good. He'd have a lump of rock, a nice little homemade paperweight."

"It was pale green, with an icy interior, as if it held light of the world focused down to the head of a pin."

"Excuse me? Did you dream this? Look, Sidra, none of his notes mentions a green stone. Isaac never wrote about the Stone at all!"

"He couldn't. Don't you see? He had to keep it secret. I've seen this stone, Josh."

Josh's jaw dropped open. "What in God's name are you talking about? You're worrying me, honestly."

His expression of concern pulled Sidra from her own shock. *What's going on!* She needed to speak with Van, and quickly. She couldn't have glimpsed the seventeenth century and Isaac's alchemical creation, could she? *Are you really losing it, Sidra?*

What if I never see him again?

"Honey, do you mind if we knock off for tonight? I'm babbling because I'm exhausted."

"Sidra, maybe I should stay on the couch or something? You really don't seem yourself."

"I'm fine, I swear."

Josh rose and gathered up his papers, shut down his laptop, and pulled on his coat. "Get some sleep, Sidra. You have the whole weekend to rest. We'll start fresh on Monday. Promise me you'll rest?"

"Promise."

"And you'll call me if you need anything at all?"

"Promise, Josh. I'll be okay."

Josh leaned down and gave her a gentle kiss on the forehead, and panic clutched at Sidra's throat. She'd be alone again. Perhaps the wraiths would come back? Perhaps that Defon character learned her address? Should she ask Josh to stay? But he was out the door, and she didn't want to appear as crazy as she felt.

Sidra rose to chain the door behind Josh, and hesitated. The fine hairs on her arms stood up as the air turned chill and a hint of Van's cologne filled the room. Sidra turned quickly, but he wasn't in the room. *Great, now you expect him to materialize in your living room.*

The soft tap at her door set her heart pounding in her chest. She backed away from the door a step.

"Who is it?"

Sidra looked through the peephole and suppressed a cry of mixed relief, joy, and fear. Van had changed clothes, and now looked oddly casual in an untucked white dress shirt, jeans, and sneakers. His hair was wet and tied back.

With a shaking arm, she placed her palm against the door and watched as he tapped lightly again. He looked at the floor, long dark lashes brushing his pale cheeks. *If you let him in, you'll never want him to leave.*

She threw the latch, turned the knob and stepped back, heart racing at his expression as he stepped into the apartment. Pain etched across his forehead, and he squinted as though the low light of the living room hurt his eyes. His mouth was tightly drawn and he let a deep sigh escape at the sight of her.

Pushing the door closed behind him, he stood and regarded her head to toe for a moment, then stepped two paces towards her and held out his palm. Without intending to, as if in a trance, Sidra touched his palm with hers.

"Sidra." His voice was a mere whisper. "Tell me you remember me." He pulled her towards him with a strong grasp, eyes pleading for an answer.

"It's only been a few hours, of course I remember ..."

He shook his head. "No. Do you *remember* me? Your charming boy?"

"Charming ..." The Earth moved beneath Sidra's feet as she looked into his eyes, as longing consumed her, body and soul. It made no sense. How could she remember a man she'd never seen before yesterday? Nevertheless, she *did*. She remembered looking into his deep eyes, and as she reached out to grab a strand of his hair and lace it through her fingers, tears welled up. *I've touched his hair a hundred times.*

"My charming boy. Did I call you that?"

"Yes, quite often, in fact." Van's sad eyes belied his sweet smile.

Like a lightening bolt, a bright flash of memory filled Sidra's senses. She reached out to steady herself and Van laced his arms around her waist.

The biting smell of sulfur mixed with the fragrance of pipe smoke, of roasting food and a wood fire. She stood in a shadowy room with a low ceiling made of the heaviest wooden beams from which herbs and dried flowers were suspended. Through an ornate leaded window, a single beam of sunlight cut through the particles in the air. The sound of carriage wheels and the whinny of horses made Sidra look out the window, and she saw that her room was beneath street level. A man raced down the stairs to the entrance of her home.

Her heart sung in joy. He is home! Do not let him see how excited you are. She quickly turned away from the door and picked up a jar of crushed stone.

The door banged open and she turned to see her beloved, weighed down with parcels wrapped in cloth and twine. His proud, broad smile brightened the room.

"Here you are! I am most pleased to report that I have secured every item on your list, no small task, I assure you! I did spend all the coin you gave me, as well as a bit of my own. I hope there is a hearty meal waiting as my reward!"

Donovan dumped the packages on a low table and extended his forearms to Sidra, clutching hers with his broad hands in a brief greeting. He loosed his hair from its leather binding and pulled off his waistcoat, throwing it irreverently onto the table. "I believe half of Cambridge's soil has attached itself to me. Where is the boy, Marcus? I would kill for a hot bath."

Sidra walked toward him and reached to touch his cheek. "I am happy for your safe return, my charming boy."

Her words echoed until they became a faint whisper. As someone shook her by the shoulders gently, time and space shifted, leaving her stomach rolling and her head spinning.

"Sidra! Sidra, what is it?" Sidra opened her eyes slowly and glanced around her apartment. She clutched tightly at Van's shoulders and he pulled her in, held her tightly against his body.

"Oh God. Oh God." Her entire body shook and as if just woken suddenly from a nightmare, she felt disconnected, ungrounded. She counted her breaths and felt the air fill her lungs, heard the sound of her own exhalation. Van watched her carefully as he brushed his hand through his hair. The gesture was so familiar ...

No! Make it stop! She clutched on to Van as she slipped back in time again.

How she loved that habit of his, long pale fingers laced through his thick midnight-black hair, head cocked to one side, unaware, or simply not caring how compelling he looked.

"You are filthy yourself, Sir! Have you been working the entire time I have been away?" Donovan shook his head in disapproval. "I am selfish! Let me call Marcus to prepare a bath for you, and I will go upstairs and see about a meal."

"To be honest, Donovan, I am so weary, I think I might simply retire for the night."

"I will not allow it! If you will not care for yourself, then I must do it for you. I will bathe you, feed you, and tuck you in as if you were my child, if that is how you continue to behave. You are a Fellow of Cambridge, Sir. Your colleagues begin to gossip about your strange ways and your isolation." Donovan smirked. "Not to mention the company you keep."

"What company? How can I keep company if I am isolated? Bah! Morons all, to the last man!"

"They mean me! Are you so innocent that you cannot imagine the nature of their gossip? One day I take up quarters with you, shadowing you by day and night, running your errands. You may be my Father, but to them we are nearly the same age. They snicker loudly enough that I might hear and jest that we are quite the handsome couple -- you with your long blonde curls and delicate features." Donovan winked. "Evidently I am considered comely as well."

Sidra turned away, panic sweeping through her. Oh, God help me! "Such talk is vile, unholy. Do not listen to them, Donovan. You are not to speak of it again."

"Oh, Father, do not take it to heart so! You and I know the truth. I simply warn you to take care of appearances. Go out among your colleagues, take a meal with them, talk about your research, and perhaps chat with one of the lovely ladies of Cambridge about the weather." Donovan winked again with a sly grin.

"You tease me. I have no time for the insipid ladies of Cambridge."

Donovan smiled sadly. "Nay, Father. Time is not the issue. You have no interest in the ladies of Cambridge or any other town."

"My work comes before earthly pleasures! Leave it be, Donovan. You take liberties with this talk of my wants and needs and know nothing of my true feelings on the subject. I am a man of God!"

"You are flesh and blood, and if you do not admit your desires, the truth will eat your spirit away until you are a lifeless shell."

Desires? What does he know of my desires? To have him in my arms, to feel that silken hair in my hand, that perfect skin against mine! This is unbearable.

"Leave me now."

"Please, you may trust me, you know that! Have you considered that Master Wickens may feel as you do? I see his covert glances in your direction as you work together. Do you fret that I might think less of you? I would not. You will always be my perfect Maker. I only wish for your happiness."

"Leave, I said!" Sidra shook in agony. Wickens? He means for me to take Wickens as my lover? He would be happy to see me with another!

"As you wish, Father." Donovan took the stairs to his quarters, leaving Sidra to slide to her chair, heart shattered.

"Sidra, look at me! Stop crying, open your eyes!" Van wiped at her tears and she opened her eyes, head spinning at the sudden clarity of her vision.

"You're safe now, love. Tell me what happened. I won't let anything hurt you." Van rubbed her back and pecked brief kisses on her head, pulled her head against his shoulder. "Did you have a vision, Sidra?"

"Yes, a vision ..." *What happened?* She had been out of body, out of time and space. However, Van was there, and she'd loved him in a way she hadn't known possible. Like a son, like a brother, like a husband, a friend, a lover. How she craved him! *I'm really losing my mind. I'll have to see that doctor now, and they'll give me drugs, and then put me away.*

"Was I there, Sidra?" Van pushed her away slightly and held her steadily by the shoulders. She looked away, unwilling to meet his eyes lest the longing she now owned deep inside for him show clearly.

He shook her slightly and she pushed at his chest in protest. "Leave me alone! You started all this. Leave me alone." Sidra covered her eyes and wept in a pain she didn't fully understand. Van pulled her hands away and brushed at her tears again.

"Stop it! There's nothing wrong with you! Ah, bloody hell, woman, don't you see? We *knew* one another." He brushed her damp hair from her cheeks and pressed his lips to her forehead. "We knew one another, Sidra, and we loved one another. You're just now remembering. I've remembered my whole life."

She studied his face, desperately searching for an answer that made sense, finding only his exquisite blue eyes pleading with her to accept the unacceptable.

"We knew each other in a former life? You expect me to believe that?" She had always believed in reincarnation. Why hadn't she ever considered it for herself? The alternative was unthinkable -- that she truly was insane.

"Yes, love, we knew each other in *your* former life. I'm still in the same lifetime."

"I'll never believe that."

"Never say never." Van smiled wryly and brushed at her cheek lovingly.

"And we were ... lovers? Married? Who were we?"

"We weren't lovers, but we loved one another very much. We were ... roommates."

"Why weren't we lovers if we ...?" A flicker of awareness shot through her and her legs went wobbly. The arms that had clutched at Van's in her vision -- the hands -- broad and calloused -- they had been the hands of a man! He had called her 'Father.' A man who loved Donovan Barlowe heart and soul. A Fellow of Cambridge, he had called her. *No! Sir Isaac Newton? It was insanity!*

"Because I was a man. And you are a man."

"You noticed. I'm flattered." Van pressed another kiss on her forehead. His scent flowed to her heart. How she had longed for such kisses. For so much more. How she longed for him now. A rush of sexual awareness and heat pounded to her core, and she squirmed in Van's grasp, embarrassed at the moisture building between her legs, the press of her aching nipples against his chest.

"Let me go, Van. I need time to think."

He slid his hand through her hair, against her scalp, and pulled her in.

"Stop fighting me, Sidra. Stop fighting our destiny."

"What is our destiny?"

"Let's find out together." Van scooped her up into his arms and strode towards the bedroom. "Do you remember wanting to make love to your charming boy, Sidra? Do you want to now? I'm finally ready." Sidra didn't understand the deep emotion lacing the low dark tone of his laugh, until she looked into his eyes to see one tear tracing a crooked path down his cheek.

He loved that man. He doesn't love you, Sidra, remember that. This is about his past, one you don't understand. I won't be a substitute for another, no matter how badly I want him.

"Ah, if it were only that simple." Van laid her on the bed and unceremoniously unbuttoned his shirt as he gazed at her head to toe.

"Stop reading my mind."

"Take your clothes off, Sidra. Please, don't force me to take my time seducing you. I'm not very good at it."

"I doubt that. I doubt any woman ever resisted you."

Van shrugged with a sly smile. "Got me there."

Sidra lost the ability to speak, to think, as Van peeled off his shirt to reveal a glorious expanse of muscled chest, strong arms, flat stomach, provocative cords of muscle angling down from his hips, and a hint of dark hair at the waistband of his low-slung jeans. She wet her lips with her tongue, her mouth going dry instantly as he unsnapped his jeans and pulled at the zipper.

"Ah, just like old times." Van laughed lowly and ran his hand slowly down his abdomen to tease, pressing his hand inside his briefs and hissing out a quick breath as he caressed his swollen cock for a moment. "He'd glance at me furtively while I changed or bathed, you know, thought I didn't notice, but it repulsed me. You have the same expression on your beautiful face." Van laughed lightly. "Somehow I'm not repulsed this time."

A flare of anger quelled Sidra's passion. "I'm not him, whoever he was. I'm me. And I'm not looking away."

Van laughed freely. "Good for you, Sidra." He freed his enormous erection from his jeans, ran his fingertips along the dark, thick hard length of it as it jutted up to his navel. He rolled his thumb over the broad head, spreading a drop of his essence, shuddering slightly in pleasure. Van's eyes burned with lust as he continued his slow strokes, and Sidra bit back a plea, unsure if she craved him to go on or to stop.

Van moved next to the bed and nodded to Sidra. "I want to watch you undress."

"I'm not ready. Please, this is too weird."

"Oh, you're ready." Van laughed, knelt at her side, and with a solid grasp on her blouse, tore it down the middle and pulled the fabric away, then quickly yanked her bra down to her waist, leaving her panting, breasts exposed to the cool air and Van's hot gaze. Sidra folded her arms across her chest, but Van pulled them gently away.

"Come on, Sidra. Why pretend you don't want me? You've wanted me forever."

"Have you ever been unsure of yourself, Van? Of anything? You could at least pretend I have a choice in this."

"Of course you have a choice. I simply don't want to waste time pretending you don't want me and I'm not insane for you."

"You want something from me. There's a big difference."

"I want it all." He pulled at her arms again.

"A one night stand with someone else's spirit!"

"More than a one night stand, and you know it. That's what you're afraid of isn't it? That I might actually want you and you might have to decide whether to let me in. Admit it."

"That's not it."

The lie clenched at her chest. It *was* it, precisely. Beneath the flush of lust and longing, Sidra wondered if she could stand to get dumped again. An ancient part of her already desperately loved this man, and the rest of her was falling in love with him quickly. Sidra closed her eyes and a wave of panic swept through her. Like a tsunami, unstoppable, never ending, building on itself, her love for Van would crush her, leave pieces of her heart tossed about in a random pattern like flotsam and jetsam. *Just like when Patrick left. I can't feel that way again -- I'll never survive it.*

Van suddenly sat upright, as if startled. He ran a hand through his hair and winced. "Oh, Sidra. That guy who broke your heart. Is this too soon? There hasn't been another since?"

"There's been a few too many since."

Van's eyes widened in surprise. "Really? So you're loose?"

Sidra sat up in anger, pulling a blanket up to cover her naked torso. "Jackass! That's not fair. I bet you've been with a different woman every night for each of your ... how many years?" *Jesus, how many years? How old is he? How is this possible?*

"Not every night." Van pulled the blanket away and leaned in, kissing her neck, nibbling at her skin, sending a wave of pleasure through her.

"See! That makes you a stud and me loose because I've had a few dates."

"You need to shut up and kiss me now. I'm *your* stud." His order had the pull of destiny, and Sidra lost her trail of thought, aware only of his hot tongue pressing into the shell of her ear, his long hair brushing her bare shoulders, the dark scent of desire pouring from him.

"My stud," she repeated numbly as she ran her hand along his waist and up his back, luxuriating in the feel of muscle under silken skin.

Van caught his breath and stared into her eyes, then looked down at her lips. His eyes glinted with mixed longing and amusement, and Sidra's resistance shattered.

"My charming boy. You are charming. You're ..."

"What am I?"

"Everything."

With a low moan, Van leaned in and pressed his lips to hers, laced his hands in her hair, and ravished her mouth with a desperation that made her dizzy. His tongue slashed against hers repeatedly. Sidra heard herself moaning as she lost herself in his kiss. Nothing in her life prepared her for the searing heat of this man's hands, his mouth. Sidra lay back and pulled him down onto her, lacing her hands in his hair, clutching at his back.

"Please, Van ..." *Please, I need all of you.*

"Stop? Don't tell me to stop, Sidra. I don't know if I can."

"No, don't stop! My God, don't stop!"

Van pulled back and smiled broadly. "I did seduce you!"

"Shut up and kiss me."

He fell back on top of her, his heavy cock pressing into her as he leaned in to suckle on her breasts. The first flick of his hot wet tongue on her hard nipple set her soaking pussy throbbing. She pulled at his hair, wrapping her fingers tightly in the silk strands to force him closer, wanting, needing desperately to lose herself in him.

Van moved his full lips from one breast to the other, nibbling and sucking, teasing and pinching with his fingers and mouth until Sidra cried out in glorious frustration.

When he got up, she reached out in protest, desperate for his touch again. He stepped out of his jeans and underwear and she gazed in longing at the size of his cock, now swollen even larger. She ached to touch the veined skin, to feel the size and strength of him fill her.

Van leaned over and pulled her sweatpants and thong off in one swift motion. Sidra glanced at him quickly, unable to ward off insecurity. He'd been with so many women; how could she ever hope to satisfy him? How could such a man find her adequate? *Never*.

"God help us. What a body."

Sidra let out a breath, not realizing she'd been holding it, and he laughed.

"Oh come on, now. No false modesty."

Van sat opposite her and pulled her upright. He inched closer until his cock pressed against her mound. The friction of his skin against hers set her on fire, and she arched up to press him inside.

"Sidra. You're so wet, so hot. My God."

Van steadied her around the waist with one hand and ran his other hand over every inch of her torso. Sidra touched her fingertips over his cheeks, down his neck, along his collarbone. When he pinched at her nipple, she reached for his and pinched back, and he hissed in satisfaction. "Go ahead, play with me. Don't hold back. I'm yours."

He brushed his hand along her collarbone, ran his fingers down the well between her breasts. Van pushed her back to the bed and hovered an inch away, just as he had in her dream. His wet kisses lavished her face and neck as he pressed his heavy cock against her belly, pushed her legs apart with his hand, and explored her with his fingers. Crying out at his touch, which was so delicate it tortured her, she pushed harder into his hand.

"More?" He licked his lips in anticipation, watched her carefully as he pressed fingers into her opening and explored with practiced motions.

"More!"

A sweep of flush crept up her body as he circled his thumb over her nub, leaning in to imitate his movements with a kiss. Sidra reached for his cock and clutched desperately, trying to pull him closer.

"Now, Van, please!"

"I'll never last if you keep that up ..."

"Now."

He laughed lowly and pressed inside her in an agonizingly slow pace. Sidra wanted him to fill her quickly, but he took his time, eyes burning into hers, then closing tightly as he pushed in one hard thrust. Fire spread through Sidra, her nerve endings sizzling as she clamped down on him, trying to draw him in further.

"Oh my God, Sidra. You're so perfect."

Van lifted her hips and rose to his knees, angled to thrust in a steady rhythm that sent them both crying to God. Sidra wanted it to last forever, clutched at him, praying for a spell that would make the moment last, make it count.

"Try and love me again, Sidra." His harsh whisper made her heart stop and her eyes shot open to fall into the deep blue pools of his eyes.

I never stopped, Donovan. Her spirit cried out in triumph as she called his name, a wave of release breaking through her entire body as he fell into his own release, as his throbbing essence pumped into her body and flooded her heart.

Van finally pulled her into his arms and rocked her gently, kissing her hair and eyes and sighing deeply.

"That was all right." He looked at her slyly from one squinted eye.

Her heart still pounded furiously in her chest, and she wondered if she had heard him right.

"I guess."

"I'm kidding, love, it was wonderful. You didn't enjoy yourself?"

"It was okay. I've had better."

Van leaned up on one elbow and eyed her seriously. "When?"

"Oh, maybe in another life." She tried to keep her tone light, but Van saw right through her, she was sure.

He snorted. "That was *not* amusing. Don't do that to me."

"Oh my God, you can't be that vain! You have to be the best in everything you do?"

"Where you're concerned I do. I can't have you looking elsewhere for your kicks."

My kicks? That's what this is to him?

Van brushed a strand of hair from her eyes and ran his finger down her shoulder, humming a tune Sidra didn't recognize. "You really should do yourself a favor, Sidra, and stop expecting the worst of people. Of men."

"Please stop reading my mind, Van."

"It's getting easier. I wonder if your vision has put us on the same wave-length, so to speak."

"I don't want to talk about that."

Sidra rolled onto her back, pulled a blanket up to her chin, and stared at the ceiling. *Please, God, no more of those visions. I'd rather have the wraiths. Well, maybe*

Van reached down and held her hand. "Love, we must talk about it. You do realize that, of course."

"No." *Is that what it will take to make you stay? Please don't make me do this. I don't know if I'm ready, if I'll ever be ready for all of this.*

Van pulled her chin towards him and held her gaze. A sudden jolt of energy touched her chest. Time held still, and she held her breath. Van's pupils widened and he breathed in quickly a second after her.

"Sidra?"

"Hmnn?"

"I think the world just stopped rotating for a moment. Even Sir Isaac wouldn't have known what to make of that."

"I don't understand?"

"Yes, you do."

Sidra pulled out of his grasp and sat up on the edge of the bed, turned her back to Van, hands trembling. *Yes, I do. I'm in love with you, and I'll do anything in the world to help you. When you get what you need from me, you'll leave, and my world will stop again.*

"I hate the fucking Internet. I wish I'd never found your SLlder group."

"Ah, Sidra. Don't ever play poker. Come here, love." Van sat up behind her and kissed her neck, stroked her waist, and laid his head on her shoulder. His hair fell along her arm in a dark shimmering wave, and she wound a strand through her fingers, wondering how to resist him, knowing it was useless. She turned and he caught her mouth in a kiss, pulling her to him tightly.

Sidra pushed him gently away. "Van, I don't know what to believe, but I have to know something. Please be honest. You said earlier that you are dying, that all of your kind is dying -- your brothers, Defon ..."

Van nodded.

"Are you sure?"

"As certain as we can be. The Maker generally got things right. Gravity, physics, calculus ..."

"Creating you."

"There's that." His smile was weak, his eyes pained, his mouth drawn tightly.

"How long?"

"Well, taking into account that the calendar was changed in 1752, we've calculated we're looking at the end of this month."

“What!” A dread, worse than the wraiths, worse than her vision, filled her heart. *No, it’s not possible. I’ll lose him no matter what. Two weeks?*

“Think you might like to help us out a bit?”

“I don’t see what help I can be.”

“That wasn’t the question. Are you willing to try? To rescue me? To rescue my annoying brothers?”

“You honestly think I’m the reincarnation of Sir Isaac Newton?”

“I know you are.”

“He created you, and he’s responsible somehow for the end drawing near? You think I did that?”

“You don’t own the sins of that life.”

“Don’t I? I think it’s called karma.”

“You did a lot of good, Sidra. The world changed because of the Maker. Do you understand?”

“I really think you have the wrong girl. I barely passed geometry in high school.” *How could I see the Philosopher’s Stone if I’m the wrong girl? Dear God, Isaac Newton. All these years, so drawn to him, so fascinated with his studies.*

Van pulled her close and hugged her breathless. “I don’t think it works that way, love. Although you do have to admit a rather strong interest in the man.”

“This is a lot to take in, Van. Do you have any sisters?”

“Only two. I often wondered if the Maker hoped we would pair up and breed.”

“Did you? Did any of you?”

“No, love. We are like siblings, and feel that way towards one another. Three of us married mortals and had children. Defon buried many children through the years. Alex, Went, and I watched in horror as the grief took its toll on his spirit. Perhaps that is one reason we Barlowes avoided marriage. Although there might be some offspring out there somewhere -- or their descendants. What with no birth control ...”

“Do you think you have descendants?” *God, how many women? How many children?*

Van shrugged sheepishly. “Times have changed. I believe I knew more bastard children than acknowledged heirs in the first half of my life. Speaking of birth control ...” Wincing, he ran his hand through his hair. “I suppose that’s the sort of thing you ask in advance? It’s been a while, believe it or not.”

“Not.”

“I swear on my Maker. I don’t want to ruin whatever playboy image you might have of me, but I’m rather fussy. That is, unless one of Alex’s bimbos ... well, never mind that. So, is there a chance we just made a baby?”

“No.”

"I see. Now you're worried I'm lying to you, and that I screw around every chance I get. That I might infect you with a horrid disease?"

"I don't know what I think."

"On the plus side of being one of the Maker's brood, I don't get sick, don't carry viruses. I think I'm what's known as a good catch."

"A good catch?" Sidra laughed despite the horrifying thought that Van might die soon. Surely this was some psychic superstition of his?

"I'm incredibly handsome, or so I'm told." He arched a brow. "That's the cue for you to tell me I am."

"You are." *That's the understatement of the century.*

"I have money, stable businesses, and homes around the world."

Sidra snorted. "This isn't a reality TV show. You aren't The Bachelor."

"I'm fun at parties. I dance -- how many men do you know ballroom dance? One advantage of growing up in a different era, or eras -- you know what I mean. Dancing was a fairly important social pastime for the last few hundred years."

"I'm not convinced about the few hundred years part, but yes, I'm familiar with the fact that men used to dance. Go on."

"I love to shop and I'm not gay. Come on, Sidra, that has to count for something."

"That is a plus."

"I'm fashionable. I have impeccable hygiene. I can read and write."

"Good for you! Wow, a man who can read and write."

"Darling, you can't imagine how long it took for me to learn to read and write. That bloody Latin and Greek as well as English. Isaac was a very patient man."

"Oh, right. The late 1600s."

Van nodded, then rubbed his chin in mock concentration. "I'm about the best there is when it comes to housecleaning."

"You do windows?"

"No, love, I mean the ghosts. I hire others to clean up, or force Wentworth to do it. He's a real chump for me. So you have to admit I'm a good catch."

Sidra tried to match his joking demeanor, but it was useless. "A good catch for whom? For how long?"

Van groaned and pulled her in. "Don't do this, damn it. Hasn't a guy ever asked you to be his before? You said you had a boyfriend, didn't you?"

"Excuse me? What are you talking about?"

"Lovers. Boyfriends and girlfriends. You know, going out? Kids call it going steady, right? Having sex, sleeping over, meeting the parents? Oh, wait, you are the parent. Look,

love, I know it's complicated in our case, but I want to hear you say you're interested in being with me. For more than one night. Oh, God, what have you done to me? Turning me into a bloody girl."

"I'm so confused."

