

Eternal Obsession



Ann Liory

ETERNAL 2: ETERNAL OBSESSION

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Dedication

For my husband, James. You've always been there for me through these last 11 years, and you continue to be my constant, loving companion.

A very special thank you to my editor, Olivia Wong, for taking on the tough task of polishing me up and making me look pretty and, of course, the lovely ladies of JBuL.

And one more thank you to a member of my list, Therese Goodlett, who's lived a long time in Paris after falling in love with her own Frenchman. Thank you for helping me with some of the rough edges on the culture and the city itself that I wouldn't have known otherwise.

Disclaimer: The author wishes to acknowledge that although a number of real places are mentioned in Eternal Obsession, some minor artistic license was used in the descriptions for the story's purposes.

Chapter One

Kelly smiled brightly, throwing kisses to the crowd, then waved when she was handed a bouquet of bright red roses. The audience roared with cheers of approval and applause. She felt Chris's hand at her back, and they bowed together. She curtsied gracefully, allowing the tail of her blond ringlets to fall over her shoulders and brush the floor. It was wonderful to be adored for her dancing, but today it wasn't as fulfilling as she'd hoped it would be.

Her partner took her hand and they walked off the stage, waving to the audience until finally they were backstage. Her brilliant stage smile vanished.

"I'll be in my dressing room," she told Chris and the others, then hurried along the corridor to her room, quickly closing the door behind her. Breathing a sigh of relief, Kelly walked across the floor and seated herself at her vanity. The lights were bright around the mirror. She smiled sadly, running her fingers over the looking glass, remembering how, as a little girl, she'd always wanted a mirror like this so she could sit in front of it and pretend to be a star.

Sighing, she picked up her facial cleanser and washed the stage makeup from her face. Reaching for the clip at the top of her head, Kelly released her hair, letting it fall freely down her back, then brushed the blond strands until they were in waves around her face.

There was a soft knock on the door. Without taking her gaze from her reflection, she called out, "I don't want to be disturbed."

"Not even by your very best friend?" a familiar voice replied.

Dropping the brush, Kelly ran to the door, flinging it open. "Cassie!" she squealed enthusiastically; the two women embraced, then pulled away to look at one another. Kelly's dearest friend looked radiant; her chestnut hair flowed in waves down her back, her skin was like porcelain, and her eyes -- once a violet purple -- were black, but still held a mischievous purple gleam to them. Despite this, Kelly couldn't help but think the events of nearly a year

ago that had led her friend to meet and marry a vampire, as well as becoming one herself, seemed unreal.

"Kelly, I missed you while we were away!"

"I missed you, too." Stepping back from the doorway, Kelly motioned with a sweep of her hand for her friend to enter the room. "Come in, come in, and tell me all about your trip. Did you have a wonderful time?"

Cassie sighed dreamily. "I won't tell you one thing until I say how beautiful you looked tonight. You were magical, and you took my breath away. But I must say I am a little jealous for you held Dimitri captivated." Both women laughed.

"I find that hard to believe when you were by his side."

Cassie gave an impish wink. "Well, I did remind him I was there with a nudge or two from time to time." She stopped in the middle of the dressing room and gripped Kelly's arms. "You made it! I knew you would, and I can't tell you how proud I am. I know your parents are smiling with pride from heaven."

Cassie's words touched her heart, and tears began to burn behind Kelly's eyes. "Thank you, Cassie, it means a lot to me to hear you say so." She hugged her friend tightly, not wanting to let go, but finally did. Taking her hand, she led Cassie over to a couch at the back of the room.

"Now, tell me all about your extended honeymoon. And where is Dimitri?"

Cassie settled down on the cushions and gave a wave of her hand. "He's backstage, playing. There must be something about really old people and going to the theater. He just loves it."

"You haven't told Dimitri you think he's old, have you?" Kelly asked, snickering behind her hand.

"Well, let's just say I like to tease him every once in a while."

Kelly nudged Cassie. "Be nice to him." She laughed, then leaned back on the couch, sitting cross-legged. "So tell me everything."

"*Everything* was wonderful. We visited Dimitri's family home in Greece; he had had it rebuilt, and it was breathtaking. Oh, you should have seen him the moment he walked through the doors. He was like a giddy boy showing me all of the rooms, telling me stories upon stories, and romping me around his lands. From there we went to Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, and France..." Her voice faded as she looked at her friend. Kelly knew the look on her own face was probably stricken; her heart rate increased, pounding a wild rhythm in her chest.

"Kelly, how are you?" Cassie asked, clearly concerned.

Thoughts of Jacques paraded through Kelly's mind. "I'm fine, why? Go on with your story."

Her friend ignored her lie. "If it makes you feel any better, Jacques is utterly miserable. We stayed a while with him at his castle outside Paris. I tried to talk to him, but he refused to discuss the two of you. I even yelled at him, shocking both Jacques and Dimitri. Suffice it to say, Jacques had very little to say to me after that outburst."

Kelly winced. "No, it doesn't make me feel better. And I don't care."

"You can't fool me, Kelly." Cassie's hand covered hers, but Kelly moved it away.

"I said I'm fine, really. So what else did you do? I'm sure Dimitri had a wonderful time showing you the sights of Europe."

"I think he did; let me ask." Cassie was silent for a moment, then giggled. "He says he was thrilled and can't wait to take me there again."

Kelly leaned forward. "How is it you can communicate with Dimitri? I mean, I know you can, but how do you do it?"

Cassie shrugged. "I don't know. It's a bond we've had since the first blood exchange. I say the words to him in my head, and he hears me and vice versa. I can picture him in my mind whenever I want, too -- it's better than phone or e-mail." She laughed.

Kelly contemplated Cassie's revelation. Her mind started to whirl with possibilities. Could she communicate with Jacques? How would she do it? Cassie said it was an ability she'd gained after her blood exchange with Dimitri. Could she do the same thing if she pictured Jacques in her mind? What if...

What am I doing? Kelly grunted in disgust, then focused on Cassie who was studying her with understanding and worry in her wide eyes.

"Kelly, talk to me." Cassie touched her cheek gently; the sobs Kelly had been fighting for the past nine months bubbled forth.

"He didn't even say good-bye." The tears flowed as she finally surrendered to them. Cassie's arms immediately went around Kelly, pulling her into a hug. "Sometimes I feel like he's with me, that I can sense him inside me. There's affection and tenderness, but then he's gone. My heart aches, and I can't get it to stop. I feel so cold and barren, as if there is a piece missing. Jacques took it with him when he left, and I'll never be able to get it back again." She buried her face against Cassie's shoulder and cried until she was drained.

Cassie hugged Kelly tight, as sobs racked the other woman's slender body. Although Cassie also loved Jacques, if her husband's mentor and friend had been there at that moment, she would have given him another piece of her mind -- and maybe even a good right hook.

When Jacques had come to the States to aid Dimitri against Gabriella, Jacques and Dimitri's maker, he'd met Kelly. Even from the first moment, the attraction between the two had fairly set the air humming. But Cassie knew that Jacques had tried his best to stay away from Kelly. Unfortunately, Cassie and Kelly's friend -- and Gabriella's servant -- Craig, had attacked both women, forcing Dimitri to turn Cassie in order to save her life. It was then that

Kelly had discovered the existence of vampires, and that Jacques was one, too. All of which had left Cassie with a lot of explaining to do.

And yet, Kelly had accepted the fact that the man she cared for, even loved, was a creature of the night; she'd saved his life, putting her complete trust and love in him by sharing her blood, which had only made the bond between the pair grow deeper. Then Jacques had abruptly returned to France, deserting Kelly without an explanation or good-bye.

Cassie thought she knew why he'd left; much as her own love, Dimitri, had done, Jacques probably didn't want to turn Kelly into what he was. Still, it was clear that he loved Kelly and thought leaving was best for them both, but at what cost? Cassie hated to see Kelly hurting this way, and despite the fact that Jacques was suffering much the same, Cassie was mad at him for his treatment of the woman who was like a sister to her.

"Kelly, I am so sorry. I wish there was something I could do to ease your pain." Cassie pulled away slightly, forcing her friend to look at her. "Actually, if you want..." her voice trailed away.

Kelly sat up, wiping the tears from her eyes. "What? What is it?"

Cassie shrugged nervously. "If you want, I could make you forget him."

Kelly's eyes widened. "You could do that?"

Nodding, Cassie ran her fingers through Kelly's golden hair, pushing strands from her friend's wet cheeks. "I can, but only if you really want me to."

The thought made Kelly shudder and realize again that Cassie was indeed a vampire now, and that she possessed powers Kelly didn't understand or know anything about. She shook her head, shifting away from Cassie and glancing apprehensively at her.

"No, please don't, but thank you. I think."

"I'm sorry, I meant no harm. I only want you to stop hurting."

Kelly smiled slightly. "I know you do." She touched Cassie's hand, squeezing it. "Thank you."

There was another knock on the door and, at Cassie's seductive grin, Kelly knew it must be her friend's husband. "Come in."

Dimitri entered the room, carrying an abundance of flowers. His confidence and power seemed to vibrate through the air. Long, straight, black hair fell around his shoulders, framing his sharp and elegant features, and his piercing black eyes were filled with warmth as he smiled at Kelly.

He seemed to glide across the room, hugging Kelly as she rose from her seat. Kissing her cheek, he handed her several bouquets. "These are from your many admirers." Pulling another bundle, this time of brilliant white roses, from behind him, he placed those in her arms as well. "And these are from Cassandra and me."

Kelly lifted the white roses to her nose and breathed deeply. "They are lovely, thank you both."

Dimitri nodded, his white teeth flashing. "You were radiant tonight, Kelly. You have such grace, it is wonderful to watch you dance."

She blushed. "Thank you, Dimitri."

Cassie laughed at her husband, teasing him about his generous compliments. "Now you're embarrassing her."

He looked at his wife, and Kelly could see his eyes were filled with love and adoration as he gazed on Cassie, making Kelly's heart lurch with thoughts of Jacques.

"I would think with Kelly's outgoing nature it'd be difficult to embarrass her."

Chris suddenly appeared in the open doorway, smiling widely at Kelly, then Dimitri and Cassie. "Excuse me, I don't mean to interrupt."

"Chris, these are very dear friends of mine, Dimitri and Cassie Alexios. Dimitri and Cassie, this is my dance partner, Chris Thomas."

The men shook hands, and Cassie inclined her head, smiling at him. "How nice to meet you." But Chris stared openly at Dimitri; by his intense gaze it was obvious he was very much pleased at what he saw. His eyebrows lifted slightly in suggestion. Cassie snickered behind her husband, while Dimitri pulled at his collar. When it apparently dawned on the young man what he was doing, he apologized quickly, then turned his attention to Kelly.

"Mr. Vincinni wants us all here tomorrow morning. He has a special announcement to make."

"Thanks, Chris, I'll be here."

Her partner hurried out of the room, casting a glance in Dimitri's direction before disappearing around the corner.

"It seems you have an admirer, husband."

Smacking Cassie on the bottom, Dimitri tried to appear stern, but failed miserably, causing both women to laugh. "Hush, wife!" He turned his attention to Kelly. "Come, let us help you gather your things, then we will escort you to your car."

He reached for the flowers, but Kelly laid a hand on his arm. "That's not necessary. I still have to change out of my costume, plus security will see me out. I'll be fine."

At Cassie's uncertain look, Kelly leaned over and kissed her friend's cheek. "Go home. I'll give you a call tomorrow."

Dimitri wrapped his arm around Cassie's waist and led her from the room. Kelly watched them go, her heart heavy. She was alone once more; a constant state of affairs lately.

Closing the door behind them, she returned to her vanity and sat down. Though she looked hard into the mirror, she saw nothing. *Could* she truly communicate with Jacques? Did she want to?

Yes.

She thought of his long, wavy, dark brown hair and his bold nose, so strong and striking. The way his lips curled into a seductive smile when he'd looked at her, and those black eyes that had held her spellbound when she'd gazed into them.

Kelly's breath caught; she was actually doing it! She saw him, clear as day. Her heart raced, and she covered her mouth as she gazed on his perfect male features.

Jacques sat at a large mahogany desk, a lit fireplace off to the side and behind him. His long hair fell over his face as he appeared to look over some paperwork, and he pushed the unruly locks back. Then his long body leaned deeper into his high-backed chair, and he sighed.

Suddenly, his movements froze, and he tensed. Kelly inhaled and exhaled in short, quick spurts as his eyes lifted slowly. It was as if he were staring right at her, which didn't seem possible, but she knew that it was. His presence seemed to fill her room; warmth spread through her body as if he held her in his arms.

Kelly. Her name was a whisper.

She could almost feel his breath fanning her cheek as the deep sound of his voice washed over her like dark silk. She closed her eyes at the glorious sensation of him talking to her within her mind. *Jacques.*

She hadn't intended to call back to him, but it seemed natural to do so. Opening her eyes, she saw his shut in turn, as if he were savoring a delicious treat. *Jacques*, she said again, wanting him, needing him. With her mind, she used the touch of her fingers to stroke his hair, his face. She heard him sigh once more, then falter. His eyelids snapped open as if he was only now realizing what was happening.

Kelly felt as though she were being hurled from his room. She blinked in surprise, her senses reeling, and grasped the vanity table for balance.

Kelly frowned. What had happened?

Rejection!

Comprehension settled around her heart, and her disappointment quickly turned to anger. He had shut her out, just like before. So that was the way he wanted it?

Fine.

Chapter Two

Sitting center stage, Kelly tried to stifle a yawn of exhaustion as Sandro Vincinni, director of the ballet company, stood in front and addressed the entire troupe of dancers.

“I am beside myself with joy with fantastic news.” Everyone looked around curiously, then back at the director. “We have been asked to perform in Paris, France, the same number of shows we have done in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco.”

Everyone else burst into applause and cheers, jumping to their feet and speaking excitedly, but Kelly sat motionless, sick to her stomach. Her heart plummeted and raced all at the same time. It was finally happening, her dream to dance on one of the world’s most spectacular stages in Europe, but she was dreading it.

Chris rushed over to her, leaned down, and grasped her hand. “Can you believe it, Kelly? Paris!” She let him pull her to her feet, laughing softly as he picked her up and twirled her around.

Yes, Paris, she thought. What luck! What lousy, lousy luck!

* * * * *

Cassie pulled the suitcase from the top shelf of the closet and placed it on Kelly’s bed. Kelly handed her some personal items, which Cassie packed away.

“I can’t believe this is happening.” Kelly rushed around her apartment, grabbing things she needed for her trip. “On the one hand, I’m thrilled about dancing in Paris. What an honor and a dream come true, but on the other hand, I should stay away from things that remind me of Jacques, not flock to them.”

Cassie laughed at her reasoning. “I understand completely.”

Sighing dishearteningly, Kelly sank down on the bed and faced her friend. "I know you do; I'm sorry to bother you like this."

Cassie touched her chin. "It's no bother at all, silly."

Kelly smiled slightly. "I know. I was trying to be polite, since you have to listen to me complain."

Grinning devilishly, Cassie folded one of Kelly's shirts, placing it in the suitcase. "Hey, I live for moments like these, remember?"

They laughed. Kelly shook her head and stood, walked to her closet and snatched shoes. She stopped at the foot of the bed beside Cassie, serious and full of sorrow. Cassie set everything down, giving Kelly her full attention.

"I'm scared, Cass," she whispered softly.

"Why?"

Kelly touched her fingers to her chest. Her heart still ached after all these months. "I'm afraid I'll see him again -- and even more terrified that I won't."

Cassie hugged her. "I felt that way with Dimitri, too." She pulled away, motioning Kelly to sit. "In one respect, maybe this is a good thing. If you see Jacques, it will be a chance to talk to him, to get everything out in the open. You'll know what to do."

Kelly shook her head. "But there wasn't anything between us, Cassie, otherwise, he wouldn't have left."

Cassie smiled, a kind and understanding smile. "You're wrong, Kelly. He ran because there *was* something deep between you two, and there still is."

"I don't understand; how could he leave if he really cared?"

Cassie sighed. "Because men are stupid; even when they are vampires, they make bad decisions at times where their hearts are concerned. I don't think they can help it."

Kelly chuckled and thought about that. Remembered the way he had kissed her. His gentleness, despite his great need. The fact that he would have died, would have refused to take what she did not offer freely. But she had saved his life with her blood. Saved him because she loved him.

Kelly touched her forehead to her friend's. "Thanks, Cass."

* * * * *

Another traveler in the airport rudely bumped into Kelly, almost knocking her over in the process. "God, I can't stand this place!" Kelly made her way toward the baggage claim and waited while the announcer over the loudspeaker gave out flight arrivals and departure changes in French. Luckily she spoke the language; even so the announcer's monotone voice was starting to wear on her nerves.

Finally, the luggage started churning out around the turn belt. People began grabbing their bags and walking away. One by one, the suitcases left the line, then circled again. Where was hers? Growing impatient, she crossed her arms and tapped the toe of her shoe against the tile. This was ridiculous! Everyone in her company already had their bags and was now waiting on her. Glaring at the carousel, she clenched her fists at her sides. They'd better not have lost her luggage!

Finally, she had no choice but to join a crowd of people at the lost baggage claim area. Kelly wanted to scream; practically everything she had was in those bags. Luckily she had her purse so money was not a problem, but she was without clothes, makeup, hair combs, and other necessities. She just knew it was going to take forever for the airport to find her bags.

Stepping up to the counter after a twenty-minute wait, Kelly was greeted by the fatigued woman behind the counter.

"Bonjour, qu'est-ce que vous desirez?"

"I'd like my bags. You lost my luggage."

The woman sighed and handed Kelly a slip of paper. *"I did not lose your luggage, ma'am. Please fill out this form."* Then she muttered an obviously rote statement about the airline sending on her suitcases when they were found and looked past her, dismissing her completely. *"Merci. La prochaine."*

Kelly wanted to cause a scene, but moved on reluctantly so that the next person could get his form and be dismissed as well. After providing the necessary information, Kelly handed the paperwork back to the woman, then made her way toward customs, where Chris was waiting with his belongings in the middle of what seemed like a mob.

"Any luck with your bags?"

Kelly shook her head and felt a headache beginning. How she wished for an aspirin, but she knew one would not be forthcoming until she could get to her accommodations. "The airline doesn't know where they are but will bring them to the hotel as soon as they turn up. Where's everyone else?"

"They've already gone through customs and will meet us out front; there's a limousine to take us into town. Mr. Vincinni asked me to wait for you."

Kelly rubbed the pounding spot between her eyes when a woman cut in front of them. Of course there were never lines in Paris -- everyone seemed to mill around -- but after everything she'd just gone through, there was no way Kelly was letting the woman get away with this.

"Excuse me, but I was here first."

The woman looked stunned. *"Oh, pardonnez-moi, mademoiselle."*

Kelly smiled as the woman walked away, knowing perfectly well the stranger had known exactly what she was doing. It was a game of sorts, but Kelly was playing hardball today.

Chris laughed. "Look at you. You're not messing around."

Kelly shook her head. "I just want to get to our hotel, lie down, and take a nap. My head is throbbing, and my previous trip to Paris was a bad experience all the way around."

Chris smiled apologetically. "Sorry you're having a rough day."

Kelly waved her hand to dismiss the apology, then let her gaze wander off to the surrounding windows, where sunlight spilled in. It was late morning, and Kelly hadn't gotten much sleep on the airplane. She yawned when she eventually reached the customs man and handed him her passport, waiting for him to stamp it. He looked at her picture, then at her, and leered. "Welcome to France, *cherie*. Will you be here long?"

"*Oui*." Rolling her eyes, she reached out her hand for her passport as he stamped it, and then she rushed past the counter, very aware of him watching her all the way. *Creep!*

She and Chris made their way to the exit. When they stepped out, Kelly had to stop for a moment. She really was here... and so was Jacques. Her heart pounded at the thought, her chest tightening, making it difficult to breathe. Somewhere out there, he was in a deep slumber, unaware she had arrived in his country, his city. She was closer to him now than she had been in the past several months.

Chris touched her arm and she jumped. "Are you okay? You looked a million miles away."

"I'm fine, thanks."

A chauffeur approached them, took Chris's bags, led them to the sole remaining limo -- she and Chris guessed Vincinni and the rest had gotten tired of waiting, not to mention the extra limos probably had blocked the entrance to the airport -- and placed the luggage in the trunk. Chris opened the back door for her, and she slipped inside, settling into the soft seats and gazing out the dark, tinted windows.

The drive into Paris was not pretty. Old, rundown buildings lined the busy streets in this poor part of town, something people didn't really think about when they pictured the great French city. As their trip continued, she saw that there were many different cafés and shops, but it was the history the city told that interested Kelly, such as that demonstrated by the old stone buildings, some of which had stood since before the French Revolution.

The Eiffel Tower was visible in the distance, metal beams towering over the city, watching over it all. Kelly smiled as she looked at it, then rolled down her window and took a deep breath, smelling fresh baked bread in the air as they passed by one of Paris's many bakeries.

About an hour into the trip, just as they entered Paris proper, her cell phone rang -- the airport had found out the location of her suitcases, thank goodness. Unfortunately, the bags weren't in France.

When the chauffeur pulled into the parking lot of the hotel, *La Villa Maillot*, Kelly gazed down the road where the *Arc de Triomphe* stood, taking in the beautiful sight before rushing toward Chris, who was waiting for her at the hotel's entrance. At least her troupe would be residing in style while they performed in Paris.

Chris walked with her into the main lobby, their shoes echoing off the hardwood floor and filling the air of the sparsely populated area. Approaching the front counter, Kelly was greeted by a young man who smiled warmly at her.

"*Bonjour, mademoiselle.*"

"*Bonjour.* I have a room reserved under Kelly Matthews with the Vincinni Company."

"Aha, I have you here. Do you have any luggage?"

She groaned. "No, I've been told it's in Germany and will be making its way to Paris on the next flight." Behind her, Chris chuckled, and she nudged him with an elbow.

"I am sorry to hear that, *mademoiselle*, but here is your key." He handed her a brass one. "You are in suite 507, on the fifth floor."

"Thank you." Kelly turned and stepped back to wait for Chris, but he motioned her to go on. Thankful, Kelly approached the elevator and was soon on the fifth floor. Walking down the hall, she reached the door to her room. Breathing a sigh of relief, she slid the key in the lock. Nothing. Trying the key again, then a third time with no luck, she shook the door. "No!"

Turning back around, she stomped past Chris as he stepped off the elevator.

"What's wrong?"

"My key doesn't work." At his loud laugh, she pressed the button to close the elevator doors on his smiling face. Back in front of the check-in counter, Kelly handed the man the key. "This doesn't work."

"Oh, forgive me. I must have given you the wrong key."

Trying for a forgiving smile but failing, she took the new proffered key and returned to her room. Setting the key into the lock, she slowly turned her wrist. "Please work." The door opened and she exhaled sharply.

Entering, she looked around. The suite was large and spacious, with a small fireplace in the wall of the main seating area. The plush carpet was white, and there was a matching large sofa. Two chairs surrounding the sofa were situated in front of the fireplace.

An open bedroom area was on the next landing, occupied by a king-sized bed against the far wall, with a nightstand on each side that held white lamps. A TV was set inside an armoire across from the bed. Flipping on the light to the bathroom on the upper level, she saw there were plenty of fluffy towels and washcloths. Switching the light off, she wasted no

time in removing her shoes and rushing to the softness of the bed. Giving a final sigh of relief, she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Three

As the sun set, air filled his lungs, and Jacques woke to another night. He rose from the bed, letting the sheets fall from around his waist, and grabbed the burgundy robe draped over a chair, slipping into it. He breathed deeply, taking in the scents of the night. His keen hearing detected the sounds of Quintin and Marian on the other side of the castle as they prepared to rest.

He hated the term “human servants.” Quintin was his grounds caretaker and Marian, Quintin’s wife, maintained the upkeep within the castle. Though Quintin was at Jacques’s command, Jacques also regarded the man as a friend.

Leaving his chambers, Jacques walked up the steps to the main floor and made his way to the study, where he picked up the newspaper lying on the desk. Seating himself on the leather couch, he flipped through the pages, reading over the world’s recent events. Then he stumbled upon a photo.

A man was lifting a ballerina into the air, her body a picture of grace and beauty. Jacques’s eyes took in every detail and feature of her flawless face; his heart pounded wildly in his chest.

She was here! Kelly was in Paris.

Tossing the paper aside, he bounded from his seat, his mind reeling. He had to see her; though he had tried not to think about her every night for many months, he had failed miserably. Everything in him now cried out for just a glimpse of her in person.

Without a second thought, his body shifted and contorted; glossy black feathers appeared, and his nose stretched into a hooked beak. He let out a cry, the hawk’s high screech echoing down the corridors of the castle; then he took flight up into the rafters and out a window.

The dark ground rushed below him, the warm breeze ruffling his feathers. His eyes were trained on the horizon where Paris lay... and where Kelly was. He reached with his senses, working to locate her. Heartbeats flooded his mind, scents filled his nostrils until, finally, Kelly's was the only pulse he could hear, her perfume the only one that called to him.

Entering the city, he followed her trail to *La Villa Maillot*, where he flew onto her balcony. It was dark in her room, but he could see her lying on the bed, asleep. Her hair spilled around her face like a golden waterfall, and her hands were tucked prettily beneath her face, allowing him a view of her profile: one high and elegant cheekbone, a small nose, and full, lush lips. Her body, revealed to him as she lay above the covers, was long and lean, her breasts small and firm. Slightly rounded hips extended from a tucked-in waist, and her legs went on for ever, uncommon for a prima ballerina, but perfect for wrapping around a man's waist...

Suddenly wishing he were not a bird sitting outside watching her, but a man moving into the shadows of the room and claiming her beauty, he transformed and pushed the balcony door open. Jacques strode across the room; when he came to the bed he stopped and gazed down at her.

Mon ange.

He lowered himself beside her and breathed in deeply. Her feminine scent overwhelmed him, and the sweet flow of her life's blood was alluring. Then he touched her, unable to resist the softness of her skin, the silky texture of her hair. His palm caressed her cheek, brushing up into the luxurious tresses. She mumbled incoherently in her sleep, and his eyes became riveted by her lips, so pink, so sensual... so inviting.

His breath hitched; he couldn't remember a time when another woman had made him feel this way. The excitement, the longing, the aching need. His mouth descended on hers. Her arms wound around his neck, and he lifted her into his embrace, holding her against him as his tongue delved, savored. His body seemed to catch fire. He couldn't believe she was here, in his arms, and that he was kissing her once more.

How often had he thought of her? He wondered yet again if he'd made a mistake and whether he was doing the right thing for them both. Wanting to see her eyes open, he pushed gently against her mind so that he could look upon them. Her lids lifted, and dark blue orbs stared sightlessly at him.

He groaned, his hands coming up to shape her breasts, squeezing lightly, caressing them. She moaned. Cursing, Jacques quickly laid her back on the bed, tamping down the flames consuming him. His need for her was great, but if she woke to find him in her room, mauling her in her sleep, he knew she would be more than upset.

Turning, he fled the room and hid in the shadows of the balcony.

Kelly stirred, then sat up in bed, stretching, before rolling onto her belly, breathing heavily. Her body felt hot, aroused. She had been dreaming of Jacques -- he'd been holding her, kissing her, stroking her body with his expert touches.

She had to stop doing this, stop tormenting herself. Admonishing herself, she rose from the mattress, fumbling to flip on the light in the darkness. Finally, the lamp came on, blinding her momentarily. Rubbing her eyes, she groaned, then placed her hand over her rumbling stomach. Remembering that she hadn't eaten on the plane or since she'd arrived in Paris, Kelly realized she was starving. Looking at the clock on the nightstand she saw it was 10:00 p.m.

She tried to tame her blond locks in the bathroom by running her fingers through her hair, but its long length was wild around her face. Finally giving up, she made a disgruntled grimace at the mirror, turned off the light, then descended to the main level. She grabbed her bag and the room key, then left the suite, the door locking automatically behind her.

As she walked past the room beside hers, Chris stepped out. "Grabbing a bite to eat?"

"Yes, I am. You want to join me?"

He held an arm out to her. "Escort a beautiful lady to dinner? But of course."

Laughing, Kelly slipped her hand onto his arm. "Oh, you Casanova, come on."

"Me? A Casanova. Hmm... maybe I'll meet someone this trip."

"I know you will, and he'll be gorgeous with a wonderful personality." They chuckled.

Once outside, they found there were several cafés up and down the street. Choosing one, they were soon seated inside. Menu in hand, Kelly was again grateful for all the French classes she'd taken as a teenager, then in college, allowing her to read and speak the language fluently, or she would have had no idea what she was ordering.

The waiter appeared. "And what can I get for you this evening, *monsieur et mademoiselle*?"

"I think I'll have the *coq au vin*, and a glass of *Chateau Neuf de Pape*." With its rich flavor and high calories, Kelly was being naughty with that choice of entree, but she was starving, and chicken cooked in rich red wine sounded delicious.

"Very good, *mademoiselle*." The waiter took her menu, and then he looked at Chris, who then gave the server his menu and selection.

"I'll have what she's having." It looked like her partner was also foregoing watching his diet tonight.

The waiter nodded before disappearing.

Taking a deep breath, Kelly leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. There was a perfect view of the Eiffel Tower from here, and she gazed at it, thinking she would definitely have to visit the structure before she left. She hadn't gotten to see it the last time she was here, as that had been a disaster. She'd gotten separated from her French class, and everything she owned had been stolen, everything. Luckily, she had kept her passport safe,

but the entire situation had been absolutely miserable. She'd had to call Cassie's parents to wire her money and, despite her teachers' and chaperones' efforts when she'd finally rejoined them at their hostel, no one in Paris had been the least bit helpful to a teenage girl in trouble. Now she had to smile at the experience, bad though it had been. She'd vowed to always dislike this country, though that hadn't kept her from wanting to dance here.

Kelly stretched, her hands in the air behind her, as she worked the kinks out of her back and neck. Her gaze drifted up to a tree that stood just on the other side of the outdoor restaurant. Startled, she watched as a big dark hawk appeared to stare at her. Its black eyes bored into hers, and she could have sworn a feeling of recognition filtered through her mind. The bird inched along the branch as if listening to their conversation.

Bringing her arms down and shaking off the fanciful thought, she spoke with Chris about their practice the next day, but her eyes returned to the hawk from time to time, even though she tried to ignore it. He -- she was certain it was a he -- almost seemed to be smiling at her, as if he knew something she didn't.

The waiter brought their meals and glasses of wine, and she inhaled the aroma that wafted up to her. It smelled wonderful, and she sighed at the first bite. Absolutely delicious! The chicken seemed to melt in her mouth, and the red wine sauce warmed her from the inside out. She relished every bite, and when she finished, she slowly drank her wine. For the first time in months, she felt completely relaxed.

Kelly closed her eyes and imagined herself on top of the Eiffel Tower, envisioning what it would look like at night with all the lights shining throughout the city. It would surely be amazing. Opening her eyes, she leaned forward in her chair.

"What do you say? You, me, and the Eiffel Tower?"

Chris nodded. "That sounds good. Is it a date, then?"

Kelly grinned, reaching over and placing her hand over Chris's. She jumped when the hawk let out a loud cry, scaring everyone around them. Jerking her hand away from Chris, she somehow felt she had been scolded. Glaring at the bird, Kelly berated herself for being silly. She covered Chris's fingers again, keeping her eyes on the hawk's eyes.

Chris looked behind him, then at Kelly. "What are you looking at?"

Kelly blinked, surprised. "I-I was... that is..."

Chris chuckled. "Come on, I'll pay for this, and then we'll walk back to the hotel. We have a long week ahead of us before our first performance."

Kelly stood while Chris put money on the table. Then, hand in hand, they strolled to *La Villa Maillot*. Kelly watched nervously as the hawk followed them, but she quickly forgot about him when she reached the lobby and found her luggage, containing all her blessed necessities, had finally arrived.

* * * * *

Kelly sighed, exhausted, as Vincinni yelled at the company to perform the last number again. He had made one of the young women cry already, and Kelly's heart went out to her.

The orchestra started the music once more. Chris lifted Kelly into the air, the swirling white of the other dancers flashing around them, and they moved until the song ended, and she bowed gracefully.

Vincinni applauded as he came out of his chair, then made a few comments to the other dancers. The director seemed pleased overall as he sent them to the hotel to rest for the performance the next evening.

Kelly didn't waste time changing. She grabbed her tote bag, slinging it over her shoulder, and walked toward the exits. Once outside in the night air, she immediately spotted the hawk in yet another tree; she swore he had been trailing her all week. She stalked over to the tree without really knowing what possessed her to do so and gazed up into the shadowed limbs.

"What are you doing here? You keep tagging along after me, but the last thing I need is a pet bird."

The hawk cocked his head.

Kelly extended her fingers toward him. He hopped down from branch to branch to land by her hand. She touched him, tentatively at first, then stroked his soft feathers. A rush of warmth filled her palm and, suddenly, a flash of Jacques appeared in her mind's eye. The vision shocked her, and she stumbled backward, whispering his name.

The hawk stared at her, his beady black eyes penetrating through Kelly. She shivered, knowing she must be losing her mind. She wanted Jacques so badly that she was even seeing him when she talked to a bird.

Kelly jumped as an arm went around her waist.

"Hey, you okay?" She hadn't been aware of Chris approaching. He looked at her worriedly as she trembled against him.

Forcing herself to smile, Kelly nodded. "I'm fine, I didn't hear you, is all."

"Sorry I scared you." He kissed her temple.

Kelly shrugged and watched as the bird stretched his wings and launched into the night sky. She continued to look after the hawk until he had disappeared from sight, blending into the dark, then yielded to her partner's tug.

She and Chris started down the street; she thought he was probably as content as she to walk on such a gorgeous night. Abruptly, Kelly felt a shiver race up her spine. She saw a man across the street. She couldn't clearly view his features from where he stayed in the shadows, but he seemed tall and lean, and she could feel his focus on her. Kelly knew it wasn't Jacques, though; she could sense that somehow.

Kelly felt strangely drawn toward the stranger; she needed to go to the man, but Chris stopped her.

“Kelly? Where you going?”

“Give me a sec, Chris.”

He released her arm, but followed her instead of remaining on the sidewalk. She hurriedly crossed the road and approached the figure, her body seeming to have a will of its own. This was wrong, she knew it somehow, but her body refused to listen. A pressure built in her mind as she tried to fight the urge, but was unable to.

The man stepped forward, and she gasped, her gaze meeting his black eyes. Frightened, she tried to move back, immediately recognizing him for what he was, but it was like a wall had gone up behind her, and she had nowhere to go.

“Dominique?”

She frowned. She hadn’t intended to tell the man anything, but somehow found herself answering him. “No, I’m Kelly.”

The man smiled, and she fell into his gaze, struggling against it, realizing too late what was happening. His assault on her senses was swift and too powerful to dissuade. He pulled her into his embrace, his cool lips settling against hers in a brief kiss. His hold on her was gentle, like she was porcelain, but the gesture was possessive. Vaguely, she realized Chris was still there behind her as the man in front of them spoke.

“Return to your room, and do not remember our meeting. I will court you, my love, and you will be mine once more. As for you,” he motioned to Chris, “you will forget, too. Escort her back and see that no harm befalls her this night.”

