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Rubies of Fire

Lynne Connolly •

Dept 57
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Chapter One

February in New York felt cold and dreary, just like Andreas's life. But the occasional beam of sunshine helped. So did his daily sighting of Roz Templeton. If straight, black hair and blue eyes, combined with a curvy body was every man's idea of the perfect woman, Roz Templeton was it. A pity it was his. It made his job that much more difficult.

Straightening his back and forcing inappropriate lust from his mind, Andreas continued walking towards the office building where Roz stood chatting with her cousin Nancy. He hated the rasp of his mixed-fiber suit, which really meant polyester and the scrapings off a factory floor somewhere in Indonesia. He longed for silk and wool again, something less harsh and more comfortable. But he missed his sunglasses the most, understood as necessities by his usual work colleagues, but here, in his undercover work, someone would notice them and remark on them as unusual. Here he was a low-grade worker at a government department, trying to make his day less tedious by flirting with the female staff.

Slipping into gigolo mode, he lowered his chin and slowed his walk to a saunter.

He took his time looking the women over, taking all the enjoyment he could out of what promised to be another tedious day at the office. While Roz was dressed in a simple business suit and blouse, her curves filled the clothes perfectly, and was, to his mind, as sexy as if she wore a silk nightgown. Something her cousin said made them both turn towards him and watch his approach. Roz's gaze wasn't as admiring as the woman standing next to her, but Nancy Carragher was out of the picture, engaged to be married in a few weeks, and not always in the office. She could stare all she wanted, and she knew he wouldn't hit on her, or her fiancé, also employed by the Department of Internal Business would hit *him*.

He allowed one corner of his mouth to turn up and his gaze to soften. Damn. Any other place, any other time, he would have enjoyed taking Roz to dinner, spending time with her. Normally he'd never make an approach that was crude, sexy and direct. But she was part of his assignment here, and he couldn't let up. His Psi ability depended on getting people relaxed, so they didn't notice his invasion of their minds, a quick sweep to discover anything unusual.

Roz frowned at him, refusing to respond. He liked her better for that. The easy, no frills good time he offered the women in this office wasn't to his real tastes, either.

She turned back to her friend and laughed when Nancy said something. A pang of sheer want arced through him when he saw the long, graceful shape of her neck, turned trustingly toward him. He desired her too much to stay focused on his job here. That was why he'd left her until last.

Nancy patted Roz's shoulder and murmured something that made her smile. He got near enough to hear what Roz said. "Aren't you coming up?"

Nancy gave her a meaningful smile. "I forgot to check on something for my wedding. I need to make a call before I go in. I'll see you inside."

Roz touched Nancy's shoulder. "Sure it can't wait?"

"Mom's changed her mind about the number of attendants she wants me to have."

"How many now?" Roz grinned, letting her hand fall back down by her side.

"She's trying to double the original six to twelve. I still think Vegas would be better. Quick, cheap and no fuss."

Roz' grin turned into a chuckle. "If you do that, you're taking me with you. No way am I facing your Mom on my own if you do that."

"Okay, I'll warn you if we do." Nancy's face broke into a broad smile. "Probably from my cell phone after we've taken to the highway."

"Oh yeah." Nancy turned away from Roz and winked at Andreas, a flicker of her eyelid he could have imagined. Except he hadn't. Nancy walked away.

Still chuckling, Roz turned to him and her laughter died. He watched the awareness in her eyes as she realized she was about to share an elevator with the office wolf. He obligingly held the glass door open and she walked in, giving him the briefest of smiles.

The DIB, or the Department of Internal Business was housed in a nondescript, not too tall, not too small building in the middle of architectural gems. New York was like that, treasures erected next to ordinary buildings. A space never stayed empty for long. Crammed between an art deco skyscraper and a modern glass and steel monster, their office building was like the Second Attendant in a Shakespeare play – you'd only notice it if it wasn't there any more.

The lobby was just as nondescript. Indifferently cleaned, with dirt in the corners and between some of the tiles above eye level, tiled in fake marble, it might have been an interesting addition to a smaller town, but it seemed to know it didn't stand a chance in this city of architectural marvels. Andreas liked it. Sometimes New York was too pretentious for its own good.

He followed Roz to the elevators, enjoying the view of her neatly curved ass, holding his control strictly in check. He gave her another smile that barely creased his lips, but allowed the warm look in his eyes to increase. "A fine morning."

"For February, yes it is. Maybe an early spring." Her cold tone told him she wasn't interested in conversation. She shifted her briefcase to her other hand, the one closest to him.

A light ping heralded the elevator's arrival. She walked forward, and he followed. Nobody else did. That came of getting to work an hour early. He'd hoped to do a little snooping before the place filled with workers, try to wrap this job up. Now he had the opportunity to relax Roz enough to read her mind without alerting her to his presence there. He might be out of this place by nightfall. So why didn't that thought fill him with the elation he'd expected it would?

The answer stood in front of him. Roz Templeton attracted him too much for comfort, and he regretted what he was about to do to her. If he judged her character right, it would put her off him forever. And he couldn't blame her. By doing his job right, he'd alienate a woman he would have loved to get to know better. In every sense of the word 'know.'

The elevator wasn't large, but there was room for them to stand with half an arm's length between them. Not that Andreas tried. He reached across her on the pretext of pressing the button for their floor. Instead of leaning back, he looked down and smiled. "We have to stop meeting like this." God, she smelled so good!

Roz didn't smile back. "We do indeed." Unlike him, she meant it. Her beautiful eyes held little softness or willingness to comply. She was going to be hard work.

Under her buttoned-up suit jacket and light knit top, he saw the slight ridge of her bra, and the lacy fabric of the cups. It was enough to put his senses on alert, his palms

tingling with the need to touch her.

"Or perhaps not." He lifted his hand and caressed her chin, urging her to look up at him. "You're single, I'm single, what's your answer?"

She lifted her chin to free it from his touch. "To what?"

"Getting better acquainted."

She stared up into his eyes, and he let his mental barrier relax and reach for her. At once he became aware of her speeding pulse and heightened senses. She wasn't as indifferent as she looked. "You're suggesting a date? Dinner somewhere?"

He wished. He gently exuded a seductive, sensuous aura to relax her.

Reaching over, Andreas pressed a button. The elevator came to a sudden, jolting halt, shoving her against him.

He took the invitation, curling the arm not braced above her head around her waist. Unlike Roz, he wasn't burdened with anything other than his jacket, slung casually over one shoulder. "We've been dancing around each other for the past six months. Don't you think I've been patient?"

Her heat, her nearness, all seeped into him as though his body knew hers already. Yet he'd never touched her before. He couldn't ignore it, and if one kiss was all he would ever have of her, he'd take it. When he lowered his mouth to hers, she rose to accept him, almost without thought. Natural, like breathing. Oh God, he wanted her. His body readied itself for her, moving into her soft welcome as though it was coming home. *Get a grip, Constant!*

His lips caressed hers, gently moving. Her body lifted to him, begging him for more. His tongue slid into her mouth, his control absolute, making it a slow, gentle seduction instead of a fierce taking. When she opened her mouth, letting him in, his sigh came right from the heart.

The kiss turned deeper, and wildness curled deep in his belly. He wanted her. Now. His hand slid smoothly around her body to her breast, stroking her through the thin silk and wispy bra, pushing aside her jacket. When he slid the jacket off her shoulder, she gasped and he pulled back just enough to speak, his lips still touching hers.

The brief pause gave him a chance to pull his senses together and remember what he should be doing, not what he wanted to do. He sent a mental probe into her. He should now have relaxed her enough for her to accept him without noticing his intrusion. She stiffened under his hands and his heart sank. She'd sensed his presence. Some perceptive mortals did.

If she was at all sensitive, that meant she might be a link, a contact with his mission. The realization came as a wake up call. Keeping her anchored to his body, he swept her consciousness with ruthless efficiency, but she slammed down her mental barrier, and he lost the duel.

He lifted his head and stared into her fathomless blue eyes, now hard and accusatory.

She was psychic, and she knew it. Most mortals weren't aware of their abilities, and those that were had either worked to develop them, or conversely, worked to block them out. That barrier had gone down deliberately, with the ease of practice. Before she'd closed it, he'd seen something in her mind that made his heart sink, and lift at the same time. At last an opening, a break in the case. But why did it have to be Roz?

Every vampire, well almost every vampire, had a sigil branded into part of their mind, a sign of their family like a mental tattoo. It protected them from attack, warned any marauders that this person belonged to a powerful family of other Talents, telling them

what and who they were.

Roz was a vampire, from the Gardiner family.

He felt her answering probe, but he'd been expecting it. He didn't drop his barrier, not completely. He let her in, making sure she'd see only what she expected to see. A man who used his psychic talents to smooth his path in life, to seduce women with sensual persuasion, who linked with women to make them friendly to him. He regretted the hardened look on her face and knew she'd never come near him again.

Slipping into character, he slid open the top button of her blouse. "You want it, don't you?" He allowed himself to make a crude suggestion into her mind, making it clumsy so she could reject it easily. The repulsion hurt, even though he'd invited it.

"No, I don't. Stop."

He opened the second button before he stopped. His eyes, previously half closed in the spell he'd woven over both of them opened fully. "You want so far and no further? What are you, a tease?"

"An idiot," she muttered. Her hands were still on his back, but she drew them back and pushed against his chest to move him away. He resisted. "I mean it. Get off me."

One more taste. Just one more. He leaned forward and touched his tongue to the corner of her mouth. "Two can play tease. If you want me, you'll have to come get me. But you won't be able to resist. You know you won't."

She turned, and viciously punched the button on the control panel. He heard the telepathic message she sent him.

I'm better than this, I deserve more, I demand more. She turned to face him, contempt narrowing her eyes, tightening her mouth. "Go to hell, Constant."

She was right. She deserved much more than the character facing her. And Andreas Constant wanted to give it to her.

Chapter Two

Inwardly, Andreas seethed with anger and frustration.

Roz wasn't a quick lay, the type who shared a night of mutual pleasure and then parted without regret. Roz Templeton was the forever kind, or at least, the serious commitment kind. Then she'd looked at him with those fathomless blue eyes and told him to go to hell.

What made matters worse was that his groin insistently told him what it wanted, and his brain told him to back off. None of it helped.

With a heartfelt sigh, he sat in the little booth where he spent most of his days and switched on his computer. For a CIA field agent he was spending too much time in the office, and he wasn't an office man. The regular hours and the sheer boredom were slowly driving him mad. He guessed that was half his problem. He needed to be out of here and doing. The trouble was, he couldn't be doing unless he got some kind of a lead.

The computer booted up to the government screen, and he read the words on the screensaver again. *Department of Internal Business*. Not that they told him anything new, just the compulsion to read anything put in front of him had never died since his childhood. The screen blinked, then flashed to his desktop. Most of the other occupants of this office had their own screensavers and customizations, but he hadn't bothered. He couldn't risk leaving clues behind. As far as his fellow workers knew, he was a low-level agent, doing a low-level job, just like the rest of them not a top-level agent pursuing a dangerous inter-departmental leak of information. The green hill and the blue sky on his virtual desktop taunted him, both impossible to achieve in February in New York.

Stacey sauntered past his cubicle and glanced at him to see if he was watching her. He was. Blond, curvy and flirtatious, she didn't stir him one bit. He'd scoped her out a week ago, taken her for a drink after work, not a proper date, which was just as well. She would have bored the balls off a buffalo. Unlike the stereotype blond, Stacey was bright, very bright. And a computer geek. Andreas knew his way around a computer but he left the under-the-hood stuff to somebody else. Anybody else.

He flashed Stacey a smile he hoped was merely friendly and turned back to the screen, clicking on the folder icon that contained yesterday's half-finished work. He might as well look as though he was working.

CIA or not, this was about as boring as it got without making him fall into a coma. His cover job was to check and vet employee files in a department much like this one. Two hundred and some employees, all of them upright citizens as far as he could tell. How people did this, day in, day out, he'd never know.

After the first ten files, he decided he deserved coffee. He stood up so fast he nearly collided with the woman turning into his booth.

Nancy Carragher. Another blond, short and curvy. He liked her type, but he didn't crave it the same way he did Roz Templeton. Her security level was higher than his, so she was probably doing something a lot more interesting than reading personnel files. She gave him a friendly smile, a pleasant change from the predatory smirks of most of the females in this place. They were as bored as he was, looking for anything to lift their day. He hoped he'd helped some.

"The boss wants you in a meeting. Now."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Me? Are you sure?"

"You're Andreas Constant, right?"

"Yeah."

"I'm sure."

This close he could smell her perfume, heady and intoxicating. He smiled, sending out a mental probe almost automatically, but he'd never gotten past her defenses before, and now was no exception. If he pushed, she'd feel the probe, and if she was at all sensitive, she'd know it for what it was. "Right away?" He turned the simple question into something slightly more suggestive.

She ignored his tone. "Right away."

He thought he was losing his touch. Sure, Nancy was engaged to be married, but he should have provoked some response from her with his smile and his friendliness.

His real boss, Cristos, would never believe it. The stud of Department 57 had failed to get a response. But the sleazy womanizer of the DIB had no resemblance to the man he was, the man genuinely interested in women, who liked to talk to them as well as bed them.

Pausing to snag his jacket from the back of the chair, Andreas followed Nancy to the large conference room at the end of the office, past all the booths where his colleagues worked. Some glanced up at him, some smiled. Andreas didn't smile back. When Nancy turned, he smiled at her instead. Her gaze turned speculative, but she said nothing.

When he reached the conference room, she walked straight in, although he hurried forward to open the door for her. He followed, feeling slightly foolish and swept his gaze over the occupants.

At last something was about to happen, though he hadn't a clue what that was going to be. He couldn't extend any senses to cover the room, he dared not after Department 57 had discovered Psi tracking devices last year. Someone, somewhere, could detect anything but close, one-to-one work. That made his job very difficult, until they discovered the source of the leaks that had made the devices possible. Which was why he was really here. Several trails led back here, and someone had to go in and find out where they came from. Which, he was very much afraid, he'd just done. If Roz was the cause, he wondered what had driven her to work with the enemy. Some did. Not every Talent was on the side of the angels. He just needed to confirm it, tell his backup, Fabrice Germain, which person to target, and the job was done.

Nancy Carragher sat with her fiancé and co-worker Don Harris, a man he knew only by sight, as Harris spent more time out of the office than in it. With a sinking heart, he saw Roz Templeton on the other side of the table. If he wasn't mistaken, his boss was putting a team together for a special job.

Deliberately keeping his face bland, Andreas strolled into the room and took the seat next to Roz. It would have been obvious they were avoiding each other if he'd sat anywhere else, because the other two sat together on the other side of the table, looking like the ideally matched couple. He'd bet they were holding hands under the table.

Resisting the urge to tell them how sweet they were, he nodded. "Do you know what we're doing here?"

Harris shrugged, his powerful shoulders enhanced by the clever cut of his Italian suit, close-clipped, dirty blond hair glinting in the cold beam of sunlight striking it as though he'd paid it to. "I've no idea."

Oh goody. The quiet type. Andreas decided not to break the silence any more. *Way to say something stupid, chum, just to break the tension.*

After a minute that felt like five, the door opened and the Head of the Department came in.

Assistant Director Bernard Knox walked decisively into the room, a laptop computer tucked under one beefy arm. If he hadn't been a CIA chief, Knox could have made a good living as a wrestler. Under the comfortable suits he wore for work, muscles bulged. He probably had difficulty finding neckties long enough to encircle that bull neck. His bulk matched his intelligence—both were impressive. He glanced around. "Good morning."

While they murmured their responses, Knox put the computer down and plugged it into one of the power outlets set in the floor under the table. Then he turned around and picked up a hooked pole, using it to pull down a screen.

Andreas looked forward to the picture show.

"You three have worked together before, and I want Constant here for a reason." Andreas's senses went on alert, and he prayed the tedious waiting was finally at an end. But this meeting intrigued him. Why, after six months of ignoring him, did Bernard Knox pick him for a specific job with people of much higher rank than he was supposed to be?

He tried to look blankly stupid, a low-rank employee trying to keep his head down. Knox shrugged and leaned forward to boot up the computer and click the touchpad into a program that projected pictures and information on to the screen.

When a picture of a well-dressed man of late middle age appeared on the screen, Andreas looked at Knox enquiringly, careful not to show any of the shock of recognition lancing through him. "I never spoke to him."

"Tell the others what you know."

Andreas swiftly schooled his thoughts. Well it explained why Knox wanted him. "This is Florenz Cristos, the head of Department 57, where I worked before I came here. He prefers to be addressed as just Cristos. No Mister, Sir, or anything else. He's around six feet tall, blue eyes, short gray hair. Dresses well."

"Any more?" Bernard's voice held a tinge of disappointment.

"His secretary is Diane, a woman who changes her hair color every week. He isn't always in the Department, but travels in the States and Europe. Not unusual for a CIA operative." That was about as far as he wanted to go.

"Unusual for an Assistant Director," Roz commented. She didn't sound interested. "You've shown us this picture before, Bernard. What's new?"

"Constant is new."

"Not that new. He's been here six months."

Knox shrugged, the soft cloth of his suit jacket riding up into wrinkles that looked as though they hadn't just formed for the first time. Andreas guessed that Knox liked to get full value from his clothes. "I needed to check him out. Then I needed to watch him for a while." His mouth stretched into a brief, conciliatory grin. "You know how it is, Constant."

Andreas nodded. "I think so." He decided this was the right time to inject a little excitement into his expression. "What do you want me to do?"

Knox flicked a sharp glance at the other three. "These people have concentrated on researching Department 57 for the last twelve months. You are the final part of the puzzle, Constant. We're going in."

Andreas didn't fake his gasp. With the deep inbreath that followed Knox's statement came a sense of the woman next to him. More than perfume, an absorption of her reality, her essence. It was just enough to save him from revealing more than he wanted to, that anchor to reality. "Why? What have they done? They're part of the CIA,

the same as we are."

Knox's mouth turned up in a sneer. "You can't be that naïve, man. How old are you? Don't bother telling me, I know you're thirty years old, although you must have gone around for at most of that time with your eyes shut." He took a step in front of the screen, and the ghostly image of Cristos flickered across his face. He stood before Andreas, gazing down at him. Andreas tightened his muscles, deliberately trying to look tense, concentrating on the reality of Roz Templeton as a distraction from the power of Knox's attention. All mortal, all male power. "Department 57 is one of our longest running projects. The Company leaks like a sieve, and it's our job to plug the holes. Department 57 gushes like a damn waterfall."

"Who are they selling information to?" And who put the DIB on to them?

"We've had some information leaks, and it all comes back to someone in that place. I don't know if it goes right up to the top, but I intend to find out."

Andreas sighed regretfully. "I can't go back there. They said my work was unsatisfactory. There's no way for me to go back."

Knox waved a hand. "I've looked at your work while you were here. Unremarkable but satisfactory. You make an excellent clerk, Constant, I've personal proof of it now. Thorough and neat." Knox took a few steps away. Again that spectral change when Cristos's face flashed across the dark brown of Knox's suit jacket.

"Thank you sir." Andreas wondered if Knox had heard the phrase 'Damning with faint praise.' It had never happened to him before. He didn't want it to happen again.

"So they asked you to leave for another reason." Knox spun around, but Andreas had expected something of the kind. The man wanted to shock the look of blank docility off his face. He'd have to try harder than that. "Why?"

Andreas breathed deep, deliberately relaxing his senses and got another whiff of Roz's delicious perfume. "Diane." Not an unexpected question and one they'd prepared for. "I fell for Diane and Cristos is protective of her. He wanted me out." A story they'd worked out well in advance. It had contributed to his present persona. To his regret, he felt Roz stiffen, heard the small movement she made when she leaned away from him.

"Is Cristos screwing his PA?"

Andreas shrugged. "Probably." His expression hardened. "Yes. It's sick. He must be twice her age." Or maybe more, but it didn't matter. Cristos wasn't screwing Diane.

Knox stood aside and turned back to study the image on the screen. "His records have him as fifty-five. He started his career as a field agent, a good one, and when he returned from his last tour in the USSR, the Company brought him in to run Department 57. It started as a place to study psychic ability. The Soviets had a laboratory, so we had to have one too. Neither amounted to much, but Department 57 became a research department for new communications devices. At least that's what they want everybody to think."

Don Harris sniggered. Knox was on him immediately and, the heat was off Andreas. Knox braced one meaty fist on the table, glaring at his operative. "I've told you before, Harris. Broaden your mind. Accept the possibility that psychics exist. Imagine the potential, if they do." No one else spoke and Knox shrugged. "It's probably a crock, but we know they still do experiments. What kind?"

Again the abrupt question and the switch in attention, meant to catch Andreas out. It didn't. "The usual kind. I've been tested myself. You know, you have a pack of cards and the other person has a pack, you hold one up and try to project the image to the other person."

"Any success?"

Andreas allowed himself a grin. "No, not that I saw, and I compiled some of the reports. No statistical significance." Cristos was careful not to allow any significances to show, but Andreas didn't bother to tell Knox that little thing.

He drummed his fingers on the table, then stopped when he realized he was doing it. He thought he'd kicked that habit years ago. "Does it matter? If they were doing it for the country's benefit, does it matter? We might get a few questions about wasting the taxpayer's dollar if the public get to know about it, but why is the DIB interested?"

Knox stared at him and Andreas wished he could open his senses properly. Not using his Talents to their full extent was driving him slowly crazy. It was like losing one of his senses, becoming blind or deaf. Knox showed no outward emotion, no reaction and spoke impassively.

"The Company captured a terrorist cell last year, operating on American soil. Highly organized, a cut above the others we've found so far. They called themselves the Perfect Human Race, but the resources they had pointed at Department 57. We have to investigate." Andreas tensed. The PHR had set itself against all Talents and used the classic cell structure of terrorist organizations as its model.

If the CIA had discovered a PHR cell, and recognized it for what it was, the game was up. Talents, and those few mortals who knew about them, would have to make their own decisions what to do, whether to come out or stay hidden, ally themselves to mortals or range themselves against them.

It could rip apart everything they'd worked for. Shapeshifters, vampires, Sorcerers, all banded together to fight the menace that ranged itself against them. Premature exposure could wreck that precarious alliance.

The silence seemed to go on forever, but in reality it must have been less than half a minute. Neither wavered. Eventually Bernard Knox turned away as if his scrutiny had been merely casual. "The cell had information it shouldn't have. Information that was available to only one person. Florenz Cristos, of Department 57."

The emotional part of Andreas's mind, deliberately distanced but never totally divorced, shrieked in denial. The rational part admitted it was possible. Cristos was a secretive man. Even those closest to him didn't know everything about him, nor could hope to. He had to know more. "What kind of information?"

"About the way the CIA runs some of its covert operations." He glanced around the table. "I need to bring Constant up to speed." They nodded, and Knox turned all his attention on Andreas.

"You have to be aware of the attack on the department store in San Francisco last year." Andreas nodded. The news had been full of the attack, put down to an unnamed and yet undiscovered terrorist cell. Except he'd been there, and he knew where the attack had come from. "Above that department store was the San Francisco office of Department 57. We weren't even aware there was one before that day." He grimaced, and Andreas remained passive, listening. He knew. He'd always known. "At the same time, one of the CIA's laboratories was invaded and sensitive information taken. The government chose to put the blame at the door of the same cell, and are officially still searching for the perps. But we know better. Department 57 invaded that lab." He knew. But no one else was supposed to know. They'd covered their traces well, left fake security videos, wiped the minds of the people they left behind.

"What was the lab doing?" He knew that as well.

Knox's intensive glare flickered away from him, before looking back. "Sensitive

experiments into psychic ability.” That was one way of putting it. He’d rather call it what it was. Torture. Experimenting on Talents, people they’d captured from information they shouldn’t have had. Knox knew, that was why he’d looked away. Andreas couldn’t risk a mental probe, not here, in the center of activity. But he longed to know how much Knox knew, what exactly was his stake in this. “If we can discover these abilities, if they’re real, it would give us a killer blow against the people threatening our security.”

The old ‘if you aren’t with us you’re against us’ attitude. Why couldn’t they accept that not all people were the same that having your own agenda didn’t mean you couldn’t still be loyal to the country that had nurtured you? Andreas was a vampire, which meant he had to keep hidden, but he was also an American. He’d never do anything to damage the security of his country, but at the same time he didn’t want to be experimented on as a creature, something subhuman. He couldn’t help what he was. “So you think all members of Department 57 are traitors?”

“Hardly.” Knox flashed him a grin. “Most employees are people like you, low-grade clerks doing necessary work. And the research the department has done into improving communication and bugging devices has been invaluable. But there is a unit there. Department 57 employs more consultants than it should need, and not all these people have any connection with the communications industry.” Most Talents preferred to remain independent operatives. Andreas was an oddity, a full-time field agent, whereas most of the people he worked with had lives elsewhere. Even low-life clerks who worked at the Department would know that. “I saw many people I didn’t know while I worked there,” he confessed, “but the Department isn’t a field operations department. It’s a research department. Many of those employ consultants from outside.”

“Sure.” Knox turned away and clicked the computer touch pad, flashing up a picture of the outside of the Department, a block of offices next to the flashy headquarters of a large television company. He flicked the picture back to Cristos’s. “The Department has refused to give up the information it captured last year. It rejects any suggestion that it had a base in San Francisco. But our informant tells us they were there.”

“Who’s the informant?” It was worth a try.

Knox glanced at him scornfully, thin mouth turned down in a sneer. “Oh no, not yet. I’ll give you any names you need when I think you need them. I can tell you that we sent a covert team in last year, just after the San Francisco incident, when the Department’s resources were stretched. They posed as independent documentary makers.”

The documentary maker, Michael Clarkson. The Company had told Cristos to cooperate when a documentary maker had asked for access. This man had made controversial films about matters dear to the US citizen’s heart, accusing football players of corruption, TV companies of cooperating with the government, and he got the authorities on the run.

A man who collected anything he could about the present regime, and the past ones, if he could. A natural anarchist. The world needed people like those. It was just a shame so many of them didn’t think things through properly. If anyone unmasked Talents, Andreas would put his money on a maverick, obsessed filmmaker to be the one to do it.

On the principle that they wanted him inside the tent pissing out, instead of outside the tent, pissing in, the CIA had reluctantly granted Clarkson access to some non-covert departments. Cristos had cooperated, up to a point. They’d suspected him, and been careful around him. Had they been careful enough?

“That is why we’re here, and not in Langley, ladies and gentlemen. Department 57 is here, so we’re here too.”

It was true, the DIB had relocated a couple of years ago, and speculation had said the department that investigated other departments wanted to make space between it and its targets. The move had relieved most residents of Langley, but it only made Andreas's blood pressure rise even more. A two year investigation. What could they have discovered? How could Department 57 neutralize them?

Knox spread his hands then punched the touchpad with more force than he needed. At last, Cristos's picture was replaced by another. Andreas didn't like this one any better.

A floor plan of Department 57. The central office area, the smaller offices around it. All labeled, all correct. Cristos's office, at the end of the large space, the big conference room, the smaller ones, and some of the laboratories. At the other side to Cristos's office, the corridor that led to the more covert laboratories. At least this one didn't show any details, just a series of rooms. He needed to communicate with his contact, Fabrice. Now.

"This is the Department 57 layout. Whoever I send in there won't have to know this, of course." Knox pulled a small, thin object from his pocket and pressed the catch at the end, so it expanded into a slim pointer. He tapped the screen, where the end corridor began. "We want you to find out what's beyond here. And to get into the system. Cristos has a discrete system, as well as the usual network. We need the code to that, and a means of accessing it from here. I have a team of analysts on standby, wasting time. We need to put them to work."

He swung around to fix them all with a steely glare. "There are a few more pictures. Targets. Memorize the faces, people, learn all you can about them."

The picture changed again, and Andreas suppressed a flinch of recognition.

"These people are what Cristos likes to call 'consultants.' Not full time agents, and they coincidentally have jobs that take them all over the world. I want them tracked, and if possible, turned." Turned into agents for the DIB. Was there a word for that kind of agent? One who worked for one CIA department, and reported covertly to another? Andreas could think of a few words, but they wouldn't pass official muster.

"This is Fabrice Germain. He's an advertising executive out of Toronto. He has a French mother and French-Canadian father. Currently working in New York on long term loan, to the same company he works for in Canada. Consultant to Department 57. I want him tracked and shadowed. You have a team, Don. Arrange it." Don murmured his agreement.

The next picture. *Christ!* "Svetlana Yevchenko. Russian. International photography and runway model. Has a contract with the French House of Roubillard. She's been seen more than once entering the Department." Not for six months. She'd worked in San Francisco, then left on a European assignment. That meant the surveillance had been going on for some time. Surveillance was expensive, suggesting a high priority case.

This was getting worse every minute. Andreas watched dumbly, as several pictures passed through the computer and on to the screen. Dev Wyvern, art auctioneer and consultant. Laurie Friedland, soccer player and consultant.

Was this a trap then, did they mean to take him and question him? If they did, he had a trick or two they weren't aware of.

It was too late to worry about the new equipment that could track Psi activity. He had to know.

Andreas opened his mind and concentrated on Bernard Knox, rapidly scanning the man's mind. He could only enter the outer part, otherwise, if Knox was psychic, he'd be able to tell someone was probing him. To go further caused a slight pain, but a recognizable one.

Nothing. No identification, no awareness of his search.

Quickly, he risked communicating with Fabrice and even quicker, he received a reply. *Tonight. Usual place.*

After sending an acknowledgment, Andreas shut down. But as he did so, he felt something moving in his mind, or rather, someone.

Someone had made him.

Shit on a stick.

Astonishment seized Roz when she realized this man she'd dismissed as useless had some of the same Talent as she did, and it wasn't natural, it was carefully controlled. Telepathy. He used his with an assurance that told her he knew what he was doing. Earlier that day, in the elevator, she'd made him as a mortal with a gift, one that helped him lay women and pal up to men. She'd been wrong.

Surely her family would have told her if there was another Talent active in the DIB? She risked a look at Nancy, who met her eyes with a raised eyebrow and she felt her question in her mind.

What is it?

Didn't you feel it? Sense it?

No.

Talk to you later.

Abruptly she cut the connection. She needed to concentrate on her boss. Finally, he'd begun to tell them what he wanted them to do.

"I want one of you to go into the Department. You'll be at a medium security level, so you can gain access to some of the material you'll need, but not high enough to invite too thorough an investigation. Whoever goes in, Constant will be your contact. He's the only insider we've managed to get, so you'll have to make the best of it." Glancing sideways at Andreas Constant, Roz smiled when she saw the chagrin with which he greeted that comment. But he said nothing and didn't look at her. "The other two will observe, and in time, we want you in there, too. But it would be suspicious if three people all transferred from the same place, so you'll have to wait. Don, I've assigned you a geek, one of the best we've got. Hook on to the private Department 57 system and see if you can break in. This is your only concern." He paused and looked from Nancy to Roz. "So which of you will it be? I need to know today, now, so I can put your name on the transfer documents."

Roz heaved a sigh and thought of doing it for her country. "Me. I'll do it." If Nancy went in on this op, she'd have to postpone the wedding, or at least scale it down. Her mother would never let her hear the end of it. "I take it this is not a fast job, you'll want your operative in place for as long as it takes. I have nobody at the moment. I'll do it."

Knox watched her, his eyes gleaming speculatively. She saw the narrowed gaze, the sudden inspiration. Hell, what now? "That will be fine." He didn't take his gaze away from Roz. "You and Constant can be an item. He can back you up much better like that."

"But they'll know he works for the DIB."

"Yes, and they'll know he's a schmuck, a lowlife, someone who won't climb higher in the Company." Constant made a sound, but Knox interrupted him. "You know it's true, Constant. You don't work hard enough to make a difference. You might have gone further, but you don't have the dedication to do the job. But you can be liaison and backup, and you're here to give us as much information as you can. If Roz gets into trouble, she can

fake illness and they'll call you to come get her. Kapische?"

"Yeah." Constant didn't sound any happier than she was. She'd only just shaken him off, and now she was stuck with an office Lothario. Whatever else he was, he was someone she could only despise.

"Move in together. Make like lovers."

Could it get any worse?

"Why do we have to do that?" That came from Constant, but it might have well have come from her. Except he didn't sound as agitated as she felt. Almost as if he wanted it. That shouldn't come as any surprise after this morning. So she'd be fenced in on two sides. Working covertly within Department 57 and fighting off Andreas Constant's wandering hands. She kept her attention on her boss.

"Because I need easy communication between you. Constant isn't a security risk, his reasons for leaving Department 57 were personal." He smiled, but without humor. "A habit he seems to take with him. So what better than hitting on a member of his new department? It's in character. And I need him close to you, Roz. He'll debrief you every night and bring his reports straight to me. He'll help you find your way around, point you to the places we're most interested in. Living together would do that."

"But I live with Nancy," she protested feebly. Unfortunately, Knox was right. The whole operation would work more smoothly that way. She brightened. "Perhaps he can move in on an apartment share instead?"

Knox frowned. "It wouldn't work so well." As she half suspected, he kept to his original plan. Bernard Knox hated deviations from his carefully arranged schemes. "No, lovers. Move in with him, or the other way around, I don't care."

"My apartment isn't in the best part of town," Constant said. "I'm changing where I live, so I took a temporary lease on a small place."

"You can move in with the two women, then." Knox smiled, a bland conciliatory smile. "You can claim the rent on expenses for the length of the case."

Roz felt some relief, but not because of the rent. Because Nancy could help, even act as a buffer between her and Andreas. Nancy was marrying Don in six weeks, but they didn't have plans to move out before then. Don almost lived with them as it was, since his place was out of town, in a quiet 'burb.

When she finally looked at Constant, he smiled blandly at her, but under the smile, she saw a promise. A dark, sensual promise she had no intention of accepting. Truly she didn't.

Then why did her skin prickle when she saw the dark, intent eyes fixed on her, why did she imagine his mouth on hers, on her body, everywhere?

Telling herself firmly that physical attraction was a chemical thing didn't help, either. She didn't care what caused it, but she wanted it. And she hated him for making her want him.

What a mess!

As she watched, his eyes hardened in expression, before he swung his head to confront Bernard again. "What's the idea? You want to know about another CIA department, you ask. The bosses in Langley tell you what you need to know. Why is this so undercover, so secret?"

Perhaps he wasn't so dumb, after all.

Knox seemed as startled as she felt. A to-the-point, downright intelligent question from a man who coasted through his career with as little effort as possible. As if to answer, Constant smiled, a mere baring of teeth. "There's some danger involved. Danger to me.

So I want to know everything you're not telling us."

Knox sighed heavily and turned back to the computer. "There's another leak that's turning into a serious problem."

"You said that."

"Yeah. This is another leak, in the field, and it could get messy. Some of the terrorist cells based in Afghanistan have been targeting our troops a bit too closely. Then an agent found a group smuggling information through the Khyber Pass. Straight from Russia. The plans were so fresh the CIA stamps were barely dry. So we're looking into all departments with Russian connections, and Department 57 is first on the list. Cristos worked in Russia for years, and Langley has never trusted him. That's why he's here in New York, not at home base." He raked his hand through his hair, sending the close-cropped dark mass into spiky tufts. "He's not the only person under scrutiny, but he's our prime target. This isn't some stupid interdepartmental war, people, it's a matter of national security. So go to it."

"Aren't we forbidden to act on US soil?"

Knox growled. "You know better than that, Don. If we can keep this in-house, we will. If it is Cristos who's doing this, we'll tie the case up and present him to the courts neatly wrapped. Without compromising our internal security. You're not officially on an operation. Roz is transferring, Constant is coming in to work, and Nancy is on leave. You're getting married, right? So take a long vacation. A paid one."

Something uncomfortable prickled Roz's nerve ends, and it had little to do with the man sitting next to her, unless he was feeling it too. If they were caught, they were on their own. The Company would hang them out to dry.

There was something nasty here, she was sure of it.

Chapter Three

The situation worried Roz all the way home. Don was the highest ranking officer, but she and Constant were the ones in the field.

Back at the apartment, the first thing Don said made her heart sink to her boots. "You keep in touch with me at all times. I don't like this. Knox didn't tell us everything, I'm sure of it. I think all that Afghanistan stuff is a crock."

"Do you know or are you guessing?"

He shrugged. "My radar is up, that's all. I just think it's peculiar that when Knox wants the Department investigated, he picks on two vampires to do it. You and Nancy. I'll get a cell phone for you, one with a scrambler unit, so you can talk to me privately when you need to. You can always talk to Nancy the other way." Even now, Don couldn't bring himself to utter the word "telepathic." He preferred to ignore their special Talents, and treat Nancy as the woman he loved, rather than a vampire hundreds of years older than he was, with special powers. Nancy loved him for it. Don stuck his hands in his pockets and wandered over to stare out the window. The setting sun gilded the buildings with an almost unearthly glow, effortlessly demonstrating that sometimes man could enhance nature.

Strictly speaking, this apartment was too good for two middle-ranking government employees, but they'd told everyone they had family money. Enough to get a decent place to live and buy a few luxuries, like good clothing. True enough, and then some. Since everyone knew she and Nancy were related, no one thought anything more than envying them their luck in having rich relatives.

Only Don knew exactly what kind of family they were. He'd coped with the information remarkably well, even when they'd explained to him that 'turning' him wasn't as easy as the novels and legends said. For him to receive the Dark Gift, someone else would have to die, another vampire. She'd watched his face as Nancy explained, and not seen one hint of regret or relief. She couldn't read him telepathically. Don had a rare capacity—to block all attempts at reading his mind, at whatever level. That was why he was such a good agent.

That had been a year ago, and since then, Don and Nancy had behaved like a regular mortal couple, and Roz had helped with the illusion. Time enough to cope with it when Don was old, and Nancy wasn't.

She hoped she wouldn't be there to see it, but she was afraid she would be. Nancy had helped Roz through her own loss after she'd married a mortal, so long ago now she could hardly remember John's face. Only his arms around her in the dead of night, his total courage when he learned what she was, the bliss of having him near.

She would miss John until the day she died, but she honored his words, too. "Never miss an opportunity, Ruby. If you see someone or something you want, go for it. Remember me, but don't stop your life as well as mine." Ruby was her first name, her birth name. Roz had come later.

She never had.

"Hey." Don slid his arm across her shoulders. "We'll be fine."

A perceptive man. Nancy was lucky to have him. Roz forced a smile. "I was just thinking of John. Good times."

"I'm sure they were." Glancing at Don's smiling face, she didn't need telepathy to see the sympathy and regret in his eyes. "Thanks. It won't happen to you for a long time, and nothing's certain."

"You sound like Nancy. She says she might die first, because you're vulnerable during the daytime, and accidents happen." He snorted. "Well big deal. I'd rather share a long life with her and live it to the full."

"You might find a donor," she reminded him, lifting her hand to touch his cheek in a gesture of sympathy.

He lifted his head to kiss her finger, his blond hair blazing in a sudden shaft of late sunlight slanting through the big window. "I'm not living on that eventuality. We'll cope." He looked away, perhaps to hide his feelings from her but she'd seen that spark of hope before. Occasionally a vampire might donate his or her Talent, but it happened so rarely and there were so many people waiting for a chance, that it was a waste of time to live in hope of the event. Don was right. They had to learn to manage with what they had.

She smiled gently. "Yes, you'll manage. I know you will." Moving away, she strolled towards the kitchen area. "I have to go out tonight."

"We'll probably be gone when you get back." Don didn't need Roz to tell him why she was going out, and what for. Roz hadn't fed for a week, and she needed sustenance of a particular kind. She didn't tell him of her other plans.

She looked up when Nancy walked through from her room, a towel wrapped around her hair, turban-style. "I'm still not sure I want to do this." Don lit up when she walked in and Roz indulged herself watching them both. Nancy looked healthy, happy, much better than six months ago, when she'd lost sleep trying to persuade her parents her marriage to a mortal wouldn't be the disaster they expected.

"What, you don't want to take the assignment?" Nancy looked at Don, blue eyes wide and startled, then back to Roz.

"I can refuse it, right?" She filled the coffeemaker as she spoke. She didn't want coffee, but it gave her something to do. For some unknown reason she felt nervous and unsure. Telling herself she could cope with any mortal paled when she remembered Andreas Constant's intense gaze, his soft mouth and the scent of raw sex she'd smelled in the close confines of the elevator. She tried to act casual. "I'm not sure I want the office Lothario moving in with me. He hit on me this morning, and although I told him to go to hell, this just gives him another in. I'll be fighting the bad guys off from both directions."

"You're showing your age," Nancy remarked, from the shelter of Don's arm. "Nobody says Lothario any more."

"You just did."

"I copied you. I'm not as old as you, Grandma."

Roz snorted. "Not too far away. Anyway, you get my point. I'll be the laughingstock of the office, and I'm not doing this job just for something to do. I like it. I want it to go on for a while."

"You'll age for it?" Keeping an appearance of age was something vampires could do, but it was hard to reverse the progression.

Roz shrugged. "Maybe. If it goes well. But it won't, if I'm seen to take up with a man who's gone through half the office."

"As long as you keep him close, they might get jealous."

"I don't get it." She slammed the coffeemaker on the stove with more force than she needed. "He's reasonably good-looking, he's good at his job, what has he got to prove? He even dated Stacey." Stacey was the office slut, a not so young blond with an aggressive

boob job. Most men avoided her. Four ex-husbands and a string of ex-boyfriends didn't add to her appeal for most men, but Constant had made a beeline for her. True, their affair had lasted less than a week, but he'd lost credibility with that move. If he forgot to leer, stopped looking at women with that calculating expression, wore more flattering clothes, Constant might be more than tolerable.

That morning had been the first time she'd been even slightly attracted to him, come to think of it. His dark pants and white shirt had seemed less cheap, better cut, somehow, until he'd come closer and she'd seen the gleam of polyester in his pants and the creases in the badly ironed shirt. Even then, enough glamour had remained so she stepped in the lift with him. "He's psychic, did you spot it?"

"I've read him," Nancy said. "He has some mild talent. I wouldn't put it any stronger than that."

"He knows he has it." Many mortals had no idea their 'charisma' was due to an ability to project psychic auras. "When he hit on me this morning, he used it, or tried to."

Don's fair brows lifted. "Does he now? I might look into that."

Damn, damn, damn! There was no way she would let Andreas any further into her life, and she'd check the lock on her own bedroom door, just in case.

"You'll make it," Don assured her.

She sighed. Apart from anything else, recently she'd felt hemmed in with Don and Nancy, and she was tired of playing gooseberry. "He can sleep on the sofa while he's here. I'll just have to make it clear there's nothing outside work, and there never will be. If I have to, I'll persuade him he hates me as much as I hate him."

"Do you hate him? Truly?"

She hadn't until that morning, and she still wasn't sure. "Yes," she said firmly, hoping her statement would help to destroy the doubt in her mind.

Of course she hated him. Didn't she?

Following Andreas Constant had proved easy as opening her mind and letting him in. So much that Roz wondered briefly if he suspected anything and was making investigation easy for her. No, that wasn't possible. She'd read him, entered the forefront of his mind and there was nothing there but lustful thoughts and work niggles. No sigil, no tense, electric tingling that she would have gotten if he'd been strongly psychic. Constant was just an extraordinarily handsome, sex-obsessed mortal. A straightforward man to read. That was all.

She'd picked up his trail easily enough, right after she'd stopped in a back alley to feed off a college kid looking for kicks. Everyone left a mental trail, or at least, mortals did. Messily leaving parts of their thoughts here and there, as good as a fingerprint, as individual as DNA. However, finding one mortal in all New York was beyond the abilities of anyone but a Sorcerer, so she'd helped herself a little. Being a couple of security levels above him had given her access to his files, so she knew where to start.

The district given as his address shocked her a little. Rather a lot, when she saw the stinking building it took her to, in the middle of Hell's Kitchen. Not so far for her to walk from her home on the Upper West Side, but a world away in every other sense.

Groups of children lounged in the street, probably working when they should rightly have been in bed, teens slouching on the corners. If she wasn't Talented, Roz wouldn't have dreamed of venturing here alone. But she fuzzed her presence well enough,

blurring people's vision of her, so she looked like anyone else in this godforsaken rat-hole. No one took any notice of her.

She was beginning to think she had the wrong address, or that he'd lied, when a figure emerged from the block she was watching, although she had to look twice to confirm the man really was Andreas Constant.

He wore a pair of perfectly cut pants and a leather jacket with something dark underneath, a shirt or t-shirt. No sign of the practical, but deeply boring, clothes he wore to work. His dark hair was free of the gel he used during the daytime, brushed back off his face in short, tousled locks. She supposed everyone was entitled to their secrets. Some secrets, anyway.

But not from her. If she was to work with him, she wanted to know more than he wanted to tell her and that controlled touch to her mind this morning had made her wonder about him. She'd wait until he was off-guard, and read him deeper than she'd done so far. Before she began her assignment, she wanted to know more about her backup. She already knew he wouldn't tell her, so she'd find out for herself.

Constant moved down the street with an easy stride, past people who should have mugged him for his jacket alone. Perhaps they knew him. Why he lived here she had no idea. If he could afford to dress like that, he could afford a decent neighborhood. Perhaps it gave him some perverse pleasure to walk through these low-lives every day.

He moved at a brisk pace, so she had to lengthen her stride to keep up with him. She tried a gentle mental probe, but she found his mind shuttered, even more than at work.

She paused, then had to hurry to catch up with him.

Half an hour later, she paused for breath outside a fashionable nightclub in Gramercy. He'd walked all the way and her legs ached with the pace he'd set. Also, she wasn't dressed for fashionable nightclubs. She'd just about pass, in her plain pants and white blouse, with a heavy black overcoat, but it wasn't the outfit she'd choose to party in.

For New York, it was early, but she knew this club would be fuller than most others at this time. It was newly fashionable, and non-celebrity residents needed to be there early. She fumbled in her pocket and pulled out her drivers' license, shoved it back and found a MasterCard. She guessed the membership card would be about the same size.

Ignoring the long line of people, neatly corralled behind red ropes, she walked straight to the front, and held her card up to one of the bow-tied door attendants. She didn't bother to smile. Smiles weren't for door attendants, it made them suspicious, unless she needed to be conciliatory, and either this would work or it wouldn't.

Her standard white-blouse-black-pants looked like designer wear to the discriminating door attendant once she'd messed with his mind a little, and the gold card she showed him allowed her into any area she chose. He smiled and opened the door for her.