"Sidra, I'm simply saying that even if I didn't need your help, I'd still work very hard to make you want me."

"I don't believe that."

"You'll see. I'll work hard to convince you. Speaking of hard ..."

Van guided her hand down his smooth torso and pressed it to his cock, rock stiff again. He moved her hand along the shaft, moaning as she took over. "You're amazing. You have magic hands. Kiss me."

Sidra threw herself into the kiss as Van moved above her and without a moment's preliminaries, pushed his throbbing penis deep inside her, crying her name in bliss. This time they rocked together in a primitive embrace, Van pounding into her in a slow steady rhythm as she arched up to meet each stroke. Van held her face in his hands and forced Sidra to meet his gaze as the fire built slowly inside and washed through every cell of her body.

Was there any chance that he could want her, for herself? As pleasure washed through her and his deep blue eyes flared in passion and release, it struck Sidra that it didn't matter. She wouldn't turn her back on him. If he told her now that she meant nothing to him, that she never would, she'd help him with her dying breath if she could.

Closing her eyes to fall off the cliff of sensations, she heard him speak, as if from very far away. *I'm falling in love with you, Sidra. Please help me.*

She opened her eyes. He hadn't spoken aloud.

Chapter Eight

The morgue had not changed at all in the ten years since Isaac's last visit, with one exception -- caretaker Chivers had long since become one of the temporary occupants.

His son had taken over his duties, and Isaac smiled inwardly at the uncanny likeness of young Chivers to his father, wondering how God could have created two such hideous creatures.

Donovan pulled at Isaac's sleeve and beckoned him to hurry.

"I loathe this terrible place and this terrible man."

"It twas your home for but a day. Nothing here can harm you."

"You bring me here to punish me, Isaac. Why this sudden disdain? It tears at my heart."

Isaac patted Donovan on the back, ashamed of his pettiness, wondering himself at his bitterness.

"I would have your opinion. The next will be your brother or sister; you should have some say in the choice." This is the last thing you want, you fool. You torture yourself with these tests of Donovan's fealty. What a frail creature!

Donovan turned away from the floor littered with dozens of lifeless bodies, many covered in dried pus and sores from the recent pestilence. Shielding his face with his arm, he muttered to young Chivers. "Are these not to be burned immediately?"

Chivers spat on the ground and scratched at his chin. "Aye, Sir, immediately after Majesty's visit to the college. We cannot have the smell of burning flesh assault the royal nose."

"You choose, Donovan. The sooner you do, the sooner we may leave this place."

Isaac watched carefully, sure that Donovan would choose one of the women. The thought ate at his gut.

Donovan scanned the floor quickly, then pointed to a tall, auburn-haired man who seemed victim of a noose rather than disease. "He'll do. Looks strong enough to help with the work of the house."

Isaac's heart sunk. He expected a selfish act from a man who'd never acted selfishly. No, Donovan chose a man to be of assistance, had thought of Isaac first.

"Would that he were brilliant enough to help with my research on refraction." Why, Isaac, why do you taunt Donovan so? He has no talent, no passion for the experiments. It is not his fault. I hold my own beloved son at fault for a crime that is mine alone.

"Perhaps if you are fortunate, Isaac, he will not only be bright, but he will also be a lover of men. Then you will not have to hate me so for staying true to my own nature. I see that you would replace me. I hope it is for the best."

Donovan shot Isaac a scathing glance and ran out to the street.

"Well done, Isaac. You have lost the only soul you ever cared for."

* * * * *

"Damn!" Van ducked behind a pillar to watch as a man hugged Sidra with affection. Clean-cut, handsome, older -- and looking like he could be a relative of Sidra's, he talked to her seriously on the steps of her building.

Van groaned. Why hadn't she stayed inside, as he'd instructed? Screw the pastries! How could he have been so stupid? Defonsius no doubt still prowled the area, and he certainly was clever enough to notice that Van hadn't abandoned Sidra as unremarkable, hadn't bought his story. Van wanted her safe, and cursed himself for leaving her alone.

This man was no threat to Sidra, but he could put a wrinkle in Van's plans. The man turned away to answer a call on his cell phone, and something in his mannerism clued Van in. Sidra had said she'd called the Feds, called her uncle, and this guy fit the bill perfectly.

Van chanced a quick appearance from behind the column and caught Sidra's eye. She looked nervously at the man and motioned Van away, but he shook his head no and put a finger to his lips.

With a nonchalant swagger, Van sauntered down the block, approaching Sidra just as the stranger ended his call.

"Hi honey, sorry I'm late."

Sidra looked panicked for a second, then smiled and stepped in to hug Van. He squeezed her tightly and then offered his hand to the suit before Sidra could get a word out.

"Hello. I'm Jack Warner, Sidra's colleague and friend."

"Nice to meet you. Fred Abercrombie, Sidra's uncle."

"I can see the resemblance. You'd be Scarlet's brother, then?"

Sidra bit at her lip nervously, and Van handed her the bag of pastries to occupy her.

Damn. The guy had quick eyes, had sized him up in a few seconds.

"What do you teach, Professor?"

"Please, call me Jack. History, like Sidra."

"Fascinating. What specialty? I'm a bit of history buff, as Sidra will tell you. Just an amateur, of course."

Fred crossed his arms and waited for Van's answer, holding his gaze steadily. *Fed, definitely.*

"Well, I can handle just about anything from the late 1600s onwards. Especially Britain."

Van glanced at Sidra and saw a flicker of a smile.

Go ahead buddy, ask away. I was there.

To Van's surprise, Fred didn't delve, but turned to Sidra. "Honey, I don't mean to intrude, but I'd like a little time with you, alone." He turned to Van. "Family business, you understand."

Damn it. Can she handle this? What will she tell him? "Oh, perfectly. Sidra, do you want me to stop back here and collect you for lunch?"

"I can meet you somewhere. *I Tre Merli?*"

"Fabulous choice! One o'clock?"

Sidra nodded and Van extended his hand to Fred, who shook it wordlessly and pushed Sidra to the door of her building.

Van watched them enter the building, cursing to high heaven. Hopefully she'd manage, convince her Uncle she was fine. She was under such a strain, though. Maybe she'd tell Fred everything, and turn away from Van.

He turned and bumped squarely into Josh, who lost his balance and dropped the two cups of coffee he carried. "Ouch!" Josh quickly brushed the hot coffee from his hands and clothes, the cups erupting as they hit the ground.

"Oh, sorry Josh!"

Josh wiped at his jacket and shrugged. "I don't really drink the stuff except when I'm hanging with Sidra. It was for her. Well, she'll have to make her own ... I guess maybe you're going there too?" Josh was flustered, struggling to pull his laptop case onto his shoulder. "She really worried me last night. Wasn't herself at all."

"No, her uncle stopped by for a visit. I'm meeting up with her later."

"Fred Abercrombie? Glad I ran into you first then."

"Why?"

“That guy gives me the creeps. He stares you down as if you’re a serial killer or something. I think Sidra said he’s a cop. I always wonder if he’ll ask me about the book I forgot to return to the library in fourth grade.”

Van laughed and patted Josh on the back. The guy was so likeable, and so knowledgeable, Van reminded himself. It wouldn’t hurt to spend some time talking to a Newton expert.

“Well, I drink coffee and I need some breakfast. Want to join me, and then maybe Freddy will have gone on his merry way?”

Josh shrugged. “Sure, why not? I’m kinda lost on the weekends anyway. I mean, unless we’re working. Or I have a date or something ...” His voice trailed off in embarrassment, and Van wondered when Josh’s last date had been. The guy was a bit of a nerd, but the kind that women tend to want to mother, take under their wing, then take to bed. A shame he probably didn’t know it. He was really quite good-looking, if he’d lose the glasses and update his wardrobe. Terri might even be willing to chat him up a bit.

God, Donovan, you’re trying to save your life and you’re worrying over a kid’s love life.

Well, he had to pass some time, and his choices were limited. Walk the streets and think about Sidra, go home and face his brothers and think about Sidra, or spend time with a guy who could tell him more about Sidra. *You mean to talk to him about the Maker, don’t you? This isn’t about Sidra.*

“By the way, Josh, if Uncle Fred asks about me, my name is Jack Warner, and I’m one of your colleagues at NYU.”

“Okay. What do you teach?”

“History. Late 1600s onwards. Britain.”

“Huh.”

Van glanced at Josh curiously. “Not interested in why I’m asking you to lie for me?”

Josh shrugged. “I guess you and Sidra have your reasons. Might be hard for her to explain she’s dating a demonologist?”

“What makes you think we’re dating?” *What has she said about me? You’re pathetic, Van, acting like a school boy.*

“I may not be that great with women, but when one of them mentions a guy every five minutes, it’s pretty clear something’s up.”

Van polished his nails on his sweater in mock triumph. “Every five minutes, you say?”

Josh stopped cold and suddenly regarded Van coolly. “You like her, too, right? I mean, she’s had it rough. I wouldn’t want to see her get hurt again so soon. She hasn’t seen anyone since Patrick, I mean, not seriously. A few one-nighters I think. Ugh, maybe I shouldn’t be talking like this.”

“Yes, I like her. I like her a lot. She really mentioned me every five minutes?”

"Oh brother, you both have it bad. I'm a little protective of her."

"I'm glad. Tell me about this Patrick fellow. I hate him already."

"I still hate him. What's to say? He cheated on her, and when she confronted him, he said it was her fault. Asshole. She was grieving, it couldn't have been more than a month after her mother died, and I guess he thought she wasn't being attentive enough to him or something. I don't know. He didn't deserve her. Thank God she found out what an idiot he was before the wedding."

Van wondered how much more difficult his task would be if Sidra were married now. "And she was close to her mother?"

"Oh my God, they were more like sisters than mother and daughter." Josh sniffed out a low laugh. "Promise you won't say anything to her? Scarlet hit on me once."

"Whoa!"

"Don't laugh, she was an amazing looking woman at fifty. The only thing that stopped me was my job as Sidra's assistant, and it was a close thing." Josh sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "I miss Scarlet too. You would have liked her, a true free spirit, in the real sense. She saw the good in everyone. Anyway, Sidra was with Patrick for years, so that break-up coming right on the heels of her mother's death really shook her up."

"And you were there for her."

"Tried to be." Josh shrugged again. "All I could do was listen. She mostly threw herself into her work, into the book on Newton."

Oh, Sidra. Now I pop into the picture to confuse you more.

Van walked up the street with Josh in companionable silence, thinking how little he really knew about Sidra's second life. A teacher, a researcher, a bit of a loner. What else? She was lovely, breathtakingly lovely, and vulnerable, although she'd certainly object to being called so. For the first time in countless decades, Van found himself unable to concentrate. Memories of their first night together played repeatedly through his mind, mixed with fantasies of what future nights might hold. The sex was good, with promise to become great. If only ... Van sighed and Josh looked at him in question, but Van ignored him.

If only Sidra weren't afraid of him. If only she could separate her past life from this one. If only she weren't still grieving. If only he weren't about to die. *Then what, Van? What would you want from her? A girlfriend doomed to a normal lifespan?*

He never wanted to go through the agony again of watching a loved one age and whither, reject him lest he reject her first. He'd been in love with a woman once, and the hurt wasn't worth it. This was different. *How?*

"Hey, Van, what about that breakfast?" Josh pointed to a kitsch diner.

"That's fine."

Van ushered Josh to a quiet booth, wondering how much he'd be willing to spill about Sidra, unsure what he really wanted to know.

Once they ordered, Josh looked a bit uncomfortable, wriggling in his seat and casting his gaze at the other patrons. Not the social butterfly, Van thought.

"So, tell me about your work, Josh." Josh's eyes lit up.

"You'll have to narrow that down for me a bit. Teaching, research?"

"Research. Tell me about your work on Isaac Newton."

"Oh, well, as I said, it's Sidra's work really. I just help with the Latin and the code."

"Code?"

"Yeah, the alchemical codes. It's hard to appreciate how secretive Newton had to be. Well, you're a demonologist; you probably face a lot of criticism. In Newton's day, a mystic might be subject to prison, or worse. Actually, Newton's ideas on Christianity were probably a bit more dangerous than his alchemy. He really didn't separate religion, mysticism, and science. His goal was always to understand God's work."

"I see." *I remember.* The Maker's devotion to God was unshakeable, as was his disbelief in the trinity, in Jesus as God. "So you and Sidra have worked to understand what this code meant?"

"It's been a kind of academic race for decades, really. We've come close to understanding what he was up to, or we think so anyway. Some of his experiments were so far ahead of his time -- creating alloys, classifying elements. Always with a mystical slant, though. The encoded writings weren't simply to keep his work secret. For centuries, alchemists wrote in what seems like gibberish, combining cookbook-like recipes and ... well, I guess you'd call them spells. Not easy reading let me tell you. Of course, the physics and math don't make for light bedtime fare either."

"And did Newton find what he was after? What's it called -- the Philosopher's Stone?"

Josh laughed. "Who knows? If he did, he didn't write about it. He may have found the proper combination of elements to create the legendary substance, but then found that it didn't do what it was supposed to. You know, like finding out your diet pills are just caffeine."

Van snorted. "So we'll never know more about these codes?"

"Hope springs eternal. However, short of finding a time machine, nothing is really going to get us much further. Maybe if someone finds a long lost notebook. You never know -- he filled a hell of a lot of them. I think if he'd found a way to tap into the source of all life, we'd have known about it."

Josh paused as the waiter brought their meal. "I know it sounds strange, but I've always felt sorry for Newton. He was so brilliant, but he wasted so much of his life searching for that Holy Grail. Biographers think he was rather depressed. I always wondered if it was his disappointment, you know? He did seem kind of out there, maybe a little obsessive. Actually, quite obsessive."

"He wasn't depressed, not in the way you mean. Obsessive, yes, absolutely."

Josh looked up suddenly from his plate, searching Van's face carefully.

Careful, Van, this lad is sharp. Change the subject.

"So, Josh, tell me about yourself. Got a girlfriend?"

Josh pushed his omelet around on his plate and looked up again a little sheepishly.

"Sidra's not interested in me, if that's what you want to know."

"No, mate, didn't mean to pry. I have a female pal always complaining she can't meet smart good-looking guys in Manhattan. Says they're all weirdos. You seem pretty normal to me."

"Huh. You mean, like, you might hook me up with someone?"

"I could certainly arrange matters so that you're in the same place at the same time."

A flash of life set Josh's eyes sparkling and Van laughed to himself, wondering what Terri might think of him. He really was a nice guy.

Josh suddenly looked deflated and went back to eating. "Nah, I'm not a babe-magnet, I'm sure that's pretty obvious. Women are always calling me cute, like I'm five years old. It fucking gets on my nerves, man. A guy like you ... you wouldn't understand."

"Sure I understand. It's called a self-fulfilling prophecy. I've lived with them my whole life. If you thought you *were* a babe magnet, women would chase you through the Village on your way to class. Students would shove their phone numbers into your hand. Male and female."

"I'm not gay!"

"Did I say you were? Relax, mate. I swear, you Americans are so frightened of someone questioning your sexuality. All I'm saying is that you need a little confidence booster. That gaunt artsy look goes over downtown. You're smart and sensible, have a lot to offer."

"Gaunt and artsy, eh? That and a dollar ... make that two dollars, will buy you a cup of coffee in New York."

"Want to place a wager on that?"

"Let's change the subject."

"Come on, Josh. A friendly wager. Give me an hour, put yourself in my hands, and see if I don't get you a date with a very hot little blonde."

"Yeah, right. Why do you care? You're dating the most wonderful woman in the world."

I'm dating the most wonderful woman in the world. Is that what I'm doing? Oh, God, if it were only that simple. Still, Josh's words lightened his heart a bit, bringing back a picture of Sidra in his arms, staring at him lovingly, despite her every attempt to keep her emotional distance. *She's a goner over you, and you really, really like that, Van.*

"I'm not doing anything special until I meet up with Sidra for lunch. What do you say?"

“Like a makeover? You’re creeping me out, man. Straight guys don’t do makeovers.”

“Her name is Terri. She could model if she wanted. She has short blonde hair, big blue eyes, and a killer smile. She has a fascination with ancient Egypt, favors morose poets, and loves jazz.”

“I like morose poets.”

“That’s a start.”

Two hours later, Van gestured for Josh to walk across the designer shop to examine his handiwork. “I could put Mizrahi out of business in a day.”

Josh ran his hand through his newly shorn hair in embarrassment.

“Stop that! You’re screwing with a hundred-dollar haircut.”

“I look gay. These frames -- are you sure?”

“Positive. Black, black, and more black. It suits you. You look like you could be an NYU professor.”

“I am an NYU professor.”

“Ah, how convenient. You won’t need to pretend to be something you aren’t.”

“I guess.” Josh stared into the mirror and suddenly stood up straight. The one detail Van hadn’t been able to fix, Josh fixed himself. His whole demeanor changed.

“You’re a tall guy, mate. Lucky.”

Josh looked again into the mirror. “I always hated it. I suck at basketball. Do you know how many people ask you if you play ball when you’re my height?”

Van looked at his watch, anxious to see Sidra again. “My work here is done.”

Josh looked a little lost. “Oh. I guess I’ll go to the office.”

A plan formed slowly in Van’s mind, a way to make Sidra more comfortable. Because there was no doubt his need to take her to the seventeenth century was going to take her out of her comfort zone. It might help if Josh was on board, and he seemed open enough to support his plan. It might just work.

“My brothers and I are having a little soirée tonight. I hope that Sidra will be free, and the babe in question will be there. Don’t wash your hair, all right?”

“Oh, cool. Where?”

Van wrote the address of the penthouse on a sales receipt and Josh stared at it. “Huh. That’s upscale, isn’t it?”

“I suppose you could say that.”

“Wow, didn’t realize there was money in demonology.”

Chapter Nine

Fred hadn't really bought her story, Sidra was sure. A new boyfriend, Jack Warner, was suddenly helping her cope with her fears and delusions, lifting her spirits, taking good care of her. Fred was emphatic about Sidra seeing Dr. Guntar, and she reluctantly made an appointment while he watched. Well, maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to chat with someone. There couldn't be any doubt that she was under stress. Not that she'd be able to tell a therapist she was dating a creation of the Last Sorcerer.

Sidra let the shower water run over her back, easing her neck muscles that always ached from worry, from bracing herself against the world. Other muscles, she thought with a smile, were strained from Van. Part of what she told Fred was true, she thought wryly; "Jack" had lifted her spirits, had rid her loft of some real ones, and was taking good care of her. Of course, he needed her, or so he thought.

Why can't you be the sort of girl who just goes along for the ride? Who in their right mind would turn down Van Barlowe? Of course he'll leave. Big deal, grow up, Sidra. Josh will be there to give you a hug, and you have your work.

Sidra tried to shake off the baffling questions that surfaced as she thought of her research. Was her lifelong fascination with mysticism and alchemy really due to reincarnation? *Isaac Newton, indeed.* The brain did amazingly weird things, and she had been under such stress this year, Fred had been right enough about that. Her vision of being a man, of knowing Van in another age -- it must have been a freak twitch of neurons, his power of suggestion.

The Stone, Sidra. How do you explain that?

Sudden fear stabbed at her chest. Was Van doing something to make her see such things? A man who could vanish through doors was probably capable of a lot more.

Vowing to confront Van, Sidra dried off and searched through her closet for clothing he might like on her. She pulled a dozen dresses out and cast them aside in disgust. The guy was a fashion junkie, and he's seen her one designer dress, the one that had cost a half month's salary.

A half an hour later, still fretting over her appearance in jeans, blouse, and leather jacket, Sidra applied lipstick and grabbed her keys. With one last look in the mirror, she decided she needed a necklace. On a whim, she dug through her lingerie drawer for the velvet box that held her most precious piece of jewelry -- an ancient necklace, an elaborate pendant, with a luminescent gem as the centerpiece, surrounded by seven golden circles set with different precious and semiprecious gems. She'd bought it during her sabbatical in London, paying an exorbitant price, well beyond her means. At the time, she'd felt the overwhelming need to possess the heavy piece. Now, as she ran her hand along the chain, she wondered if grief often made people do impulsive things.

Sidra clasped the necklace on and held the pendant in her hand, muttering a quick prayer for Scarlet and all who moved in the immortal realm. *What? Why would you pray on a necklace?* The pendant felt warm against her skin and Sidra fancied that Scarlet acknowledged her prayer. Sidra brushed away the memory of her mother, and the single tear that came with it. *Enough tears, Sidra. You need a clear head today.* As she clutched the jewel box to close it, she noticed the antique dealer's card tucked against the inside of the velvet lid.

"Eighteen carat gold. Quarter carat each of sapphire, emerald, ruby, amethyst, diamond, peridot, and garnet. Two carat center stone, unknown, perhaps opal. Reputed origin Cambridge, early eighteenth century. Probable Italian gold workmanship. Design in the style of Byzantium."

The card fell from Sidra's hand as she looked into the mirror, eyes drawn inexorably to the central stone. She closed her eyes, trying desperately to remember her vision of Isaac's Stone, but couldn't pull forth a clear picture. Greenish in color, with a fiery center.

Hers was the correct size, but as she looked again at the central stone, it was murky, flawed, and ordinary looking. Sidra remembered the dealer shrugging his shoulders. "I won't lie to you, Miss, the value is in the gold, not in that nugget. The workmanship is impeccable, but why a master jeweler would choose to create such a lovely piece with such an ordinary centerpiece is beyond me. I've never seen the likes of it, and I've looked, trust me. My guess is that the original was priceless, and at some point in the pendant's history, the central stone was replaced."

He'd boxed the necklace lovingly and taken her credit card with glee. "In any case, it's yours now, and I'll miss it!"

"How did you acquire the piece?"

"We've been in this business for many generations, and I think that it's been in one of our locations since the start. I remember as a child my grandfather nearly traded it for a

piece of African art, but he said he couldn't part with it for some reason. It's odd, I've lowered and raised the price several times, but you're the first person who seemed to appreciate it. I suppose it was waiting for you!"

Sidra had smiled happily, thinking nothing of the man's tale, except that she'd likely paid ten times what the necklace was worth. It hadn't mattered at the time, she'd wanted it so badly.

Now his words rang in her ears like the toll of fate's bell. "I suppose it was waiting for you!" *Your imagination is getting the best of you, Sidra. It's not the same stone, how could it be? It's a lifeless rock, worthless. You bought it on a whim.*

Snapping the box shut, Sidra slid it beneath her lingerie and with a last check of her make-up, quickly snatched up her keys and purse and emerged onto the street. Nervousness, excitement, and longing ran through her in a loop as she thought of seeing Van.

The day felt more like Spring than Fall as Sidra made her way down Houston Street to the restaurant. The unseasonably warm sun peeked in between the buildings that usually kept every Manhattan street chilly this time of year. She watched a few couples window-shop, hand-in-hand. Sidra had avoided looking at couples for the last year, resenting them for the companionship torn away from her. Now the sight made her uncharacteristically happy.

"Hey, Sidra!" She turned at Josh's familiar voice and gasped.

"Josh. My God, what ... hi."

Josh grinned sheepishly as he pushed his hand through his short hair. Sidra couldn't believe her eyes, eyeing him head to toe. He was a knockout!

"I can't stand this stuff they put in your hair. I'm afraid small birds might get caught in it."

"You look amazing." Sidra hugged him, then stepped back again to examine his transformation. From his artfully disheveled hair to his new eyeglass frames to his designer clothes, he looked like he stepped off a fashion show runway. Something else was different too. He seemed even taller.

"Honey, I don't mean to insult you, but there's no way you picked out those clothes and glasses."

Josh stuck out a foot to show off his new shoes.

"Those too -- they're great."

"You really think so? Van said it all worked together, but it's a little hard to get used to, you know? I've worn the same four flannel shirts for the last two years."

"Van?"

"Yeah, we had breakfast after he left your place. He wants me to meet his friend Terri tonight at a party."

“Terri?”

“You know her? Um, do you think there’s any chance ...?”

“I met her briefly. You’ll fall instantly in lust with her. I don’t get it. Van took you shopping?” *Is there any end to Van’s surprises? Does this have something to do with me? It must!*

“Yep, paid for it all, wouldn’t take a dime. I guess it’s his hobby or something. Like one of those reality shows where they take a loser and spiff him up. He’s really not gay?”

Sidra laughed. “Trust me, he’s not gay, and you’re no loser! What’s this about a party? He didn’t say anything to me.”

“Oh. You’ll go, right? I don’t think I can handle this without you there.”

“Sure, I’ll go if he asks me. I’m not sure I could handle it without you. Anyway, I’m having lunch with him now, so I’ll get the scoop on Terri. You’re sure about this, Josh?”

“You don’t think she’ll like me?”

“Oh, baby, that’s not what I meant. It’s just that these things rarely work out. I suppose it’s worth a shot.”

Josh took in a deep breath and nodded. “You know, even if it doesn’t, I think I’ll keep the clothes. I thought of buying a few more things. Maybe I should wait for Van to go shopping again?”

“Put yourself in the hands of the vultures in any of these stores and you’ll do just fine. Try *that* one.” Sidra pointed to her favorite shop across the street. “Just remember, the stuff in there is worth the gross national product of some nations.”

“Got it. Maybe just a few things. See ya tonight!”

Josh bounded across the street and Sidra stared at him in wonder. What was Van up to? Then she caught a familiar figure out of the corner of her eye and her heart skipped a beat.

Defon sat on the step of a nearby pastry shop, sipping at a cup of coffee as he watched Josh. Then he stared openly at Sidra and held two fingers to his forehead in a salute as he smiled slyly.

Sidra’s heart raced, and she stood frozen in place, wondering whether to confront him. Was he stalking her? Defon was an imposing figure, tall, muscular, and very handsome. His long black hair fell well past his shoulders in elaborate braids. Like his “siblings,” he dressed in stylish black clothes. *Don’t forget his supposed immortality and ability to vanish into thin air.*

With a deep breath, Sidra decided Defon was unlikely to try to kill her in broad daylight, although anything was possible. *Well, if he wants to kill me, he’ll find a way.* She waited for the light to change, noting Defon looked shocked she was going to approach him. *Good, keep him surprised.* It gave her a bit more courage, and she crossed the street and walked to within a yard of him.

