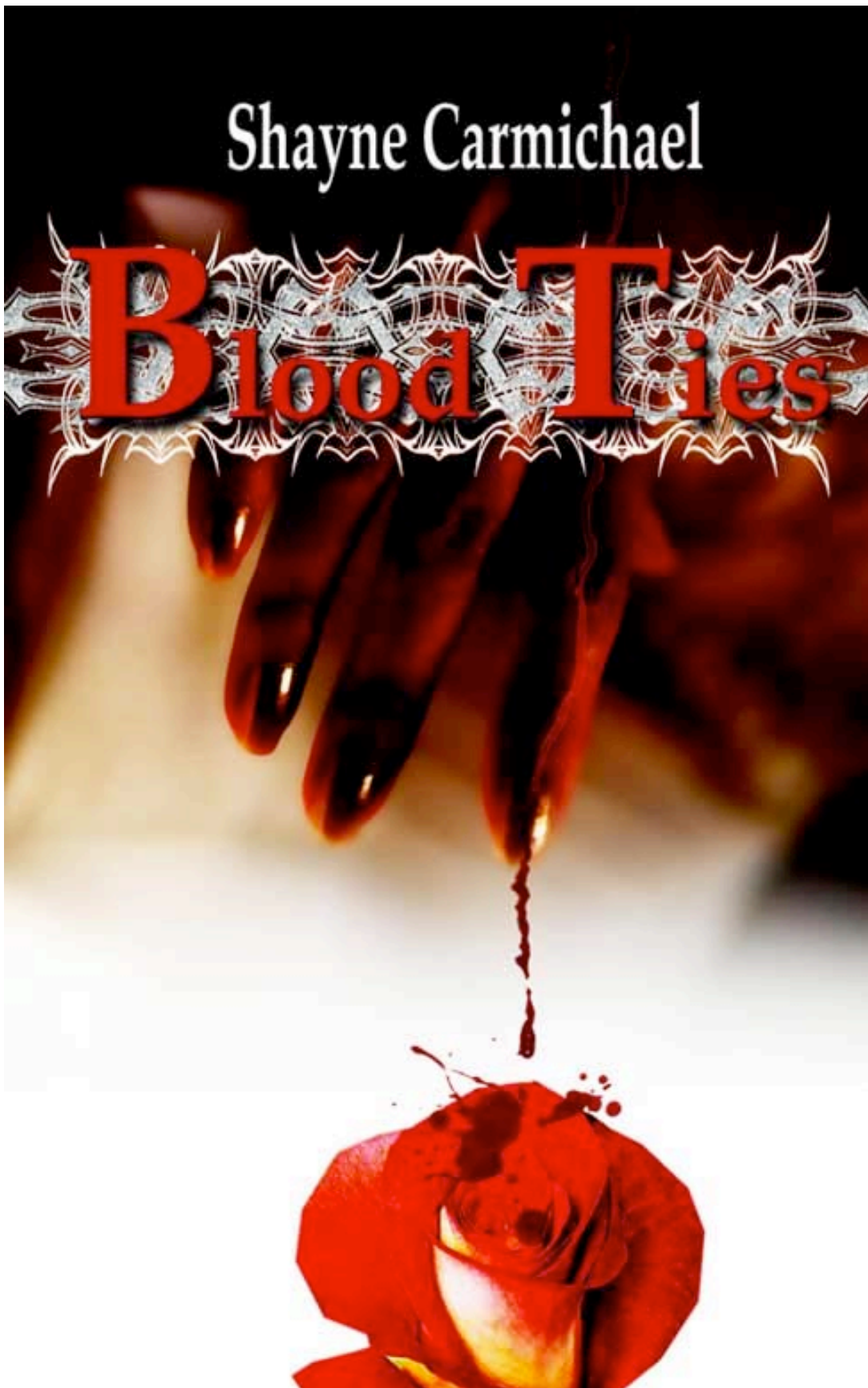


Shayne Carmichael

Blood Ties



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Blood Ties

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Dedication

To Jen for taking on Ash, and putting up with me through the worst of my spazs when the characters kept changing the story on me. Yes, I mean you, Nikolai.

To Dan and his character Nef for the inspiration for Marcus. Big bad scary.

Thanks, Maria of allexperts.com, for being an invaluable help with the Latin.

To the Mel. The original inspiration and guidance into that confusing world of male vampires. You taught me well.

My undying gratitude goes to my beta reader, Aubrey. For having the stamina to make it through my punctuation, talking heads, and the thens phase. But she never found a spelling error. And also to Michelle for having the guts to smooth this puppy out. Ings, double hes and all. I'm learning. I really am.

And what would I have done without Myc? For falling in love with Gabriel, I adore you. Heh.

Ex umbris ei imaginibus in veritatem, From shadows and images to the truth.

Shayne

Chapter 1

"You're getting on my last nerve, Charlie." Adrian met the imperturbable ice blue gaze as Charlie tried to cajole Adrian into going along with what he wanted. Most times, Adrian thought it was cute when Charlie tried it, but definitely not tonight.