Inside, she was as out of place here as a demon in heaven. The fancy nightclubs she visited with her friends were livelier, even at this early time of night. No sign of the fancy cocktails with paper umbrellas and fruit favored by the more ebullient crowd, no chalked list of cocktails with dubious names by the discreetly lit bar. Instead, dimly lit tables with couples and threesomes sitting absorbed in anything but each other, who occasionally glanced around to see who had come in and who was heading for the roped-off area at the end where the VIP's strode with a purposeful air entirely lacking in the main room.

Except for one couple right at the end, two men totally involved in their conversation, leaning across the little table towards each other like lovers at a secret tryst. Roz hastily turned aside and found a place to sit, sliding into the seat as far away from the

single low spotlight as possible. They hadn't seen her, but she didn't want to take any chances.

Andreas Constant sat with his back to her. Facing her, though not looking at her, his features highlighted by the candle flickering on the table between them was a face she recognized from the pictures shown them at the briefing this morning. Classically beautiful, his blue eyes dazzling even in the dim lighting of the nightclub she recognized Fabrice Germain. A Talent for sure, but what kind of Talent?

Cautiously she projected her senses. Just enough to eavesdrop. Blocking out the gossip around her took a moment, and then she honed in on the couple at the end table.

Her first shock came when she realized they were speaking telepathically.

There's a mole in the Department.

What? Germain sounded rattled.

I'm supposed to act as go-between for Roz Templeton and the DIB. They're sending her in to the Department.

We expected something like that. We'll let her in.

I know. What you don't know is that you, Svetlana, Wyvern, and Takasc are specifically targeted. Knox briefed us this morning.

A moment of shock, then, *That could be from surveillance. Watching people coming and going, even if they use the back way.*

They can identify most of the team from the San Francisco job, and they know too damned much. There's a mole.

She saw Germain's slight shrug, the way his silk tee shirt moved like a second skin over his muscular shoulders. *I think you're imagining things, bro, but there's no harm doing a second sweep.*

Yeah. You do that. I'm moving to Roz's apartment. Knox wants me to play the lover.

She saw the chuckle, echoed in Germain's mind. *That shouldn't bother you none. She's a good-looking female.*

I thought your kind weren't supposed to notice that?

Another chuckle. *We notice just fine. We just don't act on it.*

Only one race of Talents had to remain untouched to keep their powers. Monks, some of her kind called them, but they called themselves Sorcerers.

Jesus. Fabrice Germain was a Sorcerer.

Shock jolted Roz so she lost the thread of the conversation. Sorcerers were possessed of mortal lifespans, but in control of immense powers. Especially the virgins, the strongest Psi powers known. Virgin Sorcerers were rare. Even rarer was the Virgin Sorcerer who made it past the age of twenty-five without succumbing to temptation. But if they were in love, and gave their virginity voluntarily, they could retain their powers. Perhaps the admittedly gorgeous Fabrice Germain was one of those.

He had to know she sat here, listening in. That was why she'd found tracking them easy. They wouldn't let her go. If Germain wanted it, he could kill her with a thought.

Roz swallowed, concentrating on controlling her rising panic and slid out of their minds, slowly, a fraction at a time. There was a slim chance they hadn't noticed her presence. If she could get away without them noticing, she could flash—teleport—back to her apartment. Then she'd be safer. Constant hadn't been to her apartment yet, he wouldn't dare flash to an unknown place, for fear of landing in the middle of a piece of furniture, or even a person. Vampires flashed blind, and unless they knew precisely where they were going, it could mean instant death. But no one would be in her room and she knew it well.

She could do it. Just a matter of slipping into the ladies' room and flashing from there.

Watching the men carefully, aware that hunter had just turned into prey, Roz slid to the end of the seat and glided out of her place. She concentrated on the two men, who looked at each other, seemingly not aware of her presence.

Forcing herself to move slowly, she headed for the Ladies' rest room, walking around the small and sparsely populated dance floor to avoid walking past the two men.

The only sense she dared use was empathic, sensing their presence, making sure they didn't move or watch her as she concentrated on walking unhurriedly.

A shame she never made it. A strong, male hand clamped over her shoulder and turned her around, pushing her against the wall next to the rest room.

Before she could catch her breath, a hard mouth clamped over hers, preventing any cry she might have made for help and a voice she knew well commanded her mind.

Say anything and I'll knock you out cold. Come with me. I need to talk to you.

Panicked, but always aware of her position, the way he shielded her from view, he flashed them to an alley. She felt the wind whip around them, and sensed they hadn't gone far.

The mouth remained clamped over hers, but she pulled away.

"So tell me what you were doing watching me and my friend so closely?" Andreas Constant demanded.

She glared at him. "How on earth did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"I kept tabs on you while I was walking to the rest room. You and your friend were still sitting at the table. How did you move without me tracking you?"

"You've not met many Sorcerers, have you?"

Her brows went up. "No."

The sound came into both their minds simultaneously. *Incoming! Prepare yourselves for attack!*

Andreas sprang back, and pressed against the wall, gaze darting to either side of them. *I see them. Roz, we have company.*

Dark figures slipped around the corner, three, maybe four. They weren't friendly shadows.

Roz tensed and dropped into the pose her karate master had taught her. Beside her, Andreas did the same, but she felt an aura of danger emanate from him, terrifying if it he'd aimed it at her.

"You want something?" he asked, his tone deceptively mild.

"Your wallet, for a start."

Immediately Roz felt a piercing pain. Psychic attack, like fingernails down a chalkboard, paralyzed her senses for a brief moment. Long enough for them to attack.

A swift blow to the side of her head knocked her aside, but she recovered, snapping up her mental defenses, as she should have done at the start of the fight. No time to scold herself for her stupidity, but she felt it just the same, curling up hotly through her body.

It helped psych her up. Her job didn't involve regular combat, but vampires were always on guard. One of their attackers held something that glinted in the light, smaller than a knife, but she didn't stop to identify it, just assessed the distance between the hand and her foot. Then there was no distance at all as she kicked up and knocked the object away. She didn't hear it fall because by then Andreas was roaring in pure fury.

She spun when an attacker would have grasped her arm, twisting out of his grip and

completing the spin with a hard kick. Satisfaction flooded her when she met soft flesh. The man dropped to the ground with a soft grunt.

She took the time to read him. Mortal.

No one else came for her, and when she looked up, she saw why. Andreas whirled in the center of attack by at least three, but behind him, Fabrice Germain had joined the fray, lashing out with hands and feet in a perfect balanced display of kung-fu. They stood between her and their assailants, fending them off until in a brief hiatus, Fabrice stood up and focused.

Get out of here!

She felt the power grow, building high and knew if she didn't get Andreas away, quickly, they would suffer, even die, with the others. Fabrice Germain had staggering mental powers. He would stun or kill the assailants with one blinding mind attack. At the moment, she didn't much care which.

She grabbed Andreas, making the necessary physical contact and flashed them out just as a massive wave of telepathy hit her.

Chapter Four

The first sense to return to him was smell. Light and pleasant, without overpowering him, a welcome change after the stuffy, alcohol-laden air of the nightclub and the stench of the alley. His sight cleared to show him Roz. She stared at him, her eyes wary. He was crowding her. He stepped back, watching her. He'd felt the power Fabrice sent out, but only the edge of it. She seemed fine. Her reactions had certainly been good.

He glanced around, not surprised to find himself in a bedroom, with obvious feminine touches in the perfume bottles and make-up on the vanity, and the crocheted cover on the bed, although the room wasn't deeply feminine. Roz obviously didn't go in for frills. He took a refreshing breath and turned his attention back to her.

Did he imagine the relief he saw in her eyes? No, it was there, behind the fast fading adrenaline rush. She hadn't realized he was vampire before that too-brief encounter preceding the attack. Revealing vampire secrets to a mortal was forbidden. Punishable by death, if the vamp was discovered doing it.

No doubt she planned to clean his mind of recent memories and send him back, if he'd been mortal. It was what he would have done. A small tongue of pride licked up his spine when he realized his shielding had been so good she hadn't gotten a sniff of it before he'd revealed himself as a Talent. "Are you okay?"

She took a deep breath, much as he had done. "Sure. People attack me in alleys every day."

"Did you read them?"

"I didn't have time. Did you?"

He frowned. He hadn't liked what he'd had time to read and he didn't want to discuss it until he'd reported back and found out what Fabrice had extracted. "Yeah. As much as I could. Fabrice will search them more thoroughly before he leaves, if the cops don't arrive first."

"Your friend's a Virgin Sorcerer."

He smiled, nice and slow, letting the shady office Lothario back for a final visit. "You've got the tiger by the tail here, sweetheart. Well worked out. There aren't too many Virgin Sorcerers about, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised you haven't met one before. The Department has tabs on most of them."

"What?" He watched her assessing, rejecting and finally accepting. She had no choice. "So Department 57 didn't throw you out after all?"

His smile broadened. "Is that what they're saying? Good. That's what we wanted them to think. We had to reduce Diane to victim status, which she doesn't like a bit. Until Bernard came up with his nutty scheme about you and me, she was my contact."

"Why did you meet Germain tonight? Couldn't you have contacted him telepathically?"

He grimaced. She was too quick. "He had something to give me. But he made you as soon as you walked in, so you had no chance. Roz, you have to keep your thoughts to yourself better. Some lab somewhere has developed a detector for telepathic communication, based on a sonic wave formation. Until we find the source, we have to be careful." He pushed his hand into his jacket pocket, feeling the reassuring cool, smooth barrel of the syringe, the "thing" Fabrice had to give him, in fact a device to be injected

subcutaneously that would prevent any Psi detectors reaching him. "Apart from the new device, you never know who's listening in."

She blinked. "We're usually very careful."

"Most Talents can pick something up, especially the ones who have bothered to train. A trace, a wave, a prickle on the nerve endings. The Department trains us to close down completely, to strengthen our shields. It also trains us to pick up traces of Psi communication. I don't like the idea of you running around broadcasting to anyone who can listen." He stopped, surprised by his own emotions. He really did care about her risking danger, although she could still be the enemy. Not all vampires worked for the good side. Her support in the alley could have been simple self-defense.

He'd have to take her in to the Department. "You're Roz Templeton, a vampire of the Gardiner family. I read that in the elevator. So what are you doing in the DIB? Who sent you, and what do you want?" He shot her a curious glance. "We might be able to work together."

"You first."

He took a step closer, and felt an unaccustomed pang of guilt at the flash of alarm he felt in her before she suppressed it.

This was part of his job. Not something to feel guilty about. Lives depended on him discovering all he could about the DIB before he had to pull out.

The double entendre had him thinking about more than work. His behavior to Roz hadn't been playacting. He wanted to touch her, felt an unaccustomed streak of protectiveness in her presence. More than all the other women in the DIB that he'd dated. That was why he'd left her till last, but being aware of his vulnerability didn't negate it.

He would have to work through it. He'd done worse before. So why did this touch him more than usual?

"What are you, a Sorcerer like your friend?"

"No." Slowly he lifted his lip, and let her see the buds above his eye teeth, the buds every vampire had, the place the fangs withdrew to when they weren't in use.

He watched her eyes widen and heard her gasp. "You're a vampire?"

He relaxed his lip and nodded. "All my life."

Then he opened his mind, just at the first level. "You should be able to read me now."

He closed his eyes when she entered his mind for the first time, feeling her soft, enquiring presence, like a shy entrant to a new place. The urge to keep her there, to feel her caressing him inside grew stronger.

He knew what she would say before she said it, and telepathy had nothing to do with it. Every vampire he'd ever met said almost the same thing. "Where's your sigil?"

The family insignia, the sigil branded on to every vampire's mind at the time he came into maturity. A sign of identification for other Talents to read. The usual pang went through him, the aching loss when anyone mentioned it. "I don't have one."

"The Department removed it?"

He saw the shock in her eyes. It could be suicide to do that. Vampires were still clannish, and some never lost the old ways of family rivalry and blood feuds. Walking around without the protection of a family sigil meant you were on your own. No one to protect you, no place to hide.

"Someone removed it, with a few other things. I have no family, Roz. None that I know of."

Her eyes rounded, and she turned away from him. She walked slowly to the bed

and sat down on the edge, the soft lavender fabric of her comforter curling gently around her like a lover's welcome. "How is that possible? All vampires have family. We couldn't survive without it."

He stayed where he was, but something inside him mourned that she was now across the room from him, and not gifting him with her proximity. "Some of us don't."

"You're a renegade?"

He grinned tightly. "Never had a chance."

"You were turned out?"

He shook his head. "Never had a family to be turned out of."

She frowned, staring at him. "I don't understand."

"Someone discovered me living on the streets, no idea of who or what I was, no way of coping with it. I had a sigil once, you can still see the scars if you look closely, but they couldn't find out what it was, however hard they looked. The best in the business have examined me, but someone scrubbed my personal memories clean. I could still do math, still read, I still knew where I was, but not what I was or where I came from."

He hated the pity he saw in her. He'd do anything to take that away.

She leaned towards him, her bed linen rustling as she moved. The sound sent a pang of want through his body. He wanted to help her make a good rustle. Not the time now, though it was surely the right place. "We could look. My family could help. It's one of the most powerful families."

"No. We tried that. I have no family, and that's all. Perhaps someone, somewhere is mourning a child. Vampire children are rare, so they were sure they could find my family. They never did." He stepped back and leaned against the wall, folding his arms in front of his chest. "Don't waste your time, Roz. Enough people have tried and failed."

"It doesn't seem right, that's all."

He shrugged away the trouble that had plagued his teens, until he'd learned to move on. The inner yearning for a place of his own, a family of his own, never went away, but he'd spent too many years longing for something he couldn't have. "Don't worry about me. I've survived on my own." He pushed away from the wall. "We have other things to sort out. Like, what are you doing working at the DIB?"

"You're coming from Department 57, right?" Her stare was as determined and as hard, as his must be.

"Right."

"Well I'm from the Gardiners. The bodies of two vampires appeared in California last year. They'd been tortured, tortured clinically. That meant there must have been a laboratory in the area, one of those sick places that don't consider vampires as human, don't even consider them as sentient. Just after that, there was an explosion on the top floor of a department store in the centre of San Francisco. Bernard says it was the Department 57 office." She looked at him questioningly and he gave her a short, curt nod.

"I was there when it happened. It wasn't good. They didn't care who they killed to get to us, and as it happens, more humans died than Talents."

Roz fell silent for a moment. He could guess what she was thinking about. Last year, Gardiners had died and no one had paid for it. Vampires were big on revenge. Then she looked up at him, determination in her face. Now she knew what he was, she would trust him a little further. Woop-de-doo. "We couldn't discover much, someone covered it all up but one of the victims used to work at the DIB when it was based in Langley. It was all we had to go on. I've worked at the DIB for the past five years, along with Nancy. The family contacted us when they needed help."

He sighed heavily. Wasted effort, and worse. Amateurs made the job harder. And infinitely more dangerous. "If I tell you what happened you can go tell your family, right?"

"I guess." She watched him, eyes quiet. He did her the courtesy of not probing her mind. She would know he was doing it, and it might make her mad. He needed to control this situation.

"Bernard Knox told you the facts as he saw them. In San Francisco, we were on to the lab, and searching for it. The firebomb was a little diversion, something to take our attention away for the time they needed, but it didn't work. We found the lab and closed it down anyway. 'We' being Department 57, in case there was any doubt in your mind." He looked away. The memories of the things he saw got to him sometimes, mostly at dawn when the sun was coming up and his vampire powers were leaving him for another day. That was when his kind was at its most vulnerable, in the daytime. Andreas was highly trained in martial arts and the use of firearms, so he could operate at any time of the day but that moment of weakness, when the powers seeped out and he couldn't stop them, was the time he felt as helpless as a newborn and he remembered what a dead vampire looked like.

He heard the rustle of fabric as she stood up, felt her hand gentle on his arm, softly comforting. "It was bad?"

"The worst." He pushed the images out of his mind, as he'd done many times before in the last six months. He couldn't do his job with those thoughts to weaken him. Anger and sorrow could blur his judgment, something he couldn't afford now. "We discovered a sonic field that senses and inhibits telepathic communication. The lab was for experimentation on Talents, they hadn't developed the sonic field there. We have to shut that discovery down, before the technology spreads, before it becomes well known. We're sure it's still in its experimental stage, though God knows how it works. I'm a member of the team with the assignment." The warmth of her hand seeped through to his flesh, comforting him, reminding him he wasn't alone. "I have a contact, and you know who that is. Originally, he was to come in here, and I was his contact, but someone made Fabrice. His Psi powers are awesome, much greater than mine, and he could have gone through the DIB much faster than I have."

"Why didn't they make you?"

"We're assuming the information the DIB has is from a specific operation, one I wasn't involved in. Cristos brought me in from solitary field activity to work with the teams a year ago."

"Cristos."

"Yeah. My boss. He's not going to be pleased when he hears about this wrinkle."

"I'm a wrinkle?"

"And then some." He turned his head to look at her and caught his breath. She was so close, so lovely, and he wanted her so much. Now he knew they were the same kind resistance seemed totally useless.

So he gave up resisting and bent his head to kiss her.

The first touch of his lips told Roz this wasn't going to be like before, no quick softening of her outer defenses so he could steal in and spy on her inner thoughts. He meant this. His mouth played softly on hers, with a seductive touch she let herself enjoy.

He lifted his head without ravaging her, as he had that morning. Roz become aware

of a pang of disappointment. She stared up into his face and the wry smile that quirked his lips.

"You were expecting something rougher, maybe?"

She nodded, not trying to hide her reaction, and smoothed her hands over the back of his dark shirt, stilling when she noticed something unusual. "It's silk."

"Yeah. I prefer silk and natural fabrics. This morning, when Knox said I was thirty years old, he was speaking the truth. I'm young for a vampire. The sun still bothers me, and the artificial fabrics I wear to work irritate my skin to hell, especially in the daytime."

"Why do you do it then?"

He pressed his lips to her forehead. "Do you know how good you taste, Roz? I do it because it's my job. I'm an agent working undercover. I'm the office tomcat, a lazy worker who never fulfilled his potential. That kind of man wouldn't wear designer clothes and expensive garments, he'll wear what he can afford, something he doesn't have to worry about too much."

"Wow, you go in deep!"

"I have to."

"So do I, but I'm not exactly undercover."

His mouth settled in a grim line. "No, you're not. You weren't to know about the sonic field. It seems our scientists have found a kind of antidote, something we can do about it."

"I heard."

"So you did. I'll ask Fabrice to get another one. Another three," he corrected himself after a moment. "It might stop you blundering about in the bushes."

"Bushes?"

He laughed and kissed her forehead again. "Metaphorical bushes. Meantime, don't communicate telepathically in the office. Just in case."

She sighed and rested her head on his chest, the smooth silk rubbing sensuously against her cheek before she pulled away and stepped back. "After tonight, I don't know what to think."

His arms went around her, dragging her against him once more. His breath fell hotly on her ear. "What is it about you, Roz Templeton? Why do I need to touch you, why does the very scent of you drive me crazy?"

She swallowed back her instinctive retort. It was the same for her, too. "I don't know."

"Roz, my knowledge of vampire lore is extremely limited. The people who brought me up weren't vampires. They did their best, but it's not like I belong to any family. You're a Gardiner, one of the strongest families. What is this feeling?"

Warmth seeped into her. His warmth and something hard pushed into her buttocks. His erection. Roz squeezed her thighs together. "I think it's called lust. It's pretty universal. Not vampire specific at all."

"I'm doing my best here." He sounded ragged, his voice shaking. "I'm not what you think I am, but I do like women, share time with them. More than one Roz, less than a hundred."

"All at the same time?" She kept her voice low so it didn't shake, as his had done.

He chuckled, a slight rumble in his throat that did nothing but ratchet her libido up another notch. "No. One at a time is my usual limit, though I have been known to vary it from time to time. But I've never felt like this."

"Like what?"

His grip tightened. "Like if I don't find my way inside you soon, I'll die."

"No you won't."

A low groan this time. It did nothing to lower her temperature. She wanted him, but she still remembered the office wolf, the man who hit on anything with boobs. "I'll back off, I promise. Just as soon as I can."

Instead, his hands slid up from her waist to cup her breasts. She lifted her hands to push them away, and found herself cradling his hands in hers, encouraging him to press, to soothe the ache deep inside her. Only *his* hands, only *his* touch. She leaned back into him, feeling the insistent pressure of his erection, welcoming it now. "We seem to have no choice."

When she dragged her arms away from his grip, it was only to turn around and drag his head down to hers. They devoured each other, his hands sliding up her body, snagging her top and pulling it up her body. She didn't care. As long as this happened, she didn't care about anything else.

He thrust his tongue into her mouth and she sucked it in, hearing his growl, feeling the vibrations pulsing low in his throat. Swinging around, he took her down, and neither cared if they hit the bed or the floor, as long as they got horizontal fast. Easier that way, since she was a full six inches shorter than he was.

They managed the bed, more luck than design and while he stripped her, with jerky, feverish movements of his hands, she stripped him, dragging off the silk shirt, the soft wool pants. She would have dragged his tight-fitting boxer shorts off too, but he winced at her rough handling.

"Sorry," she gasped, dragging her lips away from his for a mere second or two, long enough to babble her apology.

"Don't." He took his hands off her and she felt bereft, until he eased his underwear over his sensitive erection and kicked them free. Mouth slightly open, panting as though he couldn't get enough air, he leaned over her, concentrating on the last of her clothes. She unclipped her bra herself, longing to feel his hands on her bare flesh, all the places she was most sensitive. Everywhere.

Not only his hands, but his mouth, sucking at her skin, her neck, her throat, moving swiftly on to her breasts. The slight chill when he lifted his mouth and moved on to her nipple made her shudder, which in turn drove her fever for him higher, ever higher.

He made whimpering, needy sounds low in his throat, and she realized the sounds she heard were her answers. No words, just small sounds of want and need.

Sharply, he lifted his head and his eyes burned, glowing redly around the rims. She knew what was about to happen, because she felt it too, the fever inciting all her appetites.

She pulled her lower lip in when her fangs shot into full growth, extending like flick knives, triggered by a sudden impulse of need. This would be a complete coupling.

Neither wanted gentleness, neither needed it. Driven by the blood pounding in their veins, they opened up at the same time, mind and body, opening, readying.

No words, but feverish images, all intensely phallic, of volcanoes, heat, fire. Nothing was as electrifying as the sight of him moving above her, opening her with his fingers, sliding into her body with exquisite care, despite the trembling she felt in every pore of his body.

The gentleness melted her, made her trust him enough to open her legs wide, and push up against his hand. She had never wanted this more, never wanted anyone as much as she wanted – needed – this man now.

He touched a spot inside her, the one that drove her wild, but she was already wild.

If she thought she had nowhere else to go, she was wrong. She cried out, and he growled and abruptly withdrew his hand, making her whimper in need, empty without him.

But not for long. He mounted her and leaned on one arm, the other holding his cock while he positioned himself, and for an instant she felt him, burning hotly against the heat she was generating. The soft slide against her wetness made her push her head back into the pillows and groan. He loomed over her, fangs gleaming in the soft light thrown by her bedside lamp, his eyes black with need, beyond speech now.

He slid inside her, where he belonged, and without thinking, she lifted her legs and hugged him with her knees, opening herself to him completely.

Although she knew what would happen next, it, sent shivers of shock and passion through her when he bent and took her neck. The first pain caused by the piercing dissipated quickly as his fangs made contact with her blood and her blood began to flow into him.

Instinct took over. His neck was bared to her, his vulnerable throat pressed against her, inviting her invasion, so she pierced and took, as he was taking her.

Her blood into him, his into her, surging into each other, feeding the energy, the strength, that vampires craved, needed to survive. While they needed human blood, both had found time to feed that night, and sustenance was strong in them both.

It fed their passion, their need. Still buried deep in her neck, Andreas began to move, lifting his hips to slam down into her body, which made a wet sound of welcome with every plunge.

Groaning against her neck, breath hot on her skin, his lips sucked her in, his heavy body pressed her hard into the mattress, but she fought back, arching her hips up to take him in. She gripped his side with her knees, and lifted her feet to curve around his back and press her heels just above his buttocks. He wasn't getting away until she came at least once. Her body demanded it.

Her mind had little to do with any of this, but she felt his mind in hers, hers in his. Too late to draw back now, she saw thoughts and emotions swirling through him, echoing and completing hers. Helpless to prevent it, he entered her thoughts, her very being.

This was too much, too intense, and Roz panicked.

He wouldn't let her pull away, although she yanked her fangs out of his neck and screamed loud and long as passion built inside her to an intolerable level, when it all detonated into another place, somewhere she'd never been before.

Vaguely she heard him shout, and felt the gush of hot liquid into her, seeping between the tight fit of his body in hers. He withdrew his fangs, but not his cock, and kissed her neck softly, his tongue bathing the slight wounds he'd left.

They'd be gone by the morning. It was sad, really. She wanted to bear his mark.

What was she thinking? He must have felt her shock because she experienced his reaction, a tingle of awareness. She concentrated on retracting her fangs. When he lifted his head she met his eyes, saw her satiation in him, and an edge of male arrogance that was all his own.

His shock seemed greater than hers. "I thought you wanted this. You don't seem entirely happy."

He bent to lap at her neck. Her wounds must still be seeping a little. His tongue caressed her softly, warmly caressing, healing. "I may be a vampire, but I wasn't brought up in a vampire community. I didn't have the teaching you had. Tell me something." He lifted his head once more. "Is this normal for vampire sex? Does this mean we've bonded or something?"

A satisfied smile stretched her lips. "Just how many vampires have you slept with?"

His eyelids flickered down, then opened, and he was studying the marks on her neck. Not meeting her gaze. "You're the third. The other two were enjoyable, but no more than sex with a mortal."

"I knew something like it once before." She couldn't hide anything from him, not now, although she might regain the ability later. If she wanted to.

When he looked up, she saw and felt unmistakable anger in him. "What's wrong? Staking your claim? I wouldn't worry, the man is dead, long dead. Fifty years dead."

"How old are you?"

"A gentleman wouldn't ask."

"I'm not a gentleman, I'm a vampire. But if you don't want to tell me, that's okay."

She laughed, a movement that reminded her he was still embedded inside her. She moved her torso to relish the sensation. He was flaccid, but at her movement, she felt a response, a twitch and he grew a little firmer. "I'm a hundred and fifty years old. I was married once, to a mortal, and I loved him dearly. He's the one I felt that for, and it came after ten years with him, not on our first time together."

He lifted his hand and touched her chin, stroking with a gentleness that had been entirely absent a few moments before. "I'm sorry. I'd like to hear about him sometime, if you want to tell me."

She wanted to tell him, shocking herself with the thought. She'd never told anyone about her relationship with John, because she'd never wanted to.

No, whatever she wanted to do, it wasn't right. It couldn't be. Bad etiquette or something like that. Instead, she smiled. "How does it feel to be a boy toy?"

He rolled off her on to his back and howled with laughter. She smiled, then joined in, the release delicious after the day and the fraught, but thrilling, sex. Somehow, it brought them closer.

Still smiling he turned his head and reached for her. She went before she thought about it, curling into his arms as if she'd done it many times before. "It feels fine," he murmured softly. "Just fine."

They held each other, hands at rest on sweat-slicked flesh. "So tell me," he said. "Where do we go from here?"

Chapter Five

Dressed in his polyester suit and shirt, his new device safely injected under the skin of his forearm, Andreas felt distinctly out of place in the expensive restaurant, where he'd arranged to meet Cristos. This was not one of the places Cristos preferred to frequent, which were usually discreet, with good food.

He sat in a fashionable, loud restaurant with paparazzi gathered outside the door, a place where people went to be seen. Andreas hadn't realized how important appearance and natural arrogance was for ingress into these places.

First, he'd had to fight his way through the crowd, none of whom seemed to understand he had a right to be there. Then the uniformed man on the door stopped him, and forced him to wait while he checked his name against a list before reluctantly allowing him through.

A long bar ran down one side of the room, with white linen-covered tables on the other side, mostly set for two or four people. Clear glasses glinted against the bright light over their heads, and the cacophony swelled as he entered. Nothing to do with him, but from the bright flashes behind him, Andreas guessed a Celebrity followed him into the restaurant.

A waiter, dressed much as he was but without a jacket, hastily led him to a table in the center of the room, where Cristos waited. Although Cristos had risen to his feet to greet Andreas, he didn't shake his hand. Andreas glanced behind him. The man behind him was a rock star, he guessed, from the low slung leather pants and carefully ripped t-shirt. He exchanged a glance with the man, only mildly surprised to discover he was a shape-shifter. The flash of recognition and greeting was so swift he nearly missed it, because it wasn't for him. It was between the rock star and the man waiting to greet him.

Cristos knew everybody. He exchanged a brief greeting with the celebrity.

Including Andreas Constant. He nodded and motioned to the seat opposite his. Andreas returned the nod of greeting and sat down. A waiter bustled over and handed them two huge menus. Cristos waved his away. "We'll start with the mushrooms and go on to the salmon. Thank you."

Okay for you?

Anything. I doubt I'll get as far as the main course.

"So what's this about?" Cristos demanded, as the wine waiter arrived with a white wine bottle cradled in a silver case. Beads of condensation oozed down the side of the bottle, and when he poured a taster, Cristos indicated he should fill both glasses.

"I thought we should try a reconciliation. We've known each other too long to fight, and we work for the same ends." *They're sending someone in.*

"You want to come back to the Department?" I know?

They paused when the waiter arrived with their starter course. It looked more like an architectural assembly than food, something built by a child with a construction kit. "What the hell is this?"

The waiter shot him a startled look, but left after Cristos jerked his head for him to leave. *God, I hate this place!* "It's easy to see you don't keep up with the latest trends in eating."

"What's to keep up? Food is food." He found what he supposed to be a mushroom,

heavily disguised as a piece of roofing tile. It tasted fine, though. *A bit bland, this food.*

That's the way the customers like it. No garlic to taint the breath, no spices to burn the throat. They can pose and eat.

Well this vampire likes a touch of garlic with his meal.

Stop grumbling, boy.

This reminder of his youth nearly made him smile, but he forced it back. That wasn't why they were here, sitting under what amounted to a spotlight in full view of anyone who cared to look. He ate another mushroom. "Yes, I want to come back to the Department. I didn't do anything wrong, did I?"

"No, but you were a dead weight. I don't carry dead weight."

That was true enough. Cristos had no patience with clock-watchers and got rid of them at the earliest opportunity. This well-known intolerance had much to do with the construction of Andreas's cover for this job. "I'll do better. I'll smash all my watches."

"What's wrong with the DIB?"

"Everybody in the Company hates us. We interfere, and I don't like being disliked."

Since when did that ever bother you, Andreas? The teasing note sounded at odds with the disapproving, slightly louder than usual, tone of Cristos's speech. "I want to see results before I have you back. What have you done?"

While Andreas recited the unclassified aspects of his job, the conversation for real began. *I need more of those communication defeater things. Nancy Carragher and Roz Templeton need them, too. Roz is being transferred to Department 57.*

I know. I signed the acceptance this morning. She's supposed to be a medium level security agent.

She is. She's to discover everything she can about the Department. You're supposed to be passing secrets to the Russians about Afghanistan.

They're clutching at straws. Everyone at director level knows the source of that particular leak. They hardly noticed the waiter removing their starters and replacing the plates with another architectural construction, this time more like something Frank Lloyd Wright might create. Andreas eyed his plateful suspiciously. "The latest trend in food technology, I presume."

"You presume right." Cristos picked up his glass and took a sip of wine before turning to his food. His regard was distinctly jaded, but he sounded enthusiastic when he said; "I taught you about good food, boy." *And this isn't it.*

I noticed that. I'm posing as Roz's lover, living in her apartment. I'm supposed to be her contact between you and the DIB. She's vampire, and her family sent her to find out what happened last year in San Francisco.

And extract revenge, if I know the Gardiners. Cristos took his time chewing the small bite he took. *Let's hurry this along. I really don't want to eat much more of this stuff.* He took another sip of wine.

Andreas tasted his food. Cristos wasn't wrong. This food was of the 'look pretty but taste of nothing' variety. Probably assembled in advance and microwaved to bring to the table. *The Gardiners will want to kill everyone involved, won't they? Vampire justice.*

Yes. And the Department wants them alive. We need them alive to tell us what they know. So while we seem to be on the same side, we need to get to the perps before they do.

Oh, right. Andreas pushed a piece of unidentifiable food aside and found a piece of fish. *So are we negotiating with them, or just in a race to get there first?*

I think the race wins. You can't negotiate with a vamp involved in a blood feud. A death for a death and all that.

You don't think they've let Roz and Nancy handle this on their own, do you?

Cristos smiled wickedly. *We're keeping the others busy. There are a couple of Gardiners in the city, and a few outside, but of course they can flash in if they're needed. You need to keep Roz busy.*

"No. Oh no." Andreas dropped his fork with a clatter. "What are you saying?" You want me to seduce her?

You've already done that.

Fury rose inside him. You're having me watched?

Cristos shook his head. I know you, Andreas. I've known you for most of your life. I can smell it, sense the difference in you.

Andreas took a few deep breaths, but he knew the impression of irritation helped their charade here today. Still, the intensity of his emotion took him by surprise. He'd known Roz for less than a year, and of that was in his undercover role. He would trust Cristos with his life, with no hesitation, and yet he'd instantly risen to support Roz.

Almost as if – no!

Cristos, is there such a thing as bonding, soul mates?

Cristos stared at Andreas and blinked, his grey eyes startled into opening wide. *Why do you ask?*

I just wondered.

Go with it, Andreas, at least for now. Let's deal with one thing at a time.

Probably why so many people referred to Cristos as enigmatic. He only answered the questions he wanted to.

Cristos picked at his food. *Time we brought this charade to a conclusion. We'll take care of Roz for you and give you a few documents you can take in to Knox.*

Do you trust him?

About as far as the other side of the room. He's a Company man, through and through. Our kind of out of the box thinking doesn't suit him.

There's a traitor in the Department.

We know a few, we keep them in place because we know who they are. If we get rid of them, they'll only send more.

Andreas picked up his wine and took a sip before putting it down again. *Why did you teach me to appreciate good wine, then bring me to a place like this?*

Cristos chuckled. *"This is a place where people want to be seen. I'll bet more ends up in the trash than ever gets eaten. I thought you'd like it, Constant. You've always wanted to be part of the celebrity set."*

"Oh yeah."

Tell me about the traitor.

Andreas suppressed a sigh. *He-or she-gave information about an operation I wasn't a part of. They have Vencel Takasc, Svetlana Yevchenko, Fabrice Germain, Deverell Wyvern and the Friedland brothers. That's Roz's mission. To find those people and discover what she can about them from inside the Department.*

How do you know they haven't made you?

I don't. But I'm vampire, Cristos, I can flash away if I need to. If they make me, I'm gone. I'm best staying where I am for now.

I tend to agree. Who are the personnel on this mission?

Roz, Nancy Carragher and her fiancé Don Harris. He's a mortal.

We know about him. He's on the list of people requesting vampire donors.

A very long list. One I'm not intending to make any shorter.

People who were on the vampire donor list were like people waiting for a vital organ. They had to be in the right place at the right time, and lucky.

Okay, I'll do some research. Stand by. You can communicate freely now, those devices work very well, so that should speed your work up. I'm sending someone in to join you, someone from the San Francisco office. She's a computer geek, so she'll be able to ransack the DIB's system without anyone discovering her.

Andreas sighed in relief. He could scan everyone in the office without fear of detection. The terrible restrictions imposed after the discovery of the technology last year had been hard on every Talent. *Are you spreading those blocking devices around?*

As fast as we can. They're not expensive, and until we find the source of the technology and eliminate it, they work well. We have to neutralize the source, in case they make other developments. I'm low security at the DIB. There are so many places I can't go. It's driving me crazy.

You're spoiled. Andreas was anything but spoiled, and Cristos knew it. Having a high security rating went hand in hand with dangerous, life-threatening assignments. Andreas had seen his share and had shirked none of them.

What did Fabrice read the other night, from our attackers?

A pause before Cristos replied. *A slight complication. Come to the meeting, if you can. Otherwise I'll tell Roz to brief you.*

That meant it was too complex for him to explain now. It was time to go.

In accordance with the scenario Fabrice had told him about at their last meeting, Andreas stood up and flung his napkin down. "You won't take me back and you won't let me develop my career!"

Voices around them stilled and faces turned in their direction. Cristos played his part. "You're not trustworthy. You just get by, you don't do anything that will involve effort, or real work. I don't want you back."

"But you're more than my boss!" Andreas let a whining tone creep into his words, and forced his eyes wide open to increase the puppy dog look. A spoiled child, complaining to his parent.

"I took you in when you needed someone, but I don't have to like the person you've become. Time I threw you out of the nest." Cristos leaned back in his chair, staring up into Andreas's face with every sign of superior indifference, his eyes half-lidded, a taunting smile curving his lips. "Come to dinner, but don't come work for me. I won't have you."

With a roar of fury, Andreas pushed his chair out of the way so it clattered to the floor. He turned his back and strode out the restaurant, real pain throbbing behind his temples, ignoring the flashes that meant the paparazzi had caught him on film, just in case he was 'Someone.' He trusted Cristos to get rid of the images. He was truly upset.

Cristos meant more to him than anyone else in the world, and he'd just been publicly humiliated. Farce or not, it still hurt. Not that he was about to tell anyone. He slammed down his mental shields, denying anyone entrance.

Cristos would understand. He always had.

Chapter Six

"Is something wrong? Would you like to sleep somewhere else?" Roz walked to Andreas across her bedroom floor, savoring the cool wood under her toes, but her mind was with him. Since he'd got back from his meeting, he'd been quiet, uncommunicative, his thoughts closed to her. Perhaps he didn't want this closeness, maybe he needed to keep the operation separate from his feelings.

She wished she'd known earlier, before the madness, before the frantic lovemaking. Before she'd made herself vulnerable to him.

He blinked and shook his head. "No, it's not you, not us, I mean."

She sensed she'd intruded where he wasn't yet ready to accept her. "It doesn't matter. I shouldn't have asked."

She would have turned away, but he put a gentle hand on her shoulder and drew her closer. When he looked down into her eyes, she saw sadness, an edge of bitterness. "It's stupid really. But Cristos is more than my boss. He found me. He was my guardian. He looked after me when I was a kid with nobody."

A flash of shock pierced her at the realization. Cristos was the eternal enigma and she happened on one man who might know more than most. Not that she'd know what to do with the information, if he told her. "So why did he send you on this assignment?"

He smiled, but it didn't dispel the sadness in his eyes. "Because it was more believable that way. I didn't live up to his expectations as an agent, so he had me transferred, instead of firing my ass. We played out a farce today, for anyone who cared to watch. I asked him to take me back, he refused, I stormed out."

"What really happened?"

He glanced away, then back at her, raising his hand to touch her hair, as though it gave him comfort. She leaned into his touch. "I told him about you. He told me he's sending someone in, a shifter who's also a geek. She should be able to ransack the computer system to complete the operation and then we can get out of there."

Lifting her hand, she slid it around his waist, but didn't draw any closer to him. Touching was enough, for now. "So why so sad?"

His smile was warmer now. "I told you it was stupid. It felt real, that's all. Cristos found me wild on the streets, caught me when I tried to take blood off him, knocked aside the mental spell I'd put on him as though it didn't exist. I had no personal memories. If I'd had a sigil to show where I belonged, someone had erased it. I knew how to eat, how to steal, how to take blood. The Department took me in, sheltered me, and Cristos took me into his home, although he didn't have to do that. Where I expected to find more condemnation, more people to repudiate me, I found kindness and understanding. They stopped me from becoming an animal, and Cristos stopped me from becoming a brute. They studied me, thought I was about fourteen, just matured as a vampire. That could be why whoever it was abandoned me on the streets of New York."

"Didn't they look?" What she heard appalled her. Vampires needed family contacts. To manage without them was unthinkable. But Andreas had done it, and made a life out of nothing.

"Yeah, they looked. I had a Midwest accent, I was about fourteen, my education was average. I didn't know any vampire ways, none of the rituals. None of the family

names meant anything to me, but they thought I was brought up outside the community. Most likely, I'm a half-breed. A dhampir, some people call them."

"Nuts to that." His pain hurt her as if it were her own. The soft, matter-of-fact voice explaining such agony hit her harder than an angst-ridden recital would have done. "There's no such thing. You're either vampire or you're not. If only one of your parents was a vampire, then the chance of you becoming one was fifty-fifty. You're a vampire." She moved closer, and ran her hands up his back, feeling the stiff muscles caused by tension. "Was that why you were abandoned, do you think?"

"Probably." He pressed a gentle kiss against her hair, and she felt him relax a little bit, the knotted muscles in his back loosen. "But whoever abandoned me knew how to not only block my memories, but wipe them clean. And only my personal memories. My knowledge was left intact. I could read, I could write, I could do math. I could keep myself alive. But I had no name, no memories."

"I've never heard of that happening before. Blocking or destroying memories leaves scars."

"I have scars. I've put new memories over the top. Cristos named me, or rather, he chose the name and asked me if I liked it." His sudden grin disarmed her. "I did. Not many people get to choose their own name."

She swallowed. How had he survived? Ever since Talents had decided to keep hidden, a thousand years ago and more, vampires had depended on family support, so most found going without it unthinkable. Literally unthinkable. It said a lot for Andreas's courage, his determination, that he'd come through this as well as he had. Not only survived, but made a career for himself. "So Cristos brought you up?"

He smiled, and this time she saw genuine warmth. "Yes, he did. He fostered me for a couple of years with a vampire family, who taught me their ways, but they had no fondness for me so Cristos took me back. That's when I learned how to flash, and developed my Psi talents. I went to a good school, left and decided to become an agent."

"Because of Cristos?"

"Yeah. He set a good example, showed me how you can serve your country and retain your integrity. It starts inside." He picked up her hand and pressed it against his heart.

Her eyebrows went up. "Not family? No, I'm sorry, that was stupid. I'm just so used to putting the family first." She paused, enjoying his warmth against her hand. He radiated heat, warmer than a normal vampire. Perhaps he did have a human parent, and this was some kind of legacy. She thanked his unknown parent for that, but not for anything else.

The human parent must have known his or her partner was a vampire, surely. And vampire fertility was so low that they cherished every child. "It's unthinkable," she murmured.

"What is?"

"That anyone would abandon a vampire child. Your vampire parent would have given you up for adoption if he or she didn't want you. There wouldn't have been a lack of adoptive parents. It's every vampire couple's dream, failing a child of their own."

"Almost every couple. Have you thought that it might have been my mother who was the human half, and she was raped? Not every vampire is a good guy, you know. Perhaps she didn't realize I'd turn vampire at puberty, perhaps when I grew fangs she believed all the vampire myths and turned me out. Though that doesn't completely explain how she knew how to strip my memories"

He spoke so quietly she almost missed the tremor in his voice. Sorrow filled her heart, mixed with wonder, that he should let her in so far. "You trust me that much?"

When he turned his head and looked at her, his eyes glistened brightly. "I trust you. I know you. Better than you know me after my charade as the office wolf. I do like women and I don't stay with them for long. Usually. But I treat them better than my cover story would tell you. I'm honest."

"Will you be honest with me?" She couldn't tear her gaze away from his. He could see all her vulnerability, her fear of commitment, her desire to be on her own. If he couldn't see it in her eyes, he could feel it in her mind. Once linked the way they had connected last night, the barriers were almost impossible to erect.

"Yes, I promise I'll be honest with you. Last night I wanted you beyond reason, beyond thought. It shouldn't have happened, you know that?"

She swallowed back her concerns. "Yes, I know. We're working a case. The last thing we should do is get personally involved."

He grimaced, but even that slight twist of his lips made her want to touch them, and smooth out the frown marring his forehead. That wasn't sex, that was caring. It worried her. "Then we'll agree not to get involved."

He laughed and drew her closer. "If only it were that easy."

If only. She feared she felt more for him than a work colleague or a casual lover. "I don't see how I could think anything else. I thought I knew you. I read you."

"You read what I wanted you to read. You're not as highly trained as I am."

"I'm older than you, I've had more practice. How do you know you're more highly trained?"

His arm around her made her feel safe. She hadn't felt that way for a long time. "I'm a field agent, Roz. All the senses I possess, including the Psi ones, are honed towards that. Unlike my DIB profile, my security clearance is very high, because I need it for my job. Have you always worked for the CIA? Are you undercover, too?"

She sighed against his chest. "No. No, I'm not, at least, not until my family asked me to look for some evidence of my dead cousins."

His tone sharpened. "The two Gardiners who died? They were your cousins?"

"Kind of. When you're a member of a family, anyone you're not directly related to is your 'cousin.' "

"Did you know either of them?"

She couldn't keep the emotion out of her voice. "I knew them both. One was a particular friend."

He hesitated, but then asked the question she knew he had to ask her. "How particular?"

"We were lovers."

He pushed her away, and she marveled at the hurt expression on his face. Also at her instinctive response to go back to him. What was wrong with her? She took lovers when she felt the need and walked away without a backwards glance. She'd sworn not to get involved with anyone else again. Once was enough.

Before she could move away from him, he pulled her back, and this time his arms imprisoned her firmly. "That was childish, I'm sorry. I don't understand my reactions to you. We can be lovers, can't we? I've never been particularly possessive, so I'm sure it's just instinctive." Claiming a lover was bad etiquette in vampire society, until the lover showed she wanted more. The behavior was ingrained into her soul. She wondered if it was as ingrained into his.

That was the problem. Instinct. It told her to burrow close, to hold him as tightly as he held her, but it wouldn't do. He was right, she didn't know him. "Bill was a good man. I wasn't in love with him, but we had a good relationship. When Neville disappeared, he went after him, didn't think once about his own safety. They took him too, and we found their bodies later, where they'd been dumped." This time his arms didn't seem imprisoning. They seemed comforting. She hadn't needed protection or comforting for a long time. "I volunteered but they would have asked me anyway. I've worked at the DIB for a couple of years and when the trails they found, precious few that they were, led back there, they would have asked Nancy and me to help."

As though he sensed her reticence, he drew back a little and gave her a smile, the kind of smile he might give a friend he was fond of.

"I like my job, and so does Nancy. I didn't want to be some kind of vampire princess, so I've made my own life."

"They want you to get inside Department 57, don't they? Your family, I mean."

She swallowed. There wasn't a chance she could hide that from him. "Yes. We know the Department was hit, and that it was directly involved in destroying the lab that experimented on Bill and Neville. We didn't find a lot afterwards, but from what Bill and Neville left behind, we know the Department was involved."

She sensed his withdrawal, rather than saw it, and then his muscles tensed and he drew back physically, holding her away from him so he could study her properly. "What did they leave? We couldn't trace where they'd been staying before the lab kidnapped them. We could have used that information."