His hand ran over her throat, as if he had every right to touch her, his fingers resting for a moment at the pulse there. She leaned her head back, longing to feel his mouth against her flesh. The desire was intense. He kissed her lightly over her vein; then in a swirl of smoke, he was gone.

Kelly felt dizzy for a moment, and Chris said he did as well, but they recovered after a moment. “What the heck are we doing over here?” she asked her partner dazedly. “We were across the street, weren’t we?”

Chris lifted his shoulders in confusion. “I have no clue. I think rehearsals are catching up with us. Vincinni is driving us to the point of exhaustion so that we don’t know what we’re doing.” They laughed. Then his arm went around Kelly, and they resumed their carefree conversation as they returned to the hotel.

Chapter Four

It was five minutes before curtain time, and Kelly was more anxious than she had ever been. She could feel Jacques in the audience. She just knew he was there, watching. She should be happy about that, but her stomach was doing flips and her skin tingled. What if she saw him later? What if she didn't? Both fears weighed heavily on her heart.

Chris came to her side, looking handsome in his pristine white costume. The sleeves billowed slightly, but not too much to interfere with their dancing, and his white tights fit his muscular legs like a second skin. His thick brown hair was tousled artfully, and his deep brown eyes twinkled with excitement. He was not much taller than she was, so she laid her head against his shoulder, careful to not get makeup on his shirt.

"Are you ready?"

"I'm ready," she said softly.

The music began, and the lights dimmed in the theater. The other dancers weaved their way onto the stage. Kelly took deep breaths and did a final stretch, jumping quickly into the air and landing lightly.

Turning, she tucked her hand into Chris's and gave it a slight squeeze. "See you out there." Then she swept in front of the audience.

* * * * *

He had never had the opportunity to see her dance when they'd met in San Francisco, and Jacques now regretted it.

Her sunny hair was in a loose bun, white flowers tucked in the golden mass. The pale glittering gown she wore swayed around her hips and feet, teasing him with peeks of her satin slippers. Her arms and fingers glided into the air and she swayed with the music. Could

anyone's fingers be more delicate than hers? She moved with grace, her body seemingly weightless. She was beauty in motion and magnificent to behold. She amazed him.

As she twirled, Jacques heard her heart pounding; her breathing was rushed with excitement... and fear? Leaning forward, he clutched the banister, his face moving into the light spilling from the stage.

* * * * *

Kelly pirouetted, her senses on overload. She could feel eyes focused on her. Though there were hundreds of people watching her, she knew one pair that penetrated her to her very soul. Her gaze moved up to the nearest balcony... and she saw him. His wavy hair framed his face, those bottomless black eyes somehow reaching into her to brush her heart with emotions. After all these long months, he was there with her.

She stumbled.

Chris caught her around the middle, covering her misstep; she glimpsed his concerned look, but he quickly masked it. Her cheeks burned, but she continued to dance, trying to ignore Jacques. It was a struggle, but she was determined. Heart pounding, she ensured her performance was flawless for the remainder of the show. When the curtain came down, Chris turned to her, ignoring the cheers that filtered through the thick material.

"Are you okay? I felt your tension out there, your slip."

Kelly brushed a hand over the crown of her head, smoothing her hair. "I'm fine. I think just the idea of where I was dancing and finally getting here overwhelmed me for a moment."

He grinned and kissed her temple, giving her a quick squeeze. "Our public awaits, Kelly Matthews. Nothing stands in our way now."

Smiling widely and hand in hand, they both glided back out as the curtains slid open again. Chris bowed and Kelly curtseyed deeply. Flowers decorated the stage even as Kelly accepted a large bouquet from an audience member. She blew the man a kiss and waved at the crowd. After a final bow and curtsey from the troupe, the dancers exited.

Kelly hurried away from everyone. "I'm going to go change, Chris. Where is the party going to be held?"

He shrugged. "Vincinni has new plans. We're going to some castle outside of Paris, where there is a vineyard and all that. It's supposed to be very nice; everyone is meeting there. The limos are out back ready to take us when we're ready."

"Fine. I'll be ready in fifteen."

Reaching her dressing room, Kelly slammed the door shut. Pins flew in all directions as she shook out her hair. She had messed up, stumbled in front of everyone, and it was all Jacques's fault! She must have looked like a fool to him, to the audience. Scowling into the

mirror, she saw her eyes were a deep sapphire, shiny with anger. What did he think he was doing, showing up at her performance?

Jacques. She couldn't believe she had actually seen him. Furious though she was and despite the brief glimpse she'd had, she couldn't help but realize how breathtakingly handsome he still was. Her hand flew to her chest, the heartache reminding her of its presence there. No matter how mad she was, or how much Vincinni would yell at her for her mistake, she missed Jacques. She wanted to run into his arms.

Was she insane?

She tossed her head, then grabbed the slinky black dress hanging in her wardrobe. Sliding the outfit on, she pulled it into place over her body, then frowned at her reflection. The jerk had up and left her without so much as a farewell. Not even a thank you for rescuing his worthless hide. Now he was suddenly back in her life, watching her dance and throwing her whole world out of order once more.

She slammed her fist down on the vanity. "No way, buddy! Not this time." Whirling around, she stalked from the dressing room and out the back door, where she greeted fans and reporters, answered questions, and was the perfect prima ballerina who would make Vincinni proud.

Finding her way to the limo at last, she saw Chris was already there, holding the door open for her. She thanked him, climbed in, and they rode in silence out of the city. Chris was likely reflecting on their welcome reception by the theater-goers tonight; unhappily, her own thoughts returned to the object of her wrath.

Jacques wasn't getting off the hook so easily. She was going to find him and give him a give him a swift kick in the ass. When she was done, she would walk away from him and never look back.

Mind made up, Kelly decided to call Cassie first thing in the morning, when it would be night in San Francisco, and find out where the scumbag lived. She'd rent a car and get clear directions. Then, after the performance tomorrow night, she'd drive to his home.

Plans in place, she passed the time making desultory conversation with Chris. After almost an hour, the chauffeur pulled up a winding drive to a castle that sat at the top of a hill. Kelly studied the edifice from her window as they approached. The structure was huge and stood four stories high on the two outer sections, and five stories tall at its center. Towering steeples peaked from each rounded corner of the castle, as well as the center, and stretched toward the sky. There were so many of them, it almost looked as though there were a castle within a castle.

The chauffeur assisted her out of the limo, and Chris offered his arm as he led her to the lowered drawbridge. She looked down into the surprisingly clear waters of the moat, then sighed with pleasure as they entered a large, brightly illuminated courtyard where there was lush green grass and scattered white lawn tables and chairs. On the opposite side of the yard was a gazebo leading into what appeared to be a garden. Although she didn't see the rest

of the dance company, she thought she could hear the faint sound of voices and music nearby.

Their feet crunched under the gravel as Chris escorted her toward a large, oak door that was probably the entrance to the main part of the castle. Before they reached it, the door opened and a plump woman with rosy red cheeks stood smiling at them.

“*Bonjour*,” she said cheerfully, albeit with a faint British accent.

“*Bonjour*. We’re here for the party.”

The woman beamed and continued in English. “Ah, you must be Kelly Matthews. I heard you danced beautifully tonight.”

Kelly nodded. “Thank you, *madame*.”

When Chris loudly cleared his throat, the woman clapped her hands together. “Oh, pardon me, but I am afraid Mr. Devereaux was so spellbound by her beauty and talent that he had no eyes for anyone else.”

Kelly froze.

“It is forgivable then,” Chris teased, taking the woman’s hand.

Tension filled Kelly’s shoulders, fear rumbled through her stomach, and hope clutched at her heart. Could it be? Was Jacques the host of this party?

The woman laughed delightedly, stepping back so that they could enter. “Come in. It’s so good to meet you both.” She closed the door behind them.

Kelly gaped in awe at the main hall. It was incredible. Portraits in golden frames lined the walls, overlooking two long staircases that wound their way up on either side of the hall to the second floor, where green ivy draped over the balcony as if they were reaching to touch the floor below. Chandeliers with glowing candles swirled above them from high, arched ceilings. The gray marble floor was polished and gleamed.

“This is amazing,” she whispered.

The woman chuckled. Kelly turned to look at her. “Yes, it is. Mr. Devereaux is proud of his family’s home.” She beamed at them. “My name is Marian LeBoeuf. My husband Quintin and I met in England, my home; then I came with him when he returned to France to work for Mr. Devereaux, who will be down any moment now. I believe the others in your party are awaiting your arrival behind the courtyard.”

Both Kelly and Chris moved back outside. Chris excused himself to meet the other dancers as Kelly looked toward the garden; she had the sudden urge to be there, to walk the paths and smell the flowers. Glancing over her shoulder to make sure no one was watching, she swiftly slipped across the yard to the garden entrance.

Once she stepped past the gazebo and onto the stone path, she gave herself up to the beauty surrounding her. She could see the main hall of the castle through a giant cut-glass window with the design of a swan in a lake; it was breathtaking with the garden lights glistening against the artistic masterpiece.

Kelly followed the path, admiring every plant that lined the walk, including roses of all colors overflowing brilliant verdant bushes. Kelly leaned over and breathed in the fragrance of a single red rose that seemed to have bloomed ahead of the others; its petals were opened wide and full, where the others were still closed. She couldn't help but smile at its loveliness.

Trees dotted with white blossoms flourished within the secluded area. When a breeze blew, a few of the flowers fluttered to the ground, as if nature were throwing petals at her feet.

Finally arriving at the center of the garden, she noted there were white benches set in a circle around a gurgling fountain. Overlooking the water was a statue of a female reclining on a stone pallet, her hair loose around her shoulders. The maiden seemed lost in thought, perhaps dreaming as she gazed down into the swirling waters; she wore a peasant top, and her skirts exposed delicate ankles.

Hearing the rising noise from the front lawn, she cast one last look at the fountain, then decided she'd better join the party. She wound her way back up the path, then stopped dead in her tracks.

He seemed to dominate the entire perimeter, including her. She swallowed hard, trying to find her voice, but it would not come. Instead, she drank in the sight of him: wavy, chocolate brown hair framed his face; sensuous lips held a hint of a smile; black eyes devoured her very soul; and a long, lean frame emanated power in a simple stride.

Jacques moved forward and plucked the very rose she had admired earlier. Approaching her, he gently took her hands in his and brought the tips of her fingers to his lips. The simple action caused shivers of pleasure to ripple through Kelly; she thought she might very well swoon into him. But the stem of the rose slid between her hands as he released her, and she held the flower, inhaling its scent and him.

His voice slid over her like smooth silk; in that instant, her hurt struck her as well. "Its beauty pales in comparison to your golden one."

Glaring up at him, she did the only thing she could think of. She punched him, right in the nose, then jerked her hand back, pain crackling through her knuckles. "Ouch!" She rubbed her hand. "Don't think your sweet words will get you anywhere." Kelly had to fight down her remorse when she saw the blood oozing from his nose.

Jacques looked surprised, pained, and amused all rolled into one, as he covered his injury. She steeled herself as he shook his head, then brought his hands down and reached inside his coat pocket, pulling out a dark cloth to dab at his face.

"I never thought that you'd simply forgive me," he said, dabbing at his nose. "But I really hadn't expected you'd strike me, either." Folding the handkerchief and replacing it, he gestured for her to lead the way back to the center of the garden. She pivoted and quickly reached a bench by the fountain, then whirled around to face him.

"I want you to know that I think you're one of the biggest jerks I've ever met." Once she started she couldn't stop. "You took from me, and then you disappeared. I never heard

from you... You just dropped off the face of the earth. Then you showed up tonight and distracted me, messed up my dancing. Thanks to you, I'm going to get yelled at tomorrow by Vincinni! I don't appreciate any of t-this!"

She was out of breath by the time she was done and ashamed to hear her voice break. "Y-you made me feel like such a fool." She struggled against tears but was unable to fight them when he pulled her into his arms. The essence of him filled her being. It seemed so right, so natural to be there that she rested her head against his solid chest.

Jacques took in the fragrance of her, overwhelmed at finally having her in his home and in his embrace. She was all he had dreamed about since he had left her nearly a year ago. Time had always flown by so fast before, but after meeting this woman, hours and days had slowed to a miserable crawl, reminding him every day that she was just out of his grasp.

Her beauty captivated him, and he invariably felt as if he were drowning whenever he gazed into her sapphire eyes; they always sparkled with life and spoke volumes about her vibrant personality. Unable to resist her, he allowed his hands to travel up her spine to the jeweled scrunchie in her hair and tugged it free as his fingers delved into her silky, sun-kissed strands.

She moaned as he fisted handfuls of her hair, tenderly pulling her head back so that she looked up at him through passion-glazed eyes. His lips met her petal-soft ones, and her mouth opened as his tongue swept inside. Kelly's arms circled his waist, yanking his body to press along hers.

Her knees buckled as his mouth continued to dominate hers, his tongue fervently stroking against hers with intense desire. He held her fast to him, supporting her against his body as he continued his sweet torture. Her response fueled the scorching fire of their kiss.

She tasted of sweet honey, smelled of sunshine, and glowed like an angel. The need to possess her surged through him, his body reacting to her every whimper, the slide of her body against his, and the way she returned his kiss with the same passion as his own.

Finally, Kelly pulled away, expression startled and confused. His gaze roamed her face, and his knuckles gently skimmed over the curve of her jaw.

"No," she whispered, stepping away from his touch.

His hand fell like a dead weight to his side, as he watched the play of emotions cross her face.

"You hurt me; I won't let you do it again."

His sigh came from deep within. "I did not mean to cause you pain, Kelly. I thought I was doing the right thing."

Her eyes shot icy daggers at him. "Maybe next time you should ask me what is best for me before you make assumptions. But I don't want to hear anything from you now. I'm past caring."

Jacques didn't speak, understanding that she had to vent her feelings. He would let her... as long as she stayed. He would allow her anything, give her everything, if she'd remain with him, but she didn't.

"You turned my world upside down, then left me to try to straighten it out. Everything changed from that moment." Dropping the rose to the ground, she stepped over it and passed him. "I'm sorry I came tonight. Just leave me alone."

He watched her until she disappeared, but even then he listened to the beat of her heart... and the sound of her barely suppressed tears. Bending down, he retrieved the rose she'd discarded and held it beneath his nose, drawing in the flower's sweetness and the lingering scent that was only Kelly's.

He'd made a mistake, but he would make it up to her. She was his, and he would fight anyone and anything to have her, even her own heart.

Chapter Five

Kelly spent the rest of the evening avoiding Jacques. It was a hard feat, especially when Vincinni had introduced them to each another, then -- in Kelly's opinion -- *forced* her to mingle with the jerk as *hors d'oeuvres* and wine were served. The director was bubbling all over Jacques since Jacques had given a sizable donation to the dance company; the sly vampire's only request had been to spend some time with the prima ballerina.

Kelly had to keep from rolling her eyes as both men discussed her splendor and elegance. She gave Jacques frozen smiles at his compliments, but humor twinkled in his eyes. She would have given her soul right then and there just for the satisfaction of slapping the glimmer from those dark depths.

Be careful what you're willing to sell your soul for, mon ange.

Kelly gasped, then glared at Jacques. "Stay out of my head," she muttered under her breath so that no one else but him could hear. "Or next time I'll kick you in the balls." She smiled to herself when he visibly winced; she tried to walk away, but Jacques grabbed her hand as the live band that had been playing all evening began another song.

"Dance with me."

Kelly looked over the dance floor, her heart thumping rapidly. Then she examined him. He wasn't asking; he was demanding. Shaking her head, she yanked her hand from his. "No."

She glanced to the side of the room at the long, pretty table with fresh flower arrangements, different delectable foods, and bottles of wine. There were servers everywhere, greeting the guests with more drinks and snacks, or assisting guests.

"Excuse me. I'd like to sample the wines and figure out what I want."

"I'll escort you."

She scowled at him, switching to a brilliant smile when Vincinni narrowed his eyes at her from a short distance away, clearly warning her to be polite. “No, thank you, sir. I’ll manage fine on my own.”

“I insist,” he said in a low voice.

The heck with Vincinni’s silent demands that she make nice with their host. There were plenty among this crowd who could do the honors, such as they were.

She left Jacques, zig-zagging in the hopes of losing him between the many dancers twirling about the floor -- and purposely bumped into a few of them, sending the couples directly into Jacques’s path. Her “accidental” actions forced him to mingle and accept many thanks for a wonderful evening.

Smug and a little proud of herself, Kelly was almost at the exit when his voice stopped her. Everything in her screamed for her to run for the castle gate, to not to turn around, but she halted her headlong flight, refusing to play the coward.

Slowly, she swung around and faced him, teeth tightly clenched. “*Oui, Monsieur Devereaux?*”

“You are leaving us so soon? I thought you wished to discuss a wine you’d prefer for the evening.” He lifted a glass in his hand, feigning innocence, swirling the contents suggestively, as if enticing her to take a sip.

She should have known she’d not be lucky enough to escape him that easily. “Thank you for the party, but I have an early day tomorrow and need to seek my bed.”

Jacques took a step toward her. She moved back and he halted, feeling the fear pounding through her veins. He wondered suddenly if he had been wrong: was she afraid of him? Was she indeed afraid of what he was? He frowned, studying her.

“I won’t bite you, Kelly.”

She nodded. “I know. That’s not what I’m afraid of.” Relieved, but puzzled by her words, he had to restrain himself from rushing over and sweeping her into his arms. “Goodnight,” she whispered, then whirled away.

He stood there for a long moment, staring after her even after she’d disappeared out of the castle. He tightly gripped the glass containing the deep red wine. This reconciliation business would not be easy; Kelly was not nearly as forgiving as Dimitri’s wife had been. Maybe Jacques couldn’t have Kelly for eternity, but he wanted her for the time she was here at least. For the time she would allow him.

Pivoting, he strode past the one of the main staircases and into his study while the party continued on without him.

* * * * *

Early the next day, Kelly's first order of business was to call Cassie, who would now be up and about for the night. Dimitri's voice rumbled a quick hello.

"Hi, Dimitri, is Cass around?"

"She is. Hold on, and I'll get her."

There was a moment of silence; then Cassie's cheery voice greeted her. "Hi, Kelly, how's Paris?"

"Interesting." She paused. "I saw Jacques and was at his home."

"Really? What happened?"

"I told him exactly what I thought about the way he'd left, and then... then..."

Cassie's excited voice bellowed through the phone. "Then what? Spill!"

"I punched him."

There was silence on the other end of the phone. Cassie cleared her throat. "You what? Did you just say you punched him?"

Kelly heard deep laughter in the background and knew Dimitri was enjoying himself immensely.

"I didn't mean to; I just sort of reacted. I was mad and, bam! there went my fist."

"So what happened next?"

"I told him to leave me alone, then tried to avoid him. When that was impossible, I left."

"What?" Cassie sounded upset.

"What do you mean, what?"

"I can't believe you did that. Did you at least hear him out?"

Kelly felt a blush staining her cheeks. "I think he tried to say something, but..." She sighed heavily. "Come on, Cass, cut me some slack here. You know I'm impulsive."

"Yes, you are, and it's going to cost you something spectacular. I'm your friend, so I'm going to tell you exactly what I think."

Kelly groaned, knowing Cassie rarely got upset, but when she did, she could really let a person have it.

"You're stubborn, and now you're the one being a jerk! Jacques is like seven hundred something years old, and he was only trying to protect you. Why?" Cassie's voice rose as she continued. "Because he cares about you! He does, Kelly, and you feel the same way, so you'd better do something about it, or both of you are going to really tick me off!"

Kelly slumped down on her bed, stunned at her friend's ferocity... and the truth of Cassie's words about her emotions. There was no way she would ever get over Jacques; she did like him. Faintly, she was aware that she refused to allow herself to use "L" word again regarding him. "I know you're right, Cass, but it's hard. I can't go through it again if he walks out of my life once more. I can't."

"I'm sorry; I don't have any answers for that. I don't know what he'll do."

"What should I do?"

"Just tell him what's in your heart."

Kelly sighed. "I don't think it's very safe that way, putting my heart on the line so he can crush it later." She glanced at the clock. "I have to go, otherwise Vincinni will string me up for being late. I love you, Cassie."

"I love you, too, but I still think you should tell him."

"We'll see." Kelly smiled sadly as she hung up, then grabbed her tote bag.

Over the next few days, Kelly worked hard, focusing only on dancing. Occasionally, she did contemplate what Cassie had said, but then pushed it aside. She buried herself in her performances in the hopes of wiping away the memory of Jacques from her heart, but as soon as she left the stage and the parties behind, she was alone with her thoughts and the nights.

* * * * *

He lowered the newspaper and walked down the hall to the stairs that led beneath the earth to his chambers. There, he made his way to the fireplace opposite his bed and rested his hands on the mantel. His dark gaze devoured the portrait that hung on the wall. Her golden hair was pulled back away from her face, and her lovely blue eyes sparkled with life.

Dominique. The name whispered through his mind like a talisman.

Burin entered and stood in the doorway, waiting for his command. He addressed his servant, his eyes never leaving Dominique's. "Go to my home. Prepare it for her return."

The man bowed, then turned and left the room.

Finally stepping away from the fireplace, he brushed a hand down his tuxedo sleeve and adjusted the tie at his neck. Tonight, he would begin his courtship. Tonight, he would stake his claim and damn anyone who stood in his way.

Kelly Matthews was his.

* * * * *

She slipped one satin slipper from her foot then the other, attempting to rub the ache from each foot. Had he been there, watching her? Though she'd berated herself for it, she had tried to find him in the crowded audience, had even stolen several glances at the balcony he'd occupied that first evening, but she hadn't sensed him in the theater.

Flowers arrived for her, delivered by a stagehand, and she knew they were from him, as they'd been each night the company had performed: a dozen deep-red roses, a reminder of the blood that flowed between them, she was sure. She thanked the stagehand, then laid the roses on her vanity. Her hotel room was full of them now, the scent inviting and heady

whenever she returned to it. She brought one flower to her lips and breathed deeply. She'd always loved the smell of roses, her favorite plants.

A knock sounded, and she walked across the dressing room, rose still in hand. She opened the door.

The man who stood there was tall, with broad shoulders and a sinewy build. His auburn hair was cut short, his dark brows arched over black eyes, his nose was thin and long, and he had high cheekbones. The stranger was handsome, attractive... and a vampire. The obsidian of his eyes told her that.

The rose dropped from Kelly's hand as his power rushed over her. She stifled a gasp, and her heart began to pound wildly in her chest. She took a step back, shaking her head, refusing to meet his steady gaze.

"You are not invited into my room." By the shock on his face, she knew she had taken him completely by surprise. He was probably wondering how she was aware of *their* existence. "I know it's not my home, but if it keeps you out, I'll lay claim to it as my home."

"Pardon me, but are you all right?" She noticed that he was careful not to move and realized he could no doubt sense her sudden fear, the sound of her heart racing, and the rush of her blood through her veins.

"Are the flowers not to your liking?" He indicated the bouquet the stagehand had brought.

Kelly was shocked and disappointed to discover the blossoms she'd assumed had been from Jacques were actually from this stranger. She was even more stunned to recognize a feeling of compulsion wash over her like dark velvet as he attempted to soothe her with his voice. The pressure in her head was very gentle, subtly insisting that she remain calm, that she trust him, but it was still an intrusion, gentle or not. She squeezed her hands into fists and fought the urge to obey, sweat breaking out on her skin at the struggle. "Stop it!"

When she looked at him next, avoiding staring directly into his eyes, his face was full of disbelief and amazement. "Do you know who I am?"

"I know *what* you are." She could hear his intake of breath. The situation would almost have been funny had it not terrified her. Her thoughts were scattered; what could he possibly want from her, unless it was the obvious. Her blood.

Kelly had only known three vampires: Cassie, Jacques, and Dimitri. Well, four, if she counted the men's cruel maker, Gabriella. The thought of another one standing at her door sent terror streaking through her.

He bowed low, and she retreated a little further, ready to slam the door shut and scream for help, but when he straightened, he seemed sincere and apologetic.

"My intention was not to frighten you. I only wanted to meet the prima ballerina who has the grace of a swan and a beauty that rivals the red rose itself." His voice was filled with warmth and admiration.

Kelly had not been expecting that and was somewhat disarmed. She nodded her head slightly. "Thank you for your kind words and for the lovely flowers."

He held up a hand. "It is the truth I speak. I am newly arrived in town, but I heard the talk of the woman who adorns this stage and had to come see for myself if the rumors were true. How glad I am that they were accurate, and so I have attended each performance since. You are magnificent to behold and will soon be dancing on the stages of Mother Russia. I know it."

Kelly felt her face redden. She didn't know what to say, so she smiled and changed the subject. "You are Russian?"

"I am Mussek Chetvertka from St. Petersburg. I'm pleased to meet you, Kelly Matthews." He held his hand out.

Hesitatingly, Kelly slowly placed her hand in his, grinning and relaxing when his lips brushed the back of her hand. "A pleasure to meet you as well, Mr. Chetvertka. Are you a friend of Jacques?"

His eyebrows shot up and recognition dawned in his eyes. "I am. I was Jacques Devereaux's teacher when he was newly... *made* I took him under my wing when his creator left him to wander alone." He seemed to be trying to choose his words carefully.

Another dancer hurried past outside the dressing room, waving quickly at Kelly. Kelly leaned down and picked up the rose she'd dropped earlier. "That's how I knew about what you are, Mr. Chetvertka. My dearest friend was brought into your, um, 'family' by her husband, Dimitri. Well, by Gabriella, to be honest."

"Ahhh." Mussek's smile was pleased. "Well, then, I hope my being here does not cause you any discomfort. I am friend to both Dimitri Alexios and Jacques. My wish is that you and I can spend some time together since we share the same friends. Please allow me to call on you." His voice had dropped to a husky timber.

Kelly's eyes widened; this vampire was asking her out. Did she dare? He did seem to know Dimitri and Jacques, after all. *Jacques*. Again, thoughts of him caused her heart to clench in her chest.

Jacques was not a bad man or an evil one; he was just a jerk, and she needed to get over him. She smiled. A vampire jerk. It sounded terribly funny.

Well, it was time to move on with her life and not let Jacques's presence or words tempt her back into his arms. Besides, this man had been his teacher.

"I am going to another after-performance party this evening, and I do not have an escort."

Mussek bowed deeply. "I am honored. I will wait for you while you change." He stood and turned to walk down the hall outside her dressing room but stopped and glanced back at her. "By the way, so that you are aware, you cannot claim a public theater room, where everyone is welcome, as your home." He winked at her. "It doesn't work that way."

* * * * *

Jacques was astonished as he watched Kelly walk in on the arm of Mussek, who was all smiles as he led her through the door. But what man wouldn't be ecstatic to have an angel by his side? Wearing a vibrant red dress that clung to every curve of her body, and her hair falling in ringed coils down her back, Kelly was the most glorious woman in the room.

Those thoughts brought with them unbidden jealousy. He growled low in his throat and watched as Mussek's head lifted, the other vampire's gaze immediately searching the area until it came to rest on him. Jacques inclined his head, and Mussek led Kelly in his direction.

"Jacques, my friend, it is good to see you again so soon." Mussek smiled. This was an inside joke since it had been the better part of a hundred and fifty years since they had last met.

"And you, Mussek. It is always a pleasure."

His former teacher brought Kelly forward; she'd been staring wide-eyed between them the entire time. "I have the honor of escorting prima ballerina Kelly Matthews this evening."

Jacques vexedly noted that Mussek's hand rested possessively at her waist. "Oh, indeed. I've had the pleasure of Miss Matthews." She scowled at him. "Of course, it was just a taste."

Mussek's brow furrowed. "I did not realize you two had been... that close."

Kelly stiffened as Jacques smiled at her and said, "You don't mind if I steal your date for a dance, do you?"

"That would be up to Kelly." Mussek gazed at her, but she continued to glare at Jacques.

"Of course. Jacques is an old friend; how can I deny him a dance?"

Jacques took her hand and moved into the ballroom, where others already whirled around the floor. He brought her flush against him, smirking when she gasped. She narrowed her eyes; he knew she was wishing that she could punch him again.

"I see you are friendly to everyone but me. When are you going to stop being angry, Kelly?"

"Oh, I don't know. As a friend of mine told me, I can be very stubborn."

He glanced over at Mussek, who was watching their every move... and probably listening to their every word. Jacques didn't like the fact that Kelly was with the other man. Ever since Dominique's death nearly two centuries ago, Mussek had not been himself. His once-proud and firm morals had seemed to dwindle, and he had become... unpredictable in his actions. Jacques wondered if Mussek had finally moved on, but he planned to keep an eye on his old friend while Mussek was in Paris, especially since the former mentor seemed to be interested in Kelly.

"I don't like you being here with Mussek."

“Tough!”

He reared back as if she'd slapped him.

It pleased Kelly that she had surprised him. “You’re not my boyfriend, Jacques, and you’re certainly not my husband, so I can share an evening with whomever I wish.”

He twirled her outside into the cool evening air, releasing Kelly as the curtains falling closed behind them. She shivered for a moment as she stared out over the balcony at a magnificent and huge moonlit backyard. Then Jacques swung her against him with a swift move, her body going pliant against his without her conscious decision.

“Won’t you let me make things up to you?”

Kelly felt her heart splinter, melt, and accelerate all in the same beat at the burning possession in his eyes, the determined set of his lips. His hands moved down over her shoulders, slipping the thin straps of her outfit from her flesh. He lowered his head and kissed a trail of heat over one shoulder. Strong hands circled her waist and lifted her so that she sat on the balcony ledge, but she wasn’t afraid. Jacques’s strength surrounded her; she knew he would never let her fall.

He captured her lips with his. She couldn’t think to fight him anymore, couldn’t remain mad at him when his mouth and tongue were creating such delicious havoc. One hand moved from her waist and slid up her side to fondle her breast, pushing the material of her dress aside till he finally cupped the bared globe. His thumb played over her nipple, causing fissions of electricity to zing up her spine.

Eyes closed, she arched toward him, shoving her mound into that warm hand, while he continued to make her dizzy with kiss after kiss. Her belly quivered as his hand skimmed over her and came to her thigh, gliding up and beneath her skirt, touching, caressing. Then his fingers brushed her moist juncture.

Good God. Was that her moaning and mewling? She cried out as his fingers slipped inside her panties, and his digits moved over her, stroking, teasing. She clutched him, her eyelids snapping open to meet his fiery gaze.

She was about to say his name, to surrender to him completely, but the loud clearing of a throat cooled both their ardor. Mussek stood a little distance behind them.

Jacques brought Kelly’s skirt down, and he helped her to stand on the balcony as the other vampire spoke.

“I think it time we leave for the evening. I can tell that you’re distressing Kelly.”

Jacques’s smile was smugly satisfied. “That’s not distress, and you know it, Mussek. You’re very aware it is her need for *me*.”

Kelly’s face felt on fire. She looked between the men, wishing a hole would open up and swallow her. Mussek glared at Jacques and extended his hand toward Kelly. She took it, her resolve back.

“Will you take me to my hotel?”

“Of course,” Mussek said, as if he were comforting a child, and then he turned a steely gaze on Jacques. “Find your own date, Devereaux, and leave Kelly be.” He led her away, but then they ran into Vincinni, who was about to scold her for exiting the party early she knew, but Mussek took care of the situation. While Vincinni fell under the man’s compulsion, Kelly glanced back toward the balcony.

It didn’t feel good to leave Jacques this time; there were no feelings of him deserving her anger, just an ache in her heart. What was she doing? Shaking her head, she focused her attention on Mussek. After all, he was, by her request, her escort for the evening.

He wrapped his arm around her as they walked.

“I’m sorry. Jacques... he’s a... is...” She couldn’t find the words.

Mussek bristled. “He’s a fool! That’s what he is.”

Kelly smiled at that. “I will agree with you there. Jacques and I... I thought we were more than friends at one point, but I was mistaken. Tonight... I...”

His expression was understanding. “There is no need to explain. We have certain abilities, as you know. I am certain he brought you under his thrall. In fact, I was lucky to have arrived on the balcony when I did, or he might have seduced you completely.” His voice was filled with contempt. “I’d never have thought Jacques would stoop so low.”

Kelly didn’t say anything. She knew she hadn’t been enthralled; it had just been Jacques being Jacques. That was all it ever took for her to be his. She changed the subject as they left the party.

* * * * *

“Thank you for coming with me this evening. I enjoyed your company very much.” Despite their brief appearance at the party, Mussek had been a pleasant companion on the trip to and from it.

He walked her into the hotel lobby. “I will be at the theater tomorrow night to see you dance.”

“That’s very nice to know. It pleases me that people enjoy my performances.” They stopped in front of the elevator. Kelly felt a nervous tension, uncertain what she should do. She didn’t want to invite him up, but she didn’t want to be rude, either.

Mussek seemed nice, and he was handsome with his dark eyes and rich auburn hair. His thick Russian accent was attractive as well. He lifted her hand to his lips; she was disappointed that she didn’t feel the same rush of excitement that she did with Jacques.

His mouth lingered for a moment, his eyes capturing hers. Then he stood and bowed deeply in a chivalrous gesture. “Till I see you grace the stage tomorrow evening. Good night”

“Good night.” She watched as he moved across the lobby and out the door, the smile slipping from her face before she stepped into the elevator.

Thoughts of Jacques once again permeated her mind as she traveled to her suite. She opened the door to her room and prepared for bed, groaning in frustration when images persisted of the interrupted scene on the balcony -- his caresses and the intoxicating kisses that turned her mind to mush.

She heard a low chuckle in her head and knew it was Jacques reading her mind. She tossed the covers aside on her bed and flounced in. “Oh, shut up!” she grouched, then shut the light off, pulled the covers up to her chin, and fought to go to sleep.

Chapter Six

Kelly sat straight up in bed, covering her eyes from the brilliant morning light that streamed through the window. The banging sounded again. Kelly moaned, then stumbled toward the door.

Flinging it open, she looked at the surprised man on the other side. The same one who had checked her into the hotel. “*Oui?*”

“These arrived for you, *mademoiselle*.” He handed a bouquet to her before leaving.

Closing the door, Kelly grimaced at the dozen red roses. Was Jacques apologizing for his actions last night? She reminded herself to be strong since she was still mad at him, of course.

Removing the card, she gasped at its contents. *Please honor me with your beauty and company tonight. Mussek*. His contact information was below. She inhaled the scent of the roses as she pondered his invitation.

Laying the flowers aside, she picked up the phone and dialed Mussek’s number. An answering machine picked up; his accented voice asked the caller to leave a message and stated he would call back.

“Hi, Mussek. This is Kelly Matthews. I got the beautiful flowers you sent. Thank you. I would love to meet you tonight. It’s so nice to have a friend who shares the same interests. There is a small café just down the block from my hotel called *Le Bistro*. We can meet there after the performance, if that’s okay. If not, please call me. Thank you again for being so kind.”

* * * * *

Kelly sat at the café she'd directed him to. The waiter brought the menu; when she looked up, Mussek stood before her. He smiled warmly down at her and stopped her as she made to rise.

"No, please don't get up. I can't tell you enough what a pleasure it was to watch you on stage again this evening." He kissed her fingers.

"Thank you, Mussek." Then she grew silent, clearly thinking over her next words. "I want to apologize again for last night. I wasn't prepared to handle Jacques."