"We met the other night. I'm Sidra Patmos." Sidra extended her hand. Defon arched a brow and stood, grasping her hand in his and kissing it lightly. A tiny trail of energy ran up her arm, and Defon flinched slightly at the contact. *So, I share something with him, too!*

"Hello, Sidra."

His deep voice resonated to Sidra's bones, but she held her chin high and forced herself to stare into his dark eyes. *I know him, I know him well. Oh, God, this is too strange.*

"I recall advising you to stay off the dangerous streets of lower Manhattan." Pedestrians pushed by Sidra, and she moved in closer to Defon.

"A killer, I think you said? Thanks for that warning."

Defon chortled and pushed back his long braids. "I can only imagine what tales Donovan's been telling. I'm not a murderer."

"What a relief. Why are you stalking me?"

"I live here; we're neighbors. Isn't that a stunning coincidence, Sidra?" Defon thumbed to the old building behind him. "Can't fault a guy for enjoying a nice Fall day on his front step, can you? It was chilly this morning, though. Of course, you stayed in." His eyes searched hers intently, and Sidra wondered what he wanted, what he needed to hear.

"No. I'm not him. Is that what you want to ask?"

"Excuse me?"

"I'm not your girl. Or boy. Whatever. Donovan said you think I can lift some curse, and that you want to stop me from doing so. Well I can't, and I wouldn't if I could. Does that satisfy you?"

Defon backed up a step and smiled nervously. "I suppose it does. Thank you."

He's lying. You shouldn't have spoken with him. He feels the connection, he knows you're lying too.

"My pleasure. You'll leave me alone now?"

Defon nodded. "Of course."

Sidra turned on her heel, anxious to flee down the street, but felt a strong pull of emotion from Defon. *He's suddenly so sad. My God, what sadness!*

Against her better judgment, she turned to find him still staring at her, eyes pleading for ... something. Forgiveness? Acceptance? *Who is this man?*

His silent question trickled through her brain. Sidra grabbed onto a lamppost to brace herself against his emotions, his deep grief and hurt. *Did you really stop loving me, Master?*

"He stopped loving you? Isaac, you mean?"

Defon brushed away a tear with embarrassment. "Yes. Because of my faith."

"That's a poor reason to stop loving someone. Newton loathed the idea of the Trinity. I take it you're a Christian?"

Defon pulled a magnificent crucifix from his shirt and held it out. "Even worse. A Catholic."

A smile pulled at Sidra's lips. She liked him, wanted badly to know more about him, and wished she wasn't terrified of him. "I'm so sorry. I wish I could help you."

"You can."

Sidra hurried down Houston toward Broadway, blocking Defon's statement and working desperately to push down the sympathy he evoked. She scanned the street for Van. He leaned against the streetlamp outside the restaurant, and she ran to him. His dazzling smile disappeared as he saw her expression.

"What's wrong?"

"Defon, I just ran into Defon. He was across the street, watching me speak with Josh."

Van groaned. "You're sure it was him?"

"I went to him. We ... we spoke."

"Why? Oh, God, he must know now."

Sidra nodded. "Oh yeah, he knows all right. Poor guy."

"What?"

"He's so sad, Van. I never felt such sadness pouring off anyone. It was so strong I nearly broke down myself."

"Oh boy. You're really picking up on everything. Don't worry, I'll get him to back off, and you're safe as long as you're with me. Hey, why didn't you stay inside this morning as I ordered? How did it go with Uncle Fred?"

"My guess is he's checking out Professor Jack Warner rather carefully."

"We don't need this right now. Is Fred likely to show up again?"

"No, he's off on a business trip this afternoon, had to run to catch a plane."

Van scanned the street carefully. "He'll send someone to watch us."

"He wouldn't spy on me, he loves me."

"That's why he'd spy on you. He's FBI, Sidra. It's how they show love."

Sidra glanced away and clutched at her pendant.

"What? Tell me, Sidra. There's too much at stake to hold anything from me."

"He made me make an appointment with a shrink. He thinks I'm nuts."

"Maybe it wouldn't hurt to keep that appointment? God knows I've thought of doing so myself through the years, but my problems are a bit difficult to explain. I could have seen Freud, you know? Met him at a dinner party -- really strange fellow. Anyway, Uncle Fred will check to make sure you keep that appointment."

"You really met Freud? Did you know anyone else famous? I mean, besides, you know ..."

"Besides you?" Van laughed and pulled Sidra in for a hug. "Let's have lunch and I'll tell you anything you want to know. God, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you for a second. I'm losing my edge, and I may never forgive you."

Sidra's heart flopped in her chest. *Don't say anything. He doesn't mean it.*

"Come here, you skeptic." Van pressed his lips to hers as he laced his hands in her hair. Sidra's knees went wobbly as he released her, and he laughed as he steadied her when she opened her eyes. "Ah, you look like I feel. Tell me you've been thinking about last night."

"Hasn't crossed my mind."

"Ouch. Let's have lunch and then go to my place, see if I can't fix that."

They entered *I Tre Merli* and a pang washed through Sidra. Patrick had loved the restaurant. Hip and modern, filled with a mix of tourists and smartly dressed locals, the dining room hummed with activity as black-clad servers moved smoothly from table to table. Sidra tried to recall the dish Patrick always ordered as she took in a deep whiff of wonderful aromas. It shocked her that she couldn't remember -- was it pasta?

"Lighten up on yourself, love. It's normal to get over someone. It's a good thing."

"You're hearing *everything* now?"

Van winced. "Not quite, but a lot. It's a bit disturbing, actually. I can't quite sort out your thoughts from mine. I'll have to work on that."

The host ushered them to a quiet table. Sidra pulled off her jacket and Van stared at her chest. "Where did you get that necklace?"

"At an antiques shop in London. It caught my eye and I splurged. It was a big splurge."

"I imagine so. It's ... extraordinary. What's the stone?"

"I really don't know. The dealer didn't know, thought it might be opal. It's looks a bit like a chunk of quartz to me. I really should get it insured. Maybe it's a piece of junk, but I think the gold is real. When I first bought it, I looked all over the Internet trying to find something like it, but nothing's close. The shop owner claimed it was early eighteenth century."

"Hmm." Van continued staring and reached out to touch the stone, but the waiter approached. He ordered wine and opened the menu, stopping occasionally to look at the necklace.

"I've seen it before. I know I have."

"Where? What are the chances of that?"

"What are the chances of finding you? I don't think in those terms much anymore. I've seen too many 'coincidences' to believe anything is random."

"You've seen a lot, haven't you? I mean, if what you tell me is true. Not that I'm convinced, but ..."

Van reached across the table and held her hand.

"I've fibbed about a few things, because you weren't ready to hear them. Now you are. You have the right to know it all. Ask away."

"What the hell did you do to Josh?"

Van smiled broadly. "That's your main concern? What do you think?"

"I think I'd like you to give me a makeover. He looked fabulous."

"You don't need to change a thing. My God, if I could create a woman myself from scratch ... There I go again. Anyway, Josh didn't really need it either. It's just a little psychological trick."

"It worked. It tickled him to death. Are you really going to try to set him up with Terri? What's this about a dinner party?"

"We need to discuss that." Van lowered his voice as the waiter approached with their order. "Later, I'll tell you everything, promise, love."

Sidra nodded as Van tapped his wine glass against hers in a toast. "To life."

Her heart sunk. *Life. Please God, it can't be true. He's not going to die soon.*

"To life."

They ate in silence for a few minutes, Sidra's nerves building with her unanswered questions. "Tell me about Defon and the others. You said they're ready to die. Why?"

Van sat back in his chair and ran his hand through his hair, blew out a deep breath. "That's perhaps the hardest question of all. Immortality has its down side, Sidra. We've seen so much through the years -- wars, devastation of every kind, unimaginable horrors. Wentworth is perhaps the most moral of the Maker's children. He's been a soldier for more causes than I can count. Defon used to be like him, but gave up a while back, turned in on himself. He and a few others -- the ones you saw the other night -- are convinced the Maker made a mistake and should not have created us. He thinks we have no souls, but he hopes he's wrong, because he's anxious for eternal life. Heaven."

"Do you? Have a soul?"

Van shrugged. "I stopped wondering years ago. I can't change it; at least I don't think I can. Defonsius, Aloysius, Martin, and the two girls -- Bernadette and Anne, our youngest siblings, took a different route than Alex, Went, and me. They tried to live normal lives, with families. They've lost loves and children and ... hope. You've lost someone close to you. Imagine two hundred and eighty years of loss and suffering, piled so high that life itself loses its meaning."

"And the rest?"

Van shrugged. "We've come together in different groupings through the years. Defon said the rest are in Europe."

"Why do you think that you and Alex and Wentworth are so different than Defon?"

"Maybe it's just our natures, perhaps left over from our first lives." Van laughed. "Alex is probably too vain to imagine the world without him. Went enjoys life too much."

"And you? What keeps you going, Van? You seem happy enough?"

"I always thought there was something ... maybe someone ... waiting down the road for me. Something I had to do to make things right. It's hard to explain. Perhaps my faith in the Maker is too strong, but I always imagined that he knew what he was doing. That I had a purpose."

"Terri isn't one of you, is she?" *Tell me she hasn't been your lover. I need to know.*

"No, she's a SLider I met the same way I met you. She has a healthy dose of psychic ability, but that's about it. I never really thought that she was the Alchemist, the embodiment of the Maker. She's hung around anyway, helping us look for you. I think she feels safe with us."

"Why Manhattan? I mean, why didn't you go to London to look for him?"

Van laughed. "Darling, a free spirit doesn't pay particular attention to geography. We've lived here for the last hundred years. Wentworth had a hunch we needed to stay put. Seems it was a good one. Went is the prognosticator in the bunch."

"And you're the ghostbuster. Alex?"

"He finds things."

"What, like Jimmy Hoffa?"

Van laughed. "I really do like you a lot. No, Jimmy Hoffa would fall to me. I'm pretty good at finding people. Alex is good at objects -- keys, national treasures, ancient tombs."

"How did Isaac do it ... you know, make you?"

Van shook his head in despair. "You probably know as much as I do. He mixed and crushed and heated materials; chanted, prayed, and charted the planets; day and night for most of his life. I helped with some simple tasks -- stoking the fire, for example. He never would tell me the secret though. Although once ..."

"What?" Sidra's academic curiosity took over.

"Once he told me that before he died, he'd show me the Stone, which he claimed was the key. He never did." Sidra's heart raced. Then Isaac *had* created the Stone?

"Why?"

"He grew bitter and senile. When I asked him on his deathbed to tell me the secret, he cursed us."

"To die in 280 years? Why 280?"

"He predicated an important alignment of Saturn with the other planets would occur this year, and for some reason it held special religious significance to him. He was right on the money about the planets."

"I don't get why you think he had the ability to curse you to death?"

“He was always right, Sidra. You’ve written about him. When was he wrong?”

“Well, there were very minor errors in the *Principia*.”

Van arched a brow and Sidra shrugged.

“Okay, so he got things right. How are we supposed to reverse this curse?”

“You’re supposed to. He said that in his next life, which he vowed would be an ordinary one, no insult intended to you, he’d be alive to see us perish.”

“Then if I’m him, if it’s true, why don’t I want you to perish?”

Van smiled. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

“How am I supposed to change this curse?”

“By remembering how to create life.”

“What? That’s ridiculous. I don’t remember what I had for lunch yesterday, and I’m supposed to remember a complex mystical alchemical ... spell or whatever?”

“That’s where the dinner party comes in.”

“Huh?”

“You sound like Josh. Eat up. I need to make love to you -- soon.”

Sidra choked on her pasta and swilled a mouthful of wine to calm her cough. “You don’t beat around the bush, Donovan.”

“If these are the last weeks of my life, I’m going to make sure they’re the best weeks of my life.”

“I don’t suppose it occurred to you to ask if that’s what I want?”

Van’s smile turned sly and he ran his hand along Sidra’s forearm. “Now why would I ask a silly question like that?”

Chapter Ten

Drunken laughter filled the stairway, and Isaac looked up from his notebook in disgust. The three men pushed through the door with a loud bang and nearly fell atop one another in a fit of laughter.

Alexander removed his hat and made a sweeping bow to Isaac. "Good evening, Father. I hope that you are well this night?"

"It is morning, boy, and I am not well." Indeed, Isaac's head pounded in pain. His eyes grew weaker by the year, long before the rest of his body, and his hand quivered at the terrifying thought that he wouldn't be able to continue his work. His notes, his notes must not be lost. So much to do, he thought. The telescope was incomplete, and an esteemed group of colleagues waited anxiously for the demonstration he had postponed several times. Isaac winced at the irony that his vision diminished as he created a way to gaze into eternity.

Wentworth staggered to Isaac's side and pressed warm hands on his shoulders, rubbing his aching muscles. "You work too hard, Father. Come, let us tuck you in. Did you even take supper?"

Isaac patted Wentworth's hand fondly. "Go back to your drinking and whoring, son. I will be fine."

Isaac glanced up at Donovan, who leaned against the door, arms crossed, brow arched. "Isaac, aren't you going to lecture us about our escapades tonight, demand to know the name of the women? There was but one."

"Demon seed, to use one woman thusly. I fear for your souls, if you indeed have souls."

Alexander laughed. "Do not trouble yourself over the girl, Isaac. She enjoyed herself immensely. Why worry over our souls? If we have none, they cannot be in danger!"

Donovan started up the stairs. "If we are demon seed, Isaac, what does that make you?"

Isaac rubbed at his eyes, wondering when his love for Donovan had turned so very bitter, that it could put fire in his gut and bring bile to his mouth.

"I pushed him to hate me. He was happy when we were alone, completely content to be an only child. Why, Isaac? You did not punish him for not loving you, you punished yourself!"

* * * * *

"My God, you actually live here?" Sidra wandered slowly through the living room of the Upper East Side penthouse, pausing to examine small antiques, framed medieval manuscripts, and dozens of oil paintings of all periods.

The distinctive cursive scrawl of one dog-eared page of text under glass caught her eye, and she bent to examine it more closely. *It's Isaac's! I'd know that writing anywhere.* She scanned through the Latin quickly, realizing it was a short bit of an unpublished work. The thrill of her academic passion took over, and she barely heard Van's question.

"I said, do you know what that is?"

"Where's the rest of this?" She turned to find him laughing at her. "What's so amusing?"

"You are. You look like a bloodhound on the trail of a murderer."

Sidra turned back to the manuscript. Unlike anything she'd read of Newton's on alchemy or religion, the entry wasn't in his usual mystical code. "This is very late, certainly from the 1720s, based on the slight tremor of his hand demonstrated in his script." Working through the Latin, Sidra read aloud. "What He has deemed worthy of creation, He may choose to rent asunder. Immortality is in the hand of the divine Maker alone, and none other, including His humble servant, may presume to hold the power of life and death without His blessing." Sidra turned suddenly to Van. "The part that's cut off. He writes *"Lapidus Philosophicus,"* the Stone. Damn, where's the next page?"

Van shook his head sadly. "We scooped up a few things from his desk as mementos. The barristers circled like vultures, ensuring we took nothing."

"Isaac left you nothing? None of you?"

"No." Van's voice was that of a hurt child. "We didn't behave like his children, and he left us nothing. It was terrible at the end, Sidra. They sold off his entire estate in London, and various institutions lay claim to his manuscripts. If we'd been thinking ahead ..." Van shrugged. "I don't think any of us truly appreciated his genius until much later, until more modern researchers and historians recognized the importance of the *Principia*. I only have one thing of his. I begged the mortician for it. Perhaps you'll think it's a bit morbid."

Van opened the doors of a huge armoire and pulled out a small drawer to extract a box. He handed it to Sidra, who opened it with trepidation. Thin yellowed paper crinkled under

her shaking fingers as she unfolded the layers to reveal a shank of long, wavy, pure white hair.

"Oh!" She gingerly ran a fingertip along the silken hair. For so many years, she'd concentrated on Isaac's words, unraveling his mystical symbols, searching intensely for clues to the inner workings of his mind. *I missed the mark. I forgot about the man.* She now wondered what made him laugh, whether his voice was high or low, which were his favorite foods, if he liked to walk on cobbled streets or among nature. Did he enjoy artwork? Did the squeals of children make him laugh or scowl?

Donovan knows these things. He remembers. Should I ask? No, he looks sad now.

"Thank you for showing that to me. It means more than I can say." Van nodded silently and wrapped the package back up, tucking it reverently into its hiding place.

"Can I study the manuscript page again sometime? I promise not to publish it."

"Of course. Any time you like."

A painting splashed with bright blues and oranges caught her eye on the wall next to the armoire. "That looks like a Van Gogh, and the subject is familiar, but I thought I'd seen prints of everything he did."

She turned quickly at Van's laugh. "It's Alexander. Can't you see it?"

"No! Your brother sat for Van Gogh? You're pulling my leg, aren't you?"

It *did* resemble Alexander, but the subject sported a short beard and shorn hair. The painter's loose style made it difficult to be sure, but the mischievous twinkle in the sitter's eyes matched Alex's temperament perfectly.

Van walked up behind Sidra and pulled her into his chest. "I'll make you a deal. Kiss me and I'll tell you the truth." Sidra turned in his arms and laced her hands behind his neck, standing on tiptoe to brush his lips with hers. He moaned at the contact and deepened the kiss, then scooped her into his arms as he had done the night before. Van continued the kiss as he kicked open the door to an enormous room. Sidra slithered out of his arms as he locked the door behind him and scurried to the sweeping vista of Central Park that filled one enormous wall of the room.

"Van, this is breathtaking! I can see New Jersey."

"I try to ignore that part."

Taking a slow walking tour of his bedroom, anxious to learn more about him, Sidra peered carefully into very old photos, mostly of New York. One small sepia-toned likeness placed in the center of a bureau caught her eye.

"This looks like one of those Civil War photos."

"What tipped you off? The Union uniform?" He chuckled as she squinted at the likeness. *No! Wentworth?* Sidra dropped the photo as if it burnt her hand. She was afraid to look at the next, a larger photograph of New York *circa* 1900 -- horse-drawn carriages; black-clad women with broad-brimmed hats, full skirts, gloves, and parasols; a child with a

stick and a hoop, all frozen in mid-step before a grand building. Three men, arms laced over one another's shoulders and smiling good-naturedly, stared at the camera -- Alex, Went, and Van.

Sidra turned to Van. "I'm afraid to look at another."

She swallowed hard as Van pulled off his sweater.

"Then look at the present, if the past scares you."

"These photos aren't a trick, are they?"

"No, love. The only trick was getting you to the bar that first night."

If I knew then what I know now ... What would you have done differently, Sidra? Nothing. There's no resisting him. It's as if my whole life led me to him.

"You're really struggling over me, aren't you, Sidra? I understand, honestly. It's a lot to take in. Maybe I'm not enough to make it worth it?"

"I thought maybe I just dreamed you were so perfect, Van. I *have* thought of you every minute. I can understand why Isaac fell in love with his own creation."

Van closed his eyes, and Sidra regretted her remark instantly. She wondered what their relationship had been, why Van's pain was palpable now, after so much time had passed.

"I'm sorry; I didn't realize that would hurt you. I guess time doesn't heal all wounds. I thought enough years had passed ..."

"Don't apologize. You're right; he was in love with me."

"You loved him, but not in that way."

"Gently put, yes. We weren't lovers."

Sidra sat on the bed and thought about the intense longing for Van that pulled at her, longing older and deeper than possible in the few days she'd known him. She rubbed her palm across the shades of brown silk artfully covering the enormous bed.

"I think he's still in love with you, Van. I think part of me feels his pain, his fear, his excruciating need for you. I don't think it died with his body."

"You finally believe, then?"

Sidra nodded. Since her vision of the past, the evening before, tiny flickers of memory beckoned to her, but she'd been pushing them down. She lay back on the bed, closed her eyes, and with a quick prayer for protection, opened herself to the realization that she was really remembering another person's life.

"Do you remember any more?"

"Bits and pieces. Nothing important, I'm afraid. The smell of wood burning, the sound of heavy glassware, the laughter of men. Utter exhaustion. The feel of a pen in my hand, my arm shaking from tiredness, my eyes burning from sleeplessness. I feel pangs of unfamiliar pain, emotional pain, as if life itself had become such a burden as to be intolerable. Right

before I woke this morning I thought I saw men and women gathered around me as I lay in bed. They were crying.”

“That all makes sense to me.” His eyes looked strained, and Sidra wanted desperately to ease his troubled heart.

“Do you want me to try to understand him, to reach out to him for you?”

Van sat by her side and squeezed her hand. “No, not now. I want you, Sidra. Whatever *you* might feel for me.”

Sidra opened her eyes. “You only have feelings for your Maker; this has nothing to do with me.”

“I can’t separate the two, love, I’m sorry. I only know that I haven’t felt this way before in my life. I’m desperate for you, Sidra. I know I come with a heavy price tag for a woman who’s lost too much already. Maybe it’s not worth it to you? I can’t promise I won’t die, that we’ll figure this out.”

“We’ll figure it out. We have to.”

“Why?” Van leaned in and kissed her on the lips, moved to her neck, nibbling his way down her cleavage. “Tell me. Say it, Sidra.”

“Let this be enough, Van.”

“No, please, I need to hear it from you.”

Sidra choked back tears, fighting to keep the last thread of resistance alive. “I’m sure enough women have told you they were in love with you.”

“Many. I wasn’t in love with them.”

“You’re not in love with me. You’re all caught up in your past.”

“Don’t deny me my own thoughts, Sidra. Isaac gave me life, but he also gave me free will. I’m asking for both from you. Tell me you love me back.”

“I love you back,” she muttered.

“You’re really annoying.”

Van laughed as Sidra pushed him to his back and pinned his arms over his head.

“Tell me again that you love me and I’ll have sex with you.”

“You think I can’t get out from this?”

“You have no intention of trying.”

“Oh, God help me, I love you, Sidra. Now please fuck me before I go out of my mind!”

What would it be like to believe you were enough for this man? How would you act? How would he react?

Sidra pulled off her shirt and bra and stepped out of her shoes and jeans.

“Get back here,” he gasped through clenched teeth.

“You’re pretty impatient for a guy who’s been around a couple hundred years.”

"I feel like I've had this hard-on for a couple hundred years."

"Let's see what we can do about that." Sidra fumbled with the zipper of his slacks, then pulled them off him. Van pulled off his boxer briefs and threw them across the room.

"Impatient ..." She lost the ability to taunt him as he squirmed beneath her. Sidra reached out to stroke his swollen cock and pulled back, suddenly losing aggression. *He's been with so many women. I'm not so good at this.*

"Bloody hell, woman, don't you get it? All you need to do is touch me and I'll be your slave forever."

"I like the sound of that." Sidra smiled, thinking he was being kind as she ran her palm along the taut length of his shaft, tracing her fingers over the large veins pulsing with his life's blood. His cry changed her mind. "Harder," he gasped out. "Jerk me off, love. Oh, God, you have great hands."

Sidra slid one palm over the slick head of his cock as she ran the other in a tight circle up and down the length of his shaft. He bucked beneath her, pinching at his own nipples and moaning in ecstasy. Her own arousal at pleasing him, at watching his free expression of pleasure, grew with each moan from Van. Sidra slipped off her thong and knelt naked over him. He gazed at her nude mound and reached out to caress her, but she slapped his hand away.

When he realized she meant to suck him off, he muttered mixed curses and blessings. "This won't last long, I'm sorry, love."

Sidra teased the tip of his cock lightly with her tongue, lapping at the sweet cum that oozed in the crevice. A far away voice tapped at her brain. Van's voice.

Harder. Less than a whisper, more than a thought, the power to hear his wishes flooded her with pleasure as it shocked her. Sidra pressed harder and faster with her tongue and sensed Van's unspoken relief. "Oh, yes, God, that's it." His silent thoughts directed her as she plucked at the head with her lips and grasped his shaft more firmly, twisting with her palm as she worked her way down.

Van propped himself up to watch Sidra as she slid her way down the bed to lick at his balls, pulling one and then the other into her mouth while caressing them with her tongue. He sucked in a breath and reached for her hair, tried to grasp her breast.

Moving back to his cock with her mouth, Sidra sensed his silent plea, and slid her hand down the crevice of his ass to play gently with the tight sensitive opening. She carefully worked one finger in an inch, and his muscles loosened and accepted her probing.

"Oh, fuck me." His moans echoed through Sidra's body, heating her core to a throbbing, dripping, aching cave of need. He pounded at the bed with his fists and sat up quickly, pushing her away from his cock.

"I'll come. Stop."

"Shut up, Van." Sidra pushed him back to the bed. He moaned in surrender, letting her take over.

Taking him in her mouth again, she sucked hard now, worked her hand firmly up and down his shaft, and slid her wet pussy along the front of his calf, thrilling at the friction of his leg against her clit as she worked his cock.

"Jesus, Sidra, it's never been this good." His words thrilled her, because they matched his thoughts, which rang out clearly to her in the room. With one final cry, his seed pulsed into her mouth and she struggled to swallow the sweet spicy essence quickly enough. His orgasm seemed to go on forever. He finally sat up and pulled her in for a hug.

"Jesus."

"Good?"

"It was okay, I guess."

Sidra slapped his cheek lightly. "Very funny."

"I think you remember more about being a man from your last life than you're letting on. Damn, why couldn't I have met you years ago?"

"You did."

"You know what I mean." Van sighed and pulled Sidra into his arms, kissing her passionately. "Your turn, love." He rolled her onto her back and pushed her legs open, brushing his fingertips along her clit and sucking the moisture off them with a wink.

Lost in a world of sensation, Sidra nearly jumped out of her skin at the loud bang at the door.

"Damn." Van rolled his eyes.

"Donovan, you home?"

"Alexander," Van mouthed, putting his finger to his lips.

"I know you're in there. I can feel you. Oh, you're not alone. Might I venture a guess as to your guest? Not the Patmos woman, by any chance? Need any help?"

"Shut up, Alex. I'm doing all right so far on my own."

"Let me know if you change your mind."

Sidra listened carefully as Alex walked down the hallway and slammed another door, presumably to his own suite.

"That scared the hell out of me."

"He's not always that much of a jerk. Honestly, you haven't seen him at his best. This 'we're about to die' thing really rattles him."