"We used it anyway. Nothing but a few memos, which implicated Department 57 and the DIB. Separate documents, so it seemed the two departments were working independently."

He reached the conclusion quicker than she'd thought he would. "So you were conveniently situated in the DIB. Who is conveniently situated in Department 57?"

For a full minute Roz said nothing but let him draw his own conclusions. Eventually the dark eyes boring into hers grew uncomfortably keen, and she glanced away. "You know who. Me. I'm working for the Gardiners as well as helping you. What did you expect?"

He dropped his arms, leaving her standing alone. "Who else?" She'd never heard this tone before, hard and unyielding. The casual laziness of the office worker, the gentleness and passion of the lover, but not this inflexible, determined tone.

If he was the agent he claimed, he'd be tough. This voice belonged to the real Andreas, not the one he'd let everyone in the DIB see up to now.

He had a few things to learn about her, too. "Just me."

"So who is feeding Department 57 information to the DIB?"

How had she ever thought his eyes were soft! Had she ever seen passion there? She couldn't believe it looking at him now. "I don't know that, I swear it. We'd like to know that, too."

She couldn't look away, however much she wanted to. His eyes held hers captive, until he closed them. "I don't want to hurt you, but I have to know. Please, Roz. What's the problem in telling me?"

She spun away, taking the steps to put as much distance between them as she could,

folding her arms under her breasts, careful to look away, avoiding eye contact. While she knew he could read her from where she was, without looking at her, her reaction was instinctive. The more effective action was to close herself to him, but she couldn't.

He had a point. Roz had never questioned her family before, never needed to. They'd always been there for her, always supported her, but she had taken an oath when she entered Government service. Bill had warned her against taking it, explaining that the loyalty for her family could at times conflict with loyalty to her country, but she'd emigrated to the States after John's death, and loved it. She owed the USA a lot, and this was payback time.

"Roz, you're not betraying anybody. The Department looks after Talents first, the country second. That's why so many of us aren't full time agents, but consultants. I can feel your dilemma, I know what you're thinking, because I've felt it too. So far I haven't had to choose, but I think, soon, I might have to. This isn't the time."

"How do I know? What would you do if you found a traitor in the Department? You know the law of Talents—never tell, never compel. That's all we have to do. So what if a Talent is talking to mortals, letting our secrets go?"

"They die."

She swallowed. She knew it, but wondered if he did, or how seriously he took the laws. "So why are Talents working for Cristos? Who sanctioned *him*?"

She could hardly believe it when a low chuckle filled the room. He was laughing!

Whirling on her heel, she faced him directly, furious that he could take her concerns so lightly. "Cristos is mortal, isn't he? And there's no record of him ever receiving any sanction to receive all this information. How can Talents work for him?"

The chuckle stopped, although the smile remained, the one-sided quirk of the mouth that made her hot. Not that she should be thinking of that at a time like this. Suppressing her undeniable desire for this man, Roz forced a frown. Charm could only get him so far.

"Roz, he's not mortal. Just because we don't know precisely what he is doesn't mean he isn't a Talent. No one has seen him shapeshift, but that doesn't mean he's not a shifter. No one has seen him take blood, but that doesn't mean he doesn't feed. Current rumor has it that he's a Sorcerer, though he's not a Virgin Sorcerer, that I know for sure. However, some Sorcerers retain their power, and his is awesome. I've seen—well, I've seen enough to know he isn't mortal."

She frowned. "Why?"

"Why doesn't he say what he is? He says it's to avoid favoritism. Cristos doesn't want any group to have an advantage over the other. He puts us into teams, shifters with vamps, with Sorcerers, so we can maximize our talents."

Andreas took a step towards her, but she took one back, maintaining the distance between them. "Let me think about this." She swallowed, studying his face. He gazed back at her and too late, she realized he'd reinstated eye contact. But he didn't try to probe her, only gazed at her, melancholy shading his dark eyes.

"You're going in undercover tomorrow. On your own. If I weren't sure you were going to be safer there, I wouldn't let you go."

A tide of fury rose in her, one she didn't even attempt to suppress. She put her hands on her hips, and pushed her chin at him. "Let me go? Buster, I've been in worse situations than this, worse than you know. I lived in London in the middle of the Blitz, I've spent time in Korea, nursing the wounded. You think because I look like this I'm helpless? I'm a vampire in full possession of my powers. Which is more than you are!"

He strode across the room faster than she could move, and swept her up into his arms. "And you're going in during the day. What training have you done for daywalking?"

If she struggled, all she'd do would be to embarrass herself. His strength easily equaled hers, and probably surpassed it. She could flash, but that would be tacky. She would if she had to, tacky or not. "A little kick boxing. Target practice."

"More than the standard required by the Company?" His mouth flattened again. This close she could smell him, that indefinable odor, part pine, part citrus, mixed with something else she couldn't identify, that now spelled 'Andreas' to her. It didn't help her concentrate.

"Some."

He gripped her shoulders and pushed her slightly away from him so he could meet her eyes. "I promise I won't enter your mind if you don't want me to. Please, Roz, listen to me. I usually operate at night, because that's when vampires come into their full strength, but I'm almost as strong during the daytime. I have to be. I've practiced several martial arts, including karate and kung-fu, I can shoot any firearm you put into my hands, I can handle explosives, fly a small plane or a helo. In short, I've had proper field agent training. Most vampires hide away during the day when they're vulnerable, and use their God-given powers. Why should they bother to do anything else? In full possession of their powers, they're stronger than any mortal. But I chose a different career, one that needs me to be on guard twenty-four hours a day. Can you say the same?" When she opened her mouth to answer, he covered her lips with one gentle finger. "No, it's not fair for you to answer, I already know. That's why I worry. You're going into a place I regard as safe, with a man I'd trust with my life. Forgive me, Roz, I know I have no right to care about you, but I do. I just do."

He removed his fingers and replaced them with his lips. Gentle at first, but when she opened her mouth, he took possession, thrusting his tongue deep into her. She accepted him, responded by stroking the side of his tongue with hers, relishing his taste.

The madness took them both, again. Dimly, she thought she shouldn't be doing this, should be fighting harder, but she couldn't. Her body melted under his command. He tore his mouth from hers, and stared down at her, eyes glazed with passion. "Say no, Roz. I've just enough strength left to walk away, but only just." His expression changed slightly, and she felt his reservation in her mind, locked together as they were. "I've never been this scared before."

"Me too." She knew exactly how he felt. When they kissed, when they touched, nothing else mattered. They could have been sworn enemies and the result would have been the same. "I've never let my body take me over this much."

"Oh God!" He bent and took her mouth once more.

Slowly they moved to the bed, unbuttoning, unzipping, caressing. She had to feel his bare flesh under her hands, she *had* to. The touch of the hard muscles of his chest under her hands eased the need a little, but not enough. Never enough. She started on his pants.

She had to stop when he wanted to lift her top over her head, but her bra was no impediment to him. His sigh, when he cupped her bare breasts told her he felt the same tension as she did. Roz pushed her breasts into his hands, and felt the hard peaks of her nipples rub his palms. With a swift movement, he bent to take a nipple into his mouth and the wet, hot suctioning nearly brought her to climax.

This was wrong. She never got so hot, so fast.

Feverishly she touched him, loving the warm, smooth flesh under her hands, broken

on his chest by crisp, rough hairs. "I want you. I want you *now!*"

When she sat, she nearly fell on the floor, just catching the edge of the bed with her bottom. The only way to retain her balance was to lean back, so she did, taking him with her.

His sudden, glorious weight on her body was almost too much. He moved to the side and it took her a moment to realize he was kicking off his pants, which she hadn't been able to strip off him. She swept her hands down his body, the hip bones jutting briefly into her palms, then further down, where she curled her hands around his rigid erection.

He jerked away from her nipple, leaving a momentary chill, and reached for her shoulders, straightening his body so he leaned above her. For a fraught moment they stared at each other, eyes wide, pupils open, out of control.

"Take me inside you, Roz. Show me where to go."

His low purr, so unlike his usual musically fluid voice undid any intentions she might have and she led him, drew him along her wet cleft, to the entrance to her body. Enthralled by the sensation, she pulled his cock back and forth, experiencing the thrill again when his flesh caressed hers, along her, teasing her rigid clit, encouraging the slow beat of her pulse to quicken, strengthen, until she thought all the blood in her body had flooded there, to dampen and aid their joining.

She wouldn't let him thrust hard, although he pushed impatiently against her hands. She wanted to feel every inch of him, sliding deep inside her, uniting them mind, body and spirit.

He watched her, braced himself on his hands either side of her head and lifted his upper body away, so he could look down and watch as she guided him into her body.

At the same time, they let out a quiet sigh as he slid slowly deeper, until he was fully embedded in her. She slid her hands out from between them, around his hips to his ass, clutching it with wet fingers. He pulled out of her and joined them again, deep and slow, watching their pubic hair mingle, sharing the vision with her, because she couldn't see as clearly as he could.

His shaft emerged, glistening from their combined juices, only to slide back. Roz bit her lip, as he lifted his head and looked at her.

He was smiling. She'd seen him smile before, but never like this, a caress as intimate as anything he could have given her. "This is what we are," he whispered. "Roz, this is special. Whatever it is, it's special. You feel better than anyone else, you fit me better, I'm made for you."

Roz swallowed. She couldn't tell him, but this was the best since John, and she couldn't compare him to that, because he was an entirely different person, and the experience was a world away from this one.

So she smiled back and said, in all honesty, "Nothing has felt quite like this before. What is 'this,' Andreas? Why are we doing this?"

He lifted up and sank down again, and then out, and in, beginning to speed up. "Don't ask. Just enjoy."

It was good advice, the best she'd had all day. When he dropped to his elbows, so he could take her mouth in a ravishing kiss, she pushed her lower body up into his, tilting her hips to take as much of him as she could, lifting her legs to brace her feet on the bed, the better to take him, to—

To love him.

She couldn't think like that! Neither of them wanted that kind of arrangement. Sex was good, don't let it be more than that! Closing her eyes, she forced the unruly thought

away, right behind her most secure barrier, until she felt strong enough to deal with it. There was too much going on for that to happen, too.

She didn't think he'd caught her mental acceptance of the L word, because he seemed completely absorbed by her body, and as she stared at him, his eyes half lidded with passion, she let herself sink into the purely physical sensation of making love with him—of screwing him, fucking him, boinking—

"Boinking?" His eyes filled with amusement. "Call it what you want. I'm calling it making love."

"That's your prerogative."

"Let's see what you call it when I do—this!"

He drove hard into her, reaching in, pushing, urging her towards a climax she only dimly perceived. Relentlessly he invaded her again, then jerked out and thrust back, quickening his pace, varying the length and depth of his strokes until the warmth spread throughout her body. Sharp electric thrills filled her until she wasn't sure if she felt his reaction or hers, driving her hard towards a climax that sent her mindlessly soaring into unknown skies.

Chapter Seven

Department 57 was located in a popular shopping area of downtown Manhattan, in a blank, featureless office close to the headquarters of a major television company.

The legend in Langley was that the CIA, known to its inmates as the Company, didn't want a crackpot setup like Department 57 anywhere near its headquarters. Add to that the fact that many of the associates and consultants were foreign nationals, and the Company preferred to pretend the Department didn't exist and the distance left both parties happy. As long as Cristos justified his budget by developing enough communications devices for field agents, then arm's length was just fine, thank you.

But the situation had changed. Someone, somewhere in Langley was taking an interest in the Department. Violence against Talents had escalated. The Department was on alert.

Consequently, Roz not only had to produce her CIA credentials to get in, but subject herself to a mind scan. "You'll have a scan done later today for a retinal ID," the guard told her as she passed through the narrow channel leading to the entrance. "Then you can go through that way." With a jerk of his head, he indicated another channel through which several ordinary looking people were passing. If it wasn't for the tingle in all her nerve endings, indicating the presence of many Psi Talents, Roz wouldn't have given them a second glance.

Through the sliding glass doors, she approached the Information desk. A woman sat behind a switchboard, a PC at her elbow, the screen showing a personalized screensaver of Jon Bon Jovi. Roz allowed herself a moment to enjoy the eye candy, but she didn't have long. She passed the letter of introduction to the woman, who made a call. "Someone will be down for you directly. Please take a seat."

This place seemed so ordinary, Roz found it hard to believe that in this place, more Talents gathered than almost anywhere else in the world. The employees who passed her while she sat on the leather sofa waiting to be fetched seemed like ordinary office workers, perhaps a tad better dressed than the average, but apart from that, they were the same as all the other workers who thronged the streets of New York at this time of the morning. Except for that tingle when they passed her. She closed her mind to all but superficial contact. It wouldn't have been polite to close completely, the Psi equivalent of standing with her back to everyone.

"Ms. Templeton?"

Roz blinked. A woman, average height, average build, wearing a pair of fashionably styled spectacles and a smart blue skirt suit smiled at her. Roz didn't think she'd ever seen anyone with striped hair before, but she had now. Red and navy blue stripes, to be precise. "Y-yes," she stammered, scrambling to her feet, only just remembering to take her briefcase with her. Then she had to shift it to her left hand, when the woman held her hand out to shake.

Roz felt stupid, but when she probed the other woman's mind, she found this was a mortal. "I'm Diane Mortimer, Cristos's P.A. He's waiting for you. Would you like to come this way?"

Diane led Roz through a large office, divided in the center into cubicles, but the hum of light chatter filled the air, and an air of relaxation suffused the atmosphere. It took effort

to make an office like that, one that worked without the stress of overworked personnel. She knew from the reports she'd seen that Department 57 wasn't slacking in its assignments, and now she knew from Andreas how much work the Department did aside from the official requirements, she began to understand how important this place was to all Talents.

Doors led off the side opposite the large windows, and at the end of the long room were more doors. Diane took her through one of those, the center one in a set of three.

Nothing about this office looked any different to the ones she'd become familiar with since she arrived in New York, but the air tingled with awareness and the Psi senses that thronged here.

The tingling increased as she approached the door, and Diane opened it to let them both through

An ordinary boardroom, long table down the center, chairs ranged around it, bottled water and glasses in the middle. And a familiar scent, coming fresh to her nostrils, a sense of coming home.

She knew why before she saw him. Andreas, waiting by the door, dressed in silk and wool, dark red shirt and black pants, immaculately cut, looking confident, privileged and happy. None of the assets that showed when he worked at the DIB. Only then did she realize the extent of his acting skills. This Andreas was perfectly comfortable in his skin, powerful and assured. She had no doubt this was the real man. He smiled and held out his hand, and when she placed her own in it, led her forward. "This is Roz Templeton, Cristos."

"You're involved with her." The voice was crisp and dispassionate. It belonged to a middle-aged man of around six feet in height, with clear gray-blue eyes, dressed in a breathtakingly beautiful suit of charcoal gray. Everything about him was understated, from the well-cut, short silver hair to his polished black shoes. "You weren't expected to do that."

Andreas shrugged, the silk shirt molding to his shoulder muscles. "I don't always do what I'm expected to do, you know that. I wanted to be here to introduce you," he said, turning to her, his voice softening. "Just after you left this morning I realized it was important to me to be here, so I called in to the DIB, claiming a dentist appointment."

Despite her state of nervousness, Roz smiled, warmed by his concern.

"An unnecessary risk." Cristos's voice held an edge of admonition. "You know she's safe here."

"Yes," Andreas said, not taking his attention away from her. "But *she* doesn't know that."

He must have felt her nervousness that morning, even though she'd tried hard not to project it. An emotion she was used to, this fear of unknown places, but she'd never allowed it to stop her doing what she wanted to do, what was right for her. She'd emigrated across the Atlantic Ocean alone, begun a new life determinedly independent of her British family, and she was proud of herself for overcoming her natural reticence. Every well brought up Victorian miss had some of it, but it was hardly suitable for the twenty-first century.

She smiled, accepting the inevitable. "I'm fine now."

"Have you a little time to spare, Andreas?" Cristos broke in. "I'm briefing the team this morning, and you may as well sit in on it. There's some new information."

"Yes, I can do that. I'll go in to the DIB after lunch."

She grinned, remembering his excuse. "Some extensive dental work?"

He grinned back, and allowed his perfectly shaped, perfectly white teeth to show. His fangs were retracted into their tooth-buds and not available until the nighttime. "Something like that. But Andreas the goldbricker wouldn't hurry back to the office, would he?"

"A dentist appointment would make him take the morning off," she agreed.

Cristos cleared his throat and Roz blushed. Staring at the man who'd spent the last two nights with her wasn't the best way to start a new job. Crap.

She looked away hurriedly, ignoring Andreas's low chuckle.

The door opened to admit a couple, but unlike Roz and Andreas, they gave no indication of any personal entanglements from their body language. The girl was much too young, she would guess about sixteen or so, and the man she knew.

Fabrice Germain, the Virgin Sorcerer.

In the nightclub, she hadn't been close enough to see his eyes properly. Now she was. When he lifted his head, still smiling, and met her gaze, the sheer power in the startling blue irises knocked her back on her heels. This man was a human with awesome powers. He would live a mortal lifespan, but it was hard to believe that power that strong would last longer than seventy years without burning out the body that held it. Control must be incredibly difficult.

Yes it is. The voice whispered into the depths of her mind, and she knew she couldn't hold any barriers against this man. It would be pointless to try.

So she smiled, as though she was used to being in the presence of such legendary creatures, and turned her attention to the girl.

Who wasn't paying her any attention at all. Her aura vibrated, pulsed red and then she launched herself forward into Andreas' waiting arms. Suppressing her pang of jealousy with difficulty, Roz watched the encounter.

It soon became clear Andreas saw this girl as a sister, or a daughter, even. Realizing she didn't even know how old he was, Roz wondered if he was older than she, or even younger. A younger lover tickled her fancy. Not for the first time, either.

Andreas patted the girl's back, chuckling, and eased her away so he could look down into her face. "How have you been, Ellie?"

"Peachy," she answered. Dressed in jeans and a t-shirt with "Sexy grrl" emblazoned on the front, she looked like any healthy teenager Roz could have passed in the street. Except she wouldn't be here if she was. Vampires and shifters could look any age she chose, and if Ellie was at the beginning of a life, she would take on this persona. Pretty, with a slim figure verging on skinny, short, dark hair and brown eyes, Ellie seemed bursting with life and happiness. Just like a real teenager.

Andreas drew her away and glanced at Roz, an edge of anxiety in his expression. It warmed her, that slight worry, as though her opinion really mattered to him. "This is Ellie," he said, rather unnecessarily. "She's under my care for the time being. The same thing happened to her that happened to me."

A world of understanding passed between them, all in one sentence. Ellie was a vampire then, and one with no sigil. To be certain, Roz looked in the place where all sigils were engraved in a vampire's brain. Nothing, just a blank wall. Not even a scar.

"Laurie found her on the streets. That's Laurie Friedland, a Brit." The name meant nothing to her, although Andreas seemed to think it should. "A European footballer." The last footballer she'd taken any notice of was Stanley Matthews, and that was a lifetime ago. Oh yes, and the gorgeous David Beckham. Dredging her memory, she remembered another good-looking blond man whose posters had been all over the newsstands recently.

Yes, that was it. His name, Laurie Friedland. She had heard of him after all. "He's a Talent?" The most amazing people turned out to be Talents.

"Yes, he is." She knew why Andreas didn't tell her. Etiquette demanded that they introduce themselves, and what Talent they had. If they didn't want to ask, it wasn't polite to pry. Rather like asking a prisoner what he was in jail for. He'd tell you if he wanted you to know.

So Ellie was another vampire orphan. Before she'd met Andreas, she hadn't known they existed, apart from the families. Now she'd met two. "Ellie Smith," Andreas said, stepping back. "Meet Roz Templeton."

"Vampire," Roz added, naming her Talent for the newcomers. "Pleased to meet you, Ellie."

Ellie regarded her frankly, studying her with interest, so Roz noticed when the shadow fell over her eyes. Precisely at the moment when Andreas moved closer and touched Roz's hand, murmuring, "You okay?"

"Fine," she managed, maintaining her smile.

Ellie's smile didn't waver, but her gaze sharpened. "Hey, you coming to Jenna's exhibition tonight?"

When Andreas raised his brow, she flung her hands in the air in a gesture of exasperation. "You know, my friend Jenna! We work at the same gallery."

Andreas frowned. "You work? What about school?"

"Part time, you idiot!" Ellie didn't seem to have the respect for Andreas she should have for a father figure. Perhaps she saw him more as an elder brother. "Jenna's got her first exhibition tonight. The gallery finally took a chance on her. Oh you have to come, please!"

"Of course I will." He glanced down at Roz. "Do you want to come?"

She'd rather have him to herself, but she couldn't come between Andreas and this girl. Ellie obviously cared for him a great deal, and she could feel the warmth in Andreas's mind when he looked at her. No, she wasn't jealous. Truly she wasn't. "Sure."

Another vampire entered the room. Roz recognized what he was immediately. This man was an ancient. Power vibrated from him, rigidly held in check, but it surrounded him with a magnetism she found it difficult to resist. Automatically she searched for his sigil, and found it. He was a Derubeis. Not a family she was very familiar with. They were few in number, compared to the Gardiners, and lived quietly, for the most part. He smiled, a mere quirk of his finely chiseled mouth, and gave her a courtly bow that had no mockery about it. An old-fashioned gesture meant sincerely. He must recognize her age, and what she was used to, a subtle touch she appreciated. "Virgilio Derubeis, vampire," he said.

Automatically Roz responded. "Ruby Gardiner, vampire of the Gardiner family."

The jolt next to her startled her, so spellbinding did she find Virgilio Derubeis. Oh crap, she'd used her birth name. She shook her head. "That is, I use Roz these days. Ruby is too old fashioned."

"I like it," Andreas purred, fully recovered now. "I might keep it as a pet name."

"No." She couldn't hide her jolt of pain from him. John had called her that, and after his death, she swore no other man would. This wasn't the time to explain. "I left that name behind. I'm not sure why I used it just then."

Except that Virgilio was nearer her age than anyone else in the room, except, perhaps, for Cristos, who she couldn't read at all.

"What is it?"

"Nothing." She didn't know Andreas well enough to tell him all her secrets. She might be sleeping with him, but she wasn't deeply involved.

A little voice inside, nothing to do with anyone but herself mocked her. *Liar!*

"You are right," Virgilio said. "I go by the name Virgil these days, which happens to be my birth name, but I have been James and even Frederick in the past. It is good to move on. Those that don't move on stay still." An ancient vampire saying, reminding them that they had little choice but to move with the times.

Through the open door came another man, one she recognized instantly. She'd even been to one of his shows. Shorter than the towering Virgil, but with a whipcord lean body that proclaimed the athlete, this man needed no introduction. "Vencel," she murmured. She'd seen his picture on billboards around the city.

The man bowed, bestowing a charming smile on her. "My full name is Vencel Takasc, Sorcerer. I am pleased to meet you, Roz Templeton."

Vencel's magic shows were legendary. Now she knew why.

He smiled and shook his head. "Every Talent thinks what you are thinking now, but it is not true. I do not use my powers during my shows. What you see is genuine trickery." He made a pass in the air and produced a silk scarf, walking around the table to her and presenting it with a flourish.

"Do you carry them around with you all the time?" she asked, fascinated by the elegant display.

He smiled, and his green eyes twinkled. "Sometimes. It depends on the clothes I put on in the morning and the mood I wake up in."

He turned to Andreas, and shook his hand warmly. "It is good to see you, my friend."

"How's Ilona?"

A shadow passed across the Sorcerer's sharp cut features. "She is well, although she misses Istvan. We both do." He glanced at Roz, and immediately his bright eyes mesmerized her, eyes the color of emeralds. "Ilona is my sister, and Istvan was her husband. He was killed last year, mugged in the street, or so the police told us. Ilona was pregnant, and nearly lost the baby, but we have little Istvan with us now, and he is a joy to us both."

She remembered something of the story, now he reminded her. Because Vencel was a celebrity, the media thought it their right to pry into every aspect of his life. His sister's husband's death had been headlines when it happened. "You have doubts about the mugging story?"

"Yes, I do, though I have no proof."

"You will have, if proof there is. I've promised you Vencel. We will look into it." Cristos's clear voice cut through the murmur of friendly chatter. "But for now we have another case. Shall we sit down?"

Andreas held her chair for her and she sat down before she remembered it wasn't the usual way for a man to behave these days. She flashed a warning look at him as he sat beside her, but he gave her a sweet smile.

Why did you do that? Suspicions filled her mind. Did he want to know how old she was? He only had to ask.

I wanted to. It seemed right. We have some old-fashioned ways here sometimes, which isn't surprising as some of us are older than we look.

Do you want to know how old I am?

Only if you want to tell me.

She turned to face him directly. "I'm a hundred and fifty years old."

She expected repulsion, disgust or perhaps merely surprise. What she received was a gentle smile. "I guessed something like that. Things you do, things you say."

She looked away, blushing scarlet. "I thought I moved with the times pretty well."

"You grow or you die," he said. Living in the past was something some vampires were very good at doing, but the most successful accepted change and moved with it. She felt his hand, warm on hers. *I like it*, he said, deep into her mind, in a place only she had ever been before.

Another voice, not Andreas. "I'm thirty years old." Fabrice. She heard the echo in her mind of a powerful Sorcerer.

"I'm thirty five." The other Sorcerer, Vencel.

"Five hundred." That was the vampire.

Her head whipped around in shock. Vampires usually lived for five or six hundred years. Ancients rarely moved among others, they preferred to retire and live in quiet seclusion somewhere. Yet here was this vital, aware man living a full life in the middle of modern New York. Perhaps Cristos had called him in especially for this case.

As though he heard her private thoughts, which he shouldn't have done, because she'd locked all but the superficial away, he answered her. "I live here, and I have apartments in other cities in the world. I do not like country living. I belong to a family that seems to have made an art of longevity, but not deliberately. We live longer, and if we take a spouse, their lifespan expands to ours."

Roz had heard of such a thing, but hadn't come across one of the families who lived longer than others before. She thought it was a legend. Had, until this moment.

"The woman I'm sending in to the DIB is older than Virgil," Cristos cut in. "She'll introduce herself, no doubt. I'll get to her in due course."

He got to his feet, and switched on the laptop that lay open on the desk before him. At the touch of a switch on a panel at his end of the table, the lights went out.

Roz had a feeling of *déjà vu*. She'd been in another building, receiving a similar briefing. Then the similarity ended, because Cristos switched on a device about the size of a TV remote, which stood on its end next to the laptop, and a glittering stream of lights projected across the center of the table, resolving into pictures.

She saw an image of the DIB building, but she could see Virgil's ghostly face beyond it. She reminded herself that this was a research facility, so modern technology shouldn't be so unexpected, and forced herself to concentrate.

"This is the Department of Internal Business," Cristos told them. "Roz works there, or did until she was transferred here, and Andreas is undercover there. So far, only Fabrice knows about this operation, but it's time I expanded it. We need results, people, and we need them fast."

At the touch of a button, the picture changed, and the interior of the DIB office flashed up. "I have detailed plans for all of you. Ladies and gentlemen, there is a traitor in our Department, and all the signs point to someone in the DIB. That's what Andreas has been doing there for the last six months, but he hasn't found a trace of the traitor. So I'm beginning to wonder if the trail isn't false." He flashed another picture. A perky blond girl, her hair cut into a jagged bob in the latest style, her clothes cutting-edge fashion. "This is Candy Ireton. She's Roz's replacement. Some of you will know her, but some will not. Until now, she worked exclusively for our San Francisco branch. That's why I brought her here. Andreas assures me the personnel records of Department 57 are uncompromised, and Candy isn't on the main computer at Langley."

"Another consultant."

Cristos chuckled. "Oh no. Candy's a full agent, but her security would be compromised if she were put on any mainframe networked computer."

Andreas's hand tightened around Roz's. "It's so serious you're bringing an operative in from black ops?"

"Kind of. Candy also wants to come home." That was one of the terms used for field agents who tired of putting their lives on the line every day, or who burned out on the job, but could still be of vital use to the Company. "This is her transition. After this operation, we can bring her in. It will be her bridge. She's a Talent, and very good at what she does. I've also brought her in here because she is a computer geek. What she doesn't know isn't worth knowing. So she will break into the DIB's computers, into the most secure level, and Andreas will cover her."

That meant protecting her. Would he have to pretend to take an interest in Candy? A personal interest? Roz already knew the answer. The office wolf would certainly take an interest in someone as smart as Candy looked to be. And it would help them to stay close. The fact that Andreas and Roz had hooked up would be secondary to a man as sleazy as Andreas had made himself out to be in his cover.

What surprised Roz was the pang of sheer jealousy that shot through her body. When had Andreas turned from being a good, though casual, lover to something more?

The projection faded and Cristos touched the switch that brought the lights back up.

"There is a traitor in Department 57, ladies and gentlemen. And the only people you can trust are the people in this room."

Chapter Eight

When he felt Roz slip her hand out of his, Andreas sighed, and wasn't entirely surprised when her shutters went down and closed him out. Now wasn't the time to make things clearer, but he wished he could. He liked Roz, even though he didn't yet trust her completely. He knew she was hiding things from him, there were doors in her mind she hadn't yet opened to him, although he'd shown her all of his, if she wanted to read him. He hadn't survived in the field by trusting anyone, even the women he'd associated with, and old habits came up to remind him that he didn't know her well, if at all, and he had to be on guard.

No doubt that was the reason she'd closed her mind to him. She didn't trust him, either.

A traitor was the only thing that made sense. Bernard Knox knew far too much, and suspected more. Not only that, but events last year had made him more than uneasy.

So Cristos's next words didn't surprise him. "Last year, in San Francisco, our branch of the Department there was destroyed by airborne rockets and mortars. However, after the explosion we discovered another device. This one had been detonated *inside* the Department. We hadn't employed any outsiders for a while, no engineers, decorators, nothing. A short time later, we discovered the laboratory that captured and tortured several Talents, and closed it down. Although the computers were set to self-destruct, we salvaged enough data to show us a trail back to the CIA. The DIB, to be precise." He sighed and gazed around the room, looking at each listener closely. "It's the perfect cover. The DIB is supposed to investigate other departments, conduct audits of their operations, carry reports back to Langley. So any DIB activity inside other departments is to be expected. The fact that they could contain Trojans to infect computers may also be part of the job. But not to discover facts they had no right knowing. We followed the leak. Now the DIB is investigating *us*."

He paused, and fixed Roz with a knowing stare. "The deputy director there, Bernard Knox, has given Roz Templeton instructions to report back to him, and only to him. Roz is a spy."

Although he knew, he still felt an instant of impulse when he heard the words. Worse still, he knew she felt it, because of their link. He wanted to reach for her, make it better, apologize, but that would demonstrate a weakness in a place she had to create an image of strength and independence. These agents were the best of their kind, and she needed to be an equal to them. "When did you report back?" he asked, his voice dull.

"This morning."

"What did you say?"

She grimaced. "I told him I was coming here this morning for a briefing."

"What will you tell him when you report back?"

She turned and faced him, ignoring the silent faces turned towards them. The stillness was almost palpable. "I will tell him that it's difficult to discover anything. If he wants me back, I will ask Cristos to provide me with a few false leads. Andreas, first above everything is my loyalty to my kind and my family. We wouldn't have survived so long, hidden in plain sight, if we didn't take that seriously. Talents know this is a place they can feel safe, even if they don't know precisely what it does. Do you really think I'd

compromise that?"

"Brava!" Cristos spoke the words softly, but he didn't need to shout in the hushed stillness of the quiet office.

"Do you believe me?" She wouldn't let him look away.

"Yes."

But there was doubt—he knew she saw it, even though he opened his mind to her once more. Too many betrayals, too much harshness had passed before his eyes not to let his cynicism rear up once more. That instinct had saved his life a time or two. and she had to know what he was, what being an agent actually meant.

She let him see what she felt, didn't hide it. She couldn't grow closer to a man who didn't trust her, couldn't let him see her deepest desires, her greatest fears.

Andreas would be an amusement. When this case was over, they would drift apart, like most of her lovers before. Some had been harder to shed than others, but after John died Roz didn't want to be hurt like that again.

So why did she feel so disappointed? Why that deep pang of sadness? She had done that many times before, had an affair, moved on, so what made Andreas Constant so different?

She had no answer. Not when she was gazing into the dark eyes she'd watched last night, as he'd come apart in her arms, fragmenting and re-forming in ecstatic joy.

He turned away at the same time she did. They didn't touch and he leaned one elbow on the table, the one nearest to her, creating a natural barrier between them.

"To continue," Cristos said smoothly, just as though her world hadn't shifted, and just as if it hadn't, she looked up at him brightly.

"I'm here to do the best I can to find the people who murdered two members of my family. You should know that."

He regarded her gravely. "I know it." She didn't have to say that was her prime objective, overriding everything else. He already knew. She had no doubt he'd take it into account in his dealings with her. As she would in her dealings with him.

"We are, at least for the present, working on the same side. So we will, if you don't mind, work as a team." His cold gaze left her to sweep the other occupants of the room. "All of us. You can make that an order."

She heard a few sighs, but nobody said anything. Cristos held the attention of them, all in the palm of his hand. "Only the occupants of this room are completely trustworthy in this. I mean it, people. You all have alibis for crucial parts of this investigation. None of you could have betrayed the Department, for different reasons. Usually I pick a team based on strengths and weaknesses, and I like to keep it small, four or five people. But I will not risk the security of this place. I want you all involved, all working towards finding this leak and plugging it—however we have to do it. As I can clear more people, I'll bring them in. We need to catch this person before more serious damage occurs."

"Why is there no shapeshifter here?" The vampire, Virgil, lifted his head and stared at Cristos, clearly challenging him. "Is that where the leak originates?"

Cristos shook his head. "There are two shapeshifters in this team. Although it isn't good etiquette to tell you, it's good security sense. She'll understand. Candy is one shapeshifter. The other hasn't arrived yet."

As if hearing a cue, the door opened and someone entered. Tall, strongly built, with

dark hair that showed glints of red in the bright lights of the boardroom, a man stood in the opening and surveyed the occupants of the room.

"Close the door, Domenico," Cristos said. "This is supposed to be a closed meeting. Find yourself a seat."

The man, Domenico, shut the door quietly, then glanced around. "Domenico Serafini, shapeshifting dragon," he said softly, the gentle lilt to his voice proclaiming his Italian origin. "I have recently arrived in New York on a visit, and Cristos asked me to join his team."

Everyone nodded, or murmured a greeting. A new presence entered the blended atmosphere of Talents existing in cautious harmony, a powerful, gleaming presence. Domenico Serafini was no lightweight. Neither was he lacking in self-confidence, it seemed.

The only person whose sartorial elegance approached Serafini's was Cristos, which wasn't surprising, since they both looked as if they were wearing Armani. The cut and elegance of design was unmistakable to the discerning eye. While Cristos's suit was a dark charcoal grey, Serafini wore a blue a shade lighter than navy, complimenting his tanned skin and gleaming dark hair. His eyes seemed to change in color as he passed under the lights, from gold to green and back. A prosaic observer would call them hazel. Roz thought they were magical.

Serafini took a seat across the table from Roz, and it was clear he enjoyed looking at her. There was little she could do except either smile back or accept his regard coolly. She chose the latter. "I apologize for my late arrival," he purred, his dark velvet voice rippling over her senses. "I was delayed."

"I got your message and decided to start without you." Cristos's clipped tones told everyone he wasn't pleased with Serafini's late arrival, but it didn't disconcert the Italian one bit. "Serafini works for Department 57 in Italy," he told them. "He is over here on family business, so I asked him to help us with this case."

A shapeshifting dragon added firepower to the team. Literally. And he wasn't defined by the time of day, like vampires, who only came into their true powers at night. Roz hoped they wouldn't need his more obvious powers.

Cristos continued. "I will probably split you into smaller units in time, but for now, I want you all here and aware of the immediate problem. We need to stop this now."

Cristos stared at them all, sparing a couple of seconds for each face. When it came to her turn, she felt him probe her mind swiftly, incredible power sweeping in, then out again.

Expendng that power would have exhausted her. Cristos didn't seem phased in the least. After his swift examination, he faced them all, Talents of awesome power, as their acknowledged superior.

"Now listen. This is the real heart of this investigation, this is why this operation must remain top secret. The DIB has moved to New York to keep an eye on our department. It thinks we are the research department we claim to be, and it thinks, or Bernard Knox, the head of the DIB thinks, this is a standard leak investigation. At about the same time, we became aware of a leak from our Department to the DIB. In recent days I've come to believe the DIB are no more our enemy than we are theirs. We've been set on each other to keep each other busy."

His cool stare took in the rapt faces in front of him. "Forget the DIB, forget the laboratories we've been closing down one by one. And forget about paranoia. This is the real thing.

"I think there's another department deep, deep undercover whose aims are to

expose and exploit Talents. I think few people know about it, and those few are on the highest level possible. The similarity of techniques, the methods, all point to the fact that one intelligence lies behind it all, one person or one committee. They might fear we compromise national security. That's where the sonic detector system must have come from. They know about Talents, they know how to subdue us. Someone thinks we're a threat."

Roz felt Andreas stiffen beside her and knew her own tension had increased tenfold. But it was Andreas, ever cynical, ever questioning who asked, "What proof do you have? What leads you to this conclusion?"

The fact that he could question his boss in this way, that he had the right, spoke volumes for Andreas's own position in the Department and his true security clearance in the Company. The fact that Cristos didn't seem surprised by the question confirmed it.

Cristos nodded, acknowledging the question. "It started when Dev Wyvern helped us capture a PHR hard drive which contained information the PHR shouldn't have had. I launched an investigation to discover where it had come from, but the trail went cold. Then came the San Francisco affair last year. Two Gardiner vampires turned up dead, tortured and abused by a scientific facility. As usual, they were looking to exploit vampire Talents, but treating Talents like animals. Less than animals. When we found the laboratory we found they drugged the captured vampires during the night hours when they are at their most dangerous. The shapeshifters were controlled with Cephalox, the drug that prevents them shifting. No one except other Talents should have known these vulnerabilities, and yet the San Francisco laboratory was staffed entirely by mortals. That means they learned of this somehow. The lab was also protected with a sonic field that inhibited telepathy and detected it. The computers were set with booby traps to self-destruct, but we rescued enough to realize these people had two key similarities with the PHR leak Dev Wyvern helped to uncover. They had links to the CIA, through formal or informal contact, and the information they had about Talents was similar." He waited again. "That's not all. Fabrice has more information for you."

He sat down as Fabrice stood up. He glanced around, his gaze lingering on Roz and Andreas. "I had to meet Andreas to give him the new interference bug, instead of our usual mental contact. Roz followed us, like a good agent, and we made her almost as soon as she walked in, but later, outside, we were attacked.

"Seven of them. They weren't taking any chances. They were carrying powerful drugs, enough to knock out a vampire and kill me, and a hypo filled with Cephalox. So they weren't sure what kind of Talents we were, but they came prepared. We took them on and I—" he shrugged. "They weren't expecting a Virgin Sorcerer. I zapped 'em." A chuckle rippled around the room. Fabrice smiled self-deprecatingly. "Yeah. I read them afterwards, when they were lying on the ground. All mortal, all agents. But that was all I could read. I only knew they were Company because of some of the patterns in their minds. Nothing overt."

Cristos spoke the words they were all thinking. "Black ops."

"For sure. No identifying department. Their orders were to take us, but I don't know where because they didn't know. They were to take us and stow us in the back of a truck waiting nearby."

"Another laboratory."

The thick silence filled the spaces. Another laboratory. Not the DIB, not Department 57. Some other place.

"They want what we have and they aren't prepared to learn by asking," the dragon

rumbled, voicing what they were all thinking. "So why should our communities continue to operate here? If someone is betraying us, wouldn't the sensible option be to retreat from human society, as we have done before?"

Cristos showed no emotion on his features but she felt a tightening in the atmosphere. She agreed with the dragon. It might be time to withdraw vampire co-operation with the government, go back to the insular ways that had served them well for so long.

Cristos sighed. "That isn't as easy as it used to be before the age of computers and instant information. With our links to the government of this and other countries, we have access to the paperwork and records we need in order to live secretly, as all Talents have decided to do. Without the links, we would find the whole business infinitely more complex. How do you open a special wing of a hospital ostensibly devoted to research, but in reality for the special needs of Talents, without government aid to smooth the way? How to move Talents around the world, give them new identities, fake their deaths? It used to be easy, but now it's highly complex and if we tried to do it on our own, we'd be found out. The choices are, as they have always been, to expose ourselves completely, come out of the Talent closet, to withdraw from society and fight our corner on our own, or continue to live secretly alongside mortals. To do that, we need the co-operation of a few select individuals, sanctioned by our Guardians, who understand and help us."

"That always worked up till now," Fabrice commented. But Fabrice was young, he'd never known what it was like to live in an age before computers, before the telephone, even. Roz remembered. Setting up a new identity somewhere else, necessary if a long-lived being was to stay hidden, used to be much easier. Without government help, these days it was virtually impossible.

Cristos nodded his agreement. "It worked well, and has done for the past twenty years. But we've always faced this threat, that government investigators would discover more about us than we wanted them to know. None of the Guardians, or the mortals who know about us have betrayed us. The first thing we did was check them out." Roz wondered how, but also realized she might never know. The elders of vampire society, the legendary Guardians who held jurisdiction over all Talents, would take care of that. "To withdraw would engender the kind of hatred and bigotry we have seen for centuries. To reveal ourselves would lead to the same, plus the kind of hero-worship most Talents abhor. We are not better than mortals, we are merely different. And most Talents alive today don't know how to live any differently. We have decided to continue as we are until it becomes impossible. We have unearthed this threat before it gets out of control and we have this chance to plug the leak."

He scanned the silent room before continuing. "This operation will be to discover the DIB operative, and the Department 57 one and take them alive to question them, so we learn more about this department set up against us, where we can find them and how we can shut them down." Cristos sighed, and lifted his hand, forking his fingers as if he meant to run them through his immaculately coiffed silver hair, but dropped it before he made contact. "You have my word, you and all the Talents you represent, that I will withdraw before anyone exposes us completely. If there is a leak of such proportions that I feel we cannot cope, we will go into semi-withdrawal mode."

Roz felt comfortable enough to ask, "And that means...?"

Cristos met her eyes with a cold, bleak stare. She would get no comfort or easy answers here, and that, conversely, made her feel better. "Getting the permission of Guardians to obliterate memories, use Compulsion to make politicians and officials to

forget about us, and start again as independent contractors. Destroying all official records, wherever we find them, killing to protect ourselves if we have to. It's a drastic step, but one we may have to take. Not a step I'd happily take."

Roz thought of all the people she'd known, Talents and mortals alike, all the shapeshifters she wouldn't have met if she hadn't been able to move around freely, all the mortals who had lit up her life. One in particular. Pain hit her, the familiar wave sweeping through her mind. She suppressed it almost automatically. For all the pain his death had caused her, Roz counted herself blessed to have known and loved John Templeton. Other Talents should have that opportunity. The chance to make a free choice.

For the first time she was totally convinced where her loyalty must lie, at least until this crisis was resolved. "I'm with you."

The others murmured their acquiescence.

Cristos sighed in obvious relief and reached for a glass and water bottle. Others reached for them too, as if released from a tension none had been aware of before. Andreas poured a glass for himself, and one for Roz. She left it untouched.

"Only the people in this room and our operative Candy Ireton at the DIB are totally free of suspicion. So don't trust anyone outside this room. Don't speak of the case to anyone. Keep in touch. I will issue all of you with your personal objectives in this mission. Most are on standby, but Roz Templeton, Andreas Constant and Fabrice Germain are directly involved. Roz is here, supposedly an operative for the DIB. I will give her enough information to persuade her boss to keep her here, but none of it will compromise us. Andreas is our operative at the DIB. Candy is already in place as of this morning. Fabrice is our contact man, and I would like another, to back him up." Several people raised their hands and Cristos studied them all, taking his time, before making his decision. "Domenico. Another shifter will balance the team. The rest of you, stand by. Set aside a room in your mind for this operation. I'll issue you all with a set of codes and code words, exclusive to us. Roz, Domenico, I want Fabrice to read you both deeply. I don't want to risk losing touch with you."

He sighed and looked away, out of the expanse of glass that separated the Department from the world outside. Across the street buildings stared back, as blank as theirs would appear from outside.

This time Cristos did run his fingers through his hair. He turned back to face them. "This could be the start of a long operation. I'll draw in other operatives as they become available." By which he meant, trustworthy, Roz guessed. Alibis and examinations. She winced inwardly at the thought of what such an examination would mean. Migraines had nothing on the pain caused by a forcible mental search. "I guess that we will never completely clear the database of people who know more than they should, but we need to find them and neutralize them." He gave a wry, humorless grin. "Unlike other departments of the CIA, I don't mean kill them. I mean neutralize them. Make them unable to voice their suspicions, or compel them to forget. I don't think any Guardian will deny permission. I certainly won't." He let them drink that in. Cristos sounded deeply concerned, his voice a little lower than usual. "I will outline the case as clearly as I can, and give you individual objectives, but as always, I expect you to work together as a team." He paused before continuing.

Roz knew Cristos wasn't just issuing orders. He was asking permission. Talents could withdraw from this arrangement, the agreement to work together at any time, and since the establishment of Department 57, this had been the first serious leak. Everything depended on the way they handled this case. Not just the discovery of the leak, but the

way Talents dealt with each other, and their human counterparts.

For the first time in many years, Roz knew fear.

Everyone but the team left the room, even Cristos. Roz steeled herself and from the hard look in Domenico's dark eyes, he was doing the same thing. No one had ever required this of her before. The only people she had let in to her inner thoughts had been family. And John, of course.

And Andreas. He had entered, as she had entered him, and she was still feeling a little shell-shocked by the experience. Neither had made a conscious effort, more of a mutual absorption, as though their very souls had required it.

"You can restrict your thoughts, if you wish. But I need a hook, a way to find you even when you're unconscious."

"We have been known to use tracking devices," the Italian grumbled.

"They work, no harm in having them as well," Fabrice said. "Until recently we managed with them, too. But last year we nearly lost several agents because Sorcerers couldn't reach them to pinpoint their location. Cristos swore it would never happen again. So when we go undercover, a Sorcerer acts as liaison. I'll pass messages through, co-ordinate, that kind of thing."

Domenico quirked a thick, dark brow. "I'd rather be taking action."

Fabrice sighed, his mobile mouth forming a half smile. "It doesn't stop me doing that, if I'm needed. Yes, sometimes I would rather be a hero, too. But I have to face facts, I'm nowhere near as strong as you people, my strongest skills are all in here." He tapped his temple. "It's your choice, of course, but Cristos's orders, if you don't let me read you, you don't get field work."