Mussek sat down across from her. "Please do not apologize. I find you very brave and intriguing. It's not anyone who could be in company with..." His words trailed away briefly. "...our kind."

She nodded, grinning. "So, I believe it is safe to say that you will not join me in a meal this evening."

He laughed. "I am afraid not, but thank you."

"You're missing out, Mussek," she commented, waving her fork at him as her food appeared in short order.

"It has just been many years since I have been able to converse with a mortal in such a way." Highly amused, Mussek watched as she ate. They discussed when he was last in Paris, and he felt so free in being able to talk about his life with this breathtaking woman. He had yearned for such companionship for so long -- was it finally within his reach?

She was the very essence and embodiment of Dominique. Nothing would stand in his way of making her his. Not this time. He'd lost his beloved once; he wouldn't lose her again.

"I'm so glad you enjoyed the performance tonight."

"It has been quite a while since I have seen someone as talented as you are on the stage. Of course, there are many who are skilled, but not everyone holds the true fire and passion within."

Kelly's eyes widened. "That is one of the kindest things anyone has ever said to me."

"Then I will make certain to tell you such things often."

Kelly's grin ignited something deep in his soul. He watched spellbound as she lifted her glass to salute him, then took a quick sip. "I'm afraid if you do that, Mussek, my head will swell and float away."

Kelly was shocked at the coldness that enveloped her as Mussek covered her hand. Although Jacques's touch was also cool, it always felt full of warmth to her. Kelly shivered, and Mussek immediately released her, as if realizing just how chilly his touch was.

"I apologize. Sometimes I forget I'm not as cozy as I used to be." Looking at her empty plate, he then motioned to a vehicle parked just up the street. "Please join me back at my home. We can have a glass of wine and continue our evening."

Kelly dabbed at the corners of her lips with a linen napkin. "I don't know. It's getting late." And she didn't want him to misunderstand. She might not be as inexperienced as Cassie had been, but she wasn't easy either.

Mussek rose. "I only wish to show you my collection. I have items from ballets a couple of hundred years ago that I think will interest you. Props, costumes, and art I've come to possess over time."

Kelly was excited. "That does sound wonderful; however, I do not want you to have the wrong impression, Mussek. Please be aware that I am not looking for romance but would love to spend the evening with you as friends, sharing the same love of the dance." She thought she saw a flash of disappointment, but the look vanished as he quickly smiled.

She grabbed her purse, argued amicably with Mussek as he paid the bill, then allowed him to escort her to his vehicle. Once they arrived at his home on the other side of the city, he showed her to his parlor, where a cheerful fire waited for them.

"Please have a seat, and I will get the wine before we see the collection." He indicated a chair, and Kelly nodded, making herself comfortable. He produced a bottle and glasses from a small liquor cabinet. Pouring her a drink, then for himself, he raised his glass.

"What shall we toast to?" His dark eyes focused intently on her as he gazed at Kelly.

"Let's see..." Kelly thought for a moment, "To the ballet that we love so much."

"Hear, hear." They clinked glasses; then he sat on the floor before the fire and made desultory conversation before rising and leading her to another room, wine still in hand. "Come, join me. See what I have."

She did, wandering around the room with him, finally sitting on the carpet. She was delighted at the old dancing shoes -- some a brilliant red satin, others a soft pink -- along with men's shoes. Her hands ran over the satin laces of each slipper, touched the sheer material of the male and female costumes. He pulled forth a dress from a garment box, sealed in plastic for protection. He had a story for everything. The dancers. Their lives. It was amazing.

After a few hours, Kelly leaned back and sighed, perfectly content. She took another sip of wine and smiled widely at him. "This is wonderful, Mussek. Everything is fabulous. When I retire, I will give you something of mine to keep, so you can tell someone else about me a hundred years from now."

She was startled when Mussek's hand closed over hers and set her glass aside. He pulled her to him, tugging her the short distance across the rug, so that she practically fell into him. Then his lips came down over hers, and he sipped seductively at her. Kelly was overwhelmed, surprised by this sudden turn of events.

His lips were cool, yet gentle. One hand moved to her hair and then around her waist, pressing her fully against him. His tongue grazed her mouth, but Kelly didn't invite him to taste her. She turned her head away and pushed against his chest even as a growl of warning

filtered through her mind. She gasped and felt Jacques's anger, felt every emotion that was coursing through him. Shunting Jacques aside in her head, she faced the man in front of her.

"No, Mussek. Please let me go." He studied her for a long while, as if his dark eyes could discover every secret she had. "Please. I'm asking that you take me back to my hotel."

He ignored her, bringing her down to the floor instead, his body covering hers. "Can't you feel it? What is between us?" His hands skimmed down her rib cage, behind her waist, then traveled lower to cup her bottom, bringing her against his arousal.

She shoved against his chest. But he lowered his mouth against hers again; she sealed her lips together, and then grabbed a handful of his hair when his hands slipped into the collar of her blouse, pushing the material open; buttons popped off at his aggression.

She writhed, yanking hard on his head. "I said no, Mussek!"

He growled, baring fangs and glaring at her. Kelly could see the struggle between his desire for her and her demand, but he finally released her. She quickly scrambled from the floor, grabbed her purse, and raced through the house, relieved to make it out the front entrance unhindered.

He abruptly appeared before her, opening his car door. She shook her head, trying to control the trembling in her limbs. She attempted to walk by him, but Mussek stepped in her path.

"Kelly, I'm sorry I lost control." He grabbed her hands, holding them fast even as her fingers twisted in his. "You looked so beautiful with your hair around you, your eyes wide with wonder, that I thought perhaps..."

Kelly glared at him. "When I tell you no, I mean no. Don't ever try to force me!"

"I am sorry if I frightened you. My passion overrode my senses. It will never happen again."

"You didn't frighten me," she lied. He smiled at her.

One hand released her, came up, and brushed strands of hair from her face before tracing a gentle line down her cheek. She didn't move or breathe. "Kelly, you are a beautiful and magnificent woman. Please allow me to make amends and call on you again."

She swallowed hard, facing facts. She knew she could never be his, not when her heart belonged to Jacques. No matter how much Jacques had hurt her, she *was* his woman.

"Please don't. I can't be with you while my heart belongs to another." Kelly stared at him, not knowing how he would take her reply.

His eyes narrowed, and she shuddered. "Jacques?" There was no mistaking the menace in his voice.

"I'm sorry, Mussek."

He dropped his hand from her face and let go her other hand as well, stepping aside and making an elegant bow that was somehow mocking. "Heaven forbid that I stand in the way of *true* love."

Head high, Kelly swiftly moved past him. "I'll see myself back to the hotel." She was about to try and find a cab when Jacques stepped forth from the shadows.

"Jacques, my *friend*," Mussek spat angrily.

The men stood face-to-face in the middle of the suddenly empty street. Violent rage spilled from both men. Kelly watched in terror. What would Jacques do? What would Mussek do?

Jacques's black eyes began to glow. "You know that I care for her, that we share a bond, yet here you are frightening her, *friend*."

"We haven't been close for a long time; it leaves a bad taste in my mouth to even think of what we once were. I have been alone for too many years, Jacques, and she can make me happy. You are but a child compared with me. Be gone before I teach you a lesson you more than deserve."

Jacques growled at the insult, his fangs gleaming. Mussek returned the challenge. Wind whirled around them, causing their hair to whip into their faces as their anger grew, disturbing nature with their fury. Neither man flinched.

Kelly ran between them, thinking for a moment that she was making a terrible mistake to step between two feuding vampires. What did she think she could do... stake them with her fingernails? Her hand came to rest on Jacques's chest; she looked up at him mutely, pleadingly.

"I would not harm her." Mussek snarled, glaring at Kelly's hand.

"It would mean your death, if you did!"

Mussek roared, the sound vibrating through the area like a tiger on the prowl. "You threaten me after all I have done for you?" He hissed. Jacques snarled back. "I taught you everything you know. I saved your life, you ungrateful child!"

"When it comes to Kelly, I will fight anyone to protect her." The men stared belligerently at one another. "Stay away from her."

Mussek bristled. "You have signed your own death warrant." With that, he spun away, shimmering into mist, and disappeared. They watched him go; then Jacques looked down at Kelly, whispering her name.

She flinched, weary and upset; then she raced away from him, waving a hand as the street became busy once more. A taxi pulled up. She didn't look back as the car pulled away from the curb, but she felt him take a step, then another and another, before he launched himself into the sky, shapeshifting as he did. She knew he followed her all the way back to her hotel, where she fled inside.

Chapter Seven

Kelly double-checked to make sure she had her driver's license and passport with her before driving out of the car rental lot. As she made her way out of the city and through the countryside, Kelly couldn't help but appreciate the beauty of the rolling green hills of France. Her final performance in Paris was in a few days. The rehearsal this morning had gone smoothly and Vincinni was actually being generous by giving the dancers the evening to themselves.

Unfortunately, her day had been marred when Mussek had sent her a bouquet of tulips. She'd been unsuspecting about who the sender was because Mussek had been sending her roses, so she'd read his apology scrawled across the white card before she'd realized the blossoms were from him. She'd then gone after the bellman before the elevator door closed on him, refusing the offering. The man had been perplexed when she'd told him to send the flowers back to the shop.

Sighing at the memory, she turned onto the winding drive that led up to Jacques's home. Kelly took a deep breath and prepared to meet him, to lay bare her feelings. She sped through the iron gates into the main courtyard and cut the engine. Inhaling the sweet air that entered the car and briefly gripping the steering wheel for courage, she put on her brave face and exited. She walked up to the large oak door and knocked.

Kelly couldn't help the silly grin on her face as an excited Marian opened the door. "My dear! Come in, come in." The woman took her hand and patted it, smiling affectionately at her. "It is so good to see you again."

"Thank you, Marian. It's lovely to see you as well." She looked around the massive hall. "I came to speak with Jacques."

"I figured as much. He'll be up in a little while. Go into the study, and I'll make you a nice cup of tea."

“That sounds great, thank you.”

Leading the way behind one of the staircases, Marian brought her to a room that had been locked the night of the party at the castle. Portraits of stormy shores decorated the walls, and a pair of brown leather chairs and a matching leather couch sat around the fireplace, a low coffee table in front of the sofa. A large mahogany desk piled with papers was nearby, a leather rollaway chair tucked neatly into it.

She'd seen this room before.

Kelly absentmindedly ran her fingers down the length of the desk that Jacques had sat behind the time she'd called him in her mind. She filled her lungs with Jacques's unique scent, a purely masculine fragrance; she had the immediate image of his wavy locks wild around his face and those dark eyes devouring her.

She jumped when Marian returned with a teapot and two cups. “Did I startle you? Here, have a seat. I'll start a nice fire, and we can visit until Jacques joins us. It gets chilly in this old castle.”

Kelly smiled in appreciation from the couch as Marian handed her a cup. She took a sip, then leaned back, letting the warmth of the beverage and the newly lit fire permeate her. She gazed at the slow blaze in the hearth.

“I am so glad you're here,” the older woman said, seating herself in a chair beside Kelly. “My husband Quintin is usually out in the garden or off doing something else with the grounds, and Jacques... well, you know he isn't around much during the day.”

Kelly smiled. “Yes, I can imagine how you feel. I miss my friend Cassie. We used to be able to visit whenever we liked, but now that she is married... it's been different.”

“Things never stay the same, do they? It would get rather boring if it did, I think.”

Kelly agreed. “You're right, of course.”

“Change, ladies, is what I know best.”

Kelly jerked, almost spilling her drink. She splayed her hand over the tipping cup.

Marian stood. “Now, Jacques, look what you did; you almost scared the poor girl half to death.”

“I do apologize.” Jacques said, with a bow, but the amused smile on his face negated his gallant action.

The woman wagged her finger at him. “You behave, or I'll... I'll...”

Jacques laughed aloud and hugged his housekeeper. “I will, I promise.”

Marian blushed, then hurried out of the room. Kelly grinned at her retreat and at the comical scene of her scolding a vampire. It just seemed so ridiculous. But when her eyes turned to Jacques, her smile vanished and her breath stilled at the dark gaze holding hers.

Setting her tea aside, she rose before him.

“What are you doing here, Kelly?” His question was spoken softly, and his deep voice seemed to glide over her skin like silk.

She clutched her hands together, worrying her fingers, fighting for the courage to tell him how she felt, but what if Cassie was wrong? What if he didn’t love her?

His hands came up and held her shaking ones. Pure heat pooled in the pit of her stomach. It was almost painful, and she had to bite her lip to keep from crying out. She wanted to throw herself into his arms and let him take her, to make her his in every way.

Her eyes sought his, and she was engulfed in the tenderness shining back at her. Her heart seemed to be beating out of control, and she struggled to breathe.

Talk to me, his voice whispered in her mind.

“Okay.”

“Would you like to sit?”

When she nodded and did so, he came down beside her, pulling her hands back into his grasp. “I thought you didn’t want to see me again.”

“I was angry and confused.” She freed one hand to rub over her forehead agitatedly. “This is really hard for me. I still want to be mad at you. I really do.”

He cocked his head to the side, studying her. “You have gotten over me?”

She frowned at him, his words tugging at her heart. “Don’t change the subject.”

He grinned. “I wasn’t. I merely commented on your comment.”

Narrowing her eyes, she rose and began to pace. “Don’t be cute, either. It wasn’t easy for me to come here. I’ve never been good at talking about how I feel. With Cassie, yes, but she’s like my sister. Practically everyone else, I could take them or leave them, but then you come along--”

Jacques came to his feet and stood in front of her, halting her quick strides. She sucked in a breath at the sight of his face, only inches from hers. He brought one hand up and into her hair, while the other gently stroked the curve of her jaw.

“You still care. That’s what you’re trying to say.”

Kelly struggled against her mounting desire and gave an unladylike snort. She tried to push him away, but his arms locked around her like steel bands, and then his lips touched hers.

His mouth was like molten heat, causing familiar sensations to stir in her belly and explode throughout her body. He suckled her lower lip, and then his tongue swept inside against hers. She clung to him, his caresses driving her over the edge with pure sensation, to the point where she didn’t care if he threw her on the couch and had her right there.

When he pulled back slightly, he was breathing heavily, and his forehead rested against hers. But he didn’t stop the play of his fingers through her hair, down her arms, and over her back.

"Kelly, I have thought of nothing and no one but you since we were parted months ago. Forgive my arrogance in not consulting with you about what was right or wrong for us."

She laughed softly. After a kiss like that, what *could* she do? "I forgive you -- but I still think you were a jerk, and I'll slug you again if you ever repeat the mistake of making decisions for both of us without including me."

Jacques laughed, too, and the sound filled the room. "Finally, I'm forgiven! Although I must say I think you are the only person who has ever called me such a name, and the only woman to give me a bloody nose."

She knew her eyes must be bright as she batted her eyelashes at him. "Really? Why, I'm honored."

"I bet you are." He grinned. Falling back onto the couch, he tugged her with him, holding her in the security of his embrace.

She laid her head on his chest and listened to the beat of his heart. Closing her eyes, Kelly savored the sound of it against her ear and his arms wrapped so protectively around her. She never wanted this to end.

He never wanted to let her go. Jacques held her tightly, delighting in the press of her soft form against his hard body. Nothing in all of his existence had ever made him feel this good. She was sunshine and goodness, light and life. He wished he could relish every moment with her, take her and make her his, but such could not be.

He was constantly reminded of who and what he was. Even now, he was aware of her heartbeat pounding a rhythm in his head, the scent of her blood flowing through her veins. How sweet it was! He envisioned that moment so many months ago, when she had given of herself freely that he might live. She had become his angel, her presence everywhere he turned.

He could almost taste her again on his tongue, but he dared not. To succumb to such temptation could be fatal to her -- or enter her into a life of eternal darkness. Not that Jacques hated his existence. In fact, he had taken great pleasure from it once he'd accepted his fate, but he wondered how Dimitri had stood it, being with Cassie for so long yet not making her his, dealing with her fears and regrets regarding vampires. He shuddered inwardly.

He kissed the top of Kelly's head. Could he make her his? Would she be happy as a vampire, to be with him for untold years? Cassie was adjusting well to her new life despite her earlier struggles, so maybe it would work out -- but what if Kelly changed her mind a hundred years down the road?

He flinched. Becoming a vampire was final; there was no going back once the dark gift was accepted.

Shifting to look at him, Kelly touched his lips, running her fingertips over him. "I was thinking of staying for a while after my final performance." She paused as he frowned at her, his thoughts still focused on making her vampire. "I mean, I'm due the time, and I have several weeks before we start rehearsing again. Would you mind, Jacques?"

His answer was a gentle kiss against her mouth. "I would like that very much."

"Plus, I'm going to tell them about Mussek. I don't feel comfortable with him coming to see me perform any more."

At the mention of the man's name, Jacques's body went rigid, and he sat up, grabbing her by the shoulders. "I think Mussek has become a very dangerous man" He averted his eyes for a moment, pained, before gazing at her again. "Maybe it would be best if you went back to the States. I do not want you to get hurt."

Kelly reared back. "No! I won't go!"

"I don't want you to, but it would probably be safer until I deal with Mussek. I really don't know what he's capable of now."

Shaking her head and moving away from him, she stared at his face. "No."

Jacques stood, looming over her, but she didn't back down.

"I'm not leaving you, Jacques."

Mon ange. He saw she meant it and so gave up trying to convince her and pulled her back into his embrace, resting his chin atop her head. "Okay."

She seemed happy at his words. "Show me your city, Jacques. The last time I was here, it was terrible. I want to experience it with you this time."

Touched, he grinned. "I would enjoy showing you my city."

"Great. I have rehearsal till about eight or so tomorrow night. You can come get me at the hotel, and we'll start our tour."

"Stay with me tonight." He heard her heart pound rapidly. She touched his face.

"I would love to, but I promised Chris and some of the others we'd hang out early tomorrow." She looked away sheepishly. "Sorry."

Taking her hand in his, he kissed it before walking her out of the study and down the hall. "I will see you tomorrow evening, then." Her smile was so brilliant he felt almost giddy, unable to suppress his laughter. How alive he felt!

Stepping out into the night, they walked slowly to her car, stopping every once in a while for a lingering embrace, until finally they were beside the white, two-door vehicle. "Nice car." He winked.

"Oh, hush, this was all they had."

Jacques helped her in, then leaned over the door, kissing her once more. He shifted so he could look into her eyes, which seemed to sparkle like gems at him. "Good night, Kelly. I will come for you tomorrow."

“Until tomorrow. Good night,” she whispered, then drove away.

He took to the sky, a massive dark hawk, trailing her all the way into the city, ensuring she made it safely to the hotel. He didn’t trust Mussek, but he didn’t want to share with Kelly how much danger he really thought her to be in. She needed to be aware of the risk to herself, but she also still had her remaining performances. He knew that if he’d objected to her continuing on the stage, she would have fought him like crazy to complete her commitments. He had to keep an extra watch on her. Plus, to stave off temptation, he needed to feed before seeing Kelly tomorrow; he didn’t know if Kelly was quite ready for him to let her in completely on that aspect of his life.

Having assured himself of her safety, Jacques set out to hunt. He flew through the night, rearing back as he felt the presence of Mussek. A large, auburn-winged hawk screeched from above, barely missing Jacques’s eye with extended talons. Jacques returned the cry with one of his own, glaring at the great predator. Both hawks issued threats, until Mussek gave a final call, then streaked away.

Jacques watched him go. It saddened and angered him that his former teacher was completely lost to him now. At one time Mussek had been a proud and noble friend, a man whom he’d held dear, but Jacques feared the loss of Dominique had sent Mussek over the edge of sanity. Never having met the dancer who’d stolen his old friend’s heart, Jacques had thought Mussek’s grief incomprehensible. But now... now that Jacques had Kelly, he could almost understand.

However, if it meant Kelly’s safety, he would not hesitate to kill Mussek.

Chapter Eight

Kelly could hardly contain her excitement at spending an evening with Jacques, especially since the rehearsal had gone well. She looked at her cell phone; it was close to eight. She dropped it into her bag and glared across the stage at Vincinni. She felt like screaming at him. *Wrap it up!*

Then he did, just like that. Grabbing her tote without waiting to say good-bye to the others, she flung it over her shoulder and made her way toward the front of the building and out the door, where she stopped short, beaming.

“What are you doing here? I thought you were supposed to meet me at the hotel later.”

Jacques straightened up from where he leaned on his motorcycle and grinned. “The sun set early, and I couldn’t wait to see you.” He handed her a helmet. “Here, put this on, and we’ll go.”

Kelly looked down at her leotard, sheer skirt, and tennis shoes. “Like this? Jacques, I look awful.”

He walked toward her, incredibly yummy in his tight-fitting black pants and a deep red silk shirt. “You look radiant,” he said in a low, husky voice.

Her heart did a funny flip in her chest as she took the helmet from him and put it on. Climbing on the motorcycle behind him, she let out a squeal when he took off down the street, her arms wound tightly around his waist.

* * * * *

Kelly almost skipped all the way to *Le Louvre*. “This is amazing,” she exclaimed. They stopped to look at the *Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel* that Napoleon Bonaparte had had built.

Kelly took in the engravings cut into the stone and the chariot and horses that sat atop one of Paris's stone masterpieces. "Did you know Napoleon?"

His lips quirked in a smile, and he leaned forward, whispering against her ear. "Yes, he was an arrogant little man. I did not particularly care for him."

Kelly covered her mouth, laughing at his words. Although he said them in a teasing fashion, she knew he spoke the truth.

As they wandered around the courtyard, several people milled around in front of a lighted, glass pyramid as they stepped onto the paved courtyard. The museum's U-shaped building sat behind the pyramid, its three-story yellow walls and dark-gray, arched roof protecting treasures hundreds, even thousands, of years old.

"Come, I want to show you the art inside."

Confused, she put a staying hand on his arm. "But, Jacques, the museum is closed."

He gave an amused smile. "Not for me."

He led her toward the entrance and the door opened, a security guard smiling broadly at them. "*Monsieur Devereaux, mademoiselle, bienvenue.*" Jacques nodded to the man.

Kelly looked at the stairs that led below ground to the museum. She was so excited she could hardly contain herself.

"Are you ready?"

Kelly looped her arm through Jacques's, and he escorted her down the steps, past the closed admission desks and into the underground lobby. Walking up a set of carpeted steps, they finally entered the main rooms of the museum.

Kelly gaped in wonder as she examined the portraits hanging on the walls around her. As soon as they entered the area that housed Leonardo Da Vinci's renowned portrait, she immediately rushed over to the painting of the Mona Lisa. The famous woman smiled at Kelly through the surrounding glass that protected her. Whether Kelly stood to the sides of the portrait or before it, the woman's eyes never left hers.

It was a calming picture, and Kelly returned the woman's smile, cocking her head as they seemed to study each other. She didn't care whether or not there was a code in Da Vinci's art. She just liked looking at all of it.

Grabbing Jacques's hand in hers, Kelly was like a little girl as she raced through the museum, trying to take everything in at once. Jacques couldn't help but laugh at her enthusiasm. She was a treasure herself, and he was happy to watch the way she scrutinized each piece, stepping away from it, then walking up to it. The way she would tilt her head, blond hair sliding from the neat coil on her head. Who knew all that hair could be condensed down into a little knot? And the way she looked at each piece with such awe in her eyes -- it made him feel alive to be able to experience this with her, to show her something she enjoyed, and to have another precious memory of her.

They went from room to room, and he answered all of her endless questions. “What about this, Jacques? Do you remember when the artist did this one?”

Jacques frowned ferociously. “Good God, woman, I’m not *that* old.”

She laughed, holding her sides; then, finally, she shook her head at him, kissed his cheek, and went on. The night seemed almost to last forever as they lost themselves in the history of each painting, each sculpture, each object. Yet it still ended too soon.

Outside once more, they stood by a fountain and stared at the pyramid.

“What did you think, Kelly? Did you enjoy *Le Louvre*?” Jacques asked quietly.

“I thought it was breathtaking. I’d love to come back to see the rest of it. There’s just so much.”

“I am glad. Stick with me, *mon ange*, and I’ll bring you as often as need be for you to see every detail.”

She turned and looked at him, her eyes enormous. His heart jerked in his chest. Her beauty and soul were so pure that he wanted desperately to reach out and touch her. But if he did, he was afraid he would take her at that very place and moment. How he wanted to possess her in the way a man does a woman, bring her pleasure, and then drink again of her essence.

Her blood hummed through her veins, the scent of it calling to him. He wanted her life to fill him as it had before. Shoving his hands into his pockets, his voice was brusque -- tight and strained like his body.

“I will take you back to the hotel. Tomorrow night, I will come for you again.”

Kelly frowned, but nodded at him, and they left.

* * * * *

Kelly rushed off the stage even as thunderous applause still filled the theater. She was eager to change so that she and Jacques could go to the final performance party; then, afterward, she would have her time alone with Jacques.

She kissed Chris on the cheek when the two of them reached her dressing room. “Paris has been a wonderful experience, and I’ll miss you, but I’ll be back with the Company in a few weeks. I promise.”

He pulled her into his arms and gave her a tight squeeze. “You be careful. Don’t let this Jacques guy break your heart.”

She smiled at him. “I’ll put a stake in his chest if he does.” Chris laughed, the real joke lost on him, and let her go. She stepped into the room and shut the door.

“Stake me?”

She almost screamed, practically leaping out of her skin, when she turned and spied Jacques reclining on the couch, arms crossed and staring at her, an amused smile tugging at his lips. Her hand pressed hard over her heart. "You creep! You scared me half to death!"

"I'm sorry." He grinned devilishly and rose, but the twinkle in his eyes belied his words. "Have you been talking about me behind my back?"

She held up her index finger and thumb, showing the merest space between the two digits. "I might have talked about you... just a little bit."

He laughed, then reached for her. "You looked delicious onstage; I couldn't wait to get back here and do this."

Kelly shoved at him half-heartedly, but he caught her arms. She sighed when his lips claimed hers, grinning at him as they came up for air. Then she squeaked, delighted when he lifted her easily against the wall. His lips devoured hers again, and she wrapped her legs around him, her hands working greedily at the buttons on his shirt.

This wasn't how she had imagined their first time would be, but she didn't mind being taken against a wall, her ruffled ballet skirt pushed up around her waist. She cried out again when his lips moved from hers over her neck and lower still, to her waiting breasts under her costume. She arched into him, gazing down on his dark head through hazy eyes.

He impatiently jerked the flimsy blouse from her shoulders, revealing her flushed mounds to his view. He stopped for a moment as if to admire them, then brought one hard nipple into his mouth.

Kelly flung her head back, thudding against the wall, and her hands came up to cup the back of his head. She panted, moaning with every tug of his lips and lave of his hot tongue.

The door to her dressing room abruptly burst open. Jacques immediately set her down, shielding her body. He straightened her top and skirt before turning to face whoever had interrupted them.

Kelly cleared her throat and noticed the way Jacques was glaring at poor Chris, who actually blushed.

"I'm sorry, Kelly. I should have knocked."

"Yes, you should have, but you're like a nosy brother that way. What are you doing back again?" She laughed, then shoved at Jacques. "Stop it, you be nice to him. He's a dear friend."

Chris glanced at Kelly, then at Jacques. "Don't break her heart, Devereaux, or she's threatened to stake you." He winked at Kelly, then handed a large bouquet to her. "These arrived for you. Take care. I'll see you in San Francisco." He kissed her cheek and left.

Jacques inclined his head toward the bouquet. "Another admirer for the prima ballerina?"

Kelly grinned cheekily and opened the card, her heart slamming into her chest as she examined its contents.

Jacques went rigid. "What's wrong? Who is it from?"

Kelly read the note aloud. "You are angry, but nothing can keep us apart. Mussek." She shivered, handing the card over to him. "At first the flowers came with apologies, but now their tone is changing, becoming more possessive. He simply won't take no for an answer. I told Vincinni about Mussek, but there's no way to prevent him from purchasing tickets and coming to the theater. Mussek could easily use a go-between, not to mention his Jedi mind tricks."

Jacques frowned and crumpled the card in his hand. "You mean he's obsessive. This isn't good, Kelly. I thought maybe, hopefully, Mussek would let you go, but I believe he means to pursue you."

Kelly tossed the flowers aside. "I don't care what he thinks. The answer is still no, and he's just going to have to accept it and move on." She sighed, then took her party dress off its hanger. "I need to change for our date."

"Perhaps we shouldn't go out this evening. We--"

Kelly cut him off. "No! This is my vacation, my time with you, and I refuse to let him ruin it."

Jacques looked hard at her. "Stay close to me. I don't think he'll do anything, but at the same time... He has changed so much from what he once was."

"How? Why?"

He sighed. "It happened a long time ago. He was in love with a woman, Dominique, a dancer like you, but she died in an accident. I never met her, but ever since her death he hasn't been right, as if something snapped in his brain. He became angry and aggressive, discarded his honor. Those of us who were his friends became concerned; we tried to help him, but finally we had to leave him. Indeed, he forced us away." Jacques paused. "I warned him a hundred and fifty years ago that if he stepped out of line, I would not hesitate to deal with him. It's me he's angry with, but you are in terrible danger as well. Although you are a dancer, just as Dominique was, and beautiful, I don't understand this focus with you." He ran a hand over his face. "I must end this. I want you safe."

Kelly squeezed his hand. "That's very sad about Mussek, but he must know he can't act this way. It's wrong; no matter what happens in someone's life, they still have a responsibility to do the right thing." She sighed and kissed Jacques. "You'll protect me. I have no doubt of that. Now I must hurry up. We'll go to the party; then we'll have the rest of the night to do whatever you have planned for me."

She laughed at his arched eyebrow and moved behind the dressing partition.

* * * * *

"Look at the men, Jacques. It's as if the angels are leading them into battle." Kelly and Jacques stood before the *Arc de Triomphe*. It was a breathtaking monument. Men in robes

and armor stood against the *Arc* beneath what appeared to be an angel. Horses and men dressed for war stood above, other figures blowing their horns.

The Eternal Flame there burned for all fallen soldiers; it glowed brightly on its pillar, and water cascaded below the flame to a large dark bowl that was even lower. The sight almost brought tears to her eyes.

She felt Jacques's fingers slip through hers, and she squeezed his hand, comforted by his simple action. "I love history, and this tells so much."

"I know," he whispered.

He drew her away from the monument, and walked with her down the *Champs-Élysées*, the street that led toward the *Place de la Concorde*. Kelly was pleased when the fountain came into view, and Jacques motioned for her to sit on its ledge. She watched him go to a man who was painting on a small canvas.

While Jacques conversed with the artist, she looked at the stone gods garbed in robes who stood underneath the large, bottom bowl of the fountain. Water fell all around, shimmering in the light as it spilled over the gray stone. Sighing contentedly, Kelly turned back to where Jacques had been and yelped in surprise when he swept her into his arms, settling her on his lap.

She laughed, her arms naturally going around his neck. "What are you doing?"

"He is going to paint our portrait. As he already has most of the fountain done, he will only need to add us into the picture." Looking over at the man who was resetting his paints near them, Kelly grinned with excitement.

"If you would hold your pose for a bit," the man said in French. Jacques leaned his head against Kelly's, and she pressed her body close to his, her arms squeezing him tightly.

Kelly felt a stirring in the pit of her stomach; liquid heat seemed to spiral through her, tingling through every limb. Her heart raced at the feel of his arms around her waist, hugging her to his hard length.

He was solid beneath her, all masculine strength. Her fingers itched to touch his hair as the dark locks brushed the side of her face, and she breathed deeply, bringing her that much closer to this man. Giving into the urge, out of the painter's view, she lifted her hands and glided them under his hair, twining into the chocolate waves that were soft as silk. She heard him groan as he gripped her harder. Her smile grew wider.

You are only asking for trouble if you continue doing that.

She twitched in surprise at his teasing words in her mind, and he had to catch her to keep her from falling from his lap. She could immediately feel his concern and sadness at her reaction.

"I am sorry. I did not mean to frighten you," he whispered in her ear.

Studying him from the corner of her eye, she caressed the back of his head. *No, Jacques, I'm sorry. I'm just not used to you speaking to me that way, and I was only startled. It takes some getting used to, is all.*

She glanced at him and he appeared pleased that she had chosen to speak to him mentally.

If I had my mandolin here I would play a song just for you.

Stunned, Kelly asked, *You can play the mandolin?*

I have mastered almost every instrument.

That is incredible! How did you accomplish that?

You can learn and do much in seven hundred years.

Kelly could hardly believe she was carrying a conversation this way. It seemed so unreal.

Believe it.

Sucking in a breath, she gave in to the urge to giggle. The painter gave them a quizzical look. *Stop reading my thoughts like that.* But the severity of her reprimand was lost in her laughter. *Although I'm sure I would delve into your thoughts if I could.*

You can; you have only to try.

Grinning, she ran a finger down the length of his neck. *So, tell me more about your musical ability. Will you play for me some time?*

After I became vampire, I found that I enjoyed music even more thoroughly. Playing. Singing. It comforted and soothed me during dark years. I would be honored to entertain you.

I can't wait! She hugged him.

You take my breath away.

She stared at his face; the desire radiating from his dark eyes was almost overwhelming. She clutched his shirt and slowly lowered her lips toward his ...

"I am finished," the painter announced proudly.

Kelly and Jacques jerked. He placed her on her feet and rose as the man approached, handling the painting carefully. The artist smiled hugely when Jacques handed him several bills in exchange for the picture, which Jacques passed to Kelly, then hurried away to pack up his belongings.

Touched beyond words at the artwork in her hands, Kelly's heart melted. The two of them together seemed perfect in the image, complementing each other in every way, as if they were meant to be one.

"Do you like it, *mon ange*?" His deep voice glided over her skin, and she shivered in delight.

Nodding, she looked up into his black gaze. "I love it," she whispered. "Thank you."

Her eyes shone with anticipation, making them twinkle like the brightest sapphires, and he had to force himself to breathe. She never failed to intrigue him with her liveliness and animation, and he had never met anyone else who could be so vulnerable one minute, then so spirited the next. He was humbled by her.

Jacques's hand came up of its own accord and brushed her cheek. Then he slowly lowered his head, his lips lightly brushing hers. Heat swirled to the very core of him, leaving them both breathless as he pulled away.

"I am glad." Taking her hand in his, his head reeling, he escorted her from the fountain and back to the hotel. At the entrance to her room, he kissed her tenderly. He wanted her desperately, but he also wanted to take things slowly. To savor every moment with her, every action and reaction.

He could hardly wait for the following night.

* * * * *

Mussek watched from a tree as Jacques and she entered the hotel. They had been spending a great deal of time together -- and he wanted to tear Jacques's heart out for it. The fact that she had refused him, his apologies, and the many bouquets he had sent did not sit well with Mussek. He had never wanted to possess someone as much as he did this beauty, his Dominique. Just looking at her caused him to ache in anticipation.

He listened as Jacques kissed her goodnight, heard her breathless reply. Mussek's vision turned completely red. Hatred began a steady burn in the pit of his stomach until he was consumed by it. This fledgling, the one he had saved, had betrayed him: Jacques would not step aside even when he knew Mussek was falling for her. Mussek deserved happiness after so many years of darkness.

He watched Jacques leave the hotel and take to the sky. Mussek continued to shield his presence from the other vampire, keeping a watch on the woman through her window. How many nights had it been now that he came to her in the night, with her unaware?