"What's the problem with putting Adam Trent to sleep?"

"I don't do serial killers. I help the restless dead on their way to the great beyond, but I have no sympathy for serial killer wraiths. It's a firm guide rule of mine."

"He's within your ten-limit slot for tomorrow night, Adrian. The state is paying really well, way above the normal fee for this one. They want him gone. I'd think you'd want him gone like the rest of us."

Charlie was the type that, if you gave him an inch, you'd be in New York City by sunset. He made a hell of a secretary, but his meddling sometimes drove Adrian up a wall.

"Nice try, Charlie, but I'm not buying. Tell them to call Dakota, he can handle it. The state is damn lucky to have two guides who can." Adrian knew his old mentor would be more than happy to do the work.

"Dakota is on vacation. Donovan Correctional wants Trent out of their hair tonight. There are quite a few seers there."

"Remind me again who's boss and who's secretary here. They'll wait for Dakota or contact Karl in Arizona."

"You're the boss, and I'm the obedient drone."

Picking up the newspaper on his desk, Adrian scanned the front page, ignoring Charlie for the moment.

"Front page looks like a Who's Who of the supernatural." Charlie relaxed in his chair, commenting on the article as Adrian read it.

"Yeah, I see. Voting whether ghosts have any rights or not is up in front of Congress. Looks like the newest legislation gunning for the dead is front page news."

"Well, the government has its hand in everything: guides, were creatures, vampires, no exceptions. The most they can do with the dead is deal with the vampires, since they can see them. Think it'll pass?"

The newspaper, proud in its political correctness, used the term 'wraith' and not the incorrect 'ghost.' Ghosts didn't care either way. It made Adrian wonder why they didn't insist a vampire be referred to as the living impaired. "Senator McCabe is backing it, but I still doubt it'll go through. The dead can't vote, and that's all that really matters to way too many of them."

Once he was sufficiently up on the news, Adrian tossed the paper in the trashcan before checking his desk calendar for whatever he had next on his agenda.

"Damn." Adrian had forgotten the Mayor's big public relations event. Charlie had sent his acceptance to the Mayor's office before he gave Adrian the invitation. Adrian didn't want to go, but this was one of the times an inch got him to New York City. Charlie thought he needed a night out.

"Yeah, I was just about to remind you it's time to head out and get ready for the Mayor's party."

As disgruntled as Adrian felt about the party, Charlie almost had a book tossed at his head before he disappeared out the door.

Checking his watch, Adrian realized he had to be there in less than a half an hour. Groaning again in annoyance, he grabbed his pack and list of appointments and dashed out the door.

After a stop off at the Burger King drive through, it took Adrian another ten minutes to get to the Ambassador. He finally found a parking space and wolfed down his burger and fries. When he finished, a quick look at his watch let him know he was already late. Too much downtown traffic. Reluctantly, he got out of the car and went inside. One of the men assigned to keep the riff raff out took one look at him and demanded to see Adrian's invitation. Adrian handed it over, wishing he'd forgotten the damn thing.

"Adrian Debrett? I'd like to see some ID, please."

Rolling his eyes, he fished his wallet from his back pocket and flashed the guy his driver's license. After examining the license, the man handed it back to Adrian and nodded.

Stepping inside the main ballroom, Adrian immediately noticed the room was already packed with wall-to-wall people. He singled out the vampires from the living and even a few wraiths who had slipped in without an invitation. The dead liked him; the energy

inside him was like a beacon to them. The three ghosts present made a beeline for Adrian while he hovered near the front door. Adrian didn't mind and let them know with a nod they could approach him. After listening to their mental chattering and questions for a moment, Adrian went into his spiel about resting them so they would be at peace. He never said that stuff out loud because it always sounded so hokey.

Since he'd been standing in the doorway long enough to get a few eyes on him, Adrian muttered under his breath, "Just let me get through this, and I'll help you guys, okay?"

Adrian knew any of the vamps present could hear him talking to apparently nothing if they wanted, but he didn't pay attention to them. The ghosts appeared to be fine with having to wait and followed him as he walked further into the room. Adrian wanted to find his own place to hide out until he could decently leave. Glancing over the crowd again, he saw Charlie over by the Mayor and headed toward them.

"Adrian, you made it, and almost on time, too." Charlie definitely sounded annoyed at him.

"Hey, Charlie, Rich."

"Evening, Adrian. Charlie just told me about the Trent case." Mayor Richard Carson was an amiable man in his fifties with a perpetually young face, the Dick Clark of politicians. Adrian knew him fairly well since Carson had worked with Adrian's dad on the police force.

Adrian shot a look at Charlie that should have been able to fry him on the spot. There had been no reason for Charlie to say anything to Rich about Trent. All he got back from Charlie was a smirk.

"Dakota will handle Adam Trent when he returns from vacation, Rich. I'll have Charlie set it up." Adrian happily passed the buck to his old mentor.