Domenico sighed and spread his hands. "Very well."

Roz nodded. "Go ahead."

"It won't hurt, if you offer no resistance," Fabrice said. He took the seat next to her and reached for her hand.

Roz tensed. Her experience with Talents had been almost exclusively other vampires, people of good, though not spectacular, functional Psi gifts. No one with the extraordinary Talent of a Virgin Sorcerer. Fabrice smiled. "Relax, Roz."

She felt him invading her mind, creeping in slowly, testing for resistance. She was reminded of the times she'd had an examination, and used the same technique to relax now as she had then, counting slowly to ten, and breathing deeply.

It must have worked. Fabrice surrounded her thoughts, covered them like a blanket, and before she realized it, completely entered her mind. He felt different to Andreas, his personality evident even in this incorporeal form. Gentler, kinder, but with a sharp edge. Fabrice was nobody's fool.

He was showing her himself in return. He didn't have to do that. Sorcerers could demand, take, invade and keep themselves intact, unlike any other Talent. But Fabrice chose to open himself. This exchange went two ways, and she saw his despair, his yearning to be normal, not to keep himself pure, even his fear that he wouldn't be special in any way if he let go just once and knew what other men did. Her heart went out to him, and immediately she felt him withdraw. *I don't need anyone's pity. I'm fine as I am.*

She just couldn't imagine what such abstinence would feel like, even for a mortal lifespan. It must make time go much slower.

Chapter Nine

Back in his sweat-inducing, scratchy, cheap suit, Andreas entered the DIB building and rode up to his floor in solitude. Cristos had given him a lot to think about, not least the way that damned dragon eyed up Roz all the time he sat across the table from them. The anger he'd suppressed with difficulty had only added fuel to the irritation he felt with himself, showing Roz his doubts about her.

She'd shaken him from the first time he'd touched her here, in this elevator. The link between them wasn't of his making, so how did she expect him to trust her if she kept secrets from him? Damned woman. He almost wished he'd never met her.

Almost. The incandescent pleasure they found together in bed was completely new to him, and he suspected that had a lot to do with the confusion in his mind, the inability to cope with her as he coped with other people in his life. Roz evoked unfamiliar feelings in him, and he still wasn't sure what they meant or what to do with them.

But one thing he knew. He had to resolve this case. He suspected Roz was in more danger than she knew. The two dead vampires had been her close relatives, and if they were on a list somewhere, the odds were that Roz was on that list, too.

The doors slid open at his floor with a slight squeak. The featureless, slightly grubby corridor beyond led to his department. He fumbled for his ID card, stepped out the elevator and waved the card vaguely at the reception area. They knew him well enough to let him straight through. He thought with a wry smile of the retina readers at Department 57, backed up with human mind readers. Who had managed to get beyond that and into the secure computer system beyond? That system wasn't connected to any network and members of staff were forbidden to move any data they extracted from it out of the Department. So who had done that? Hard to believe that a Talent was betraying his own kind, but they had to face the probability.

One thing was for sure; if they came anywhere near Roz, they would suffer for it.

Wondering at his protectiveness, he turned the corner that led into his cubicle and stopped dead.

A vision confronted him. A vision of shining blond hair, cut into a jagged-edged style and an elaborately made-up face, slanted dark eyes lined with black, and very strange, though undeniably expensive, clothes.

"Hi," the vision said, getting to her feet. Beyond her, his computer was up and set to one of the lists he had to check through. "I'm Candy Irving. You must be Andreas Constant."

Can we talk?

Are you set with the new sonic blocker?

She smiled and nodded, putting out her hand. Andreas stared at it, forgetting his manners entirely. Candy wore a black, long sleeved sheath, outrageously molded to her body. The top was heavily embroidered in some pink design. What made Andreas stare wasn't just the long, pink fingernails, it was the tiny jewel embedded in each nail, and the little chain provocatively dangling from the pinkie.

Candy burst out laughing. "You've never seen a manicure before?"

"Not like this."

"Well, you're honest, anyway."

He looked up, grinning. He couldn't say he liked the manicure, because he wasn't sure he did, but it was different. "Pleased to meet you." Not to say relieved. His computer skills bordered on the basic. *When Cristos called you a geek, I hadn't imagined anyone quite like you. I've seen your picture, but the reality is something else.*

She blinked, revealing her carefully applied eyeshadow. Three colors, if he wasn't mistaken. Pink, a paler pink and some kind of soft brown. Wow. Make up wasn't something he usually noticed on a woman, but it was kind of hard not to notice Candy's.

Geeks come in all shapes and sizes. I get that a lot. But I do have one geeky characteristic. She pulled on a chain looped around her neck and lifted the spectacles suspended from them, to perch on her pert nose. "Better?"

The eyeglasses were gold, with tiny jewels embedded in the arms. The rectangular shape added piquancy to her face. "Oh yeah. Now I'm sure."

They shared laughter, and Andreas felt warmth towards this woman who dressed as she chose. He liked a woman who pleased herself. But he felt no sexual warmth for her, nothing like the heat he felt whenever Roz was nearby. It surprised him. A woman like Candy would normally attract him, but the quieter Roz had captured him.

At least for now. He resigned himself to the commitment, but wouldn't admit it could be anything but the wild attraction he always felt at the start of an affair. He conveniently forgot the six months of attraction and liking that had preceded it, even before he knew she was a vampire.

"I hope you don't mind." She gestured to his computer. "Bernard is getting a station set up for me, but he said I could use your computer this morning. I've not altered the way you do things, although you don't go in for customizations, do you?"

He smiled ruefully. "No. Computers just don't do it for me. They're part of my job, and they help it go faster, but I don't see the appeal they have for some people."

"Including me." She glanced up and Andreas turned to see who had captured her attention.

Bernard Knox stood just behind him, and they exchanged a hard glance before Knox turned all his attention to Candy. "We're so pleased to have you here, Candy. If you come with me I'll show you to your station."

Andreas blinked. He'd never heard quite so much warmth in Knox's tone before. The difference became even more obvious when Knox turned back to address him. "You'd better get on, Constant. Work's piling up. I hope your teeth are better now?"

Andreas nodded. "It was supposed to be a checkup, but I ended up with a new filling." He ran his tongue around his perfect, unfilled teeth. As an excuse it sounded feeble even to his ears, but that was all to the good. Knox wouldn't complain when he was transferred back to Department 57.

He sat at his desk, trying not to groan. The job was truly tedious, at least the job he was supposed to be doing. He pulled up the first file and set to work, ignoring the trills of laughter coming from the cubicle previously occupied by Roz, now Candy's station.

Then Knox was back, leaning against Andreas's desk and folding his beefy arms across his massive chest. "Did Roz get to her new job all right?"

"Yes, she went early this morning. I took her to the office and left her at the door. The security system is very sophisticated, so I couldn't go any further."

"Retina scanners. I've been meaning to get them in here, but the budget won't stretch to it." He grimaced, one quirk of his thin mouth turning up. "You'd think Department 57 wasn't high enough, either. It's only a research department, and they don't hold sensitive information there. Do they?"

"I wouldn't know. Probably not." Andreas tried to sound careless. "Do you want me to report to you every day?"

He didn't need telepathy to read Knox's cynical thoughts. In his position, he'd feel the same. He'd want to keep tabs on someone like his persona here, a man determined to get by with the least possible effort. "Yes. Call in my office as soon as you arrive every day."

"Yes, sir," Andreas mumbled, showing the disappointment. That would mean he'd have to arrive on time every day, not shave his day by the few minutes that probably took better timing than punctuality would have done. He hated himself, or rather, he hated the person he was pretending to be. Shirkers probably worked just as hard at shirking than they would doing the job properly.

"You could win a promotion from this, Constant, if you play your cards right."

He brightened. "That would be good. I'm sourcing a new apartment, I could do with the extra cash."

He watched Knox's face darken a little. An employee's first thought shouldn't be of his private life, at least, not to his boss. Then he tried a gentle probe.

Andreas would have sighed in relief when the probe worked without any alarm sounding in his mind. If he could have done this six months ago, he would have been out of this place in a month. At last, the new device developed to counter the detector meant he could do his job properly.

Red tinged Knox's mind, which didn't surprise him at all. He would have been angry in Knox's place. He found a strong desire there as well, but it wasn't aimed at him. Candy. Knox wanted Candy. Andreas almost laughed aloud. He had no doubt Candy had already read him, and knew for herself.

You bet.

The sassy voice sounded clearly in the forefront of his head. She knew all right.

He probed as deeply as he dared. Everyone was psychic, but at birth, most mortals developed a strong barrier, locking themselves off from the outside world. Talents had no barrier, so their children were usually reared separate from society, only taken out when they had consciously built the barrier they needed in order to keep some privacy and to stop reading everyone, all the time.

Andreas examined Knox's barrier. Strong, so he wouldn't have feelings, or 'intuition,' as some mortals called it. He'd locked his secrets away. It would take some distraction to sneak in behind them.

Well he couldn't take this man out for a convivial drink, and he drew the line at seducing him.

Leave him to me. I'll handle it.

Andreas breathed a sigh of relief. Candy had more chance of getting in, quicker.

"Trust me, boss, I'll make sure Roz finds something."

"Yeah. Just report to me every morning. She's a clever woman, she should find out what I need to know pretty darned quick." Knox straightened and strolled out the cubicle. He didn't look back.

Andreas went to work. After reviewing enough personnel files to make it seem like he'd put some work in, Andreas cruised the office. With the interference capsule embedded in his arm he could probe without detection, if the DIB had the sonic protection they'd found in the lab in San Francisco last year.

He flirted with the women, joked with the men, and read all of them. Nearly all the personnel were present in the office today. He checked six months' work in the space of an

afternoon.

He winked at Candy as he walked past her cubicle to leave the office at five.

"See you, toots." Love the disguise. The pink was a wonderful touch.

What disguise? He felt the indignation in her mental voice and he chuckled. "See you, Andreas. Don't work too hard."

He left with a casual wave of one hand, slinging his jacket over one shoulder. It itched less that way.

Chapter Ten

The gallery was a small one, situated close to the Metropolitan Museum. Outside, pasted to a board was a small poster.

New artist, Jenna Brice. Exhibition Tonight.

There was no queue, no throng of people waiting to see this exciting new artist, and when they entered, only three or four people stood inside, studying the works of art on the walls.

"Hey." Roz spun to face the voice behind them, but then relaxed when she saw Fabrice Germain. He gave them an easy smile. "Looks as if Ellie's been busy. A few Talents promised to drop in tonight."

Andreas shook his hand. "You know this girl, Jenna?"

"Naa. Met her once or twice, but not what you might say know. It's more for Ellie, really. She's a great kid, she deserves some support."

So Roz entered the gallery escorted by two great looking men. She couldn't remember a time she'd been in that kind of demand, but superficial or not, it made her feel good.

A woman came to greet them, smart, dressed in a plain white dress with a gold chain around her neck, hair sleekly pulled back into a chignon, bearing a tray with glasses of wine. "Good evening. We're showcasing a new artist tonight, Jenna Brice. We sincerely believe she's destined for great things. Do look around."

They took a glass of wine each and wandered around. Roz glanced up at Andreas, then at Fabrice on her other side. "What do you think?"

"Very nice." It was more or less what she thought. Bright colors daubed on large canvases. Roz wasn't an expert on modern art, or any art at all, come to that, but she wouldn't have objected to one of these pieces in her house. It wasn't distinctive enough for her to dislike, but neither did she love it. Perhaps someone would. Here and there, what looked like shapeless lumps of plaster adorned various stands. She guessed they were probably for sale, too. She *would* object if she had one of those in her home, probably make sure it met with an accident before it had been in place too long.

"That's more or less what I think," Andreas murmured in her ear. "I see Ellie, can you spare me for a minute?"

"Sure." She watched Andreas walk across the lightwood floor to where Andreas's friend Ellie, dressed as artistically as the paintings, stood smiling at him. Roz glanced around for a place to dump her wine. Sour, not to her taste.

"Here." Fabrice leaned over her and deftly exchanged his empty glass for her full one. She smiled up at him gratefully.

While her attention was on Fabrice's remarkably beautiful eyes, a light turquoise as rich as the semiprecious stone, someone cleared her throat behind them. Startled, she almost stumbled, but Fabrice caught her, and turned her, his hand resting on the small of her back.

A tall girl with vivid red hair, most likely out of a bottle, faced them, a determined smile curving her glossed lips. "Fabrice! How nice of you to come!"

He forced a sheepish smile. "I promised Ellie." Roz nudged him. "And I'm glad I did. Fantastic work, Jenna!" Roz felt Fabrice's confusion in her mind. *I've only met her a*

couple of times. Since when did that make her so close?

She grinned. "Oh these are just a style I tried earlier in the year. The gallery wanted to show them, though, so who am I to argue?" She gave a comical grimace.

"Roz, this is the artist tonight, Jenna Brice. Jenna, Roz Templeton."

The smile frosted over and Jenna only touched the tips of Roz's fingers. "Glad you could come." She turned immediately back to Fabrice, and her smile warmed once more. "Come see the other work. They've put it at the back."

Roz watched her link her arm through Fabrice's and urge him forward. Since Andreas was in that part of the gallery, in conversation with Ellie, she followed them

Whoa! The paintings at the back of the gallery were completely different. Figurative, not abstract, clearly paintings of people. Lovers, sketched in detail, painted over with glazes of different colors, as though surrounded by auras. A few mortals saw auras, but not many. This woman, although a mortal, could be Talented.

Roz felt entirely different about these paintings. The lovers had vague faces and atmospheric color swirled around their embracing forms. They made her shiver, and immediately she thought of Andreas naked, his body entwined with hers much as these people surrounded each other.

Andreas looked up from his conversation with Ellie and winked. It was as if an electric charge sparked between them.

Jenna glanced back, but Roz had just looked away, towards Fabrice.

Andreas gave a small laugh. "Sorry, Roz." He took the step that brought him back to her side and he curved an arm around her shoulders. "What do you think of these?"

"Intense," she breathed. "Very emotional."

"I don't see it." She looked up to see a frown marring his brow. "I like the others better. These make me feel—uncomfortable."

Anything wrong? Fabrice had the power to detect 'something wrong' from a fair distance away from the source of the trouble. He could easily be sensing something beyond her capability.

No. He smiled warmly to reassure her. *Just these things unnerve me a bit.* "Can we go back into the other room?"

"Sure."

She was just about to follow Andreas when she heard a small shriek behind her and turned just as the tray of drinks tipped towards her.

All her quickness couldn't save her now. She went down, followed by a tray of red and white wine, and the crash echoed through the large room.

Shit!

Had she just said that, or only thought it? She moved her hand to push herself back on to her feet, but found warm flesh beneath it. "Wait, Roz. There's a glass there. Let me."

Fabrice circled her waist and lifted her smoothly up and by that time, Andreas had reached her side. "Jesus, Roz, are you all right?"

"Yes, just shaken." She could hardly make herself heard above the cacophony of the girl who'd tripped and tipped the tray over her. "Someone *pushed* me! Do you think I don't know when I'm not pushed?"

Others surged forward to hold her, or to push the broken glasses aside. It should probably be gratifying, but where she'd felt smug to enter the gallery with two handsome men at each side of her, now she wished they'd go away and leave her alone. She just wanted to shrink into a corner somewhere and flash out of there.

But she couldn't. Mortals as well as Talents surrounded her. She had to make the

undignified exit she dreaded.

The men supported her outside, fending off profuse apologies and offers of hospitality. "Please don't bother," Andreas told one person. "We live not far from here. We'll call a cab."

Outside they didn't stop until Andreas suddenly swung into a deep doorway and pulled her against him, pausing to scent the air. She could feel his senses flare and Fabrice's deep voice saying, "It's okay, there's nobody about. See ya."

"Thanks, man." Andreas's grip tightened but Roz wanted to go home. Before he could take them to a place he knew, she flashed them both out and into her apartment.

To him she looked wholly adorable, even with her butter yellow silk dress ruined by splashes of red and white wine. The wet made the thin material cling to her form, and although he'd only just released her, he stepped forward to take her again. He could lick the wine from her body. Delicious.

She held up one hand. "Not so fast, buster. I could have shards of broken glass over me and in any case, I feel sticky. Let me shower and change."

"Can I help you?"

She laughed. "No." But he heard the shake in the laughter, and felt her uneasiness.

"You're upset."

"Yeah, maybe. I don't like being the center of attention, and I don't like young girls getting jealous."

"Jenna?"

"Ellie. She kept you away from me. She knew about us and she didn't like it." She forced a smile, but there was no warmth behind it. "It's my problem, Andreas, not yours."

He frowned. "I'll talk to her in the morning."

"No, don't," she said hastily. "It'll only make things worse. Andreas, it's a crush, that's all. She'll get over it."

"Ellie? I don't think so. I'm a father figure to her, an elder brother perhaps."

This time her smile was pitying. "Oh no you're not. I knew what she felt the minute she walked into the boardroom at the Department. She wants you, Andreas."

Maybe Roz had something. Ellie had never known him to have a serious girlfriend, and they were close, so she could have picked up on something. He shrugged. "No contest. She'll get over it as soon as she meets someone her own age."

Roz turned away, crowing with laughter. "Like you did? Andreas you know the difference in our ages! As if that means anything to a vampire!"

"Well it means something to me. Bottom line, I want you, not Ellie, but Ellie still needs somebody to look after her. Can you live with that?" He felt his temper rise, and wondered if Roz was the jealous one. He'd never seen any evidence of a crush in his young protégée, but he had no intention of abandoning her. She needed him.

"Sure." She walked towards the shower, but stopped to glance over her shoulder. "If you're interested, I'll be out in a little while. Will you wait?"

"Can you doubt it? Sure you don't want any help?"

Her smile was a little warmer. "No, honestly. I really want a few minutes to get clean and get my head together. I was close to losing my temper there, and I don't like it."

It would probably be better to give her a bit of breathing space, but Andreas still wanted to spend the rest of the evening with her. And the night. He left, but not for long.

Neither Nancy nor Don seemed surprised to see him entering the living room from Roz's bedroom. He hoped that didn't mean they were used to seeing men enter in that way, but even if they were, he didn't care. She was his for now, and for now he intended to keep her. He would fight for her, and he paused, taken aback by the intensity of his emotion. He couldn't be getting that deeply involved this early – could he?

His mind told him one thing, his body another. When he thought of how she looked, gleaming hair spread across the pillow, mouth slightly open, lips full and red with desire, his body responded, readying him for love.

Or sex. Sex, he firmly corrected himself. It had to be. He'd never allowed his emotions to get too deeply involved in an assignment, and he'd had to fight for that control in the past couple of days, but he'd got it fixed now. Roz was a great partner, good in bed, and that was it. Period.

Yeah. He'd keep telling himself that, and it might turn out to be the truth.

Nancy smiled sweetly. "You and Roz are quite an item, aren't you?"

He let her think so. "Sure."

Don sprawled on the sofa, watching a ball game. He flashed Andreas a grin and made space. "Hey, how's it going?"

"Okay, I guess."

"Roz is impressed by Department 57. She says they have the latest technology."

Andreas shrugged. "Well, it is a research facility. The devices it produces are pretty awesome." He took a handful of peanuts from the bowl Don offered him and munched on them. They made him feel pretty sick, but he couldn't resist peanuts. Young vampires had to fight to control their appetites. When their powers weren't on them, during the day, it was easy to eat and drink, but for their first fifty years or so, taking in anything but blood after sundown was a struggle, and this was February, so sundown had arrived just as he was leaving the office. Something warned him against showing any vulnerability, probably his years in the field, so he forced down the nuts and battled the resulting queasiness.

Nancy came over, carrying two coffees, and put them down. Andreas eyed his warily and Nancy laughed. "Too much caffeine?" He nodded, glad of the excuse. He was still battling the peanuts. "I'll drink it instead. Move up a bit."

Andreas made room, and Don put his arm around the back of the sofa, encircling Nancy when she sat down. He touched the edge of Andreas's shoulder with his fingertips. He wasn't sure he liked it, but it would have been stupid to protest, so he stayed where he was. The touch made him edgy. Where was Roz? How long could a shower take?

Then Nancy moved closer, and stretched out her hand for the peanut bowl, resting between him and Don. She rested one hand on his knee for balance and on the way back, stroked her hand against his upper thighs. Andreas began to feel distinctly uncomfortable. Not that he hadn't taken his share of fun and games in his time, but not this, not now. He wasn't stupid enough to think the touching was accidental.

When the knock came at the outer door, he almost started in surprise. Unusual for him, to be so jittery.

It seemed he wasn't the only one. Nancy leapt to her feet and went straight to the small hallway to open the door. There seemed to be no pause. That meant she'd read whoever was outside, and knew them. It was the only way any sensible person would open a door in New York without checking, even in this relatively decent area. He glanced over to the door that opened into Roz's room, hoping she'd be ready soon. Then they'd talk.

The tingle in his nerve endings warned him before the new entrants arrived. Andreas straightened, watching as Nancy came back in, with two figures looming over her.

Two large, strongly built men of indeterminate age, dark haired, one short, one long and touching his shoulders. Neither of the lean faces smiled. Blue eyes bored into them and then focused on Don. He smiled easily, but Andreas felt the hand touching his neck tense.

"This him?" one asked.

Andreas felt the tingling that told him two things. These beings were Talents, and they weren't trained, as he was, to keep all their senses neatly locked away. "Don't you gentlemen have any manners?"

That turned their attention back to him. Andreas deliberately relaxed, leaning his head back against the soft pillows on the back of the sofa.

"Who are you?"

He bared his teeth in the smallest of smiles. "Someone."

"Leave him alone, boys."

Damn, he hadn't felt her come in, or heard the snick of her door! He wished Roz had chosen to stay in her room, perhaps call for help. "Roz, stay out of this. I'll handle it."

"The hell you will." He felt her presence behind him before he felt her touch on his shoulder. Light, just to tell him she was there, not to restrain him.

"What do you want?"

"Tell us about him." The short-haired one jerked his head at Don. "And him." Andreas received the same treatment.

One concentrated on him, while the other concentrated on Don. Careful to retain his focus, so Don would catch nothing, Andreas responded.

He opened his mind and sent a pure, concentrated needle of pain into the Talent's brain, closing down so fast afterwards the other had no chance of discovering who was responsible.

When the long-haired Talent closed his eyes and shouted in pain, Roz increased her grip on his shoulder. "What did you do?"

Andreas glanced at Don. Roz sighed. "It's all right. He's mortal, but he has permission. Otherwise he wouldn't be marrying Nancy, would he?"

Andreas let out a single breath of relief. "I sent a probe out."

Immediately he felt a probe in his mind, and he allowed it, but not too deeply. The Talent was searching for an identity. That meant these two were vampires. Only vamps looked specifically for identity.

Andreas bared his teeth and let his fangs extend, withdrawing them again so he could speak. "That answer your question?"

The other narrowed his eyes. "No. You have no sigil"

"No, I don't, do I?" He didn't see why this intruder deserved an answer. The man had the manners of a pig and he didn't need to enter Roz's mind to feel her distress. Her hand tensed on his shoulder told him. He seethed with anger to think that anyone should upset her, and wanted to tear the intruders limb from limb. "Your turn. Who are you?"

"We're here to look after Roz." The long-haired one glanced at the other woman. "And Nancy, too. You don't think we'd send them into danger on their own, do you?"

"You don't seem to be making a good job of it." Gently, Andreas dislodged Roz's hand and got to his feet. "You plan to flash into her presence when she gets into peril? During the day? Come on, who are you? What are you doing here?" He took a step towards them, and saw them tense, then retain their stance. He'd intimidated them, very

slightly. Good.

The short-haired one furthest away from him spoke. "Mike and George Gardiner, vampires of the Gardiner family. Protectors." His mouth turned up in a slight sneer. "Your turn," he said, deliberately echoing Andreas's words. "We've come to take our women home."

"Andreas Constant, vampire. I have no family." He ignored Don's start of surprise that rocked the cushions under them.

The long-haired one, Mike, shook his head. "That's not possible."

"Yes it is. Here I am, waiting for you to talk to me." He spread his hands in a taunting gesture. "What makes you think you can march in here and take over? Are you tracking Roz during the day, when your powers are gone? What do you expect to do about anything then?"

The vampire blushed.

Andreas watched, savoring the moment. The flush was gone almost as soon as it arrived, but Mike could call it righteous anger or anything else he wanted, Andreas knew better. That was a blush.

He allowed a corner of his mouth to quirk and caught Mike's gaze, allowing a flash of understanding to pass between them. Then, before he could respond, Andreas turned away, back to George, the one with short hair and blue eyes blazing with anger. "I'm not only a vampire, I'm a field operative for the CIA. I can shoot straight, engage in hand-to-hand combat, fly most small aircraft and set a bomb to hit a target precisely and cleanly. I can hide in plain sight, or in a hideout, I can survive on very little—even less than the Company thinks, if I have access to fresh blood. I can protect Roz day or night, if she needs it, but she's shown precious little need of any skills I can offer her." He firmly suppressed the thought of her sweat-sheened body lying beneath his. That skill was mutual, and could wait until a better time. Despite his concentration on the task in hand, he felt her presence in him, warming him with approval. He hadn't said that to please her, but he was glad he had.

"We're taking them back with us. It's getting too dangerous for us to risk our women."

Andreas didn't need their anger to know how that particular statement made them feel. "And what century do you think you're living in?"

George sucked his cheeks in, as though he was about to spit, but then swallowed. At least civilization had taught him that much. "This one. You know as well as we do that vampire women are precious. The future of the race depends on them."

"Vampires can mate with mortal women."

"But not always make vampires. Most of the children of that kind of union are mortals, like their fathers."

Andreas shrugged. "They're usually Talented in some way. If the survival of a race depends on the subjugation of half of them, is it worth preserving?" He gave them a look of pure contempt. "By demanding that Nancy and Roz disappear inside your strongholds, you're denying them the right to make up their own minds. If they want it, fine. Do you?"

Without warning, he turned to confront the women, not giving them a moment to think. Roz didn't need to think. "No. Besides, they can't achieve what we have. They'd have to join the CIA, work their way up to agents. By that time the secrets would be out." She lifted her head and confronted her cousins. "You're living in the past, boys. Our future is at stake *now*. Give it up, go home and tell them what we decided."

George breathed heavily through his nose and shook his head. "We can't. We're

under orders to bring you back for your own good."

"Who ordered you?"

Andreas suspected she knew. Only a few people had the authority to compel vampires like these, mature men in full possession of their powers.

"Your fathers."

Roz made an exasperated sound between her teeth, but it was Nancy who spoke. "I'm marrying Don, so I won't be breeding with any vampires anytime soon."

Mike shot Don a sharp glance. Don smiled back, seemingly not at all put out by the presence of these powerful beings. But then, he'd lived with one for the past six months. "He'll have to be approved."

"I've had permission to tell him what I am. That's all the approval I need. Anything more my father wants is up to him, and he'll have to ask nicely for it."

Good for her! Andreas wanted to applaud but sufficed himself with a smile. "Looks as if they made their choices, boys. Now just get back to Daddy and let him know."

"Can't do that." The voice turned sharper, and all Andreas's senses went on alert. "It's after dark, and we're two to one, if you want to take us on. We're taking them back, and that's all there is to it."

Grimly, Andreas realized George had circled around him. The vampires neatly bracketed him. If that was all it took, he'd have been dead meat a long time ago.

Without warning, he lashed out backwards with one foot, taking one vampire smartly in the chest and slamming down his mental screens. As he'd expected, the other darted forward, hoping to attack him while he was off balance.

He circled his leg, regaining his equilibrium and using his left arm to swing out. The mental attack came from two places at once. This was where he was weakest, a relatively young vampire who'd had to teach himself how to strengthen his mental defenses. These two must be a couple of hundred years old at least, and they were in full, highly trained, control of their faculties.

Pain lashed at him from George, where he lay on the floor, and from Mike, taking him from a different angle, at the front of his brain.

He nearly lost it until a single, searing needle swept into his mind, splitting the contact between him and Mike, enabling him to strike back, deflect the attack of blinding agony George had hoped to incapacitate him with. Roaring in fury, he bared his teeth and stretched his hands, allowing the claws to shoot out from their sheaths under his fingernails.

The answering hiss of twenty unsheathed claws met his attack, but here he could confidently fight on. Two to one was nothing, even against strong males, for a man of his training.

Or so Andreas told himself. "You won't take them," he growled, the words almost inaudible against his strong fangs. But the sound of the threat was enough. They understood.

One blow wasn't enough, and when George sprang up from the floor, they attacked him without hesitation. The click of the catch on Don's pistol sounded through all the roaring rage, though, and the explosion sent the world into ringing, echoing cacophony.

Mike fell to the floor, eyes wide with pain. Don had hit his mark and the bullet had gone straight through his leg. Blood pooled on the expensive cream carpet.

"Oh great, now look what you've done!" Nancy's angry cry split incongruously through the testosterone-fuelled shouts and fury.

"Darling, we'll make it right."

"Only if we get the whole room recarpeted. That bastard's paying for it. Bleeding all over my floor!"

Andreas could hardly credit what he was hearing, but that was nothing compared to Don's gawping mouth and dazed eyes. "Nancy sweetheart, I shot him."

"Yes, but not without provocation. You two can just get out of here! We're doing all right on our own. We don't need big, strong vampires to tell us what to do." Nancy strode forward and poked George in the chest. "So go."

"Sorry, babe, can't do it." George glanced at Mike, who still lay groaning on the floor. "I've got this one. Get up, grab the other one and we'll be on our way."

Several things happened at once. Mike surged to his feet, albeit wincing and favoring one leg, the one not spurting blood. He winced and grabbed the edge of his shirt, ripping a strip from the fine material to make himself a tourniquet. Don watched, open-mouthed.

Andreas was too busy to take too much notice of events. He leapt at Roz, grabbed her and concentrated. Just before he did, he saw Nancy snatch Don's hand and do as he planned to do with her.

He flashed out.

Chapter Eleven

Roz felt the air whirl around them, colors swirling around her, disorienting her senses before they settled once more. "What did you do?" she demanded, pulling away. She glanced around. "Oh. Where are we?"

He watched her, wariness darkening his eyes. "At my house in Utah. I'll take us back any time you like, but I thought we could both do with time out."

"Time out, huh?"

His voice rose a little. Roz guessed he was worried what her reaction might be. "I sensed others arriving at the apartment. Backup. We would have lost, and they would have taken you back."

Her jaw firmed. "I felt that, too. I was prepared to go back, at least until I'd explained to them." Damned Gardiners! Families were sometimes more trouble than they were worth. "They were okay until they thought we might be in real danger. Then it's—oops, save the women, the breeding factories!"

"What were they thinking?" He lifted a hand and soft lights came up. "What century do they think they're in?"

"Some of them think they're still in the Victorian era." She watched him. "Impressive telekinesis."

He laughed softly, the sound rippling through her body as though he'd touched her. "Modern electronics, not telekinesis. The twenty-first century."

Her answering smile drove the last of the wariness from his eyes. "Good thinking, Batman." She shook her head in exasperation. "They want to protect us, even from ourselves. That's why Nancy and I escaped to New York. What they don't see, they can't criticize us for."

His vicious interjection surprised her with its violence. Without thinking, she stepped forward and laid her hand on his arm. "No, they don't mean anything by it. They want to look after us, the way they think is right."

"And what about you? Don't your rights amount to anything?" His mouth compressed to a straight line. "I've never been exactly a supporter of women's lib before, but that was ridiculous. I felt like reminding them that women are people too."

She examined his face. He was perfectly sincere. For a vampire to think like that, at least one of the vampires she knew well, other Gardiners, it was like listening to a being from another world. But they weren't natural chauvinists. Some of them felt driven to it. "We haven't many females left." She reached up her hand to touch his face, compelled by an impulse she barely recognized, she'd felt it last so long ago. Tenderness, some might call it. "For some reason, Gardiners are mainly males. Vampires are rarely very fertile, and our women are even less fertile than most. The doctors are doing their best, but it's like a plague. So they've taken to coddling us, rescuing us, taking care of us."

"You still have the right to live your own life."

"Maybe." She stroked his cheek with her thumb, and watched his eyelids droop when he responded to the caress. "But you have to see their point of view."

"Why?" He turned his head and captured her thumb in his mouth, as though he had to taste her, before releasing it to speak again. "I owe them nothing. Neither do you, Roz. You can't help what you are any more than I can." He gave a rueful chuckle and

adjusted the fit of his pants. "I don't seem to have any control around you. We always end up like this. Pounding away at each other like rabbits, and then falling asleep. I want more. I want to know you and to know why you were so scared tonight. That's not like you, Roz. Talk to me."

She swallowed. Why did he have to be so damned perceptive? "They have a husband lined up for me."

"So? They can't make you, can they?"

"They might. I agreed. I was stupid, but at the time I didn't care. I just wanted to give in, give up, and I thought it was a way to bring me back. They needed me, and they loved me."

She felt and saw his puzzlement, shading his eyes, clouding his mind. He really didn't understand. "You don't know all the story. Perhaps I should tell you."

"Perhaps you should." He looped his arm around her waist and led her towards a long, low sofa in the center of the room.

It was only then she thought to look around her properly. "Tell me about this place."

He laughed softly. "We're at my home in Utah. It's a Frank Lloyd Wright style house. I can't afford the apartment I'd like in New York, so I have small, snug places, the ones the real estate people call studio apartments, and then I flash here whenever I can. I have that slum in Hell's Kitchen because I'm between apartments. This was the only place I was confident of bringing you without any danger."

She tensed at the reminder of what could have happened. Vampires flashed from place to place, but they did it blind. They had a mental picture of where they were going, but if they collided with another person, or a piece of furniture they weren't expecting, they could die. In these days of the Internet, flashing was a little safer, as they could tap in to webcams for a live picture, but the situation they had been in left no leisure for that.

Andreas had saved them both. Himself from a severe beating, and Roz from a future she no longer wanted. When she told him, though, he might take her back.

Therefore, she wasn't in any hurry to give him the information. She'd have to tell him, sooner or later this evening, but because they didn't know Andreas, or his hideouts, they wouldn't be able to find him.

One more time with him, that was all she wanted. Then she'd go back, and face the music. Music she had made for herself. "How did you find this place?"

"The usual way. I went looking, once I'd saved enough money to afford it. My job pays well. I have no family, and I'm young in vampire years, so I'm probably what you might call poor, but I had enough for this."

"You're not poor in the ways that count." She moved away, and his arm slipped away from her as she toured the room. This place called to her, in some strange way. She felt at home here, comfortable, as she felt in few other places.

The subdued light cast gentle spots on certain parts of the room, leaving others in shadow. Other lights came on above pictures hung on the walls, giving the room more definition. She stood in a long living room, containing two large sofas, one facing the windows, the other set against the wall, facing a large plasma TV. A discreet, tiny stereo sat on a shelf, surrounded by well-worn books, paperbacks, hardbacks, jumbled together in no particular order. She couldn't see any radiators, but the room was comfortably warm. As a vampire, she could adjust her body temperature to suit her surroundings, but there was no need here. No whirring noises betrayed a unit, but she guessed the small ducts in the walls conducted warm air. The polished floor held a few rugs, but little else. Colors

were rich but subdued, deep reds, ambers, autumn shades blending together to form a discreet harmony.

It was a room she could live in, breathe in.

"I like it." She turned to face him. Liking was an understatement, but it was the best she could do right now. She felt washed out, tired of fighting her family, her feelings, and herself. Just plain tired.

"I'm glad you like it. The room welcomes you. I welcome you. When I saw this house I knew I had to have it." He gave a short laugh. "I discovered later, from a friend of mine, that it was in a propitious position."

"Let me guess. The Sorcerer, right?"

"Yeah, Fabrice. He's more than a contact. He's a friend. We're the same age. We trained together. Remember agent training?"

She smiled, although not all the memories were happy ones. "Oh yeah."

He moved closer to her, but slowly. "Cristos doesn't let any of his agents use their Talents during training."

She gasped, eyes wide. "None?"

"None. Well, mortals go through it, don't they? So we had to. Fabrice is officially a consultant, but like all Department 57 'consultants' he's been through the basic training program. As a field agent, my training's been a little more—rigorous. That's why vampires working for the Department are more confident than other vamps during the daytime. We can take on most mortals and win, with or without Talents, and since we're without most of our Talents during daylight hours, we needed that strength. Enemies don't wait until sunset to make their move. As your cousins in San Fran found out."

The reminder of her cousins' deaths jarred her in this peaceful place. "The lab took them by day. Cristos said after they took them, their captors drugged them at night, when they were at their strongest, to keep them subdued."

"Yes."

"Do you do government jobs? I mean, purely government jobs, with no Talents involved?"

"Sometimes."

That seemed liberating to Roz. Her entire life had centered on vampire society, the needs and requirements of her family, the powerful Gardiner clan. To work for someone else, with no links, was something she'd yearned for all her life, but she'd never been able to reconcile the two. Never struck a balance. It had always been all or nothing. Neither had truly satisfied her. "How do you manage, without a family?"

"I have friends, and I have a family, of a sort. Cristos fostered me. He's the nearest I have to a father. The Department gave me friends and people I'm as close to as any family. It suits me." He took another step, and a shadow crossed his face. She took the last step towards him and he looped his arms loosely around her waist. "I used to pray for a family sometimes, plead with God to give me a place to belong. Every vampire I met had a family. Perhaps they would come to claim me one day, perhaps they'd discover the sigil that had once been branded into my brain. Roz, I still do." He whispered the last words, and as though their mouths were magnetized, lowered his head as she lifted hers. Their lips met, fused, clung.

But it wasn't the same this time, it was gentler, as though they were kissing for the first time, exploring each other. He angled his head and she strained up to him, but their lips moved gently. She savored the feel of his mouth, softly caressing, his tongue, gently exploring, stroking against hers, moving to touch her sensitive palate. She shuddered

under his hands.

He lifted his head, and gave her several gentle kisses before moving to her throat. She arched for him, the ultimate trust gesture of one vampire to another. He could drain her, and she would let him. It was his turn to shudder. He knew that much of vampire lore. But he didn't stop, moving gently down to her collarbone, taking a soft nip near her artery to stimulate rather than to draw blood.

"I've never told anyone that before," he murmured, his breath hot on her neck. "Cristos guessed, but I've never volunteered the information. I was always afraid, you see, of being laughed at. But not you. I knew you'd listen and not condemn."

"How could anyone laugh at you?" It passed her understanding. "You're strong, capable, you've made a life for yourself. You don't need anyone."

"Right now, I need you. More than I've needed anyone else."

His words proved the ultimate stimulant, and when he straightened, they needed no words. He kept his arm around her waist, and led her up the open plan staircase at the end of the room to the upper floor.

His bedroom, and his sanctum. The bed, draped in a cream cover, bisected the long room, the echo of the one below, but soft carpet covered the floor, her feet sinking into it as he led her to the bed.

He lifted his hand and the drapes closed. He smiled. "Technology," he explained. "There's no one to see us, but I want this to be entirely ours, as though we're in our own private place. Contained in each other."

She understood what he meant. She wanted to explore him, discover him, as she hadn't before, and she only trusted him, as he only trusted her, to be this close.

So when he took her to the bed, they sat down at the same time, their hands went to the other at the same time, and their mouths met, continuing the kiss begun downstairs. She leaned back; he followed, his mouth caressing hers. He tasted spicy, a flavor she would always associate with Andreas, and she felt the need to taste more of him.

She kissed him before, she'd caressed him, but then he had been a friend she enjoyed invigorating sex with. This time was different. She let him in further, deeper than anyone except one other. And that had been one-sided.

This was not. He opened to her, and she saw the truth as she sank into his mind, and he into hers, welcomed and ushered in by right.

His hands went to the buttons of her blouse at the same time hers went to his shirt, and they unbuttoned each other slowly, their kiss breaking so they could concentrate. Before, buttons had flown and fabric ripped. This time they slipped each button free carefully, as though each action held meaning. When he undid the last button, he lifted his hand to touch her cleavage gently, trace the cleft and dip briefly inside before pushing at the fabric of her blouse. They sat up to remove their outer clothing. He unsnapped her bra for her, and slid the straps slowly down her arms, each touch increasing her sensitivity, making her yearn for more.

He didn't hurry, but touched her as though each touch was his first, lifted his hand to touch her bare breast, cupping it, lifting it and finally spreading his hand over it. "Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?"

"I could say the same thing. I *am* saying it." His chest, sprinkled with dark hair nuzzling his nipples, covering firm, defined muscle just begging her to touch. So she touched, smoothing her hand flat to take in as much of his texture as she could. His hard nipple prodded her hand and caught in the juncture between two fingers. She took it in her fingertips, rolled it gently.

He echoed her motion, pulling gently to peak her breast before bending to take it between his lips and touch his tongue to her sensitive flesh. She moaned lightly, gliding her hands over him, finding his body soothing and stimulating against her.

He tickled her nipple, flicking his tongue repeatedly over it, bringing her to a height of awareness she'd never felt before, just from mere touches to her nipples. Except there was nothing 'mere' about it. Each touch increased her sensitivity and made her yearn for more.

Sliding her hands down his body, she felt every rib, felt his powerful muscles tense and relax, as she made her way to his waist, fumbling the buckle.

Without taking his mouth away from her breast, he eased them both down on to the soft coverlet. He didn't attempt to conceal the lapping sounds his mouth made against her, gently wetting and caressing her. He kissed around her nipple before moving on to the other one. She lay back, her hands on his back, smoothing and caressing, half of her longing to return to his belt buckle and hurry things along.

He knew, of course he did, with their minds merged the way they were. He lifted his head, glancing up and capturing her gaze. They were hungry, but not starving, as before. Permission was given and received. He lowered his hands to his waist and undid the buckle that had defeated her fumbling fingers a moment earlier. She wanted to do the same, but when she lifted her hands away from him she felt a loss, as though her hands belonged on him and nowhere else.

"Let me. Please." His low murmur broke into her mind. She gave permission before he'd asked it. She trusted him to bring her, and himself, all the pleasure he was capable of. Only she wanted to do the same for him. "There's plenty of time," he said. "All the time we need."

There was. No one would find them here. This was the middle of a state in a propitious situation, which probably meant they were untrackable, anyone following them defeated by ley lines and for all she knew, modern technology.

She let him take charge, because she felt his need, his yearning to do so, but she was no passive partner. He slid his pants down his legs, dragging his underwear down with them, then turned to do the same for her. But he took his time, undoing her pants carefully, kissing every inch of flesh revealed by the slowly lowered zip.

When he realized she had gone commando, his low groan fed her need for him. He wanted her. She smiled, pure, feminine power over her man. "I heard the commotion from the bathroom, so I didn't waste any more time." I slung on the first clothes I touched."

"But you stopped to put on a bra."

"I already had that on."

He smiled, an intimate sharing, then closed his eyes. "You smell so good, I could spend all night down here."

"Don't."

"Maybe not *all* night." He bent, and she forgot what she was about to say when he touched his tongue to the edge of her cleft.

"Andreas!"

"Sweet," was her only answer, as he shoved her pants aside to reach her. He slid them down her legs, and returned immediately to her, this time opening her with his thumbs, staring down at what he'd revealed. "You're erect. Beautiful."

No one had ever described her in that way but she felt her clit straining for his touch. She didn't have to tell him what she wanted, but she did anyway. "Andreas, kiss me there. Please."

"You don't have to say 'please.'" With a suddenness that made her gasp, sucking air deep into her lungs, he dove and sucked.

The strong pull sent waves of pure wanting through her entire being, making her shout her need, and before she quite realized what was happening, she climaxed, the waves shooting up inside her, her whole body contracting around him, answering his strong suction with pulses of easement.

All too soon it was over, but he didn't stop, continuing his caresses, pausing to lap at her, tracing her deepest creases with his tongue, plunging inside her.

When she felt the suction again it was deep in her and outside her, his mouth wide, covering her clit and her vagina, drawing both deep into him.

God, you taste so good! I can't get enough of you!

She was beyond anything beyond an elementary, *Bite, bite!*

His fangs responded. She felt their sharp edges, grazing her sensitive skin and she moaned, encouraging him to move, to take her.

I can't stop this, what have you done?

Do it!

He'd never done this with anyone else? Before her confused thoughts could coalesce, she felt his teeth enter her, graze her. She knew he drew blood, but she trusted him, as she had with her throat. He wouldn't hurt her. The intimate sting of his teeth jolted her into another climax, higher and sharper than the last one.

He lifted his head, licking her, and she felt his panic.

She lifted a shaky hand to reach down and touch his shoulder. "No, Andreas that was right. We share blood in intimate places. Lick it clean, darling. I'll heal in no time. You're so good at this, I don't think I can stand any more."

He stayed where he was, lying between her legs until he saw her cuts healing. She saw them in his mind, cruel slices, healing as quickly as he made them and she knew he needed to see for himself. The blood aided the joining. It needed to be done, but he didn't know that.

Hell, she hadn't until just now!

Was it true, then? Was there some kind of bonding vampires did with each other? No one had told her, and she thought she knew everything about the ancient lore.

He moved slowly up the bed until he could look into her eyes. "You're right. There isn't a bonding ceremony, only something that happens over time. Cristos told me there was no such thing. Only love and the physical attraction of one person for another. That was good, wasn't it?" She nodded. "It felt right to me. I have to let you do it to me?"

"Only if you want to." She lifted her hand to push it into his thick, dark hair, the strands falling silkily around her fingers. "I want to, but not yet. I need you more. Love me, Andreas."

He took her mouth and she felt her taste, the metallic taste of blood mixed with her own juices. He slipped down her wet opening, his cock sliding into her as though it belonged there, as though it was coming home.

Which it was. They fitted together like the interlocking parts of a puzzle ring, coming together as though being apart was an unnatural state. He filled her completely, and she felt his balls nestle against her perineum and ass, caressing her sensitive flesh, before he withdrew to impale her again, slowly, sensationally.

When he drew back from their kiss his eyes opened, as did hers, and they watched each other as he slowly withdrew and thrust, withdrew and thrust. They needed no words, no verbal communication of any kind, only the shared experience, him in her, she in him.

She felt his reaction and hers, doubled, tripled with the synergy of awareness. They took each other higher, with only the gentle movement of thrust and retreat, her legs wide and accepting, her body tilted up for him. They never lost eye contact as their shared climax slowly built and time ceased to exist. His thrusts deepened and increased in power but there was no abrupt passion, only that slow, inevitable building to a peak neither imagined, neither believed existed before.

Until they built up to a spiraling, inescapable consummation, soaring above and beyond, into each other, deeply sharing until they truly became one being, sharing one unbelievable climax.