He could see her shadow in the room through the drawn curtains, the outline of her supple body; her curves were perfect, and he longed to caress them. To linger over every delight her body had to offer. He would have groaned if he could in his hawk's form. His whole body tightened as desire speared through him.

The light went out in the room; shortly after, her even breathing told him she was asleep. He envisioned her on the bed, her golden hair a halo around her, her warmth beckoning him.

He flew to the balcony and transformed; with a thought, the door opened, and he walked silently across the floor to the bed. "Dominique." He whispered, his insides clenching. He needed her to want him, to long for him.

Mussek reached out and ran his fingers through her hair, making sure she remained asleep with a mental push. Lowering himself to his knees beside the bed, he pulled her into his embrace and continued to stare down into her face, the very image of his beloved's. Unable to help himself, Mussek bent his head and kissed her -- and as his lips touched hers, memories of the terrible night when Dominique had been ripped from his life flooded his mind.

There had been a terrible storm, and she'd been late, hadn't arrived at his home as expected. He'd gone out in search of her, the rain pelting him as he sped along the road. Then he'd seen the overturned carriage and raced to the smashed wooden box. The poor horse had been neighing wildly as it lay on the ground, its coachman clearly dead with one hand extending from under the wreckage.

Rounding the corner of the vehicle, Mussek had screamed her name. Her broken body was half under the carriage and half exposed to the inclement weather. She'd been choking on her own blood, her eyes imploring him to relieve her pain, to save her. He had fallen to his knees beside her and torn a gash in his wrist, offering his lifeblood to her.

"Dominique. You must drink."

Her lips had willingly closed over the wound, but it had been too late. Her heart ceased beating, and no matter how much of his blood he tried to coax down her throat and into her body, he had not been able to bring her back to life.

Even now, tears filled his eyes at his failure to revive her. He moved his lips from hers, then brushed them against her ear. "What are you doing with Jacques, my darling? Are you punishing me? Are you angry because I was unable to save you in your other life?" Mussek felt her trying to wake up, knew she sensed him there in her room. He cursed, then rubbed his lips back and forth over her temple. "You belong to me, my love, and I *will* claim you." He rose quickly and whirled away, leaving her alone in the room.

Jacques would have to die, and Mussek would take great pleasure in killing him; the thought of his ex-protégé touching Dominique was enough to make him mad with jealousy.

Yes, Jacques would pay the price for challenging him, Mussek; the younger vampire would know the full measure of his former teacher's wrath. And when he was out of the way, Mussek would have Dominique.

She would be his at last.

Chapter Nine

"This is gorgeous, Jacques. I didn't know you had a vineyard." Kelly gazed around her, and then at the plants looming over them as they sat beneath a starlit night. His castle loomed in the distance, and the fields were bathed in moonlight as she gazed down on them from their hilltop.

He poured a deep red wine into a glass and handed it to her. "It has been in my family generations, long before I was even born." He lifted his glass. "What shall we drink to?" He watched as she considered the question, then smiled.

"To France. I'm beginning to like this place, after all." They both laughed, and their glasses clinked together.

"I will drink to that." Jacques knew his eyes must be gleaming with mirth.

Taking a sip of her wine, Kelly looked up at the sky. "Well, I think this is just amazing. I'm so glad you brought me out here." Taking another drink, she said, "This is delicious; is it from your vineyard?"

He nodded, showing her the bottle. "Yes. 1878 was a fine year for my wine."

Kelly took it and peered at the date inscribed on the glass. "How wonderful. Thank you again." Studying him once more, she crossed her legs in front of her; he could already hear the unasked questions.

"Go ahead, Kelly."

"What was your family like?"

Even though he'd known she would delve into his past, his heart clenched in his chest. "I had four sisters -- Adorinia, Sandrine, Carine, and Gisella -- but I was the oldest by many years and the only son. My father, Phillipe, was a duc, and these were his lands. My mother was Leeana, a beautiful and wonderful woman. They were good people, though it was mostly

our nannies who took care of us. However, my father was there to instruct me on my future duties as a duc.”

Kelly’s eyes had widened. “You’re royalty.”

Jacques grinned at her and bowed from his seated position. “Yes, I am. *Monsieur le duc de Devereaux*.”

“Wow!” Kelly laughed enthusiastically, clapping her hands before her, then bouncing to her feet. She dipped in a grand curtsy. “Or should I say, ‘*Monseigneur*.’”

Jacques chuckled and pulled her down onto his lap, wrapping his arms around her. “Never curtsy to me, Kelly.” He kissed her temple.

“Shouldn’t those of a lower station do so?” she teased.

“You? A lower station? I don’t think so. Someone as beautiful and innocent as you could never be classified as such.”

“I am not as innocent as you think.”

He gave her a knowing look and a slight smile.

“I’ve traveled, danced in different places. And, for all you know, I’ve banged--” he winced at the word, “--men from every nightclub and the entire San Francisco 49ers team.”

Even though her voice was light, his was serious when he responded. “It is not a matter of experience of the world or the number of lovers one has had, Kelly. Aside from what Gabriella did to Cassie, you’ve never truly experienced or witnessed evil. And, remember, I know everything about you, including your sexual past. It is a part of our bond, created when you offered your blood to me.”

“Oh,” she said, clearly feeling uncomfortable.

His hands moved up the side of her face and gently brushed her hair back. He kissed her full pink lips. “You are a rare flower.”

She blushed at his words, then tilted her head and looked deeply into his eyes. “What happened to your family?”

Sighing, he gazed at the stars, away from her intent stare. “My entire family died of the black plague. I was the only survivor, and the Devereaux line died with me.” He laid his head against hers as she rocked him back and forth in her embrace. “I know you have kept people at arm’s length as well, and why, but will you tell me yourself?” She inhaled sharply. He knew the memories still hurt her.

“I was the only child and absolutely devastated when my parents died in a car accident. I was a teenager, and Cassie’s family took me in and finished raising me since my parents had no siblings, and both sets of grandparents had passed away when I was a baby.” She sighed heavily. “You’re not completely right, you know. Cassie is in my life, and her family, too. But I never wanted to be close enough to anyone else to experience that kind of hurt again if something happened... until you came along.”

Her words moved him, and he closed his eyes briefly; her heart beat an even rhythm in his head, and her voice hummed low in his soul. "I, too, loved my parents very much and felt the same as you did when they died."

She took a shaky breath, and his hands ran up her spine, comforting her, urging her to continue. "I didn't think I would survive, but Cassie... she saw me through those terrible days."

Tears fell unchecked from her eyes, and she attempted to move away from him. He knew she was ashamed to cry over old hurts, but he refused to release her, and she finally sagged against him, letting the hurt flow out. He held her steadily while the sobs racked her trembling body and absorbed her pain. When the tears finally stopped, she wiped her eyes and gazed up into his. "I hate crying!"

He smiled. "I bring out the best in people."

She touched his lips, tracing them, and his grin quickly faded. "Yes, you do." She leaned forward slowly to kiss him, her mouth deliciously seductive. Jacques's heart raced. They were mere inches from each other, their breaths mingling in anticipation... when a lightning bolt streaked across the sky.

Jumping to his feet, he examined the storm rolling in rapidly above and knew it was not Mother Nature's fury, but Mussek's. The squall was coming in without advance warning and with such ferocity that he knew the cause could be nothing else but the older vampire. Jacques could feel the rage in each loud rumble of thunder and in every flash through the air.

Without a second thought, he scooped up Kelly and raced with blinding speed toward the castle, but not before a torrent of rain beat at them, soaking both of them to the bone. Seconds later, they were safely in his home, even as the storm seemed to pound at the structure with a vengeance.

"Well, that came up out of the blue," Kelly gasped out, as she looked through the cut-glass window.

Narrowing his eyes and searching the darkness, he nodded. "Yes, it did."

Turning to face him, she gazed at him with enormous blue eyes. He saw that her lips were turning blue, and her teeth were beginning to chatter. He tugged her to him and ran his hands up and down her arms.

"Come, I will start a fire and find you some dry clothes to wear."

He led her into the study and waved a hand toward the fireplace. A blaze came to life instantly. Kelly twitched, then smiled.

"More magic?"

He kissed her forehead. "Get out of those wet clothes and wrap yourself in the blanket on the back of the couch." He winked at her. "Try not to be too loud, or Marian will have Quintin come and investigate to protect your virtue."

Jacques laughed when her mouth dropped open in shock. He left the room and went to his chambers below the earth. The doors opened at his mental command, and he walked over to his armoire, pulling out a long-sleeved, button-down shirt. *This should do till her clothes dry.*

He paused for a moment, thinking of her dressed in his shirt, the way she would look, seductive and inviting. He imagined slipping the material from her body, his body tensing as wild thought after lusty thought went through his head.

* * * * *

Kelly paused, her blouse slipping from her fingers to pool on the floor alongside her jeans. She stood in a tank tee with matching white panties, staring toward the windows. Had Jacques just called her name? What was he doing outside again?

She stepped from the study, leaving the warmth of the room behind as she made her way to one of the many back doors that exited the castle. She moved out into the garden, the rain still pelting the earth, and was immediately drenched once more.

Kelly looked through the falling sheets of water and saw a figure. "Jacques?" She felt a little strange, as if her body had a will of its own, but continued to walk. Then she felt the attack on her mind. Before she could react, everything seemed to fall away.

Mussek watched with glee as Kelly came to him, held under his power. It was a bit difficult to maneuver around Jacques's claim on her, but he'd managed by placing an aggressive hold on her so that she wouldn't be able to fight him. There would be no gentle mind submission with Kelly; no, he'd learned from their first meeting at the theater the need to seize her firmly and without remorse.

"Yes," he whispered. "Give me your hand."

She did as she was told, her eyes gazing up at him but not really seeing, he knew. His gut clenched hotly as he brought her closer. He wanted to touch her for a moment before he took her away from this place, away from Jacques. She could and would bring him joy.

Mussek kissed her fingertips, then stroked her shoulders, which were slick with the rain. Just the sensation of her was like electricity beneath his hands.

His lips traveled down the column of her neck, the smell of her blood calling to him. Only a little taste; then they would go. His tongue lingered over her pulse, and he circled her waist with an arm, his free hand rising up to palm her full breast.

Her head fell back at his command, and he inhaled deeply. She was so full of life, his *Dominique*. His teeth grazed her delicate flesh briefly, and then he bit down on her neck, savoring the sweet fluid that flowed over his tongue.

Her moans filled his ears, and he gripped her mind more firmly, dragging her further under his thrall. Her body writhed against his, her arms holding him against her as he drank.

Finally, he lifted his mouth, licked the wounds, and watched, mesmerized, as the pinpricks disappeared. He yanked his shirt open, desperate to feel her mouth on him as she took his blood.

Mussek slashed his chest, disturbed when she suddenly tried to fight him. Feeling his mental hold on her inexplicably slipping, he grabbed her arms roughly, shaking her slightly. "Do not fight me, Dominique."

Walking back to the study with towels and dry clothes, Jacques's breath caught in his throat. Something was wrong; Kelly wasn't where he'd left her. He'd been so caught up in his own emotions and thoughts that he hadn't noticed her leaving his study.

Then he heard it, felt it. Mussek's call. Reaching for Kelly with his mind to help her against the hold Mussek had over her, Jacques filled with instant pride as she began to struggle.

He tore out of the castle with blinding speed, caught the older vampire around the throat, and pinned him to the garden wall. He heard Kelly hit the ground, her cry stunned. Jacques growled, his claws digging into the other vampire's neck, but Mussek only grinned tauntingly.

"She's mine, Devereaux. I've only begun to stake my claim on her." Then, even as Jacques tried to prevent it, Mussek faded to mist and vanished.

Jacques screamed his outrage, his shout carrying over the very hills themselves. He was torn between chasing after Mussek and staying with Kelly. He heard a muffled groan and turned to her, decision made. Sweeping her into his arms, he carried her back to the security of his home. She was shivering uncontrollably as he set her on her feet in his study.

"What happened?"

"Mussek tricked you." Jacques wiped her down with a towel, his movements brisk and harsh in his enraged state. Then he glanced away from her. "I should have been more careful. I was... was..." Jacques felt her mind touch before he knew what she was doing.

"You were daydreaming about me." Incredibly, she laughed.

He looked at her, shocked. It was clear she had no idea what had occurred, otherwise she wouldn't be chuckling.

"My God, Kelly, if I hadn't gotten there, he'd have truly claimed you. I never thought he'd actually go this far, but I tried to be alert just in case. Yet I still almost failed you."

Her hand fell on his arm, stopping his quick back-and-forth strides. "What do you mean? What did he do? I have no memory of going outside. One minute I was here and, the next, I was in the rain."

Jacques faced her; for the first time, he could almost view her entire body. Her golden hair fell down her back, heavy and dark from the downpour, and she wore only a now-transparent tank top, a white lace bra that outlined her delicious breasts, and white panties

that framed her feminine mound. Her arms were slender, her legs long and glorious, and her waist, trim. The light in the room gleamed on her skin, making it appear like pure, pale silk.

She trembled. Cursing silently, he grabbed the shirt from the couch where he'd dropped it in his haste to rush to her rescue, and motioned for her to undress. When she raised her hands and, without any sign of shyness, removed the tee and unfastened the bra, Jacques gripped the shirt tightly, wrinkling the material. It seemed to him that her breasts practically leaped from the lacy cups. He found that he wanted so much of what she so delicately displayed.

Kelly grabbed her bra and panties and slid them from her body. Jacques had to suppress a groan at the wondrous sight she presented; his own body was hard as a rock, his stomach clenching hotly. Perfect pink nipples had become taut from the damp chill, and the juncture between her legs looked only too inviting; he wanted to touch her there, glide his fingers and his cock deep inside her. He wanted to crush her to him and kiss each breast while he pumped into her. But her pale skin and shivering brought him back to his senses. This fantasizing was what had gotten him into trouble in the first place and had left her open to Mussek's deception.

He held the shirt open, and she took it from him, now flushing a bright red. He sighed with relief when she covered her nudity. Taking calming breaths, he stared at the fire for a moment to regain his composure and willed other parts of himself to ease.

"I'll go heat up some tea; it will help to warm you. Don't leave the room, even if you hear me calling for you. I will come to you instead."

Her soft voice stopped him before he could get far. "Jacques? You didn't finish telling me what happened outside."

Without looking at her, he continued his way past the door. "I will, when I return."

Kelly frowned and watched his retreating back. His voice had been gruff, raspy, and he had been very tense. What exactly had happened? Everything was so foggy.

Shrugging, she sat, recovered the blanket she'd used earlier, and covered her legs. She snuggled into its warmth, and her nose brushed the collar of Jacques's shirt, his scent immediately engulfing her. As she waited for him, Kelly rolled the hanging sleeves up to her wrists and gazed at the fireplace. When he entered the room again, he carried a dark wooden tray with a small pot of tea, a cup, and a saucer. Setting the tray down on a side table, he poured her a steaming cup and sat beside her, watching as she took a tiny sip.

"Better?"

She nodded. "Much better, thank you."

He carefully settled her sideways into his embrace, and she grinned as his lips swept against her forehead. Heat enveloped her, and she almost purred like a contented kitten. "So, are you going to tell me what Mussek did or not?"

He let out a heavy sigh and rubbed a hand over his head. She waited patiently for him to begin. "Mussek tricked you into entering the garden by putting you under his thrall. By the time I reached you, he had already drunk from you, was getting ready to finish creating a bond between the two of you by having you drink from him." He paused, as if trying to find the right words.

Kelly swallowed hard. "Something in me kept saying it was wrong, that it wasn't you holding me, tasting me." She frowned as if trying to remember. "He called me a name, but it wasn't mine."

"Dominique?"

"That's it. The woman he lost." She clutched his arms, burying herself against him.

She felt him nod. "I'm so sorry I failed you, Kelly."

She turned fully in his arms and faced him. "You didn't fail me. After all, he didn't get to complete his plan. You saved me, Jacques, and I have every faith in you." He looked pained by her words, and she touched his jaw. "What? What is it?"

His dark gaze met hers. "I really think you should go home, at least until I can take care of this. I'm going to confront him, Kelly. I have to. He's proven he can no longer be trusted, that he is not the same man I once knew."

Kelly shook her head. "I won't go. I won't let him come between us. We'll fight him together. I'll be careful, Jacques. I promise."

He kissed the top of her head. "I never thought that he would try to claim you in such a way." She shuddered again, and he held her more tightly. "I will not let him harm you."

Surprisingly, she found herself laughing. "Let him try. I'll boil rabbits in his cookware just like Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction* before he gets the chance."

He snorted. "This situation is not acceptable. I will not allow him near you. Mussek is clearly determined and willing to go to any lengths to have you. I'll kill him before that ever happens."

She shuddered at his vehement declaration, then gasped when his lips ground down on hers. His mouth was demanding, searching. She was vaguely aware when her teacup spilled to the floor. She groaned and fell back on the couch, delighted at the hard feel of his body covering hers and the stiff proof of his desire prodding her between her legs.

His tongue delved between her teeth, tasting the sweet nectar she offered. His fear for her overrode every good sense he had. He needed her.

Jacques trailed kisses down her neck, her shirt buttons slipping open under his fingers. Then his hands moved over her perfectly shaped breasts, which filled his palms like they belonged there. He groaned harshly as Kelly arched her back, pushing her mounds invitingly into his fingers as the shirt fell away from her skin. He helped her remove the material completely, leaving her naked beneath him.

The tiny buds of her nipples tempted him to taste them. Sucking one into his mouth, he held her tight, feeling her body spasm. She cried out when his tongue swirled around one pale pink tip, then the other. Her fingers twisted in his hair, and her legs swung over his waist, urging him on with his delicious torture.

Jacques's fangs lengthened at her ardent actions, at the way her heart quickened, pumping her life's blood rapidly through her veins. All of it called to him. He groaned, on fire for the feel and taste of her, and tried to lift away from her. She refused to release him, holding him against her naked flesh.

"No, Kelly." He should have fed before she had arrived tonight, before the hunger clawed at him.

She ran her hands down the length of his face, cupping his jaw, her eyes full of concern. "Jacques?" He couldn't help but think, as she lay beneath him, that she looked like a sacrifice for his beast. Her eyes widened as she stared at his incisors, and he immediately clamped his mouth shut.

"If you hunger, take from me." Shaking his head, he once again tried to pull away, but she wouldn't let him. "Please, Jacques. Let me help you."

Tangling his hands through her shiny tresses, he smiled, keeping his lips over his incisors. "You have no idea how much you thrill me, but after tonight... I-I don't want to be like Mussek."

All thoughts shattered as she writhed seductively under him, baring the curve of her throat to him. "You could never be like him. What I give you is from my heart."

He groaned; it sounded painful even to his own ears. Bending his head, he gently touched his lips to her collarbone, then licked toward her rapidly beating pulse. His teeth sank into her tender flesh, loving the way her essence flowed across his tongue; then he jerked in surprise as he felt her hand glide in his pants and wrap around his already throbbing cock. It was so unexpected. While she filled him with her life's blood, he thrust himself into her palm, thrilled as her fingers pumped up and down his shaft, her other hand playing through his hair.

Feeling himself close to coming, Jacques sealed the tiny pinpricks at her neck. He was about to stop her tantalizing movements on his erection, but her mouth claimed his, her tongue rolling and battling against him until he came. His body convulsed atop hers, grinding against her slick and wet hand, pushing between her legs, as if he were already buried deep within her.

Finally he met her eyes. More than at any moment before, Jacques desperately wanted her to share eternity with him, but as that thought crossed his mind, the image of Gabriella's eyes staring into his, red lips stained with his blood flooded his mind. Unfortunately, memories of his vicious maker reminded him of Mussek as well.

He kissed Kelly's lips tenderly. "Thank you, *mon ange*." Her smile was soft and satisfied, drowsy even. "Stay here tonight." She murmured her agreement, and he kissed her again, until she fell to sleep in the warmth of his arms, exhausted.

Jacques listened to the rhythm of her heart and the sound of her even breathing. She was so lively and full of passion; he knew it would be selfish to take everything she wanted to give him, especially as there was no guarantee she wouldn't regret receiving the dark gift. He still had some weeks to spend with her, and he intended to make every one of those nights memorable. Then he would let her go. But until that time, Mussek would not be allowed to take this time away from them, from him.

Grimacing, he picked her up in his arms as the hours of the early morning ticked away and took her to one of the many guest rooms for the remainder of the night.

Chapter Ten

Kelly couldn't help the grin that seemed to be etched on her face. She stepped into the elevator, watching as the doors closed and Jacques pressed the button that would take them up to the top of the Eiffel Tower. His dark gaze roamed over her and she could see appreciation light his eyes. It made her think of the way he'd looked last night as he'd pleased her with his hands and lips, drinking from her, and how she'd brought him to climax with her hands.

The memory made her insides quiver and her blood run hot in her veins. A dark eyebrow arched on his face as he looked at her. Kelly stiffened as she tried to remember all the things Cassie had shared with her about a vampire's heightened senses; she wondered if Jacques's keen sense of smell had picked up the fact that she wanted him. The thought embarrassed her a little, and she quickly tried to divert her thoughts.

"So, here we are at 3:30 in the morning and not another person around. It still amazes me, sometimes, that you can get in anywhere whenever you want."

Laughing, Jacques shrugged. "It is a gift I possess."

Kelly smiled, beaming at him. "Some guys have it all, I guess." She watched as his indulgent expression gradually grew serious, and he gently brushed his fingers along her cheek.

She cupped her hand around his. "You look sad all of a sudden." She hoped he wasn't dwelling on how Mussek had nearly claimed her; she'd rather Jacques thought about their love play instead.

Shaking his head, he grinned reassuringly and kissed her forehead. "Nothing. Nothing at all."

The elevator stopped, and they stepped out onto the deck. A gentle breeze touched her hair, lifting the strands around her shoulders. As she walked ahead of him toward the railing,

the shimmering lights of Paris came into view. When she finally reached the edge, she let out a contented sigh. The entire city seemed to shine just for her.

She could see the *Arc de Triomphe* illuminated in the distance, the inky black waters of the *Seine* running its course through the city, and a boat slowly gliding along the river. Her chest expanded as she tried to take in all the beauty. She looked at Jacques when she felt his hand cover hers. Squeezing his fingers affectionately, she couldn't help but think how romantic he was, how everything was perfect, and that it was he who had given it to her.

Thank you, Jacques. She could tell she'd surprised him with her soft mental words; Kelly was still trying to get used to the idea that she had this skill. His black eyes probed hers.

Kelly, I assure you, the pleasure is entirely mine.

She went into his embrace, letting everything about him wrap itself around her heart.

Her eyes were jewels, trapping him in their brilliance.

"Jacques, I have to tell you something."

His hands brushed through her hair, marveling at the silken feel of the golden tresses slipping through his fingers. He kissed her gently, his tongue playing across her lower lip.

"I lo--" Her words were cut off by the sound of harsh laughter behind her.

Jacques growled, his fangs lengthening rapidly, and his eyes were no doubt glowing. He immediately shoved Kelly behind him, glaring up at Mussek. Kelly gasped, her fingers digging into Jacques's back, as the other vampire hovered above them, auburn hair wild around his face and long black cape billowing in the wind.

Jacques hissed. "What do you want, Mussek?"

"Why, her, and..." he paused, a delighted smile smearing over his face. "And you dead, of course."

Jacques heard Kelly cry out as he pushed her away, trying to send her beyond Mussek's reach. He snarled; then he and Mussek rushed each other. They fought in midair, long talons slashing and barely missing, both trying to gain an advantage over the other.

"I have had enough of you, *child*." Mussek's voice was full of venom. He caught Jacques around the throat, but Jacques swiped his hand down the side of Mussek's face, laying his cheek open and causing the older vampire to shriek in pain and rage. Unfortunately, Mussek's hold didn't falter with the blow, and his former teacher sent both their bodies flying down the Eiffel Tower, toward the ground far below.

Kelly's scream followed their descent. Jacques tried in vain to gain the upper hand, to at least turn himself into mist to halt his freefall, but Mussek penetrated his mind, preventing him from shifting. His body crashed onto the hard ground; worse, when he hit, Mussek twisted Jacques's body punishingly. Jacques heard and felt his spine crack, then break. He arched spasmodically, cried out in sheer agony, then came to rest beneath the other vampire.

Mussek sneered down at him. "Let the sun have you, ingrate." Jacques was unable to do anything but watch helplessly as Mussek slashed his talons across Jacques's chest and swiped Jacques's throat so that blood flowed, weakening him further. Then Mussek flew toward the top of the Eiffel Tower, back to Kelly.

"Jacques! Oh, my God, Jacques!" Kelly rushed away from the railing and hurried to the elevator, stabbing the button several times. The door finally opened and she leaped in, but a hand snapped around her wrist, stopped her, and spun her about. She gasped as she came face-to-face with Mussek.

"My beloved, we don't have much time. The dawn will be upon us soon."

Kelly shook her head, jerked herself from his grasp, and attempted to inch her way to the iron beams nearby. "Something's wrong with you, Mussek. I've told you, my heart does not, and will never, belong to you."

He glared at her, and she tasted fear as his eyes began to glow red. She looked away from him, afraid he would try to bring her under his control again and knowing she'd be powerless to avoid his thrall. He grabbed at her, but she thrust herself away.

"I said no!" She lifted a cross from her pocket and held it before him, her hand trembling. He laughed and covered the cross with his fingers.

"You watch too many movies, girl."

She snarled, whipping her fingers from beneath his and releasing the useless cross. Then, from another pocket, she brought forth a small silver blade she'd kept with her since Gabriella's attack on Cassie months ago. "Maybe, but I know a few so-called myths that are true." She didn't think about where or how she would use the knife, focusing solely on the urgency to escape and to get both her and Jacques to safety.

She slashed the blade up and across, shocked when she scored deeply, scarlet spilling from Mussek's neck. The vampire's face registered incredulity, his flesh burning and bubbling even as blood continued to pour from the gaping wound. He made to speak, but fluid dripped from his lips as well. He raised his hands and looked down at the red staining his fingers.

Kelly gaped, horrified at what she had done. She dropped the knife, her hands shaking, and backed up. "I'm sorry," she whispered, meaning it, but knowing she had had no other choice than to defend herself.

He stepped toward her, and she stumbled, retreating. "Silver," he managed to gurgle, sounding bewildered. He appeared sad, overwhelmed with grief, as if he couldn't believe she'd actually hurt him. "Dominique, how could--"

"I'm not Dominique!" she yelled. "I'm Kelly, Kelly Matthews!"

His demeanor changed, and he scowled, choking further on the blood welling from his wound, staining the front of his clothing. His eyes narrowed, and Kelly knew things were not over between them.

I'll see you again. Then he whirled away and disappeared into the shadows of the fading night.

Gulping in deep breaths, Kelly almost tumbled to her knees, but somehow she reached for and found strength; she had to help Jacques. She touched her mind to his and was immediately engulfed in pain. She shrieked and fell against the elevator's iron gate. Scrambling for the penknife, she folded the blade closed and slipped it back in her pocket before staggering into the elevator cab.

Jacques had heard everything that had transpired between Kelly and Mussek. He'd been terrified for her safety, but she'd certainly surprised him and Mussek with her secret weapon. Silver. He was incredibly proud of her for defending herself so successfully against a creature as old and strong as Mussek. The vampire had been so sure of himself that he had let his guard down -- and she'd taken advantage of his overconfidence to strike.

What little energy he had available Jacques used to put up a mental block between him and Kelly. He could feel her mind try to touch his again, but he firmly kept her out. For once he cursed their bond; it was taking everything in him to hold both her and the pain at bay. He knew the link between them was strong enough that the moment he failed to do so, she would succumb under his torment.

And yet, the bond had been an unintended result those many months ago as they'd tried to save Cassie from Gabriella; when Kelly had freely offered her blood to him, and he'd in turn given her his to help replenish what he'd taken, their exchange had not only been done because of the urgency of the situation, but also because of the love and compassion they shared. Now Kelly was more connected to him than anyone, even Quintin, whose bond was that of a servant to his master. The two men had partaken only enough blood for mutual loyalty and protection, which included communication between their minds. Thus, Quintin had received Jacques's strength and speed, and could sense when Jacques was in danger, but nothing deeper.

"Kelly," he choked out, but blood spilled from his lips. Her cries and hysteria were growing; so was her fear for his life. Then she was there. Her tears fell, hitting his face, as she stared at his mangled body and tenderly touched his forehead, cheek, jaw.

"Oh, Jacques." Her words were broken sobs, and her hands shook. He knew she was trying to figure out how to help him without hurting him even more.

He was going to bleed to death if they didn't fix that first. *Grab handfuls of soil and pack my wounds.* She instantly did as he said, retrieving handfuls of the earth from the nearby turf. He wanted to sigh in pain and pleasure at the contact, knowing the soil would

help heal him. *I can't move.* His breathing was labored. *My back... it's broken...I've lost too much blood... and the sun... will rise... soon.*

Kelly wiped the tears from her eyes, then stood, looking down at him. "I'll get you to my hotel; we won't reach your castle in time. I'm sorry; it's the only place I can think of."

Sensing that she felt as if she were failing him because she didn't know what else to do, Jacques tried to comfort her and yet think of her safety. *You must leave me and go back to San Francisco. Tell Dimitri immediately about Mussek; he will see to your protection.*

She appeared shocked at his suggestion, then angry. "No! I'd think you would know me well enough to understand I'm not going to leave you." She took a deep breath. "Jacques, this will be awful. I'm so sorry."

His set his face and prepared himself as best he could before nodding slightly. *I'm no stranger to pain. Do it!*

Reaching down, she grabbed under his arms, braced her legs, and gave a mighty pull. His abused body spasmed, and he howled silently. Shaking wretchedly, he grappled with control, trying in vain to keep his mind separate from Kelly's as the pain ebbed and flowed, finally overwhelming him as she heaved him toward his car.

Tearing open the door to Jacques's vehicle, she said a small prayer of thanks that they hadn't brought his motorcycle and that Jacques's shield on the car's presence on the Quai Branly had held until he'd passed out. Though she would never know where she got the strength, she wrapped her arms around his upper body and lifted him into the backseat, his limp body landing heavily over hers.

Gasping for air, she scrambled out from beneath him, carefully secured him before shutting him in, then climbed into the front seat. She drove furiously to her hotel, biting her tongue to keep from yelling at the pink sky showing in the distance and keeping a wary eye on any *gendarmes* who might stop her for speeding. Pulling in near the front of her hotel, she was grateful there were only a few people about, none of whom were really paying attention to her. Otherwise, there'd be no way to explain the dirt and blood that coated her clothes and hands, not to mention Jacques in the backseat.

The doormen seemed to be in the middle of changing shifts. She hurriedly flung open the back door. He looked dead. "Jacques!"

I only have enough strength to block our presence for a moment. The sun rises and...

She swallowed her tears and grabbed a nearby luggage cart. *Oh, Jacques, please forgive me.* Once more, Kelly gave a mighty tug, and his body slid onto the trolley with a hard thud. He gritted his teeth, but she could hear his scream in her mind. She struggled not to collapse completely as her knees gave out and fresh waves of pain washed over her.

She gripped herself around the waist, her head resting against the car as her body trembled in agony, suffering every searing pang along with him. Beads of sweat trickled

down her brow, and she thought she might be sick. Fighting the nausea, she glanced anxiously at Jacques. His eyes were glazing over; she knew she had to get him to her room before it was too late.

Rising shakily to her feet, Kelly locked the car, then pushed the cart through the hotel entrance into the lobby. Kelly was doubly grateful that it was still early and that the clerk at the front desk had drifted off to sleep. She knew Jacques was shielding their presence, but as weak as he was, she also knew that they wouldn't remain unnoticed much longer.

Inside the elevator, she punched the button for her floor, barely holding in her shrieks at the pain coursing through her body; Jacques was almost unconscious now. As the elevator chimed, the doors opened. She hurtled the cart down the thickly carpeted floor with a vengeance.

Jacques was in such agony that, paradoxically, he was almost beyond feeling. His mind had stepped away from his body, and he wished for the death that Mussek had wanted for him. Jacques thought he might have welcomed the sun, for at least the pain would be over and he could finally rest in peace. But the sound of Kelly's harsh weeping as she trundled him into her room brought him crashing back to his excruciating reality.

She tossed the do-not-disturb sign over the door handle, kicked the door shut, and hauled him toward the bathroom. Halting abruptly, Kelly ripped the blankets and sheets from the bed and appeared to be making a comfortable spot on the spacious hard tile floor of the bathroom, where the sun wouldn't reach him. She maneuvered his body from the cart onto the makeshift bed. He couldn't help crying out with each movement she made, until finally he lay still.

She closed and locked the bathroom door, then dropped to her knees beside him. "Jacques, are you all right?"

When he looked at her there, he had to blink several times to bring her into focus. He hated his weakness; he wasn't strong enough to form answers except with his mind. *Thank you, Kelly.*

She shook her head and swept his hair from his face. "What else can I do that will help you?"

Nothing for n-now.

Kelly studied him. He could see himself through her eyes: mud and blood were caked over his throat, and dirt and more blood smudged his face and clothes. Underneath it all, he was pale, his skin sunken in, his eyes glowing.

Before he could guess her intention, she reached over and grabbed a razor from the hotel's shower amenities.

Stop! But she lifted the blade to her wrist and cut deeply into her flesh. Dark red blood flowed from the wound.

Groaning, she held the dripping fluid to his lips, and he was forced to drink as she watched him take nourishment from her. She touched his head with her free hand, the gesture tender and loving.

His heart swelled. Twice now, in his hour of need, she had given generously of herself. Her blood would be the best he could have because she gave it with everything she was. As her sweet taste flowed over his tongue, it warmed his body by gradual increments. Already he could feel himself trying to heal, but it would be several days before he fully recovered.

At last, he turned his head away, but not before he adoringly caressed and laved her laceration closed so that she would not scar. He gazed at her eyes, those swirling pools of sapphire, and his emotions rioted in his chest as she lay beside him.

Her eyes remained locked with his as she spoke softly. "I love you, Jacques."

He sucked in a breath, the action causing fresh waves of misery, but he remained focused on Kelly, his beloved Kelly, who had saved him and admitted she loved him.

Then he felt the first ray of the sun shine over the horizon and, injured as he still was, sleep claimed him before he could respond.

Chapter Eleven

It seemed to Kelly that she had just closed her eyes when there was a loud knock in the outer room. She hadn't the strength to stand, so she gripped the door knob slowly, unlocking and swinging it open enough to let her body through, and then crawled out of the bathroom. She was momentarily blinded by the light that flooded her bedroom.

Painstakingly, she crossed to the door. The knock came again, along with a man's urgent voice. "Kelly, it is Marian and Quintin."

Reaching up, Kelly released the latch, too exhausted to question how the couple came to be there. Quintin's tall frame immediately filled the entrance, followed by a flustered Marian. The groundsman was much taller than his wife, handsome and distinguished looking, with white hair, piercing blue eyes and who, despite his age, had a trim and fit figure.

Marian knelt beside Kelly as her husband took in the room with a glance, then raced across the space, closing the drapes and sealing off the sunlight. He went through the partially closed bathroom door, and Kelly watched him hunker down next to Jacques. Quintin mumbled something that sounded like an apology; then, taking the blankets and sheets Jacques rested on, he covered the vampire securely before raising Jacques into his arms and over his shoulder in a fireman's lift.