"I'll take your word for it. Do you ... typically share? Women, I mean? It sounded like it."

Van winced. "What's the right answer to that question?"

"The truth. It's none of my business, I guess."

"Um, well, we've been known to be generous with one another. With a woman who wants that sort of thing, of course. Just on occasion, mind you."

Sidra clutched at Van with the second wave of banging at the door.

"Wentworth," Van mouthed, rolling his eyes and sitting up. "Brace yourself, Sidra. I have a bad feeling about this."

"Hey, Van, you home?" The doorknob rattled. "Oh, okay. You with someone?" They could hear Went's good-natured chuckle through the door. "Well, I'll be in the shower if you need a third?"

Van held a finger to his temple and pulled the imaginary trigger.

"I swear, Sidra, we aren't really like this."

"Swear on a stack of Bibles?"

"Maybe on a religious pamphlet?" Van rolled her onto her side and brushed at her hair lovingly. "Don't be mad. None of us has really settled in with anyone, you know? It's never been a big deal. I'll tell them to knock it off."

"Don't be so quick to do that, Van."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me." Sidra poked her tongue into her cheek and winked.

"You're really annoying. Can't imagine why I love you." Van pushed Sidra's arms over her head and pinned her down, as she had done to him. He slid his weight forward and worked his cock into her quickly, pounding forcefully, in and out, hard and desperate. Sidra cried out as fire spread through her body, and Van clenched a hand over her mouth to silence her. She nipped at his palm with her teeth and he let go.

"Someone got hard very fast. I wonder why?" She snapped at him playfully.

"I am *not* ready to share you. Forget about it." He pushed harder still, as if to claim her as his prize. Sidra smiled in joy as the flush of orgasm washed up her body.

"I love you, Donovan Barlowe. I'm so glad Isaac created you."

Just before she had to shut her eyes against the bliss washing through her, she caught a glimpse of his triumphant smile. Then he cried out her name loudly as he came, pushing deep, pulling at her shoulders, pressing his lips to hers in a breathless frenzy.

He fell onto her and their slick bodies slid into a warm embrace.

"We heard that!" Alex's singsong voice carried through the hallway, along with Went's chuckle.

Sidra sat up and brushed her hand through her hair. "What a family. Are you sure we have to rescue all three of you?"

Chapter Eleven

"I can shop for myself."

"But *should* you?" Van's smirk annoyed the hell out of Sidra, despite her growing obsession with him. He leaned against the window of the designer shop, arms across his chest, staring Sidra up and down with unabashed lust.

"Get that look off your face, Barlowe. I'm mad at you for not warning me about the party."

Sidra had begged to go home, but Van wouldn't hear a word of it, shadowing her every step lest Uncle Fred or Defon crawl out of the woodwork. Finally, in embarrassment, she admitted that she desperately wanted a new dress for the dinner.

"A new dress? You look wonderful in jeans!"

"Scarlet taught me better. There's nothing worse than showing up for an event in jeans when all the other women are dressed to the nines."

"All the other women? We've invited two other women, and trust me, you'll outshine them by a good deal, no matter what you're wearing."

"I simply need a little privacy. This is absurd. You can't be with me every second!"

"I can try." Van pulled her into his arms and kissed her until she floated, losing track of their public surroundings. He leaned in and whispered lowly. "Darling, it's not just an excuse to be with you, despite the fact that any moment away from you makes my heart ache. I couldn't live with myself if someone hurt you. In fact, I won't live if someone does."

With a sigh, Sidra nodded. There were certainly worse fates than having Van Barlowe as a bodyguard. She wished it could be for all the right reasons. That he loved her more than he needed her.

Van growled at her thought, and she slapped at his cheek lightly. "Knock it off. At least stay out of my head. All right, wait here, and I'll be out in a few minutes. I promise."

Van shook his head stubbornly and pointed at the next store. "You're simply not a Marc Jacobs kind of girl. Move one door down. Off with you now." He motioned her down the street and she peeked in the window at skinny mannequins draped in sheer pale colors.

"No way. I can't pull that stuff off!"

"God, you sound like Josh! Come on." Van clutched her hand and literally dragged her into the shop, pushed her to a sleek steel chair and asked the clerk to bring them each a cup of coffee.

"Of course, Mr. Barlowe."

Sidra rolled her eyes at Van, wondering if everyone in New York knew him?

"Watch a master at work." Van quickly moved through the racks of clothes, handing one dress after another to a second clerk. "Ah! Here we go! Simple, elegant, sexy, and sophisticated, like milady."

He brandished a deep scarlet wisp of cloth that shimmered in the late afternoon sunshine pouring through the shop window. Sidra curled up her nose in distaste and shook her head. "That's for a woman half my size."

Van furrowed his dark brows and scowled. "I insist you try this on, Sidra."

"You insist! I've been dressing myself since I was ten, thank you very much."

"For me? One thing -- if you ask me if you look fat in it, I'll muzzle you!" Van pulled her to her feet with one hand and pushed her toward the dressing room.

"Are you always this bossy?" She pulled the dress from him in exasperation and entered the large dressing room, slamming the door behind her. Muttering curses under her breath as she slipped out of her clothes, she pulled the sheath of silk over her head and stepped back to see just how ridiculous she looked.

It was exquisite. A perfect fit, a perfect color, hugging her curves as if she wore nothing.

Sidra squealed when Van opened the door and stepped inside the room. "Get out of here!"

"Let's see. Oh my God, I'm good. You'd better lose that underwear, though, it shows."

"I'm *not* losing my underwear."

His eyes grew heavy, and he pushed her against the mirror. "Oh, yes, you are." Van's hot tongue and warm lips moved in a fiery path down her cleavage, then he dropped to his knees and reached up her thighs, pulling down her thong.

"Van, my God, stop it!" Sidra heard the giggles of the salesclerks and lowered her voice. "Stop it!"

"Step out of those or I'll make a scene."

"You're a complete asshole!"

"Three, two ..." Sidra stepped out of her underwear and Van threw them aside, then motioned for Sidra to prop her leg on the bench.

Shock and excitement warring in her body, she swatted at his hand as he pushed her thighs apart.

"I can still make a scene!"

"So can I!"

She hissed, but he ignored her protests, bringing his mouth to her thigh as he pushed the fabric of the dress up her legs. Sidra had lost the battle before it had begun, moaning in bliss as Van licked and nibbled his way to her mound. "Now you must stay quiet, or the girls out there will get all excited. You don't want to make them jealous, do you?"

She lost her rejoinder in another moan as Van darted his hot tongue along her clit with a steady rhythm and she laced her hands in his hair. Her legs were ready to give out and she leaned against the mirror, only to see their reflection in the one opposite. The sight of Van clutching at her ass and thighs, lapping at her pussy as if he were dying of thirst for her, sent her entire body shaking. *I must be dreaming.*

Come for me, Sidra. Come hard! His voice whispered in her brain, his desire mixing with hers.

Sidra bucked against Van's mouth as the wave of pleasure poured through her body, and she clung to him for support.

"Oh my God!" She bit back a cry, and Van rose to cover her mouth with a kiss that tasted of her pleasure.

"You're a very naughty man."

Van laughed as he unzipped his pants and pulled out his huge erection. "I can tell you love that about me. Turn around, honey, and put your hands on that bench." Her juices poured down her legs at the sight of him massaging his hard rod, pulling at the head with small gasps of pleasure. "Hold on tight," he hissed. "I'm going to do this my way."

His sudden fierce manner excited her more, and Sidra bent over in anticipation. Van laced his hands around her waist and fingered her hole, then pushed into her with frenzy and power. With one leg up on the bench, he battered into her until she nearly had to tell him to stop. On the verge of pain, her entire body suddenly relaxed and expanded to accept his size and energy. She pushed back. He slapped against her audibly, and for a brief second, Sidra wondered if he wanted others to hear.

"Stop thinking and keep moving." Van nipped at her neck with his teeth and continued pounding until the hot wet friction overwhelmed her. Burying her face in her arm as she cried his name, she felt the strong pulse of his cock as Van poured into her.

"Oh Sidra. Oh God. Oh God." The pure pleasure of his release thrilled her more than her own. *I do please him.*

“Fuck yes, you please me. Like no one ever has.”

He slumped against her and withdrew, leaving her wanting more, feeling hollow for him. He wiped at her legs with a handkerchief he pulled from his pocket, then dried himself off as he leaned in for a kiss. “You please me like no one ever will again.”

Panting heavily, Sidra slid down to the bench and stared at Van in wonder. “You’re insatiable. Not to mention deviant.”

“Yeah, baby.”

Sidra laughed at his terrible Austin Powers imitation as he reached for her hand and kissed it lovingly. “This was only a ploy to convince you to buy that dress. You can’t possibly put that back on the rack now.”

* * * * *

Sidra leaned against the kitchen counter, swirling red wine in a glass, bemused as Wentworth directed his brothers over dinner preparations.

Despite the childish wolf-calls of Alex and Went as she entered the penthouse, or perhaps because of them, Sidra felt more confident in her new dress and matching heels. *Van is good at makeovers, and mighty proud of it.*

Alexander had shocked her by leaning in and whispering lowly. “You look ravishing.” He kissed her on both cheeks with a European flair. Wentworth had nodded somewhat shyly, kissing her hand with a bow of his head. “Welcome.”

Van put his arm around her protectively. “See, Sidra, they aren’t so bad once you get to know them. You’ll only despise my brothers half the time you’re around them.”

She now found the trio a bit more comical than frightening, as they argued over meal preparations. Was it only two nights ago, she wondered in shock, that these men seemed like her worst nightmare come alive? They now treated her as if she’d spent every evening in their company.

Van sighed and rolled his eyes at Sidra. “We should have ordered out. This bickering has gone on for centuries. Wentworth and his dinner parties ... each is a bigger disaster than the last.”

“I think the bread is burning.” Sidra pointed to the thin trail of smoke coming from the broiler.

Wentworth threw his hands up in frustration, pulled the charred bread out, and dumped it into the garbage. “Alex, all you had to do was the bread! One thing. All right, everyone out of the kitchen, before you wreck everything else!”

“What’s for dessert, chef?” Alex rapped Went on the back of the head. He turned to Sidra with a wink and mouthed “crème brûlée.”

“Crème brûlée, of course.”

"It's the only thing he knows how to make. How about an occasional chocolate cake or apple crisp? I've been eating your damned puddings since we lived in France."

"It's not a pudding. Well, not exactly a pudding." Wentworth turned on Alex and put his hands on his hips. "And here I thought you loved my cooking."

"It is a pudding, and you just love using that little torch." Alex picked up his wine glass and held open the kitchen door for Van and Sidra.

Wentworth called over his shoulder as he opened the fridge. "At least take the appetizers out for me!"

They each took a platter and carried it to the sideboard. Van guided Sidra to one of four huge couches in the huge living room and sat close to her.

Alex sat across from them and picked at a platter of cheese as he watched them beneath his dark lashes. "What a lovely couple. Your taste is improving, Donovan. You can't imagine some of the women he's brought around, Sidra."

Sidra brushed aside the bolt of jealousy Alex sought to create and reached for Van's hand, squeezing it tightly to silence him before he could speak.

She sat up tall and took a sip of wine to calm her temper. "It must be difficult to have such a gorgeous brother, Alexander. I hope Van at least lets you sleep with his rejects."

Alexander's stunning green eyes flared in quick anger that belied his sweet smile. Van chuckled and squeezed her hand. "It's tough being a middle child. Alex never adjusted. Want to try again, Alex? Sidra's no pushover, trust me. I caught her calling one of her wraiths 'Butt Face.'"

Alex laughed in earnest. "Really? Good for you, love. So, are you ready for this evening? I understand you're willing to lend a hand."

"Lend a hand? What's happening this evening?" Sidra turned to Van, who bit at his lip.

"We didn't really get around to discussing that, Alex."

"Too busy fucking and shopping to talk about saving our lives? Jesus!" Alex pushed his hand through his hair and shook his head in disgust.

"Shut up, asshole. Let me handle this." Van turned to Sidra. "Please, honey, you have to trust me. I wouldn't let anything hurt you."

Can I trust you, Van? You'd do anything to save your life, wouldn't you? Would you sacrifice me?

He shook his head seriously. "You know better."

"You can read her, Van?"

"A bit. It's easier since her ... visit."

"Her regression?"

"Stop talking about me like I'm not here!"

Alex put down his glass and stared at Sidra. "Do you think you're the Maker, Sidra? Or are you pulling old Van's leg here because he's so rich and pretty? You wouldn't be the first woman to try to weasel trinkets out of him."

Sidra extracted her hand from Van's and stood, pointing to Alex, who sat up in surprise. "For someone who needs my help to stay alive, you're not doing very well, Alexander. If any of this mumbo-jumbo plays out, you might find yourself at the bottom of my people-to-save list. I think I'll see if your brother needs help with dinner and give you two a chance to discuss me freely."

"Bloody hell, she even sounds like Isaac."

Sidra pushed through the kitchen door and strode up to Wentworth. "What can I do to help?"

He looked at her in surprise and then nodded to the salad bowl. "I guess you could add some feta to that."

"Dinner smells wonderful," she muttered, grabbing the cheese, knife, and cutting board.

"Dear, you'll want to crumble that feta, not cut it up."

Son of a bitch Donovan. *I'm in love with you, Sidra. Oh, Sidra. Trust me, Sidra.* What was he planning for her?

"So, the boys fighting again out there? You're still cutting, dear. Crumble, I said."

"They're bickering like children. I don't know which of them is the bigger idiot."

"I do." Wentworth chuckled.

Sidra waved the knife at him and he backed up. "I don't suppose *you'd* be willing to tell me the truth about any of this?"

"Sure. What do you want to know?" Wentworth laid the finishing garnish around a roast, wiped his hands on a towel, and picked up his wine glass. His beautiful pale brown-green eyes surveyed her carefully.

Dear God, I know those eyes. I know all of these men.

"Is it difficult?"

Wentworth arched a brow. "Come again?"

"Your visions of the future. It must be hard."

A trace of sadness changed his countenance for a moment, then he turned to examine his roast. "Oh, it depends upon the event, of course. The flashes don't come in like news reports."

"I don't understand what you mean?" Sidra longed to comfort him, his discomfort now palpable. Wishing she hadn't caused him pain, but hoping to hear more, she waited to let him take the lead.

Wentworth turned back to her. "Imagine that you see a vision of planes crashing into skyscrapers, and you know it will happen exactly as you see it. You don't know when, or why, or who to tell. Because no one would take you seriously. Then you watch it unfold."

The full horror of Wentworth's gift hit her in the gut. "Are they always visions of tragedies?"

"Earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, mass murders, genocide, ships going down, train wrecks. Once in a blue moon, something wonderful."

"Like what?"

"Well, I always know who's going to win the World Cup." Wentworth winked with a weak smile and Sidra knew he was joking.

"Then I hope you're a betting man."

"How do you think we got rich? Microsoft at a dollar a share. It's not always so hopeless, honestly. I've been in the right place at the right time on a few occasions. They practically make it worth it."

"I'm sorry, Wentworth. I can't imagine how you've endured it all."

"Van. That's how I've endured it. He insists that I tell him about every vision."

"Why?"

"So that I'm not alone with the pain." Wentworth lifted his glass in a silent toast to Van, and Sidra joined him.

"You're a brave lad." *What a thing to say to a grown man!*

"I've heard that one before." Wentworth's smile lit the room, and Sidra decided that she liked him immensely, and wanted to know him better.

"What's the plan for tonight? Are we going to call on demon spirits? Torture me until I remember how to create the Philosopher's Stone? Host an orgy?"

Wentworth smiled. "Do I get to vote on one of those?"

"You're all insufferable."

"I know. We've been together too long. From what Van says, that's probably your fault."

"My fault! What did I do?"

Wentworth arched a brow wryly.

"Oh. Well, if it's true I created you -- and I'm still not convinced -- I bet I didn't intend for my 'children' to be such idiots."

"You're convinced. I am now, too. No one has called me a 'brave lad' in many decades, Sidra."

"Oh, I see. Well, what about tonight?"

"We thought we'd hypnotize you. See if it helps you remember anything."

"Hypnotize me! Oh." Sidra leaned back against the counter, picked up her wine glass, and downed it in one swig. *That's not so bad, I guess.* Still, her hands trembled as she put the glass down. *What if it doesn't work? He'll hate me if I don't remember; if this is all just a mistake.*

"Why didn't Van tell me?"

"Honestly, I think he's afraid of scaring you off."

"Because I'm your only hope."

"No. That's what they fought about while you showered. Alex wants to try anything, and Van won't try anything that might ... damage you in any way, physically or emotionally. He's got it pretty bad for you."

"No, he doesn't. It's all about Isaac, not about me."

"If it makes it easier for you to think that, carry on."

Sidra watched a wisp of smoke curl up from the broiler. "I think your bread is burning again."

"For the love of the Maker!"

Sidra snorted and poured herself another glass of Merlot. *For the love of the Maker? That's me, isn't it?*

* * * * *

Josh's appearance relaxed Sidra a bit, and she suspected Van had planned it that way.

"I tried to be fashionably late," he leaned in and whispered to Sidra, "but I'm not sure how late is fashionable?" She rubbed at Josh's back and smiled. He *did* look wonderful, and she'd never seen him so excited over anything, save their work.

Sidra wondered how Van meant to break it to Josh that she was Isaac Newton reincarnated, that they were alchemical children hoping for a reprise from damnation. As far as she knew, Josh still thought Van was a ghostbuster. *Maybe I should talk to him?*

Van and Alex talked in low voices in a corner as Wentworth carried dishes from the kitchen to the dining room. They all looked over when the doorbell rang.

Van nodded to Josh. "Get that, would you, buddy?"

"Sure." Josh looked to Sidra nervously, and with a reassuring smile and wink, she gestured for him to go.

The room fell silent as Josh opened the door and Terri bounced through, looking over her shoulder at Josh as she pushed a bottle of wine into Wentworth's hands. She pulled off her coat and sat near Sidra as she stared at Josh.

"Who is *that*?" Terri quickly pulled lipstick from her pocket and applied it to her full lips, smacking them together and then fluffing her hair.

"That is my friend, Joshua Asimov."

"He's dreamy. What shows has he done?"

"Shows?"

Josh tentatively sat across from the women.

"Yeah. What shows have you done, Joshua?"

"Shows?"

"Is there an echo in here? Shows -- Calvin Klein, Donna Karan, Versace, you know -- shows."

Van called from across the room. "He's not a model, Terri. He's a professor."

Terri leaned back on the couch, still staring. Josh ran his hand through his hair and blushed. "I'm a professor. Well, an assistant professor."

"There is an echo in here. Are you actually blushing?"

Sidra bit back a laugh as Josh pinched at the bridge of his nose.

"I suppose I'm blushing, yes."

"How adorable!" Terri abandoned Sidra for a seat a few inches from Josh. "I'm Terri."

"Figured so. Nice to meet you." Josh extended his hand awkwardly, and Terri clutched it in both of hers and didn't let go.

"Tell me absolutely everything about yourself, Joshua. Oh, I love that name. Do you like blondes?"

"Huh?"

"Blondes." She pointed to her hair. "Women with this hair color."

Terri glanced at Sidra. "Am I coming on too strong?"

"I think it might be all right in this case." She smiled and gestured for Terri to go on.

Josh grinned stupidly and nodded. "It's fine, good, wonderful. Yes, I like blondes."

Van caught Sidra's eye and smiled, gave her the thumbs-up sign, and she had to let a giggle escape. *I love you, Donovan Barlowe. Who else would think to put these two together? You're a hopeless romantic, aren't you?*

Van narrowed his eyes and nodded slowly, seductively. He walked to Sidra and held out his hand, pulled her to her feet and into a close embrace. He called over his shoulder to Alex. "Maestro, could we have a bit of music here? I want to dance with the most beautiful woman in New York."

"I'm going to vomit if you keep this up, Donovan." Alex switched on the CD player.

Van held Sidra's gaze as he led her in a slow dance. Etta James's voice crooned Sidra into a dream state, lost in Van's blue eyes and warm embrace. She laid her head on his shoulder and caught a glimpse of Terri pulling Josh to his feet to dance.

"Hey!" Wentworth emerged from the kitchen with a basket of burnt bread. "I didn't get an invitation to the prom. My dinner will get cold!"

Alex groaned and sat at the dinner table, alone. "Want to dance, Wentworth?"

Wentworth's dinner was cold, but delicious, and Sidra laughed with the brothers as they told stories of their world travels, all edited, she thought, so as not to shock Josh with their identities.

If only my life could stay like this. When was the last time she'd really enjoyed herself so much? Besides department functions that were more work than pleasure, she hadn't socialized at all since Patrick, except for a few working meals with Josh.

Van flirted with abandon, and she even warmed to Alexander as he teased her. It wouldn't stay like this, she thought, if she couldn't break the curse on these men. Sidra prayed Van's plan could work, felt deep in her heart it was impossible that it would.

Van leaned in and whispered in her ear. "I need to bring Josh up to speed, okay? He might be able to help, know the right questions to ask. Are you game?"

Sidra nodded as her chest tightened in fear. Her first vision had rocked her to her soul, and the thought of trying to return to another life again sent her heart racing.

"Sidra, you won't leave us, do you understand? It's all up here." He tapped at her temple.

"What if it doesn't work?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Together." Van kissed her hand and she brushed her palm along his cheek, longing to forget their task, longing to hold him again, feel his kiss and caress.

Van stood and motioned the party to the living room. "Josh, if I might tear you away from our Terri for a bit, I want to talk to you."

"Sure man, anything." Josh's grin seemed permanently fixed now, and he released Terri's hand reluctantly. Terri pouted dramatically and sat near Sidra.

"Sidra, are you sore at me for tricking you in the bar?" Terri threw an arm around Sidra and hugged her briefly. "It was for a good cause."

Sidra leaned close and whispered in her ear. "As long as you don't lead Josh on, I won't be sore."

"Lead him on? I was thinking of asking him to marry me." Terri giggled, eyes twinkling in mischief. "He's the real thing, isn't he? Doesn't have a clue how special he is?"

"Not an inkling. I'm glad you're making him feel special."

Van interrupted. "Girls, girls, a little quiet. Josh, my brothers and I have an ulterior motive for this little party." He glanced at his watch. "We have one more guest, due to arrive momentarily. She's a psychic, and a hypnotist."

Sidra bit back a gasp. Of course, it made sense to bring in a professional. *Stay calm, Sidra.*

"Oh. Cool. I'd like to be hypnotized!"

"It's not for entertainment."

Josh's brow furrowed in concentration. "Part of your demonology? I don't mean to insult you, since it's your profession, but you do need to be careful. It's not a good idea to monkey around in certain areas. I've heard stories about people releasing bad spirits and having a hell of a time getting them back in the bottle once they're out. Remember that priest we met, Sidra, the exorcist?" Josh shuddered visibly.

"Martine's no dummy, Josh. I promise we're not going to release any demons."

"Martine? The woman from TV?"

Van nodded and leaned forward, chin propped on his hand, studying Josh. No one spoke, and Josh looked at the others in discomfort.

"I'm here for a reason, aren't I? Besides, well, you know ..." Josh nodded toward Terri.

Van blew out a breath. "We think Sidra knew a good deal about alchemy in a past life, Josh. You are to help us interpret anything she says as Martine takes her back to that life."

"Huh."

Josh looked at Sidra, who tried to console him with a smile she feared looked forced.

"You believe this, Sidra? Why didn't you mention it before?"

"I only became aware of it recently, Josh. I promise I wouldn't hold something like this from you."

"It's a shame Martine can't take you back for a peek at Newton, eh?"

Silence hung over the room like a heavy storm cloud, dark and threatening. Sidra shuddered and one of the lamps flickered out.

Josh folded his arms stubbornly and glared at Van. "Spit it out, Mr. Barlowe."

"We believe that ..." Van winced at Sidra. "It suddenly sounds silly to me."

Alexander put down his wine glass so hard it shattered on the table. He held up his hand to silence Van. "Enough, Donovan. We are the children of Sir Isaac Newton, created by his hand nearly three hundred years ago. Our Maker cursed us on his deathbed, and Sidra *must* learn how to break that curse." Josh opened his mouth to ask a question, but Alex gestured again for silence. "We have searched for the reincarnation of his spirit for centuries, as he prophesized we would. We found her. I wonder if that counts as cheating on your dissertation, Sidra?"

Sidra returned Alex's wry smile. "Straight to the bottom of that list, Alexander."

Josh pulled off his glasses and pinched at his nose, eyes shut tightly. "Of course, that would mean that he created the Philosopher's Stone. That it's real, not an allegory for life and nature." His eyes shot open. "I don't buy it. Not for a second."

Sidra heard the hint of doubt through Josh's conviction. "You don't have to believe, Josh. Only listen carefully. Can you do that for us?"

"I suppose so." Josh suddenly looked at Terri. "You aren't ... one of them, are you?"

“Just a family friend,” she answered with a bright smile.

The knock on the door jarred Sidra. She covered her face with her hands. *This is it. Do or die. Please, God, even if I can't have him, show me some way to help him.*

Wentworth opened the door and Martine swept into the room in a dramatic flash of color, draped head to toe in beads and scarves, trailing the scent of patchouli. Her garish lipstick matched her bright red hair and set off her flashing green eyes. Sidra thought she looked twenty years older in person than on television, but still couldn't put her finger on the woman's age.

Martine zeroed in on Sidra in a second and walked straight to her. “I take it you're the purpose for this reading?”

Sidra nodded.

Martine's gaze swept about the room, resting on each of the group for a moment. She rubbed her hands together, making dozens of bracelets jingle.

“What the hell do we have here? This place is crawling with energy! Where's a damned television camera when you need one?”

She suddenly pointed to Josh and Terri. “You and you, out!”

Van started to protest, but Martine held her hand up and shut her eyes. “Mr. Barlowe, if you'd like my help, you'll follow my instructions to the letter. Is that quite clear?”

Josh stood. “I'm not leaving Sidra alone!”

Martine turned on Josh, disdain etched across her face.

Terri pulled at Josh's hand and led him to the door. “Come on, honey, buy me a drink.” Josh looked past her at Sidra.

“I'll be okay, Josh.”

“That's what you always say.”