Roz wasn't sure when it ended, but she found herself in his arms, lying nestled closely to him, on the soft cream coverlet of his large, welcoming bed. "Did I sleep?"

"Hmm? I don't know. Maybe. Maybe I did, too. Does it matter?"

"Not really. Andreas?"

"Yes, sweet?"

"What happened then?"

He grunted. "Something wonderful. I don't know what to call it, precisely, but I'm not sure I care. Only that I want it to happen again. Sometime."

"Me too."

"Sometime soon."

"Yeah." She kissed his nipple, and felt his instant response. "You taste good."

"Good doesn't begin to describe the way you taste." He stroked her shoulder and back. "Roz, this is new to me."

"To me as well." Shock arced through her when she realized how true this was.

Had she been kidding herself when she thought John had been her one true love? Andreas had made her feel things John never had, but he still held a place in her heart nobody ever reached. At least, not until now.

Still unsure about the way she felt, she lifted herself on one elbow and watched his eyes soften and his free hand go to her breast, to caress it gently. She had to tell him.

"What is it?"

She might have known he'd notice the change in her mind. The easiest way to tell him would be mind to mind, but it would also be unfair to both men. Andreas should never see her images of herself and John, and a man of John's generation would be betrayed by the sharing of such intimate memories.

"There is a place in my mind forever closed to you, as it should be."

He tensed, and his hand fell away from her. His gaze sharpened. "Tell me."

He suspected someone else. He was right, but the someone else wasn't a rival to him. They were such different men, but they had similarities. She hoped the similarities went as deep as she suspected.

"Yes. Let me tell you in my own time, in my own way. Please."

He sighed. "Does this mean you want me to wait until you're ready? Roz, I knew there was something between us, and you just confirmed it. I'll wait, but if you make me wait much longer, it will drive a fence between us."

"I know." She rested her hand on his chest, more because she had to touch him than from desire. "Just let me begin where I need to, and try to explain to you."

"Okay. Shoot."

And as though she had shot him for real, she saw pain enter his eyes and she hated herself for what she was about to tell him.

"Andreas, I was born British, at the height of the British Empire. In 1852."

He smiled. "You told me how old you are."

She lifted her hand and gently pressed her fingers against his lips. He half closed his eyes then kissed them, but didn't say anything when she drew them away.

"I lived a quiet spinster life for my first fifty years, and with the turn of the new century, I decided on a new life, so I disappeared from my old haunts and became a secretary in Liverpool. It was going really well until 1914. I lived through a terrible World War and saw my country brought low by it." She heard the British accent creeping through her educated American accent and relaxed into it. The better to convince him. "I decided to 'die' early, so I could start again. I'd seen too much, and I wanted to start again. It was easier then. I moved cities that was all, from Liverpool to London and began as a young woman with a family in the north. We began to recover, but by the time prosperity began to return, and other times I never want to remember, we were at war again. Most of us knew, Talents and others, that we were headed for another conflict.

"In 1932, when I was ostensibly twenty-three years old, working as a secretary in the City of London for a company of lawyers, I met a young lawyer of great promise called John Templeton."

He knew, he knew then, and his eyes flattened as he drew his thoughts together, from post sexual relaxation to full awareness, but she couldn't stop. She had to tell him everything, now, or he would wonder, would remember. The whole story. "We fell in love. My family wanted me to have an affair, to indulge myself and then leave, because John was a mortal. I thought I knew better, and I married him. I told him what I was before we married, and I was terrified of losing him. He was so conventional, but so passionate about the causes he believed in. But he was braver and wiser than I gave him credit for and he accepted me for what I was. He understood that I would not age as he did, and he forbade me to take on that burden. I respected his wish, and accepted it. He told me to go on, to live my natural lifespan, and when he heard about the donor scheme, he demanded I never volunteer for it, to let another young couple take my Gift from me. He couldn't bear it, he said, if I allowed anyone to take the life out of me, to make me suffer." She gazed down at Andreas, and saw the same integrity in him. "I think you would have liked each other, had you met. I could almost wish you had met." She felt him wince, but he kept his gaze on hers, kept his mind quiet, although she felt violent emotion suddenly rise and just as suddenly banked. His control surprised her. For such a young vampire, Andreas had resources some of her elders never developed. This took real strength, to hear her talk about the man she had loved and lost. Her husband. She swallowed.

"But the revelation created a wedge that slowly drove us apart. He was a man of great truth, so when he fell, he fell hard and painfully. John fell in love with someone else, someone I only knew by sight, the wife of a colleague. Small, blond, sweet. She fell for him. But they never did anything about it." She fought back her own pain, so effortlessly recreated by the articulation. She'd never told anyone about this before. It hurt more than she'd imagined, even after all this time. "In those days, people didn't. She was married, so was he. It hurt so much to see him look at her at social functions, the only places they allowed themselves to be together once they realized how they felt." She blinked back her tears. "I offered him a divorce, but it was no use. He still loved me, he said, and her husband wouldn't have divorced her. It would have damaged his career as a family lawyer, destroyed two families. I said they could have an affair, I would go away for a while, or 'die,' and he would be free. He wouldn't hear of it. He cried, said he'd get over it. For a while we worked at what we had, and we were happy. When we married, I told him

about my probable infertility, and he accepted it, but I think after a few years that made him unhappy, too. Men have biological clocks, too. He would have loved children, I'm sure of it."

She no longer tried to blink back her tears, they came too fast for that, trickling down her cheeks and dripping on to his chest, sticking his chest hairs to his skin. She looked down and concentrated on the effect, hoping she would stop soon. "Late in 1939, he came home and told me he'd signed up. In September, Britain had declared war against the Nazi menace. In December, he joined the Air Force. He had a private pilot's license, rare in those days, and he felt he could do his duty better as an airman than a lawyer. We were all filled with loyalty, a desire to get this over quickly and stop the Nazis taking over Europe. We didn't realize what it would cost us, least of all me." She lifted her gaze to his face. What she saw there stopped her breath. He felt her pain, even though hearing of her love for another man must hurt him, he still felt for her first.

"He died?"

"He died in the Battle of Britain. Shot down. When I heard the news, I wanted to give up. I felt guilty for everything, our marriage, his death and then the woman who loved him killed herself. I know that it wasn't my fault, but at the time that was what I felt. And I'd promised I wouldn't give myself up to the donor scheme. That's when I made the promise to the Gardiners."

His gaze sharpened.

"They provided a Gardiner man for me, a nice man, one who might not bring me the heights of love, but I didn't want that. I didn't want anyone. So I told him to wait. He agreed. I emigrated to the US after the war, I wanted, needed to start again. He came over, too, not because of me, but because he felt, as so many of us did, that we needed to start anew. We'd seen too much. It wasn't a good time to be born in Europe, not a good time to live, and we'd had enough." She swallowed. "Bill died last year."

They stared at each other, naked in mind and body. She held nothing back except the very private thoughts she'd shared with John, things it wouldn't be right to share with anybody else.

"He was one of the San Francisco vampires, wasn't he?"

She met his gaze fearlessly. "Yes, he was." She kept still, watching his face. "We never loved each other, but neither of us wanted that. He'd lost a mortal wife. The family thought they were doing us both a favor, and giving us a chance to make a child together, and we agreed, always putting off the marriage, busy with other things, other people. When he was killed, they agreed it was my right to help in the search for his killers, but they want to hold me to my promise and they've provided someone else for me. I promised to marry a Gardiner, and they want that. They do care, Andreas, truly, but some of them are stuck in their ways, for all they live in this new country."

"Yeah. But they're not having you."

She waited, watching the bleak expression in his eyes morph into a new, fierce one.

"For now, you're mine. Especially after tonight."

His grip on her strengthened, his fingers biting into her hips. She felt the edge of his claws, before he retracted them. In a vampire, a possessive gesture of claiming. Filled with wonder, she said; "You still want me?"

"I still want you. We're here, you want me, I feel a pull towards you I've never felt with anyone else before." With one hand he stroked up her back, smiling at her shiver of response. "Everything's against us. My lack of family, our respective ages, my job, your past, but I still feel it. I don't know what it is, and I don't want to call it love. Not yet. I've

known you for six months, but all you knew was that office wolf, so you can't say you know me."

She leaned down to kiss his chin. "Can't I? Can't I get to know you better while we call it love?"

"No." Gently he put his hand under her chin and pushed her head up, so she met his gaze once more. "I don't want you hurt again. What you just told me makes me even more determined. If we part, then we do so with goodwill and friendship on both sides. If we let our feelings run away with us, call it something it isn't, then we risk losing that. I want to know you for a long time, Roz." He stroked her cheek, caressed her shoulder, curving his hand around her. "You're a fiery, precious jewel of a woman, vampire or no, your essence blazes through you. I don't want to damage that."

She laughed, and he raised a quizzical eyebrow. "What is it?"

"When I came to America, I changed my name. I really wanted to start fresh. I kept Templeton in honor of John, changed it from my maiden name of Gardiner. But I changed my first name, I told you before. I was christened Ruby."

His laughter joined hers, easing her pain.

He'd never brought anyone here before. Partly because he hadn't owned this lovely house for long, partly because Utah was so far from New York, so he would have to be sure of the woman before they took the journey here.

Partly, of course, because he'd never dated a vampire before. He wondered how Roz would feel about that.

He saw her as woman first, vampire second. He didn't know how she'd feel about that, either. She seemed to think of herself the other way around. "I hadn't realized before how much the name Ruby suits you." He stroked down her flank, unable to resist the feel of her skin under his palm. "All fire and sparkle."

"Thank you." Mischief still making her eyes shine, she moved a little, making her breasts jiggle enticingly. Andreas usually went for the tall, skinny types, the small-breasted, tiny-waisted models. He'd wanted Svetlana Yevchenko, and until recently had hoped he could lure the sexy shapeshifter into his bed for some mutual pleasure, but he'd given that up the moment his eyes had first lit on Roz's lush, enticing curves. Full breasts, a luscious bottom that reminded him of a ripe peach, smooth, silky skin. All he'd always wanted but hadn't realized he wanted until he saw her.

She could call it what she liked, as long as she didn't leave him. He'd call it love.

When he glanced up at her face, he knew she'd noticed his admiring gaze, which wasn't surprising, since he hadn't tried to hide it.

The surprise came when she reached for his hands and pushed them above his head. The movement brought her breasts to hang enticingly in front of his face, so he accepted the offering and lifted up to take a nipple into his mouth, caressing it with his tongue. He loved her response, loved the feel of her nipple peaking against the roof of his mouth, sucked harder.

She shuddered, but drew a shaky breath to say, "My turn, vampire. My turn now. Keep your hands there. Let me play."

He would have given her the earth, if he could. But she didn't know that, not yet. For now he obeyed her instructions, and let her play.

She curled one hand around his erection, smiling at his resultant groan, and gently

massaged. Up and down, up, down, Christ, he didn't know how long he'd hold out, especially when she licked first one nipple, then the other. She lingered to suck, as he'd sucked her a moment before, and made a sound of appreciation that nearly broke his resolve. But he'd promised. He gritted his teeth on the pleasure.

He hadn't realized his stomach and hips could be so sensitive, and then she was there. Nearly. She paused to kiss his navel, curl her tongue briefly inside, then work down the line of hair that led to his cock.

"Please!" was all he could manage by then.

"Oh don't worry," she murmured, her hot breath inciting him. "I'm there."

The head of his cock bobbed just below his navel, stronger and longer than he could remember it being before. The only thought that prevented him coming when she just touched the tip of her tongue to the eye at the tip was the reminder that if he survived this, he'd be inside her sooner.

Now, please, now.

She picked up his thought, and chuckled, leaning back and smiling at him. "You called me beautiful. This, Andreas, is beautiful." She spread some of the moisture over the tip before bending, mouth wide.

He felt the heat of her breath before he felt any touch. He was convinced he was about to die in the instant before she closed her lips around the head of his penis.

It had never felt so sensitive before, ever. He jackknifed, forcing himself deeper into her mouth, too far gone to apologize. He'd say sorry later. But she didn't seem upset. Instead, when his ass cleared the bed, she slipped her hand underneath and cupped his buttocks. The sting of her fangs added to his mounting ecstasy.

Now he would die. He was certain.

But he didn't, and by gritting his teeth against the rapture shimmering through his body, he didn't come.

She released him after one long lick right up his length, but she hadn't finished. He nearly came from the wicked look she cast him when she pushed on his buttocks. "Over!"

After she flipped him, she slipped her hand underneath, to grasp his cock when he landed face-down on the bed. He groaned. *You're killing me!*

If you come, we'll have to wait.

Wanna bet? By now he was certain once wouldn't be enough. Or even twice.

What she did next he wouldn't have credited.

Andreas had never been attracted to men sexually. If anyone could be said to be straight, it was Andreas Constant, something that had caused him the occasional pang of regret. He'd turned down several scenes he knew he wouldn't enjoy, but knew the other participants would.

But when Roz tongued him, he learned what he'd been missing. This time he did cry out, an exclamation of surprise and delight, wordless, ringing around the quiet room.

She flipped him again. He stared at her, heavy-eyed with passion and could only voice one word. "Please!"

Lifting up, she poised herself, holding his cock ready for her. He nearly wept with desperation, but she wanted this, he felt her pleasure flood him, flowing from her open body and her equally open mind. Agony. Ecstasy.

He fisted his hands to stop pushing up into her wet welcome. She wanted to take him, not the other way around.

She took him. His relief was almost unbearable. When he felt her close around him, taking him in with one deep plunge, his groan came from deep inside, close to where their

bodies joined.

When they were completely joined, his balls touching her backside, she leaned forward, stretching out on top of him, he curled his hand around her neck and kissed her, taking her with his mouth as thoroughly as she was taking him below.

Your turn. Her mind caressed his, as her breasts caressed his chest. He didn't need her to tell him twice, but turned so he was on top. But she had another surprise for him. As he plunged deep into her welcoming body, he felt her curl her hands around his buttocks again. *Oh yeah, hold on tight!*

That wasn't her intention. Now he realized why she'd licked him when she inserted the tip of her finger and twisted. "Argh!"

"Tell me if you don't like it." She hadn't spoken until now, but their communication had been profound, for all that. "We used to call it the French way, back then."

Wow, they'd been wilder than he'd imagined back in the day. God, this was better, deeper. "Ohhhhhhh!" The sound left his mouth as his body shuddered in response.

"So that means you like it?" Her mouth curved in a sexy grin, and he couldn't bear not plundering her in every way he knew, so he took her lips, plunged his tongue inside, swept her up as she devoured him. He'd never been closer to anyone, never trusted anyone this much, or wanted anyone to trust him with as much fervor. Her finger, a tingling stimulation, drove him on better than anything he'd known before. He pushed, felt her passage walls contract, knew she was climaxing and felt like every dominant male since life began.

He drew away and murmured to her. "That's it, baby, that's it, come for me, I'll take you there, oh yes!"

She arched up, would have thrown him off had he not been expecting it, her movements only driving him on, giving her no mercy, taking her release and making it his, their combined heat blossoming inside them until it became unbearable.

And exploded in a combination that was more than one plus one, brighter, higher, than either had known before.

Andreas knew nothing for minutes, or perhaps hours. He had enough thought left to roll his weight off Roz, but he didn't let her go. He doubted he ever would, now.

He opened his eyes to find her watching him. He smiled back and touched his lips briefly to hers.

"We have a choice," he said in a voice that sounded strangely rusty. "We can sleep, or we can shower, change the sheets and sleep."

"Mmm," was her only response. "Can we decide in a few hours?"

It sounded good to him. Snuggling her close to his side, he closed his eyes.

Even sleeping was better with Roz.

Chapter Twelve

Sheets changed, freshly showered, they faced each other in the dark hour before dawn. She wore a robe several sizes too big for her. He wore a cheap suit, the artificial fibers gleaming slightly in the cold glimmer of a table lamp. He reached out to take her hand. He would go into the DIB, and she would go home to change. But she didn't want to leave him.

"Will George and Mike still be there?"

"I doubt it, but I won't go back with them. Not now. If they take me, I'll just come straight back."

His smile held tender warmth. For her. After last night, they had grown closer, allowed themselves to link deeper. No secrets. "There might be danger for you, if they find out we're involved. If they've found me someone else they'll want me to go back, and when I refuse, they'll want to know why."

"Tell me why."

She swallowed and told him the truth. "Before I met you I wanted to live my life on my terms, despite that stupid promise. Now I want more. I think I want you."

His tender expression told her more than she needed to know. "*I know* I want you. But you're not sure, are you?"

He understood. Not many men she knew would even bother to try to understand. "I'm scared, Andreas. I've never felt like this, not ever." She'd felt something like it once, and her fear was more instinctual than reasoned, and so harder to cope with.

"Tell you what. Let's take it as it comes. Day by day." He was willing to wait for her. Gratitude swept through her.

"Yes, please."

A harder look entered his eyes. "But one more thing. They'll be here for revenge, as well."

She turned aside with a muttered curse word. "Why didn't I think of that? Of course they are! They'll want the people who murdered my cousins, but they don't want to ask questions."

"We do, the Department does. We need to find out what these people know, strip their minds, if we have to."

"Does that make the Department as bad as they are?"

He shrugged. "After what I saw last year I can't bring myself to care too much about that. We'll take all the information we can, use whatever it takes, then wipe their memories. But with your kin after them, we could offer them a deal and find them new identities. Use the Gardiners as a threat, make them think they're Mafia, or something like that." He seemed sanguine but the thought shocked her as the simple revenge scenario had not. She had grown up with that, but the other was new to her. He drew her closer, and she went, nestled against him to take what comfort she could. "We have to know, sweetheart, not just for vampire society but for all of us. And if your relatives run amok and destroy the people in a bloodbath, who's to know what's behind it all? Who is behind it all? I know Cristos must suspect this conspiracy is more than nationwide, because I do, and I haven't half his reasoning power. It goes deep. It could take us years to flush it all out, if we can. If we can't, we have to consider coming out of the vampire closet."

She shuddered. "I don't want to be different."

"Very few people do. In a world that differentiates people by the color of their skin, how do you think we'll fare? We just have to consider it, that's all. And we have to do it by common agreement, not Talent by Talent."

"It's not a good idea."

"I know." They thought of the dangers. They made superb weapons, ones that world powers would destroy much to get hold of. Kill for. That made them targets as well. Every Talent would fight to prevent that.

He kissed the top of her head. "We're a long way off that. Let's fight day by day, and together."

"Together." She looked up with a smile and he took her mouth in a long, tender embrace before lifting his head to gaze into her eyes. "Breakfast."

"Breakfast."

Over a breakfast of thawed-out frozen waffles and none-too-fresh coffee, which nevertheless tasted better than any breakfast she could remember, she brought up the subject of Ellie. "Do you think the same thing happened to her as happened to you? Someone wiped her memories and set her loose on the streets?"

He paused, swirling his remaining coffee around the mug. "Probably. More than probably. Whoever did the job on us was careful to take every personal memory but leave us with schooling and the means to get on with our lives. We were both discovered on the streets of New York, but at least I knew what I was. Ellie knew, but she believed all the old legends. Thought she was some kind of mutant because she couldn't turn into a bat." He lifted the pot and gave them both a refill. "Poor kid. She took far more blood than she needed, even as a young vampire she didn't need a pint at a time. It made her ill, overtaxed her system, which convinced her even more that she was some kind of vampire freak." He smiled, softly and Roz felt him remembering. "Laurie Friedland brought her into the Department, but he's not based in New York, so I took her on. I couldn't foster her, my job took me away too much and she needed stability, but I took an interest. There's a strong bond between us." He met her gaze over the rim of his mug, the steam from the freshly poured coffee making his eyes shimmer in the heat. "Not like ours."

"She thinks so." Roz pushed her plate away, replete.

He quirked a brow. "She's too young. She can't be more than fifteen."

"Fifteen year olds tend to be very intense. And she's intelligent, and Cristos trusts her. To have such a powerful — person take an interest has probably pushed her to think of herself as older than she actually is. Who's to say she isn't?"

He frowned, thinking back. "Vampires only show their true nature at puberty. That would put her to about thirteen or fourteen when Laurie found her. She had memories going back a year, and they included a sense of taking blood for the first time, of it all being new. Not implanted memories. The doctors confirmed it, from her physical make-up. We could be a year out, but not much more than that. She's a child, Roz, a little sister."

Roz reached for her coffee. "Andreas, think of the difference in our ages. She can realistically expect to be ready for you in two years, maybe three. There's hardly any difference at all between you, in vampire terms. I've seen the way she looks at you."

Alarm filled his eyes, his mind and he reached for her free hand. "Do you think of yourself as too old for me? Is it too much?"

Instantly she shook her head. "No, no way. We're—linked, in a way I don't quite understand."

His thumb stroked her palm, unable to stop caressing her, touching her. "I don't

want to make you into something you don't want to be. Would your family laugh?"

"Not at all. My father was a couple of hundred years older than my mother. It didn't matter one bit, not to them and not to the family. Of course, consanguinity isn't allowed. You can't join with your father or your brother, if you're lucky enough to have one, but apart from that, no, Andreas."

He sighed in relief. "We have enough to face without that. I don't want to cause you any problems with your family."

She smiled wryly. "Oh, you'll do that all right. But it's about time the Gardiners were shaken up a little."

Chapter Thirteen

Roz wanted to stay at the Utah house and never go back. She felt an air of timelessness there, completely lacking in New York, a city she usually loved. She enjoyed the bustle, the big city feel, the way she could be surrounded and yet totally alone.

She wasn't alone any more, and she wasn't sure she wanted to be. The thought disturbed her. Since John died, she'd taken pains not to get involved with any man, taking good sex for what it was, never tempted to read more into it than that. But last night with Andreas, she had gone further. His tender lovemaking had drawn out more than she'd realized, and now it was too late. She admitted more than a fondness for him, but didn't dare attribute more. Too early in the relationship, too painful, not enough in common.

Even to herself these sounded like feeble excuses.

Walking up to the Department, she noticed security measures had increased. Sorcerers stood by the entrances, scanning everyone who came in, swiftly moving from one mind to the other. No one seemed surprised or alarmed, even the mortals. This enclave, where Talents were accepted prosaically took some getting used to, after years of careful concealment.

Inside, her senses picked up anxiety and an alertness unusual even for Department 57. As soon as she entered, Diane walked swiftly up to her. "Fabrice has gone."

Roz frowned. "Gone? Where?"

"We don't know," came a deep voice from behind her. Cristos. "He's been kidnapped. I've called an emergency conference. You can bring Andreas up to speed later, I need him to stay where he is."

Later, in her apartment, Roz faced the necessity of telling Andreas. He'd brought the other member of the team, a shapeshifting basilisk called, incongruously, Candy, to meet her. Candy wore a lime green, form-fitting top and a tiny black miniskirt. Her nails were long, and bore a dazzling manicure, blue with moons and stars. Her fine blond hair was cut in a jagged bob.

Basilisks, in their other form, were gray and shapeless. Their only beauty, if it could be called that, was their eyes, but to look a basilisk in the eye meant death.

When she looked away, Candy laughed harshly. "I wear contacts in my human form."

Neither Don nor Nancy were present. Once Roz had told them about Fabrice's disappearance, they had volunteered to help in the search, so Nancy was doing extra research work, and Don was out in the field, both searching for the missing Sorcerer. Cristos had told her that Andreas and Fabrice were close. She already knew that. It just made it harder to tell him, but tell him she must.

"Fabrice is missing. Someone has kidnapped him."

Silence, for a single, fraught moment, but she felt Andreas's mind spin with the turmoil the news brought him. "Andreas, I'm sorry."

Blindly, he reached for her and without hesitation she went, allowing him to fold her in his arms, knowing his instinctive desire to keep her safe. If Fabrice could be kidnapped,

any of them could.

It was how the nightmare in San Francisco had begun last year, when Talents had begun to disappear from the area and it had become obvious they'd been taken against their will. She felt his chill, but it only added to her own foreboding. His body held no warmth for her, not now. Only fear had a place in her heart, though whether it was for herself or for him, she couldn't say.

"How do they know?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"He didn't come in this morning, so Cristos sent someone around to his hotel. They got the passkey and went in to his room. Fabrice isn't very tidy, apparently, and there were no obvious signs of struggle, but there was an untouched tray of food on the table. We think room service delivered more than a meal. Nobody could reach him, although we tried. We'd already linked with him, Domenico and me, so we tried every way we knew to trace him."

"God!"

She felt his thought. "Yes. They could have used too strong a drug, if they thought he was a Talent. He's mortal, for all his abilities. But if they'd killed him, they would have left him, or dumped him somewhere. So far, no NYPD officer has found a body. Cristos put out an alert, so the cops are looking for Fabrice too, dead or alive."

Candy walked to the window and stood with her back to them. "I've known Fabrice a long time," she said, in a voice completely devoid of humor or even liveliness. "If he's dead, whoever killed him is also dead. I will personally see to it."

She turned around, her grim face a contrast to the carefully applied make up and frivolous clothes. Roz saw the basilisk glint through the human form, a great, gray, terrifying form. "Where do we start?"

Roz hugged Andreas tighter, as though to reassure herself that he was safe. "Cristos wants you to accelerate your search. No subtlety any more. We need to find the spies. They're the prime suspects, the only ones we have. Andreas, you and I are to act as bait." She addressed Candy. "Andreas has been seen out with Fabrice, everyone who might have been watching Fabrice will be aware of him, so he wants Andreas out and about, especially in the places he met Fabrice. I'm backup, and when Nancy returns, so is she, as well as Domenico."

"I found a leak today," Candy said tonelessly. "I wish I'd known about this earlier, but I only found the irregularity late this afternoon. I'm going back. I'll tell them I'm doing overtime." She walked to the door, paused to take them both in. "You two take care. Contact me if you need me. I'll be there in a minute. You hear?"

They nodded and Candy left the apartment.

"She's exhausted," Andreas said, his arms still tight around Roz. "But she's tough. I met Candy in San Fran last year. Cristos brought her in because she's never worked in New York before, and so they wouldn't know her. Besides, she's immensely powerful."

"Candy?" Roz could hardly believe a being with the power of a basilisk would use such a playful name.

"Yeah. She said a basilisk is almost colorless and boring, so she makes up for it in her human form. And she wasn't born Candy. Any more than you were born Roz."

"I wonder what made her change her name?"

He stared down at her face. "I don't know. It might have been boredom." Suddenly, as though the words were torn out of him, he asked, "Do you still miss him?"

She couldn't lie to him. "Yes, I always will. I will always love him, too. But what we have is different, Andreas. You're not a rival."

His mouth covered hers in a sudden, passionate kiss, his tongue driving into her as though he needed to link them, and she felt his mind in hers, surrounding her, caressing her. He wanted her, but not in a loving way, as he'd taken her last night. It was more of a need, a basic requirement to assure himself she was safe, and here. She felt the same, but they couldn't take time out to satisfy their urges now.

He knew as well as she did. "We have to go."

"Domenico and I read each other deeper than usual. We aren't taking any chances. Nancy and I are already deeply linked. She'll join us when she can."

He hugged her close. "I know you're an agent, I know you're older than I am and probably a more powerful vampire, but I can't help it. I want to keep you safe, to lock you up somewhere and take care of you."

She chuckled into his chest. His concern for her warmed her. And she doubted she was more powerful than he was. As a young vampire, he might need to feed more frequently but his prowess probably equaled hers, his training making up for his relative lack of experience. Her family's desire to lock her away was proprietorial. His was purely from his concern for her. His care. His—

She broke off her thoughts, aware he was with her, knowing her, but not reading her. His respect for her privacy sometimes took her breath away. Very few vampires paused to consider if sometimes thoughts were private ones.

"What do we do now?"

He took a deep breath. "We go look for him. He's my friend, Roz, not just a work colleague. Tell me what Cristos said, and what he thinks. Or rather, what he told you he thinks. Machiavelli could have taken lessons from Cristos." He paused. "He probably did."

"Cristos thinks the DIB might be involved. I sensed someone else that night when you met Fabrice at the nightclub, and we never found out who it was, but it could have been a DIB agent. Candy's found something, an abnormality. Could be the source of the leak. And Bernard Knox knows far more than he should. So Cristos wants you to go in and back Candy up while she does an in-depth search of the DIB's computers."

"What about the trail? I know him better than anyone. Cristos must know I'll go looking for him anyway."

"He knows. He says report to him after work." She lifted her head and put her hand gently on his cheek. "Fabrice may be a mortal but his mental powers are far beyond anything we can muster. If they've knocked him out, they'll have to revive him to let him eat and drink, or at least to pee. He'll get in touch. I'm sure he will."

She turned his lips into the palm of his hand. "What if he's already dead?"

"Is he?" Roz gazed up at him and held her breath. If Andreas couldn't sense Fabrice at all, then the chances were they were too late. But if a research facility had captured Fabrice, they would want him alive. It was their only hope.

A fraught minute passed, where Roz didn't dare interrupt Andreas as he turned his thoughts inward. "I don't think so," he said at last. "If Fabrice is dead, I'd feel a void. I feel an absence, I can't contact him and I don't think he's conscious, but I don't think he's dead. I'm almost sure of it."

Roz breathed out in relief. "Then we'll find him. We have to."

Andreas went into the DIB the next morning heavyhearted. A long, exhausting and

noisy tour of New York's hotspots the night before had resulted in nothing. No one followed them, no one took any interest in them. He'd have been better spending the night in bed with Roz. Much better.

Even Roz couldn't help him lift the feeling of deep foreboding and depression that sank in on him. He couldn't feel Fabrice at all, though he'd tried many times throughout the night. But he couldn't feel an absence, either. If Fabrice was dead, he would feel a void, rather as though a tooth had been pulled, something missing in the place where Fabrice would be, but that was absent.

Anything was better than that.

He dragged his chair back and sat down, automatically booting up his computer before contacting Candy. He felt good having the freedom back.

Good morning. Is anything doing?

Oh yeah. Get over here, Constant.

Candy had an cubicle at the other end of the office to Andreas, and for a change he hurried there instead of taking his time. Curious gazes followed his swift progress, but he didn't care. This assignment was coming to an end, and soon. He wouldn't be here tomorrow, if he had any say in the matter. He'd be out looking for Fabrice.

Candy wasted no time telling him. "I think we're wasting our time here," she said, tapping the screen.

Andreas stared at rows of numbers. "I found something and I've taken it apart. The security here is pathetic, just pathetic. It took me an hour." She made a sound of exasperation. "See this? It's a loop. It's using this department to bounce off, and to make it look like the DIB is the origin of the leak. It isn't."

"Jesus!" Andreas stood and glanced over the cubicle next to him. Candy gave a short, mirthless laugh. "Don't worry, I checked. Nobody can overhear us if we keep it quiet."

He extended his senses. She was right, nobody was nearby. He should have done that from the start, but he'd trained himself to close down while he was in the DIB. Now there was no need, but old habits were hard to break.

He turned his attention back to Candy. The same manicure job as the day before, he noted, and not a nail chipped. "We're wasting our time here. There's nobody here who can harm us. The threat's coming from outside."

"Except Bernard Knox wants us to investigate the Department. Why would he do that?"

"Presumably the same people who've used this network as a router have told him to watch us."

This operation wasn't quite over yet. "So we need to know who told him."

Candy glanced up at him and what she saw made her blue eyes soften in sympathy. She laid one of those carefully manicured hands over his, where he'd braced himself on her desk to lean over her to look at her screen. "I'm really sorry about Fabrice. I never knew him, but you did, didn't you?"

"I guess you could call him my best friend."

Her eyes widened slightly. "Not another...?" Even with no one listening she didn't risk using the word, but he heard it whispered into his mind.

Vampire.

But the word held no threats for him. "No. I'm an orphan, brought up on the outside. Fabrice was — *is* — my best friend. No question."

"Then I'm even more sorry."

"Thank you."

They both sensed someone approaching. Candy minimized the window on her screen, leaving a desktop adorned by a semi-nude Hugh Jackman.

The person stopped and Andreas looked around. Stacy, the woman he'd begun his campaign here with. He must have been too good, because she hadn't given up on him yet. "Nice! Have you got a copy of that?"

"Sure, I'll email you one."

"Thanks." Still she paused and Candy took her hand off Andreas's and swung her chair around to confront the leggy blond. "Was there something else?"

"Only that Bernard was looking for Andreas a while back. Have you seen him yet, Andreas?"

With a muffled curse, Andreas made for the entrance. "I should have seen him first thing. What with one thing and another, I forgot."

Stacy followed him. "Why do you bother? I thought you liked Roz, but she's hardly been out the office a week and you're hitting on somebody else. Why waste your time with her?"

"Why? Don't you think she's attractive?"

Stacy let her eyelids droop and trailed one hand down his shirt, lightly tracing his chest with her nails before looking up at him through her lashes. "Not as attractive as you. Are you free after work?"

"I don't think so."

Stacy dropped her hand, accidentally brushing his fly on her way past and her full lips pushed out in a pout. "Tomorrow night then. Nobody will live up to me, Andreas."

Only then did he realize he'd met the female equivalent of the office wolf. The men in the office had warned him about Stacy, that she never stayed with any man for long, and he'd used that as an excuse to drop her. But it seemed she hadn't dropped him. "You don't walk away from me, Andreas. You just don't." With a wink, she turned and left him.

He watched her, a new understanding filling his mind. When he'd behaved like a wolf, moved from one woman to the next, he'd been careful not to engage them too closely, only enough to loosen their mental barriers so he could search them one-to-one. But there were people who enjoyed hurting others, who saw it as a kind of game. Stacy was undoubtedly one of those people. He'd seen it in her mind, the way she viewed him as another conquest, a thing rather than a person.

Hateful. He turned away to enter Bernard Knox's office and give him the brief report he should have delivered first thing that morning.

The early evening saw Andreas back in Department 57, after a brief phone call from Diane, summoning him. To anyone eavesdropping, it would have sounded like a call between two lovers, confirming his cover story of the affair with Diane causing his break with the Department, but she used the key words they'd agreed on at the beginning of the operation.

Candy had gone home early, saying she felt sick, much to Bernard Knox's disgust. Knox had claimed no one in the office cared about the work they did, that they were a bunch of goldbrickers. He could have been right, about most of his workers, but Andreas wasn't surprised to find Candy already in Cristos's office. So was the dragon, Domenico Serafini.

"We're changing our plans," Cristos said briefly, waving at an empty seat. Andreas took it. "I'm sending you to London, Andreas."

"London, England?" His head reeled. "Is that where they've taken Fabrice?"

Cristos shook his head. "No, we have a lead that goes there. It could be another false lead, but it's the only one we have, and so we have to follow it. I'll get a story ready for you."

Andreas made a fist. Deliberately he uncoiled his tension, forced himself to relax. He couldn't afford to lose his temper now. "I won't go until we've found Fabrice."

"He could be there. You can flash back, Andreas. I'll tell you the minute we find him."

"You need me. I'm his friend, we're close. You need someone close to him to track him." Never in his whole career had he allowed his personal feelings to interfere with doing his job, but this time Andreas was tempted. His whole being rebelled at the thought of leaving to travel half way across the world when his friend could be in danger. And what about Roz?

As though Cristos had heard the last thought, he turned to the topic. "I'll arrange for Roz to go too."

That was a relief. If she wanted to go. If she didn't...

The realization hit him like a fist to the gut. She'd never go. She left a husband there, a man she'd loved, a man who'd betrayed her and then been killed before she could come to terms with her feelings. He couldn't take her. It wouldn't be fair. Besides, the memories London would be sure to bring back to her would probably turn her against him.

"She might not want to go. Do you know her history?" He wouldn't betray her by saying it out loud.

"Shit!" Oh yes, Cristos knew all right. "I'll leave the decision up to her, then. But you, Andreas, you're under orders. I want you in London and soon. We have to start operations before they cripple us, or force us to change. We have to withdraw from society or come out and tell everyone what we are. I don't want to do either, not yet."

"When?" Domenico spread his large hands expressively. "I go along with the decision, because everyone has agreed, but not everyone will. Someday someone will announce their Talent, and prove it beyond doubt."

Cristos's mouth turned up in a sneer. Even that didn't mar the man's essential elegance. "You think they haven't tried? That's one of the things we do, monitor TV programs and the rest of the media to make sure nobody is overtly announcing what and who they are. Why do you think all communities of Talents support us? Without us, vampires and shifters would be running amok, trying to get women, riches and fame by announcing their Talents. But we either shut them down before they get that far, or we cover up the damage. It takes a lot of Sorcerers to persuade a viewing public they didn't see what they thought they saw, but they can do it. We need every Virgin Sorcerer we can find. They're the only ones with the power to do that, and we need Fabrice Germain back. He's one of the best, the very best. So you two are to concentrate on that. And you," he said, turning back to Andreas, "are to go to London."

"What is it? Afraid I'll lose it?"

When Cristos gave him that frank stare, Andreas knew he was about to hear something he'd rather not. "Frankly, yes. If you find his kidnappers, you'll kill them. You're a good field agent, Andreas. The only fault I've found in you is your quick temper, but you've always been able to control it before. I don't think you'll bother this time. And I want these people alive if possible, plausibly dead if not. Shot or wounded. Not left with

all the blood drained out of them but the one small speck that stops them turning vampire."

Andreas couldn't stop his smile of satisfaction at the thought of this scenario. He'd never killed, not that way, but this time he'd take great satisfaction in doing so.

Fuck, Cristos was right! He'd kill, and not even stop to think about it. He cared, truly cared, about very few people, but Fabrice was one of them, a man who'd gotten past all his defenses, even his indifference to other people, and become the closest friend he had.

But Cristos was another of those people, and he had no choice but to listen to him. "Andreas, listen to me. If you do that, you're dead. The vampire community will give you up as dead and hunt you down. I want Fabrice back as badly as you do, but I won't let two of my best agents die in this operation. I really do need a good agent to follow this lead. I'm setting up a team to continue in London under Will Grady, and I want you as part of it. Don't do anything stupid." He stepped away and stared out the window on to the building opposite, another rank of flat, glass windows, gleaming dully in the last light of day. "We'll find him. I swear it. And I'll tell you as soon as we do. I swear that too."

Why did he always have to be right?

Andreas's mind was definitely on other things as he packed to go to London later that evening. As fast as he could, because he needed, wanted to tell Roz, to hear her tell him she'd be there for him, that half a world was no distance for a vampire, that she would come with him.

If she came with him, he'd know she'd banished the specter of her husband, and the war that had caused her so much anguish. *Please, let her offer.*

But he wouldn't count on it and he wouldn't ask her.

When the knock came, he stopped briefly enough to scan whoever was out there before he tore open the door and dragged her inside. "What the hell are you doing here? You shouldn't be in this neighborhood alone, Ellie, God knows what might happen to you!"

The irritating child grinned up at him. "I needed to feed. Besides, I lived in this area before Laurie brought me in. When I still thought vampires turned into bats and slept in coffins, and wondered what was wrong with me."

"Sure." Not for the first time Andreas wondered at the resilience of this girl, who had lived on her own for at least twelve months as a newly mature vampire, a girl who'd done all he had, but at an earlier age and a more vulnerable sex. "Here? In Hell's Kitchen?"

"Yes. Just another skanky kid. Nobody noticed me much, and if they did, I had some supper."

"You were lucky you didn't kill anyone."

She shrugged. "Something told me not to kill, or I'd be the one to suffer. I was right, wasn't I?" She wrinkled her nose and looked around. "Eugh, it stinks in here! You don't live here?"

"No. I'm looking for a new apartment. This is temporary. You know where my real home is, Ellie."

"Utah."

"Right." He'd taken Ellie there when he'd first bought the place, but she didn't like it. The wide open spaces creeped her out, she said. It wasn't her idea of paradise. Ellie had a pleasant apartment in a respectable 'burb, one her salary from Cristos paid for, better than

most students could ever hope for. "But I need somewhere in town. Somewhere small, somewhere close to the office."

"You could sell that house and buy something really nice in Manhattan."

"Something small and pokey. I'm not rich, Ellie, any more than you are." He turned away, checking he'd put all his personal belongings in his backpack. He'd left the clean sheets on the bed, and a few things in the corner where the cooker was, the place the landlord optimistically called "the kitchen area." He'd given in his notice. No sense in staying. "You heard, then?"

"Heard what?" She scuffed the toes of her sneakers on the bare wooden floor. "I ain't been in the office today. Had lectures all day and some coursework to finish afterwards."

He sighed. He'd hoped he wouldn't have to tell her. "I'm leaving on an assignment."

"Where?"

"London. It seems the leak leads there."

"No!"

Her instinctive cry shocked him. "Hey, Ellie, distance doesn't mean that much to us. I haven't practiced flashing that far, but I will. I need to come back a lot, so I can see you and —"

"Roz?" Ellie's mouth firmed into a hard line. "Well you won't have to worry about her much longer. I saw her."

"Where?" He wasn't very concerned. Ellie wouldn't have seen much more of Roz today than he had.

"With Fabrice, earlier."

This caught him up short. He dropped the backpack, ignoring the dull thud as it hit the floor. "What are you talking about, Ellie?"

"It was real late, or early if you like." Ellie stuck her hands in her jeans pockets, staring up at his face, eyes wide and sincere. "I needed to feed, and because of Jenna's show, I left it till late. Hey, Jenna did good, she sold nearly everything she showed. The gallery wants more."

"Tell me about Roz."

Something in his tone must have warned her, because she took a step back. "Okay, okay, I was getting to that." She swallowed. "It was early this morning."

It couldn't be possible. "Go on."

Ellie took a deep breath. "She had her back to me, but I skimmed her mind and saw the sigil. It was Roz, all right. She was laughing with Fabrice, and there was a man with her, someone I don't know, but I skimmed his mind too. He was a mortal. I couldn't hear what they were saying and I didn't want to stay in anyone's mind. I didn't think anything much about it, to be honest. I was hungry, so I just went on and found someone to feed from."

"Where did you see them?"

"Seventh Avenue."

What were they doing there? It could have been anything. Just because Roz had forgotten to tell him, didn't mean she knew anything. She could have bumped into Fabrice, and stopped to chat. Perhaps she'd forgotten to mention it. Fabrice had disappeared early that morning, but they didn't yet know what time.

He had to speak to Roz before Ellie told anyone else. Had to know for sure. But if it was true, if she had something to do with Fabrice's disappearance, he'd turn her in. It

might break his heart to do it, but he would.

His mind rebelled, telling him he couldn't possibly have been so mistaken in anyone, that Roz was all he thought of her and more. He was trained to spot phonies, to read people on first meeting them, it was his job. He couldn't have let his feelings for her override his professional training. Surely he couldn't.

The more he thought about it the more the seed of doubt sent down roots into his mind. It was possible. He had to admit that. But she had to have some real reason for not telling him. She had to.

He reached out and grasped Ellie's shoulder, noting her slight flinch. Even Ellie doubted him, just for a minute, so why shouldn't he feel that nagging doubt about Roz? He'd talk to her and she'd reassure him.

"Ellie, do me a favor?"

She nodded, but bit her bottom lip as she looked at him.

"Don't tell anybody what you just told me. At least until I've seen Roz and asked her about it. Chances are it means nothing."

"At the very least it means she was one of the last people to see Fabrice before he was kidnapped. She should have told Cristos."

But she hadn't. Why not?

Reluctantly, Ellie promised to hold off telling Cristos until Andreas had seen Roz. "But we'll have to tell him soon. I only came to tell you first because—well, because you're Andreas."

He nodded. "Because we're friends, right? Good friends."

"Yeah." She smiled at him, a terrifyingly vulnerable smile he wished he hadn't seen. "Friends."

When Andreas appeared in her bedroom, Roz only just restrained herself from flying into his arms, romance style. That would have been too much, but she couldn't stop her need to see him. It scared her. He was getting too close, too fast. She didn't know him, she didn't want him that much, she couldn't.

Could she?

But when he walked to her and wrapped her in his arms she responded enthusiastically, lifting her face for a deep kiss of greeting, feeling his thoughts envelop warmly around hers, blending with them as though they were truly one.

And what he said when he finally lifted his head could have come from her own mouth. "You think there's something to all this soulmate stuff? Is there one mate just made for one person?"

It took all her strength of mind to scoff, but she managed it. "It's in all the stories, but since we're not Beauty and the Beast I think we can rest easy."

His hands were busy at the front of her blouse, slipping buttons through holes. "I don't want to rest easy. Roz, I want to be inside you. Now. Or better still, five minutes ago."

Since she felt the same way, she didn't object and since she seemed to be stripping him as fast as he was stripping her, the next few moments were taken up with the hiss of zippers, the slide of cloth and small sighs when clothing gave way to warm, living flesh.

He took a moment to step back and sweep his gaze comprehensively over her, head to foot and back again, before he surprised her by turning her around. When he stroked

down her back with the very tips of his fingers she shuddered. He let his touch wander down, past the cleft in her buttocks, lingering, then passing on until he found the bud at the front of her sex and gave it a stroke in greeting.

He drew her hard against his aroused body, his cock pushing against her bottom and lower back as though it had a mind of its own, blindly trying to find a way in, while his hands curved around the front of her body, cupping her breasts, pinching, stroking.

When he finally nipped her clit, her whole body stiffened, her head went back against his shoulder and he swooped to take her mouth once more in a swift, hard kiss. "Sweetheart, you are something else," he murmured before he drew back and entered her, so suddenly she gasped. Mind and body, he felt her welcome and willingly gave her his.

She hadn't been quite ready, so his swollen flesh pushed hers aside, forced its way in, not painfully, she was too aroused for that, but enough to tell her he was taking her in the way he wanted.

Moaning, she pressed her bottom hard against his groin, and received a gasping chuckle in return. He bit her shoulder, and his fangs grazed the sensitive place where her pulse throbbed.

"Oh yes! Take me every way you can!"

He shoved her forward, so she flung out her hands to steady her fall, and found the hard surface of the trunk at the bottom of her bed.

The trunk was low, forcing her ass way up, and into him even more. The sounds of their lovemaking, wet flesh slapping against wet flesh, drove her higher and the tingle inside began as his fingers resumed pinching and stroking her clit. His balls smacked against her upper thighs, each contact making her moan. All she could do was push back, now the trunk had given her purchase, and she bent her legs a little to increase the angle.

God, he was so deep, deeper than any man had ever been before. The unavoidable peak came closer and she concentrated on it, went deep, felt him with her.

"Roz, you are so beautiful, you should see this!"

He leaned back a little, and a vivid picture entered her mind, straight from his.

Their joining, as she'd never seen it before. His cock hammering into her, each stroke deeper, harder, penetrating her more each time, driving her up until –

"Ahhhh!"

He pierced her climax, sharp and sparkling, by leaning forward and sinking his fangs into the side of her neck.