Pain knifed through Kelly, and she bit her lip hard to keep from screaming. Her whole body shook with the effort, and she clutched desperately to Marian's hand. She saw Quintin falter briefly.

The older woman ran her fingers through Kelly's hair as she spoke to her husband. "We must hurry! I don't know how much pain she can withstand."

Quintin carried Jacques the short distance down the hall to the fire exit as Kelly and his wife moved behind him. Once there, he pushed the door open and the alarm sounded. He

hurried through the exit and down the stairs, Marian leading Kelly. Jacques's agony echoed in her mind; Kelly didn't know how he could stand it and not go insane.

Quintin stopped behind a small black vehicle outside the building. Kelly and Marian watched as the trunk opened with a click of a key ring button, and Quintin stowed Jacques gently into the compartment. He shut the trunk and returned for Kelly, whom his wife, eyes moist, was trying to comfort.

"Let's get you in." Quintin swept up Kelly's trembling form and placed her in the backseat of the car, Marian settling in beside her. As Quintin raced the car through the city and into the countryside, the older woman held Kelly to her, rocking her back and forth and crooning to her as a mother would a small child. Tears fell unchecked from Kelly's eyes at the pain that tore through her and the feelings evoked by being held in this kind woman's arms. Memories of her mother, affectionate and loving, flooded her mind.

Marian hummed softly in her ear, and Kelly burrowed her face in the woman's neck, stifling a cry as Quintin hit a bump in the road, jolting Jacques's body in the trunk.

"We are almost there, child, and then you both can rest and recover." Kelly watched through wet, bleary eyes as the towers of Jacques's castle eventually loomed before them. And then she seemed to have lost track of time; between one deep breath and the next, they were turning onto the hill that led to their destination.

Pulling into the garage that must have been added some time in the 1900s, Quintin waited until the outer doors were completely closed before he removed Jacques from the closed-in space at the back of the car. Kelly and Marian followed him into the castle, where he walked down a long corridor away from the main hall. Stopping in front of a heavy oak door, he somehow got it open, then traveled down a set of stone steps that opened into a room below the earth; a few lamps scattered here and there on small tables cast their light off the walls, which were gray stone like the rest of the castle.

Was this Jacques's chamber?

Marian left Kelly supported at the bottom of the stairs as Quintin laid Jacques tenderly on a bed of deep blue with matching comforter and sheets. A canopy of the same blue color arched above him. The room was filled with all dark cherry wood furniture: two nightstands on either side of the bed with lamps on the shiny wood tops, and an armoire directly across. The armoire was near an open door that led to a rather large-looking bathroom. The room would be charming if it weren't for the misery that filled it at that moment.

Quintin came back for Kelly and she clung to him, pain seemingly absorbed into her bones. He settled Kelly beside Jacques, and Marian appeared moments later with a cup of tea laced with whiskey.

"Drink this, dear. It will help you as Jacques is too weak to send you to sleep."

Taking the warm mug in her hands, Kelly drank the contents slowly, then handed the cup back. "Thank you," she whispered.

“Rest now, child.” Just as Marian spoke, Quintin leaned over the floor at the foot of the bed and, with great strength, shifted the stone floor. The sound of stone grating against stone filled the room until an opening was obvious, revealing deep rich soil. Quintin once again moved to Jacques, cradled him like the vampire weighed nothing, and placed him in the ground.

Kelly watched in tired amazement as the soil closed over Jacques and the floor slid shut.

Marian repeated, “Rest, child. Go to sleep.”

Kelly lay down on the bed obediently as husband and wife made their way to the staircase. The chamber doors closed above, encasing her within. A single lamp remained lit so that she was not in complete darkness, and finally she closed her eyes and relaxed.

Marian hovered above her, holding a cup of broth to her lips. “Drink, child; you must drink.”

Sobs filled her chest as Kelly tried to push the cup away, but Quintin was there and held her flailing arms, pulling her securely against his chest, so that she had no option but to face Marian. Kelly slumped against the older man, head hanging wearily. Confusion and constant pain seemed to have thrust her into hell, and she couldn’t think straight as Marian continued to speak softly to her.

“Why are you doing this?” Her wail rang through the room. She was in such torment, so very tired. She just wanted to be left alone.

“Please drink, Kelly,” Marian insisted.

She felt a stirring in her mind and momentarily wondered if she was finally going crazy. Jacques’s presence suddenly consumed her and she felt a rush of warmth, and some of the pain began to subside.

Mon ange. If not for Marian and Quintin, then drink for me. I cannot bear your suffering. Please.

Kelly subsided, then nodded at the older couple. *Yes, Jacques, for you, I will.*

Marian smiled, lifting the mug to Kelly’s mouth. The warm broth rushed down her throat, filling her belly with warmth. Once the cup was empty, Quintin laid Kelly back on the bed, and Marian brought the covers up beneath Kelly’s chin. Then the older woman leaned over and lovingly kissed her forehead. Kelly sighed like an exhausted but happy kitten, closed her eyes, and once again drifted off to sleep.

That pattern continued over several days. Quintin and Marian came to the chambers a few times daily, making Kelly drink the broth. The older woman helped her make trips to the bathroom, then left her once again to her rest. Each day, the pain became less and less, but Kelly was still so very worn out and weak.

* * * * *

The room glowed softly from the dim lamps filling the room. Jacques stared down at his bed and the woman who was in it. Her golden hair was a wild mess, and her hands were tucked beneath one pale cheek. Even in this state of disarray, she was beautiful; his heart ached at how much she had endured for love of him.

Earlier, he had left his home and fed ravenously before he came to her, not wanting to risk harming her when his beast had been so close to the surface. Brushing his fingers through her hair, he savored the sensation of the silken strands gliding across his hand like cool satin.

Her eyes fluttered open and glowing sapphire eyes looked groggily at Jacques. It was clear that she was disoriented as she rose up on the bed, weak as a babe. Then her eyes widened with concern. Her hands flashed out and grabbed one of his.

“Jacques! Are you okay?”

He smiled, his free hand lovingly cupping a velvet-soft cheek. “I am fine, *mon ange*. How are *you* feeling?”

“Just tired... and hungry.” She grinned and fell back against the pillows on the bed, stretching as she did so, obviously unaware that as she arched her back, her full breasts pushed forward for his hungry gaze.

How could she not have any idea how beautiful and extremely sexy she was? His breathing seemed to constrict, and his whole body went tense at the sudden wave of desire that washed through him.

When she looked at him, she blushed at the longing he knew was etched upon his face for her to see. He hoped her body cried out for the touch of his and was pleased when her hands grasped his, pulling his body down over hers, squeezing his buttocks. He was doubly rewarded when her mouth claimed his in a wild frenzy. She met every urgent demand of the sweep of his tongue and every caress of his lips.

Kelly felt on fire and very much alive, the weight of his body above hers, his hard length melding perfectly with her soft one. She felt her shirt open. As the scorching heat of his hand touched her, she knew she was teetering precariously on the edges of ecstasy. He gently fondled one breast, and then the other. She was going up in flames and thrust herself into his eagerly searching fingers. Her nipples hardened into tiny buds under his ministrations, and his lips left hers. Kelly’s sound of disappointment was quickly stifled, becoming soft moans of pleasure as he took first one soft pink bead into his mouth, then lavished the same care on the other.

His tongue swirled and licked voraciously. Kelly whimpered, her fingers twisting into the dark locks of his hair as he tortured her with both mouth and tongue, stroking and suckling her aching breasts.

This was the love and rapture she had dreamed of, yet had been always afraid to find. He was here in her arms, loving her the way a man was supposed to love his woman. *His*. Yes, she was his, and she was going to remain so for all time.

As the thought glided through her mind, she blurted out the words that she had meant to say at another time. "Jacques, I love you. Please make me yours in every way. Make me like you." Passion rippled through her body on the waves of his burning desire, at the way his fingers slid across her thighs, but suddenly his hands halted their movements.

"What did you say?"

Kelly came up on her elbows, touching her lips in feather light kisses around his mouth. "I said I love you. I want to be yours always. Make me a vampire."

Jacques pulled quickly away, and she immediately felt the coldness of his retreat. Sitting up, she stared at him as he paced back and forth before the bed. What was wrong? She had thought he'd be happy that she wanted to share her life with him.

"Jacques, I want to do it. Please."

He turned on her abruptly, and she was shocked by the chilly look in his onyx eyes. He stood with his feet apart, arms crossed over his chest, appearing very intimidating as he towered over her.

"No."

Chapter Twelve

Kelly watched as Jacques storm out of the room. She held the covers to her breast, confused and hurt by his rejection. Was he trying to push her away again? She thought he loved her, too. Had she been wrong?

Rising from the bed, Kelly stumbled. She gathered her strength before quickly finding her neatly folded clothes that Marian must have washed and ironed for her. She tossed aside the shirt she was wearing and slipped into the blouse and jeans, then slowly walked up the steps to the main floor in search of Jacques. Whether he wanted to or not, he was going to explain why he'd refused her. Luckily, there was a small recessed panel by the door, probably for Quintin and Marian, or she would never have figured out how to leave the chamber.

Following the sounds of music, she found Jacques in a ballroom on the opposite side of the castle, although it was still on the first level. The gray marble floor shone softly from the gentle glow of the chandeliers above. The crystal dipped and swayed from the night breeze invited in by the open windows lining one wall. Portraits and French landscapes lined opposite walls, and a large stage for an orchestra sat at the far side of the ballroom, full of various instrument cases. That was also where a black grand piano rested and where Jacques was seated.

She moved toward him, unable to take her eyes from the rich brown hair falling over his shoulders, the sway of his body, or the mesmerizing picture of him so engrossed in his music. His fingers nimbly moved over the keys, and the tune he played seemed to weave its way around her heart. The melody was aching, as if his soul spoke through his hands and the piano. Shivers danced up her spine.

Kelly reached the instrument, disappointed when he abruptly stopped playing. Then she stepped back in surprise when he slammed the cover down over the keys, causing a

reverberating crash. He gazed up at her, his dark eyes speaking volumes of his anger and uncertainty.

"Why do you want to be vampire?" His words were abrupt, and she winced.

"I love you, and I want us to be together." When he didn't answer, she moved around the piano to him, laid her fingers on his arm. "Is that so wrong?"

He spun away from her touch, rising swiftly to his feet. "Sit," he replied curtly, motioning toward the cushioned seat. She did as he bade, assessing him curiously, until he spoke again.

"Kelly..." He cursed, ran his fingers through his hair.

"Jacques, it's okay. Just talk to me."

He came down on his knees in front of her, his arms circling her waist and pulling her to him. "I love you with every fiber of my being, but I cannot simply make you as I am. This isn't something to take lightly or to decide in an instant. Have you thought about how this might affect your dancing?" His voice was soft.

Kelly pushed away, bewildered. "Who says this was a quick or light decision? How can you say these things if you love me? I thought you'd be happy. And yes, I have thought about what this may mean for my career, but we'll work it out. I have some significant pull now that I am the prima ballerina, and, well, maybe you could do a mind trick or two if needed."

His response confused her by its abrupt change in topic.

"I was born in the early fourteenth century in my parents' room in this very castle. This has been my home for more than seven hundred years. Do you know what that means?" He looked desolate, a great sadness in his eyes that she had never seen before. Kelly shook her head, and tears filled her eyes; she instinctively lifted her hand to his cheek.

Once more, he wrenched away from her. "I buried my entire family. Everyone, Kelly. This life has not been all darkness, but the truth is that I should be as dead as they are. I'm not. Instead, I thrive and live on the life of others. You refuse to see it, but the hunger is always there."

Kelly shot to her feet. "What you are is a wonderful man, one whom I love. Nothing you say will make me believe anything else."

He smiled sardonically, moving away from her. "In the summer of the year 1348, Paris was overcome with the Black Plague, already weakened by the Great Famine that had preceded it only twenty-six years before. The smell of death filled the streets -- and the bodies filled it even quicker." He looked into her horrified eyes and, for the first time, she could see the memories of his soul...

1348, Paris, France

Jacques walked down the filthy cobblestone streets and made his way slowly toward where his family was staying with his mother's sister and husband. They had come to take his aunt and uncle back with them to the country, but they had arrived too late; the city had been quarantined, and no one could leave or enter because of the plague.

A cart carrying bodies passed him, and Jacques felt his stomach churn at the sight of the helpless victims of this... this what? Some said it was a punishment from God. Others thought the cause was evil people. The healers couldn't decide if it was a disease or the act of a higher power. The only things that were determined to be true for everyone was that it did not care if you were noble or common peasant; it seemed to strike without warning, and it killed you relatively quickly.

Jacques knew he was affected and so was his family. He had felt the ominous swellings at his neck, armpits, and groin, and the fever had begun in him. He'd already grown weaker and was aware that his days were numbered. His intended and her entire family had died a few short weeks ago. He'd not loved her as a man should his bride, but his heart ached just the same for her fate. But that knowledge didn't tear at his heart as much as the fact that all four of his sisters, so young and beautiful, were going to die horribly. They had been vomiting blood and suffering high fevers for three days now. Meanwhile, he had been urgently searching for a way out of the city to take his family home so they could die on their land, in their home.

Jacques looked into the night sky and thought how cruel the world was; he wondered if God really was punishing them all.

He heard the call to bring out the dead as he stepped over the bloated bodies of those that had died, but whom the cart had not picked up yet. Carcasses lined the streets; some people had died where they fell; others were tossed out like so much refuse. The stench of disease and rotting flesh was stultifying.

Reaching his destination, Jacques hurried up the stone steps and pushed open the door. Instantly, the smell of death slammed into him. He raced inside and found his Aunt Lenora lying at the foot of the stairs. The black discolored swellings at her neck had burst, staining the front of her ivory gown and spreading under her arms. A thread of dried blood lined her legs.

His heart hammered wildly in his chest as he rushed upstairs and through each room. His Uncle Pierre stared with unseeing eyes by a cold hearth in his parlor. His mother was sprawled on the floor in a bedroom, his father across the bed. Even as a wail burst from him, he pelted down the hall and found three of his sisters dead in their beds.

Where was Gisella? Becoming even more frantic, Jacques called out for her, hoping, praying, that she would answer. Then he entered the playroom, crying out in denial.

The small chandelier above her did not sparkle or move. The Reaper had robbed the shimmering light from everything beautiful here, including his youngest sister. He sobbed deep in his throat as he walked over to the settee and knelt down by Gisella. Only seven

years old, she had once been full of life and joy; now she lay cold, her twinkling blue eyes hollow, her favorite doll still clutched to her small chest. Crushing her tiny body to him, his body racked with harsh cries, Jacques willed himself to die.

He didn't know how long he sat there, tenderly cradling his sister to him, rocking back and forth. After a time, he wearily wiped the tears from his eyes and rose to his feet, Gisella still in his arms. He walked slowly toward the entrance of his aunt and uncle's home and watched as a man began collecting bodies from the street. At the moment, there were only a few corpses in his wagon.

Jacques set his face like granite. Approaching the cart, he placed his sister in a clear area; then, with great tugs, he pulled out one body after another from the cart, letting them hit the ground hard, lifeless.

The owner of the wagon yelled, waved his hands in the air, and ran toward Jacques, who ignored him. He lovingly laid his sister on the rough wood, taking his time spreading her ruined, soft blue dress around her as if she were a princess who was just resting. Then he faced the man who was shouting curses at him.

Jacques pulled the short sword from its sheath at his waist and wedged the blade along the man's throat. The man stopped all movement at once and stared wide-eyed up at him.

"What are you doing, *monsieur*?"

Barely keeping his rage and voice under control, Jacques stared determinedly into the man's eyes. "I will bury my family. They will not be taken away on the bodies of others."

"What difference does it make? We are all dead, anyway."

Jacques's hand shook as he applied slight pressure and watched when blood began to trickle down the other man's neck. "I am coming back with the rest of my family. If this wagon is gone when I return, I will hunt you down, and you will wish death had taken you first." He lowered his weapon slowly.

The man inched backward, then turned and fled.

Replacing the sword in its sheath, Jacques re-entered the house and, one by one, brought out his family and carefully laid each one in the wagon bed. When his father, the very last of his blood, was positioned to Jacques's satisfaction, Jacques climbed onto the seat and urged the horse through Paris until they went through the iron gates of a park his family frequented on walks and where his sisters and he used to play as children whenever they'd visited his aunt. If he could not bury his family on their land, then they would be buried in a place that had brought them joy. This was the only place he would consider a proper resting place for them. He dropped to the ground, secured the wagon, and hobbled the horse. Then he pulled the shovel from the cart, found a section of fresh green grass, and began to dig.

He went at it for several hours, his body trembling under the strength and energy required for his self-imposed task, but his determination drove him on. By the time he was done, his dark locks had loosened, hanging limp over his face, and he was covered in grime

and sweat -- he was also profusely vomiting black fluid and clots. Climbing from the deep hole he'd made, he waited for his stomach to cease heaving before he laid his loved ones in their grave.

His uncle and aunt went first, then his father and mother. He placed kisses on their brows, and let his fingers graze over their cheeks. Turning away, he then brought his sisters and lay them over his parents. He folded each sister's hands delicately over her belly and kissed each one tenderly.

Tears once again blurred his vision as he gazed down at his beloved family. They had not deserved this terrible death, none of them. Claspings his hands in front of him, he spoke a silent prayer before grabbing the shovel with sore hands.

The first clump of the dirt hitting his family caused his heart to constrict with agony. As he continued to pile the soil over the faces and bodies of those he loved, he was overcome with grief. He shook with it, sobbing openly.

When the last shovelful of earth dropped over the freshly covered mound, he roared in despair, tossed the shovel away, and fell to his back on top of grave, staring up at the sky. Death was coming for him; he wanted to embrace it, to leave the pain that had taken root in his soul and was clawing at what remained of him. Closing his eyes, he became limp, silently listening to the sound of his heart pounding in his head, waiting for it to slow, to stop, so that he could join his family.

Some time later, a soft, sultry laugh filled the air around him. When he lifted his eyelids, it was to find a woman with golden-blond hair and pale, perfect features standing above him. She was beautiful, but when he looked into the black chill of her eyes, he slowly sat up and began to scoot away from her. "What are you doing here?"

She seemed to find his question amusing. "Why, *monsieur*, the night is mine, of course."

He looked at her wearily. "You should not be here. The plague is festering within me, growing. Leave this place while you still have your health."

The woman ignored him, inexplicably coming down to the ground beside him. "No, my lord, I am right where I am supposed to be." Her black eyes seemed to catch him, hold him spellbound. "I saw what you did for your family; I admire men such as yourself, willing to take what must be done into your hands."

Jacques shook his head, averting his gaze. "This situation is not like that."

Her lily-white hand grabbed his chin, forcing him to look into her eyes, even as she gently brushed away the dark strands of hair from his face. "It is exactly like that. I want you to have more than a ghastly death." Her words were suggestive, and her actions even more so, as she traced his lips with one long, scarlet nail and ran the tip down to the base of his neck. Her tongue licked over her bright red lips, and she smiled as she stared at his pulse.

“What is it you want?” Jacques pushed her hands away. “Leave me in peace, woman.” He gasped in amazement as her smile of delight unexpectedly revealed fangs, which she didn’t attempt to shield. Her eyes seemed to burn brightly into his, and he cried out when she pushed him onto his back with little effort, covering him with her body.

“I want you.” She laughed as she lifted fingers that curled into talons. She brought them down and punctured his neck in one quick swipe. Jacques could feel his blood pour from the wounds, the warmth of it spreading past his throat and drenching his collar and back. He coughed and tried to roll away from her, but she held him fast and wiped his brow in a gesture that was anything but soothing. His body began to grow cold, his thoughts hazy, and his limbs lethargic. He waited for blessed death to take him away.

Finally she shifted and stared hard at him. Jacques sensed a prickling in his mind. He thought without interest that she would deliver the final blow now. “I offer you life, Jacques, life as you have never known it.”

He turned his head away from her.

“You think you do your family justice by dying? They would want you to live, to remember them, to carry on their memory.” The creature roughly yanked his face around to her, then scooped up a handful of dirt. “If you don’t exist any longer, everything dies with you... everything. Who will be here to remember them, eh?” She let the soil sift through her fingers. “They will be but dust in the wind, blowing away until finally they are gone and forgotten for all eternity.”

Jacques froze; her words ringing within his head. His loved ones with no one to honor and treasure the memories of them. His father’s name dying with Jacques. These thoughts were more than he could bear.

She smiled and nodded as she watched understanding penetrate him. Stroking his head, she kissed his lips, laughing at the disgust he couldn’t hide. The woman cut her wrist and held it to his mouth. “I am your maker, Gabriella Delancré, and I gift you with the wonder of my life.”

Jacques’s mouth covered the wound and he drank, barely registering what he was doing. He only knew that he had to carry on his family name, he had to remember those he loved...

Kelly covered her mouth as tears streamed down her face. “Oh, Jacques, I am so sorry for your suffering.”

“I have lost much in my life, and I have done much that I am not proud of, but today I know who and what I am.” His eyes were intense as they stared into hers. “I love you, but can you stand for your eyes to be a soulless black? Will you allow your lips to be stained with the blood of others?”

Kelly gripped his arm. "Jacques, my family is gone. I have no one but Cassie, her family, Dimitri, and now you. You are all I need; the rest is not important."

He shook his head

"I will grow old and die. Will you bury me, too?"

He sucked in a breath that sounded like a hiss, and his eyes shone like sparkling onyx. "I can't bear the thought of that, either. I can never give you children; I can never walk in the sunlight with you. Would you willingly give up babies and daylight to be with me? What if you change your mind? There is no going back afterward."

She would have laughed had he not looked so tormented. "I would give up anything for you, Jacques, including my life. You are my world, my night and my day. I won't change my mind. I know this is what I want, what will make me happy. I love you."

He shuddered. "I'm sorry, but I still cannot do it."

His whispered apology was like thunder to her ears; she knew he would not be swayed from his decision. She stepped away from him, her mind reeling. What was she to do? Stay with him until her dying day? When she grew old, would he still want her?

Kelly knew Jacques had been reading her thoughts when he grasped her hands. "I will always want you, always, but I cannot live with your hate should you decide being vampire isn't what you really want."

"It's my choice."

"It is mine as well, and I say no." He sighed. "You must leave. It was insane for me to think this could work, to believe in such a fantasy. I want you to find someone to love and grow old with. Have children with."

Kelly flinched. "No."

He cupped her face. "Yes." He looked toward the window, then back. "There is not much time as it is almost dawn. Return to the States today, and don't look back."

His lips found hers, and she melted against him, mind and emotions overwhelmed. His tongue stroked her lower lip, then caressed her mouth and tongue. She met every demand, every delicate touch as he possessed her, then just as abruptly, he pulled away.

"I'll take care of Mussek. Know that you'll have nothing to fear from him again." He studied her for a moment longer. "Good-bye, Kelly. Thank you for everything." Then he swiftly walked away from her, leaving her alone in the ballroom as the first ray of the sun struck her.

Warmth surrounded her, but it could not touch the ice she felt inside. By turns heartbroken and enraged, she pounded from the room, racing toward the entrance of the castle. Quintin watched her with sad eyes as he held the door open for her, clearly waiting to take her back to the hotel.

Fresh tears filled her eyes and a sob threatened to burst from her chest as she climbed into the passenger-side seat. She turned away from Quintin as he drove and watched the

countryside passing by through swollen eyes. Jacques had pushed her away. *Again*. He had rushed out of her life, but at least this time he had said good-bye.

Chapter Thirteen

What a fool I've been, Kelly thought, as she rushed around her hotel room and collected her belongings. She fought against the tears that constantly burned at the back of her eyes, refusing to cry any more. She had shed too many tears for him already; he would *not* have another.

Throwing the last article of clothing in her suitcase, she did a wide sweep of the room to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything. Then her gaze came to rest on the small painting beside the bed.

Picking up the picture from the nightstand, Kelly sat down on the bed and studied it. Jacques held her protectively as she stared into his face. The painter had somehow caught the love shining in their eyes.

She gripped the frame tightly. Who was she trying to kid? She would never forget Jacques, never move on. There was no one else she wanted, no one who could make her dissolve into a puddle like he did, make her burn from a simple touch.

Her fingers lovingly traced the smile on his face and along the wavy hair that framed his striking features. Frowning, Kelly slammed down the frame on the bed beside her, letting out her hurt and frustration by finally allowing the tears flow. Hurriedly she wiped at them, pissed that she was reduced to this, but knowing it would be the only way to protect her from her complete wretchedness. What did she care, anyway? He wasn't perfect.

She looked at the picture again and tried to focus on his flaws. *His nose is too big; it's too long, and it just sticks out*. Her fingers moved over the line of his nose, and she smiled. His nose was perfect.

"Argh!" Aggravated beyond adequate expression, she tossed the picture on the bed, stood, and zipped the suitcase shut. Glancing at their image once more, she stopped her movements. What was she doing?

She wasn't going to run away. If he didn't want her, fine, but she was going to enjoy the remainder of her vacation with him or without him. He didn't own this city, and she still had some time before the next round of rehearsals started in San Francisco.

Who did he think he was to order her out of the country? Unzipping her suitcase, Kelly dumped everything back on the bed. She was determined to enjoy herself even if it killed her. She would prove she didn't need Jacques Devereaux. But just in case...

Reaching for the phone, she dialed Cassie's number, hoping her friend would have encouraging words.

* * * * *

It had been two days, but she was still here. Quintin shadowed her constantly during the day, and Jacques kept watch over her every night to ensure Mussek tried nothing. They watched her without telling her, and the entire situation was nearly driving Jacques crazy.

He sat in his study, brooding as he stared into the flames dancing bright orange and blue in the fireplace. At least Kelly was alone in her hotel room for the night, thank God. A day earlier, she'd worn practically next to nothing when she'd gone out for a night on the town; he had wanted to tear apart every male who even glanced her way.

He didn't know how, but she'd spied him when she'd left one of the clubs she'd ventured into. He'd been in hawk form again, protected by darkness when, to his frustration and shock, she'd flipped him off! And not with just one finger, but with both hands up and middle fingers blazing. Americans!

Since it appeared that she wasn't going home any time soon, Jacques had communicated the situation to Dimitri, including his concerns about Mussek. Although his friend had been ready to make arrangements to travel to Paris, Jacques had forbidden it.

You have a wife now; stay with her. I will call on another if it becomes necessary.

I will respect your wishes, but we should keep this information regarding Mussek and Kelly from Cassandra. She would worry herself to death and drag me to Paris whether you wish it or not.

Jacques smiled at the mental image of Dimitri's small wife dragging him across a continent and an ocean to be at her friend's side. But his humor quickly dissipated. He'd looked for Mussek, but the older vampire had disappeared without a trace, which made Jacques more nervous. He knew the danger Mussek presented wasn't over by a long shot, but Jacques wasn't sure where the man had gone to or when he would be back.

Someone banged at the main entrance. Walking quickly toward the door, he motioned to Marian, who had appeared. "I will get it. You and Quintin retire for the evening."

She scowled at him; then, with a loud "hmpf," she turned and hurried away. Jacques watched her go, knowing it would be quite a while before she forgave him for his treatment of Kelly.

Opening the door, Jacques was not surprised to see Damian, but he was shocked to see who had accompanied him. "Christian! I didn't realize you had risen."

The man did not smile but extended his hand. "Jacques."

Jacques shook the younger vampire's hand. Dimitri had taken Christian Mason under his wing seventy-five years after Christian had been made vampire during the American Revolutionary War. Unlike Jacques and Dimitri, who had steered clear of emotional entanglements, Christian had fallen in love, only to have his lover brutally killed.

Jacques turned his attention to his dark friend, Damian Salvatorio, who stood tall and menacing in the shadows. The vampire suffered from more than his share of demons, and it made him harsh, even cruel, at times, but Jacques trusted Damian implicitly. "It is good to see you as well, Damian. It has been a long time." Stepping back, Jacques motioned for the two men to enter. "Please come in."

Closing the door behind him, he led them to his study, where he offered each a glass of wine. Both declined. Seating himself behind the desk, Jacques studied Christian. "What brings you here?"

Pain flickered for a brief second in the man's black eyes. "Dimitri woke me. Since you forbade him to come, he requested I be here in his place."

"This is not a suicide mission, Christian. And if I cannot trust you, I don't want your help." Jacques knew that although the man's beloved, Carrie, had been ripped from his life almost sixty years ago, it was still painful for Christian.

Raking a hand through his blond hair, Christian glared at Jacques. "Don't worry about me."

Nodding, Jacques looked at Damian. "If this will put your loyalty into question, I don't want your interference, either."

Damian never moved from his relaxed position. "My loyalty is not to Mussek; it never has been."

"Where is your loyalty?"

The vampire did sit up then, his black hair falling around his face and his eyes narrowing as he gazed Jacques. "It is where it has always been."

Jacques snorted in disgust at the oblique reference to Damian's maker, D'Angel. "That isn't a family, Damian. D'Angel and her men are cold-blooded killers."

Damian mouth twisted. "I protect D'Angel, and that is all."

"I know, but for how long will you protect her? When will it be enough?"

"What is troubling you, Jacques? I am used to your lectures by now, but this is more."

Jacques smiled sadly. "Who has been man's greatest trouble since time immemorial?"

Christian and Damian replied in unison. "Women."

"Yes, this involves a woman. Her name is Kelly, and Mussek is obsessed with her. He has changed greatly since Dominique's death, and I'm afraid of what he'll do if he is not stopped."

Damian seemed to ponder that. "Mussek would not force his will on her, would he? The loss of Dominique took a toll on him, but I thought he'd eventually recover."

"I am afraid Kelly's proven adamant in refusing him, and he's grown increasingly aggressive in his tactics."

Christian leaned forward in his seat. "Who is Mussek?"

"Our former teacher," Damian said. "He took in both Jacques and me after we were newly turned."

Christian frowned. "This must be difficult for you, Jacques. I am very fond of Dimitri and grateful for all he has done for me."

Jacques grimaced. "I could not believe it at first, but he challenged me for her. Now that Kelly's life depends on me, I cannot afford to feel hurt or betrayed any longer, especially after he nearly killed me." He quickly told them about the older vampire's attacks on Kelly at Mussek and Jacques's homes and the notes and flowers he'd sent, as well as the brief midair challenge between the hawks and the battle at the Eiffel Tower.

"You have my help."

"Thank you, Christian." Jacques looked at Damian.

"And you have mine."

"Thank you, brother." Rising from his chair, Jacques walked around the desk and clapped the men on their backs. "Come, I will show you to your rooms."

* * * * *

Jacques watched Damian swirl the red contents in his glass before the other man finally broke the silence.

"I grow bored of your bleak attitude over a woman, Jacques. Tell me about her so that I might understand your thoughts."

"What do you wish me to know?"

"Why did you send her away?"

"The reason should be obvious." Jacques answered irritably, scowling darkly at Damian, who stretched his long frame in his leather chair and casually crossed his legs.

"Enlighten me."

Jacques suppressed an urge to strike his old friend and chose to ignore Damian's sardonic demeanor instead. "I met her in San Francisco while helping Dimitri face Gabriella. She is Cassie's dear friend and an exquisite prima ballerina."

"Why did you let her go if you feel so much for her?"

Jacques sighed, leaning forward in his chair. "Because she wanted me to turn her, and I refused. I'd be robbing her."

Damian looked at him with his cold, black eyes. "What about Dimitri's wife? From what you have said they both seem to be doing fine."

"The situation was different: the choice was taken from her and Dimitri. Gabriella turned Cassie against her will; Dimitri would not have allowed the change otherwise. And Dimitri had a difficult time with Cassie even before Gabriella forced her to become one of us."

"But they have coped well, and she has accepted the dark gift. Are you worried about Kelly's family?"

"No. Her parents were killed when she was a teenager."

Damian shifted in the chair, his hands cupping the bottom of his glass. "Allow me to repeat this back to you as I understand it... she has no family except for Dimitri's wife, who is herself starting a new life as vampire with her new husband."

"Yes."

"And she wants to be with you, who also has no one. But you have sent her away."

Exasperated, Jacques snapped. "It is not that simple, and you know it."

"It sounds perfectly logical to me."

Jacques examined the other man. As usual, there was no emotion in his eyes or feeling on his face. Damian, always bitter and distant.

Damian read Jacques's look correctly. "I may be cold and I may lack heart, but I do see things very clearly." He set his glass on the coffee table between them. "Dawn is almost upon us." Without a farewell, Damian left his chair and strode from the room, leaving Jacques to the turmoil of his thoughts.

Should he make Kelly a vampire? Could he put her through the pain of dying, only to be reborn again into the night? Could she really live this way of life with him and still be happy?

He sighed; then, following Damian's example, Jacques made his way to his chambers.

He did love her, loved her more than he had anything or anyone in his life, and she wanted him. Despite knowing his secrets, she truly loved him and had proven it, more than once.

Damian was right; he was being a fool. Jacques only hoped he hadn't realized it too late.

Chapter Fourteen

Kelly tied the shimmering, deep blue top at her neck and lower back. The sparkling material clung to her breasts, barely covering her stomach and none of her back. Her skirt was equally lovely, glittering in the soft light as she moved, hugging her hips like a second skin, with two small slits on each side that came to well above her knees.

Her silky golden hair fell long and loose down her spine. She smiled at herself in the mirror after applying the last touch of soft pink lipstick to her lips, but studiously ignored the fact her smiles never reached her eyes anymore.

There was a soft knock on the door. Pushing aside the way her body suddenly tensed, she prepared to greet Garin, a nice man she had met the day before while out shopping. Garin had offered to take her out dancing this evening. No matter what, she was going to start a new life and leave Jacques behind. And enjoy herself thoroughly while she was at it.

Plastering a smile on her face, Kelly swung the door open. Her welcome faltered as she stared up into familiar, dark, swirling pools, the look in those eyes matching how she felt inside.

Jacques. Here for some reason and still incredibly handsome, dressed as he was in impeccable black. His brown hair fell in its usual gentle waves, his long, bold nose -- she couldn't help but smile; yes, she loved his nose -- flared ever so slightly, and his sensuous lips curved up as he stared at her. She suddenly realized he was returning her ridiculous grin.

Jacques had to force himself to breathe when he saw the wonderful vision Kelly made as she stood before him. Her overall image screamed beautiful and sexy. The outfit she wore left absolutely nothing to the imagination, and he had to fight the urge to rip the skimpy clothing from her body and claim her here and now.

He was amazed when he saw the slow smile spread across her face as she inspected him. Maybe he did have a chance of putting the pieces between them back together. But then he watched in disappointment as her smile vanished and her eyes narrowed.

"What are you doing here, Jacques?"

He grimaced at the way she said the words. "I wanted to talk to you."

Crossing her arms, she planted herself firmly at the door as if to block him from entering. "We have nothing to talk about."

"Kelly, please allow me to explain." He reached for her, but she put a staying hand up, and he dropped his arms.

"No. You already explained everything to me in great detail that night."

"*Mon ange*, please--"

She cut him off, shaking her head, her blond tresses spilling around her face and shoulders. "Don't call me that! Please, just go away."

At that moment the elevator's doors opened and a man with dark hair and green eyes stepped into the hall. Jacques watched him approach, scowling as the stranger halted next to him at Kelly's door.