Chapter Twelve

"Lock this away safely, Wentworth. Instruct the mortician to bury it with me."

Isaac could barely make out Wentworth's pale green-brown eyes, usually so merry. He heard his sobs, though, and imagined the pain the brave lad felt. "Stop weeping; you will be fine. I am most proud of you, my son, for you seek justice and truth for others. Now hide that away, and show it to no one."

"Aye, Father, I promise." He watched as Wentworth slipped the pendant into a velvet bag and pushed it into a drawer of the heavy dresser.

"What is that?" Donovan's low voice penetrated the room.

"It is between the Maker and me, Donovan, leave it be."

Donovan pushed past Wentworth and opened the drawer, held the pendant up to the light.

Isaac bristled with resentment. "No doubt you will sell it for ale and women."

Donovan tucked the pendant away and came to Isaac's bedside. "Is that what you've come to think of me, Father? That I value trinkets more than your life, more than your love?" Donovan knelt and clutched at Isaac's hand, sending a momentary bit of warmth to his chilled body. So this is what it is to lose life a bit at time, Isaac thought in wonder.

Donovan's voice was but a whisper. "Stay with us, I beg of you. You have the power to heal yourself. Use that power, now!"

"My sin is grievous, my charming boy. God calls me to judgment, and I answer that call willingly."

"Your sin?"

"I served myself by creating a brood of immortal pleasure-seekers -- some of you worshippers of the Trinity. In my heart, I know that is a heresy against the One true Father."

"We love you, would do anything to serve you, Isaac. Is that all you need from us? To mend our ways, to live as you would like? Forgive us, and stay with us!"

"No, Donovan! I curse the day I created you! I curse you all to end your days in the coming holy alignment. You have many days to mend your ways without me, and I will return to mete out my judgment upon you. In but two hundred and eighty years, I will be among those who walk the earth and see you called to your final judgment. The planetary convergence is the image of that on the night I created the Stone."

"How can you know that?"

"It has been my vision for many decades."

"You would curse us to die? You love me, Isaac, I know it! At least spare the others, it is not about them."

"You all will die. You love me not."

Donovan's tears rolled down his cheeks and Isaac felt a stab of regret. He reached to touch the face of his beautiful creation, to utter the truth of his life, the truth of his death and vision. A rigid cold coursed through his body, and he could not speak or move. A piercing light blinded him, and he reached toward its beauty and holy embrace.

* * * * *

Martine instructed the brothers in preparations for Sidra's session. They dimmed the lights, rearranged furniture, and lit candles and incense.

Alexander leaned in and whispered to Sidra. "Isn't this a little hokey? She'll pull out a Tarot deck any second."

"Then why did you invite her?" Sidra snapped.

"She's Van's friend, of course. We've helped her out on occasion. Missing children, that sort of thing. We don't want the press and she does."

"So she's a phony?" Van shot them a look to quiet down as Martine bustled about the penthouse, adjusting candles and surveying the air with her hands as if she were touching invisible objects.

"No, this is her specialty. Martine pretends to see spirits, but Van and I know when she's faking that."

"Have you ever let her hypnotize you?"

Alex looked at her in horror.

Martine's deep voice, laced with portent and mystery, echoed loudly across the room. "The brothers don't have the balls you do, my dear. They prefer to gnash teeth and wring hands over their supposedly tortured existences in this life. It must be a terrible trial to be a gorgeous billionaire living an idle existence anywhere a whim takes you." She turned and arched a brow at Sidra, who had to smile despite her nerves.

"None of you knows about your first life -- I mean, before Isaac did his thing on you?" Sidra looked from brother to brother.

Van shrugged and seemed a bit chagrined. "Martine's right, we don't have the balls. Only Defon knows about his pre-Isaac existence, because he ran into an acquaintance from that life. The knowledge rocked him to his core, and he shared that secret with me alone. After that, we all stopped asking."

Martine cackled. "You didn't stop wondering, though, did you? I can tell you a thing or two, and it's not going to be pretty if I do."

She indicated a central chair to Sidra, who shivered at the sudden rush of cool air that circled around her.

Van wrapped her in one of his sweaters and hugged her closely. "Whatever happens, love, I'm here for you. Don't worry."

Martine pulled them apart. "Don't tug at her emotions, now, Mr. Barlowe. Do not speak with her until I direct you to. That goes for both of you," she pointed to Alex and Went.

Alex sat on the couch and sipped at a cup of coffee. "I wouldn't think of tugging at Sidra's emotions."

Sidra scowled at Alex and turned to Martine. "Is it possible to go back in time and turn someone into a donkey?"

Martine didn't crack a smile. "Your nervousness is normal. Now sit," she indicated a lounge chair, separated from the rest. Sidra pulled Van's sweater close around her, finding some solace in his scent on the fabric. She gazed at him, wondering if when she woke, he'd still care for her. If she were useful, perhaps he'd stay a while.

A sudden thought pained her. How long would he want her, a mere mortal who would age and wrinkle and sag? Which would hurt worse -- if he died at the end of the month, still wanting her, or if he abandoned her, to fulfill his immortal destiny?

I love him so much. Save him, God, even if he can't be mine, save him. Scarlet, if you can hear me, please ask God to help us.

Martine sat opposite Sidra and pointed to her pendant. "Why do you wear the representation of the *Lapis Philosophicus*?"

Sidra held the pendant up to examine it. "What do you mean? It's seven stones around a central gem ..." Her hand shook as she looked again. Could it represent the mandala of the Cosmos? She'd seen dozens of renderings, each a bit different, some showing a man, some showing planets, but nothing as simple as eight golden circles.

Martine arched a brow. "You are familiar with the Stone because of your work, are you not? Yet you are a nonbeliever?"

"I ... I don't know what I believe in anymore."

"We shall see, we shall see. Sidra, let me explain a few fundamentals. There are two ways of knowing -- Solar Consciousness and Lunar Consciousness. No doubt, you prefer the former -- rational, deductive, and intellectual. The latter, intuitive way of knowing comes from the intelligence of the heart, of the soul, and ultimately, from the Universe itself. Tonight we will learn about your own Lunar Consciousness."

"Those are components of alchemy, from the Hermetic tradition."

Martine nodded slowly. "Alchemical hypnotherapy combines the transformation of the spirit through the use of inner guides, which represent the deep knowing that lies untapped within. In your case, we seek a particular past life, is that not so?"

Sidra nodded. "I guess we're looking for Sir Isaac Newton."

Alex snorted. "Good guess."

Martine sent Alex a look to kill. He recoiled and concentrated on his coffee.

"I understand that there are many reasons why you might feel troubled by that lifetime, if indeed we make a confirmation of his identity. I suspect that we must rewrite a past-life contract. Do you understand?"

"I do," Van whispered, and Martine turned to him.

"Mr. Barlowe, did you make a bargain with the spirit that lives within Sidra Patmos? What is that bargain?"

"I only know my side of the bargain."

"Then we shall attempt to learn Sidra's. It causes no end of pain to her, this broken contract." Martine leaned in and caressed Sidra's hands, narrowing her eyes in a penetrating stare.

"I don't know what you mean. I haven't been in pain."

"No?"

The lie choked Sidra, and she gasped in a quick breath. "No, I've been fine. Except for some sad events that a lot of people go through, my life has been quite ordinary."

Martine smiled sympathetically. "You trust others, assume that they love you and want the best for you? Your relationships with men are secure and satisfying? You feel open and free, confident about your abilities and appeal? You know your true life purpose and have no difficulty expressing that purpose to the Universe?"

"That would be a lot to ask."

"It is your birthright, one we all share. Unless something goes awry. Let us find out what went awry, shall we?"

Martine's sure manner unnerved Sidra. *This isn't a parlor game. She knows what she's doing. Dear God.*

Sidra felt the strong urge to flee, to leave Van's apartment and run for all she was worth down the street, into Central Park, dash into the trees, and lose herself where no one could

find her. To run until her lungs burst and all the fear and pain subsided. Martine tightened her grip. *She can smell my fear.*

"I'm sorry, I'm not very comfortable with this."

Van stood but Martine waved him away. "Darling, very few things worth fighting for come easily. Your peace is worth fighting for, is it not? Give yourself a chance. Now close your eyes, and listen only to my voice. Clear your head of the chatter of this world, and think of nothing but a speck of light, right between your eyes, the point of true knowing. Good. If at any time you desire to return to a full conscious state, you may do so of your own free will. Nothing will stop it. You are safe and in complete control of all we do here. See the light, see only the light. I am going to count backwards from ten, and when I reach one, you will be relaxed, open, and in complete control. Ten."

Sidra uttered a silent prayer for strength and concentrated on the light that glowed in the darkness.

"Nine. You are more relaxed. Your legs and arms are becoming lighter, and you are very comfortable."

Sidra let out a deep breath, releasing tension from her arms and hands. As Martine counted, her body seemed nearly weightless, and when she reached one, Sidra floated calmly in a sea of twinkling lights.

"Nod if you can hear me, Sidra. Good." Martine sounded very far away.

"Sidra, do you see your guide?" Sidra shook her head no, just as a woman appeared in the periphery of her vision. A young woman, ephemeral yet strong, dressed in white, smiling warmly and extending her right hand. In her left hand, she brandished a gleaming bejeweled sword.

"She's an angel."

"That's a very nice description. Your angel will keep you safe during this journey. Her job is to lead you to important times. They may not seem like important times, but you must trust her. Will you let her lead you, Sidra?"

"Yes." *I want her to stay, forever.*

"I am asking your guide to take you to your childhood. I want you to think of the first Christmas you remember. Perhaps you are with your parents, opening gifts. Are your parents there, Sidra?"

"I don't have a daddy. Mommy, gave me Daisy. Daisy is mine." Sidra smiled as she played with the doll's blonde curls, pulling them straight and then giggling as they bounced back into coils. The smell of spiced cider simmering on the stove comforted her. Her Uncle's sweet pipe smoke wound through the air in a thin cloud. Her mother brushed at Sidra's hair and pressed her lips to her head. Sidra pulled away and scampered to her uncle to display Daisy. She wrinkled her nose at her Uncle's pipe smoke.

"This is Santa's pipe!" Uncle Fred hugged her closely, laughing in a jolly imitation of Santa Claus, but she wriggled out of his grasp to play with Daisy.

Martine's voice pulled her from the vision. "What a lovely time. What is your mommy's name, Sidra?"

"Scarlet O'Hara. That's not her real name, silly Mommy. Her real name is Scarlet Abercrombie. She went to a magic place far away and liked it so much she changed her name. Now her name is Scarlet Patmos. It's my name too." A tinge of fear made Sidra lower her voice. "I heard Mommy tell Uncle Fred that our new name means nobody can find us and hurt us. Don't tell anyone our real name."

"It's a lovely name." Sidra took another deep breath of holiday aromas as a handgrip closed on her heart. A tear rolled down her cheek and she brushed it away.

"What's wrong, Sidra? Where are you?"

"Mommy is crying. She's fighting with Uncle Freddy."

"Why are they fighting?"

Sidra shrugged. They always fought. Uncle Freddy wanted Mommy to be different somehow, and it always made her cry.

"I ask your guide to lead you again, away from this pain. There were Christmases before that one, Sidra. Go back again, far, far back. You are relaxed, and your guide leads you to the very first Christmas you remember, in this or any body."

Sidra reached out to touch her mother's tears, but felt herself pulled backwards into darkness, sinking into time. Images of people and buildings and seasons flashed in quick succession, but she felt a hand pull her to a small cold room, dimly lit with one candle.

She cried, curled up on a cot, clutching at a thin blanket.

"Why are you crying? Where are you? What is your name?"

Sidra pounded her fist on the bed and cried out in frustration. "Mother hates me!"

"Your mother hates you? Why do you say that?"

"She married Minister Smith. She's sending me away to grandfather's! I hate them, I hate them all!"

"I see. What year is it?"

"The year of our Lord 1645. It is my birthday!"

"It is Christmas Day?"

"Yes."

"How old are you?"

"Two."

"Are you sure you are only two? You sound a bit older."

"Quite sure. I should know my own age!"

"Why would your mother send you away?"

"Because Minister Smith calls me a bastard and a devil. I am not a bastard! My father died, but I am not to mention his name. He died before I was born. Perhaps he did not want a child. Perhaps that is why he died."

"I ask your guide to lead you forward, away from this pain. You are a little older. Where are you?"

Sidra gazed out the window of the same room. The bleak winter sky framed a low rolling plain covered in a thin blanket of snow. Guilt rolled through her at the sight of the bare fields. The season had been a complete disaster. "I am at the farm in Lincolnshire. I have failed miserably, although they all predicted this outcome! No one expected me to thrive in such an occupation, yet they put the burden of our family's crops and care for the horses on my shoulders! I have begged for some reprisal. I want to attend college. They tell me that I am not destined for academics, that I am a dullard, but the college has accepted me! Mother will not pay for my education, although she has the funds! The horrible minister left her with coin enough for a dozen lifetimes. Yet the odious woman insists I will work for my keep at Cambridge. I am so ashamed." Sidra put her hands over her face. Anger coursed through her veins at the outrage. "She seeks my thorough humiliation -- that is her sole motivation."

"How old are you?"

"I have attained seventeen years."

"What is your name?"

"Isaac."

"Will you let your guide lead you forward perhaps seven years or so, Isaac? Are you in Lincolnshire still? What are you doing at this moment?"

Sidra dipped her quill in an inkpot and scrawled a few words into her notebook. "I am in my home. I share it with another fellow from Cambridge, Master Wickens. He takes the upper floors, and my private quarters are below. Wickens leaves me be -- he admires me, I know it. But I keep much of my research secret from him."

"What are you doing?"

"I am working on a translation of a Greek text. More I cannot tell you." Dread crept up Sidra's spine, and she leaned over her papers to hide her work.

"I am a believer, Isaac, and you may trust me with your secrets."

Sidra squirmed in her chair for a moment, fear warring with a deep need to share. She picked up the notebook and read aloud.

"'Tis true without lying, certain and most true. That which is below is like that which is above and that which is above is like that which is below to do ye miracles of one only thing. And as all things have been and arose from one by ye mediation of one, so all things have their birth from this one thing by adaptation ..."

"The Emerald Tablet! Isaac, are you translating the Emerald Tablet of Hermes?"

"Tell no one. They have elected me to a Fellowship for my work in mathematics, for my book. No one must know of my true cause. It would be my ruin."

"I will not betray you, Isaac, I promise! What do you seek?"

"I seek the truth of God. I seek his purpose for me."

"Do you seek the *Lapis Philosophicus*, Isaac? Have you attempted to create the Philosopher's Stone?"

Sidra dropped the pen and held her head in her hands, exhaustion and despair draining her of life, of hope. "I have failed miserably."

"Will you step a little further with your guide? Another three years perhaps?"

A hand pulled her forward again, and she watched countless images flash by, until she settled into a moment, a breathtaking moment. Her beloved son slept peacefully, curled up near the fire, long lashes black as midnight against his fair cheeks, lips parted slightly in the breath of sleep.

"What are you doing now, Isaac?"

"I watch him sleep."

"Who?"

"My firstborn. The others have left us, determined to lose themselves in earthly pleasures this night, as most. Donovan stays behind, concerned for me. I have taken a chill, and he tends to me. He has fallen asleep, as he always does when he attempts to grasp the lessons I put before him -- my optical treatise this time." Sidra laughed lowly. "Some of my writings have proved the most effective sleeping draught."

"You said that he is your son? Of what woman?"

"Of no woman. I have lain with no woman. He is my creation alone."

Sidra watched Donovan shift, heard his low troubled moan, perhaps the victim of a frightening dream. She pulled her blanket close and tiptoed to his side, sat quietly, and reached to stroke his silken hair. "He is the most beautiful of God's creatures."

"How did you create him, Isaac?"

"With the Stone and God's blessing." She put her hand to her chest, reassuring herself that the pendant holding the Stone was safe.

"Will you share the secret of the Stone with us, Isaac?"

"I will not!" Sidra clenched her fists in anger and felt the room spin, fought an urge to swim to the surface of her mind.

"That's fine, Sidra! You don't have to give up your secrets! No more questions about that, I promise."

Sidra nodded and clutched at her pendant, pulling the blanket tighter around her to hide the treasure hanging around her neck.

"Isaac, one more time, please, will you let the guide take you to the end of your life?"

Sidra moaned. Shame poured through her, shame and grief in equal measure.

"Where are you?"

"On my deathbed. Wentworth, Alexander, and now Donovan are beside me. The other children stand back. They weep for me. Where is Defonsius? Oh my Maker, I want to lay eyes on him once more before I die."

"Do you speak to those around you?"

"Aye, I speak. I curse them. I curse them with every ounce of my failing strength. I call on God to haunt them with doubt for nearly three centuries."

"Why do you curse them, Isaac?"

Sidra sobbed, pain squeezing her heart until it came close to stopping cold. "My boy, my charming boy. The world believes I have grown insane, they speak ill of me while they praise me to my face. They bestow great honors on me, yet ridicule my life. I am not insane."

"Why do you curse them, Isaac?"

"I am so ashamed. So ashamed. I was an unworthy servant to God, so he did not grant me the happiness I sought."

"You sought love?"

Sidra shuddered and covered her face with her hands. "I only asked that he not leave me. He never left me. He did all I asked of him. I never asked him to love me. The blame is mine; the sin is mine. I cursed him for my own sin. I coveted my own son."

"Can the curse be lifted, Isaac?"

Sidra sobbed uncontrollably for the decades of longing, for the shame of longing, for the ultimate insult to one she loved so dearly. To make him pay for not loving, for not wanting, she haunted him and his kind with doubt and fear. *They are immortal, blessed by God. They will rise to the ultimate life with all of God's children in the final judgment. I could not curse them with death then, I cannot now. I only meant to hurt them. My sin is unforgivable.*

"Isaac, tell us how to lift the curse!"

There is no curse. They will live forever.

She rocked back and forth in her chair, clutching at her chest in agony for such a wrong, praying that God forgive her, show mercy on her soul.

"Isaac?"

Her guide wrapped her spirit tightly in a gentle, warm beam of pure white light, and all the pain slipped away. Sidra wiped at her tears and sat up straight. She opened her eyes and took in a deep breath. Martine slowly came into focus. "No more. I am finished."

Van ran to Sidra's chair and knelt at her side, brought her hand to his cheek, then lay his head in her lap. He shook with tears and Sidra rubbed his back.

"I'm so sorry. It would have been nothing, nothing. You were my life, my whole life. I would give anything to have that time again, to hold you, to love you in the way you wanted. You never asked, but I knew, and still I let you go on in such pain. I am so sorry, Isaac, please forgive me. Please forgive us all."

"Mr. Barlowe, please stop! Sidra will not remember what just transpired. We are no longer communicating with Isaac, do you understand?"

Sidra caressed Van's hair, as she remembered doing those decades earlier. "No, Martine, I remember. It's all right, Van, you aren't to blame."

Van looked up at her, his eyes rimmed in red, tears glistening on his lashes. "I'm so sorry."

Alexander and Wentworth came to her side, and to her amazement, both knelt with Van and reached to her. She held her hand to Alexander's cheek and brushed away a tear.

"Stop crying, Alex, it's unnerving."

"I failed you, wasted my life. I'm the most selfish of us all." He turned his head away and she rubbed at his shoulder. She gazed up at Wentworth, who smiled as he wiped at his tears. "I'm so glad to have you back. We've missed you so much."

"Oh. Well, I'm not sure Isaac is here really. I think I'm glad to be back in my own body. He was a very, very unhappy fellow."

Martine gasped, hand over her mouth. "This isn't possible, Sidra. You can't remember."

Sidra shrugged. Van held her tightly, desperately, and she struggled to pull his arms from her legs. "Van, sweetheart, please stop. It's going to be all right."

Alex pulled at Van's shoulders and held him.

"Mr. Barlowe, what was the contract you made with Sir Isaac?" Martine's voice was a mere whisper.

"I thought it was to love him."

Sidra shook her head. "No, Van. Your contract was simply to let eternal life enter your veins. To allow Isaac to bring you back from the dead. God granted him that, you had no say."

Martine lifted a brow at Sidra. "On your side?"

"To nurture him, teach him, guide him, like my son."

"Did you do that?"

Sidra nodded uncertainly. "I suppose so."

Alexander cried out. "That's not true! You cursed us; put an end to our immortality!"

"I suppose all parents make mistakes. I recognized mine the moment I made it. I had one more thing to say, but God saw fit to pull me into his arms before I could utter it. There is no curse. Isaac meant only to wound you, to frighten you. He was bitter, and very, very sad and lonely. You won't die."

Van stared at Sidra in shock. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. It was a horrid, mean, selfish trick by a lonely old man. A very brilliant man, but still ..." Sidra hung her head in shame, wondering if she shared the capacity for such selfishness, for inflicting such pain. A wave of frightening premonition swept through her. *Take care, Sidra. Don't repeat Isaac's horrible mistake.*

Wentworth sat on the floor in a puddle of relief. "My God, it wasn't real. To think how it has ruled our lives."

"I'm so sorry, Wentworth. Alex. Your lives would have been so different, I imagine, without that hanging over your heads."

Martine laughed darkly. "Are you certain they would have had better lives, Sidra? We shall see what they do with them now, shall we not? Isaac chose to return to this century. Not to watch these men die, but to release these men from their fears. What they do with their lives now ..." She smiled wryly.

Sidra trembled in confusion and the pain of two lives as she watched the brothers try to pull themselves together, tried to accept the news of their unbroken immortality. *They'll always be angry, and they have a right to be. Dear God, I would be. Isaac had chosen a cruel, bitter last act.*

Sidra brushed at her own tears. She'd spent years studying the mysteries of Isaac Newton, and learned nothing about the *man*. He was so lonely, so needy, and all the brilliant accomplishments had meant next to nothing at the end of his life.

Van doesn't need you now, Sidra. It's over.

Van held his hand out to Sidra. "What about the others? Defon? We owe them the truth."

Alexander wagged his head. "They will *not* be very happy to hear this."

Wentworth nodded. "I'm not sure they'll believe it. By the way, Sidra, that pendant ...?"

Sidra put her palm to her chest. "You didn't bury it with Isaac, Wentworth."

"I was always a trifle forgetful. I'm sorry."

Sidra pulled the necklace out and held the pendant to the light.

"I don't know how to use it. I only remember what I saw under hypnosis."

Van approached her and gazed into the stone. "That's probably a good thing. I'm not sure the world needs any more of us. I'm still not sure why he did this. Perhaps we really are mistakes."

I need you, Van. You aren't a mistake. Please tell me you still want me.

Chapter Thirteen

Van watched exhaustion sweep over Sidra as she curled up on the couch in his arms. His brothers were unusually silent after spending an hour devising a plan for speaking with Defon. The shock and relief of learning of their freedom, of their immortality, changed the dynamic of their interactions, and Van wondered how long it would be before they bickered and joked as they had for hundreds of years.

Alexander finally stood and leaned in, kissing Sidra on the cheek. “Goodnight, brave woman.”

Sidra mumbled a good night, but Alex turned around just as he approached the door to his suite. “Sidra?”

“Hmm?”

“I’ll try to do better from now on.”

“You do that, Alex.”

Wentworth chuckled and followed him. “I’ll believe that when I see it.”

Van brushed at Sidra’s hair. “Do you realize how special you are, Sidra? It’s been torture, this waiting, searching, not knowing. We’re so grateful.” *There’s no way to make her understand fully what it means to be free from the curse.*

Sidra sat up and inched away from him slightly, pulled her arm from his hand. “You did the work, Van, you found me. I owe you a debt of gratitude as well.”

“Oh, now, that dress wasn’t *that* expensive. I’ll take it out of your allowance, a hundred a month.” *Something’s terribly wrong. This has shaken her to her core. No wonder, given what she’s gone through in the space of a few days. I admire her so much.*

She didn't smile. "When I was growing up, my mom did all she could to give me security. We were poor, but I always knew that we'd be okay, and I always felt how much she loved me."

"Scarlet. You look like her."

"She used to fret over me, how I always worried how everyone perceived me, what an overachiever I was, especially at work. I think I understand that now."

"Because of Isaac?"

"My pal Isaac. He was obsessed with you, Van. When I was ... in his body tonight, I guess you'd say, it nearly overwhelmed me. I'm not telling you this to make you feel guilty again -- you need to let that go. I know, though, that he made a choice to let it rule his life. No amount of brilliance or scientific achievement, no praise or position, could have ever made him happy. He let his obsession turn to poison."

Van swallowed hard against the lump in his throat. Sidra was winding up to a dreadful punch line.

"What are you trying to tell me, Sidra?"

"I'm going home."

"What? You'll do no such thing! It's still not safe for you, love. Defon doesn't know yet about his fate ..."

"I don't mean just for the night. I'm going home. I'll get into a cab, go back to my loft, crawl into my bed, and sleep for days. When I wake up, I'll remember a wonderful dream."

"I don't understand?"

"A dream that a mystical, exquisite man chatted with me on the Internet, met me in a bar, made me fall in love with him, and then set me free. I won't end up like Isaac. I'll finally honor Scarlet's wish for me, and chart my own course."

Van's felt the blood rush from his head, his hands tremble as he reached out for her. "Sidra, what are you saying? This is ridiculous! We just found one another, after all this time. I *love* you."

"You loved Isaac, too."

"You're a woman! Come on, you understand the difference in circumstances. Bloody hell, must I pay twice for a sin I didn't commit?"

"How old are you, Van? Twenty-seven, twenty-eight?"

He winced. "Don't do this, I'm begging you." His spirit had soared when he learned he would live. One of the most compelling joys had been the promise of time with Sidra, the promise of a normal life with a woman.

Over the last few hours, he'd toyed with a fantasy of proposing marriage, of asking her to live with him, of luxuriating in her affection, of burying his passion within her body at every opportunity. *I'm just getting to know you, Sidra. Give me a chance.*

"I'm thirty-three. This August I'll turn thirty-four. Don't tell me you haven't thought of it. I won't follow in Isaac's footsteps, Van. I won't grow old and bitter when you find the need for someone else, when you turn away from me, because I won't be around to watch it. I couldn't do what Isaac did; live with that pain, day in and day out. I tasted a bit of it tonight. It would kill me."

"I'd *never* turn away from you! You must believe that."