He gave and took at the same time, bathing her in his hot sperm, drawing her blood into his body, making them one, pulsing hotly, neck and pussy, until she screamed, though whether for more or for him to stop she wasn't sure.

When he collapsed on to her, she felt his tongue, gently bathing the marks he'd just made in her neck. His tongue trembled, then he slid his arms around her and drew her to her feet. "Let's go to bed," he murmured.

He lifted her and carried her to bed, as tender now as he'd been violent a moment before, tucking her in before sliding in next to her and curling her body into his. She sighed against his shoulder, replete.

She had almost drifted off to sleep when he turned her head to face him. What she saw in his eyes tensed her anew. "I love you, Roz," he said. When she would have replied, he pressed his finger briefly against her lips. "It doesn't need an answer. It is what it is, that's all."

She smiled under his finger, and kissed it. "The feeling is entirely mutual. I love you, Andreas Constant."

His slight smile as he lowered his head to take her in a gentle, sharing kiss was one she would never forget.

They dozed, then woke and touched, instantly bringing each other to a sense of anticipation, but he paused and nestled her next to him again. "I have to ask you something." She didn't need to sense his removal from her to know it was nothing to do with their recent avowals.

"Go on."

"I have to go to London for a while."

"London, England?"

"That's the one." He watched her face anxiously. "I can flash to see you."

"You'll wear yourself out. Long distance flashing is very tiring." The news came as a shock. She needed to assimilate it, decide what to do. "How did this come about?"

"The trail from the DIB turned in on itself and then went abroad. It's only an assignment, love, I won't be there forever."

"Is it dangerous?" She pulled him closer, not wanting to think of him in peril.

"Not really, I don't think it should be any more dangerous than what I've done here. Mainly investigation, so far I've not been asked to do anything more than that."

Then maybe she should go with him. But she couldn't ask him, it would seem too needy, too much. *He* had to ask *her*.

He didn't. Either he wasn't telling her everything, that the assignment was more dangerous than he'd thought, or he wasn't as involved as he claimed. Her happiness went down a notch.

But she was a big girl, she'd get over it. Still, the niggling suspicion remained-what was he hiding? "Do you have somewhere to live?"

One corner of his mouth turned up in a gesture of resignation. "I'll find somewhere. Hopefully I won't be there long enough to put down roots." He kissed her gently. "My heart won't be there."

So he didn't expect to stay long. Still, she would have liked to have been asked. "Maybe we can take turns flashing across. All you need is a webcam."

They used webcams to send 'live' pictures. The internet was full of seemingly pointless live webcam pictures, with coded details of where the spot was.

It was the way vampires escaped too many questions.

A spark lit in Roz's mind, an idea, a thought. "Do you think—"

What she was going to say was lost in his next kiss, and her ideas flew away as he took her on another journey into passion.

No, not this time. She had just enough thought left to swing him over and sit up, triumphant, straddling his hips. She stroked her finger down the length of his nose, letting her nail prick him at the very tip. "My turn," she purred.

He looked gorgeous like this, his eyes dark with passion, his mouth slightly open, lips curved. "My pleasure. Just call me your slave."

"All right, *slave*." Chuckling, she bent forward to kiss him, but pulled back when he tried to curl his arm around the back of her head and drag her closer. "Hands behind your head."

Smiling, he lifted his arms and folded them, tucking his hands behind his neck. Then he lifted a dark brow. "What now?"

"I'm not sure."

"Then I'll just wait here until you decide, and enjoy the view." His gaze swept over her naked body.

Instead of embarrassing her, it emboldened her to see him so obviously absorbed and turned on by the sight of her body. She cupped her hands under her breasts, lifting them a little, then hoisting them higher, pushing them at him. But when he would have surged up, she leaned back, taking them just out of his reach. He could have reached her, but he sank back, laughing. "I'm putty in your hands, sweetheart."

She snuggled back, feeling his erection nestle between the cleft in her buttocks. It felt good, stimulating her sensitive skin. "It doesn't feel like putty to me."

His skin tempted her touch, and she was in no mood to resist. She began by stroking him, up and down, then tracing the muscles with the flat of her hand, pressing them when she covered his nipples, as hard as hers felt, taut and begging for attention.

She gave it, bending to suck hard at one small nipple without warning, hearing his shout of surprise, feeling his erection twitch behind her. He liked it. His shout softened into a groan. She licked around the nipple, and rose up, letting his erection through, before sinking down and taking him into her body.

A soft sigh was her reward, a sigh replete with delight, satisfaction. "Oh darling, you can make me your slave any time you want."

Looking into his eyes, she saw his soul there, and for that moment, she knew he meant every word he said. For now, he was completely hers.

And she was his.

Her turn now. Her turn to drive him crazy with wanting her. She felt him, body and mind, everything concentrated on his need, except for the part of his mind centered on her. As she moved, that part got stronger, until she felt him wanting, needing, to pleasure her.

Before he could move, she pressed the palms of his hands to his chest, pushing down. "No. This is for you. You can please me by letting me please you. Let go, Andreas. Let go."

He stared up at her before smiling and relaxing back against the pillows.

"I mean it. Stop thinking about me. Share what I'm feeling."

She felt his mind caress hers, bathing it in warmth and she laughed as she began to move again.

There was no way of counting time. It could have been minutes or hours, but her rhythm remained steady, up and down, working a regular beat, keeping her tension the same. She didn't want a quick, explosive climax, although they had their place. She wanted to feel every surge, every time her libido took another step up.

He understood, of course he did. Smiling, his eyes sparkling, he put his hands over hers, and held himself rigid for her to do whatever she wanted to him.

His growing excitement fed hers, and he took from her. Feeding and being fed, an endless circle towards a growing peak.

She felt her orgasm grow, warmth building, sparkling trails building, building, until the sudden explosion took her with it. Dimly she heard him crying her name, but she felt him in her, surrounding her, exploding with her.

For the first time in this encounter, she closed her eyes.

When she came to, she was leaning back against his upraised legs and he was still embedded inside her, though softer than he was before. He reached for her, hands open, palms uppermost, and without conscious thought she put her hands in his. He tugged her down to lay against him, moving her so she was tucked in to his side.

"That was pretty special." His voice rumbled through her body.

"Yeah."

They slept.

When they awoke, Roz had enough presence of mind to check the little digital alarm clock on her bedside table. It was still only midnight. She glanced up to find him watching her, his eyes grave. "Hey."

"Hey."

He drew her up so he could kiss her. "I've been watching you sleep."

"Good?"

"Yeah." He gave her another gentle kiss. "Hungry? I attacked you before I could ask."

She chuckled. "Now he asks! No, I don't need to feed as often as you do. I'm—"

"I know. Older. But I fed earlier tonight. I didn't want to come to you hungry. When I can go longer between feeds?"

Vampires only needed a small amount, but like a diabetic needing insulin, regularly taken. Taking blood could be deeply personal, intensely sexual, but it didn't have to be. When a vampire took blood, he could enter the mind of the donor, and most vamps tried to give something back. It could be reassurance, some kind thought, a strengthening. It didn't have to be sexual.

Or so Roz told herself. But the easiest way to repay the donor was to give a quick pseudo-orgasm, straight into the mind, which if most women were to be believed, was the most potent aphrodisiac organ in the whole body.

She didn't want him doing that. As a young vampire, Andreas needed to feed frequently, almost every night, but the thought of him wandering around administering orgasms to anyone but her made her see red. She wanted all his orgasms, everything he had to give her.

Her possessiveness shocked her. She'd never felt like that about anyone before. Her late husband had been mortal, so the question had never arisen. This time she'd fallen deeply in love with another vampire, one of her kind, less problematic, or so it should have been.

But Andreas Constant was a special kind of vampire. Young, without family, more mortal than vampire in his habits. So yet again, she'd gone against type, against what her family wanted for her.

Tough shit. She wanted this man. She was prepared to give anything she had to, as long as he wanted her. Family, reputation, she would give it up for him.

And that thought terrified her.

He was still staring at her, seemingly content to wait. What had he said? Oh yes, about going between feeds. "You're what, thirty?" He nodded. That seemed so long ago to her. Before John, when she still wore corsets every day and kept her head down in society, so as not to attract attention to herself. Of course, shortly after that, she'd met her first suffragette, and the rest was history. Literally. "Thirty. You can start spacing out your feeds, making them every other day instead of daily. But don't push it."

"I wish I could feed wholly from you."

She knew that. "I feel the same way, but until the scientists isolate exactly what it is about mortal blood that we need, we have to put up with it. I don't want you to feed from anyone else. It's too personal, but it's the least of our worries."

"Yes." He caressed her neck with one strong hand. "We can work that out."

"But?"

He sighed. She knew there was something else. Part of his mind was closed to her, and she didn't want to probe. It indicated insecurity, a lack of trust, and she trusted him.

Truly she did.

"Tell me. You've already said you have to go to London for a while. What else? There is something else, isn't there?"

"Yes." He drew the covers up over her. "Yes there is."

He didn't split his mind off from her, but she felt him withdraw, giving her the choice. What was he about to tell her?

"Did you see Fabrice before he was taken?"

This was so far away from what she thought he might ask her she just gaped at him. WTF? Pulling herself together, she thought back.

"The last time I saw him I was with you. The day before he was kidnapped, at the Department."

"No other time?"

"No."

Alarmed now, she sat up. "What? What is it?"

"You were seen."

He hadn't dropped his shields but she couldn't reach him any more, no more than his outer thoughts, the part of him he would present to any Talent. It hurt, more than she'd imagined possible.

"Seen where? Who saw me? What were we doing? Supposed to be doing?"

He gazed at her, his eyes flat and expressionless. "Standing in the street chatting. In Seventh Avenue."

She hadn't been in Seventh Avenue for weeks. What was he talking about? Who did he trust over here?

In a heartbeat, she knew. Ellie. It had to be, because Cristos wouldn't leave it up to Andreas, he would ask her himself, and make sure he had the answers. "I wasn't there, Andreas."

She watched him, felt him withdraw and it was like a knife to her soul. Nothing had ever hurt so much. Not her husband's betrayal with another woman, not even his death, because with the advent of war, everybody expected death, although they dreaded it. She hadn't expected this. After their closeness earlier in the evening, she'd dropped every barrier.

He sighed and dropped back against the pillows, disentangling his legs from hers, withdrawing, body and mind, but never slamming the door on her.

What could she say? She hadn't been there, period.

"Sweetheart, I have to know, I have to eliminate all possibilities."

Now or never. If this didn't persuade him, she would give up. "I didn't see him. Believe me or not, that is the truth."

She watched him, for once on the outside. He'd closed his eyes, lay beautiful and passive in her bed, next to her, but entirely separate. "I'm an agent. I've been an agent all my adult life. I have to think." He opened his eyes, but his inner being was locked deeply within him once more. The courage he'd had to join with her, risk all to give her what she wanted, what she needed, had gone, or he'd subdued it. "Fabrice is my best friend, and he could have disappeared because of me. Because I trusted people I shouldn't have trusted."

"Me?"

He looked at her, as though he was looking at a stranger and she resisted the urge to pull the sheet up around her body to protect it from him. "I don't know."

"Then you must find out."

She got out of bed with one quick movement, not giving him a chance to pull her

back, and snagged her robe from the hook on the back of the door, shrugging into it without looking back at him. "Go find out, Andreas. Let me know when you've made up your mind. Don't come back until you're sure."

She opened the door and left. Into what she didn't know, nor did she care.

If he'd left it so they were lovers, enjoying each others' company and bodies, she could have coped better. But he'd insisted on seeing her soul, finding his way deep inside her very being, her existence. She wouldn't, couldn't offer him any more. Either he trusted her, without proof, or he didn't.

It was up to him.

Chapter Fourteen

He'd hurt her, but all his instincts had kicked in at her defensive withdrawal. Andreas couldn't trust anyone when it came to finding Fabrice, except, perhaps, Cristos. Roz had been seen, and she lied to him when he asked her. In his heart, he felt it couldn't be true, she couldn't have done this, but he had to know for sure, and since she wasn't letting him in, he had to find out another way. If she continued to refuse to let him in, he'd have to tell Cristos. And he couldn't give her long, especially if there weren't any other clues.

He and Candy went in to the Department together the following afternoon, called in to report. 'The usual suspects' were present in the board room; Vencel, Domenico, Virgilio, Cristos, Don ... and Roz.

Their eyes met as though drawn to each other, but while he opened up to her, he only had access to her outer thoughts and from them he knew she was furious.

Have you told him?

Told him what? There's nothing to tell.

He said no more. The others would pick up on it and he wanted to give her every chance to tell Cristos for herself—if she had seen Fabrice. She must know how important it was. But by the end of this meeting Cristos would know, one way or the other.

"We have to be back at two," he informed everyone.

"Is there any more to be discovered? If not, I want you back here." Today Cristos was all business, sharp appearance echoed by razor-edged mind.

"Only that we need to know who told Knox about the Department." Cristos stared at Andreas for a moment, clearly making up his mind. "I want you back. Candy can stay. I'll send Knox a message. Finish up today, then clear your desk."

Andreas bowed his head. "Whatever you say." No more cheap, scratchy suits, no more nine to five. He should be happy. So why wasn't he? Perhaps because it would be one less link with Roz. After this operation finished, she would be able to move completely out of his life as though she'd never been there.

Except that she had. And he'd never forget her. He rather feared he'd always love her, too, but he doubted she still loved him, if she ever had in the first place. She'd turned on him very swiftly, from love to hate in the space of half an hour.

He sat across the table from her, and kept his attention on his boss until Roz spoke. She cleared her throat. "I had an idea."

Then he had to look at her, but so did everybody else. She flushed a little. Embarrassed, he guessed, praying she was about to tell them of her meeting with Fabrice.

"I thought, well, you know how vampires have sites with webcams trained on spaces and rooms, to help us flash more safely?"

"Sure."

"Well what if the opposition, whoever they are, have something similar? Why shouldn't they use the same method? You can only get to the vampire sites if you put a keyword into a search engine, so that would be a way of linking the sites without any direct, overt links."

Candy groaned and covered her eyes. "Metatags! Why didn't I think of that?"

Cristos looked at Roz with new respect, as they all did. "Good thinking. I'll get our

people on to it right away. Lateral thinking. How did you come across that?"

Roz carefully avoided looking at Andreas. "It just came to me."

He knew what she was remembering. His house, and the way he'd taken her there without consulting anything but his memory. There was no link to it anywhere, and she was the only person he'd given access to in that way.

The door burst open, breaking into the peace of the room and Ellie surged inside, her hair wild, her face agitated, eyes wide with alarm, mouth open to speak even before she'd closed the door.

The door slammed shut as someone used telekinesis to maintain their privacy. Andreas suspected Cristos. "Take a deep breath, Ellie," he advised, voice deep and steady.

The sound seemed to calm the young vampire, but not by much. She carried a large, dog-eared book, which she threw on to the table. "I found something. It's really important."

She opened the book. "My friend Jenna Brice had an exhibition recently. Half the paintings were abstracts, and half were figures, mostly lovers. The lovers sold out. Well I found her sketchbook today."

Andreas's attention went to the open book, and he froze in shock. He recognized the poses, the lovers engaged with each other, totally absorbed. But the paintings in the gallery had been faceless, a device, he'd assumed, to indicate the paintings represented all lovers. The customers could project their own faces on to the bodies so artistically twined around each other.

Ellie leaned over and flipped the page. The sketches became more explicit, the details more specific. Andreas leaned closer. "Is the girl Jenna?" He recognized the face but he hadn't paid much attention to the body. He'd been euphoric with his relationship with Roz, his mind filled with images of her.

"Yes, that's her. She's tall, skinny, small boobs, yes, I think so. And the drawings are done from life."

"So is the man. But although he has Fabrice's face, that's not Fabrice's body." He glanced up to see Cristos's eyebrows nearly reach his hairline. "He's my best friend. We're not lovers. But we've been on the beach together, done some sports – yeah, I've seen him in the shower. He has a scar here." He pointed to a spot just above the model's buttocks. "And Fabrice is more muscular. He works out. The shape isn't right for Fabrice Germain."

"So she put Fabrice's head on someone else's body." Cristos watched as Ellie flipped the page onto an even more explicit drawing. The man was kissing his way down Jenna's body, his hand between her legs, his thumb working her clit. Damn, they were good drawings! Fabrice felt his prick move and willed it back down. Not the time, not the place. Stupid reaction. Entirely automatic, and one more reason why he shouldn't let his prick rule his other emotions.

Blushing, Ellie flipped back to the previous page. Cristos's voice continued, level and rational. "Either she employed someone to pose with, or she did some life drawings and used them as a basis. It seems to indicate she's obsessed with Fabrice. He's a Sorcerer, he would be on alert for anyone following him with malicious intent, but with adoration? He's a good-looking man. To some extent, he's used to admiration. Normally he does his best to ignore it."

"He hates it," Roz said. "He told me. He can't do anything about it, so he hates the admiration women show him."

"He probably disregards those emotions, then, when he's scanning for threats. That explains how his abductor managed to take him by surprise. I'd assumed he was shot or

knocked unconscious rapidly, before he had time to call us for help, but I couldn't understand how it'd happened."

"You think Jenna abducted him, then?" Ellie watched him, guilt shading her eyes. "I wish I'd thought of it earlier. She's met Fabrice before, a few times, when he's been with Andreas."

"Is she a Talent?" Cristos rapped out.

Ellie nodded. "Kind of. She's psychic for sure. She can't use telepathy as we do, but she's empathetic, and sharp enough to pick up on other Talents in the vicinity. Like most mortals, she assumes it's just a matter of being sensitive or not. I haven't told her anything, I promise."

"Sorcerers are vulnerable." Vencel, the other Sorcerer, chipped in. "There are several texts in public libraries we can't get rid of. Legends and old stories, mostly. Like vampires, some believe in us, but we've never manage to use the legends like vampires have. So the texts that are out there are accurate, sadly. If she knew where to look, she could have found something to help her identify Fabrice as one."

Ellie watched him, growing horror in her expressive eyes. "She loves the occult, researches it all the time. Says it helps her with her art. Her room in our apartment is full of books, pictures and artifacts."

"Does she know about you?" Cristos asked sharply.

Ellie shook her head. "She says I'm psychic, but she doesn't know what I am. At least, if she does she's never said, and I've never told her." She glanced at Andreas. "You told me it was punishable by death, if she wasn't approved."

"Quite right." Andreas felt a surge of relief when he realized Ellie wasn't at risk, but she would have to move. He would keep her safe. He hadn't brought her this far only to lose her to some nut. As well as losing Fabrice. "Where would she have taken him? Any idea?"

"How rich is she?" Andreas frowned at Roz. What difference did that make? Roz met his surprise blankly. "If she's rich, she can afford more than one hideaway."

"Have you hooked into her mind? Can you track her?"

Ellie nodded, white-faced. "I think so. She isn't in her apartment. She has a studio, and she's a postgraduate student. She works at the gallery with me, but we're only receptionists."

"I want all the vampires escorted until nightfall. Pair up, people." At least that meant Roz and Andreas could operate separately. "Ellie, give each an address and every pair take one. Even if it seems unlikely, check the places. Ellie won't come into her powers until nightfall, so if we haven't found him by then, we'll rendezvous at the place Ellie pinpoints. Candy, go back to the DIB and work on Roz's tip. Vencel, take Roz. Domenico is with Andreas." Andreas ground his teeth. Vencel Takasc, good looking, famous, rich and definitely not a virgin, but a Sorcerer with great powers. Just the man to help her forget him. And he would, if the way he was looking at her was anything to go by.

And he got the testosterone-laden dragon.

Pushing everything but worry for Fabrice out of his mind, Andreas said, "I need a weapon. I'm not armed when I'm working at the DIB."

Cristos nodded. "Pick something up when you pass by the weapons store. Leave a note, I'll fill in the forms for you."

"Aren't you coming too?"

Cristos's mouth firmed into a straight line. "I wouldn't miss it for the end of the world."

Ten minutes later, a Glock and a couple of knives reassuringly tucked away about his person, Andreas was accompanying a similarly equipped Domenico out of the building. The only power he could rely upon in daylight was his telepathy, and that only for communication and 'fuzzing,' persuading people they hadn't just seen what they thought they saw. No real power until sunset.

Never had he felt the need to lash out, to destroy more. He'd taken his attention away from the job, allowed the fierce concentration he used when on assignment. Never before had anyone or anything made him deviate from what he needed to do, when he needed to do it, but Roz Templeton had broken all that. His feelings for her still overwhelmed him, but he could force himself to ignore them, now he knew for sure what it was. Love. Something he'd never felt before, not like this, not as all consuming, all powerful.

Grimly he tucked his emotions away with far more effort than usual. Time to concentrate on the operation, on finding Fabrice, and finding him safe. Guilt added to the anxiety tearing away at him. If anyone had killed Fabrice, this was the time for vampire justice to take over. His killer would die. He glanced at Domenico. "You know what I mean to do if the worst has happened. Don't get in my way."

Domenico held up one large hand in a gesture of appeasement. "Give me five minutes to strip his mind, and he's all yours. Self-defense if he lifts a finger to object."

Andreas smiled grimly. The way Domenico planned to strip the killer's mind wasn't pretty, and he'd probably be begging for death by the end of the procedure.

If there was a killer. Better if there wasn't.

In the underground car lot, Domenico threw off his clothes and weapons, which Andreas stuffed into a backpack and slung into place over his shoulder. Domenico's shift from man to dragon was fast, awesome and impressive, but Andreas was in no mood to appreciate it. He threw himself on to the back of the giant, scaled beast and heard Domenico's voice in his mind. "Hang on. I'm going in fast."

Andreas felt the air around them blur as Domenico fuzzed the area to prevent mortals seeing their flight and then winds whipped around his face. He kept low, clinging to Domenico's massive neck, feeling the giant muscles flex as he swept his wings, the powerful motions rippling through his golden body. His scales, gleaming bronze underground, hit the sunlight in dazzling ripples of gold, edged with a greenish glimmer, shading into deep crimson nearer his underbelly. Beautiful, had Andreas been in any mood to appreciate it. As it was, he was only delighted Domenico proved to be such a large, powerful dragon, in full control of both his forms. It would get them to their destination quicker and provided muscle, should they need it. Few beings could resist a mature dragon. Few even bothered to try.

Frustrating not to be in control of his own powers, but he would have to wait a few hours for that. He contacted Cristos, made sure the link was firm and clear. His telepathy was essentially passive during the day, depending on the other party being psychic too, whereas at night he could force a connection, and use his mind to persuade, to convince. Though not to compel, to make someone do something drastic he wouldn't want to do in his right mind. In this case he would have risked it, to get Fabrice back safe and sound.

Domenico's voice sounded soothing in his mind. *We'll get him, if it's at all possible. This I swear.* Italians, dragon or human, didn't take oaths lightly. Domenico's voice

hardened. *Nearly there. I'll find an alley or a backyard so I might have to drop you a few feet up and then shrink my size to land. Stand by.*

Andreas braced himself. He leapt the last six feet to the ground into a back alley stinking of garbage and unwashed humanity. Immediately he regained his balance and watched the miracle of a shapeshifter changing back into his human form.

For a brief instant, the world went away and Andreas was content to watch the smooth, gliding transformation, until Domenico stood before him, angrily gesturing for his clothes. With a muffled word of apology, Andreas swung the backpack down and tossed underwear, pants, shirt, socks and sneakers to the big Italian.

He dressed quickly and they were quickly on their way, heading for the gallery where Jenna Brice had displayed her work what seemed half a lifetime ago.

Andreas glanced at his watch. Three-thirty. Still a couple of hours to sunset, dammit.

He moved forward, feeling the reassuring weight of the Glock at his back. If they hurt Fabrice he'd kill them. Hell, he'd invoke a vampire blood feud if he had no satisfaction from the humans. That wouldn't stop until every vampire on the earth was dead, or every scientist who'd ever harmed a Talent was. And he wouldn't put his money on the scientists.

A last resort, but one he was prepared to invoke, if he had to. If he'd lost Roz, it wouldn't take much to push him to that. Finding Fabrice dead or tortured would more than do it.

He felt Domenico in his mind, establishing a firm contact, and he appreciated it. By doing that, Domenico put himself at risk, contacting a weaker entity. Which was what he was at the moment, whether Andreas liked it or not.

They strolled towards the gallery like a couple of tourists, careful to keep their body language unthreatening and relaxed. Outside, the board held a new legend, a new artist, although Jenna Brice still held some real estate with a small painting in the window. Securely held in Domenico's mind, Andreas felt him search for any traces of Jenna or Fabrice. Neither he nor Domenico had Jenna's mental signature, but he knew Fabrice better than anybody, and either he was unconscious or not here.

Not dead, please, don't let him be dead!

Andreas hadn't realized just how much this meant to him until that moment. Yes, Fabrice was his friend, his best friend, but the friendship went deep into him, right into his soul. His incipient fury at anyone who dared attack Fabrice was one thing, but the vulnerability exposed by his removal was something else. He wouldn't be the same person if he lost Fabrice.

He wouldn't, he just wouldn't.

Had he ever been so worried going into a situation? No, of course he hadn't. It weakened him, he knew that, but there didn't seem to be a lot he could do about it. He had to go with it, find a way of channeling his anger and distress without allowing it to weaken him.

They walked into the gallery. Although Domenico was dressed casually, in a pair of slacks and a shirt open at the neck, his clothes were quality, expensive, unlike Andreas. He still wore his scratchy work suit. That seemed to dictate their roles.

Domenico became very Italian. Amused despite his anxiety, Andreas watched the big man's stance change, become looser, more arrogant somehow. When Domenico glanced over his shoulder at him, lifting a thick, dark eyebrow, Andreas repressed a smile. The man could be a Renaissance Prince or a Venetian doge, his arrogance was so perfect.

Exactly right for a small, upmarket art gallery in the swanky part of New York. And right that he should treat Andreas as some kind of inferior being, although he still felt uncomfortable in the position of subordinate. Which he most definitely was.

A woman came forward, an eager smile wreathing her lips, ignoring Andreas completely. Domenico took his time. He didn't bend over the woman's hand, but he might as well have done, for the effect it had on this metropolitan sophisticate. She almost giggled. "May I help you, sir?"

Domenico smiled, a mere crease of his lips. "I think so. My friend here attended an exhibition the other night. He saw some paintings he thought might interest me. The artist was—" He turned to Andreas, his expression perfectly superior.

Andreas blinked. "Uh—Jenna Brice. Sir."

Domenico nodded regally. "Just so." An accent Andreas hadn't noticed before thickened his words. "Do you have anything to show me? I should say my taste is very specific. Most specific." The last two words were imbued with a kind of wickedness Andreas had never associated with them before. The woman seemed to understand.

"Ah yes, sir. The exhibition was a great success. We sold all the abstract work and nearly all the figurative ones. We still have a few sculptures left."

Andreas would have put money on those shapeless lumps of clay being the last to go.

"I do not collect sculpture. I do appreciate an artist who can accept a private commission, though. I assume that the best pieces you already have went at the exhibition, so I would appreciate any help you can give me in contacting the artist."

The woman frowned, but Andreas felt the increased influence Domenico was pressing on her. Friendliness bordering on business success, with an edge of sexiness. Though how anyone could actually want that stick of a woman, he wasn't sure. Along with most men in the world, he would never understand why women starved themselves to look good, losing all their beautiful curves and softness. This woman was definitely a contributor to the multi million dollar slimming industry. He supposed her clothes were fashionable, but who cared, when there was nothing to drape the expensive material over, nothing to make it *interesting*?

"I suppose I could help. Jenna is one of my protégées, just starting out, you understand. I think she is destined for greatness, but I have invested a lot in her."

Domenico took her hand again and Andreas watched, fascinated, as he absently caressed her first finger. "I understand. I would always consider you as her agent, and agents get—what—ten percent of any sale?"

"Fifteen."

Take over here.

He could do that, maintain the reassurance and waves of attraction Domenico was sending this woman. He knew what Domenico was about, so he took over, mimicking Domenico's style, while they chatted amiably about Jenna's work while Domenico swept the whole building for any trace of other people, then homed in on them, examining their mental processes for any similarity with Jenna and Fabrice.

Nothing. At least not for the first two floors, but then, then Domenico opened his mind. There was something there.

"Does Jenna Brice have a studio in this building?" Domenico asked, ruthlessly interrupting the woman's discussion of recent artistic trends.

"Why yes, she does. I lease her a couple of rooms. She likes the light, she says."

Domenico glanced at Andreas, who was already looking around the gallery.

"Which way do we go?"

"You can't just—" Domenico lifted the woman off her feet and moved her, so he could stride past her to the small door in the corner of the back room. Andreas was ahead of him. He paused, to find his badge.

"Yes I can." He paused again. "Oh yes, and you should really eat more. Get some flesh on your bones." With a wicked smile, he strode to the open door.

Past a couple of utility rooms, narrow stairs led up. Andreas and Domenico took them two at a time, racing up to the second floor as though every moment counted. Perhaps it did. Andreas heard Domenico contacting Cristos, reporting back, and felt Cristos in his head. *I'm standing by. Tell me what you need.*

You have a fix on us?

The grim voice responded. *Tight as a drum.*

Before them was a plain, white painted door. When they tried it, the handle rattled against several restraints. Bolts and locks usual for the average careful New Yorker. Gritting his teeth against his relative lack of strength, Andreas stepped back and let Domenico handle it. If they found nothing, they'd leave money to pay for the door, but both felt it now, the controlled panic inside the room, coming from not one spot, but two.

Domenico looked at Andreas. *You go right, I'll take whatever's on the left.*

Fine. Just get on with it.

Andreas pulled out his firearm and snapped off the safety catch. Domenico did the same, and partially shifted. Andreas saw the scales pop out from between his shirt buttons, the shapes clear beneath the fine material, giving him a natural bulletproof vest. Claws shot out from the end of his fingers, only to be sheathed again as Domenico turned back to the door.

He held up his free hand and counted down silently.

One—two—three.

They burst through the door, Domenico slightly in front as he had the better protection, both assuming the stance, legs slightly bent, weapons in front of them, sweeping the area for hostiles.

What they found shook them both far more than a room full of aggressive terrorists.

A daybed on Andreas's side of the room held a lone, naked figure, the sheets twisted under him as though he had tossed and turned in a restless fever. Andreas made for Fabrice, trusting Domenico to take care of the figure on the other side of the room, now screaming like a banshee.

When the sound was abruptly cut off, he glanced up to see Domenico's hand clamped over the woman's mouth. She was dressed in a robe, and the paintbrush she'd been holding fell to the floor with a clatter as Domenico swiftly frisked her for weapons. His large hand rucked up a little of the robe and it became obvious to both of them that she was naked underneath.

Andreas blinked. Fabrice wasn't tied up or restrained in any way, and he wasn't unconscious, but sweat beaded his forehead, despite the chill of the room, and his half-closed eyes showed no recognition of his friend.

Fabrice was heavily drugged. And the strong scent that had assailed Andreas's nostrils from the moment the door had burst open finally became identifiable.

The room reeked of sex.

We need an ambulance for Fabrice. Now. He's drugged, naked and I think he's had sex.

On its way. Before Cristos cut the connection, presumably to contact the other agents in the field, Andreas heard several words in a language he couldn't identify, although it

sounded vaguely Slavic.

Fabrice was—had been—a Virgin Sorcerer. He'd always taken particular care not to spill his seed in any way, so even masturbation was out for him. Andreas had seen Fabrice fight against the urge to take a woman—his good looks had been a curse to him. Andreas couldn't begin to imagine what it had been like, but he'd respected his friend's decision, and never questioned it. The decision, taken when he reached puberty, was his to make, not anyone else's to take from him, but until Andreas knew otherwise, he'd assume Fabrice had been raped.

The man was out of his mind, and Andreas wanted to kill somebody. Not the whimpering figure Domenico had found it so easy to restrain, but a real, honest-to-goodness villain. Someone who wanted to take Fabrice's power, not his body. Someone who hated him, not a person with an unhealthy obsession.

That a common stalker could subdue one of the most powerful humans in the world today! Andreas found a corner of the sheet and yanked it up to cover Fabrice. It didn't seem right, to see a violated person like this. It *wasn't* right. Helplessly, he looked up at Domenico, as grim-faced as he must be, and then he saw them.

She had covered the whole studio with studies of Fabrice. Fabrice naked, on this bed, arching his body in the agony of sexual arousal, erect and straining. Fabrice with a woman sleeping in his arms. Fabrice asleep, but not every part of his body relaxed, his erection an arduous need, even in sleep.

The ambulance crew would want the drugs.

As he thought this, he saw a shelf with telltale pill bottles and packets on Domenico's side of the room. Catching his thought, Domenico turned and snagged them in one large hand, the other holding Jenna firmly clamped to his body.

"You can guess what these are," he said.

Andreas didn't want to, but he could, all too easily.

With a convulsive movement, Fabrice ripped the covers aside and grasped his erection, fumbling awkwardly. Inexperience and desperate need warred in his agonized body. Andreas felt his suffering as though it were his own.

"Do it for him. I won't watch and if he's had a combination of this shit, he needs it." Domenico spoke flatly and turned his back, wrenching Jenna around with him. "Would you believe Spanish Fly, as well as the modern equivalents? This bitch wasn't taking any chances."

Embarrassed, but wanting to help his friend more than anything else, Andreas gently prized Fabrice's hand free and took over. Some men had bisexual leanings, but Andreas had never been tempted, never looked at anything without a pussy, but this was more medical than sexual. Or so he told himself. He tried not to think about it, but jerking off another man took concentration. He'd done it to himself, but this was awkward. His grip was different, the feel of Fabrice's penis completely different to his own in a way he couldn't describe. Longer, maybe, not quite as thick. Just different. Fabrice was a blond, and his pubic hair was thinner than his, a different color. His balls clung tightly to his body, and Andreas's lifted in sympathy, knowing his only did that when he was at the height of sexual ecstasy. To feel like that all the time would be sheer torture.

The thought helped him bring Fabrice to a quick orgasm, pleasurable for neither of them, but necessary to one. Andreas hoped to God the medics would arrive soon and put an end to Fabrice's misery.

And to think that one obsessed woman did that to him.

Chapter Fifteen

In a privately endowed wing of the Mount Sinai Hospital, Fabrice lay in a comfortably furnished room, hooked up to a machine delivering the medication he needed to accelerate the passage of the drugs Jenna Brice had shoved into him. Roz felt completely helpless, completely isolated. The powerful Sorcerer who had read her so gently, shared a joke with her, was gone. Instead, this handsome hulk remained.

Andreas sat in a chair next to the bed, listening, as the rest of them were, to the doctor discuss the case to Cristos, Domenico, Vencel and the rest of the team. Roz stood by the door. Fabrice slept on, oblivious to them all.

"I would guess your perpetrator spiked his drink," the doctor told them. "Got a barbiturate into him with some alcohol, then took him to her studio. Once she had him docile, she could have given him the other stuff. Called it medicine, aspirin or something. That's why he never called you for help. Normally Sorcerers, being in control of their powers at all times, are less vulnerable to attack, but this person took him by surprise."

"Fabrice is so good looking he's used to women hitting on him," Andreas commented dully. "He used to joke about it. When they discover he's a Virgin Sorcerer, that only drives them to do more, but most accept it, and only tease him. So what was one more woman? The trouble is, Jenna Brice was different."

"We found copies of all the Fabrice's ad campaigns in her apartment," Cristos said quietly. "She must have been obsessed with him for some time. When she found Ellie knew him, she engineered a meeting, even enrolled on her course so she could get to know him."

"Where would she have seen him?" Roz asked. Get the facts first, then work out what they were going to do. What could be done. She didn't look directly at Andreas when he spoke, but listened carefully to his reply.

"He's made a few TV appearances. He did a Letterman, when his company did a campaign to raise awareness of breast cancer. He appeared on *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* once, when they did one of their charity specials. Fabrice did a lot of work for charity. People accused him of needing something to fill his time, since sex was a no-no. Fabrice just laughed. He called his charity work 'a different kind of tax.' Now he needs our help." Roz would do anything she could to help him, he knew, whatever she thought of his best friend.

This hospital wing was a kind of charity, endowed by Talents for Talents, who needed a different kind of treatment sometimes. The extra organ vampires had, the way a shapeshifter changed form involuntarily at the new moon, the very different brain structure Sorcerers had, all needed special treatment. They couldn't expose themselves to regular hospitals, so they had small wings, discreetly tucked away in most of the world's major cities. This was one of several facilities in New York.

Roz would have been glad never to see any of them. Although the medics had kept Fabrice sedated, he felt the Sorcerer's confusion, his feeling of utter helplessness. The strong, confident Sorcerer had gone, perhaps forever. Definitely forever.

"A few TV appearances, a few magazine articles. It's terrifying. What made her latch on to him? Why Fabrice? Jenna isn't Talented, she has no idea he's a Sorcerer. So why Fabrice?"

Roz shared Andreas's confusion. She couldn't understand the mentality of such a person. Jenna had seemed so happy, that evening at the gallery. Thinking back, she did seem attached to Fabrice, but he was a handsome man, possessed of a magnetic appeal. It wasn't unusual for a woman to chase him, or so Andreas had told her. She didn't need to use her imagination to believe him.

"If you were a woman, you wouldn't have to ask." Roz answered Andreas. "Whether he likes it or not, Fabrice Germain had a very sexual aura. It made him attractive to women. You know we all have auras. Haven't you ever wanted a man, looked at him and thought; 'if only I was gay, I'd go for him'?"

Andreas shook his head and Roz made a sound of exasperation. "Well anyone who had an inclination for male sexuality found Fabrice attractive. He knew it, it was a curse to him, since he couldn't use it."

Andreas sighed. "He used to think it was a joke." He looked up. "What are we doing about Jenna?"

"I've done it." Cristos's mouth settled into a firm line. "She's in a facility for the dangerously mentally ill. You know the Company uses these places sometimes, you know Talents have influence all over. Well I told them the truth, and they won't let Jenna out unless she is completely cured of her obsessive behavior." He sighed. "If she ever is."

"So she drugged him, took him home and—violated him."

He looked up and snagged Roz's gaze. She stared at him with sympathy, but hopelessness. She felt him trying to enter her mind, but she only allowed him into the outer part, the part it wouldn't have been polite for her to refuse him. If he used telepathy now, with the number of people in the room, he might as well have spoken out loud. She couldn't bear any closer contact, not now, not until she'd thought everything through for herself. And now was not the time, so she kept her inner thoughts to herself.

"I'll stay with him unless you need me for anything else." Andreas spoke to Cristos but kept his attention on Roz.

"No," Cristos said. "We don't need field agents. After Roz's idea, I put our geeks onto it. Candy's heading up that side of the operation, and we've made a few discoveries already. Websites that don't seem to be connected, but are, usually through a backdoor. So far we've found independent websites that are linked to big corporations, but Candy says the style, the electronic handwriting if you like, is so similar they must be connected to the parent company. It opens a whole new area of investigation, one beyond governments. We've suspected it for a while, that someone is laundering the seemingly unconnected scientists, but we've never found anything. The PHR has an agenda, a way of identifying themselves, so the cells are often easier to discover. They have the same kind of mentality as underground terrorist cells. But the laboratories, the scientists, they're something else. It's almost unthinkable that they want to exploit Talents for money, but it explains a lot of things. It fits. You know what this means." He took his time, studying everyone in the room. "It means we have to extend our operations worldwide. We have to work together against this threat. Corporations are multi-national, multi-political. They work purely for profit. So we have to either make it unprofitable, or we have to close them down. It's a containment exercise."

"Can we do it?" Roz asked in the hush that followed Cristos's words.

He gave her a grim, tired look. "We have to."

They left soon after that, only Andreas remaining to care for his friend. Roz flashed into her bedroom, and immediately walked through to the living area. She wanted something, anything. And she needed to feed. Hunger clawed at her. Stress did that to a

vampire. How was Andreas faring? Had he fed?

Did she care?

Yes, she cared, more than she wanted to. Rejecting the idea of coffee, Roz headed for the liquor cabinet. Sunset had arrived an hour ago, but she was an older vampire, and alcohol wasn't as difficult to absorb as other substances. She found the vodka and poured herself a shot, not bothering with a mixer.

"I'll have one of those." Don slid into the seat by the cabinet. Roz started, but then smiled and poured him a shot. "I just fed Nancy, but she'll be out in a minute."

"It's amazing how you've taken to vampire ways." Don was a practical, prosaic man, and as such accepted the existence of vampires as soon as Nancy had offered him the proof.

"I can't really deny what's in front of my eyes. You fall in love with a vampire, you take the territory that goes with it."

She handed him the drink. "Any news on a donor?"

"No. I don't expect any. We'll just take each day as it comes. You know as well as I do how rare donors are."

She did. So many mixed couples wanted them, and so few vampires were ever willing to give up their life for another. Sometimes a vampire would die without passing on his gift. A daytime accident, a murder, even. Every death was a loss to the whole community, with so few vampires giving birth. Roz took the view that if they died out it was probably meant to be, but not every vampire was so accepting.

Which went a long way towards explaining why the Gardiners were so keen to marry her off and get her breeding. If she married a mortal, and was lucky enough to get pregnant, even then her child might not be a vampire. It had a fifty-fifty chance. If Andreas had given her time, she was sure she could have persuaded the Gardiners to accept him, but he'd accused her of lying to him. She never lied to people she cared about. If he couldn't trust her that much, it seemed to her he couldn't care about her as much as he claimed. And he didn't trust her enough. She couldn't live like that with anyone, not even a man who roused her body so much she wasn't sure where she ended and he began. No, not even for that.

"You'll get there." She patted Don on the arm, and was struck for the first time how like Fabrice he was. Both agents, both confident males, at least Fabrice had been until recently, both golden haired and blue eyed. But Fabrice seemed more vital, more alive. That might well have been a part of his Talent. Sorcerers usually possessed magnetic personalities. She wouldn't know until he'd recovered and she could talk to him again. But she suspected Fabrice Germain might still have the edge on Don Harris.

He flashed her a quick smile. "Yeah, I know we will, one way or another. Meantime, I love a woman who will stay gorgeous forever. That's compensation enough." But it wasn't. From the bleak look in his pale blue eyes Roz knew he was thinking of a time when he would be gone, no longer there to love her. Nancy would find someone else.

As she nearly had. But John had never broached the subject, never asked. In a way, that was braver than the doubts she heard Don express to Nancy occasionally. John had kept his doubts to himself.

Nancy walked slowly through from the bedroom. Her skin glowed with health, her hair gleamed with secret highlights. She'd fed well. "You look peaky, Roz. Go and feed."

"Yes, I will." She knocked back her vodka and reached for the bottle. "But it's not that. I've broken up with Andreas."

"Oh, Roz, I'm sorry!" Nancy's instant and heartfelt sympathy warmed Roz, despite

her feeling of misery. "So you won't want to go away with him anywhere?"

Roz shrugged. "I doubt it. It doesn't matter. It didn't last long." Long enough. Long enough for her to fall deeply in love for only the second time in her life. Long enough to know she'd miss him terribly. But she couldn't stay with a man who didn't trust her word. It wasn't possible.

Nancy shook her head when Roz lifted the bottle, offering her a drink. "No, I'm fine." As though struck by a sudden thought, she leaned eagerly towards Roz. "Say, how about we take off for a while?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well Cristos said this operation was over for field agents. How about we kick up our heels, go home and have some fun? We can get ready for the wedding, rest up. I'm already on leave from the DIB, now you're off duty. The boys won't let up until we do go home." By "the boys" she must mean Mike and George Gardiner.

She made a face. "I don't want to marry anyone. I've changed my mind about Mike. Do you think they'll mind?"

Nancy laughed. "Well they'll have to learn not to mind. It's about time these guys came into the twenty-first century. They can't force you, and if you've gone off the idea, it's their tough luck. Tell them."

"If only it was that easy!"

Nancy touched her arm, a gesture of simple friendship that warmed her. "They'll have to. If we go home for a few weeks, until Don and I are married, we can tell them then. They'll take it. They might want you, but they won't force it, if you get enough elders on your side. How about it?"

Roz thought it over. Without Andreas, she couldn't think of a reason to stay. Except for one more thing. "A fellow agent was captured and hurt. I want to stay until I'm sure he will be fine."

"Yes, of course. Tell me about it."

Roz told them what she could, that Fabrice had been kidnapped and abused by a stalker. They were impressed when they heard Fabrice was a Virgin Sorcerer, appalled when she told them what Jenna had done, and surprised when she told them Andreas was his best friend.

"From what the doctor said, he's not been physically damaged," Nancy commented. "It'll be a long road back for him, though. Psychological wounds and all that. And he has his friend."

For a moment, Roz thought she saw a speculative spark in her cousin's eyes, but she couldn't have done. Even the suggestion was unthinkable.

It seemed not. "It's almost as though Fabrice engineered your break up so he could have Andreas to himself. Do you think he planted the information about seeing you with Jenna Brice?"

"No." Impossible. "In any case, it was Andreas's friend Ellie who told him." And it wasn't outside the bounds of possibility that Ellie had invented the story. Ellie, while not bearing a dangerous stalker crush on Andreas, clearly loved him. Whatever. If Ellie wanted him, she could have him. Roz had done with him, finished. She'd been stupid to even think of it. She hadn't known him long enough, and this was just a symptom. Sex, that was all it had been. Nothing else.

Chapter Sixteen

Twenty-four hours later, the doctors allowed Fabrice to awaken, taking him off the sedation that had kept him docile while the drugs worked their way through his system. Quietly, Andreas helped him, doing what he could to alleviate the effects, because even in his sleep, Fabrice needed release, restless and straining for help.

Andreas got to know his friend's cock almost as well as he knew his own, although during the last day the only times he'd even thought about his own was when he had to pee.

His dour promises of revenge centered on Jenna Brice. He imagined vivid scenarios, where Jenna was the powerful, wicked adversary he could destroy without a qualm, instead of the pathetic, sniveling ruin he and Domenico had found in that terrifying studio. Terrifying because of the lack of control it demonstrated. Terrifying because several times in his life Andreas had felt his control slip, had done things he'd rather not think about too much. He'd always pulled himself back in time, drawn by a thread of sanity that had completely snapped in Jenna.

When Fabrice's eyes flickered open, Andreas breathed out the long sigh he didn't know he'd been holding. He'd expected him to wake up ever since they'd withdrawn all but the saline drip earlier in the day and while dreading what he would have to tell Fabrice, he wanted it over with. "Hey, man."

"Hey." Fabrice stared at him, his eyes dull. "How long have I been under?"

"A day, more or less. It's sunset in a couple of hours."

Fabrice grimaced and licked his lips. "Is there any water around here?"