Realizing the man was the reason Kelly was dressed to the nines, he glared down at the mortal, who was a couple inches shorter than him. Kelly smiled at the other man, motioning for Jacques to step aside.

Jacques wanted to grab her and make her listen to his pleas, but he moved. The man shot a glance at him. Jacques couldn't help himself; he gave the stranger a gleaming, predatory smile. The man visibly shivered and looked away. Kelly shot him an angry glance, but Jacques did nothing to hide his satisfaction from her.

"Hello, Garin." Her words were sugary sweet. Jacques's grin turned into a glower.

Garin couldn't seem to take his eyes from Kelly, and Jacques found he wanted to help the man with that problem... by removing them from his head.

"*Vous êtes ravissante*, Kelly."

"*Milles mercis*, Garin. *Allons-y*."

Garin again looked uneasily at Jacques, but Kelly merely waved her hand in dismissal. "Oh," she continued in French. "Don't worry about him, he was just leaving." She looked pointedly at Jacques.

Galled though he was, Jacques gave her his most winning smile. "Thank you for your time." He then stalked down the hall away from them, inwardly seething with jealousy. As the doors to the elevator closed, he gave a Kelly a last devilish grin and lingering stare. He saw her blushing cheeks and anxious expression. This wasn't over yet.

* * * * *

The music blared, and there was a crush of bodies all around them as she and Garin danced. Sweat trickled between her breasts, and Kelly knew the rest of her body was probably gleaming just like everyone else's under the flashing lights.

She tried again to step away from Garin's touch; unfortunately, the press of people made that difficult, and her actions had not gone unnoticed by him. She thought he might be a little upset.

How did one explain? *You see, I'm in love with this seven-hundred-something-year-old vampire and there are... complications.* She laughed to herself as she tried to imagine the look on Garin's face were she to tell him such a thing.

Sighing as another song started, she signaled him and made her way from the dance floor toward the bar. A bottle of water sounded very good about now. Her date followed, requested her drink, and paid for it. She smiled her thanks at him, and he returned her grin, standing close to her, his arm snaking around her waist. She had to fight the urge to pull away.

There was no point in trying to make conversation as there were simply too many people and the music filled the club. Slowly sipping her drink, she watched as others danced. No matter how much she wanted to deny it, she missed Jacques and wanted him to convince her to go back to him. Earlier, she had ached badly to throw herself into his arms and hear what he had to say -- as long as it was his promise to love her always and to never send her away again. But she had forgiven him once already, and look where that had gotten her.

Kelly looked at Garin; he grinned widely, and his fingers glided along her bare back. Suppressing a frown, she looked back at the dancers. *Yes, look at where it's gotten me.*

Swallowing some more of her water, Kelly watched a group of people walk down the stairs against the far wall that led them from the entrance to the dance floor. A few seconds passed, and the door opened again. Her heart stopped.

Jacques's eyes appeared to scan the room quickly; then their dark, smoldering depths settled on her. He grinned sensually, and shivers raced up her spine. She continued to stare as he then seemed to focus on the DJ, who suddenly stopped the current fast-paced song. The club-goers looked around in confusion; then the lights dimmed even more and an American song came on. The strum of a guitar ripped through the room, the aching sound filling her with its plea.

He made his way down the steps. The long, black coat he wore conformed to his body perfectly. Her eyes widened as she recognized the cut was from his era but designed simply, without frills; just plain black with more than a dozen dark silk buttons lining the edge of material. The cloth brushed just above his knees and a high collar caressed his neck. He appeared to be shirtless beneath the coat, and only four buttons at his stomach held the material closed, slightly exposing his perfect chest and the gold chain around his neck with each step he took.

The rest of his attire consisted of black leather pants that hugged his long legs, showcasing the taut muscles beneath, and polished black boots. He walked with confidence, and there was such an obvious air of power about him that people moved out of his path. Kelly couldn't help but think how he looked just like a bad boy or rock star; she was convinced he must be the most gorgeous man there.

It seemed to take him forever to reach the dance floor, but it was only moments... and not once did his eyes leave hers. Kelly had to remind herself to breathe as she leaned forward on the stool she was seated on. Words filled the air, and she realized he had picked this song especially for her. *Angel* by Aerosmith. One of her favorite songs by one of her favorite bands. His small grin stole her breath.

I know, mon ange. Mine, too. Come dance with me while the words speak so much of what I feel in my heart.

Her body seemed to move without her control. There was no way she could fight him, when it was in his arms that she desperately wanted to be.

Garin protested, but one look at Jacques's possessive glare silenced him. He disappeared quickly into the crowd, obviously not wanting Kelly badly enough to take on Jacques. Kelly scolded Jacques with her eyes, but he twirled her out onto the dance floor.

Kelly was transfixed by him, the music, and the song lyrics. The guitar solo wound its aching cry through her heart; she wanted to believe Jacques's feelings were being conveyed through the music. The tune was beautiful, begging her forgiveness, to not leave him, to be his.

He stopped them in the middle of the floor and gazed into her eyes. She thought she could see all of his love and passion for her shimmering there. He gently touched her jaw, and she relaxed against his body, moaning low as his hand glided a burning trail down to her neck, then the valley between her breasts. It was pure ecstasy, and she closed her eyes in pleasure, arching toward him, his arm secure around her waist. The weight and heat of a palm settled on her bottom, and he brought her body flush against his.

Their lips were mere inches apart, their breaths mingling in anticipation. His dark eyes appeared to devour her, and his whispered words in her mind sent fire scorching through her. The burning need raged within her as his hard form pressed so intimately along her softer one. She felt his hand slide up her thigh, cup her behind her knee, and lift her leg slightly. She instinctively brought her arms around his neck and her leg over one of his.

Kelly heard him groan. She gave him a sultry smile and was rewarded by a hand tangling in her hair, his lips claiming hers. The rock ballad played on in her as his mouth stole her senses and made her go weak. She clung to him, savoring the taste of him, the scent that was his alone. His lips sipped and caressed hers as his teeth nipped her, then his tongue toyed with hers. The scorching fire of his erotic play was driving her over the edge.

Kelly eagerly craved more of his touch as his hand moved over the bare flesh of her thigh, grinding his arousal against her. His mouth worshiped the base of her throat and her collarbone, before he captured her earlobe between his teeth.

She felt his fangs, and then the stroke of his tongue. Shudders of pleasure raced up her spine, and she sucked in an excited breath as his warm whisper brushed against her ear.

“Come with me.” His hands moved over her shoulders, touched the naked skin of her back. The sensations swept her further into a world of swirling delight. When he looked at her, she knew her eyes were likely glazed with passion, and her cheeks felt flushed. She nodded.

Taking her hand in his, Jacques led her through the dancers, the sea of people parting for them. When they reached the top of the steps, Jacques smiled at her... and this time there was promise in his eyes.

Chapter Fifteen

The drive back to his castle seemed to take forever, made torturous by the fact that Kelly couldn't keep her hands to herself. Her fingers slid over his chest and stomach, and her lips grazed his neck, jawline, and mouth.

Jacques drove like a bat out of hell in his raging passion to get home and make love to her. She was driving him wild with her roaming hands and succulent lips. Her lusty kisses made him practically sizzle out of control, and he was more than half tempted to pull off to the side of the road...

He slowed down, then parked at the edge of a field. Kelly sat up and looked at him in confusion. "What are you doing?"

Killing the engine on the sleek Jaguar, he stepped from the vehicle, walked around, and tugged her from the car. He swung her up into his arms, then with a great leap that made Kelly squeal, he jumped over the simple wire fence into the field that looked a lush green even under the full moonlight. Jacques swiftly moved further from the road to a secluded lake he knew lay nearby.

When he rounded a group of trees, he heard Kelly sigh delightedly at the sight: the moon's rays reflected off the water, lilies floated on the peaceful surface, and an abundance of trees surrounded the area.

"How did you know about this place?"

"France is my home, and this is one of the places that has not changed much since I was a boy." He stopped at the water's edge and lowered her body, her soft form gliding down the length of his hard one.

Jacques was pleased when her hands clasped his neck as she gazed lovingly into his eyes. "I can't tell you how glad my heart is that you came for me."

He kissed her, his tongue laving her lower lip before he spoke. "I don't think I could have kept myself from doing so for much longer. I love you, and I want you to be mine." Then his mouth captured hers, drinking in her sweetness and her moans as his mouth ravished hers.

His fingers made quick work with the tie at her lower back; his hands slowly caressed up her silken flesh toward the other tie at her nape. When the strings fell around her shoulders, the gleaming material cascaded to the ground, and Jacques leaned back to gaze at her beauty.

She stole his breath. The water shimmered behind her, and the moon cast its glow, making her look like the angel she was. Her skin was perfection, her breasts high and firm. Unable to resist, he cupped his hands beneath each globe, thumbs grazing over the erect nipples. He was exultant when she moaned out loud, arching her back. The action pushed her breasts into his palms and his body tightened even more than he thought was possible at the anticipation of finally possessing her.

Jacques watched as she bent her body toward him, her blue eyes seeking his. He sucked in a breath when her hands traveled to his stomach, where she released the buttons, then eagerly pushed his coat off. He nearly threw her to the ground when it appeared she could hardly take her gaze from his chest and abdomen... and his groin. Then she stroked her hands up over each pectoral and let her lips blaze over every part her fingers grazed.

Jacques tensed, moaning at her actions as her tongue and teeth tortured and teased him. His mind whirled as he felt her hands shift his to her hips. Then he relished seeing the cool wisps of her skirt and panties falling over her thighs to rest at her ankles, leaving her gloriously nude before him.

Jacques's gaze surveyed every inch of her, but she didn't allow him too much time to ogle as she continued her ministrations. The sight of her pink tongue stroking his flesh, scorching him with each delicate touch, was more than he could handle. Crushing her to him, he brought her to the grass, all the while trailing his mouth over her face, neck, and between her breasts, until he took one hard nipple into his mouth.

Her hands tangled in the dark web of his hair as his tongue swirled and pulled, tormenting her. First one breast, then the other. His hands worked magic over her sensitive skin, causing a kaleidoscope of colors to swirl and blossom before her eyes.

With a blur of speed, the last of his clothes were suddenly gone, and she felt his naked flesh pressed along every inch of hers. Her body seemed almost overloaded with sensations -- the burning heat of him above and the coolness of the grass beneath her -- adding to her intense desire. She desperately wanted, needed, him inside her, for him to claim her.

His fingers slid over her belly while his mouth continued to devour her breasts. Then his digits finally slid between the folds of her sex. She cried out, lifting into him, begging him

for more. A finger pushed into her wet core, stroked, then plunged again and again, giving her exquisite pleasure.

Her hands moved restlessly over his broad shoulders and chest, loving the way he felt and the way he touched her, seeming to derive as much delight from her as he was providing. She gasped when his mouth left her breasts and traveled down, tracing fire over her quivering stomach. Then, deliberately slowly, he brought his head between her thighs. His tongue scorched her entrance.

She bucked, clutched at him, and parted her legs in invitation. Jacques groaned and glanced up for a moment, grinning as he continued to taste her. He drove her wild, making her writhe and cry out, until her release burst over his tongue. She vaguely felt him greedily lap up every drop, but still he continued to work at her core, suckling her and stroking with additional fingers.

Kelly was almost sobbing by the time he brought her to another climax. She gripped his head, clawed at his shoulders, her knees bent and pushing off the ground. Rising above her, Jacques grasped her hips in his hands, smoothing his fingers over her flesh, and prepared to enter her. Pure fire enveloped Kelly, as with one swift thrust, he buried himself inside her.

Her body welcomed his invasion, drawing him to the very center of her as he plunged fully within her. He braced himself above her, arms straining, and she knew it was because he wanted to give her pleasure before he found his own, that he feared he'd lose control. When he finally started to move, Kelly couldn't help her moans and cries of ecstasy. The driving of his hard flesh overwhelmed her, building an erotic swirling storm throughout her body. He filled her completely -- heart, body, and soul.

She was not prepared for the explosion of feelings and sensations that erupted through her. Kelly shrieked in joy as she clung to Jacques's quivering form. Her lips found his, her body blazing with what only he could give her. His responding kiss was forceful, urgent, demanding everything from her, and she obliged, releasing all of her passion.

She gloried in the feel of him, of his cock still thrusting in and out of her, pumping, taking everything that she was. Kelly wrapped her legs around his waist and moved her hips rapidly in time with his, meeting every lunge so that he was embedded deep inside her each time, straight to the hilt.

As she spasmed around him once more, Kelly sensed he couldn't hold back any longer. He drove into her, bringing her to the edge again, her cries echoing through the air and the sound of his name on her lips as pleasure ripped from between them. Her world spun and sensations rocked her core as he convulsed and gave another mighty thrust, groaning as she clutched him, milked him. She'd never expected making love could ever be like this, but as she quivered in the aftershocks beneath him, she knew it could only be this intense with him.

* * * * *

Kelly's hands played through Jacques's hair. His body still covered hers; she reveled at the length of him still within her and did not want him to leave her body just yet.

Jacques rose up on his elbows, pushing his lower body further into hers, and she moaned deliciously as he gazed down lovingly at her. His fingers gently brushed strands of hair from her cheeks. He tenderly kissed her lips and smiled, black eyes gleaming.

"Am I too heavy for you?"

Kelly twined her legs with his, hugged his waist with her arms. "No, you're perfect."

"For someone who doesn't like the French, you certainly know how to love one."

Laughing at his teasing, she caressed his jaw. "Well, I just couldn't help myself where this Frenchman is concerned."

He spoke in an exaggerated French accent, chuckling nasally as he did. "Vell, ve Frensh 'av a vay een ze matters uf luv."

"You are too much." She laughed again, the movement bringing a wash of warm sensation through her. Her feminine walls flexed around him.

Jacques groaned, his eyes immediately becoming hazy with desire again. "Kelly, do you know what you do to me?"

She shook her head, eager for his praise.

"You truly are an angel. *Mon ange*." He stressed the latter words. His lips prodded hers, and his hands fondled her breasts. Kelly hunched her hips against his, delighting in the feel of him growing rigid within her, and then the liquid heat as he began to move. He took his time, thrusting deep.

Suddenly, Jacques lifted them both from the ground onto his knees, still planted solidly between her thighs. Kneeling, he held Kelly nestled on his lap, her legs wrapped tightly over his hips. His mouth nuzzled her breasts, while his hands worked her body along his.

She held his head to her, marveling at the sight of him bent over her nipples, the feel of his lips savoring each one, even as he plunged in and out of her below. This new position seated him to the depths of her, gliding along every sensitive point of her being. She clung to him, gasping loudly, as a multitude of intensely pleasant sensations rippled through her from the white heat of his fangs piercing the swell of one breast. The feeling shook her, and rapture gripped her relentlessly.

His mouth continued to tease her flesh as he drew her blood; his hands caressed her hips and ribs, played with her breasts. Flames licked over her flesh when his tongue closed the pinpricks on her skin. He looked at her, his dark eyes capturing hers with their intensity. His lips parted in a wide smile, his fangs gleaming whitely at her.

Her name rained from his lips, and his hands held her against him. He seemed unable to get enough of her as he pumped into her. Her mouth sought his as his thrusts became more frantic; she could taste herself, and the flavor only managed to inflame her more. Finally, Jacques reached his climax and took her with him.

Lights swirled and burst before her eyes, elation pouring through her body. Stars exploded from twilight to a shimmering brilliance. She clenched around his body as bliss cascaded through every cell. His heat spilling into her made her shudder in joy and grip his shaft tightly. She was engulfed by him, branded by him. She couldn't do anything but pull him deeper until she didn't know where he ended and she began.

He held her close, her head resting on his shoulder, both panting heavily, until the flames settled to cooling embers. When their breathing returned to normal, he lifted her chin and brought her face up to his. She stared up at him for a moment, wide-eyed when he placed a gentle kiss on her lips, then smiled softly.

"I do love you, *mon ange*."

She grinned drowsily, languid and sated in his arms. "I love you, too." She placed her head back on his shoulder, but he raised her body off his, cradling her in his arms. Standing, he strode into the lake, the clear water feeling good over her heated flesh.

Lowering her to her feet, he began to leisurely wash her body, his hands running over her skin. Kelly moaned contentedly as he rubbed her shoulders and back. She gladly returned the favor, delighting in this quiet moment to just be with him, to be able to touch him -- to love him with her eyes and with her tender actions.

Her hand closed around his cock, the full length extending past her palm. He groaned as she continued her exploration. He was long and wide, her fingers barely circling him as she massaged from base to tip. She quickened her movements, and he threw back his head, a hiss seeping from his lips. She watched the slightly purple-tinged organ as he jerked his hips and came.

Jacques stared at her. "What was that for?"

She shrugged, smiling, and plunged deep into the water up to her chin. "I thought it would be fun."

They frolicked some more, and when they were done, Jacques carried her from the water. To her astonishment, he created heat from his hands and began to dry her skin.

"More magic," she teased.

He grinned up at her from where he knelt at her feet. "Yes, more magic." He gathered her clothes and helped her slip into her skirt, then tied both sets of her blouse's strings, sealing a kiss at her nape and waist as he did so.

Kelly licked his body as she slowly zipped up his leather pants, grinning naughtily at his groan as she *accidentally* brushed her lips against his swelling rod.

"Be careful, *mon ange*, for if I love you again, we may not make it home in time before the sun rises."

"I didn't think older men had this kind of stamina."

He grabbed her hands, holding them together at the wrist, his grin wicked. "It's been a long time."

Shaking her hands free of his grasp, she continued to dress him, sliding his coat over him and fastened the same four buttons that had caught her attention in the club over his contoured stomach. Then she allowed him to swing her up into his arms as he sped back to his waiting car.

He drove quickly, and she knew he was trying to beat the sunrise. Kelly could see his fatigue, and she breathed a sigh of relief when they pulled into his garage. She stepped from the vehicle before he could come around, then yelped as he lifted her once more. She slung her arms around his neck as he sprinted through the castle and then down the stone steps to his chambers.

He set her on the bed; as he did, her blouse fell away, and he pushed the skirt from her body, smiling devilishly. "There is time before the sun fully rises."

Kelly gave a sultry laugh, opening her arms to him. She welcomed the feel of his body, of his hard shaft, as he entered her. Swirling pools of desire erupted into ripples of pleasure as they undulated against each other.

When the sun did finally rise, they curled under the covers and fell into sated slumber.

Chapter Sixteen

Kelly stretched leisurely, then smiled up at Jacques, who was propped on one elbow and grinning down at her. A fire crackled cheerfully in the fireplace, casting a soft warm glow to the room.

Jacques rose from the bed, dressed in a black silk robe, and brought a tray of food to her. Kelly gave a contented sigh, sitting up in the bed and pulling the comforter up over her breasts.

"I had Marian prepare this for you -- which reminds me: she wants to see you as soon as you are up and about. It is nice to have her speaking to me again."

Grinning wickedly, Kelly couldn't help asking, "Why wasn't she speaking to you?"

Jacques shrugged as he set the large wooden tray over her lap. "Let's just say she didn't agree with the way I treated someone dear to her heart." His fingers brushed gently down her cheek. "And mine."

Kelly covered his hand with hers, kissing his palm and looking adoringly into his eyes.

"Eat. I know you must be hungry."

Turning to her food, she picked up her fork, ready to dig into the brisket with rich brown gravy, when she noticed a black velvet box beside the plate. She gave Jacques a quizzical look and noted his small smile. Picking the box up, she slowly lifted the lid; her hand flew over her mouth and various emotions gathered in her chest.

A gorgeous diamond sat in the cushion, twinkling up at her. The center stone appeared to be one carat, princess cut, with a half-carat baguette nestled on each side and another layer of round diamonds circling the white gold band. Her eyes sought his, but she couldn't speak. She could only stare at him, uncertain but hopeful at what this meant.

Removing the box from her hands, Jacques slid to his knees beside the bed and lifted the ring from the case. He took her trembling hand in his, his gaze searching hers before he spoke.

“Kelly, my light, my love. Will you be my wife and share my life with me?”

Happiness filled her and she gave him a radiant smile. Tears collected in her eyes at the joy that overwhelmed her. She studied his face intently for any doubt. “You mean it.”

His words brushed her mind intimately, gently. *With all my heart.*

Nodding her head vigorously, she laughed. “Yes, Jacques! Oh, yes!”

The ring glided in place on her left ring finger, Jacques bestowing it with a kiss. She held her hand up before her, marveling at the way the diamonds sparkled in the light. It was the most beautiful piece of jewelry she had ever seen. Her gaze went to Jacques; he had his hands on his thighs and was grinning as if he were the proudest man in the world.

Kelly pushed the tray aside, food forgotten. With a thrilled little squeal, she lunged at Jacques. He caught her flying body to him, laughing as she rained excited kisses all over his face.

“Oh, Jacques, I love you, I love you, I love you.”

Her hands went into his hair, and her lips traveled every bit of bare flesh she could reach. He groaned as she rubbed herself against the hard wall of his exposed chest where she opened his robe. He cleared the bed, the sound of crashing silverware and broken porcelain hitting the floor startling her.

He grinned as she looked over the edge of the bed at the mess, then back at him. “Marian will have my head for breaking one of her favorite dishes.”

Kelly giggled. “I’ll protect you.”

He laughed, rolling over to sprawl over her nude body and kiss her deeply. “I don’t doubt that a bit.”

* * * * *

Kelly watched Jacques dress, heaving a pleased sigh as he gave her a gentle peck on the lips, then left the room. She burrowed deeper into the covers.

They had decided to get married immediately. Jacques had gone to organize things, and she wondered if Cassie and Dimitri would be able to come. She would have to talk to Jacques about that; Kelly wanted Cassie to stand with her on her big day, for her friend to share her happy moment. They had always promised each other that they would do so.

Making up her mind, she tossed the covers aside, jumped out of bed, and slipped into the only clothes she had available. Wrinkling her nose at the mess of the outfit she’d worn last night, she was quickly done.

When she reached the corridor outside Jacques's chamber entrance, she made her way to the main hall. The heels of her shoes echoed on the stone as she approached the study, abruptly stopping dead in her tracks when a man appeared at the doorway.

She had to tilt back to look at him; he was even taller than Jacques was -- six-six, six-seven? His hair was pitch black, and his eyes were just as dark... but cold. Kelly couldn't help the shiver of fear that traveled through her, or notice the recognition on his face, despite the fact she knew she'd never met him before. There was no way anyone could forget such an imposing figure as this stranger, but just as quickly, the look vanished.

As though sensing her sudden apprehension, Jacques appeared at the door, then glared at the man. "Would you not frighten her to death?" He extended his hand to her, love and warmth shining in his eyes. "Do not mind Damian, my love; he is heartless."

Damian bowed regally, and Kelly nodded at his courtesy. Jacques brought her into the study, and another man rose to his feet. This one had a shock of blond hair, and he was tall and lean, with the same black eyes that all vampires seemed to have, yet his seemed more dull somehow.

"Kelly, this is Christian Mason. Dimitri met him some time after your country's Revolutionary War." Christian inclined his head, and Kelly smiled slightly.

"And you've already met Damian Salvatorio. He is an old friend."

"A pleasure to meet you, *cara*. I believe congratulations are in order."

His words were like magic, and Kelly lost her nervousness as she melted against Jacques. At the mention of their engagement she couldn't seem to help the huge smile on her face, even though it seemed ridiculous since she was in a room full of vampires. "Yes, thank you."

Jacques's arm tightened around her; he looked at Kelly's garb and the way Damian studied her. Christian even smiled a little.

"I see I forgot to have a change of clothes for you."

Kelly blushed. "I'll go to the hotel."

Jacques looked at the two men lounging in his chairs. Christian appeared mildly amused at his hard stare, and Damian looked bored as always. Both men seemed subtly intrigued at his show of jealousy. He almost growled at them. "Gentlemen, if you would please excuse us." They rose and left. Kelly appeared to breathe a sigh of relief.

Jacques touched her chin and kissed her. "I want you to get your belongings and stay here with me."

"One thing, though."

Jacques paused. "Yes?"

"I want Cassie here when we get married. I want her to be my maid of honor."

"Of course. Contact her; as soon as she and Dimitri arrive, we will be married." He examined her face. "Are you sure this is what you want? Do you still wish to be turned? Once you are, there is no going back. You will be mine forever, and I will never let you go."

Her hands came to rest on his chest; she gently brushed her lips over his heart and looked deeply into his dark eyes. "I want this more than anything. Twice now, I have been separated from you, and it was misery. My happiness lies with you."

Jacques picked her up and whirled her around. "Then let us retrieve your things; we will make arrangements from Paris." They turned to leave, but Damian stepped back into the study.

"Jacques, a moment, please. I'd like a word with you in private."

Jacques kissed Kelly's temple. "I'll be along shortly." Kelly nodded and walked by Damian to wait in the hallway.

Damian closed the door behind her and strode to Jacques. He lowered his voice as though to keep Kelly from hearing him, even through the thick walls and door. "Jacques, do you not realize who she looks like?"

Jacques frowned. "I've no idea, Damian."

"Dominique. She is the very image of Mussek's lover all those years ago."

Jacques's heart constricted in his chest. "Kelly did say he called her by Dominique's name, but I never met Dominique. I didn't know." He sank down into a chair, many things abruptly more clear to him. "Of course. It makes sense now why he's fixated on Kelly." He stared at Damian. "My God. You believe he thinks Kelly is really Dominique."

His friend nodded. "It's the only logical explanation for his extreme behavior. But knowing this makes the situation more precarious. He won't stop. I remember how much he pined for Dominique. He'll pursue her, Jacques, no matter the cost."

Jacques agreed. "I'm going with Kelly to her hotel; then we'll be back. She cannot wander about unguarded. One of us must be with her at all times."

Damian inclined his head. "I'll help you. I've already told you I will."

Jacques rose from his seat pulled Damian into a hug, the other vampire holding himself stiff. But Jacques didn't care. "Thank you, my friend. Now I have to find a way to tell Kelly."

Kelly's grin faltered as Jacques approached. He looked so serious all of a sudden. "You okay?"

He smiled faintly, the somber look disappearing. "Of course. Let's go."

They took the Jaguar. Kelly turned to Jacques as he drove through the splendid evening, concern eating at her. "Jacques?"

He glanced at her and brought her hand to his lips. "Yes, *ange*."

"Why are those men at your home?" She could see he knew what she meant; the other vampires were there for a specific reason.

"They are here to help me fight against Mussek, and to protect you should the need arise."

"But why is Mussek so determined to have me? I've really done nothing to encourage him -- at least I hope I haven't."

He paused before answering her, as though trying to find the right words. "You remind him of someone he loved a long time ago."

Kelly frowned. "Dominique?"

"Yes. I've no other way to tell you this, but Damian met her. He says you are the very image of her."

Kelly gasped, her heart thudding loudly in her ears. Jacques squeezed her hand.

"I'm sorry, Kelly. I did not mean to upset you, but there was no other way to tell you than to just come right out and say it."

"He won't stop then, will he? If I really remind him of Dominique, he'll keep coming, won't he?"

At Jacques's silence, Kelly shivered. He kissed her hand. "I'll protect you till my dying breath, Kelly. He will not have you."

"But, Jacques, he almost killed you the last time. It almost *was* your dying breath."

"I know, but Damian and Christian are here, and they will aid me, If, God forbid, anything should happen to me, they, along with Dimitri, will see to your safety. You will be shielded always. This, I swear to you."

"I don't want their protection, and I don't want yours. I only want us to be safe and happy, for Mussek to go away and leave us in peace." She laid her head on his shoulder.

"I know, *mon ange*. But something in Mussek snapped a long time ago, and he cannot be trusted. That is just the way it is. I *will* stop him."

"I don't think I could stand it if you were hurt or killed," she whispered.

"Do not worry so much. All will be well, I promise."

She leaned back and looked at him in the light from the illuminated dashboard, saw the sincerity in his eyes. Kelly turned her gaze and stared out the window, silent for the remainder of the trip. Her emotions and fear for Jacques plagued her. Mussek was a real threat; she'd known it for a while now, but Damian and Christian's presence brought it home -- as did Jacques's resolve to see her safe.

They entered the hotel parking lot and Jacques maneuvered the car to a spot before cutting the engine. "Kelly, look at me."

She shook her head, ashamed of her weakness. Of the terror settling in her heart like a heavy stone.

"Please."

Turning slowly, Kelly faced him.

"I will be fine. I give you my most solemn promise." There was such confidence and determination in his eyes that she had to believe him.

"I know."

Climbing out, Jacques helped her exit, then wrapped his arm around Kelly. They walked quickly into the hotel. Once inside her room, the tension between them seemed to ease a bit. She went to her suitcase and tossed it on the bed. She began stowing her personal items, then paused.

"I'd love a shower before we go."

Jacques walked to the balcony window and looked out. "I'll wait here for you."

Kelly started the shower, stripped, and hopped in. The hot water felt good washing over her body. She closed her eyes and let the spray soothe her.

The sound of the curtain being drawn back made her jump and squeak in surprise. Jacques grinned sheepishly, his body completely nude.

"Hearing you in here, knowing you were naked... I couldn't help but want to join you."

Kelly went immediately into his arms as he stepped in. His mouth claimed hers, his tongue sweeping and stroking, and she moaned. His cock pressed against her belly; she reached down with one hand and wrapped her fingers tightly around him. He hissed, his head thrown back. She laved his neck with her tongue, kissing down his body. She licked each nipple, paying special attention to the taut nubs, while her hand pumped up and down his erect shaft. He filled her hand, thick and heavy. He felt unbelievably good.

She went to her knees, peering up the length of Jacques's torso. His eyes were heavily hooded as she leaned forward and took the head of him into her mouth, loving the salty flavor from his juices that was smeared across her tongue. She delighted in the sound of his moans as she licked his balls, then back up to the tip of his cock. She thought his legs might have buckled for a moment, but the wall seemed to hold him up just fine. Engulfing him into her mouth once more, she swallowed every inch of him, moaning as his hands went into her hair, his cock thrusting in and out of her mouth.

She felt him grow more rigid, and she continued to suck, to draw him in and out, her hand running up and down the shaft till he pulled back. She groaned in disappointment, but he jerked her to her feet and turned her to face the shower wall. His breathing was harsh, and his mouth brushed her ear, his tongue sweeping over the lobe.

"When I come, I want to be inside you, feeling you clasp me tightly."

Her nether lips quivered and pulsed at his words; then she gasped as he plunged into her. She cried out as he thrust unmercifully inside her, his hands coming around to grasp her breasts, squeezing them, plucking the nipples. Her own hands scrabbled along the walls; she

thought that the growl that filled the shower couldn't possibly have issued from her throat as she slammed her hips back into his, meeting every demanding lunge.

One hand roughly wound in her wet hair and tugged, yanking her head back so that his mouth could dominate hers. He possessed her in every way, taking her over and over, surging into her, the passion seeming to drive him as it drove her. When she came, her orgasm was fierce and harsh, but he wouldn't let up. She screamed his name, screamed things a nice girl shouldn't, but she didn't care. She needed him.

Finally, he jerked spasmodically, his hot seed spilling into her. His thrusts remained urgent until he stopped at last, panting heavily behind her. Slowly, he lowered them both to the shower floor, still buried deep inside her. They stayed on their knees for a long moment, trying to recover.

Jacques revived first. He kissed her cheek and withdrew from her slowly, then helped her to her wobbly feet to face him. He grinned, picking up the bar of soap.

"Now, how about that shower?"

* * * * *

A short time later, they were both clean and dressed and on their way back to the castle. Once they reached his home, Jacques excused himself to find Damian and Christian.

Kelly went in search of Marian. The smell of fresh baked bread filled her senses, and she followed the delicious aroma to the kitchen where she found the housekeeper sweeping the floor. When the older woman saw her, she clapped her hands together in delight.

"Kelly!" Placing her broom aside, the older woman opened her arms wide. Kelly eagerly went into her embrace, holding Marian to her.

"How are you?"

Pulling away, Marian grinned brightly at her and led her to a small table at the back of the kitchen. "Oh, fine, fine, dear. You sit right over here, and I'll fix you something to eat."

"You don't have to do that."

The woman held up her hand, silencing Kelly, and feigned a stern countenance. "I do. I know for a fact you didn't eat because Jacques broke my dishes."

Kelly laughed. "You weren't too hard on him, were you?"

"If I was, he deserved it." Marian's eyes twinkled at her; then she turned her attention to removing a loaf of fresh bread from the oven.

"While you are doing that, could I make a quick phone call?"

"Heaven's yes, dear. You go right ahead."

Moving to the phone on the wall, Kelly picked it up and dialed, knowing that it was almost time for Cassie to sleep, but hoping she might catch her. She was delighted when her friend answered the phone. "Hi, Cass."

“Kelly!”

“I’m getting married; I want you and Dimitri and the family to come to Paris so you can be my maid of honor.”

“What?!” Cassie squealed, and Marian dropped the pan of bread on the counter, running over to Kelly and lifting the ring on her finger for inspection. Kelly listened as Cassie excitedly told Dimitri the news, then returned to the phone.

“Congratulations! We will be out there in the next couple of days. You can count on it.”

“I can’t wait, Cassie. As soon as you get here, I will become Madame Kelly Devereaux, so hurry!”

“I am so happy things have worked out for you. You’ll have to tell me every little detail, you hear?”

Kelly could hear the change in Cassie’s voice and knew that the sun was rising. “I will. Give me a call when you get up, and we’ll make plans.”

“Okay, Kelly. Goodnight.”

The line went silent, and Kelly hung up, laughing at Marian, who was still staring in awe at the ring.

“This is gorgeous, Kelly, just magnificent.”

“Thank you. And I’d love some of that bread; I guess I am starving, after all.”

Chapter Seventeen

Jacques and Dimitri stared helplessly at the two women who were acting like teenage girls as they discussed the small ceremony that was to take place the next night. Cassie and Dimitri had arrived in the night, and Cassie's family had arrived late that afternoon. Despite the lack of a blood relationship between Kelly and the Stephenses, it was clear they all viewed each other as family. Now everyone was exclaiming and talking over each other.

Ever since his own family had died, Jacques was unaccustomed to such a large gathering in his home again and felt uncomfortable at the idea of in-laws, however pleasant the Stephenses were.

Dimitri laughed and clapped his friend on the back as everyone made their way through the main hall of Jacques's castle. "Welcome to married life," he teased.

Jacques smiled, enjoying Kelly's joy and enthusiasm as he watched her grasp the hand of Beverly, Cassie's mother, indicating with wild points of her finger about the flowers that would go there and there.

"Come, everyone. Damian and Christian are awaiting your introductions." As they entered Jacques's study, Damian and Christian came to their feet. Dimitri took the liberty of presenting his wife and in-laws; both men smiled and politely greeted the Stephenses.

Cassie spoke up. "Well, while you gentlemen are doing manly things, we ladies plan to go into Paris to find gowns for tomorrow."

Jacques shook his head slightly and lowered his voice so that only Kelly could hear. "I don't think it a good idea that you go into town alone. Although Mussek has been quiet the last few weeks, he is still a threat."

Kelly frowned. "With everything happening, I forgot about him."

Cassie eyed Kelly and Jacques, then turned and glared at her husband. "Do you know anything about this?"