"Your part of the contract with Isaac was to live your life. I'm finished with my part. I have to find a way to live this life."

"Then you don't love me. If you felt the way I do, you wouldn't be able to leave me."

Sidra shook her head. "You know that's not true. I won't bind you to an unfair promise. Do you know what you are? A very grateful man. That's not the same as love. I barely know you. I think I'm in love with you, but even part of me wonders if I'm feeling Isaac's longing, or my own. We can't extricate these lives from each other."

Van stood, pushing his hand through his hair, pacing, searching desperately for the right words. "I won't let you do this. You just gave me my life back, and now you'd pull it from me?"

Van watched her tears well up and overflow onto her pale cheeks. *Never. I won't give up.*

"I'm so sorry. It hurts so much already. If I let it go any longer ..."

Pulling Sidra to her feet, he crushed her mouth with a kiss and gripped at her hair as she tried to pull away. "Never," he whispered desperately. "You're mine. You always were, and you always will be. I won't let you go." What could he say, what could he do? He understood the pain of loss; he had vowed never to love another mortal and watch her die. *This is a different love, though. She's the love of my long life. My creator, my friend, my lover, my one and only. Isn't she?*

She heard the hint of doubt; he saw the pain cross her face.

"You don't leave me any choice, Sidra. I never expected to beg for anything from anyone. I'm begging now, love. Marry me."

It felt so good, so right, to utter the words and see the shock in her eyes, the flare of hope she quickly disguised. She was looking for any reason to stay. They weren't finished. His heart raced with hope.

"That wouldn't change anything," she muttered.

"Of course it would! Do you think I'd break a sworn vow before God? Abandon the mother of my children? Children, Sidra, think of it. I'd care for them, watch them grow and have children of their own. I'd have you for eternity, as our family grows."

"You'd watch me die, too. Do you remember watching Isaac die, Van?"

Van closed his eyes against the unbearable vision of Sidra on her deathbed, clutching at his hand, telling him to be well, to take care of their family. *It doesn't matter. I'd rather watch her grow old than live without her. Please, God, tell me what to say to convince her.*

"I'm rich. Does that count?"

Sidra laughed sadly. "I'd die in luxury. Nice try."

"I can keep a place wraith-free. You need to keep up with the pests."

"I think I can get rid of them myself, now, thanks."

"I'm a snappy dresser."

Sidra smiled weakly. "The best. You're the best at everything, Van. No more jokes, please stop. You know how I feel about you."

"Will you do me one favor, Sidra?"

"What?"

"Promise first. I'll never ask for anything again."

She sighed in exasperation and he heard her thought. *I can't afford the hurt.*

"Spend the night, stay with me, and think about it. Don't make any decisions for a week."

"I have to teach tomorrow. I can't ... if I stay ..."

"One week. Promise me you won't make a decision for one week. After ... everything ... is that too much to ask?"

"You're playing on our previous relationship. Not fair."

"I never claimed to play fair. One week?"

Sidra wiped at her tears. "I'll think about it."

"All right, how about one day? Just give me one day with you."

"I still have to teach tomorrow."

"Why don't you lecture on Newton? You have some new material now. Come on, love, you're exhausted. To bed with you." *Hurry, get her into bed so she doesn't walk out that door.*

For the third time in as many days, Van pulled her into his arms and carried her to the bedroom. He pushed her head against his shoulder and brushed his lips lightly on her neck, taking in the sweet scent of her perfume. He wanted so badly to make love to her, to take his time. Van cursed that lust had made him hurry the few times they'd been together. She closed her eyes, and he knew the chance would have to come another day. If they had another day.

Van rolled Sidra onto his bed and nudged her onto her stomach.

"Mnnn. What?"

“Shush. I’m getting you out of this dress. You’re terribly hard on clothes. You really looked beautiful tonight. You wouldn’t want to lose your stylist, would you?”

“Mnnn.”

Van unzipped her dress and inched it down off her shoulders, then pulled at the hem and slid it off her hips and down her legs. Choking back a groan at the sight of her long shapely legs, bare back, and gorgeous ass framed in strands of black lace, he pulled off her heels.

“Jesus.”

“Mnnn.”

Suddenly completely awake and fully aroused, Van stripped naked and sat next to Sidra, who snored softly.

“Darling, would you mind if I look at you a while? No? How about a little massage to give you good dreams?” *How unseemly, Donovan, show a little class!* He ached for her, his cock throbbing fiercely, his stomach churning at the thought of losing her, his mind reeling from the connections they’d made earlier in the night.

Sidra moaned and rolled onto her side. Van pulled a quilt around his shoulders and crawled into bed next to her, covering her gently. He inched his way toward her until he cupped her skin with his, pulled back his groin as he felt the brush of his erection against her ass.

Let her sleep, Donovan. She’s earned it.

Laying his cheek against her back, he slid an arm around her waist. *Dream about me, Sidra. A wonderful, overpowering dream of love. I can’t lose you.*

Van brushed his lips against her shoulder and let his body relax and luxuriate in the feel of holding his treasure securely.

“If I could, I’d give up forever for you.” *I finally have empathy for Defonsius.*

Van tossed and turned in half-sleep for an hour, consciousness drawn back three centuries, then cast forward to Sidra. He woke suddenly, knowing she was awake, watching him.

She lay on her side, hugging him with both arms. In the low light, he could just make out the whites of her eyes. Moonlight caught a glint of the pendant around her neck as her chest rose and fell with her deep breathing.

“Van?”

“Yes, love?”

Sidra ran her hand down his torso and his skin came alive, tingling as her fingers explored his waist and hips, moved to his crotch. Instantly hard for her, he rolled her onto her back and captured her lips in a kiss. Van pulled at her lovely full mouth with his, nipping at her languidly. He licked his way to her breasts, pulling at one hard nipple, rolling it

between his teeth, suckling as she moaned. Heat pounded to his cock, and he reached for her mound, pushing under her thong to clutch at her warmth and wetness. Sidra panted as he pulled off the thin layer of silk and rubbed the length of his body against hers.

Sidra pushed at him forcefully, and he rolled onto his back, holding his breath, hoping she meant to take him, to take control.

Claim me, Sidra.

"I can hear you now. Deep inside, as if you were whispering into my heart."

Sidra clutched Van's cock in one hand and rubbed briefly as she climbed atop him, lowered herself onto him. Van felt as if they were alone in the world, Sidra's heat pulling him in one tiny inch at a time, clutching at his slick erection with her velvet walls as she finally lowered herself completely.

"God, help me."

They clutched hands and Sidra rose to a squat, then rode him with her back arched, breasts bobbing as she moved up and down. A pounding, thrilling wave rushed to his cock as she moved more quickly, slapping against him with her wet folds. The last thing he saw before she cried out his name and he closed his eyes to die his tiny death was the pendant of his Maker, gleaming in the night, glowing as it were alive. It beckoned to him, called him to look into its depth, but Van fell off the abyss into pleasure, forced to close his eyes. At the height of his release, he heard a man call his name, chilling him with fear.

Sidra fell onto him and pressed her lips to his neck. "Van?" He rubbed her back and choked back tears.

"What is it, Van? Tell me."

"I heard Isaac call to me. He wants something else from me."

"He's gone, Van. He needs nothing more from you. He's at peace."

"No, Sidra. It's the Stone. He wants me to understand something about it. He once said he'd show me how to use it. He never did."

"Shush. You're exhausted. If Isaac wanted to speak to you from the grave, don't you think he'd speak through me? Trust me, this is your imagination."

Van kissed her head and hugged her tightly. Isaac's words rang in his ears, and nothing Sidra said or did would silence them. "My dear boy, one day you may seek eternal life for another. I will guide the keeper of the Stone."

The door suddenly opened and Van saw Wentworth's figure in the doorway.

"Bloody hell, Went, leave us alone!"

"Terri's here. They've taken Josh."

"What!" Van sat up.

"Defon. He has Josh."

Chapter Fourteen

Terri sat on the floor of the living room against the wall. She looked up at Sidra, cheeks smeared with mascara, eyes red, and her face pale as a ghost.

Sidra shook her head numbly, unable to think clearly enough to speak. *Anything but this.*

Van squatted next to Terri and pulled her to her feet, guided her to a chair. "Tell me, Terri. Quickly."

Terri glanced at Van and cried again. Alexander put his hand on her shoulder and shook her gently.

"Honey, you have to pull it together. Josh's life may depend upon it. Tell us what happened."

Terri nodded and wiped at her tears. "We were walking in the park, you know, flirting and laughing. It's my fault, I guess. He said he wanted to go to a club, that he'd never been to one, asked if I'd take him. He's so cute," she winced. "I pushed him to take me home, so we walked."

Sidra sat near Terri. "You walked all the way downtown? To SoHo?"

Terri nodded. "Time passed so quickly. We talked the whole way. When we got to his place, he hesitated. I thought he was nervous, you know, about me. I don't think he gets around, if you know what I mean."

"Yes, I know. He doesn't."

"It wasn't about me. He looked up at his apartment -- you can see it from the street ..."

Sidra nodded impatiently. "Josh said he didn't remember leaving the light on. He looked troubled. I think he might have a bit of psi ability of his own. Anyway, it didn't really seem important at the time. I leave the lights on a lot. I kissed him and cajoled him into forgetting his worry, made him hurry with his key."

Terri rested her forehead in her hands.

Alex grabbed one hand and rubbed it. "Go on, Terri. We'll have plenty of time for a pity party later."

Wentworth clucked at Alex. "So much for the new Alexander."

Van shushed them.

"We kissed the whole way upstairs -- he lives on the third floor. He fumbled with the key, and we fell into his apartment, not noticing much but one another. Then Defon spoke."

Van reached for Sidra's hand and squeezed. She squeezed back, trying to reassure him that she was okay, sensing he knew better. He'd feel responsible too, of course. Josh was the most innocent of bystanders. *He's in trouble because of me.*

"Go on, honey," Van prodded. "Was Defonsius alone?"

"Yes. He was sipping a beer, looked like he'd been waiting a while."

"What did he say?"

"He greeted me by name and introduced himself to Josh as your brother. Josh looked a little confused, and he laughed hysterically at his joke. He acted strangely, Van. I think he's come a bit unglued. Josh went to pick up the phone, and Defon pulled out a pistol. He was so nonchalant about it, just set it on the coffee table.

"I was so afraid Josh would try something heroic, you know? Go for the gun or maybe try to fight him, not realizing that Defonsius is immortal. So I tried to seem casual, like Defon was there for me. Josh didn't buy it, so Defon told his story."

Sidra's mind reeled. "What story?"

"How he was a pirate from the Barbary Coast with a horrid record of murder and mayhem. How the Maker brought him back to life, him and his friends -- he mentioned Martin and Aloysius by name, and then cursing them and the women, saying they'd lost faith and abandoned him, gone off to Europe to waste their final days in the sun. He stayed behind to make sure they would actually be final days. I knew he was talking about Sidra, then."

Sidra imagined Josh as he listened to Defon, and wondered how much he'd believed. "What did Josh say?"

"Nothing. He listened, and I could tell his mind was racing, trying to figure out what to do."

"What else did Defon say?"

Terri took in a deep breath and pointed to Sidra. "He wanted to know everything about you. Why you were with the Barlowes, if you knew anything about the Maker, if you ..."

"If I knew how to break the curse."

"Yes, he was desperate about that."

"Why didn't he just come after me? Why Josh?"

Van shook his head. "He thinks you might lift the curse. He fears you, and probably imagines if he steers clear of you, you won't be able to stop him from dying."

"He's not dying."

"He doesn't know that, and he's not going to like it when he finds out."

"How did you get away, Terri?"

"Josh. He went for the gun, and as they struggled, he yelled to me to get away. I figured the best thing to do was to skip the police and come here." She threw up her hands in despair. "Here I am."

Van paced and rubbed at his chin. "Josh doesn't really know enough to satisfy Defon."

Sidra stood and pulled at Van's arm. "We have to get to Josh's apartment. Van, we have to hurry!"

He put his hands on her shoulders to steady her. "Listen carefully, Sidra. They won't be there. Defon will have taken him somewhere else."

"Where? We have to find him!"

"They could have gone anywhere, honestly. It's a huge city. Defon is a big guy, he's armed, and it's impossible to kill him. We'll have to wait for his next move."

"His next move? He might kill Josh."

"No, that's not his style, I swear. Defon's struggled with a lot, but he's no murderer, at least not in his second life. He simply wants some reassurance he's going to die. Eventually he'll figure out that Josh can't help him. He probably knows that already. He's just going to use Josh as security, a bargaining chip."

"We can't simply sit here, Van! You made Defon disappear that first night on Prince Street. He's frightened of you, I know it! Talk to him. He can't hurt you, right?"

"No, we can't hurt one another. All I can do is try to reason with him. He's frightened of me because he thinks I have the secret of the Stone up my sleeve. He heard Isaac promise to show me his spells. Defon thinks I've been holding back on him all these years."

Sidra reached for her pendant. *There must be something I can do!* "I know! Let me speak with him."

"Absolutely not. He'd do anything to stop you if he thinks you have the power to lift the curse. You're the one person he might not hesitate to kill."

"I don't care. Josh is in this because of me. I have to help him. I'll convince him that this is the Philosopher's Stone!"

"It is the Philosopher's Stone, but you don't know how to use it, do you?"

"No, but I can convince him that I have the power to lift the curse with it. He'll believe that, right? Then I can hand it over to him in exchange for Josh."

"No! The Stone stays with you! We can't give it to him. It can't fall into the wrong hands."

"It's nothing more than a rock, Van. We don't know how to use it -- Defon won't figure it out."

She heard Van's silent protest. *We can't give it up, Sidra. It's more than a rock. It still has power. Isaac wants us to understand it.*

How about if we pretend to offer it to him?

Alexander pushed the two apart. "This involves us all, stop that!"

"It's not a crime, Alex. Sidra and I are close; we just fall into it naturally."

"Well, knock it off. We've all had enough of secrets! What do you want to do, Van? It's your call."

Sidra bristled. "Josh is *my* friend."

"He's *my* boyfriend," Terri sobbed lowly. Everyone looked at her and she shrugged. "Well, he was going to be. I suppose this will change everything. If he survives it ..."

Wentworth groaned. "It's Van's call."

Van nodded. "We wait."

* * * * *

Defon motioned for Josh to take a seat in a back pew of the church and patted his jacket, indicating his pistol. "Don't move, Dr. Asimov. I have some personal business to attend to here. You wouldn't understand."

To Josh's amazement, Defon pulled a few dollars from his pocket and knelt at the back of the Cathedral, where he lit a candle, bowed his head, and prayed.

He's going to kill me. He's insane. What has Sidra gotten into? What has she gotten me into?

Josh leaned back against the smooth wood of the pew and closed his eyes, praying for himself. Only a few hours earlier, the night held more promise than any he remembered. The sexiest, funniest girl he'd ever met had wanted him, told him in no uncertain terms that she'd stalk him if she had to. She'd liked *him* -- not his clothes, not his hair. Terri had said he was smart, funny, and sexy, and ... Josh blew out a deep breath. At least she'd gotten away. Had she made it to Sidra and Van? Was there any hope that they'd find him? No. This is about the last place they'd suspect.

Josh glanced around St. Patrick's Cathedral, thinking how ironic it was that he lived his entire life in New York without stepping a foot inside the magnificent church, and now he would likely die there.

Shouldn't it be locked, shouldn't there be a guard? Defon had led them into the church without a care for who saw them. Still, they were alone, and Josh wondered if Defon really had some mystical power he exerted on others.

Josh glanced at Defon, who made the sign of the cross and then slid in next to him.

"Lovely place, isn't it, Doctor?"

"I suppose it is. I'm a bit more familiar with temples."

"Ah, I see. Do you believe in God, Joshua?"

"I've never been sure. Though I suddenly find myself praying to someone, or something."

Defon laughed lowly. "I'm not going to kill you. I don't want to mar my perfect record if I don't have to. Nearly three hundred years without a mortal sin. A few trespasses, mind you, but those have been forgiven I've been assured. Of course, if I don't have a soul, it won't much matter, will it?"

"I really don't understand any of this."

"I believe you don't."

"Then what am I doing here?" Josh knew the answer as he watched a flicker of regret in Defon's dark eyes. "I'm bait. You want Van for some reason. He won't care enough about me to put himself at risk."

"I don't want Van, but don't underestimate how quickly my friend becomes attached to people. Appearances can be quite deceiving, and our Donovan is more moral than even he realizes. The Maker prized that quality of his, among many, many others." Defon sighed and brushed his long black braids back. "Your pal, Professor Patmos. The Barlowes believe she holds the key to preserving our lives."

"Sidra? This Isaac Newton business? I think you've all lost it! Sidra may be a bit psychic, have ghosts or whatever in her apartment, but she doesn't hold the cure to anything."

"Donovan wouldn't be courting her like this unless he thought she was the Alchemist. I saw the psychic go to their building tonight. What happened?"

"Martine kicked us out. Look, Defon, can I speak honestly? Sidra is an ordinary woman who just happened to fall for a very charismatic guy who seems to be involved in some pretty heavy-duty mysticism. It doesn't make her the reincarnation of anyone. She knows a lot about Newton, so do I, but neither of us can lift a curse, cast a spell, talk to the spirit world ... solve any of your problems. Please, I'm begging you, leave her alone. If you have a beef with Van, then work it out with him."

Defon reached into his jacket and Josh's blood ran cold. He let out a deep breath when Defon opened a cell phone and handed it to him. "Call your boss for me."

"No. I won't let you hurt her."

"I only want to speak with her. You're low on options, if it escaped your notice."

Josh took the phone and dialed Sidra's cell. After a few rings, she answered, breathlessly. "Josh?"

"Yes. I'm okay."

"Let me talk to him."

"Promise me you won't come here, Sidra. Promise."

"I promise, honey. Put him on."

Josh handed the phone to Defon, who leaned back in the pew and closed his eyes as he spoke.

"Professor Patmos. Do you know why I'm calling? Good."

Don't do it, Sidra, don't come.

"St. Patrick's. The side door is open, and the guard is sleeping peacefully. Come alone. I won't hesitate to kill your assistant." Defon snapped the phone shut and arched a brow at Josh. "I had to say that, for effect."

"Van's in love with her. He won't let her come alone."

"I know."

Chapter Fifteen

Van grabbed at Sidra's arm and pulled her in close as their limo driver stopped a block away from the Cathedral.

"Promise me you'll do exactly what we discussed."

"Promise." Sidra's hand shook as she reached to brush Van's cheek. He grasped her hand and pulled it to his lips.

"Make me one more promise."

Alex turned to the back of the limo, scowling in disgust. "Bloody hell, Van. Pick another moment for a make-out session."

Van flipped Alex the bird and turned back to Sidra. "When this is over, you'll marry me."

"You said I had a week."

"I changed my mind. I have to hear it, Sidra. I'll get you a proper ring and anything else, just say it. Say you'll stay."

Alex groaned, got out of the car, and pulled the door open for Wentworth. "This is bloody hopeless. Donovan, hurry the fuck up."

A finger of fear curled to Sidra's chest. *This plan is wrong. Don't go in.*

"Sidra, don't leave me hanging."

"It's not that. I have a bad feeling about this. One of us is going to be hurt."

"Premonitions are Wentworth's territory. You're simply nervous. I won't let anyone get hurt. You and Josh are the only mortals, and the three of us can protect you from Defon."

Sidra nodded. "I guess we don't have much choice."

"That's not an answer. Tell me you'll marry me, Sidra."

"If you get Josh out alive, I'll marry you." It hurt to lie to Van, but she had to rescue Josh.

Van sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "Not quite the romantic acceptance I was looking for, but I'll take it."

The four huddled in the shadows across the street from the Cathedral. Whispering for Alex and Went to materialize inside, Van pointed to the side entrance. "He'll feel you. Make sure Sidra and I have his full attention before you make your presence known."

"Brave heart, Sidra." Van pulled her across the street to the rectory. "I don't know where Defon is, but he's unlikely to expect to see us at the altar. Do not step out from behind me for any reason. Understand?"

"Yes, I know."

Van pushed open a heavy oak door and Sidra wanted to ask why it was open, when he pointed to a guard sleeping peacefully on the floor. "Defon," he mouthed. They tiptoed softly through the hallway that opened into a small anteroom where vestments hung in locked glass cases.

Pushing Sidra behind him and pulling her hands to wrap around his waist, he inched close to a door that led to the sacristy and peeked around the corner.

Can you hear this thought?

Sidra nodded.

Defon is in the back, kneeling in prayer. Josh is next to him. When we appear, it's likely he'll grab Josh for protection. Try not to let that shake you. Understand?

Sidra nodded again.

Are you Catholic, Sidra?

I guess.

You guess? He looked over his shoulder at her. His smile crinkled the skin around his eyes and Sidra wondered how she would ever leave him. It would take the strength of ten lifetimes.

Then this is where we'll marry.

I think you have to convert for that to happen.

He shrugged. *I'm fairly flexible where religion is concerned.*

I'm glad Isaac isn't here to hear you say that!

Van leaned in and pressed his lips to her forehead, then turned around and pushed her behind his body. Holding her hands to his waist, he walked through the sacristy and stood behind the altar. Sidra scrambled in tiny steps to keep up with him without knocking him over. Her heart pounded furiously; she was sure Defon must be able to hear it. She let out a deep breath at the sight of Josh, unharmed. At least he seemed to be unharmed across the great expanse of the dimly lit church.

Van squeezed her hand in warning. "Defonsius, my good brother, we must stop meeting like this."

Defon looked up, a sly smile creeping to his face. He pulled out his pistol and pressed it to Josh's temple. Biting back a scream, Sidra closed her eyes for a second.

"The little woman for the lad, Donovan. Not a trade you'd make, I'll wager, but I bet she will. Am I right, Sidra?"

"You don't need Sidra. You need the Stone."

Defon pushed Josh to his feet and holding the gun to his back, forced him to walk up the central aisle toward the altar.

"What's this about the Stone? I've known you a long time, brother. You don't have the Maker's Stone."

"Sidra does. I recognized it the moment I saw it, but I couldn't quite place it. Take it off, Sidra, and show it to him."

With trembling hands, Sidra unclasped the pendant and slid it into Van's hand. He held it up, and Defon approached slowly, squinting to see in the shadows. When he was only a few yards away, he pushed Josh aside slightly for a better view. His pupils grew large and Sidra saw the glint of recognition cross his face.

"You've had that all along?"

"No, Sidra had it. Bought it in a shop in London. Imagine. What did you pay for it, honey? A hundred pounds or so?"

"A thousand pounds."

"On a teacher's salary? I'll have to watch you once we're married."

Sidra winked at Josh. *Don't worry, Josh. We'll fix this.* Pale as a ghost, he swayed for a moment and clutched at the rail of the pew.

"Doing okay there, Josh?" Van dangled the pendant before Defon, as if to hypnotize him.

"Yeah, great. Never been better. What the hell is going on here?"

"We're just here to reassure my brother that death is around the corner. That's all you need to hear, right Defon?"

"Prove it."

"The only way Sidra can lift the curse is with the Philosopher's Stone. She's already rescued me, Alex, and Went. We have no further use for it. It's yours, in exchange for Josh."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Because I've known you your whole life, and I've never lied to you. You are my brother, and I care about you. We've never crossed one another, Defon. I know you're in pain. How many wives and children have you buried? You've lost enough love for an army of immortals. How many great-great grandchildren do you have now? You took all the risks

while we played it safe. You lived fully, honored the Maker more than any of us will ever do. You don't know how to live any other way, and I respect you very much for that. If you want to die, so be it. As long as we're safe, you can do as you want. I'll even bury you myself if you like."

Defon bit at his lip to stop its quivering. "Donovan, I beg of you, don't lie to me."

"I swear by our Maker that I want the best for you. I'd kill you myself if I had the power, just to put you out of your misery. Take the Stone, and throw it into the East River. All I ask is that you ensure it doesn't fall into anyone else's hands. The Maker wanted it buried with him, but my little brother Wentworth slipped up."

"Why are Wentworth and Alexander here?" Defon nodded behind him to an alcove housing a shadow-shrouded statue of St. Patrick.

Josh turned toward them, but Defon nudged him forward with the pistol.

"Because you kidnapped our friend. Let him go."

"Give me the Stone."

"No deal. Let him go."

Sidra sucked in a quick breath as a shadowy figure emerged from behind a pillar and ducked low behind the pews.

What are they doing, Van? Tell them to stop!

Who?

Went and Alex. They're sneaking up on Defon.

No, they're in the back.

The figure suddenly leaped forward with both arms extended, aiming for Defon's head.

"Freeze!" Fred Abercrombie held his arms straight and steady. "Let him go."

"Uncle Fred, no!"

"Stay where you are, Sidra. I said, let him go."

"Oh, shit!" Van pushed at Sidra to duck, but she watched in horror as Defon again pressed the gun to Josh's temple.

Van groaned in frustration, and Sidra could hear the race of his thoughts. "Agent Abercrombie, please put your gun away. You can't hurt this man."

"I assure you, *Mr. Barlowe*, I can hurt him. Drop the gun, now!"

Defon pulled Josh in tightly as a shield and glanced from Fred to the pendant that Van still dangled in the air. "Throw me the Stone and I'll drop the gun."

Fred's jaw tightened in determination. Van tossed the pendant onto the marble floor between him and Defon, who loosened his grip on Josh for a moment.

Josh dropped to his knees and rolled on the floor as Defon lunged for the pendant. The piercing sound of pistol fire echoed through the church. Defon flinched as the bullet pierced

his skin and he fell to the floor moaning, then slowly stood and defiantly faced Fred, who fired another round. The bullet flew through Defon's chest and ricocheted off the wall, but Defon merely winced, braced now for the shots.

Alex rushed forward and grabbed Josh, pulling him behind a pew for cover as Wentworth wrestled Fred to the ground from behind, pulling the gun from his hand and knocking him out with a blow to the jaw.

Defon stared at Van with hatred. "I don't know what you're up to, but I don't believe anything you've said. That's not the Stone, and you're not my friend. The Alchemist dies now, and her death is on your head, Donovan."