"Sure." Andreas poured a glassful from the bottle of mineral water on the nightstand. Now the moment had come, he didn't know what to say. He pushed his arm under the pillows to help Fabrice up, listening to his friend's groans.

"It feels like I've been here a hell of a lot longer than a day." Fabrice gulped down the water, and flopped back down again before Andreas had a chance to fluff his pillows. "Is sex usually this exhausting?"

Shock lanced through Andreas when he realized he didn't have to talk about it at all, or tell Fabrice anything he didn't know already.

Fabrice stared at his face and then smiled. "I knew as soon as I woke up. There's something missing from me, and I have weird memories. That kid, Jenna Brice. She raped me, didn't she?"

Andreas swallowed. How like his friend to face the problem head on! "Yes."

"People learn how to manage if they go suddenly deaf or blind, so I can manage, too." He didn't need telepathy to see Andreas's reaction. "Yes, it's that bad. Losing one of my senses. At least I can remember what it was like before I came into my powers, when I was a kid."

"It must be worse than losing your hearing or even your sight. You were one of the most powerful Sorcerers anyone had ever known."

"I was, wasn't I?" Fabrice quirked a brow, a very slight movement, but one that showed Andreas he hadn't lost his sardonic sense of humor. "Now I'm not. But I still have a job that doesn't depend on my Talent, I have five other senses and some powerful friends."

"I'm not so powerful."

"You will be in a couple of hours." Fabrice took a deep breath, and then another, before lifting himself up, and almost falling back, swearing.

Andreas crossed the room to the closet and found a couple of pillows, coming back to lift Fabrice with one arm and shove the pillows under him to support his weight. Fabrice gave him a shaky smile. "Thanks. Although I know that's not all you've done for me."

Andreas almost dropped him. He'd convinced himself Fabrice wouldn't remember what he'd done.

Then Fabrice really laughed, a deep chuckle of appreciation. "You're very good at it, man. How much do you charge?"

If Fabrice hadn't been so ill, Andreas might have considered hitting him, friend or no friend, but his obvious glower only made Fabrice laugh more. "Andreas, you're one of the straightest men I've ever met. Nothing of the female about you whatsoever. I've heard you complaining about it before now. Do you think I don't know how bad you feel about that?"

"I was hoping you wouldn't remember. Or at least, you wouldn't remember who'd done it."

"Better you than the doc. Only we know what I needed, and what you did, and I'd rather keep it that way. Thanks for preserving what dignity I have left."

Andreas sighed out in relief for the second time in ten minutes. "I'm glad you see it like that. That's why I did it. Domenico knows I did it the first time, but he won't say anything."

"Damned Italian was useful after all."

Andreas busied himself pouring another glass of water for Fabrice. The shared knowledge had created a kind of bond between the Italian dragon and himself, one he would never have expected. Under all that bulk, Domenico proved to be quite a sensitive individual. He'd even turned his back.

He handed Fabrice the water, making sure he had a good grip on the glass before sitting back again. "What do you remember?"

Fabrice took a few deep swallows before he replied. "Well no doubt now Cristos knows I'm awake, he'll want to debrief me."

"Not necessarily. Your abduction had nothing to do with anything the Department is involved in. You'll probably have to tell the police, though."

"You called the cops?"

"The woman who owned the art gallery did that. We showed her our creds, but she called the NYPD anyway. So New York's finest are involved. They don't know anything except the girl drugged you and – and –"

"Raped me." Fabrice looked away, staring at the end of the bed. "Do I have to go to court?"

"Probably not. We've put her in a facility, and she's clearly nutty as a fruitcake. If they want to be hard nosed, they'll prosecute."

"I'm not sure I want them to. Not if it means I have to go to court." Fabrice handed Andreas his empty glass without looking at him. "I never really realized how women felt. I was stronger than her, one of the most powerful beings in the country, but none of that helped me, did it?"

"We were looking for some powerful enemy, someone who could have overpowered you."

"Yeah, well." Fabrice stared at his fist, pale against the blue coverlet, and clenched

it. "It didn't matter how powerful I was. I wasn't careful enough."

"What happened?"

"I went to a Java Hut for coffee." He spoke slowly, clenching and unclenching his fist, watching the tendons tighten and the muscles tense. "I met her there. Or most likely, she had staked out my hotel and she followed me to the coffee bar. We got talking, you know, general stuff, about art, about life, and I thought I'd scored, so I started to back off, talk about her art, impersonal stuff. Christ, how I'd scored!" The bitter note in his voice was almost welcome to Andreas. At last, the response he'd expected instead of the light, humorous tone Fabrice had used up until now. Because Fabrice couldn't respond, he kept out of his head. Fabrice had been invaded enough.

"She asked me back to her place, and I accepted. After all, what trouble could she be? I'd met her at the gallery, Ellie seemed to know her well, and Cristos himself had vouched for Ellie. I was feeling pretty rough by then, thought I was ill, so I figured I'd tell her I wasn't available and get a cab back to my hotel." He glanced up at Andreas. "How's Ellie taken all this? She was Jenna's friend, wasn't she?"

"Shocked, like me. She found Jenna's notebook, with sketches of you in it and came to us at the Department. I'd be with her if I wasn't here with you. But she's with Cristos. He took her home to look after her for a day or two."

"Cristos? Well she couldn't be in safer hands."

Andreas grunted in agreement. "She's broken up. She knew Jenna wanted you, just not how much. You're a good looking cuss, and so it's not surprising her friend would like you."

"One good thing, I suppose. I can stop guarding my precious virginity." Andreas was vaguely shocked that Fabrice could discuss it so dispassionately. Fabrice gave him a crooked smile before going back to watching his hand, still clenching and unclenching. "I've got to find something good in this, otherwise I'll go completely mad." He paused. "I figured Jenna misunderstood me when we ended up at her studio instead of at my hotel. We had a few glasses of wine at her place. She said I could crash, and I figured what the hell? I was already feeling woozy, and I remember wondering why she'd brought me to her studio. Then she asked if she could draw me, and I said yes. I stripped down to my underwear. After all, she was an artist, right? Then the first erection happened." Another long pause, one Andreas didn't want to interrupt. "It hurt. I mean burned, really hurt. I couldn't think for a while, and when I did, it was too late." He swallowed, all bravado gone. Andreas didn't want Fabrice to look at him now. He was afraid of what he might see. Fabrice looked like a schoolboy, despite his powerfully built form and the rhythmic clenching and unclenching of one fist. He drooped against the pillows, one lock of golden hair falling forward over his face. "I couldn't think of anything except stopping the pain. And when I did, all I wanted was to do it again. Because I had nothing to lose, then, except the pain. All the while she was doing it, I felt the power drain away from me, but I held on, or tried to. When I released— I can't call it an orgasm—everything went away. Then, too late, I thought of calling for help. The telepathy had gone. I had all the techniques, all the skill I needed, but no power. Nothing. I never felt so helpless. Andreas—I cried."

"I would have cried, too."

When Fabrice lifted his head Andreas could see the sheen misting his eyes. "She thought it was joy. She was completely nuts. She said all kinds of weird shit. We were meant to be together, it was fated, she knew as soon as she saw me I was hers and she was mine. And when I fell asleep, she must have shot some more poison into me, because I woke up hard again. What an introduction to sex!" His sharp, hard laugh held no humor,

but a bitter agony. "She took away my free will, used me like a thing. I tell you, Andreas, I'm going to help raped women all I can when I get out of this. Christ, I was so angry! But I couldn't do anything except fuck her, and fuck her and fuck her. That's all there was. And she kept telling me crap like she loved me. Who'd do that to someone they loved, really loved?"

"Nobody, man. Nobody."

Then Fabrice wept, and Andreas wept with him.

That evening, Cristos arranged a brief meeting in Fabrice's hospital room. "The case is still open," he informed everyone, once they had arrived, in their various ways, "but the situation has changed. It's become more a computer-based project. Andreas, you can go in to the DIB and tell them you've been transferred back to me. There's nothing left for us to do there. Candy has already resigned at the DIB, but she's back with us already." Candy dimpled at Cristos. Today her contacts were emerald green. Andreas thought they suited her.

Roz stood by the door, as she had the day before. She wouldn't look at him, wouldn't open to him. Sitting up in bed wearing an open shirt, Fabrice looked every inch the powerful Sorcerer, but everyone present knew that had gone from him. Not everyone knew to what extent it had gone. Only Andreas and Cristos knew for sure.

Everything. Fabrice was a mortal, a human being. A very handsome, reasonably well off, successful human being, but at the moment, he felt like an intruder in the company of Talents. Andreas knew, because he'd told him. Cristos knew because—because he just knew, but neither man volunteered any information, only exchanged a brief mental link before the meeting started. It wasn't their call.

Typically, Fabrice faced his new status head on. "I'm not much use to you any more. I'm nothing but a man. A mortal."

"You're more useful than you know," Cristos told him. "You're still a trained agent. You're a successful businessman and you happen to be in a business we're currently investigating. You know your company has a branch in London, England?"

"Yes, we opened it about ten years ago." Fabrice frowned, and Andreas knew he was wondering where Cristos was leading them this time, because he was, too. He was all set to move to Europe. Was Cristos changing his mind?

"We need a man in London." He glanced at Andreas. "I thought a full-time agent would be useful, but I was wrong. We need someone who can contact corporations, entrepreneurs. There's a specific company there we need investigating. I was planning to send Andreas, as a trained field agent, but you'll do better, because you have an in. I wouldn't have asked you before, but—well, things have changed."

"You're damn right things have changed. And yes, I'd like to get away for a while. The change of scenery would do me good." Talents in London might know he'd been a Sorcerer, but not what kind. Cristos had deliberately kept Fabrice's abilities quiet. He'd been a secret weapon. One of a few. Andreas was another who knew.

"If you want, the job's yours. A fresh start in London and a new assignment. You'll have a new boss, too. My London equivalent. The MI6 department is smaller, it depends more on outside agents, but it's just as wide ranging. You'll like Grady, he's an old friend of mine."

"So I wouldn't be working for Department 57 any more?"

"You know better than that, Fabrice. You'll always be working for us. Us being the operative word. Whatever the collection of Talents calls itself, you'll be part of the collective. Always."

Fabrice's mouth turned down in a derisive sneer. "An honorary member?"

"No." Cristos didn't hesitate in his reply. If he had, Fabrice would have walked. "I need your skills. You know your way around a computer, you can handle yourself physically, and you have a mind as sharp as a razor. Whatever or whoever you are, the services can always use a man like you."

"Thank you." Fabrice sounded humbled, or as humbled as he ever sounded, which wasn't very much. "I'll take the assignment. What about Andreas?"

"It's up to him." Cristos turned his laser-like stare on Andreas. "You can go with Fabrice if you like, act as his backup, or stay here. There are others I can set to work with Andreas, and I have plenty of other things for you to do. This new avenue of exploration is turning out to be more fruitful than I thought. Roz's idea is on the right track. Candy's not here because she's glued to her monitor. I glued her there."

"Does this mean Italy, too, is involved?" Domenico, standing staring out at the night sky, turned to confront Cristos.

"Very much so."

"So I am to return home?"

"Back to Europe, anyway." Cristos spread his hands. "I know you came here to get away from a difficult situation back home, but that's more or less resolved now. There is a definite Italian link. We need all the good people we can get if we're to put the lid on this problem."

"What, precisely, is the problem?" Andreas found himself asking. He concentrated on Cristos as he rarely had before, but he didn't fool himself. He looked at Cristos so he wouldn't have to look at Roz. The last time he'd held her, why hadn't he memorized every touch, every dimple and hollow and curve? They would have to last him a hell of a long time. The way she gave him one, brief glance of contempt when she entered the room told him all he needed to know.

"I'll brief you all when I know more, but it seems clear that the labs are linked together, and are being run by a corporate executive. Candy isn't getting time off. Nor are any of the computer staff at the Department. They have a lot of dross to sift through before they can find the gold. But gold there is, I'm sure of it. They just have to establish a pattern, and we can go to work. Candy unearthed the London connection just before I left the office, so it really is ongoing. When I know, you'll know." Cristos, who looked as though he'd never abused a suit in his life, shoved his hands in his pockets. Andreas almost winced. Such a perfect example of the tailor's art didn't deserve treatment like that.

Ellie! "Where's Ellie? How has she taken all this?"

Cristos's expression softened. "She took it badly at first, wanted to take all the blame. When I told her it wasn't her, it was Jenna, she needed some persuading." Typical of Cristos to take time off from a punishing schedule and urgent appointments to reassure a frightened and insecure teenager. He'd probably given her much more time than he had to spare. "I'll bring her to visit as soon as she feels ready. And as soon as you feel ready, Fabrice."

"I'm ready now," Fabrice said softly. "If the poor kid is worrying, the sooner the better. She's as much Jenna's victim as I am."

Andreas felt an unaccustomed blast of sentimentality. Ellie had been through far too much in her early years. She deserved some down time. Fabrice had been far too

generous, though. Nobody had suffered from this more than he had. If he'd been Fabrice, he would have wanted Ellie dead. Maybe that was the vampire in him talking. Perhaps he had some natural vampire instincts, after all.

His thoughts had taken him off guard and somehow he found himself staring into Roz's fathomless eyes. *I'm sorry, I'm so sorry! Give me another chance!* He no longer cared who heard him say that. He'd believed Ellie over Roz, even when Ellie admitted she could have been wrong. His fierce loyalty to the orphaned teenager had driven him to make the wrong decision. He'd never forgive himself. Pleading seemed the only thing left for him to do.

No. The single word came calmly and dispassionately into his mind, but for a brief moment, the time it took for her to open up and say it into the depths of his being, he saw the grief and turmoil at the heart of her. He'd hurt her badly, as she had hurt him. Not that he didn't deserved it. He deserved every stinging word. He just wanted her to say them, throw them all at his head so he could accept his punishment. Then there might be a chance for them. They could go on.

He wanted Roz, even now, when she despised him, wanted her as though he'd taken the Spanish fly, instead of Fabrice. The ache deep inside wanted, needed to feel her in his arms, her skin connecting with his, so he could be whole again, complete.

She was looking at him as though he'd crawled out from under a rock. "Do you particularly need me, Cristos?" she asked, her voice hard and unyielding.

"Why? Have you something better to do?"

"Depends what you mean by better. Yes, I have."

"What?" Andreas surprised himself by the hoarseness of his tone.

"I have a wedding to go to. Nancy's, and maybe my own." She tilted her chin up. She'd never looked more beautiful. Dressed simply, as always, nothing detracted from her beauty. His body yearned for hers, with an intensity that shocked him. He couldn't do anything about it except try to ignore it and hope the ache went away, given time.

"You're marrying that man then?"

She shrugged. "I'm thinking about it. I could do a lot worse." Her stare told him exactly who she meant. So she intended to marry one of the two Gardiner vampires. He couldn't remember which one.

"Yeah, you could. I hope he looks after you."

Her chin went up a fraction more. "Sure he will."

Someone cleared his throat. Domenico, a thick black brow fractionally higher than usual. "So you're rescheduling this assignment, Cristos?"

"I have no choice. It's changed since we began it. By the end of the week I'll have more idea of where we stand, some names to make a start on. I'll keep you all in the loop. Meantime, consider yourselves off duty. We could all do with a few days' R and R."

The visitors dispersed after that. Roz left without looking back at Andreas, and he tried hard not to care. He forced a smile for Fabrice once they were alone again. "So it's London for us. Should I start calling you 'mate' and practice my accent?"

Fabrice smiled back, and this time he seemed more relaxed. "Better not. The English like an American accent, just as we like the English one. It's different, a touch of the exotic." Andreas snorted. His wouldn't describe his accent like that. Fabrice's face turned solemn once more. "But I want you to reconsider."

Again the hurt, again the careful shielding. Used to feeling Fabrice's mind in his, Andreas finally realized that wasn't going to happen. Not ever again, but his reactions would remain for a long time. "Reconsider what?"

"Going to London. You should think about Roz."

"What's there to think about? We slept together a time or two. Obviously I wasn't to her taste, because she's most definitely moved on."

Fabrice lifted his hand, but let it drop back on to the covers. "You think so?"

"I know so. I communicated with her privately. She said no, then she shut me out. She's done with me."

"But you haven't done with her, have you?"

Andreas didn't try to misunderstand. He knew exactly what Fabrice was getting at. "No. But I'll have to try to get over her. Otherwise what would it be?"

"Rape? Stalking?" said Fabrice with a small, melancholy smile. "Oh I know what that feels like. But if you're on this side of the Atlantic, you might still have a chance."

"You heard her, she's getting married."

"Wait until you know for sure."

Andreas's mouth flattened. "That shouldn't take long. She has her groom all lined up. She was promised to him before our little fling."

"An arranged marriage? Do vampires go in for that?"

Fabrice's look of blank astonishment drew a reluctant laugh from Andreas. "No, but this was something she agreed to. She liked him, thought they had a chance, and agreed. You know there's a problem with vampire fertility?" Fabrice nodded. "Well the Gardiners are even worse off than the other families. They have few womenfolk and it sounds as if the elders have decided to do something about it before they start to die out. So they're gently pressurizing their women into marriages most likely to produce little vampires."

"So what's wrong with you?"

An involuntary sneer curved his mouth. "Nothing. I can do the business, but you know what I am, Fabrice. A vampire with no family. No support, no wealth, no influence to bring to the Gardiners. I'm the lowest kind of vampire you can get. I've always known that, and it's never concerned me before. I do okay."

"Go after her, Andreas. Give it all you've got. Then, if she still says no, come to London. Although I'd rather go on my own."

"Why?" Andreas fought the feeling of uselessness, and won. Ever since he'd come into contact with vampire society, they'd made it clear he was low in the pecking order. Before, it had only made him more determined to succeed on his own terms, and he'd done that in spades; money in the bank, a comfortable home, a worthwhile career. But now his situation had helped to lose Roz, all the misery of his early teenage years returned to haunt him, the feelings of worthlessness, of doubt in himself. Cristos has fostered him with a vampire family, but as soon as he'd realized they were doing Andreas no good, he'd pulled him back and taken over guardianship himself, but after the trauma of knowing he would never regain his early memories, he was all too ready to accept martyrdom. Until Cristos has shown him otherwise.

"I want to make a clean start. I don't want to carry the legend of Fabrice the Mighty Sorcerer with me, I want to be Fabrice Germain. That's all." He fixed Andreas with his electric blue stare. "I need to do this on my own, see what I can make of my life now. There's a lot of it left. But if I wanted anyone with me, it'd be you."

"Thanks for that. Yeah, I can see what you're getting at. You'll let me come visit sometimes, won't you?"

"Sure. I insist on it."

While Andreas understood what Fabrice was telling him, it still felt a lot like rejection. Again. He'd had a lot of that lately. Well, it was the story of his life. He'd cope.

He always had. "But don't think you get rid of me that easily."

"Wouldn't want to. I just need some time to get my head together on all this." Fabrice's smile was a lot firmer than it had been earlier that day. "Okay?"

Andreas sighed. "Okay."

"Never mind, hon. Forget Andreas. Think about the future, what you've got ahead of you."

Roz smiled wanly at Nancy. "Sure. I'll get over it."

"Yeah," agreed Don, from the other side of her. "Just a passing thing, eh?" He gave her a swift hug. Roz had to force herself not to shrug him off. She didn't want anyone to touch her right now.

Right now all Roz wanted was to get well and truly loaded, just to forget for a few hours. It would stop hurting soon, she knew that. It seemed Andreas was headed out the country in any case. She'd just made the inevitable break a few months early. She didn't believe in long term relationships, even for vampires. She wanted to be part of her future husband's life all the time, to live with him, not have a part time relationship. Even with their Talent for flashing, they wouldn't have that.

So why did she feel so bad? She'd had affairs before, why was this one different?

It just was. But she'd survive, she'd manage. She always did. Smiling at Nancy and Don, she crossed the living area in the direction of her bedroom.

"Hey, Roz, did you mean that about marrying a Gardiner? Mike wants you, you know. He'll try and claim you if you don't object."

She considered the possibility. Mike would befriend her, take her out, and if they liked each other, claim her in front of witnesses. In the old days vampire males would claim a woman without her knowledge, but the women had refused to put up with that shit any more. The whole thing was still a bit too macho for her liking. But she liked Mike and what did she have to lose?

She turned around, a bright smile on her face. "I don't like all this claiming nonsense, but sure, why not? I've known him a while. I could try and make a child with him."

As though on cue, Mike flashed in. Nancy gave Roz a bright smile. "He asked my permission to visit earlier today. Chat to Mike while I get changed and we'll go out somewhere."

"Sure. Sounds like fun." Roz considered Mike. Attractive, potent, she'd always liked a man with long hair, and he was keen for her. The air around him exuded pleasure, excitement caused by her presence. A typical vampire courting gesture, but none the less potent.

This could be fun. An old-fashioned date with an old-fashioned vampire.

Chapter Seventeen

Andreas walked into the DIB for what he fervently hoped would be the last time, and for the first time he wore comfortable clothes. No more itchy cheap suits and polyester shirts. He'd relegated them to the bottom of his wardrobe, where he hoped he'd never need them again. But come another day, come another assignment. He could never be sure.

The navy blue wool suit and dark red silk shirt he wore didn't feel as good as Roz's skin next to his, but they were a hell of a lot more comfortable than the other stuff.

He had to stop thinking about her, or he'd go mad. At least he wouldn't have to walk into this place, reminding himself of her previous place of work, teasing him with elusive remnants of her scent, her presence.

The elevator's doors squeaked open and he entered the small compartment with several of his co-workers. They stared. He pretended not to notice until just before the elevator reached their floor. Then he gave them one raised eyebrow and strode out first, before they could say anything.

That felt good. What felt better was walking past the row of cubicles where his co-workers sat. He felt the movements, heard the creak of seats, the sharp feminine gasps, but he didn't look round until he came to the cubicle where the tap of long nails on keyboard drew him to glance around. "Candy? I thought you were going home!" Vague enough for any eavesdropper to misunderstand, but close enough for her to understand his meaning.

Her eyes were green this morning, to match her nails. "Morning, tiger. I thought you weren't here any more. I'm just finishing up."

Sealing the holes, making sure nobody knows what I've been doing here.

He grinned. "Same as me, then. I'm back at the Department, as of today." *Anything new?*

Nothing. I still think something else is going on here, but I have more important things to do.

Lifting his hand, he waved to her and went on his way.

Bernard Knox's secretary was buttoned up, middle aged and humorless, but even she did a double take when Andreas walked in. "What have you done to yourself? You look gorgeous!" Blushing, she clapped a hand over her mouth.

Irritably reminded of Miss Money Penny, he walked over to her desk and perched on the corner, leaning down to feather a flirtatious kiss on the top of her head. "If I'd known you'd be waiting for me, I'd have made the effort when I first came here."

"Constant! In here!"

Could it get any better?

The answer was no. Inside, Bernard Knox waited, standing behind his utilitarian desk. His direct gaze didn't waver one bit. "Close the door, Constant."

Andreas turned and pushed the door closed. "You've had my transfer papers?"

For answer, Knox touched a paper with one stubby, thick finger. "This? More like an order. From another Assistant Director, an order. Talk to me, Constant. Tell me what's going on."

Andreas used his eyebrow again. "I don't understand. What in particular do you want me to tell you?" Eyebrows wouldn't work against Knox. He might have to do some

gentle mind-to-mind persuasion. It went against his nature to do it, he respected Knox, but his first duty was to the Department, and Cristos.

Knox faced him. A bull elephant in its prime couldn't have been more intimidating. "I've been doing some research. As soon as Cristos yanked Candy Irving back, in fact. You never left Department 57, did you? You've been working for them all this time."

Andreas shrugged, deliberately casual. "A kind of double-double agent. What can I say? Cristos knew there was a leak, and it led here. He didn't want to start stirring the shit, not until he knew more so he sent me to investigate. Specifically to look for the source of the leak."

"So that's why you went through the women in the office like a man running out of time? I wondered. You were a good-looking guy even with your hair slicked back like a seal's and those godawful suits. You took out every woman, drank with every man. You're a smooth operator, Constant. It took me this long to catch on to what you were doing."

Andreas shrugged. "Yes, and it took me far too long to get through them all. But you might like to know I didn't discover anyone. It's a loop, a computer thing."

"Hence Candy."

He couldn't be surprised that Knox had made Candy. "Quite. I can find my way around a computer, but Candy's the real thing. So why are you allowing her out there today?"

Andreas picked up the paper and the one under it. "You're not the only one who requested an investigation. I don't like your record, Constant, but hers is consistent. If she's working for the wrong side, they're getting better at their cover."

You don't know the half of it. "My public record is spotty because of the reason you suspect."

He met Knox's gaze steadily until his ex-boss's gaze flicked away, back to the paper he still held in one meaty fist. "You're a covert operative."

Andreas nodded. "A field agent. High security level, occasionally employed on assignments the government might want the option to deny. Hence the gaps. You know the score. You were in the field yourself not so long ago."

"Yes, I was." Knox didn't seem surprised that Andreas knew. But then, with his security clearance that kind of information was available to him.

Knox dropped the paper in his hand and reached for another, one of the bunches of papers, some roughly clipped together, adorning the wide expanse of his desk. "Sure. Many AD's have. But not many find a shocker like this waiting for them."

"Don't you use your computer for anything?" Andreas stared at all the piles of paper on Knox's desk, and the film of dust over his computer monitor.

"What? No, I don't like the thing."

"The devil's work," Andreas muttered.

"Shut up, Constant. Or if you must use your mouth, tell me about this."

Andreas took the paper from Knox's hand and skimmed it. Shit, oh shit. "Where did you get this?"

"Why?"

"Because you shouldn't have it. *Nobody* should have it."

He'd never seen the report before, but he recognized the words on the page.

San Francisco. On this date we observed several phenomena and recorded them.

What followed was a detailed description of the events in San Francisco the previous year. The attack on the Department's headquarters, the shapeshifters zooming in and out,

rescuing anybody they could.

Silently Knox handed him some ten by eight glossy photographs. He flicked through them.

Candy, get in here now! We've got trouble.

"Who's seen these?"

"They were sent by an anonymous donor yesterday. You might find this picture particularly interesting."

He took the photograph. Seeing his image didn't surprise him much, since he'd been there, doing what he could to help the people trapped in the burning department store. It had been precious little, since the attack had come in the daytime, although he'd been able to do a little more after sundown.

"Yes, I was there."

"You weren't supposed to be. Your record says you were here in New York."

"Yeah, you know about these records."

"The thing is, Constant, I have proof you were in New York, about an hour before the attack in San Francisco. You have a twin?"

Andreas looked up, frowning. "What proof?"

"A picture. No one would have noticed if I hadn't asked. A picture taken by a security camera at a hotel."

Shit. These days you couldn't move without being photographed, filmed or recorded. Talents were taking more risks, ones they couldn't afford to take for much longer. "Those pictures are notoriously fuzzy." But he knew he was talking to someone who'd already made his mind up. He'd gone to the hotel to pick up someone to help in the San Francisco operation. Someone who couldn't flash. Fabrice. "Perhaps they got the wrong date or something."

The door opened to the sound of a protesting squawk from Knox's secretary, but he knew it was Candy who actually entered the room. She closed the door and walked across to join Andreas. He handed her the paper. Her sharp gasp seemed to echo in the stillness of the office. "Where did these come from?"

"I don't know, but we have to find out."

She looked up and narrowed her eyes at Knox.

"Not that way, Candy. Leave your contacts in. We're taking Knox with us."

"If you say so. Then can I turn him to stone?"

Andreas chuckled. "Whatever Cristos says. Do your stuff, will you? We need to get him in the elevator without anyone suspecting anything."

"Then what?"

Casually, Andreas leaned forward and grasped Knox's wrist. He couldn't get his hand around the whole limb. "I know you've hit the panic button. I heard it. So we have to get you to the Department. I can't tell you what you want to know, but Cristos can."

"I thought we'd just do a number on him and leave." Candy sounded disappointed.

Andreas shook his head. "No, we need to know more, and we need to take him in for that. Come on Candy, it's daytime, I can't do what you can during the day."

"You're telepathic."

"It's passive."

They ignored Knox's exclamation. Candy shot Andreas a cheeky grin. "I don't mix with too many vampires. Okay, I'll handle it. You owe me, Constant."

"Sure." He leaned back and winked at Knox. "Do we go before the troops get here, or wait so you can fuzz them, too?"

"If he's knocked the panic button on, we need to handle that first." Candy sighed. "I hate doing this."

She closed her eyes, and Andreas took his hand off Knox's arm. It wasn't needed any more.

Knox watched them, his mouth slightly open, his eyes glazed with what could be shock. But he wasn't a CIA Assistant Director for nothing. He blinked, the intelligence flooding back, and reached behind him.

Andreas restrained him. "No. Please. We're on your side. Just give us a chance to explain." Knox tried to wrench his arms free, but Andreas had the upper hand, and a vicious twist made his ex boss stop. "What do you think the Company would do if it knew it had vampires in its employ? Well it does, and some people do know. You guessed something of the kind, otherwise I wouldn't be telling you now. I have enough telepathy left to sense that in you. Why shouldn't vampires be patriots, too? Think about it. We have to take you in, but we don't want to hurt you."

"Right." Candy opened her eyes, and then opened them wider when she saw Andreas on the other side of the desk. "Wow, Constant, you're good. I've dealt with security, so we can go."

"You fuzzed them all?" She nodded, a smile on her pink-glossed lips. "Kind of. I persuaded them it was a false alarm, they hadn't heard the warning after all."

"Clever." He pushed a finger into the side of Knox's neck and murmured intimately into his ear. "We would like to leave with the minimum of fuss. Now being a vampire, I am intimately acquainted with the blood vessels of the human body. So I have my finger in precisely the right spot to sever an artery before anyone can get to you. I have teeth like you've never seen before, Knox." He didn't tell him they wouldn't appear for a few hours yet. "We'll be out of here before you are dead, but what we'd prefer is to take you with us so we can explain to you what's going on. Your choice, Knox."

Andreas prayed it would be enough to make his boss see sense, at least temporarily. They just had to get somewhere Candy could shift – no, better not.

At least it wasn't the rush hour. They'd have to take a cab.

Three quarters of an hour later, they were walking into the Department, Knox in tow. He'd said nothing, just given a single nod. Andreas had warned Cristos of their imminent arrival by cell phone. Modern technology had its uses.

With the extra security still in place, Knox watched the iris and hand scans without comment, but stared pointedly back at the Talent staring at him. "What's he do?"

"He's scanning auras. He can spot deceptions better than any machine, and while the Department is under attack, we need the check." Candy sounded so matter-of-fact Knox nodded, and only halted when they had already passed the checkpoint, before resuming his swift stride.

Knox grunted. He walked between Andreas and Candy as they took the long path through the big office to Cristos's suite at the end. Andreas opened the door and ushered him through, nodding at Diane. "I called."

"I know. He's expecting you. Coffee?"

"Diane, you are an angel!"

Since Diane was a white-blond today, the epithet was more appropriate than usual. A symphony of beiges and golds, Diane wouldn't have looked amiss in a front row seat at a

fashion show. However the smile she threw Andreas was all wickedness. "Welcome to Department 57, Mr. Knox."

The door opened before they reached it, and Cristos stood in the opening, hand outstretched to greet his counterpart. "I'm glad to see you here, Knox. Just sorry we had to restrain you."

"I could have gotten away if I'd wanted to," Knox rumbled. "These two couldn't have held me. But I wanted to know what this was all about before I make my final report. You should know I have left messages that will activate if I don't return." Cristos glanced at Candy, who shook her head and patted her jacket pocket.

Andreas watched Cristos handle the difficult Knox, with a suavity he couldn't hope to emulate, although he did his best and now, his appearance more normal, for him, he felt more comfortable, too.

Cristos led the way to the lounge area, where comfortable chairs ranged around a long, low table. Unlike Knox's untidy office, Cristos preferred order. The books on the shelves before them were neatly laid out, and one slim file rested on the table. Cristos ignored it in favor of speech.

"You might have noticed the extra security at the door, Knox, but this whole Department is ringed with protective layers. Among other things, we're a research department, so we have access to state-of-the-art security. We supplement that in our own way."

Knox grunted. "I noticed. Is this all show, or is there something real in this? I've seen a few party tricks, heard a few rumors, but there are always rumors."

"Oh it's real." Cristos paused when Diane brought in the coffee. Andreas smelled the rich brew and knew it would be the last for him this day. The sun would set soon. He picked up his cup and cradled it between his hands, warming them, before taking a sip and allowing the first, shuddering taste to slip down his throat.

Only Roz tasted better.

Right at that moment, in the middle of a situation, right out of the blue Andreas decided he wasn't giving in. He'd fight for Roz. She was more than worth it. He wouldn't give her up, unless she told him she didn't want him and proved it by marrying someone else. Even then he'd make sure she could always find him, if she needed him. He loved her with a love that would last a lifetime. Even a vampire's lifetime.

Cristos was explaining some pertinent facts to Bernard Knox. Roused from his brief, though for him earth-shattering decision, Andreas sipped his coffee and listened.

"We are on the edge of research here, Knox. Vampires and shapeshifters exist, along with other Talents, humans with extraordinary psychic gifts, anthros and others."

Knox's thin mouth turned up in a sneer. "Proof? Just the woo-woo experts, or have you any real, tangible proof? I've never seen any, and I think you're kidding yourself."

Andreas finished his coffee just as the sun dropped below the horizon. He didn't need to look out the large one-way windows to confirm it, he felt it in himself, the change from human to vampire.

Creature of the night, indeed.

Cristos glanced at him and Andreas nodded. "I'm a vampire. You heard Candy say so earlier. I can prove it now, if you like. And I'm hungry."

He pulled in his jaw and let his fangs burst from his mouth, from the protective buds above his ordinary eye-teeth. Just for good measure, he extended his claws in the same dramatic way, and pushed his way into Knox's mind. *I'm here. Do you need any more proof?"*

Knox yelped and shot back, so his chair skidded over the hardwood floor. "What the hell is that?"

Candy joined Andreas in Knox's head. *I'm here too. We can read you so far, but no further without your permission or without hurting you.*

If Bernard Knox had been the bruising fighter his disheveled appearance suggested, his reasoning wouldn't have moved as quickly as it did, and he wouldn't have recovered. He narrowed his eyes, staring at the three people sitting around the coffee table, waiting for his reaction. "I've seen some screwy things in my years with the Company. I should know better than to deny anything exists. Even aliens."

Andreas smiled, and retracted his fangs and claws. "I couldn't tell you about them." He withdrew from Knox's head, his point made, leaving the silent Cristos in possession. "I know what I am, and because I am, I believe. I respect anyone with the flexibility of mind to adapt so quickly to the existence of another species of human."

"We think that's what Talents are," Cristos said easily. "They resemble human beings closely, except for a few significant differences. Sorcerers can trace their ancestry to a Hungarian family, the Nadasdys. We think their gifts are largely genetic. Every human is born with the ability to communicate telepathically, but most develop a barrier in their first week of life outside the womb, so they grow up not realizing they have it. The Nadasdys never develop a barrier, they have to build it themselves, so they knew they were different. Vampires and shapeshifters are fairly obvious. But we're all the same until we reach puberty. That's when Talents reveal themselves to their owners."

"So—so how do they know what they are?" Knox's voice was croakier than usual, but he was recovering fast. He drew his chair back to the group and picked up his coffee cup.

"It's genetic. One or both of their parents had a Talent. But Talents have a loose confederation with only two laws; Never Tell, Never Compel. They are not allowed to tell anyone else what they are, unless they have permission from a Guardian, or that person has guessed, and they cannot use the power of their minds to make another do something that goes against their nature—something they wouldn't ever do. Guardians are appointed from the ranks of all Talents and sometimes humans, too. I'm a Guardian, and I chose to tell you."

"Why?"

Candy huffed, taking their attention away. "Yes, why, Cristos?"

"Because I trust him. Because he was on the brink of finding out anyway. Because we need his help." Cristos turned back to Knox. "We are a section of the CIA, and most of the Company doesn't know about us, but those of us who work here are loyal to our country. Unlike the spy in our Department and in yours. That's why we need your help. If we're to trap these people, and do it before any more damage is done, we need to work together. Access to all your computer networks, fast, to be precise. I've called Candy back because she's a genius with a computer, and I need her here, to track the leak I know is happening but I can't find. We have discrete computer networks here, Knox, as I'm sure you have, networks that don't leave the Department. I have one that is connected only by physical cables, and is confined to one room. No Internet, no wireless connections. I'd like to bet you have something similar for the most sensitive information you handle. But whoever is our spy revealed information from that network. I've closed it down, until we catch the perp, but we could set up a trap for whoever it is."

Bernard studied Cristos assessingly, stroking his chin in thought. Andreas watched him smooth his hand over the dimple and rub it back again twice before he spoke. "I

know. We investigate any Department that asks, and as you say, some are far more sensitive than others. Yes, I've lost something from my private files. It was significant, but it hasn't emerged anywhere yet. God knows why. I thought it would be passed on the next day, and I've been bracing myself for results."

"Who've you told?" Cristos sat up, all business now, any camaraderie he might have felt shaken off.

"You. That's it. I only made the discovery this morning. The information left the department sometime in the last week, as far as I can work out." He paused. "I'd rather not tell anyone but you what it is."

Cristos nodded. "Understood. Meantime, I need a decision from you, Knox. I trust you to keep this to yourself. Everything about Talents. But if necessary I can wipe all the things you've learned about Talents out of your mind. Clean out. You'll remember this meeting, and what we said about leaks, but not the fact that you're sitting with a vampire and a—"

"Shapeshifter," Candy said helpfully. "Etiquette can be a bitch, can't it? We're supposed to reveal ourselves first, it's only polite. Not that we always do."

Knox stared at her until Candy lifted her hand and studied her nails, examining them minutely as though the carefully rendered surface had chips and cracks. They did not.

"You have a choice, Knox," Cristos continued relentlessly. "I can cleanse your mind, or you can choose to keep what you've learned about Talents secret. I would have to brand you, because if another Guardian discovers you know, and you're not branded, he'd most likely kill you. It's just a small mark in your mind."

"Hurts like hell," Andreas offered. He'd rather nobody knew about him or his kind. "I vote for cleansing."

"I'm letting Knox make the choice." Cristos waited. "Well?"

"I'm thinking," Knox growled.

"Very well." Cristos turned his attention to Andreas. "You did well, but I think this meeting would proceed better without you. Your security clearance is high, but—"

"Not that high," Andreas said with a grin. "Is there anything you know that the President doesn't?"

"Plenty," said Knox and Cristos in unison. It seemed to break some of the tension, and the older men grinned at each other. Cristos reached for the coffee pot. He didn't speak again until he'd poured the thick, hot coffee, then he curled his elegant fingers around his cup and leaned back. "We've been looking in the wrong place."

"Pardon me?"

"You're investigating us, we're investigating you. Keeps us both busy, doesn't it?" Leisurely, he took a sip of the steaming brew. "When in reality both of us are clean. No official leaks, but one we're still tracking down. With both of us working together, it shouldn't take long to track it down. But we did find something else. For some time now, we've known of the existence of laboratories. Inhuman experiments against our kind, but when we've closed one lab, another takes its place. Up to now we thought they were separate facilities, or perhaps run by a covert government department. Now, as of today, we're pretty sure they're nothing to do with any government. Private corporations, working together."

"What?" Andreas heard the affirmation in shock. All his adult life he'd assumed the battle was political, one government against another. Even the PHR, the purists, had a political agenda. "Why?"

"Money." The answer came from Bernard Knox. "If all you tell me is true, the potential profits are vast."

"And by keeping ourselves hidden, we're playing into their hands," Cristos continued, grimly. "They can limit the supply and we're helping them do it. We have to concentrate on them. I'm setting up a unit to track the people involved. We think it's a kind of supra-company, an inter-company unit, linked only at the highest level. In some cases one individual is the key. So we're going for those. This is top secret and in its early stages, but as soon as I have something together, I'm going to Langley with this. Whether you believe in Talents or not, there are serious security implications in this whole operation."

Andreas's head spun. His two worlds were coming together, just when his private world was fracturing apart. He pulled himself together when he heard his name.

"I'll let you know, Andreas, if I need you. We'll decide on a plan of action first. Until you hear otherwise, you're on leave. Candy, I think there's a computer with your name on it."

"Several," Candy said, getting to her dainty feet. "I'll work as long as I can. You'll be the first to know if I find anything."

"I better be."

Chapter Eighteen

Released from duty, Andreas raced to Roz's apartment. He didn't dare flash into her bedroom, the only safe spot he could be sure of, so he hit the streets and found a cab. Thrusting a note at the cabbie, he leapt out the door, jeopardizing life and limb to negotiate with several cars and a lorry, which proclaimed its allegiance to a popular beverage. Ignoring the hooting and yelling, he hurried inside the building. Pausing only to persuade the concierge he'd seen nothing, Andreas hit the elevators running, wishing he could manipulate them as Fabrice could. As Fabrice could have done, once.

Divided loyalties were a bitch, but he'd manage, somehow. If he could get Roz back, he'd try to persuade her to stay for a while, until he was sure Fabrice could cope on his own. At the moment, he wasn't sure of anything, except that he loved Roz and he wasn't letting her go without a fight. He wanted her so badly he could taste it. He wanted her to taste him, he wanted to taste her in return, absorb her with everything he had, give himself to her completely.

So what if she'd had a date with the macho Mike the night before? He wasn't at all to her taste, she'd tire of him in a fortnight. Her independence of spirit deserved a man strong enough to cope with it. Mike wasn't that man.

He was.

The elevator seemed to take forever. Perhaps he should have risked flashing into her bedroom. No, the woman he knew wouldn't take kindly a vampire appearing in her bedroom, even if she had trusted him enough to let him see it so that he could. If she was mad enough at him she might even rearrange the furniture, and that could kill him. No, he didn't believe she'd do that.

The corridor stretched endlessly before him when the elevator finally stopped, pinged gently and slid open its doors as though they were stuck in molasses. He found the door to the apartment and hit the bell.

Waited a full minute before he hit it again. Waited some more.

After five rings and one long peal when he leaned on the button until he was sure someone was home, following it up with a few good, hard bangs on the door itself, Andreas began to wonder, and fear the inevitable. But perhaps Don and Nancy were out, and she had headphones on or something, and couldn't hear the doorbell? He tried to contact her mentally, a gentle touch in her mind, as polite as he could make it, but he couldn't find her. She must have blocked him.

Damn. Well he wasn't going away like a tame dog, his tail tucked between his legs. Andreas glanced around, made sure the security cameras weren't watching him and took the risk of flashing into her room. To hell with politeness. He'd make it right with her later.

The bedroom smelled of Roz. Andreas closed his eyes, savoring the taste of her, the sense that she was somewhere close. When he opened his eyes he saw he was wrong.

The room seemed the same, but unnaturally tidy. The throw on the bed was neatly arranged, the contents of her vanity seemed too straight from the way he'd remembered. When he crossed the room to look, he noticed there weren't as many things on it as he recalled. What those things were he wasn't quite sure, not having had the leisure to study them in the feverish hours he'd spent here loving her, but when he looked for a hairbrush,

one of the things guaranteed to be on a vanity, he couldn't see one.

Fearing the worst, Andreas headed for the bathroom. No toothbrush, and the towels on the rack were clean and neatly set out as though waiting for the next resident.

A few personal items remained, but not enough. Roz had gone.

Tearing open the door, he strode into the living area to be confronted by the same unnatural tidiness as he'd found in the bedroom. Not only Roz, but Nancy and Don had gone, too, but their absence didn't seem as final. As though they planned on coming back. Coats hung on the stand near the outer door, but none that belonged to Roz. Andreas would have known them simply by touching them, but there were none there. Nor was there any sense of her in the kitchen. Fear clutched at him. It was as though Roz Templeton had ceased to exist, as though she never meant to come back. She'd taken leave, not moved out.

Before he could take stock and decide what to do next, someone rang the doorbell, seemingly as impatient as he'd been a short time before. In no mood to stall any trouble, he ripped open the door. "What?"

Outside stood two vampires. Two angry, extremely pissed-off vampires. Seeing Andreas only seemed to make them worse. He didn't care. His agonizing sense of loss made him angry enough to take on anyone. So he launched himself at the first one, the long-haired one.

Who seemed to be as eager for the fight as he did. At least Andreas didn't have to worry about not having a good opponent. This man was his equal, probably his superior in strength. But Andreas was mad enough to take on anyone and win, or at least leave lasting marks of his presence.

Claws and fangs shot out and after the first, violent clash they sprang apart, circling. "Where is she?" someone cried, and Andreas thought he'd said it but he couldn't be sure.

"Tell us!"

Andreas backed up, watched both vampires, but the second one, the short-haired one, stayed in his line of sight, watching the combatants until something else took his attention.

The other man lashed out with one strong, accurate slash of his foot but Andreas, trained in combat, caught it and turned it, knocking his opponent off balance. He heard furniture smash, but didn't take his attention off the other man, raising his mental shields and reinforcing them in order to bounce any mental attacks off him. This was one battle he wouldn't, couldn't lose.

Mike growled low down in his throat, dropping into a crouch, but Andreas was ready for him, rising up, claws extended, the tips glinting in the light of the overhead lights. To anyone else he would have been terrifying, but his opponent was his equal, and in some respects, probably more. "Come on, damn you. I haven't seen blood tonight and it's about time I did!"

"How about this?"

Another finger came between them, a drop of red gleaming obscenely on its tip.

Both paused, but didn't take their attention away from each other. The blue eyes of the other man reflected the fury in Andreas's own.

The voice came again. "She's gone and he's here, Mike. He doesn't know where she is any more than we do. If you want to kill him, go ahead, but be quick about it. We have a job to do."

He sounded so much like Cristos that Andreas risked another glance, and he took a breath, taking in the flavor of the blood.

The blood was Roz's. He snapped to attention. "Where did you find that?"

He didn't retract his claws but he relaxed his stance slightly, waiting for the answer.

"Over there by the bedroom door. Just a smudge. But you can smell the owner as well as I can. You haven't taken her, or you wouldn't be here. Or are we wrong? Have you come back for something you've forgotten?"

Andreas straightened up and shook his head. "No." He couldn't afford to waste his time with these two. His mind clicked into action, working out the angles. He opened his mind and immediately felt the dual invasion. He allowed it, but probed theirs in return.

He didn't like these two, but they were his best chance of finding Roz quickly and alive. "When did you see her last?"