Dimitri glanced away from his wife, and Jacques held back a chuckle knowing it would only make matters worse for all of them. Seeing Dimitri's guilty shrug, then wince, Jacques knew full well Cassie was giving him a piece of her mind even though the room had gone silent.

"What's wrong, Kelly?" Everyone looked at Cassie's mother, Beverly, whose eyes were wide with concern.

Kelly kissed the woman's cheek. "Nothing, really. Just a fan who is getting a little carried away."

"Have you notified the police?" Edward Stephens prompted.

"All is being handled, Mr. Stephens," Jacques assured him. To Jacques's surprise, Christian volunteered to escort the women into town.

"I will go as well," Dimitri announced, eyeing his wife, who had jerked discreetly away from his touch.

"I'll join you; it's been a while since I've been able to visit with my son-in-law."

Cassie grinned wickedly at her father's words, her violet eyes winking in delight. Since she'd yet to tell her family she was a vampire, Cassie was forced to wear violet contact lens when she saw them to hide the black of her changed eyes.

Jacques saw Dimitri shoot her a glare; Cassie had a "gotcha" expression beaming on her face. Jacques looked away quickly, scratching his chin in order to hide his smile. Meanwhile, his bride practically danced in her excitement, oblivious to the sudden tension between Dimitri and Cassie.

"Great, come on." Grabbing Cassie, Beverly, and Alynn, Cassie's younger sister, Kelly dragged them from the room, leaving the men no other choice but to follow. Edward grabbed his eighteen-year-old son Jay around the back of the neck and forced the groaning young man along with them.

Soon only two remained. Jacques looked at Damian. "We need to talk."

Damian nodded, seated himself. "Go on."

Leaning against his desk, Jacques crossed his arms, watching Damian's reactions. "I want you to stand with me tomorrow when I take my vows."

Damian didn't stir. There was a brief silence. Then, "I would be honored."

Jacques smirked at his friend's nonchalant attitude, but he had expected this from Damian. "Shortly after my marriage, I want to settle things with Mussek."

"I understand. When the time comes, I will be at your side."

Jacques inclined his head and stepped away from the desk. "Thank you, Damian. Thank you for always being my staunch ally."

Damian didn't say anything. He stared into the flames burning in the hearth.

* * * * *

Obtaining a marriage license had been surprisingly easy. Though Kelly hadn't lived in France for sixty days, with a little persuasion -- and the knowledge that the city chairman loved Kelly Matthews, the prima ballerina -- most of the red tape and formalities had been cut. Kelly was now a resident and able to be married in France.

Now, on his wedding day, Jacques stood by the minister with Damian to his left as they faced the main entrance of his castle. The hall had been decorated with flowers, and vines twined down the railing of the stairs that curved to the main floor on either side of the hall. Candelabras scattered throughout the area created a romantic glow.

Cassie's family, Dimitri, Christian, Marian, and Quintin all stood as witnesses. Cassie herself walked alongside the most radiant woman present. Jacques forced himself to breathe as the two women made their way toward him.

Kelly's golden hair was pulled away from her face, piled high in ringlets on her head and spilling down her back. Wild flowers were scattered through the silken mass, making her look ethereal. She wore pearls around her neck; the ring he had given her glittered in the candlelight. She held a colorful bouquet of wildflowers at her waist.

Her bridal gown was white, simple yet elegant, and flowed freely, the material made from the finest of satin. Sleeveless, her creamy shoulders enticed him to run his fingers along the neckline, which drew attention to the slender curve of her throat. The bodice was embroidered with just a touch of sequins, and the back dipped to her waist. The skirt flared out, and he caught a glimpse of the neatly folded layering of fabric above her bottom and the slight train following in her wake.

Her face was angelic, her smile breathtaking. Jacques would never know how he had been so fortunate as to find a woman like her, one so beautiful, loving, and talented. When she finally stood before him, he was transfixed, unable to take his eyes away.

Kelly had to remind herself to breathe, and Cassie had to tug a bit on her arm to keep her from fidgeting. Jacques stood by the minister. His hair was fastened at his nape with a black ribbon, but some long wisps of his dark hair had escaped, framing his face. He was dressed in a long, ornate black coat with tails, his white shirt gleaming pristinely against the black. The ruffled collar and cuffs peeked out beneath the jacket's sleeves, and she almost thought she was being whirled back to his time centuries ago. His pants fit his long legs perfectly, shaping the hard muscles there.

His dark gaze seemed to swallow her as she traveled the length of the hall; she was drowning in the love she saw shining there. This was the man she adored, the one she had fallen helplessly for the moment they had met nearly a year ago. Now he would finally be hers.

"Who giveth this woman to this man?" the minister asked in French.

Cassie cleared her throat. "I do." She turned, kissing Kelly on the cheek before placing Kelly's hands into Jacques's.

His fingers closed over hers, and warmth filled Kelly at the gentle touch. She listened vaguely as the minister spoke of the love and the unity of two people becoming one. Kelly knew what he was saying was terribly important, but she couldn't seem to hear any of it; she was too focused on Jacques and the way he was looking at her. But when Jacques spoke his vows to her, she felt immense joy as he said the words that would bind them together as man and wife. His eyes never left hers, and his hands caressed her trembling ones.

She stood quietly drinking him in, until she felt the soft brush of his voice against her mind.

Mon ange, the minister is talking to you.

Blushing furiously, she saw the minister was smiling broadly at her.

"Répétez après moi, s'il vous plaît."

Kelly did as the man said and repeated his words to Jacques. She spoke softly, yet the words somehow seemed to carry through the hall.

Cassie and Damian handed the wedding bands to the minister, who discussed the symbolism of the rings before handing one to Jacques. Her lover slipped the white gold band over her finger, fitting it snugly against her sparkling engagement ring. She smiled at how both rings looked on her finger. Then she took Jacques's hand in hers and placed his band on his finger, repeating once again after the minister, until finally he pronounced them man and wife.

"You may kiss the bride."

Jacques's wide smile was contagious as he pulled her into his arms, sealing their union with a soul-searing kiss that she felt to the tips of her toes, and an unspoken promise of forever. The embrace left her shaken, and when he finally let them come up for air, she loved how he kept his arm secure around her waist to keep her from falling.

Their small group of participants applauded and rushed forward to congratulate the newlyweds. Marian had tears in her eyes, hugging them as though they were her son and daughter, and Quintin kissed Kelly's cheek. Damian and Christian both clapped Jacques on the back and kissed the bride. Dimitri embraced Jacques and Kelly. And lastly, Beverly, Edward, Jay, and Alynn, then Cassie were there, crowding around them.

Her friend touched Jacques's cheek gently, bussed him, then wrapped Kelly in her arms. Cassie had tears in her eyes and Kelly sniffled. "I am so happy for you, Kelly."

Kelly kissed her, whispering softly in Cassie's ear. "Thank you for coming, and for being my friend and family." She did the same to the rest of the Stephenses, grateful to all of them for giving her their love when she'd ached so much for her own mother and father. She loved them dearly -- her family. And now she had Jacques.

Everyone retired to the lighted garden for the reception. A large table surrounded by wrought iron chairs was decorated with a white tablecloth, shimmering candles, and flowers for the occasion. Lanterns flickered on curved iron poles throughout the space, softly

illuminating the area. They gathered around the table to enjoy the red wine and champagne Jacques had brought in from Paris. Even sixteen-year-old Alynn was allowed to drink.

As a lovely surprise for his new bride, Kelly discovered Jacques had asked Dimitri to paint their wedding portrait. While Dimitri set up shop, Cassie looked on over his shoulder. Marian fussed over Damian and his apparent indifferent attitude, but the others appeared interested. Dimitri's strokes were sure and quick as Kelly and Jacques posed.

After a while, as Dimitri worked, the rest of the group mingled. Those that "ate" enjoyed the *hors d'oeuvres*; the vampires among them feigned eating and discreetly deposited their food elsewhere when the Stephensens weren't looking. Some time passed; then Dimitri carefully handed Jacques and Kelly their portrait.

Kelly was riveted and thanked Dimitri several times for the perfect gift, holding the canvas delicately in her hands. She was astonished at how he had captured every detail of the flowers behind them, the sheen of her wedding gown... the love that shone in both her and Jacques's eyes. Then Jacques took the picture from her and passed it to Marian.

"Will you please see to this?" The woman nodded, smiling broadly. Jacques turned back to his guests. "Thank you for coming and sharing this evening with us, but..." he paused, his intent gaze roved over Kelly, fervent desire obvious in those dark depths. "I think I would like to take my bride away for our wedding night."

There was much laughter and cheers as Kelly blushed. Jacques rapidly escorted her from the group. Once through the door, he swung her up into his arms and kissed her.

"Duchesse Devereaux, welcome home." She kissed him back as he carried her down the corridor leading to his chambers, her heart swelling with joy.

"I would like to give you another gift for our wedding day."

"Jacques, you don't have to do that."

"I want to, *mon ange*." He kissed her temple. "Ask anything, and it will be yours."

She gave him a sly smile. "Anything?"

"Yes, you have only to name it."

They entered their room, and Kelly sighed happily. Lighted candelabras filled the room, red and white rose petals covered the bed, and vines twisted and twined overhead, creating a lovely canopy. She gazed in appreciation at all that he had done.

"This is beautiful. Thank you."

"It is you who are beautiful." He lowered her to her feet, and she breathed deeply the scent of the rose petals. She was incredibly lucky to have such a thoughtful man in her life.

She touched the collar of his jacket. "Where did you get this? It's exquisite and so old worldly."

His smile was sad. "It is a replica of the one made in preparation of my wedding centuries ago."

It seemed ridiculous even to herself that she'd be upset about a woman from hundreds of years past, but she couldn't help it. She flounced on the bed, not caring that she wrinkled her dress as she glared up at Jacques.

He came down on the bed beside her, his gaze intent upon her face. "I was engaged to a young lady through our parents; when I was born they had pledged to betroth their children. Suffice to say it was a match made in heaven for our parents and not for us -- especially since, unfortunately, my fiancée was not born until after I reached manhood." He paused, his hands going to Kelly's. "She was very young, and I hadn't wanted to settle down unless it was my choice, but it was past time for me to marry. I believed I was never meant to find the woman who would complete me."

Kelly's heart pounded at his words. She looked at him through her lowered lashes as he continued to speak. "She thought me an old man, of course." His thumb brushed the palm of her hand, his smile sad. "My mother had the original outfit made for me. I kept replacing it with new ones all these years because it was one of the last things she gave to me."

Kelly turned to him, her skirt pulling tight over her legs. "Oh, Jacques, I'm sorry. I didn't know. I wouldn't be so jealous if I had."

The rest of her apology died on her lips and her mind turned to jelly as she felt Jacques's hands travel over her bare shoulders; she shuddered at the scorching heat emanating from his eyes.

"There is nothing to forgive, *mon ange*." His fingers glided along her lower back, then lifted her to her feet. He pressed kisses along her shoulder and neck until, finally, he unfastened the dress and pushed it free; the satin slipped from her body.

She raised her face to his, smiling when she heard the quick intake of his breath and watched the widening of his eyes. She wore only a strapless bra, lacy white panties that rode low on her hips, and a white garter belt with lacy thigh-high hose.

At the sexy and erotic picture she made, Jacques could not keep his hands from exploring her further. But she stepped back, a playful smile on her face as she moved to the bed and lay across it, and spreading her thighs and arching her body seductively for him. Her gaze fluttered to the thick bulge at his groin.

"I'm glad you like what you see."

She would never know how beautiful she was amidst the rose petals, her hair blanketing her upper body and the sheets around her. Jacques hastily removed his clothes, then joined her on the mattress. He came down over her, his hands feverishly fondling her flesh. Her soft moans and whimpers tortured his ears, but they tormented his body more. Everywhere she touched, his skin burned him in turn, setting him ablaze.

He caressed her breasts, bringing each hard peak into the moist heat of his mouth. Then he slid down to her stomach, causing her to quiver as his tongue swirled in and around

her navel. Finally, he went lower yet. She stiffened, then cried out when his tongue licked the swollen bud between her thighs.

Her hands went into his hair, and he could sense the pleasure swirling through her body as his mouth worshiped her, as his tongue stroked and tantalized. She writhed under him until he felt her tighten; she spasmed and exploded with shrill cries.

He rose over her and penetrated her swiftly, becoming one with the woman he loved, his wife. She was really his and, as he moved deeply within her, he knew heaven was within his reach at last.

He wanted to show her more of paradise, to bring her ecstasy, and was satisfied when she convulsed around him, then shuddered again as she reached one orgasm after another, her moans and cries of pleasure music to his ears. Unable to hold back any longer, he found his own rapture, swelling within her and releasing the seed from his loins.

* * * * *

It was late and the castle and its occupants had settled into silence.

Christian wandered down the halls, his heart heavy. Although he was happy that both Jacques and Dimitri had found their true loves, it made him ache for his own lost Carrie.

He trod up the stairs and along the corridor toward his chambers but halted at the sound of music coming from one of the rooms. He walked slowly toward it, hearing shuffling feet and light singing, and found himself in front of Alynn's room. The door was cracked open slightly, and he could see her shadow against the wall. He swallowed past the lump forming in his throat, licking suddenly dry lips. Then he inhaled sharply as she wiggled her way into his line of sight.

She was wearing a black lace bra and matching boyshorts that left half of her nicely shaped bottom bare. As she spun, he could see her small breasts. They looked inviting, perfect for palming, for nibbling. He swallowed again with great difficulty and told himself he should walk away *right now*, but he remained riveted by the vision of her.

She was young -- but almost seventeen, as she'd proudly announced at the garden reception when Kelly had teased her like a younger sibling. Alynn was a little taller than Cassie, trim and lean, and her hair was darker than her older sister's chestnut color, so dark a brown the strands were almost black. Her eyes were dark blue mixed with green.

He'd had a hell of a time ignoring her. She'd approached him after the wedding couple had retired, while everyone else was visiting amongst themselves. Her walk had been provocative and her grin inviting. It had been the wine and champagne, he knew. She'd been thrilled to have some, thinking it *totally cool*. When she had finally stood before him, her smile had been saucy, and she'd asked if he'd wanted to take a walk with her in the garden, then hiccupped.

He'd politely declined and left her. As he'd passed Dimitri, though, Christian had snapped at the older vampire. "Keep your *sister-in-law* away from me."

Now he stood at her door, staring in like a damned peeping tom. She stopped dancing at the end of the song and went to change the CD, glancing at the door as she walked by. It was too late for him to leave; she'd spotted him. Alynn frowned as she walked over to the door, her body angled behind the paneling, and peered out at him through the opening to her room.

Christian wasn't sure what to say. What excuse could he possibly give for spying on her? While she was in her undergarments, no less. But she didn't give him the chance to open his mouth. She smiled, this time shyly, causing his heart to do a funny flip in his chest, then she shut the door completely, closing her away from him.

He exhaled and inhaled deeply, taking in the remnants of her scent, disgusted with himself. What was wrong with him? Was he that hard up for a woman that he was preying on a teenager? Annoyed and more than a little embarrassed, he sped to his chambers and slammed the door.

Chapter Eighteen

Mussek stared into the fire, his eyes aching, but he was beyond caring. He seethed with rage, then roared in agony and tore through his rooms, turning the place into a shambles. A *tsk, tsk* sound had him spinning about, talons extended, fangs exposed. He hissed at the intruders.

Michael Windsor's trim body leaned casually against the door frame. His dark blond hair fell past his shoulders, tied back in a leather thong.

Mussek's servant, Burin, bowed. "You asked me to bring Mr. Windsor to you immediately upon his arrival, master."

Mussek seized his fury and willed himself to be calm. He waved a hand when he had some semblance of control. "You are dismissed." His voice was hoarse and gravely, still healing from the wound Kelly had inflicted. Burin bowed again and left.

His guest didn't smile, face rigid.

Mussek walked over to his liquor cabinet. "Wine?"

Michael walked into the room. "No. What do you want, Mussek?"

Mussek slammed the bottle down, nearly cracking it. "Watch your tone, youngling. I can kill you with but a thought."

Michael smirked. "Oh, I think you'd need more than a thought, Mussek. I may be younger than you, but I'm not a fledgling." He went to an overturned chair and set it upright, brushing nonexistent lint from it, and then sat down without being invited. "What do you want? I've little time, but since I was passing through on my way back to England, I thought I'd answer your summons."

Mussek glared at him. "I need your help."

Michael laughed and crossed his arms. "This, I have to hear. The great Mussek asking help from a humble soldier."

Mussek sneered at the upstart. "You've much to learn about respect still. Remember, you're the one who came to me begging to be turned when his majesty's army failed to bring about the revenge you desperately sought."

The man returned his sneer. "Alexander Forbes is a coward, and I *will* find him. His feeble excuses will not protect him from my wrath. I will see him dead, and now I've the means to do it."

Mussek leaned forward at this bit of news. "Really? What leverage have you got to bring him out of hiding?"

Michael shrugged. "A woman, of course. She's the missing piece I need to find the Scot."

Leaning back, Mussek smiled. "It was only a matter of time."

"Never mind me. I repeat, what do you want, Mussek?"

"I need a distraction. Jacques, that pitiful excuse for a vampire, has stolen my beloved Dominique from me. He knows she is mine, but he has brought in Damian and another to guard her. If I'm not mistaken, Dimitri Alexios is in Paris now as well."

Michael's expression showed a flash of confusion. "Dominique is dead."

Mussek's heart stuttered for one beat before he cleared his throat. "She is. I meant Kelly, Kelly Matthews. She's the prima ballerina for the Vincinni Company, and I want her. She would have been mine if Jacques had not stepped in and interfered with her feelings for me."

"Did Jacques give you that nasty cut at your throat?"

Mussek's hand flew to his throat where his shirt had become unfastened at the collar, exposing the vicious slash. "No, Kelly did it in her fear." He looked toward the portrait of Dominique. "Jacques has turned her against me. She would never have done this otherwise." He turned his gaze back to the other man.

Michael didn't say anything for a long moment. Mussek wanted to shake him, but he needed the other vampire. "I'm unsure if I can -- or want to -- help you. I have plans of my own to carry out."

Mussek shot to his feet. "Bastard!" he shouted angrily. "You are ungrateful, all of you whom I've turned or took under my wing. You all betray me." He lashed out, catching Michael off guard, his talons raking across the other man's cheek, laying it open.

Michael immediately covered the wound and stared up at his maker. Then he lunged and grabbed Mussek about the throat, squeezing unmercifully. Mussek choked but broke the hold. Gripping Michael's wrist, he twisted, hearing bones crack, although the other man made no sound of pain.

Mussek shoved the younger vampire away, full of righteous fury. “You owe me. You came to me, starving, beaten, and I helped you.”

Michael was silent, his eyes glaring deep into Mussek’s as he held his wrist and his cheek bled. He sneered at Mussek, who growled in warning.

“I will see what I can do; my debt will then be paid. In full.” He stalked out of the room.

Mussek smirked and walked to the mantel, staring at the painting of Dominique. “Soon, my love. Soon we will be together and never parted again.”

Chapter Nineteen

Jacques and Kelly made love throughout the night, resting during the day. When Jacques next woke, he stared down at the serene face of his wife. He touched her cheek, and she stirred, giving him a lazy smile as her eyes opened, gazing up into his. He felt hunger rising in him, swift and hard, as the sound of her heart pounded in his head, as the sweet scent of her blood hummed through her veins.

When she spoke, her voice was soft and full of concern. "You need to feed."

He blinked; he had been unaware that Kelly had touched her mind to his until that moment. He gave her a pained look and shifted, but she grabbed hold of his arms, coming up to sit on her knees before him. "I know what I want for my wedding gift."

His mind raced as he brushed hers. Instantly, he knew what she was going to ask.

Her hands cupped either side of his face. "I want forever in your arms. There is no possibility that I would ever regret it." As she whispered the words, she pressed her body into his, her breasts mounding against his chest, and lifted her arms, pushing her golden mane from her neck.

"There will be great pain." His voice shook slightly.

"Pain will be worth the eternity I will be able share with you."

Her flesh was ivory and smooth as silk. How he wanted her. Jacques felt the fangs descending in his mouth; the smell of her blood was so tantalizing.

His arms locked around her and she sighed as his tongue swept over her wildly beating pulse. Jacques kissed her neck, then his fangs sank deep. Her body shuddered slightly before relaxing against him. He took care to be extra gentle as his lips brought her essence into himself, drawing and sipping her slowly. The warm liquid rushed over his tongue like fine red wine, coursing through him, heating his body.

Kelly curled her fingers in the dark locks of his hair, lost in the erotic feeling as he drank from her. Her naked flesh was pliant against his; she basked in the sensation of his lips as they stroked along her skin, until gradually she became more and more cold, her mind and limbs sluggish. She was unable to hold herself up against him, and her eyes grew heavy and her sight blurry as she tried to gaze at a single candle among the many that illuminated the room. She blinked rapidly, feeling her heart rate ease and her breathing become prolonged.

Jacques pulled away from her; she tried to focus on what he was saying, to bring her vision to where there was only one of him. His words were a distant echo in her mind, but she could somehow sense his distress.

“Kelly!” Were those Jacques’s broken pleas? Had he gashed himself over his chest? She thought she saw ribbons of blood trickling from a wound.

He cupped the back of her head, one arm supporting her weight behind her back, and raised her to him. Kelly flicked her tongue against his chest, sucking and caressing his skin as she drank from him. The sweet-salty flavor of him coated her tongue and throat until her world narrowed down to the feel of his hands holding her and the taste of him. Finally, she had enough. At a sudden jolt inside her, she looked at his face with confusion.

“Jacq--” His name was cut off by the pain that lanced through her abdomen. She choked in a deep breath, her nails digging into his forearms as another burst of agony burned within her.

Jacques gathered her shaking form to his body, holding her close to his heart, but she was almost beyond understanding anything but the sensations that knifed through her. It felt like every organ was twisting inside her body, being pulled apart and restructured. Pure molten lava seemed to have erupted within her, and she cried out, tears running down her face as the agony rapidly became overwhelming.

Her body convulsed and she tried to reach for Jacques, but her body curled itself into a fetal position as she tried to hold herself together in the face of the inferno that stabbed daggered flames through her. Vaguely, she caught glimpses of Jacques’s haggard face and what appeared to be streams of red tears from his eyes. He seemed to be talking to her, his voice loud and high, but she couldn’t make out what he was saying over the roar of her heart and her shrieks. She tried to smile reassuringly, but only managed a pained grimace and another scream as more torment ripped her apart.

Kelly felt as if her mind was slipping over the edge as she fought for the next breath, the pain clawing at her viciously. She shouted hoarsely as another onslaught sliced through her; her insides had surely been skewered by swords.

Finally, after enduring an eternity of anguish, Kelly fell into oblivion.

He was never more thankful for anything than when sleep claimed Kelly at last. Jacques gathered her still form to him and buried his face in the hollow of her neck. His body

trembled from the suffering he had caused her. He rocked her back and forth, and he kissed her forehead, rubbing away the ruby red tears from her eyes and face.

Loathing himself, he placed her carefully under the covers. Then, dressing quickly, he fled to his study, where four pairs of eyes stared at him. He knew her screams must have echoed through his chambers, mingling with his cries of sorrow. He could only hope that Cassie's family's hearing was not as sharp as the vampires'.

"It is done. She's asleep now."

Cassie's compassionate gaze and the moisture in her eyes for her friend shamed Jacques as she moved to him and hugged him. "We know. She told me she was going to ask you. Dimitri took care of distracting my family. You don't have to worry; no one knows but us."

Jacques nodded somberly. "I thank you, but I think I'd like to be alone."

The group quickly and silently left; Dimitri, Damian, and Christian each gripped his shoulder as they passed by.

He sat, staring for a long time into the fire he'd conjured. He could only hope he'd done the right thing, but terrible thoughts plagued him. Would she hate him? Could she ever forgive him? Despite her assurances, what if she woke regretting her decision?

She was his wife. He had to take comfort in Damian's words that Cassie had undergone the same change -- albeit under much different circumstances -- and seemed fine. He took in a shaky breath and rose to return to her, wanting to be there when Kelly woke, but a disturbance at the entrance of his home caught his attention.

Jacques flung the door open, then hissed at the man standing there.

"Greetings, Lord Devereaux. I hear congratulations are in order."

"I don't know where Alexander is, Michael, and I still wouldn't tell you if I did."

Michael shrugged and glanced into the castle beyond Jacques. "I'm not here about that. I've news from Mussek."

Jacques stared long and hard at the other vampire, trying to read his thoughts, but the man kept his mind carefully blank. He'd known Michael for several centuries now and the man's biggest flaw was his need for vengeance against Forbes. Deep down, Jacques knew Michael was a good man; he opened the door wider. "You may enter."

Michael inclined his head and sauntered into the hall. Jacques brought him to his study, then pinned the other vampire with an intense look as they sat. "What news do you have?"

"He's very upset about your marriage to Kelly and has asked for my help in stealing her away from you."

Jacques leapt from his seat and began to pace in front of Michael. "Son of a bitch!" He turned and glared at Michael. "Why have you told me this?"

The other vampire shrugged. “Just thought I’d pass the word along that you need to keep your head up. Mussek is not all there anymore, and I fear for your young wife.”

Jacques sank down in his chair once more and sighed. “I’ve been on the watch for Mussek’s possible attempts to take her. I know he is no longer in Paris; should I assume he’s in St. Petersburg?” Michael nodded. “There are others here who will help me guard her.”

“I would like to do so, as well.”

Jacques studied Michael. “Why?”

“My allegiance is not and has never been to Mussek. My primary concern is finding Forbes, but until that blessed day, I can do this. Mussek is unstable; who knows what he will do in his madness?”

Jacques rose. “Come, then. We’ll get you settled.” Jacques brought him to an empty set of rooms. As the man entered, Jacques stopped him. “It is good to see you again after so long, Michael. I’m grateful for your help and am glad you are in our corner. Kelly and I... it’s been a difficult courtship.”

Michael nodded, then shut the door.

* * * * *

As the sun dipped low in the sky and night finally enveloped the land, a rush of breath filled Kelly’s lungs. Her heart began to beat, and her eyes fluttered open.

The crackle of flames was almost deafening. She sat up abruptly in bed, feeling Jacques beside her. He was whispering soothing words to her, but she focused on the fireplace, where the color of the fire was so brilliant it almost hurt her eyes. She looked around the dimly lit room. Everything seemed brighter and more defined; she could see every detail where she wouldn’t have before.

She inhaled deeply, and scents rushed through her all at once. The smell of food wafting from the kitchen turned her stomach, and she covered her mouth to keep from heaving. Then she noticed the fragrance of the blossoms that filled the garden and heard the sounds of the insects and animals. She clutched the bedspread, and the soft material felt lighter than usual; in addition, the pads of her fingers seemed to graze over every fiber that went into the silk. Pulling the covers to her chin, Kelly tried to understand what was going on.

Jacques’s fingers wrapped around her wrists and his face came into view. She could see his lips moving, but everything was so loud, drowning out his voice. Her gaze wandered the room as she looked for any kind of escape from her keen senses. Then she felt pinpoints of pain in her mouth and suddenly realized she had fangs. She tentatively ran her tongue over the tips, then stared at Jacques, desperate for help.

He pulled gently at her arms, and she tensed, not wanting to lower her mental shields for fear of further bombardment. He rubbed her hands and she felt him immersing himself

gently into her mind. Gradually, all other sounds fell away, and the only thing she could hear and focus on was his deep voice.

Kelly, it will take a short time, but you will adjust.

She nodded, and took a deep breath. *You promise?*

His smile was quick. *Of course.*

She gulped in another breath and blinked, able to focus a little better now. It was like she was seeing everything again for the first time, as if she'd received a pair of very powerful glasses. Rising, she shakily walked around and tried to block out the sounds and smells without Jacques's help. He allowed her that, and she was grateful.

Sighing, Kelly looked at him. "Do you mind giving me a moment?" He didn't say anything, but the request made his heart beat faster, and she could smell his fear. Funny, she'd never smelled emotions before; fear was bitter. She knew he thought she was second-guessing the gift he'd given her, but she just needed to get her bearings on her own.

She watched as he rose cautiously from the bed, looking as if he was afraid she might bolt in an instant. Finally, after a long, intense stare, he turned and left the room. Kelly waited a few minutes, then inhaling deeply, she dressed, exited the underground chamber, and made her way out into the garden.

She looked up at the night sky, pleased at how the stars twinkled like diamonds, winking down at her. She walked along the path and absorbed the scent of the roses, letting the rapture of the night calm her. It felt wonderful!

She hadn't gone too far before she stumbled onto a stranger, who sat on a bench and stared into the central fountain. He was tall and lean, with long, dark blond hair and black vampire eyes. He stood.

"Forgive me for startling you, Madame Devereaux. I'm a friend of Jacques's and arrived last night."

She extended her hand to shake his, smiling when he brought it to his lips instead. "Kelly Devereaux."

"Michael Windsor. A pleasure to meet you."

"What brings you to Jacques's?"

Michael hesitated. She noticed the reaction and watched him. "I'm here to help him with a problem he's been having."

"You mean Mussek?" Michael nodded and Kelly shuddered. The words were out before she could stop them. "He scares me." Michael seemed to give her his full attention, his gaze intent upon her face. "Jacques told me he tried to bond with me without my knowledge." She took a few steps from Michael, then turned back, regarding him soberly. "We don't really know each other, and I'm sorry about all this, but it gives me some relief to know that you and the others will help him. Every day I'm afraid of what Mussek might do. I love

Jacques; I have for a long time. I don't know what it will take for Mussek to understand this and accept it."

She brushed a trembling hand through her hair. "Have you ever been in love, Michael?"

"No," he said softly, his gaze wavering slightly from hers. "But I have loved."

"Then you know what I'm talking about." Kelly patted his arm and smiled. "Thank you for letting me vent a little." Kelly picked a white rose that bloomed prettily beside the bench. She gave it to Michael and kissed his cheek. "And thank you for being here for us." Then she went in search of her husband.

* * * * *

Jacques sat on the couch in front of an empty hearth, face buried in his hands. The room was cold, and he let the chill of it surround his heart. He was unsure of Kelly's earlier reaction and terrified.

Thankfully, the Stephenses were still out sightseeing; Quintin and Marian had been given the task to help Cassie's family navigate around Paris. It had been easy enough the previous evening to plant an excuse in their minds why the others would be unable to go with them. Newlyweds, of course, would not be expected to leave their bed, Cassie and Dimitri were supposedly not feeling well, and Damian and Christian were guests themselves.

He tensed as his wife's presence made itself known. Looking up, Jacques gaped as she seemed to glide toward him. She wore a sheer white night dress that hugged her curves and a matching robe. The flimsy material of the gown left nothing to the imagination as he could see every swell and curve her body had. She looked ready for seduction, which puzzled him, given what had happened in their chamber before.

Kelly came to stand before him, nudging his legs apart; she knelt between them, studying his face with concerned eyes. Eyes that were black as pitch. Jacques held in a breath as that dark gaze roamed over him. He barely restrained himself from touching her; still she caught his hand in hers, bringing it to her lips and kissing his palm, nibbling softly. The tender gesture tore through him.

"Kelly." His voice was full of overwhelming guilt and sadness. Kelly touched his mouth and smiled lovingly. A blue gleam shimmered across the black depths of her eyes and Jacques was spellbound.

"I didn't mean to frighten you, I just needed a moment. This is what I wanted and still want. The night is gorgeous, Jacques. I love it!"

Jacques grasped her hands and gazed down into her eyes. "This will be a most difficult transition for you. Already I can feel your hunger, the pain--"

"No, Jacques. As long as you are by my side, I can do this. I can do anything--" She touched his cheek, her fingers tangling in the locks of his hair. "-- because I have you." She

stretched and kissed him, and he read the truth of her words and her love in her passion, tasted them on her lips. Relieved, he pulled her up against his chest and into his lap, his hands roaming all over her.

Her mouth left trails of fire along his jaw, his neck, and hovered over his pulse. Her tongue skimmed along his skin as her hands played over his chest, tugging his shirt up and over his head. Her hunger and desire beat at him, and he urged her to his flesh.

She hesitated, looking up at him, her dark eyes blazing with desire. He could see her fangs showing from beneath her slightly parted lips. His entire body clenched at the desire that surged within him, at the exquisite sensuality that she exhibited. God, she was beautiful! Even in death, she was breathtaking to behold.

With an instant's thought, the study door swung shut, the coffee table behind her slid away from them, and flames burst to life in the hearth. His bride looked surprised.

His voice was deep and husky with his burning need. "Take from me, Kelly. I can feel your hunger. I will always feed you, and you will learn all that you need to know."

With the slightest pressure from his hand on her head, Kelly lowered her mouth to his pulse once more. Her tongue swiped across it; then he felt the white heat as her fangs pierced him. His entire body clenched as pleasure slashed through him. Her mouth was hot and moist as she sucked. His own craving built until he thought he might burst with the need to be one with her. His fingers clasped a hip; his free hand glided along her ribs, cupping one breast.

As she drank, she unfastened his pants and took his cock into her hand, fondling him, running her fingers over him. He arched off the couch as the wicked sensations scorched him from his groin inward.

She moaned as she stopped drinking, then looked at him.

"Run your tongue along the wound, *mon ange*." Kelly did he said and watched as the wounds closed. Jacques knew his desire permeated the air, combining with her lust; how could he ever deny her anything?

She shoved him back onto the couch and brought his shaft into her mouth, loving him with her lips and tongue. Her hands stroked him from base to tip, clearly relishing his cries of pleasure and the fact that she could bring him to the heights of ecstasy.

Kelly kissed him with passion as she straddled him and brought the full length of him within her. She moved her body to the rhythm of their hearts, which beat in time with each other's, and moaned when he fondled her breasts. He lifted his head so that his lips could worship her sensitive mounds. When his fangs sank into her tender flesh, she whimpered. He could tell from their mental link that a warm tidal wave of pleasure rippled through her. He continued to move her hips as he plunged in and out of her, and she gripped and released him until, with a roar, he joined her over the crest.

They loved each other with infinite passion through the next few hours, losing themselves in erotic abandon. Jacques heard Kelly's thoughts just before he swept her up and brought her back to their chambers: they now truly belonged to each other in every way.

Chapter Twenty

Kelly looked at the picture on the nightstand, reminding herself to buy a frame for it. She turned and Jacques winked at her as he pulled on a shirt, quickly buttoned it, and tucked it into his pants. He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "I'm going to be visiting with the men for a while. Will you stay out of trouble?"

She smiled and shrugged. "You go be macho man! I, Jane, will remain in the tree house with the other females."

Jacques rolled his eyes at her and left the room.

She finished dressing and walked from their chambers in search of Cassie, finding her in the garden. Her friend sat on one of the many iron benches, reading a book. It made Kelly laugh that she didn't need more light to see the words. Cassie's head popped up at her approach.

"Hi, there!"

Kelly smiled. "Hi, yourself." She plopped down beside Cassie. "Well, the family isn't back yet from their day in Paris, and the men have ditched us." She had a sudden and immediate urge to run into town. "Want to go into Paris with me? It's still fairly early, and I want to buy a frame for my wedding portrait. Maybe we'll meet up with the family."

Cassie hopped to her feet. "Of course. Let's go."

Kelly found all the sets of keys to the many different cars hanging on the wall in the kitchen. Taking one batch from the hook, they were soon on their way. The women teased and laughed with each another, rolling down the windows of the car as the night breeze blew into the interior and surrounded them.