Van turned to shield Sidra with his body, hugged her in tightly. Sidra heard the soft hiss of the gun and felt Van twitch as the bullet hit his back. Like a sharp bee sting, a burning sensation started in her chest and rolled through her body until she fell in agony to the floor. The room spun away, and she heard Van crying her name.

He hovered over her, and she tried to lift her hand to his cheek, but her arm wouldn't move.

I love him so much. Why can't I ever have him?

"Sidra!" Van pressed hard on her chest and she knew he tried to hold life in her body, knew it was useless. She grew cold and tried to suck in a breath, but it didn't fill her lungs.

"Van," she gasped out his name.

Sidra rose to the ceiling of the great Cathedral, hovering with paintings of angels and saints, looking down at Van as he bent over her lifeless body, which looked like a doll someone had cast aside. A scarlet blanket spread across the marble. *That's my blood.* Josh ran to Van's side and fell to his knees, hands over his eyes.

Sidra smiled at the men, now all huddled over her, weeping and trying to console Van and one another. Defon scrambled to the back of the church and fled onto the street. She turned to the light that called her name, and walked up toward its warmth -- joyful, happy, free of pain and confusion.

A striking young man with shoulder-length blonde hair smiled kindly at her and took her hand, kissing it elegantly.

"I am so sorry, my dear."

"Isaac, why are you sorry? I am so happy to meet you!"

He chuckled lowly, his pale blue eyes twinkling to life. "My dear, I am not elsewhere than in you. We are one. You see yourself."

"Why are you sorry? Aren't you leading me to Heaven?"

"Nay, Sidra. We have too much to do here! My children do not yet understand their purpose. You must teach them."

"Purpose?"

"Aye, purpose. I know why God allowed me to serve Him, allowed me to create these children." Isaac gestured to the crying men on the Cathedral floor. Van continued to press on Sidra's chest as Alex flipped open his cell phone and talked rapidly. Sidra could barely make out his urgent words.

"They're trying to bring me back, aren't they?"

"Of course. It is the way of our kind. Ah, look at my angels."

"They don't look like angels to me, Isaac."

"Do they not? Are you certain?"

Sidra watched as Van rolled onto his side, clutching at her lifeless hand, tears rolling onto the marble floor. His shimmering black hair fanned out along the pale stone. His black lashes glistened with his tears. Even in his moment of greatest despair, he was exquisite.

"Isn't he a little sexy for an angel?" Sidra shrugged at Isaac, who laughed again.

"I always thought so as well. Go lead your angel army, Sidra. Seek out and destroy those who haunt the dark places, who lay siege to hope and joy. These children have powers they have barely used. You must nurture these powers and guide them."

"I'm to lead an angel army? I'm a college professor. I'm not even immortal. In fact, it seems I'm rather dead at the moment."

Isaac laughed and hugged Sidra close, his lithe figure surprisingly strong and very reassuring. He brushed at her hair and whispered into her ear.

"Sidra, attend to me now. You have within you the ability to lead the Last Sorcerer's children, as any parent has the power to guide their own. Your task is to uncover that ability."

"How?" Sidra felt the tremor of human doubt and insecurity tug at her heart.

"What are your thoughts, my dear? What troubles you? I was once like you, and only in death was I able to release the shackles of doubt. We have another chance."

"I'm not a leader. I'm not ... enough."

"You are enough in the eyes of the true Maker. When you are ready to accept your fate, you may call on me, and I will guide you."

"You'll show me how to use the Stone? Is that what you mean?"

"You must decide what you want and embrace that desire. That is all I can advise. I will listen for you."

"Why don't we go back in your body, Isaac? You loved him too."

"We will both go, my dear. Only I think our charming boy might take to our life together better if we look like you. What say you?"

"I don't know. It's very nice not having a body. I don't feel pain of any sort." Sidra glanced at Van again, wondering why she didn't even feel sorry for his tears and anguish.

"That is quite true. To serve God properly, however, we must make this one little sacrifice." Isaac leaned in and whispered. "If you would like, I will even show you a few little scientific tricks that would bring us great praise on Earth."

"I'm not very interested in that sort of thing, but if it would make you feel better ..."

"You are a sweet woman."

Isaac pulled her along as he swept down to Sidra's lifeless body.

"Can I see my mother for a moment, Isaac? I would like to tell her ... everything. A million things."

"She knows all you think, my dear. This is not the time to see her. You will meet her again, have no fear."

The Cathedral lights flickered out for a moment, the great expanse black except for a few dozen candles. When the lights came back on, Sidra sighed in regret. Isaac was no longer by her side.

* * * * *

Van's body had gone numb with his brain. Someone tugged at his arm, and he tried to shrug it off, but he couldn't move. It wasn't a bad sensation, this numbness. *Is this what death is like? Like nothing?* Perhaps he *was* dead, he mused. He stared at the ceiling of the Cathedral, trying to pick out Sidra's likeness among the angels and saints that danced in the clouds. He felt her spirit above him, her energy still in the Cathedral.

"... she's alive. Snap out of it!" He turned in a fog to find Josh hovering a few inches over him, grabbing him by the jacket collar and shaking him.

"Leave me alone." He looked back at the ceiling, but Josh pulled harder.

Alex pulled Josh away. "Brother, come back to us. Josh, go to the front of the church; I hear the ambulance. Hurry!"

"What?"

"Get up, Donovan." Alex pulled him to his knees. He shook as he took in the pool of blood spreading across the floor. He wouldn't look at Sidra's blank face again. Never. *Defon, my friend, I understand. God, please take me now.*

Wentworth leaned over Sidra, stemming the tide of blood. Sidra's eyelashes fluttered, and she gasped in a sickening gurgling breath of air. Her chest rose and fell quickly, and when she opened her eyes, she focused directly on Van.

He fell onto her, rubbing her hair and face, knowing he'd gone insane. It didn't matter. Let the insanity take hold. It was better to be crazy and imagine her alive than be sane and know her to be dead.

"Donovan." She reached up and wound a strand of his hair in her fingers. Her voice chilled him to the bone. Josh dropped the pendant to the floor, and the noise of metal against marble echoed loudly through the arched vaults.

"Donovan," she repeated. He could barely see her through his tears, and he looked to the others to try to understand if he imagined she was alive.

"They're here!" Josh called from the rear of the church and threw open the doors to let the paramedics inside.

Sidra nodded and closed her eyes. "I think I'll sleep for a bit, if you don't mind. It's been a really exhausting week."

Chapter Sixteen

Sidra smelled the unmistakable aroma of coffee, and she desperately wanted a cup. Opening her eyes to slits, she caught a glimpse of Josh's short dark hair and Terri's platinum spikes.

Van was nowhere in sight, and Sidra breathed out a sigh of relief. He had held her hand for nearly forty-eight hours straight. She'd woken every few hours to see him sleeping, or staring at her in desperate worry, or crying softly. Pretending not to see him, she'd put off the real conversations she'd been rehearsing in her head through a drug-induced haze.

Doctors and nurses had tried to pull Van away, but he'd charmed, threatened and cajoled until they left him with her. One young doctor underwent a thorough interrogation several times, but her reassuring answers didn't quell Van's worry.

"I'm telling you, Mr. Barlowe, she's full of blood, safe blood. Before you ask again, yes, it's her type. We treated the entrance and exit wounds. For the hundredth time, there is no permanent damage. She's a very, very lucky woman. She'll be fine."

"What about infection? I hear about all kinds of horrible diseases you people give to your patients," Van had challenged.

"She's on antibiotics. See that tube? She's getting everything she needs. Except for quiet! Now the police are outside and they insist on speaking with you."

"Is Agent Abercrombie with them?"

"I have no idea."

Sidra's mind reeled at the thought of Uncle Fred, what he had witnessed. *Dear God, how would they explain Defon and talk of the Philosopher's Stone to him? Was Van in danger now?*

"Josh!" Sidra's throat burned and she realized that he hadn't heard her. She called to him again.

"Sidra!" He ran to her side and grabbed her hand. "Everything's going to be all right. The doctors say you'll be fine."

She smiled and nodded. "Can I have some water?" Terri rushed to pour her a glass, and held it up while she sipped.

Josh brushed at his tears. "I thought we lost you. We all thought we lost you, Sidra."

You did. "Nah, not Scarlet's daughter. Honey, can we talk alone for a minute?"

Josh turned to Terri and she nodded, brushing away a tear. "I'll be right outside if you need anything."

"Just don't tell Van I'm awake." Terri tilted her head questioningly, but nodded and left the two alone.

"What's going on with the police, Josh? What about Fred?"

"Well, the Barlowes and I only had a minute to get our stories straight, but we basically said that Defon was stalking you and grabbed me, trying to lure you to him. It's more or less the truth. Of course they want to know why we didn't alert them, but I think they're focusing on him. Van didn't want to send them after Defon, but Alex insisted it was the only thing that would work."

"They're looking for him now? He's in Central Park."

Josh bolted his head back. "How do you know? Sidra, is this all real? The whole Newton business? Van tried to convince me ..."

"It's real, honey. If you told me right now I dreamt Van Barlowe up in the hospital, I might believe you. You saw enough for yourself, though. What is Fred doing? Where is he?"

"He's searching for Defon, along with half of NYPD and I guess other FBI agents. We managed to convince him that you hired Van to protect you. Fred was on Van's trail the whole time, never even left New York. Evidently, he watched Defon watch you, and so he's convinced, at least partly. I don't know why he hasn't asked about the pendant and how well the Barlowes know Defon. I think he's afraid you were involved in something illegal, and he's waiting to speak with you. He's a cool customer, your Uncle."

Sidra's head pounded and she moaned as she tried to sit up. "What drugs are they giving me? I feel like shit."

"You'd feel a lot worse without them. The bullet went straight through, an inch away from your heart. You lost a lot of blood."

"Josh, where is the pendant?"

He patted his jacket pocket.

"Good, please keep it safe; don't give it to anyone."

"Of course I won't." Josh smiled in reassurance, but a look Sidra knew well flickered to his eyes as he studied her carefully.

"I know what you're thinking. I'm not crazy. I'll explain it all when I get out of here."

Josh kissed her forehead. "Stop worrying for now. We're taking care of everything. I've told Professor Jameson you were the victim of a random crime and he agreed I'll take over your classes until you're better. Everyone sends love."

"I'm going away for a bit, Josh. I mean, when they let me out of here."

"Where? Sidra, this isn't the time to make big decisions. You'll need care, and friends."

Sidra reached out for Josh's hand and squeezed it weakly. "Have I told you that I love you, Josh? That you're a wonderful man, my dearest friend?"

"Huh." Josh's cheeks flushed deeply and he looked as if he wanted to speak, but could only smile shyly.

"I need you to trust me, Josh, like never before. Keep the Stone safe, I beg of you."

"Sidra, you haven't asked about Van. He's sick over you. This is the first time he's left your side."

"He feels guilty for getting me involved in this."

"He *loves* you, Sidra, for God's sake! Even you have to see that much."

"I'll talk to him soon. I need some rest first. Don't tell him we spoke, okay?"

"That's not right, Sidra. You really care about him, and I know he's nuts about you. Tell me."

Josh brushed her arm in an awkward caress.

I need time. Isaac, tell me what to do. "If you don't believe Van is immortal, you won't understand my dilemma."

"Try me. You're convinced he's going to dump you because you're going to be an old bag next year. It's something like that, isn't it?"

"Something like that." *Exactly like that.*

"So you'd rather walk away than get hurt again. Firstly, the bit about him being Isaac Newton's eternal child or whatever you think he is ..."

She held up her hand in protest.

"Okay, that aside, what makes you think he'd dump you? You're beautiful, brilliant, strong -- everything any man in his right mind would want."

"You're biased."

"Yes I am. So is he. Jesus, Sidra, is that what you think love is? My parents have been together thirty years and they're still in love. You didn't see that kind of devotion growing up, that's the problem. All you have to go on is your mom and your still-closeted Uncle, and your pathetic former fiancé. Not everyone is as shallow as Patrick, or as abusive as your father, or as ... as whatever it is Fred is."

"Fred's not gay."

"Hello. Earth to Sidra."

"Ridiculous. Anyway, thanks for the analysis, but our hour session is up. I'll see you next week."

"Oh, that reminds me, a Doctor Gunter called when I checked on your apartment. He said you missed your appointment. Do you want me to call him?"

Sidra sighed and slumped back on the pillow. "No, I'll take care of that."

Josh pinched at the bridge of his nose and Sidra knew how he struggled. "I don't know if I can teach your classes, Sidra. It's the least of our problems right now, but I don't think I can fill eight weeks of lectures alone."

"You may as well get used to it, if you ever want tenure. Think what it will do for your career. I'll call you by Christmas break. Wherever I am, you'll come, right? Promise me."

"This isn't the way to handle things."

"I just need some time alone, a couple months."

"Rest up and we'll talk more about this. I'll come back tonight."

"Come back tomorrow, honey. Promise me you won't tell Van?"

"You're going to kill him, Sidra."

"That's really not possible."

* * * * *

Leafless twigs brushed at Defon's arms and face as he wandered through the park, off the main paths. They would be searching for him by now. The agent could ID him easily. What a fucking way to go, he thought.

Defon knew this part of Central Park well; it was close to Van's house, and he'd spent more nights than he cared to admit wandering nearby, wondering how to make peace with his brothers. Now there could be no peace.

Looking into the sky to utter a prayer for mercy, he could just make out a sliver of the Moon before a black cloud slid across its surface. A street lamp flickered out nearby, and Defon's heart sank.

"All the light is gone from my life. What have you done, Defonsius? You murdered your Maker."

Turning his back to the balustrade of the bridge, he slid to sit on the damp earth. The tears wouldn't come. Perhaps he'd cried himself dry over the years.

Of all the many times he longed for his life to end, this act of desperation weighed him down the most. He had finally committed a mortal sin, and in an effort to free his soul from immortality, he'd sentenced it to eternal damnation.

The energy of the last two nights felt heavy, and Defon wondered if the death of Sidra had caused a shift in the ether. He had watched a shimmer of spirit rise from her body a

moment after she collapsed to the Cathedral floor, and had recognized, instantly, that he'd killed the right person, and done the wrong thing.

"At least you only have weeks to suffer now," he reassured himself as he rose and edged his way across the bridge.

He froze as he heard steps behind him. The steps of one of Isaac's children. Only one would follow him, would be powerful enough to sense his trail. Donovan.

"Sorry to be the one to break this to you, Defon. You have a bit more than a few weeks to go."

Defon hadn't seen Donovan exhausted before. It shook him a bit, to know the strongest of their kind could suffer so. Dark circles marred the skin under his eyes, and his typical poise was gone. Van slumped as if his entire body ached, and he clutched at the bridge's railing.

"They're looking for me, aren't they? Leave me be, Donovan. I know you fancied the woman, and I'm sorry for that. I never wanted to hurt you or yours, but I don't expect you to believe that."

"I know, Defon. I wanted to help you, and I don't expect you to believe that either. You shouldn't have taken our Josh, though. That wasn't very nice."

Van walked forward slowly, one arm up to halt Defon's natural reaction to flee. "Don't leave, my brother. You have a bad habit of misting away in the middle of a conversation."

Defon chuckled despite his pain. *What did it matter now? Let Van do his worst.* "You are charming, Van. I wish we'd spent more time together through the years."

"All brothers have problems, Defon. We did all right. I always admired you because you chose the hard road. The Barlowes are cowards. We drank and whored our way through life, not letting anyone get close, not setting ourselves up for the fall. Except maybe Wentworth."

"Wentworth simply enjoys his causes. The Revolution, Abolition, Civil Rights ... didn't he become a vegetarian for a while and protest for animal rights?"

Van laughed tiredly. "Let's walk together for a bit."

Defon nodded reluctantly, anxious to avoid chatting about old times. He certainly had no idea how to console Van over his grief, though every fiber of his being craved to do so.

"I'm not grieving, Defon."

"You read my thoughts now, Van? That's new."

"Contact with the Maker. With Sidra."

"Why aren't you grieving? I thought you mentioned marrying her in St. Pat's?"

"I'm not grieving because she's alive, and I am going to marry her, if she'll have me." Van put his hand on Defon's arm and slid it down his sleeve to grasp his hand. "I know she'll want you to be at the wedding. The trick is to stow you somewhere the authorities can't find

you.” With a deep weary sigh, Van pulled Defon in for a hug and patted his back. “Brother, do you understand what I said? She’s alive.”

Relief came in a wave, and Defon leaned on Van for support. “I didn’t kill her? I’m sure I saw her spirit!”

Van rubbed at his back. “I know, man. I think we did lose her for a bit. She pulled through, and it’s a bloody miracle. She lost a lot of blood ...”

Defon felt Van shake and pushed Van away to examine his expression. “Then she can still lift the curse?”

“Brother, Isaac was messing with us -- in the worst possible way. He certainly had a knack for pushing the right buttons. He didn’t curse us, didn’t have the power, couldn’t have if he’d wanted to.”

“Sidra believes this? How can she be sure?” *There’s no hope, then.*

Defon closed his eyes and imagined an endless cycle of years, of dragging through life with no purpose, isolating himself against attachments and watching the world repeat the mistakes of previous generations. *There’s no escape for you now.*

“She’s sure. She went back and they were one. The Maker was angry, bitter to the depths of his soul.”

“He hated us at the end, didn’t he? Hated my heresy, hated the women, and hated you.”

“You noticed.”

“It was mostly about you, wasn’t it? It’s about the worst case of unrequited love I’ve seen in my life.”

“Just my charm and good looks, I guess.”

“You didn’t come here to invite me to a wedding, Van. Why did you follow me? You’re putting yourself at risk. The cops are probably following you, too.”

“I’m pretty good at shimmering away in the nick of time, like you. Come on, man, let’s get you deep underground. You don’t want to spend time in prison, no matter how much you hate this world. And my brothers and I certainly don’t need to be part of a trial. I’ve got to get back to the hospital, in case Sidra wakes up.”

“I suppose I’ll join the others in Europe.” *I don’t know where to go, what to do.*

“Come here, Van.” Defon led him down the path to a narrow clearing that opened onto a view of a skyscraper, and pointed to it.

“That’s my building.” Van glanced at Defon in puzzlement.

Embarrassment heated Defon’s cheeks. “I’ve stood here so many times, gazing up at your place, wondering how to reach out to you.”

Van tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. “What stopped you? We’ve been in touch, man. A knock at the door would have sufficed.”

“What would I have said? I never understood what I wanted until now.” To his utter horror, Defon felt tears escape down his cheeks.

“I’m listening.”

“I wanted my big brother back, the Maker’s first child. I wanted to ask you what we were supposed to do with our lives, if we had a purpose.”

“You have me, Defon. I never stopped caring about you. As for Isaac’s purpose for us, your guess is as good as mine is. I think, however, that Sidra may have some ideas on the subject.”

They regarded one another seriously for a moment.

Van patted Defon on the shoulder. “Get lost now, really lost. Have Martin or one of the others call when you’re settled in. Don’t lead the police to your door. They’ll tap my phone, no doubt.”

“Tell her I’m sorry, Van. I panicked. I never intended to hurt her.”

“I know. She knows, but I’ll tell her.”

With a quick hug, Defon turned on his heels and shimmered into the night, anxious to be alone again with his tears.

Chapter Seventeen

Isaac held the pendant near the candle with a shaking hand, listening carefully lest any of the children approach. The Stone was silent, lifeless, the brilliant light within hiding in the mystical realm for the precise incantation to call it to life.

You can call it to life, Isaac. For yourself.

How many times had he yearned to gain eternal life for himself, only to cast the Stone aside in fear and shame? Too many to count.

Isaac growled in disgust. Decade after decade slipped away, and along with them, the chance to live in his prime slipped with them. His golden hair grown white, his vision grown misty, his strength draining with each passing year -- he had missed the most precious opportunity. To be young, vibrant, in his prime. Forever.

The same question plagued him each time he considered chanting the code of Hermes. To what end? If his goal was to meet his God in bliss, then why stay in the realm of human frailty? He had tried to justify his longing for immortality by enumerating the research yet incomplete, the unfinished equations, the new scientific tools developed by others. The times became more exciting, as chymistry gained acceptance, as the Principia, his prime work, astounded scholars throughout Europe.

The truth always brought him back to despair, however. You long for one thing, the one thing you may not have in this lifetime, no matter how many decades you remain above the soil. Love that will never be returned in equal measure, love that cannot find a home, a way to flourish. You will live forever, but you will suffer forever. This is not God's intention for you, Isaac.

He pushed the stone into a velvet bag and tucked it into a drawer, wondering if another would ever learn the secrets it held. It will be buried with me. Perhaps someday the truth will surface, and another will exhume my bones and find the Stone. Wentworth, he

will take care of the funeral details, but you must remember to tell him to bury the Stone. Your mind is not sharp. Remember, Isaac.

With a deep sigh of regret, Isaac inched his way to his desk, running his hand across a fresh page, and dipped his quill into ink. God grant me the energy to finish this letter. I will entrust the secret to Donovan, as I promised him so many years ago.

Barely able to see the words he wrote, Isaac scratched at the parchment, writing the incantation that he'd said precisely twelve times in his long life. Exhaustion overwhelmed him, and he reluctantly put down his pen and crawled to his bed, hoping he would find the strength the next day to finish his instructions. He blew out the candle, and muttered a curse as a chill started working up his body from his feet. I will not finish that letter. And I will not rise from this bed again.

Ready to tear the IV from her wrist, Sidra squirmed uncomfortably. Sleep eluded her, the constant interruptions of nurses and chattering in the hallway grating on her nerves.

She longed to sleep, to sleep for days, for weeks. Each time she woke, she thought of Van. She was closer to the terrible moment. What would she say?

As if on cue, Van poked his head around the corner of the door and smiled as he saw she was awake. Her heart pounded quickly. She glanced at the peaks and valleys of her body's rhythms, measured in green on the screen near her, wondering if the machine had captured the moment when she saw Van's face again.

Van sat on the side of the bed and pointed at the EKG. "That's me," he pointed to the succession of quick points on the chart.

"You love the effect you have on women." Sidra smiled despite her pain.

"I love what I do to you." He leaned in and pressed his lips on her forehead, then moved to her lips and gently kissed her.

"Did you find Defon? I knew you'd go after him."

Van nodded. "He's sorry. I assured him that you'd understand. Do you?"

"Yes, I do. I had a dream of Isaac, that he struggled whether to try the Stone on himself. I believe he made a conscious choice to escape the pain of this world. The choice Defon would love to be able to make."

Van squeezed her hand. "Could you ... could you do that? Use the Stone on yourself?" His lips quivered in excitement as he stared into Sidra's eyes.

"No. I'm sorry, Van. I simply don't know how."

His whole countenance fell, and with it, Sidra's final hope.

"Never mind that now, Sidra. How do you feel? I've been worried sick."

"I'm fine. A little concerned about Fred and you and your brothers, how this will all play out with the cops ..."

"Fred's devoted to you. He doesn't completely buy our story about Defon, but with a little prompting from you, I think we'll be safe enough. He only wants your well-being. That's all any of us want."

"I'll be safe enough. Van, I'm going to go away for a while. When I'm stronger, of course."

Eyes misting over in sadness, Van let out a deep sigh and looked down at her hand, which he clutched tighter.

"Look at me, Van."

As he lifted his head, a few tears escaped the bright blue pools of his eyes. "Deep in my heart I knew you'd say that. I guess one advantage to hearing your thoughts is that it's pretty hard to surprise me. You were awake when I was here before. You don't mean 'a while.' You mean you're dumping me."

"I'm not dumping you. I simply need some time. When I spoke with Isaac ... Oh, how can I explain this to you?"

"I've been around for a long time, seen all the movies, read all the books. Doesn't *Casablanca* end that way? She gives Bogart up so he can follow some great cause?"

"The other way around."

"What's your great cause, Sidra?"

Van's jaw tightened in anger, and Sidra trembled at the unexpected bitterness in his voice. *He's given up on me already.*

"Wrong, wrong, wrong." Van stood and paced the room, turning on his heel to point at her accusingly. "You're wrong! Why do I have to give you up, Sidra? I know your great cause. Do you? It's fear! You're so devoted to your bloody fear of losing me you won't even give me a chance to prove myself!"

"There's nothing to prove, Van. It's not your fault!"

"There's always been something for me to prove, but no one will give me a goddamned chance. Bloody fucking hell! I didn't ask for this life, but I've done the best I can. It wasn't good enough for Isaac, and it's not good enough for you." Van dropped to his knees at her bedside and brushed at his own tears and then at hers.

"What do you want, Sidra? Do you want me to give up my immortality for you? I *would!* But I have no fucking way to prove it."

"I would never ask you to do such a thing!" *Wouldn't you, Sidra? What guarantee would be enough?* A tingle of premonition ran up her spine. Isaac's voice echoed in her mind, the mutterings of an angry old man, the regret of a full life, lost to misery and mistrust. *I'm just like him! I don't think I'm worthy of this man's love. But why?*

"You're just like him." Van brushed his cheek against her hand, kissed it reverently, and stood.

Sidra's breathe left her lungs in a sudden rush as if a huge weight had dropped on her chest. *He's going to leave. Are you doing the right thing, Sidra? Can you learn what Isaac wants you to learn? Can you use the Stone on yourself?*

Van pushed back his hair and pulled a small packet from his pocket, tossing it on the small stand next to her bed. "This is a gift to remember me by. Thank you for saving us from the curse."

"There was no curse."

"Depends upon your point of view, I suppose." Van brushed away a final tear and turned his back to her, taking a few steps. He looked as if he wanted to speak, and she waited breathlessly.

Without turning, he mumbled. "God protect me from men and women who don't love themselves. Goodbye, Sidra. Perhaps we'll meet in a third life. Don't bother me in this one again."

Sidra rolled on her side, clutching at her stomach as the pain rolled through her with the sound of Van closing the door behind him. Loss building on loss, she grieved for everything and everyone who had ever meant a thing to her. A father she never knew, a fiancé, Scarlet, and now ... Sidra sobbed Van's name aloud. Her tears blinded her for minutes, and then numbness spread through her whole body.

Pulling the covers to her neck, she stared at the EKG, watching the pulsing of her heart trace a thin jagged line across the screen. The packet Van left on the table caught her eye, and she sat up and reached for it nervously.

Isaac's manuscript page. Did it hold the key to immortality?

"Help me, Isaac."