Mike, eyeing him balefully, straightened up and retracted his fangs and claws. "Last night. I took her out to dinner, but she asked me to take her home early. I didn't mind too much-she was tired and unhappy. She said she was going home, later that night, back to Nancy's parents' home for Nancy's wedding. Since I'm invited to the wedding, I didn't worry too much. Time to let her get over whatever you'd done to her, I figured. I don't want to be a rebound." Neither would Andreas, in his position. Reluctant respect for Mike crept almost unnoticed into his mind. Mike's expression hardened. "What did you do to her?"

"Fell in love with her." What was the point in denying it? He'd admitted it to himself, that had been the most difficult part. "But I'm an orphan. No family, no wealth."

"If I know Roz that wouldn't have mattered," the other vampire, George, said. "So why did you split up?"

"She wanted one thing, I wanted something else." He felt uneasy explaining precisely why they'd broken up. "I came back to get her. Whatever it took, I'd do it. I didn't get an answer when I rang the bell so I flashed in here. I'd just realized she wasn't here when you arrived."

"I don't think she went willingly. Or something happened and they were all taken."

Mike lifted his head, sampling the air. "I can't sense any other blood."

Despite his animosity towards these two, Andreas was impressed by their ability to scent out blood. He'd have to wait for those Talents to become quite so refined in him.

He needed to know for himself. Keeping the others in his sight line at all times, he backed off, and glanced around. "No signs of struggle."

"Except for the blood."

"She could have fallen and hit her head."

Mike frowned. "She said she'd call me before she left. I don't like this. Not at all."

"I've been in her bedroom," Andreas said, his hand on the doorknob leading to the room Nancy shared with Don. "It looks as if she's moved out. She's left a few things, but none of her books, none of her toiletries. Nothing that mattered to her."

"Which says she packed for herself. Doesn't it?"

"Or that someone wanted us to think that." Andreas ran his hand through his hair, distractedly. "I won't be happy until I see her for myself."

"I feel the same way," Mike admitted unhappily. "Something's wrong."

They all froze when the phone rang, one shrill ring after another. Andreas muttered a curse and picked up the receiver when the answer machine failed to click on. "Uh," he said, trying to sound like Don.

"Andreas."

"Yes?"

Cristos's voice sounded clipped, all business. "I called you because I knew you'd be

there, and I don't want whoever you're with to overhear. Which they will if I contact you telepathically. You're with Talents, aren't you?"

"Uhuh."

"Is Roz there?"

"No. Neither are Nancy or Don."

Cristos sighed heavily. "I was afraid of that. I went through her records again. Nancy's. Not her Company record, I checked with a friend and confirmed something that nagged at me. That brand in Don's mind, the one that says he's had permission for Talents to reveal themselves to him."

"Yeah?"

"It's fake. No Guardian made that brand. We all have our sigils, but we have something else besides, which I have no intention of telling you about, but it acts like a watermark. Don's brand doesn't have that."

"Jesus." Andreas ran his fingers through his hair again. "Does that mean Don is our mole?"

"I don't think so, at least not on his own. But he hasn't permission to know from anyone. Not official permission, that is."

Andreas opened his mind, and let the other two in. "You need to listen to this. Cristos, these two are members of the Gardiner clan. They came to bring Roz home, but all we found was a small smear of Roz's blood. The place is empty."

"Okay, this is what you do. I'm sending a team over to secure the place. If Don's our leak, we need to search his place of residence. Don't go anywhere until they arrive. Then go look for Roz."

"You think she's in danger?" Andreas met Mike's eyes, as troubled as his must be.

"Yes I do. But even if she isn't it won't do any harm to track her. I want Don and Nancy captured and returned here. Alive, if at all possible, so we can question them." Andreas glanced at George. He grimaced.

"If they've killed Roz, someone has to pay," he said tersely.

"That's fine, but we want to talk to them first." The communication must go two ways, because the vampires could talk to Cristos as well as he could, and hear him too. "We can work together on this, guys. I'll promise to hand them over to you, as long as we get to question them first. It's national security, vampire security, you name it. We need to plug all the holes and the best way to do that is to give them over to us for a while. Believe me, they'll be begging to die by the time we give them back."

"Sounds good to me," Mike said tersely. "That team'd better be quick."

"They're coming by dragon. The fastest we can find."

"Domenico," Andreas said. "He's a good guy, Cristos."

"I know it."

"Okay, get on with it." Cristos rang off.

Three male heads jerked around as a wild hammering hit the door, sounding like someone desperate to get in. It couldn't be the backup team. Even a dragon needed time to get here.

Andreas extended his senses and knew who it was. "Hold it, guys. It's a kid I know, another vampire. Her name's Ellie."

Before they could finish asking "Ellie what?" He walked to the door and wrenched it open. Ellie almost fell on his chest, tears streaming, her mouth twisted in agony."

His arms automatically went around her. "Hey, what are you doing here?"

"Oh Andreas, Andreas, I'm so sorry!" She gulped, clutching him.

"Ellie." He gently drew her away. "Sorry for what?"

She stared up at him, her eyes swimming with tears but no longer overwhelming her. He forced a smile. "Come on, tell me. I'm here, but not for much longer."

"What?" Dazed, she looked past him to the other two. "Who are they?"

"Gardiners. Relatives of Roz and Nancy. Do you know anything about this?"

"What?"

"They're gone, Ellie. They planned to go to Nancy's wedding, but there's been some violence done here. We're worried for them."

She swallowed and pulled away, making a visible effort to regain her senses. She wrapped her arms around her waist in a gesture of protection. "Gone? I came to tell you, to tell her. Andreas, I've done a terrible thing."

"What?"

She paused, and then lifted her chin in a gesture of courage. Andreas's heart went out to her. "You know when I said I saw Roz with Fabrice just before he disappeared?"

"I remember." His lips thinned into a hard line. He guessed what she was going to say.

"I lied." He'd guessed right. "I made it up. I know it was wrong, and I'm so sorry!"

"Okay, Ellie, it's okay."

"It's not, I broke you guys up!"

He forced a smile, although it nearly killed him when he felt so churned up inside. "No, no you didn't. Well not entirely. I came back here to make things right, but somebody got here first. We think Don, Nancy and Roz have been kidnapped. We don't know who took them."

Ellie frowned. "No, that's not right."

She had their instant attention. "Ellie? What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

"I came up because I thought I'd find Roz alone. I wanted to tell her myself and say sorry. I didn't realize you guys were here." Ellie looked around, as though she expected Roz to pop out of the bedroom or somewhere. God, how he wished she would! She sniffed, and wiped her sleeve across her nose before Andreas could stop her. "I saw them, and Roz wasn't with them. Don and Nancy, that is. They looked happy, real happy."

"Where did you see them, Ellie?"

"Getting into a cab, with their luggage. Probably on their way to the airport."

"Why would they do that?" Andreas turned to see a frown on George's face. "They could flash."

"Don's mortal. Still, Nancy could take him with her. Transporting one mortal's no problem." Andreas bit his lip, knowing something was wrong. "But if she had to transport two people, she might have problems."

"She'd have to feed first," Mike said. He took a step forward. "What kind of luggage did they have, sweetheart?"

Although he kept his voice soft and unthreatening, Ellie ducked behind Andreas before peeking out again. "A couple of backpacks, and—" she paused, and nibbled the tip of her forefinger in thought. When she looked up, dawning horror filled her eyes "—one of those big suit carriers."

"Big enough to hide a person?"

Ellie nodded, her eyes wide with terror. "What does that mean?"

"It means you've given us a lead, Ellie." Andreas snagged the sleeve of her t-shirt and dragged her out from behind him. "Whatever you did before, you just made up for it."

"They've kidnapped Roz." Andreas didn't try to hide the menacing growl in his voice. "I think I can guess why."

He didn't bother with the phone this time, but contacted Cristos directly. Pausing only to briefly identify himself, he launched straight in. *Ellie's here. She saw Don and Nancy, and a large suit carrier getting into a cab. That means they have Roz, I'm sure of it. Nancy will need to feed before she can flash Don and Roz to wherever they're hiding out. Don's on the donor list.*

Cristos's return came instantly. *He can't be on the list if his mark's not legit. They want to use Roz to convert Don. Perhaps they planned to tell us she did it of her own free will. If they dare to forge a permission sigil, they'll do that. Get after them. I'll arrange the search here, in case they're hiding out in the city.*

I can't sense her at all, Cristos. That means she must be far away.

Or unconscious.

She can't convert anyone if she's unconscious.

It's your only hope. Find her before she comes around and Nancy controls her mind. Go.

Cristos cut away from Andreas, probably to arrange the search he'd promised. Andreas didn't need to tell anyone what they had said. He'd made the communication open, and they'd all read it along with him.

The brothers walked forward, but as they did, they felt a familiar fuzziness in the air, the sign of a shapeshifter masking his other form. Then they heard the arrival, the elevator whirring as it brought people up to their floor.

When Andreas opened the door, Domenico was just pulling up his fly. He shook his head. "I'm sorry, man. They blindsided us. Nobody suspected." He led two men inside, Talents Andreas didn't know and Candy, who gave him a sympathetic smile. "We're securing the electronics."

"You think this is the source of the leak?"

She shrugged. "Could be. I think so, but don't jump to any conclusions." She glanced at the two Gardiner vampires and her eyes widened slightly. "Hurry back, boys."

Andreas supposed they were quite good looking in a dark, brooding kind of way. Not something he usually noticed. He was more interested in their muscle tone and usefulness as backup. He waved vaguely at the apartment, anxious to be away. "Help yourselves. Don't move the furniture in the bedroom around, we can flash in and out there, if we need to."

"Sure." Candy had already spotted a computer, a tower set in a unit in the corner of the living area. She was gone. "A new development, guys," he told the new arrivals. "It seems Don and Nancy kidnapped Roz. They're probably going to make Roz convert Don." Blank astonishment showed on their faces as they took the new facts in. Domenico let loose a string of colorful Italian curses, but Andreas had other things on his mind.

He turned his attention to the two vampires. "Where first? Where will they take her?"

George frowned. "Much as I hate to admit it, you can sense her better than we can. We'll work as a team. We'll take you to the places we know, you try to scent her."

"Sounds like a plan."

Moving closer, they took hold of each other's hands, needing the physical contact to flash. With their minds linked, Andreas saw where they were going, and then felt the familiar whirring as they shifted.

They moved as quickly as they could, urgency a fever in them all, and as the night went on, their desperation increased. They would find them, or someone would, and

whatever they did, Don and Nancy were doomed, but if they didn't find them in time, it wouldn't matter much to Andreas. He didn't care what happened to them, the only person in his mind was Roz. Roz, stroking his skin, kissing him, loving him, joking with him. The only woman, Talent or mortal who had come anywhere near stealing his heart. And Roz never did anything by halves. When she died, he doubted there'd be much left for him.

Andreas didn't ask where they were, but mostly they arrived in open spaces near buildings. In some places sunset had just fallen, and in others, they arrived a few hours after. Like most vampires, Andreas could always assess the arrival of sunrise, and so he could assess roughly where in the country they were.

They had no luck at the first three places. Not a sniff, or a sense of anyone. While Andreas concentrated on Roz, the other two sensed Nancy and Don, trying to find their sigils, any pattern. They still weren't entirely sure they would find them together.

Where was she? At the third destination, Andreas paused, holding up one hand. "No I can't find her here, but let's think about this logically. They're an hour or so ahead of us, so they can't be anywhere sunset has only just happened because they can't move on. We can cut those out."

George slapped his open palm to his forehead. "Why didn't I think of that? That cuts the search right down."

"If they flashed at all," Mike added gloomily.

"Cristos is taking care of the New York end. He's quartered the city, got every available Talent combing the place."

George grunted. "I want to find them. I want the pleasure of seeing their faces when we arrive."

"But not kill them."

"Oh no, not yet." His smile told Andreas more than he wanted to know about the manner of their punishment.

Chapter Nineteen

Roz blinked and came awake, aware of only two things. It was dark, and her head hurt, although 'hurt' didn't come close to the pain she felt when she turned to find out where she was.

Alone, in a room that smelled unfamiliar, and restrained. Not where she expected to be, not in any condition to fight. When she moved, something rattled. She rubbed her eyes, hoping her night vision would kick in soon. Or she tried to rub her eyes. A jerk on her wrist told her they had restrained her. She moved one foot and heard another jingle. Handcuffs or manacles, then.

Exerting her strength, she pulled hard, to free herself from the restraints, but a searing pain shot through her arms straight to her heart and she cried out from the shock of it.

"Don't."

She wasn't alone. The single word clued her in to the speaker, and her heart pounded with relief. "Nancy! Let me out of this, will you? Or have they got you, too?"

A long pause. Had Nancy passed out, or was she thinking?

Her eyes had become accustomed to the near darkness. Although she had the vampire's enhanced night vision, she needed some light to go on, and all she could see was the thin beam coming the side of a door or window. It raked over an upright form. Nancy. "What are you waiting for?"

"What do you remember?"

Impatiently Roz rattled the manacles against the metal of the bed. "Why does that matter? Let me out of these things! My head hurts."

"They're silver."

Roz groaned. Both she and Nancy, almost all Gardiners, had a sensitivity to silver. She never wore silver jewelry, because it brought her skin out in a rash, inflamed it and made it swell up. So whoever had taken them knew that. The worst part was that silver weakened her, removed the extra strength she gained after nightfall. Not all vampires had the same sensitivity, so that meant whoever took them knew what they were. "Do you know what they want?"

"Yes."

"Is there anything you can do to get me out of these manacles? I know you're as sensitive as I am, but isn't there a weapon, something you could use?" She quelled the rising tide of panic building inside her. If one of the laboratories had her, they wouldn't be happy with her death. They'd kill her slowly, experiment on her until she'd given up all her secrets, but she couldn't help them. She was what she was, and they wanted the essence of that, not Roz herself.

When she tried to contact someone, anyone, mentally, she hit a hard wall, a barrier blocking her from the outside world. The silver again. She couldn't even connect with Nancy. Either that, or Nancy was keeping her defenses up. "Is there somebody listening to us?" she whispered, afraid to give away too much.

"Only me."

Nancy sounded unnaturally calm. Was she drugged? Was that why she wasn't trying to help her?

Roz injected a harder tone into her voice. "Nancy, get over here. See what you can

do to get me out of these damned manacles."

"I'll get you out. I need to find out if you're okay."

"Except for a sore head, I'm fine. And that's healing pretty fast. Someone knocked us out, didn't they?"

A shred of a smile echoed in her mind. "Yes, *someone* did."

Irritation which could easily grow into anger hit her. "Quit playing games, Nancy. What's happening here? What's all this about?"

The door opened and a silhouette stood in the doorway. The bright light behind the figure blinded her for a moment, but Roz knew the shape. Don. No longer relieved by the presence of two people she thought she knew so well, Roz's stomach tightened. "Tell me," she said, her voice as low as a whisper. "I deserve to know."

"She does," Don said, solemn and still. He'd always had so much laughter and good humor, but none of it was apparent now. "Tell her, Nancy. Then let's get this over with."

Apprehension grew, tightening her senses, but not helping her strength. Of course Nancy knew about the silver, but she'd bet Don wasn't as susceptible. He must have snapped the manacles into place.

So in this situation, Don was the danger. The mortal, weaker than either of them, but he had the immunity to silver. Her agent's training clicked in to try to help her. She had no idea where she was, she couldn't call for help, she could only hope someone missed her and started to look for her. But no one would, unless someone in New York contacted the family and they realized the three of them had gone missing.

She couldn't depend on anyone except herself. So what was new in that? Her mouth twisted in a cynical smile. It always came down to that.

"What are you smiling at?" Nancy, sharper than Roz was used to hearing her.

"Just wondering what story you'll cook up to explain all this."

"How do you know what we've got planned?"

Roz caught her breath so Nancy wouldn't hear her gasp. Then it was true, the suspicion forming tentatively in her mind. "Are you completely insane? You can't do this and have a hope of getting away with it."

"We have to." A note of despair crept into Nancy's voice and by the light from the room behind them Roz could make out the bleakness in her eyes. "I don't want to do this Roz, but it's the only way. I can't let Don die in a mortal lifespan, I just can't."

"And afterwards, are you going to wrap him in cotton wool, refuse to let him out in the daytime? And how about yourself? Can you live with what you're doing? You know I wouldn't do this, not for Don. I like him, but this is going way beyond friendship. Liked," she corrected herself. "You'll have to use Compulsion, and you know I'll fight that. Are you stronger than me?" Yes, her mind told her. Nancy was older and had stronger mental powers. "How many men have you lived past, Nancy?"

"Too many."

She ignored the despair in the other vampire's voice. She must not feel sorry for Nancy. "Why didn't you restrict yourself to vampire men, once you got hurt one too many times?" For her, John had been enough. She didn't want to feel like that again. But to her knowledge, Nancy had been through that experience three times at least. Falling in love, marrying, living on—too much, too hard to bear.

It was her choice.

"There's something about mortals," Nancy continued sadly, "I can't resist them. Vampires just don't do it for me."

Realization hit Roz. "You like to be in control." She kept her voice calm and steady,

just as if they were in their apartment, discussing this like rational beings. "You like the superiority of the vampire/mortal relationship. So you've picked needy mortals, not the strong types. My John was strong. He coped. Your husbands couldn't."

When Don flinched, she knew this was a fruitful line to follow. "Does Don mind that you've loved before, been married before?"

Don opened his mouth to speak, but Nancy was there first. "No, he doesn't, he doesn't mind in the least."

"But even if you convert him, he'll always be younger than you, always be that much weaker, won't he?"

Not necessarily. A vampire's powers often increased with age, but with practice and study, a young vampire could achieve awesome powers. She thought of Andreas, stronger than any of them by day, and nearly as strong by night. Another five years or so and he'd be anyone's equal. A pang shot through her. Would she ever see him again? She prayed he wouldn't be the one to find her dead body, if it came to that.

"We'll cope."

She felt Nancy's mind in hers, examining it clinically. "The head's almost better now. I didn't want Don to feel that, but it should be fine now." She stepped back, to stand at Don's side.

Roz gritted her teeth and threw Nancy out of her mind, shoving with such force she heard Nancy's whimper as she slammed the door shut, but almost immediately, Nancy returned. "Not this time, Roz. This time I win. Open up."

Don leaned forward and Roz saw the small key dangling in his hand, teasing her with its nearness but then a searing pain took her as he took her hand and bent her little finger down. Down and down until the dull snap told her it had broken.

The physical pain was enough to let Nancy in, back into Roz's mind, forcing it open, heading straight for the center, where Compulsion was easier.

She fought and fought, ignoring the pain of her broken finger – two broken fingers, and only heard Nancy's order of "Enough! I have her now!" forcing Don to stop. Through the fog of pain, the frantic fighting, she felt Don's satisfaction. All those times she'd refused his teasing and flirting, when she'd thought he was joking, he'd meant it.

"It would have been good," he murmured. "Nancy likes to watch me with another woman. It could have been good for you, Roz. Now I get you anyway."

Roz gritted her teeth but felt herself going under, like a patient on an operating table.

"You can take the cuffs off her now, darling," she heard Nancy say, as though at a great distance or over a bad telephone line. Sparks crackled through her head as she brought every Psi sense she had into play, but nothing was enough. If Nancy didn't know her as well as she did, she might have had a chance, but Nancy knew every pressure point, every weakness she had. Even Andreas.

Her last self-determined thought was for him. *Don't be sorry. Avenge me and move on. I love you, Andreas Constant.* She had no sigil for him, so she used his CIA insignia, sending the last thought out into the night.

It was all she could do. He might pick up on the thought she sent into the ether, he might not. She had done all she could. As she sank into the control of someone else, her every thought dictated by Nancy, she couldn't help but be thankful for the two men who had meant the most to her, and were so different. John and Andreas.

"I heard her!" Andreas paused, in the act of taking the hands of George and Mike for yet another flash to another place.

"I felt something," George said, cocking his head to one side. "It's from somewhere near here. But I don't know if it was Roz. It could be another vampire."

"No." Andreas brought up a mental picture. "See that? It's my insignia, from my ID. CIA."

Mike growled low in his throat. "You have no family, no sigil."

"Tell me about it. Wouldn't another vampire have used the sigil?"

"Maybe."

They dropped hands and took a closer look around. This was a small community in Virginia, a respectable place, family saloons and SUV's in front of comfortable houses, not too far apart, not too close together. "I wouldn't have thought they'd bring her somewhere like this."

George stared around him, head high, as though he were a pointer dog trying to sniff out prey. "Perhaps they had no choice. They know we can trace almost anywhere they've been. This was a hunch, something I felt while we were on the way someplace else."

"You've been here before?" Mike asked sharply.

"Once, a while back. I had a woman here."

"Where?" Both Andreas and Mike snarled the question.

George's attention sharpened and he held up one hand, closing his eyes. "114 Bedford Avenue," he murmured, as though he looked far, far back in time. "It didn't last long, her husband was missing, presumed dead, in the Gulf War, but he came back. I bought them a house, I felt so guilty and she'd been good company for a time. While I was screwing her, her husband was choking on sand."

"Which way?"

They'd felt nothing else after that first, sharp pang of recognition.

George led the way, striding quickly towards a small street. "Nancy knew about the affair, but so did several others. I didn't think, didn't connect, but she must have known." He paused, glanced back. "Her husband was military, they never stayed in one place very long, but I told them to keep the house, rent it out until they were ready to move back. Her husband's a general now. Probably never come here from one end of the year to the other. They can afford something a bit fancier these days." His long stride quickened, but the other two had no difficulty keeping up with him.

He stopped before a pleasant looking house, well kept, but with none of the personal touches that showed signs of a family in residence. Neatly barbered lawn, a garden swing, a clean, white paint finish with a blue front door. "This is the place."

"Do we go in like gunfighters at noon, or take a quiet look first?" Mike asked.

George gave him an exasperated stare. "Take a quiet look, stupid. You want to wake the whole neighborhood?"

Mike shrugged. "I don't care. Whichever is the quickest way."

Andreas took control. "This is my field. I'll pick the locks. That burglar alarm isn't on." He clicked his tongue between his teeth. "It would have slowed us down just that little bit. Stupid, but I'm glad of it. C'mon, let's go. I'll open the door and lead the way. Mike, you scan for mortals, George, scan for vamps and Talents." Mortals and Talents operated in different ways. It would be more efficient to do it separately.

Mike pushed his long hair behind his ears. "What are you going to do?"

Andreas snicked off the safety catch on his Glock. "Take care of business." He

flashed a mirthless grin. "It's what I do best."

He was good with a lock pick, even if he said so himself. Shoving the roll of slender instruments back in his pocket, he stepped back to let George and Mike in the house before stepping noiselessly through the dark hallway to the stairs. The delay helped his night vision along, and he could see perfectly now. Doors to the right and left, stairs ahead. Mike held up one finger. So did George. Two presences, one human, one vampire. Andreas's heart sank. There should be three. Two vamps, one human.

As he watched, Mike closed his fist. No humans, and George extended another finger. Two vampires.

Something more than terror clutched Andreas close. Oh no, no this wasn't going to happen. Revenge wasn't enough. He wanted Roz back, and he wanted her alive.

The three exploded into action. George leaped up the stairs, taking them three at a time. If the staircase had been broad enough, the other two would have been neck and neck with him.

By the time Andreas reached the top of the stairs, George's foot was up and kicking hard against a door at the top. He burst through on the first well-placed kick, Mike and Andreas surging in behind him.

Like practiced agents, they spread out, George and Mike taking either side, Andreas the center. As though they'd worked together before. None needed the lights. What they saw was overwhelmingly too much.

The smell of blood overwhelmed Andreas, but under it all, he got the faint scent of woman. His woman. The echoes of another woman's screech echoed off the walls, but he ignored it, and the woman it belonged to. The other two were more than capable of taking care of Nancy.

The two figures on the bed could almost be engaged in sex, but they were fully dressed. Don lay half on top of Roz, his head buried in her neck. Roz stared straight up, from half focused, heavy lidded eyes. But ecstasy hadn't caused that slumberous look. Roz was dying.

He felt the heavy throb in the air, the essence of her fading. Without pausing to consider his actions, he did the only thing he could. He moved slightly to make sure his aim was true and shot Don in the side of the head.

The blast overpowered Nancy's scream, but he heard the echoes of it reverberate with the sound. "We have to get out of here," Mike said, his voice completely emotionless. "We'll take them together."

He was right. The sound of gunfire in this area would bring the cops in no time, not to mention any gun-happy neighbors who might fancy their chances against an intruder.

Andreas calmly clicked the safety catch back on the Glock and tucked it into the back waistband of his slacks before bending down to scoop the interlocked couple into his arms. He forced away any thought of Roz's soft, scented body. It might weaken him just too much. Mike took the other side, keeping them together.

Andreas forced a vivid image of Roz's bedroom in New York into his mind, and opened the vision for the other two, with the co-ordinates firmly set.

They flashed.

Chapter Twenty

When they landed, Andreas nearly staggered under the extra weight of the two conjoined figures he and Mike held. With a jerk of his head, he indicated the bed and taking one step at a time, they headed for it, laying Roz and Don down carefully. For Roz's sake, not for Don's.

"She compelled Roz to take Don's blood. All of it." George said solemnly. He must have linked with Nancy, now locked in his hold, her arms wrenched behind her back.

She glared at them defiantly. "I wanted Don with me. There was no way I was going to let another lover die." Tears poured down her face unchecked, and she sobbed openly. "Now you've killed him. I'll see you all burn in hell!"

"Shut up," said George without heat. "When I want your opinion, I'll tell you." His gaze met Andreas' where he knelt on one side of the bed, Roz's hand clasped in his while Mike tried to ease Don off her. "Be careful, Mike."

"I'm trying to be," Mike said through gritted teeth. "Don't, Andreas. We need to think about this. Don, or what's left of him, has locked into a major artery. If we pull him off, Roz will lose what blood she has left in her. It will kill her for sure."

Andreas abruptly loosed his hold on Don and let the body fall back on to Roz, feeling nauseous. He wanted the body off her. He was on the cleaner side of Don, where his bullet had entered. Mike had the other side, the exit wound, where little remained of the head, but he seemed unaffected by the sight.

"So what do you suggest?"

Mike glanced down at the interlocked bodies. "I can offer my neck to her, nick it a little first. If she has any life left in her at all, she'll take the offer."

"Won't she be in a blood frenzy? Hold you tight, not let you go?"

Mike shook his head, his hair glimmering in the dim light from the bedside lamp. "No. Nancy used compulsion to make her take all Don's blood. Then the frenzy took him, not her. The recipient of the Gift gets the blood frenzy, not the donor. She's down to her last few gills. If we don't do something soon, she'll go into shock and die anyway. Watch her closely. If she tries to take too much from me, take my place. Or I'll draw away after a couple of pints, and leave the rest to you."

"It might take more than one transfusion. She needs four more pints, at least."

"She can have it."

Andreas's respect for Mike went up several notches. "You don't have to do that. I called Cristos as soon as we arrived here. But give her something now. I'll make sure you're safe, I swear." Glancing down at Roz, he thought her face had paled even more. "I'm sorry I shot him. She could have had him."

Mike shook his head. "That's not a good idea. The Gift has never been given and immediately taken back like that. There must be a reason why not. But since blood from a dead person is no good to us, it doesn't matter. Ready?"

Andreas met Mike's eyes above the conjoined bodies between them. Without another word, Mike extended a claw and scratched his neck.

A scratch was all it took. With overwhelming relief, Andreas saw Roz's fangs extend. She didn't pull her lower lip back, and the razor sharp fangs sliced through it. Mike bent, offering his neck and he watched Roz's fangs take possession of his vein.

When vampires withdrew, their fangs and the saliva on them closed the wound naturally, leaving small marks that disappeared quicker than usual wounds. So by morning, the blood donor would be left flawless. But Andreas had killed Don before he'd done that. He'd had no choice. If he'd waited until Don withdrew, Roz would have been dead. In a blood frenzy, the recipient of the Gift sank deep into the artery, not a vein, and remained there until every drop of the donor's blood had gone. It was the only time a vampire drained the victim, because to drain a victim invoked the blood frenzy and no one could withstand that.

He waited for a few moments and heard the gentle sucking sound that meant Roz had latched on and had taken some blood. She would lose a little with the action he was about to take next and he wanted it replaced. He flicked a look up at George, who nodded, grim-faced, still holding Nancy, who by now had subsided into heartbroken sobs. George nodded just as the door opened. He didn't need to turn around to know who had just come in.

"Go on," Cristos said. "Do it. There are enough of you now to replenish her. I'll take over with Nancy."

Dimly he heard handcuffs clicking, no doubt silver ones, like the ones that had been dangling from the bed in that house in Virginia. "Don't take her away Cristos. We might need her as a donor."

"Count on it."

"Let her have all of my blood. I don't care any more!" He doubted he could care if he tried.

"We don't need your permission, Nancy. After we separate them, it's your turn." Andreas knew Cristos well enough to know just how much anger seethed under the calm tones.

He took a deep breath and dragged Don's body away, swiftly pushing it aside, ignoring the thump when the body hit the floor. Blood pumped from Roz's neck, the raw wounds gaping. He bent and covered them with his mouth, feeling the fresh blood fill it before his fangs came down and the saliva came. He would have blocked the wounds with his body, anything, if this didn't work, but he felt a slowing of the flow. He let the blood trickle out of his mouth. Vampires didn't take blood into their digestive systems, it went up their fangs to a special organ that only their species possessed. Too much blood in the stomach made a vampire as sick as any other human.

Thank God, it was working.

Andreas concentrated on the task at hand as if it were the only thing in the world. It was, for him. He counted slowly, and by the time he reached twenty, the pulse had slowed to a trickle. He drew away.

Pinpricks, with a tiny trickle of blood. He lifted a corner of the bed sheet and touched it to the wounds, now sore rather than life threatening.

When he looked up Mike was just pulling away, paler than usual, but intact. Andreas bent forward. "She probably lost most of that in this wound. It's my turn."

"No." Cristos moved, and he heard the stumble that meant he was pulling Nancy along with him, although he didn't take his eyes off Roz's face. She was still unconscious, still pale. Still critical.

"Nancy employed compulsion so her life is forfeit. Let Roz drain her."

"No!" Nancy's voice echoed off the walls. "You can't do that!"

"Yes I can. I'm a Guardian. You might say it's my job." They came into sight when Cristos dragged Nancy around to the other side of the bed to Andreas. "Go now, Mike.

You provided the first aid, stopped that wound killing Roz. Now it's time to administer the cure. Thank you for all you've done. Department 57 would be glad of your services, if you ever consider helping us out."

Mike got to his feet, aided by the now unencumbered George, making room for Cristos. "We'll stay around for a while."

"He needs to feed," Cristos told him. "I've got their six, you go. But keep in touch."

"Sure you're all right?"

Andreas looked up, right into George's deep blue, troubled eyes. "Thanks, guys. I can't tell you how much I appreciate your help."

"Thank us by taking care of Roz. We won't go far. Call us if you need us."

With George supporting most of Mike's weight, they slowly left the room. The thump of the front door closing sounded hollowly in the apartment as Cristos stepped back.

Nancy stood before Roz, tears slowly trickling down her face. "I'm sorry, Roz," she whispered, "but it was the only way and when you split with Andreas, our leaving for the wedding was just too much. I knew nobody would worry about you until it was too late." She looked past Andreas, to where what was left of Don sprawled over the floor. "I'd do it again."

"We do it differently this time," Cristos said. Andreas didn't attempt to help him. Cristos was the Guardian, and he would obey orders, just as long as it helped Roz. Anything against her and he'd defy anyone and any rule to save her.

As though he'd spoken the words Nancy met his eyes. "Yes. That's what I meant."

"Would you die for her? Would you have died for Don?" Andreas swallowed. If she said yes, had he the heart to insist on justice?

He didn't have to ponder that problem because Cristos solved it for him. "On your knees."

Andreas felt the warmth as Cristos exuded power, seemingly effortlessly. For the first time he noticed Cristos was wearing a tux and black tie. Cristos spoke without breaking an ounce of concentration. "I was at the opera. But it's okay, I know how *Aida* ends." The warmth left his voice when he spoke to Nancy again. "Down on your knees by the bed."

"You want me to beg forgiveness?" She sank down. She had little choice, with the mental pressure Cristos forced on her, but she did it gracefully, as though kneeling before an altar. As she would have been doing in a couple of weeks, if she'd been content to marry the man she loved and make the most of what they had. "I will, I do. Forgive me, Roz." She looked up, her gray eyes as hard as flint and met Andreas's gaze. "The answer to your questions is no. I liked Roz, but not that much."

"The choice is no longer yours. Offer yourself to Roz. She has enough strength to take you, and if she has not, I'll help her."

Implacably, Cristos moved behind Nancy. He didn't touch her, but she moaned as if he had and pushed back against the immovable force he pressed on her, forcing her, inch by inch, towards the wicked fangs protruding from Roz's mouth.

With a swift movement, Roz turned her head away from Andreas, towards Nancy. Nancy cried out, but Roz had her, a panther seizing its prey. Andreas watched the sharp, feral teeth sink deep into Nancy's neck and knew Cristos had initiated the deepest contact of all. He reached for Roz's hand and lifted his gaze to Cristos.

"She needs to drain Nancy fast, before her strength ebbs fatally and she slips into a coma. She was close to it when you arrived, but Mike's offering stopped that. You owe

him.”

“I know it.”

“When she’s done, take her away. I’ll deal with everything here.”

Andreas nodded. Exhaustion swept over him like a wave as the hand he held began to pinken and warm, and the adrenaline rush had its inevitable kickback effect. He slumped forward, holding her tight as if he’d never let her go.

Chapter Twenty-One

Roz slowly became aware she was lying on a cloud. A warm cloud. A soft, warm cloud, although it wasn't consistent, because parts of it were harder and warmer than other part. She heard a rustle when she turned towards the warm part and then smelled something she knew well, although she couldn't quite get a handle on what it was.

Anyway, she knew it was hers, and warm and comfortable. A low rumble sounded close to her ear. "Roz? Love, are you awake?"

She opened her eyes, blinking when her lashes caught on something in front of her. A wall of muscle. Smiling, she remembered what the smell was. Spicy male cologne and something even more delicious. Andreas.

She lifted her head and felt his arms tighten around her, lifting her up the bed so she could meet his eyes. Gazing into them she felt his concern and memories began to creep back into her mind.

Before they could overwhelm her, he kissed her, soft and warm, like the comforter enveloping her. "How do you feel?" he murmured, pulling back just a little. His anxious regard swept over her.

"Fine." She swept her hand up his side and around his back. "Better now."

A low rumble she interpreted as a chuckle. "Good. Do you remember anything?"

She frowned and moved closer, feeling his hug before he slackened his grip to let her relax, her head on his shoulder, her legs interlaced with his. "Some. Tell me."

"Nancy kidnapped you."

She put her hand to her head, unsurprised when she found no trace of a wound. Peering over the expanse of his chest she saw the dark night outside, and the soft light cast by a bedside lamp. She knew this room. "We're in your house in Utah, aren't we?"

"Yes. Only Cristos knows where we are. I wanted you to rest. But he wants to debrief us as soon as we feel ready for it."

"What time is it?"

"Around seven. Early yet."

She smiled, and pressed a soft kiss on his neck. "Are we living by night, then?"

"For now. Until you're completely recovered. Even after that. It's time I accepted what I was."

She tried to lift herself up on one elbow, succeeding on her second try, frowning at him. "How long have I been out?"

"Two nights. The night before last would be the last one you remember. You slept the day through after that, and the doctor gave you something to make you sleep last night. He said it would help the healing process, but if you felt anything tonight, to call him."

"What doctor?"

"Poor darling, you don't remember, do you?"

Mistily she remembered someone she didn't know bending over her, but that was all.

"Before I brought you here, I took you to the hospital and they checked you over. That's when the doc gave you a shot." He smiled up at her, his expression softening the harsh lines by his mouth. "But I checked on you every hour, like they told me to. Every half hour, really."

"It was Nancy, wasn't it?"

He nodded, and she was sorry to see the lines return. They seemed a little deeper than she'd noticed before. "It was. When we broke up, she suggested you took early leave and went back home for her wedding. So we wouldn't be surprised to find you gone. Only I was. I have Mike and George to thank for helping me find you." He lifted his hand, twining a lock of her hair around it, wrapping himself in her. "Do you remember Nancy using compulsion?"

"I remember realizing that was what she meant to do," she said slowly, staring into the recent past, forcing herself to remember. Her mind shied away from it, but she had to face it. Now, while the memory was fresh. Then she could put it away and get on with her life. "That's the last I remember, clearly. They fastened me to bed with silver—like most of the Gardiners, I react badly to silver. If I have silver jewelry, I lacquer it."

"I'll remember not to give you any. Are you okay with gold and platinum?"

She smiled at his attempt to give her some peace. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed each fingertip, lingering over his self-appointed task. "I'm fine. What happened after that?"

He gazed at her, and wrapped her hand in his, as though he could keep her safe that way. "Nancy used compulsion to make you drain Don and send him into a blood frenzy. He took you. We found you in time, brought you back to the New York apartment and did what we had to do. Then I took you to the hospital and brought you here."

"Tell me, Andreas."

He sighed. "Do you have to know? You must have guessed. Nancy was the leak. Candy took one look at the files on her laptop and zoned in on the codes. She said they were pretty simple. Nancy took the files from the Department and routed them through the DIB to provide the false lead."

"I didn't think she was that clever."

"She wasn't. Someone in the Department helped her. A clerk, someone nobody really notices, but someone with high enough clearance to collect information. Just not high enough clearance to provide them with the proof they wanted, thank God. Cristos and Bernard Knox are working together to close the leak and any hole it might have left."

She laughed. "There's an unholy alliance!"

He smiled, too. "They do make quite a pair. Cristos thinks there's a consortium of businessmen, working together to dissect Talents and distill whatever it is that we have."

She frowned, lifting her hand to cup his cheek. "I thought we had scientists doing that already."

He nodded against her hand and she felt the stubble of a day's growth rasp her palm deliciously. "We do, but these people want to bypass humanity. We're creatures to them, subjects to be used. And all they want from it is money. Somehow it would be easier if they had some kind of ideal, however twisted, but they just want to make a profit. The labs have been getting more sophisticated and the Department has suspected for some time that they're linked, but Candy helped Cristos break the code, provided the final link. She was right about the metatags."

"Pardon?"

"Hidden labels on web pages. They act like a code for those in the know, but if you're not looking for them, you wouldn't spot them." He paused. "Nancy helped them. They promised her Don would be one of the first people to take advantage of their studies. He would get the magic bullet first. She decided not to wait for that."

She swallowed when she saw the misery in his eyes. "Nancy's dead, isn't she?"

He lay completely still, watching her closely. "Yes, she is. George, Mike and I found you before Don had drained you completely, but I had to kill him to make him stop. It was the only way, I swear. He'd locked on to your artery. We had to stop that. I wanted to kill him for what he did to you, but I made it fast. He didn't even yell." She stared at him, just listening. "Mike gave you blood while I removed Don from you and healed the wound. I couldn't have done that alone. You were too weak to lose any more blood. You got most of your blood from Nancy. Cristos deemed it necessary. She had to die for using compulsion, and you needed blood."

"But I didn't kill her."

He shook his head slightly, his hair rustling against the pillow. "No, you know you didn't. She was already dead, Roz. Condemned by her own actions. Cristos delivered the verdict, began the exchange and then knocked her out. She wouldn't have felt anything." His mouth flattened, the first sign she'd seen of the ruthless side of Andreas Constant since she'd woken up. "Frankly I wouldn't have cared. Not after what she did to you."

She stared at him for a long time, not entering his mind, just watching him and thinking. He'd suffered for her. She had no doubt he would have died for her, if he'd had to. But she was glad he hadn't.

"Andreas, I wanted to call you but Nancy said you'd already called. You were on your way to London, she said, and you wanted to let me know, but you hadn't wanted to talk to me. I should have known then. You always confront your problems head-on, don't you?" He continued to watch her, but his head inclined in a reluctant nod. "I was mad at you, but not entirely sorry. I didn't want to face you again, if you didn't want me."

She watched his face and this time he responded, his arms looped around her back pulling her close. "Oh I wanted you all right. I came by the apartment to beg you to take me back, but you'd gone. Even then I might have gone away, but something was wrong, and when I found the smear of blood on your bedroom door I knew for sure you were in trouble. Then George and Mike arrived, looking for you. I was so scared, Roz! Scared I'd lost you, scared I'd never see you again, that I wouldn't find you in time!"

His grip tightened and she gasped for breath. "But you did. You found me. Are you still going to London? Would you mind if I came with you?"

"Mind!" He laughed shakily. "Mind? I thought you wouldn't want to come. You know, with your previous—"

"Life," she finished for him gently. "Andreas, if you don't let me loose I'm going to suffocate!"

With a bark of laughter, he released her so she could prop herself up, her elbows each side of his muscular chest. She bent and swiped her tongue over a nipple, but pulled away again when she heard his gasp and felt the nipple instantly tighten. "Andreas, London is very different from the city I used to know. Even if it wasn't, I'd rather go there with you than spend time here on my own. I don't want you to go alone."

"I'm not going." He lifted his hand to cup her cheek. "Fabrice is."

"Fabrice?"

"Yeah. After—he's a man now, just a man. All his abilities have gone. For good, according to the experts Cristos consulted. So he wants to start again in a place where people don't know him so well. So Cristos gave him the assignment instead. It's the best lead we have from Nancy's files. Some London based company. The Talents there will know his past history, sure, but not him. It's what he wants."

"You'll miss him, won't you?"

"Not half as much as I'd miss you. I want us together, Roz, I want to be with you for

as long as you can take me. Will you think about it?"

She lifted one hand and sleeked it over his chest. She couldn't help it; the expanse of smooth muscle invited her touch. In return, he cupped her breast, gently thumbing her nipple until it stood out in proud relief. "I don't need to think about it. Yes, Andreas, I want to stay with you."

"Marry me?"

"If that's what it takes."

Even then he didn't drag her down as she expected. Instead, he stared up at her, and she felt him enter her mind. His tentative entry almost made her weep. Unsure of his welcome, unsure if he could trust her answer, not because he didn't trust her, but because he didn't trust himself. Deep down Andreas felt unworthy. Under all that male arrogance, his certainty of purpose dwelt a small boy abandoned on the streets of New York to fend for himself, bewildered by his strange desire to take blood, scared by the powerful fangs that shot out of his mouth when he smelled blood, or even thought of it.

"Andreas, I love you. I want to try to have a family with you, but if we don't succeed, I don't really care. You've given me the two most precious things I'll ever have. My life and your love."

Then he did draw her down to take her in a deep, loving kiss. Still he was gentle with her, as though afraid she might break. She supposed if she'd been through the experience he'd just suffered, she might feel the same, but he should know she'd recovered now, he should feel her health, now his mind was joined to hers.

With a powerful surge of muscle, he pushed off the bed, taking her with him. "I want to get the debriefing over with, so we can have our leave now. Is that okay with you?"

"I guess."

He wouldn't let her walk but carried her to the shower. Was he planning to coddle her from now on? He must know she couldn't bear that. He wasn't the only one with a libido.

Andreas' shower was a walk-in room. Half of it was shower, and the other half contained his bath, sunk half into the floor. He touched a pressure switch and the shower came on, like sweet April rain, cascading gently on to the tiled floor, tilted slightly so the water ran straight to the drain against one wall. The off-white tiles gave a softer glow than stark white would have done. He set her carefully on her feet under the water and she tilted her head back so the shower could fall over her face and hair. "Oh, this is lovely!" She exclaimed. Nothing like a near death experience to make a person appreciate the simple things in life.

He smiled, reaching for a bottle of shower gel. His hand lingered over a washcloth, but passed over it and instead, he squeezed a puddle of gel into his hand. She shuddered in anticipation.

He washed her. Every bit of skin and her hair, from her head to her feet. Now resting in his mind, she felt his need. He wanted to touch her, make sure she was completely healed, that no mark remained on her. She could have told him, but he needed the reassurance this gave him. And she relished his exploration. At first he skimmed over her more sensitive parts but when she drew closer, licked his wet skin, lapped drops off his chest like a cat tasting cream, he gave in. Lifting her breasts in his hands, he stroked her nipples gently until they began to crinkle and peak for him, then bent his head and took a nipple between his teeth. She moaned, hoping the sound would encourage him. "Andreas, don't stop, Andreas. You need reassurance, well, so do I. But I don't want it the same way.

I want to feel us together, joined. Make love to me, Andreas."

He released her nipple, letting it slide out of his mouth slowly, lingering to savor the texture and taste. "I don't think I have much choice," he whispered, his voice hoarse with longing. "I'll die if I don't love you now."

His erection swelled hard between them, pressing against his belly and hers. She slid her hand up his back, tracing the groove of his backbone, cupping his buttocks in both her hands, teasing, relishing the feel of this man under her palms before sliding one hand around to take his straining cock in a firm grip. With her other hand, she cupped his balls, lifting them, sliding them from one side of her palm to the other under their layer of soft skin, fuzzed with dark hair.

"How long do you think you can last?"

"Not long." His voice had sunk to a whisper of breath, hotly touching her forehead with yearning.

"Let's see." Need overcame her. She had to know he belonged to her, lay her claim for now and all time. Sinking slowly to her knees, she opened her mouth and took him in. Letting the downwards momentum of her body impel her forward. While her hand moved over the lower part of his shaft, she caressed the sensitive head with lips and tongue, tickling the tiny slit in the centre until it wept.

He groaned, past words now, and the sensations she felt in his mind were delicious. She wanted it all, wanted to do more than taste him, wanted to take all of him, now.

He bent and slid his hands under her armpits, dragging her up his body while he took the step that brought them to the tiled wall.

One part of her mind registered surprise that the wall wasn't cold. They must have been in the shower longer than she'd thought. But she had no more time to think, because with an animal growl he pushed her up against the wall and pushed into her.

"Ah God!"

"No, just Andreas Constant needing to be inside you. You can do that again another time, but for now, I want—*this!*" He shoved hard, driving himself deep, and deeper still. She shattered, came apart around him, sensation forcing everything else out of her mind, everything but the reality of this moment. He withdrew, drove in again and she flung her arms around his shoulders, lifted her legs to curl around his back, her heels resting on his buttocks, as she let her lover take control and impel her, stroke by stroke, into ecstasy.

At the peak of her climax she threw back her head and howled, past words, past anything but sheer awareness of this man and their love. Dimly she heard his answering growl, then his shout as he released everything into her.

She didn't know how long they stood there, the warm tiles against her back, warm water trickling over their conjoined bodies, but eventually she lifted her head from his shoulder and opened her eyes. "Will it always be like this?"

He smiled, a smile of possession, pride and love. "You'd better believe it."

The End