Kelly parked on a busy street where there were still several shops open. She and Cassie ventured into each one, but she still hadn't found the right frame for her painting. It still

amazed Kelly how everything was so vivid and keen to her senses, whether it was by sight, smell, touch, or sound.

She looked at a young couple talking across the street and heard every word the male whispered to the woman; Kelly grinned at his sweet sentiments.

“Quit eavesdropping,” Cassie scolded, laughing at her.

“Is it that obvious?”

“It is to me but, hey, I’ve gotten used to it by now.”

Kelly looped her arm through Cassie’s and laid her head on her shoulder as they walked down the brick sidewalk. “Was it terribly difficult for you in the beginning?”

Cassie pondered the question for a moment. “Not in the way you mean. The whole idea of vampires was crazy when I found out about them, and the way Gabriella turned me was traumatic as you know, but Dimitri was wonderful. The hardest thing to get used to was drinking someone else’s blood, but mostly Dimitri feeds me. At different times, though, he makes me hunt on my own so that if I ever need to I can.”

“What about the smells, sounds, and sensations?”

Cassie laughed. “I understand now. Yes, that did take some getting used to, but it won’t take long to learn how to block those things out. Jacques will help teach you to always be aware of your surroundings.”

Kelly smiled dreamily as she thought of her husband. Husband. It still sounded a little strange to know Jacques was completely hers now, but she savored the knowledge in her heart. She pictured him now, his dark good looks playing in her mind and that heart-stopping smile that made her insides all mushy...

“You goofy girl, you’re grinning like a teenager in love,” Cassie teased, nudging Kelly with her elbow.

“I can’t help it, Cass. All these years I thought I would never love anyone like this. I was so happy for you when you found Dimitri, and now I know how you feel. It’s incredible, wonderful. At times, I thought the heartache after I met Jacques would kill me, but he’s mine now, and I wouldn’t change any of it for the world.”

Cassie nodded in agreement, obviously understanding all too well. Her friend and Dimitri had endured quite a bit themselves to be together. Cassie’s struggles to accept the fact that Dimitri was vampire. The couple’s ultimate fight for survival against Gabriella, who had made Dimitri, Jacques... and Cassie.

Kelly shook off the morbid thoughts. They rounded a corner as they walked back to the car when she noticed the absolute silence that seemed to fill the street. There were no people as there should have been; even the breeze seemed to have deserted the area.

Kelly was not yet used to her new powers, so she turned to her friend for an explanation when Cassie grabbed her hand and stopped her in mid stride. Kelly could feel

the other woman's concern; she watched as Cassie's eyes searched the dark alley they were in front of and the one across the street, looking deep into the shadows.

"What's wrong, Cass?" Kelly was becoming nervous at Cassie's alert countenance. Then she screamed as Cassie was suddenly hurtled from her and her friend slammed hard onto the dirty pavement in the middle of the alley.

* * * * *

Something was wrong, Jacques could feel it. He sent every sense into the castle to locate Kelly. She was in the garden with Cassie, but wait... Rising, Jacques rushed from the study, Dimitri hot on his heels. "You feel something amiss, as well."

Dimitri nodded, now beside him. Damian and Christian followed them.

"Search the garden," Jacques ordered. With preternatural speed, they were done with their search in seconds. Racing back into the castle, the men searched again for Kelly and Cassie, but there was still no sign of the women, though the sense of them still being there was strong.

Jacques looked at Dimitri, Damian, and Christian, his gaze narrowed. "Where is Michael? He should have joined us already, as he said he would." Increased terror clutched his heart at the immediate answer. His latest guest was gone, of course. Michael must have helped Mussek, after all.

He still felt Kelly and Cassie's presence, but he knew he'd been tricked, as Dimitri had been tricked. Their wives were no longer in the castle. Reaching out with his mind, he searched once more for Kelly. Jacques prayed to God they weren't too late for the women.

* * * * *

"Cassie!" Kelly had moved toward her fallen friend, who was lying disoriented on the wet and smelly ground, when she noticed a shimmering mist coming toward her. Frightened, she watched the oddity for a few seconds as it wove its way into the alley. Confused at what it was, she became even more alarmed when a cold feeling filled her; the hair stood on the nape of her neck. Whatever that thing was, it couldn't be good.

Kelly, go to Cassie and get out of there now. I am on my way.

Hearing Jacques's voice combined with the overall fear she felt spurred Kelly into action. Kelly dropped to her knees by Cassie, helping her friend sit up. "Are you okay?"

Cassie clutched her head for a moment, then looked up at Kelly. "Dimitri knows. He and Jacques are on their way."

Kelly nodded. "We have to get out of here. Something is coming."

Cassie clutched Kelly's hand and Kelly heaved her to her feet. She wrapped her arm around her friend's waist, supporting her as they made their way quickly to the opposite end of the alley.

Laughter, malicious and cruel, filled the small passageway, seeming to bounce off the walls of the buildings surrounding them. It rang in Kelly's ears and wound down her spine, making more goose bumps rise, if that were possible, on her flesh.

"Ladies, why do you run?"

They both froze, slowly turning around to face the creature who had found them. Cassie and Kelly gaped at Mussek. He levitated in the air, a long black cape flowing behind him, his auburn hair whipping around his face.

"I will not let you have her." Cassie moved to shield Kelly, but Kelly tried to push her aside.

"What are you doing? Are you nuts? You can't fight him."

Cassie flung out her arms, clearly in an attempt to push the vampire back with her powers, but Mussek easily withstood the attempt. Laughing, he lashed at Cassie, sending her body flying back into Kelly.

The force knocked both women off their feet. Kelly heard Jacques cry out in her mind, knew that he was trying to get to her as quickly as he could. She watched Mussek warily from where she lay on the ground as he floated toward them.

"Foolish girl! Your strength is no match for mine, and you insult me by trying to use it against me." His hand came up and Cassie rose into the air. Kelly latched onto both of her friend's hands, trying to hold her. Cassie's eyes were wide with fear as she clutched desperately at Kelly, but Mussek's fingers flashed opened and Cassie was ripped from Kelly and flung into the brick wall on one side of the alley.

Kelly watched in dismay as Cassie fell to the ground, unconscious. Mussek lifted his hand again, elevating Cassie's limp form. Kelly cried out, jumping to her feet. "Stop it! Stop it!"

Mussek looked at her then, his smile wicked. "But why should I stop, my sweet?"

Kelly looked at her friend's suspended body and swallowed her fear. "Because if you do, I'll come with you. Willingly. But you have to let her go."

Mussek extended his other hand toward her.

Jacques's cries of denial rang in her head. *Do not take his hand. We are almost there.*

Kelly hesitated, wanting to wait for Jacques and Dimitri.

"The time is now, my love, or I will kill your friend this instant." Cassie's body jiggled in the air. "Do you really want to take that chance with her life?" His black eyes were cold as ice as he glared down at Kelly. "Make your choice."

She looked at Cassie one last time, then stepped forward, her hand reaching for Mussek's.

I'm sorry, Jacques.

No, Kelly, no! Do not do this!

But it was too late. She cringed as Mussek's frigid fingers closed around her own. He spun her up and jerked her into his embrace, releasing his hold over Cassie, who dropped down, still unconscious.

Mussek held Kelly in his embrace, her back pressed against his chest. She whimpered as his lips brushed her temple. "At last, my love, you will be mine." Then, heedless of her struggles, Mussek fled into the night.

Tears filled Kelly's eyes as she echoed Jacques's cries with her own. He and Dimitri flew into the alley seconds later. But Mussek and Kelly were gone.

Chapter Twenty-One

Dimitri immediately rushed to his wife. He lifted her into his arms, his fingers brushing through her long chestnut hair, one palm caressing her cheek as the other searched her for injuries.

“Cassandra, *agapi mou*, open your eyes.”

Cassie's lashes fluttered then her eyes slowly looked into his. Dimitri kissed her lips passionately. Having her safe in his arms was an overwhelming relief. Pulling away, he stared down at her.

“Why did you leave when you knew the danger?”

Cassie lowered her gaze. “I'm sorry. Honestly, we didn't think of it, only about spending time with each other. And she really wanted to get a frame for the portrait you did.” She looked over at Jacques, who stood alone, facing the other end of the alley where Mussek had disappeared with Kelly.

His friend's head was high and Dimitri knew he was calling out to Kelly with his mind, trying to catch her scent, anything that would help Jacques locate her.

“Jacques,” Cassie whispered softly. Slowly he turned around to face her. The expression in his black eyes was so forlorn that Dimitri's heart nearly broke. He knew what it was like to fear for a beloved.

Jacques nodded slightly. “I know.” He turned away from them again. “I will find her and bring her home.”

Dimitri went to his friend, his wife in his arms. “Where would he have taken her?”

Jacques didn't answer for a long moment. Then he spun around with such speed that Cassandra jerked in Dimitri's embrace.

“St. Petersburg. He will take her to his home in Russia.”

"We will follow," Dimitri said.

"No. Take Cassie home and tend to her. Damian and Christian will come with me." Jacques studied Cassie's face and touched her cheek. "I will bring Kelly home. She is mine, and he cannot have her."

* * * * *

Kelly could sense the approaching dawn. Her limbs were heavy, her heart began to slow, and lethargy settled over her. Mussek's speed was decreasing, and she yelped as he stopped suddenly, lowering her to the ground. She tried to stand, but her legs would not support her weight. All she wanted to do was sleep.

Mussek knelt beside her, placing a finger beneath her chin. "I can't believe Jacques's selfishness in turning you. The right should have been mine." He smiled sadly. "The dawn is always hardest on the newly made. Sleep calls you, I know."

Kelly glared at him and turned her face from his touch. She curled up into a ball, wanting to give herself over to the rest that her body was demanding.

Mussek rose and swept his arms wide. The ground churned and roiled open. She choked in surprise, screaming when Mussek lifted her into his arms once more and carried them both into the earth. She shrieked and clawed at him with renewed energy as the earth began to close over them. Jacques had never prepared her for anything like this, never had time to.

"I am sorry, my love, but this is the way we must sleep until we reach my home tomorrow."

Hysteria settled in her heart, terror gripping her soul as she felt like she was being buried alive. She knew she would not survive with her sanity intact, that this would be her undoing.

Then she heard him, Jacques's voice whispering to her. He had sensed her terror and was sending calming waves to her. She opened her mind wide to him, letting his love flow over her, welcoming it as her lifeline. His warmth filled her, as did his tender words.

Mussek gripped her harshly in his embrace. "Back off, Devereaux."

Kelly hit him in the face and chest as hard as she could, but Mussek's strength quickly overcame hers. She was desperate, feeling her connection with Jacques slipping. She needed him.

"No, my love. It is you and I now. Leave your old life behind and be with me."

She screamed in rage at him, hating him with every fiber of her being; then the sun rose over the horizon, and death claimed her.

* * * * *

Jacques allowed himself to feel wild with rage when he felt Kelly finally sleep. He, Damian, and Christian were also safe in the earth's rich soil, but the thought that Mussek would subject Kelly to such a thing when she was unprepared for it made him writhe with fury. He wanted to rush from the ground and save Kelly from her nightmare.

Damian's voice filled his mind. *You will have your chance, Jacques.*

Jacques clenched his fists. *I will kill him, and then I will hunt down Michael and see that he rots in hell! They will both suffer for their actions.*

I know. Let your body and mind rest; you will need your strength when you face Mussek.

Jacques gave a harsh laugh. *I let my guard down, which is why I was not there to protect my wife.*

Mussek was waiting for any opportunity. If it had not been now, it would have been later.

Jacques knew the wisdom of Damian's words, yet the guilt was still there. He closed his mind to Damian, anxious for the sun to set so that he could claim his wife from the man he used to call teacher and friend.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Kelly pushed away from Mussek when he set her down. She looked up in amazement at the three-story house that was Mussek's home. From its grandiosity and location in St. Petersburg, she could tell he'd probably been of nobility at one point his life.

"Does our home impress you, my love?" His arm went around her waist, drawing her against him.

"Don't touch me." Kelly's voice was low and venomous. Mussek released her, his black eyes glaring down at her. She had thought him a handsome man once, but now she knew he was evil, and it made him hideous. He held out his hand. "Welcome."

She ignored his hand. Head high, she walked haughtily past him up the white steps to the door, which was opened by a tall, grim man. He reminded her somewhat of Frankenstein, with his choppy black hair and sunken-in dead eyes. His hands were huge, hanging like deadweight at his sides.

"Welcome home, master."

Kelly tentatively moved past the servant into the house, her shoes making no sound on the thick, carpeted floor. Her gaze made a wide sweep of the entrance area. A chandelier hung over the bottom of a staircase, each step covered by plush red carpet. The dining room was to her right and a ballroom was to her left. There were portraits, probably Mussek's family and ancestors.

"Thank you, Burin. I trust everything is in order?"

The man bowed slightly. Kelly cringed at his expressionless face.

"Yes, master, everything has been prepared for your return and the arrival of your lady."

Mussek smiled. "Very good. Show our lady to her room."

Burin looked at Kelly with those dead eyes and she shuddered. "This way, my lady."

She didn't move. She didn't want to follow that man anywhere.

Mussek's hand fell to her waist. "Go, my dear. Burin will show you your wardrobe and the gown you'll wear this evening. Change; then join me in the ballroom."

Kelly gazed defiantly at him. "You are not my love, and you are certainly not my husband. I am *Madame la Duchesse de Devereaux*, wife to *Monsieur le Duc de Devereaux*. No matter what your sick mind thinks, that will not change. Never in my heart."

Her words had the desired effect as his mouth twisted into a snarl, and his black eyes glittered with rage. He shoved her toward the stairs with such force she fell, her blond hair tumbling over her face, and her shoulder hitting the last step.

Burin leaned over, his big and cold hand closing around her upper arms as he lifted her to her feet. Kelly righted herself and smiled at Mussek, happy with his anger, then followed Burin.

The servant led her to another set of stairs, located behind the ascending ones in the foyer and along a corridor to a large door at the end of the hall. He opened the door and gestured.

Watching him warily, Kelly quickly moved into the room, never taking her gaze from him. He bowed slightly and shut the door, leaving her alone. She turned and noticed first the evening gown lying across the four-poster bed, which was covered with brilliant red sheets and blankets, a shocking contrast to the white outfit.

Walking over to the bed, Kelly picked up the shimmering material and held it up for inspection. He was crazy if he thought he could woo her into loving him.

Clutching the dress to her breast, she sank down on the bed, her heart aching for Jacques. The last time she could freely touch his mind was when she had been buried in the earth with Mussek. Her terror had somehow broken through to him, despite Mussek's shield. How she wished she could mentally speak to him right now. It had somehow felt natural for her, as if she had been doing so her entire life. She felt empty without him, though she knew he was coming for her.

Rising, she tossed the dress onto the bed, refusing to do as Mussek wished, but then she thought of her husband. Maybe if she played along with Mussek, it would help Jacques when he arrived. And maybe Mussek would lower his guard.

Kelly sighed and began removing her clothes. She retrieved the gown and dropped it over her head. It slid over her skin in a cool wisp of movement, the folds of the skirt loose and flowing. She found matching slippers beside the bed slipped those on, too.

Finished, she looked toward the fireplace and gasped, riveted on the portrait that hung above the mantel.

When had he painted that of her and how had he done it? She squinted, moving toward it, and studied the picture closely. That could not be her; the clothes and hair were wrong. It must be the other woman, Dominique. Her stomach heaved. How could she have someone else's face?

Mussek didn't want her; he wanted Dominique. Kelly had known that, but seeing the portrait brought the ugly truth slamming into reality.

There was a light knock on the door, and then it opened. She turned as Burin motioned for her to follow. Back straight, she took a deep breath and tried to prepare herself for the night to come.

* * * * *

Jacques, Damian, and Christian stood on a roof across from Mussek's home, using their combined powers to shield their presence from the older vampire. Jacques gasped as he watched Kelly being led into a grand ballroom, where there was a candlelit table. Mussek rose from one of the chairs, a pleased smile on his face.

"What is your plan?" Christian asked. They continued to watch the scene below.

"To raid the fort, of course." Jacques tried very hard to suppress the rage he knew was emanating from him in turbulent waves.

Damian laid his hand on Jacques's shoulder. "We need to have a plan, my friend. Mussek is not newly turned; he is older than all of us together and will not be conquered easily."

Jacques nodded, turning and looking at the two men. "I have a plan, but it will be for her only. You will both protect her, see to her safety... I know how we can do that."

* * * * *

Kelly sat across from Mussek. He poured a glass of dark red liquid into a goblet and handed it to her. The smell of blood wafted to her nostrils and hunger immediately clawed at her stomach. She turned away from the glass, refusing its contents. Mussek seemed undeterred as he set the goblet in front of her, lifting his own for a toast.

"At last, my beloved. To us."

Kelly swung her gaze back to Mussek's, teeth clenched. "I am not your beloved."

He *tsked* and lowered his goblet. "Must we fight? Can't you give yourself to me like before?"

Kelly slammed her fist down on the table. "I am not Dominique. I am Kelly. I don't have old memories of you, but the recent ones that I do have are terrible."

Mussek ignored her words. "Dance for me."

Kelly glared at him. "No."

He crashed his own fist onto the table, causing her to jump. "You will dance for me. It pleases me very much whenever you do so." His eyes held red flames.

Kelly rose from her seat and hurried to the middle of the room. She didn't want to be near him when that look, glowing of lust and insanity, was in his eyes. She raised her hands in the air and prepared to dance as music filled the air, provided by a stereo Burin had placed on the of the large fireplace across from them.

Twirling to the music, Kelly pretended it was Jacques she dipped and swayed for. That she was back in their castle, in the warmth of their home. It was his gaze that caressed her, his voice that beckoned to her.

Would her husband find her? She stumbled as her heart thudded painfully with thoughts of Jacques. She turned and faced Mussek. He lifted his glass and swirled the contents, grinning widely at her.

"Everything I remembered and more." The scent of blood and wine slammed into her. Her fangs pricked her lips. She wanted to shriek at him, but the pain in her gut stopped her.

"I feel your hunger, my love." He rose swiftly from his chair, took her hand, and led her back to the table where he knelt beside her. One of his talons lengthened; he tore his shirt open, slicing across his chest.

"Take freely from me, beloved. Let me feed and love you."

The fragrance of his blood hit Kelly like a brick wall. It washed over her, called to her with its sweet voice, promising an end to her empty belly. Her hands shook, and she clutched the shimmering material of her dress in a death-like grip. "No." Her voice was barely a whisper.

She shoved him from her and ran from the room; she heard him command Burin to remain where he was. Kelly sped toward the main entrance, but Mussek was there in a blink of an eye, blocking her escape. Kelly turned and raced back through the massive house. Flinging herself through a swinging door, she stopped and looked around the kitchen.

Mussek's laughter filled the space around her, louder, then quieter. He was playing with her, stalking her.

Frantic she rushed to the drawers and jerked them open, scrounging for any type of weapon. Pulling forth a long, sharp blade, she turned and made her way cautiously out of the room.

Everything became silent. Her heart was pounding, and she knew he'd be able to hear it. She didn't know how to block her presence like he did, but she'd be damned if he'd keep her against her will.

She felt the hair rise on the back of her neck, his gaze on her, but she didn't know where he was. She put on a burst of speed and was at the front door in a split second. The new power overwhelmed her; dizzy, Cassie caught herself and grappled for the door knob.

Suddenly, she was thrust across the foyer, Mussek taunting her. "Yes, my love, my sweet Dominique. If you will not come to me of your own free will, then it will be by force. I will bend your mind to mine, and you will serve me well."

"I'm not Dominique. I'll kill you before you claim me." Kelly lifted the blade to stab him. He caught her wrist and looked down at her with a mixture of betrayal and pain; then his rage lashed out at her.

"You bitch!" he roared, the very walls shaking from his wrath. He shook her roughly. "You are meant to be mine. You've always been mine!" He lifted his hand and struck her hard across the face, sending her flying. Her body slammed into the far wall.

Kelly landed in a limp heap. Mussek had a grip on the knife when the front window shattered, blowing shards of glass at him. He faded to mist, but the damage was done; splinters penetrated his skin.

Mussek took shape again and faced Jacques, who levitated at the broken window. His former protégé's hair whipped around his face, his eyes filled with hate.

"I see *my wife* does not desire your touch." Jacques's voice was deep and menacing as he motioned to the blade Mussek had dropped.

Mussek smiled widely and knelt down, grasping the weapon from the floor. Burin appeared, waiting to do his bidding. "Her betrayal is no worse than yours."

Jacques's feet touched the marble floor. "Your fixation on Kelly has made you mad."

Mussek hurtled the knife at Jacques, who sidestepped the steel, letting it bury in the wall behind his head. "So it's mad, am I? Very well." He looked at his servant. "Kill her." Mussek glanced back at Jacques maliciously. "If I can't have her, then neither shall you."

Burin reached for Kelly's still form, but Jacques lifted his hand; her body rose and soared from the room, barely missing Burin's grasp, to land in another vampire's arms outside the window and on the front lawn.

"Take her now. Go!"

A cloud of mist began to swirl around the vampire and Kelly. Mussek rushed forth, but it was too late; they vanished.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Kelly moaned. Her head was pounding; her jaw and the rest of her body ached as well. A soothing hand brushed her forehead, a cool cloth following in its wake.

“It's okay, child.”

The voice startled Kelly. She opened her eyes, and a woman with skin the color of dark chocolate leaned over her. She wore a brilliantly hued wrap around her head, her dress was multicolored and fell to cover her toes, and a white apron was tied around her waist.

Kelly jerked her head to the side, seeing flames blazing in a fireplace. She was lying on a bed softer than any she had ever rested upon. She seemed to sink into the mattress. Sheer curtains hung from the canopy and surrounded her.

Where was she? Where was Jacques? Mussek? What had happened?

Kelly pushed herself up on the bed.

The woman grabbed her arms. “Hush now. Everything is all right. Master Christian is here.”

Kelly shook. She looked over as Christian entered the room and came directly to the bed. He sat down on its edge, opposite the woman.

In her confusion and fear, he was the only thing Kelly recognized as safe to her. She launched herself into his arms, which circled her, soothing, calming.

“Christian, where am I? Where is Jacques?”

He gripped her upper arms tightly and pulled back. His black gaze caught hers, intense, concerned. “Kelly, I need you to listen to me. You're on my plantation in the 1800s. This is Annie, head of the household and a trusted servant and friend.”

Kelly peered at Annie through the red haze of her tears, ignoring Christian's reference to the time period. The woman smiled at her and nodded. Looking back at Christian, Kelly clutched at his collar. "Take me back," she choked out.

He shook his head. "I can't do that. You have to remain here for a full week, and then we will return to a safe place back in the present time."

"Where?" Kelly asked, trying not to cry.

"We will meet in San Francisco at Dimitri's home. If..." His voice trailed off, and he looked away from Kelly.

She dug her nails into his chest; a week would be torture for her. "If what?"

He met her gaze once more. "If Jacques doesn't make it, you will stay with Dimitri and Cassie. If Jacques defeats Mussek, he will be waiting for us there."

Sobbing, Kelly pounded her fists against Christian's chest. "No, no, no! Take me back! Please!" She fought against the hold Christian had on her arms. He had risen to his feet and was trying to restrain her. Kelly reached out to touch Jacques with her mind, but she couldn't find him.

Something must have happened to him!

Christian clearly sensed what she was doing, thinking, saw her hysteria increasing. "Kelly, you cannot contact him from here." He shook her roughly, causing her blond hair to fall around her face and shoulders. She calmed down somewhat and stared at him wide-eyed.

"He is going to make it. He has Damian with him, and he will defeat Mussek. You have to believe that. Trust in Jacques, and you will return to him."

Kelly hung her head. She loved her husband more than life itself. She would have to think positive to make it through the next week. She knew her love for Jacques would sustain her. It had to.

Leaning against Christian again, she let him cradle her as she cried.

* * * * *

"No! My love!" Mussek spun around, his fury pushing at Jacques. "Where have they gone?"

Jacques looked his old teacher in the eyes. "Where you and I can never touch her."

Mussek thrust his long talons at him, slashing out, but striking only air. "You will die, Devereaux."

Jacques bowed elegantly.

Burin stepped forward to aid his master, but Damian was outside and moved toward the broken window.

"Oh, no. That would not be fair at all. Come to me, little man." The servant bellowed as he was hurled from his feet to land in the front yard. "Welcome to your death."

With one eye on Mussek, Jacques's other eye noted that Damian's gaze glittered like black glass. Burin didn't have time to react before Damian's talons cut the man's throat from ear to ear with one clean swipe.

The servant gurgled, suffocating on his life's blood.

Damian bent over the dying man, his lips curled in a cruel smile. "You chose Mussek, the wrong man to follow, and this is your punishment -- death by my hand." Jacques heard his friend's words as Damian brought his lips closer to the man's ear. "Unfortunately for you, there is no difference between me and your master." The last of the man's breath left his body, and his eyes stared sightlessly at the night sky.

Jacques crouched low, waiting for the attack to come. Mussek stood across from him, his fangs gleaming in the light. He snarled, and Jacques reciprocated. Then they rushed toward each other, their bodies slamming together in mid-air.

Each strike was delivered quickly and blocked, until Mussek managed to fling Jacques away from him, raking his claws over Jacques's torso, shredding his shirt and leaving deep red gashes. Mussek laughed, licking the blood away from his fingertips.

Jacques stared down at his chest; the pain was like liquid fire scorching his flesh. His head snapped up; then he pivoted and caught the other vampire off guard, slicing Mussek from shoulder to wrist, rendering one arm useless.

Mussek howled and streaked across the room, catching Jacques around the middle. Both men flew through the air, crashing through a wall and tumbling outside.

The battle continued, with lashes of power sending one man or the other crashing into objects. Their minds fought for control as Mussek choked Jacques from across the yard. Jacques managed to break the suffocating hold that Mussek wielded, struggling against the blackness that swirled around him, the shimmering stars that exploded in his mind.

Pushing both his hands forward with one last strike, Jacques was gratified that Mussek fell backward, crashing to the ground. Jacques wasted no time; with blinding speed he launched himself atop Mussek, who vanished, leaving Jacques to collide with the hard earth. He turned, but a hand wrapped around his throat stopped him as Mussek materialized once more.

Lightning lit the sky and slammed down around them. Jacques felt Mussek slipping into his mind, holding him immobile. No! This couldn't be happening. He refused to believe it, but it was true; he felt Mussek's power dominate him.

Jacques caught a glimpse of Damian from the corner of his eye, but the other man abruptly stopped in his tracks and fell. Michael stood behind him, holding a blunt object.

Michael smiled widely, and Mussek laughed.

"Trusting fool! To try to steal Dominique from me and think that I would not retaliate and still make her mine in the end." He spat at Jacques's immobile form.

"Oh, yes. She's mine now, Devereaux. Know that nothing you can do or say will stand in my way." Mussek reached toward the iron wrought fence surrounding his home. The metal groaned, bending, and then, finally breaking under the strain of Mussek's strength, a jagged piece flying into the waiting vampire's hand.

Jacques felt despair grip him; he had failed Kelly... and Damian as well. There was no one to stop Mussek. His years set him above and beyond everyone there; Jacques had been foolish enough to believe he could best his former teacher.

Mussek raised the rod above his head. Jacques refused to look away; he wanted to see the final blow as it came. He whispered a silent prayer for Kelly, but as the piece of iron came down toward his heart, a part of the same metal fence suddenly protruded from Mussek's chest.

The vampire appeared incredulous for a moment; then his gaze met Jacques's before he burst into dust, his ashes carried away on the night breeze. Both rods clanged loudly as they hit the ground.

Jacques immediately felt the release of Mussek's hold on him and rose shakily to his feet to face Michael. He was stunned. "I thought you had betrayed us."

Michael shrugged. "You fought well, but against Mussek, you needed someone whom he would not suspect of aiding you. Old as he was, none of you had a chance otherwise."

"Thank you, Michael."

"It was nothing." Then Michael shifted and flew away.

Damian approached him, rubbing the back of his head. "He was always a bastard."

Jacques grimaced as the pain from his wounds finally registered. His chest and stomach were badly slashed; he needed the healing soil of France. Damian caught Jacques as he staggered; then Damian lifted him into his arms. "My thanks, Damian."

"I will take you home; then I must go."

"You are welcome to visit the States with me."

Damian shook his head. "No, D'Angel calls, and I must travel to her. She's in danger and needs protection."

Jacques grimaced at the mention of Damian's maker. "You are a good man, my friend. Allow yourself to behave as one."

Damian said nothing and took to the sky.

Jacques watched as the earth moved in a blur beneath them. Soon he would be home, but it would be empty an empty place until Kelly was returned to him. By the time his wounds healed, he would be in San Francisco awaiting her. He missed her now and hoped she would forgive him for sending her away, knowing her fear for him must be great. It was the worst and best thing he could have done for her, depending on the outcome of the night's events.

He relaxed in Damian's arms, but cursed and tensed when he remembered he'd have a lot of explaining and memory-planting to do about the other vampires' absences when he faced his in-laws.

It was a good thing no one would doubt he himself had spent the time in bed with his wife. If only it were true.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Christian approached Kelly. "It is time to return."

Kelly wrung her hands together; she was afraid to go back, afraid Jacques would not be there waiting for her.

She had spent most of her time keeping her mind occupied by reading books from Christian's extensive library, walking the plantation each evening, and even learning how to milk cows.

Christian's hands closed around hers, stopping her fidgeting. "Be brave, Kelly. You've been valiant these past seven days. Remember that."

Kelly squeezed his fingers and smiled. "Thank you, Christian." She looked over at Annie, who stood with a towel in her hand.

"I just wanted to wish you well, Mrs. Devereaux."

Kelly walked across the room and hugged the woman. Annie had been a wonderful companion to her during her stay on the plantation, including fitting a dress especially for Kelly. She'd told Kelly it wasn't right for a woman to wear the revealing white dress she had been in when Kelly and Christian had first arrived.

"I will miss you, Annie. Take care, and thank you." Annie inclined her head, smiling sweetly at her, and left the room.

The full skirt Kelly wore, with all of its heavy material swished loudly as she moved to Christian and into his arms. "Let's go," she whispered.

A shimmering mist clouded around their feet, rising to swirl them into its embrace until they disappeared.

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Disoriented, Kelly stood still for a moment getting her bearings. Opening her eyes, she looked up at Dimitri's mansion. She gasped and ran toward the side entrance, which was the closest to her. Her heart was thumping against her ribs, her fear making her sick to her stomach as she wondered if Jacques would be there. This life she now led was not worth it if he wasn't around to share it with her.

Flinging open the door, she raced into the house and moved toward the front hall. Cassie was standing on the stairs.

"Kelly!"

She sobbed loudly, her terror a living thing. "Jacques! Jacques, where are you?" She felt his love surround her before she saw him. Then he was there, rushing toward her from Dimitri's study, his friend following close behind.

Jacques caught her in his arms. Kelly cried out in joy, the sound muffled as her face buried in the hollow of his shoulder. He picked her up and swung her around, the sound of their laughter ringing through the hall.

Jacques pulled away, but she latched onto him, kissing his forehead, eyes, cheeks, nose, chin. Finally, her lips met his, and it was a soul-searing kiss, burning through her. Their mouths clung, and their hands held each other tightly as if they would never let go.

Eventually, Kelly released him, her eyes shimmering with tears as she gazed at his beloved features. "I was so afraid you wouldn't be here." Her sobs rolled from her as she tried to tell him how much she loved him, but his fingertips touched her lips.

"I will always be here," he whispered fervently. "I promise."

Kelly grinned through her tears, and his mouth met hers once more, sealing his promise of always and forever to her.

Epilogue

Kelly laughed as Marian clucked over her and Jacques like a mother hen. She laughed even harder when he actually reddened at the woman's affection.

Quintin smiled at his wife. "I am sure Kelly and Jacques would like some time alone to get settled back into their home."

Marian hugged Kelly tightly, then took her husband's hand and let him lead her out of Jacques and Kelly's bedchamber.

Kelly peered at her husband, eyebrow raised, a teasing smile lifting the corners of her pink lips. "Why, my dear, I do believe you're blushing." Jacques flushed even more, and Kelly grinned, rising to her toes and twirling away from him around the bed. Her arms lifted gracefully above her head, and she knew her eyes must be glinting with mischief. "I didn't know vampires blushed."

With a move too rapid to follow, Jacques was around the bed. He grabbed her and flung her down on the mattress. His body covered hers, his hands pinning her wrists above her head.

"I didn't know wives were supposed to tease their husbands so unmercifully."

Kelly chortled with glee. "Aww, I'm sorry." She knew it was likely the most insincere apology Jacques had ever heard. As punishment, he began to tickle her until, breathless with laughter, she begged for mercy.

Jacques stopped and looked down at her soberly, though a smile still hovered around his mouth. "Are you happy, Kelly?"

Kelly's eyes widened. She touched her hand tenderly to his cheek, caressing him. "Happy? That word seems so small compared with what I feel. Elated. Joyous. I love you, Jacques. And I'm thinking about joining a new dance company here in Paris; they seem amenable to me dancing in only their evening performances, since those tend to draw a

larger audience. I think Vincinni almost stroked out when I told him I was leaving his company.”

At the moment Jacques seemed to have other things on his mind. She moaned as he pushed her skirt over her waist, clearly delighted at the absence of the panties she’d purposely left off. He leaned back, quickly unfastening his pants and kicking them away, then stared at her, watching as he entered her.

She gasped at the pleasure as he filled her, and then he was moving. Kelly’s moans filled the air as she pushed herself against him, burying him even deeper within her. She groaned as tingles raced up her spine; her tongue licked her lips as he shoved onto his elbows and continued his long, deep strokes.

Kelly realized she’d underestimated her husband’s ability to concentrate on more than one thing when he spoke.

“You know you’ll have to retire at some point; perhaps return as someone else every seventy-five to one hundred years or so. What about rehearsals during the day?”

Kelly tangled her fingers in his hair, grinding against him as she replied. “I’ll have you work your vampire mind tricks on the director. You’re like my very own Jedi Master.”

“You obviously have all the answers.” Grinning widely, he bent down and kissed her. “I love you, Kelly. You are truly my angel.” Then Jacques rolled her above him, causing her to cry out at the earth-shattering bliss they could only find with each other.

She had everything she wanted right here, and the one who had given it to her was Jacques. He’d made her dreams come true, had made her willing to risk giving her love wholeheartedly again, despite the early loss of her parents. She was his in every way now, and his pain, frustration, happiness, and love were hers. They belonged together for eternity.

 THE END 

Ann Lory

I am a Missouri native, although I did live ten years in Nebraska, where I began writing in hopes of one day being published. I have been married to the same wonderful man for the last eleven years, and we have a son who is the spitting image of his father. Our second child is on the way; either late winter or early spring -- whenever baby decides to make its debut into the world.

We also have our furry babies -- two cats, and one dog. Our poor Lab still gets pushed around by our hissing felines.

I enjoy spending my spare time with my family, watching movies, reading, bike riding on one of the local trails, and of course college football. I love football season and my Missouri Tigers! I hope other fans don't hate me, but it's like our significant others ... we can't help who we love.

Visit Ann on the Web at <http://www.annlory.com>.