* * * * *

Van punched the wall and then sat in a chair in the hallway, covering his face with his hands. He'd wracked his brain for two days for the words to convince Sidra to stay with him, and had come up short.

Alex slid into the seat next to him and shook his arm. "Is she okay? What happened?"

"Fuck off."

"Uh oh. Trouble in Paradise?"

"Take a wild guess."

"Shit. I was afraid of this. She doesn't like guys with long hair."

"That must be it."

"Come on, Donovan. Don't you remember? This is why we gave up on all this shit so many decades ago. We're different, and there's jack we can do to change it. I for one don't want to change it. We don't mix well with the populace."

Van glanced up at the handsome face he knew as well as his own. *You're wrong, Alex, but I don't have the strength to argue with you.*

"Let's go home."

"Righto." Alex laced his arm through Van's as they walked onto the street, and Van needed his support. With each step away further away from Sidra, he felt as if the immortality were draining from his veins.

Wentworth fell into step with them within moments. "I just parked the car. What happened? Is Sidra okay?"

"Our boyo got dumped, Went. We're going to go drink ourselves sloppy. Want to come?"

Wentworth ducked low to look into Van's eyes.

Van pushed him away. "What? Bloody hell, leave me alone."

"Mate, this isn't how it ends." Wentworth stopped Van, pressing both hands on his shoulders. "Donovan, look at me."

Van looked up at the artificially lit sky, thinking that it would be nice to get out of the city and see stars again. Isaac had loved the stars. *No, don't think about him.*

Alex pulled Went off Van. "Come on, brother, leave him be. No bloody predictions, tonight, okay?"

"If you say so, but I'm telling you, this isn't how it ends."

A street light flickered out. *I wonder who did that? Or maybe it's just time to change the fucking bulb.*

Chapter Eighteen

Sidra wound her way up the dirt path to the Venetian ruins that loomed over the tiny Greek town of Monemvasia on the isle of Patmos. From her high vantage point, she surveyed the red roofs of tiny houses packed in irregular blocks like a jigsaw puzzle until she found her own flat. Her gaze moved out to the rough sea, churned a deep grey-blue by the winter winds.

“What did Scarlet love so much about Patmos?” It was wild, she thought, as Scarlet was wild. Ancient and barely touched by the hand of modern expectations, Patmos was the antithesis of Manhattan. A place where one had no choice but to hear the call of destiny, to hear long-buried voices, to breathe in fresh air, eat fresh food, and believe ...

Believe in what? In two months, what had changed?

Sidra sat on a cold marble block and pulled her scarf tightly around her head. She glanced around the once impenetrable building, half-expecting to see an ancient spirit emerge from the mist. How many times had she come in the last two months to this spot, hoping that Isaac would appear, and tell her some great secret, some way to unravel the mystery of her soul? Some way to ease her longing for Van?

She stood suddenly and paced in frustration, desperately searching for answers. Josh would arrive today, and she was no closer to learning how to use the Stone, no closer to understanding how to lead an army of angels, no closer to happiness.

“Damn you, Isaac! I spent my adult life trying to decipher your codes, and that wasn’t enough! Now I’m supposed to read your mind?”

She kicked at a block of marble and hopped around in pain, cursing herself for her stupidity, cursing Isaac, and finally, cursing God. “What do you *want*, damn it? What did I do to deserve this? How about a little peace and happiness for once in my whole life? Is that too much to ask? Everyone deserves a fucking moment of happiness, even me! Especially me!

Look what I've been through. Dear God, please help me. Oh, Isaac, for Pete's sake, cut me a break!"

"But of course."

Sidra spun around to find Isaac draped in a long black woolen cape, pale hair whipping about his calm face. He leaned against a ruined brick archway, chin propped in his hand as he studied Sidra carefully.

She ran to him and nearly knocked him over with her embrace. "You're real. I didn't imagine it. You're here. Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you."

"Now, now, you've known all along I'm real."

"Why didn't you come?"

"Why didn't you ask me to? In fact, why didn't you demand it of me? All in all, a few fortnights is better than I expected." Isaac pushed her away and looked deeply into her eyes, a twinkle surfacing in his.

"Am I *that* dense? You mean it was like the ruby slippers. I had the answer all along?"

"Slippers made of rubies? Yes, you did have the answer all along. You desire happiness, and you believe you have a right to it. I'm not sure you are quite comfortable with the notion, but it is an auspicious beginning."

He laced his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close as they wound through the ancient castle ruins. "This place is full of wounded souls, is it not? Shall we spend some time sending them along their merry way before turning to the Stone?"

"Yes, I think I'd like that, Isaac."

Josh stepped off the hydrofoil, the wind whipping his now longish hair around his ears. Sidra smiled inwardly. He'd kept his new look, improved upon it, even made it his own. His overcoat flapped about his lanky legs as he wrestled with a huge backpack.

Josh scanned the dock. His smile as he spotted Sidra lit up her heart. *I love him so much*. She ran to him and he swept her off her feet in a big hug as he dropped his backpack again.

"Oh, honey, it's so good to see you!"

"Merry Christmas, Sidra! How do you say that in Greek?"

"*Kala Christougena!* Welcome to Monemvasia! Come on, we'll get you settled in. You must be exhausted."

Josh took in his exotic surroundings with enthusiasm. "This is awesome. Man, when you said remote, you weren't kidding."

"We're really close to my place. It has the unfortunate name of Romeo's House. Up for a walk?"

"Sure."

“Good, because there’s not a car on the island.” Sidra linked her arm in Josh’s and braced herself against the wind as they made their way up the cobbled street. Josh couldn’t stop looking at the great mound of rock, Greece’s Gibraltar, towering in prominence over the tiny old town. “What’s up there?”

“Typical Venetian ruins. Actually, they’re fairly ruined ruins. There’s really not much else to see. The population swells to about fifty in the summer. Plus a dozen donkeys.”

“I’m not here to sightsee. I do have a little work to get done, though. You left me with a hellish group of students and some horrible papers to grade. I don’t suppose there’s an Internet connection at your place?”

Sidra laughed. “Sometimes the overhead light works. I do have running water.”

“I guess that’s my answer.”

They wound their way up a series of ancient staircases and curving streets, higher and higher into town, passing small, weathered houses, most with shutters closed against the quickly falling evening.

Sidra waved at her nosy proprietor as she unlocked her apartment door. The crone muttered something in Greek Sidra couldn’t catch.

“I presume that’s not Romeo?”

Sidra giggled and stood on tiptoe to kiss Josh’s cheek. “God, it’s good to have you here.”

“You look fantastic, Sidra. I mean, you’ve always been beautiful, but you look ... I dunno. Relaxed, maybe. I didn’t expect that.”

“You’re looking great too, baby.”

Sidra helped Josh with his backpack and showed him around the small apartment -- a monastic-looking maze of tiny rooms, whitewashed and pristine, with simple wooden furniture and splashes of colorful local weaving and pottery.

He took his coat off and flopped onto the couch with a sigh. “It feels great to sit down. Wow, this place is neat.”

“Neat? You really are some kind of throwback to the fifties, you know that?”

“That’s what Terri says.”

“Ah, we get right to it then! Spill.” Sidra poured retsina into the only two glasses in the apartment and handed one to Josh in a toast.

Josh clinked his glass to hers and grinned. “There’s not much to say about her. We’re still dating, I guess you’d call it.”

“Nonstop sex.”

He blushed in a split second. “I guess that about sums it up.”

“And you’re hoping it’s more.”

“Well, she talks about the summer, going away maybe to the Caribbean and stuff like that.” He raised an eyebrow in question.

"You're good to go, then! Trust me, women don't try to get a guy to plan trips unless they're trying to reel him in. Has she brought you any brochures, shown you any web sites of hotels?"

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"I'm happy for you, honey."

"Well, I could still screw it up I guess."

"That's the last of that kind of talk I want to hear. You're simply not allowed to speak that way on Patmos. They'll send the authorities after you."

"On a donkey?"

"Here's your room ..." Sidra threw open the door to a small cell-like room, with a simple cot and a small dresser with an old-fashioned washbasin on top. "I know it's tiny, but there's a hidden perk." She unbolted the shutters and drew them aside, revealing a spectacular view of the town below and the charming harbor, tiny boats bobbing in the choppy water.

"Wow, you know, if I ever write a book, I'm going to come here to do it. How did you settle on Monemvasia, Sidra?"

"Scarlet's diary. Remember I told you she and some friends backpacked halfway around the world when she was just a kid? She saw all the islands, including Patmos, which is how she chose her last name years later. She ended up here for a few days and thought it was somehow special. It must have been even more isolated in the early seventies. I'd like to visit every spot she did on her trip."

"Well, I love what I've seen so far."

"Good! Why don't you freshen up and we'll grab some dinner. I thought we'd go down the street to Vasilis's. His spanakopita is the best." Sidra heard the nervous tone in her chatter and glanced at Josh, who studied her carefully. "I haven't really talked to anyone mortal in two months. Sorry. It's so exciting to have you here!" She groaned inwardly at the girlish rise of her voice.

"You haven't talked to anyone *mortal*? Does this relaxed look have anything to do with narcotics, Sidra?"

"I'm sane, Josh, I promise. Come on, let's have dinner and then I'll fill you in."

Josh pulled her into his arms and hugged her tightly. He rested his chin on her head and sighed deeply. "Dr. Patmos, you're as mysterious as the Last Sorcerer himself."

"It's because I crossed, Josh. It has an effect."

"You mean because you almost died?"

"No, honey. I *died*. I don't know why people call them near-death experiences. There's nothing 'near' about it."

"Huh." Josh's eyes grew large and he slumped to the couch, picking up his wine and draining it in one gulp. "Huh," he repeated. "Tell me about it. I mean, if it's not too personal or anything."

"I guess it's about as personal as anything can get." "Is it like they say -- the white light and all?"

Sidra snorted. "It's funny you ask. I've gone over it a million times in my mind, wondering if the whole thing was a hallucination. In any case, it was *exactly* as others have described. With one exception. It didn't leave me ..."

"At peace."

She shook her head. "Not at the time. It felt peaceful while I was speaking to Isaac, but ..."

"Isaac! Aren't *you* Isaac? I mean, do you have two separate spirits, or ..." Josh wrinkled his brow in confusion.

"Honey, I wish I had all the answers. He was friendly and rather more handsome than I expected."

"Friendly? Huh. What did he say?"

"Oh, some nonsense about the ... the immortals, you know."

"The Barlowes."

"Yes, and the others. There are twelve of them."

"Van told me." Josh winced and studied his hands in embarrassment. "Sorry."

"You're in touch with him." *Does he ask about me?*

"Tell me what Isaac said about the immortals. Did he mention the Stone? Did you ask him about his alchemy? My God!"

"He said they have a purpose, and powers they barely understand. He called them angels."

"Angels? Did you tell Van about this? He has the right to know, Sidra! All they talk about is finding their purpose, bickering back and forth about it. You have to tell him."

"I didn't get a chance. I will tell them, I promise. In fact, it seems I'll be spending a good deal of time telling them. You did what I asked? They're gathering, all of them?"

"I can't make any guarantees. But Wentworth and Alex agreed to try to get them all together for Isaac's birthday. They miss you too, Sidra."

"I miss them so much. I miss Van so much I can barely breathe."

* * * * *

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!"

Van dropped his travel bag on the hotel room floor and slumped into a chair. He sent Alexander a look to kill. "You fucking set this up. Why?"

Alex glanced at Wentworth and shrugged. "Does that answer your question, Einstein? Wentworth assured me you'd be okay with this."

"Nice to see you too, Van." Defon put down his drink and sauntered over to Van, pulling him to his feet with one massive arm and clutching him in a death grip of affection. Van hugged Defon and patted his back, then looked past him to the assembly of faces he had missed so badly for so long.

"Bloody hell! Matt, how long has it been, man?"

Matthew waved nonchalantly. "About fifty years, I think, Van. Good to see you."

Matt's "siblings" Bernadine and Max Milburn sat with him on the couch. Sam, Art, and Anne Taylor put down their card game and rose from the round table near the balcony. Defonsius's brothers, Martin and Aloysius, walked up behind him to give Van a hug. One by one, each greeted the Barlowes with a hug and a kiss or a handshake.

Van's head spun in confusion, fear, and joy. *When were we last all together in one room? The night Isaac kicked Defon out.*

He willed away the lump in his throat and bolted down the small glass of ouzo Max offered him.

Alexander laced his arm in Van's. "I didn't think it possible. We've rendered Donovan speechless."

The group laughed and chatted good-naturedly. Van pulled Alex aside and whispered to him. "This had better be good, Alex. You're setting me up for something. A vacation in Greece during the bloody winter. I thought something was up."

"Talk to Wentworth. It was his idea." Alex threw his hands up in frustration. "What's so awful about it anyway, Van? Is it just too touchy-feely for you to see your brothers and sisters all at once? Isaac would have loved ..."

Van held his hand up. "Do not utter his name again."

"Get over it, Van. We've put up with your brooding for two months now. It's a fucking drag. Have you forgotten that some of these guys wanted the curse to be real? Show a little sympathy, okay? They've been through a pretty big shock."

"You're starting to sound like Went. Bloody hell." Van sat back down and signaled for another glass of liquor. "This had better not be about *her*."

"Who?" Alexander poked his tongue in his cheek and left Van to mix with his siblings.

"I'll fucking kill you, Alexander."

"You'll have a bloody hard time doing it, mate," Alex called back over his shoulder.

Chapter Nineteen

Josh and Sidra sipped Greek coffee, watching the small town close down, the fishermen making their way up the street.

"In the summer, I guess everyone sits outside." Sidra pointed to the wide veranda that opened onto the street.

"Yeah, guess so."

Sidra wracked her brain for a benign topic.

"Look, Sidra, just spit it out."

"You have the Stone?"

"Duh. Of course. What the hell are we going to do with it?"

"I'm not quite sure. You have to help me figure that out."

Josh extracted the necklace from the velvet bag tucked in his coat pocket, and moved behind Sidra's chair, clasping the necklace around her neck. It warmed her chest and the warmth slowly moved through her whole body. The solace of the feel of it shocked her. "It does belong on me. I suppose I've been denying too much of my own life."

"Sidra, we don't have much time if you want to be in Nauplion by Christmas. You have to tell me the plan."

Sidra's heart beat quickly. *What is the plan, Sidra?* All Isaac had instructed her to do was to use all the resources at hand. What did she have at hand? The Stone, Josh, a bit of Isaac's manuscript?

"The manuscript! You brought the manuscript too?"

"Yeah, it's at your place."

"Eat up. Hurry."

After a quick bite, they took the maze of streets up to Sidra's apartment arm in arm and finally settled in for the evening on Sidra's couch, as they had done so many evenings in her SoHo flat.

Josh squinted as he spread Isaac's manuscript page on the table and scanned it. "I've been dying to read this."

"What! You didn't read it?"

"Of course not! You didn't tell me I could. I thought it was something personal, between you and Van."

"In a way it is. I can almost remember what the next page says."

Josh turned back to the writing, muttering excitedly as he took notes. He got to the end and cried out in glee. "Oh my God, he's talking about the Stone!"

"Yes, and it's not in code. It seems to be a letter, written toward the end of his life, I think at the very end. Van said they found it on his desk. I wondered if maybe ..."

"If he intended to tell someone how to use the Stone?"

Sidra nodded. "I think so." *I know so.*

"God Almighty! Do you really think you're remembering more of it? Imagine what that could mean! Could you actually use the Stone, Sidra? What if it holds the power to heal, to help the sick or cure diseases? If it can create life, who knows what else it can do?"

"The problem is, I don't happen to have a corpse lying around. Although my landlady isn't looking well."

Josh turned back to the manuscript, rereading each word. Sidra went into the kitchen to catch her breath. A flash of Isaac's memory made her clutch at the table as the room spun. *Please, God, help me do this. Make me worthy.* Sidra slid to a chair and rested her head on her arms.

Isaac looked up from his writing, long white hair disheveled, deep lines etched into his face, eyes sunken and rimmed in dark circles. Sidra gulped in a breath, realizing she was not in his body, but that he looked at her.

"Ah, well met, my dear. I see your doubt still blinds you to your truth."

"My truth? I've lost sight of any truth. I don't know how to use the Stone, Isaac. I don't know if I should. Do I have the right to become immortal? Do I really want that?"

"A familiar theme, my dear, one with which I sympathize fully. However, your life is only now beginning, and your purpose is but a bud, about to flower into a luxurious fragrant bloom. Does not the Bible tell us there is a time for grief, and a time for rejoicing?"

"I don't read the Bible much, but I've heard that."

"Your time for grieving is at an end. Your time for rebirth is at hand. Hold the pendant to your bosom, and incant the Greek's words with a pure heart, with a wish to do the will of the Universe that rules us all. And please, dear, one favor. Make sure each of my children

understands that they hold a place in my heart, an eternal place. I did not always treat them wisely. Defonsius in particular. Tell him it matters not how and whom he worships, only that he fights for justice. Each will want to know their purpose. You will guide them. Choose your causes carefully, for the smallest acts may prove the most beneficial."

"Will you stay with me, Isaac, will you guide me?"

"I am always with you, have never left your side. Just do it, Sidra. Isn't that a phrase from your age? Just do it. The rest will come. Now go to our charming boy and proclaim your undying love for him. I would see him truly happy for once."

Josh rubbed at Sidra's shoulders and whispered to her. "Honey, let's get you into bed. You can't sleep in the kitchen. We'll look at the manuscript tomorrow."

Sidra sat up and blinked as the room came back into focus.

"Are you okay? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Does Van still care for me?" *He does, of course he does. He'll care for you always.*

"He'd give up forever for you. He asked me a dozen times if I knew anything in the alchemical tradition that could undo what Isaac did, anything that could make him mortal."

"If Isaac is right, he won't have to."

"I don't get you?"

"Do you have Isaac's translation of the Emerald Tablet handy?" Josh's eyes widened and he ran to his notebooks, rifling through papers frantically. He finally held up one sheet, hand shaking.

"You know how to do this, don't you?"

"We'll find out."

* * * * *

"Cat got your tongue, Donovan?" Defon eyed Van slyly as they walked through the narrow streets of Nauplion, passed tourist shops closed for the season and restaurants just shutting down for the Christmas holiday.

Van gazed out at the tiny island in the middle of the harbor as they stepped onto the broad quay. He pushed his hand into his jacket pocket and clutched at the velvet box tucked inside.

Throw it into the sea, Van. What are you waiting for? You'll never see her again.

"You still have it pretty bad for her, then, mate?"

"It passed. I got all caught up in Isaac and the curse. It was never about her."

"No? Don't kid a kidder, Donovan. I recognize that look. Seen it on myself more times than I care to count. Never saw it on you, though."

"Leave it be, Defon. I'm not interested in your expert analysis on the human heart." Van's arms tensed in anger, and he pulled the box out of his pocket, staring at it for a moment.

"What's that?" Defon moved to grab the box, but Van pulled it away.

"A worthless trinket." Van opened the box and stared at the emerald-cut diamond he'd chosen with such excitement and care.

"Lovely. I take it Sidra never got a chance to see it?"

"I'd known her two days when I bought it. Go ahead, laugh it up. I bet even you never did anything that stupid in your entire life."

"Come on, Barlowe, you'll have to do better than that. There's nothing stupid about recognizing the love of your life the minute you lay eyes on her. The stupid part is letting her go."

Van turned on him in fury. "Letting her go? Do you think I wanted to? I'd given anything to keep her with me forever." *Forever. The word cut through his gut like a hot knife.* "She didn't have any faith in me. Just like Isaac. She would have spent every moment waiting for me to leave her."

"You probably would have done so eventually, don't you think?"

"You don't know me, Defon, if you think that."

"I don't really think that. But it doesn't matter what I think, it matters what Sidra thinks."

"Drop it. All that matters now is that you've pulled everyone together to try to cheer me up. It's going to take more than getting the twelve of us together again."

"How about thirteen?" Sidra's voice quivered softly, and Van thought he'd imagined it. His nerve endings screamed in shock and he turned to see her standing alone, blonde hair whipping about her head, tears streaming down her lovely face.

Van thought his heart would pound out of his chest. *Oh God, I love her more than ever. How is this possible?*

"Go away, Sidra."

"I can't."

"Of course you can." *Why is she here? Please, Sidra, if you aren't sure, don't put me through this.*

"No, I really can't." She took a few steps toward him and smiled at Defon, who approached her and gave her a huge hug. Defon leaned down as Sidra whispered to him. To Van's amazement, Defon fell to one knee at her words, pressing his cheek to Sidra's palm. She pulled him up and kissed him on both cheeks. With a quick glance over his shoulder at Van, he ran up the street toward their hotel.

Sidra took a few more steps, and Van longed to run to her and hold her, beg her to take him. *I won't. I won't beg.*

"You don't have to beg. Please just tell me you still want me."

"Why, why should I? You'll only ..." Van's breathe left his lungs as a new awareness filled him, sending his blood coursing quickly through his body, his heart pumping furiously.

It's not possible.

Sidra winked and bit at her lip nervously. "You told me you've seen all the movies and read all the books, Van. Did you ever see *The Wizard of Oz*?"

He swayed in disbelief, barely hearing her words. *My Maker. My love.*

"It's a cautionary tale, of course. Look for your happiness within. Or else you're in for all kinds of trouble -- witches, flying monkeys, angry trees and the like. Remember the ruby slippers? Dorothy always had the power to go home, she simply didn't know it."

Sidra reached into her jacket and pulled out the pendant, held it toward Van.

"You're my home, Van. I'm so sorry I wasn't strong enough before. You tried to tell me, but I didn't understand. It wasn't doubt in you, it was doubt in myself. That I was enough to keep you."

Van squatted to the ground, which felt as if it shifted beneath his feet, and steadied himself with one hand. "You're immortal."

"I am. So the question has changed a bit. Am I enough for a lifetime that never ends?"

Van's eyes clouded with his tears and he reached out his hand toward her, whispering her name into the wind.

Sidra ran to him and he rose to his feet, pulling her into his arms. He ran his hands through her hair and clutched at her shoulders. The scent of immortality filled his nostrils, and he breathed her in deeply.

"I thought I'd lost you forever, Sidra. I didn't know where to turn, what to do. I wanted to die, like Defonsius. Do you understand? I didn't want to live with that pain."

"My charming boy." Sidra laced her hands in his hair and pulled him in for a kiss that stole his breathe. The air around them shimmered and sparked. Too weak with relief to do anything but let Sidra control the desperate kiss, Van muttered her name repeatedly.

"Van, I love you." Her whisper brought more tears from them both. He brushed at his own and then at hers. "Darling, is that a box in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?"

"You saw it?" He laughed weakly and snapped open the lid. He'd spent a fortune on the ring, yet it suddenly looked inadequate. How could he ever show her what she meant to him? She'd redeemed his life, and healed his heart.

"Yes." Sidra held out her hand and arched a brow at Van.

With shaking fingers, he pushed the ring onto her finger and kissed her hand. "I didn't know anything could feel this good. In nearly three hundred years, nothing has come close."

Sidra smiled broadly. "Wait until the honeymoon."

Cheers and jeers broke out behind them, and Van laughed at the sight of all of his brothers and sisters, as well as Josh and Terri, clapping and hugging one another.

"Come meet your family, Sidra. You have a lot of catching up to do."

Church bells rang out, cheerfully calling the devout to Christmas Eve services. Sidra took in a deep breath and said a quick prayer of thanks. *Happy birthday, Isaac.*

Chapter Twenty

Alexander tapped his foot in annoyance. “Bloody hell, Van, hurry up. I’m sure this one’s fine!”

Van examined himself carefully in the three-panel mirror and shook his head uncertainly. “No, this Versace is wrong. It has to be Armani, I’m sure of it. Went, get me the first tux I tried on.”

Wentworth groaned. “This is fucking awful, Van. Sidra picked her dress out in an hour. You’re worse than a girl.”

“I haven’t approved that dress. She really needs some help in that department. If you tell her I said that, I’ll kill you.”

“I will tell her if you don’t finalize this in five minutes. Then she’ll give you a terrible assignment.”

“Assignment?” Van tried to sound as confused as possible. *Good girl, she’s started to take charge already.*

Alex folded his arms smugly. “I thought you’d be the first to hear. After the honeymoon, we’re all to meet you in Tahiti to pick up our assignments. It’s all very hush-hush. I’m hoping to come back to Paris. It’s quite nice being here again.”

Van looked at Wentworth, who shrugged. “He’s not making it up. Your fiancé has become awfully bossy.”

“What kind of assignments?”

“What kind do you think, idiot?”

“You mean mystical things? Ghostbusting and such?”

“Well she’s not organizing bank robberies. She only mentioned locations.”

“Really? What have I gotten myself into?”

“What have you gotten *us* into?”

Van frowned for his brothers as joy filled his heart. He couldn't remember a time when Alex and Went were so hopeful and excited. He thought of Defon and Sidra's plans for him. Defon's pained question echoed in his head. “What's my purpose, Van?” *Soon, Defon, soon you'll have your answer. This is going to work out just fine.*

“I'll have a chat with her about it, talk her out of it.”

Alex pushed his hand through his hair and then glanced at his watch. “I don't know, Van. You might want to give her a chance, see what she had in mind. It's not like we have anything special planned for the next three hundred years.”

Van studied his image in the mirror. “You know, I think this tux is perfect after all. Let's grab some lunch.”

With a promise to come back for measurements the next day, the trio walked into the sunshine and made their way down the street, arguing over their choice of restaurant.

“I know a little spot with the best crème brûlée,” Went elbowed Alex.

“You and your bloody puddings.”

 THE END 

Ciar Cullen

Ciar Cullen grew up in Baltimore, Maryland -- Charm City -- and has lived a charmed life. She worked for a decade as an archaeologist, summering on digs in Greece. Ciar has a strong interest in history of all periods. She worked for years in academic nonfiction publishing and is currently a bureaucrat at a prominent college. Ciar took up writing in 2004 to scratch an itch brought on by years of reading fantasy and romance fiction. She submitted her first book on a whim, and hasn't turned back. Her favorite authors are Terry Pratchett, Mark Twain, and Roger Zelazny. Ciar lives in New Jersey with her wonderful husband and magical cat.

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