"I'll let them know." Waiting to get it done didn't seem to bother Rich.

"Adrian, would you mind if I ask a favor?"

"Sure, Rich, you can ask."

"Could you stop by the house around two? I should be home by then."

Charlie drifted off, no doubt hoping to find some potential clients, as Adrian answered Rich. "Yeah, I can. I have to be at my first appointment by ten, but I should be done around two."

It seemed Rich didn't want the ears around them to hear whatever he wanted to say. It had Adrian curious, but only mildly so. With his back to the crowd, Adrian didn't want to

give up his safe haven quite yet, so he asked Rich, "Mind if I hang out here?"

"If you can bear the boredom, feel free."

Adrian took up position about a foot from Rich's side. Not close enough to look like a favorite or anything, but close enough for his sense of well-being. He paid some attention to political maneuvering and knew his place in the scheme of things. Watching the comings and goings of everybody who wanted a word with Rich, Adrian didn't contribute much to the conversation, and the ghosts stayed close by. Charlie returned, but he was too busy talking to everybody else to engage Adrian.

Social gatherings were at the top of Adrian's ten least favorite things to do list, so time dragged by, and he stuck out like a sore thumb in his jeans among the evening gowns and suits. Not that it mattered to him.

Occasionally somebody would mention business to Charlie, and he'd introduce Adrian. According to Charlie, Adrian was supposed to give a nice smile to the potential client and agree to everything. The best they ever got out of Adrian was a nod, and occasionally a "No problem." Tonight would be no different; but, bless his heart, Charlie kept trying.

A group of several vampires walked toward them, interrupting Adrian's secure island of internal reverie. He shifted slightly to the right, adding about six inches to the space between the Mayor and himself. The vampires wanted to talk to Rich, and Adrian wanted to stay out of it.

"Prince Garland, I'm glad you accepted my invitation." Rich did the hale and hearty politician act quite well, but Adrian liked him better when he didn't.

Regally, Garland inclined his head to Rich, then to Adrian. "Trisha told me that you wanted to speak with me about the Meyer Building. Your secretary should have the folder by tomorrow."

The deep, cultured voice had a faint accent; it caught Adrian's attention and made him look up. At six foot, Adrian wasn't short, but still he had to look up. Not liking it, Adrian just gave the man a nod. Damn, he was a gorgeous specimen. Was there such a thing as a not-gorgeous vampire? The official head of the herd of vampires who hung around their fair city cornered the market on good-looking.

"Excellent, I wanted to push the plans through." Rich gave Garland a wide smile, showing teeth. Adrian always hated that smile; nobody really smiled like that except models, politicians and Hollywood types. Rich motioned to Adrian, introducing him. "Have you had a chance to meet Adrian Debrett yet, Garland?"

"No, but I have heard many things about his work." Gabriel bowed slightly to Adrian. "A pleasure, Mr. Debrett."

"Same here." Adrian gave Garland a quick, 'I really don't want to smile' smile. The ghosts clustered nervously next to Adrian, reacting to Garland's presence. He eyed the outfit Garland had been poured into, wondering how it was humanly possible-- The thought broke off as Garland addressed him again.

"Would you care to join my group, Mr. Debrett? I would enjoy speaking with you about your work."

"Some other time." Apprehension did a tap dance all the way down Adrian's spine, making him take a step back just as one of the wraiths decided to hide behind him. Apparently the ghost was as nervous as Adrian, but he'd temporarily forgotten he was dead and had nothing to fear from a vampire. The cold, clammy sense of Adrian's body's co-inhabitant made him shiver slightly.

Garland didn't look like he expected nor accepted the answer. "Please, won't you reconsider and join me?"

Though politely phrased, the last two words had a definite emphasis. Gabriel's words were low, but brooked no argument and intensified the burning sensation. Adrian shook his head, trying to clear it. Suddenly, Adrian felt an increase in the burning tingle at the edge of his mind, and his head jerked up to stare at Garland. None of the others paid attention to them.

Adrian normally would have rejected a ghost trying to ride his skin, but he didn't because of the aversion he felt, knowing the vampire had tried to take him over. Garland had seriously pissed him off.

He said through gritted teeth, "Like I said, some other time."

The utter stillness among the other vampires put Adrian off stride for a split second. They were aware of what was going on, even if nobody else was. Their gazes fastened on him, though outwardly they looked no more than politely interested.

One of the women moved to Garland's side, laying her hand on his arm. "Father?"

Garland held up a hand to silence her. "I will deal with it, Indy."

The young brunette fell silent before she stepped back. Charlie and Rich were immersed in their own conversation. Adrian doubted if they would have caught on even if they had been watching.

A quick glance at his watch told Adrian he had an hour before he could get out of there. To hell with it, he'd leave now. "See you at the office tomorrow, Charlie. Later, Mr. Carson. Prince Garland." Adrian threw the vampire a cold look.

Adrian caught the perplexed look in Garland's eyes before he concealed it. Charlie

glanced pointedly at his watch, and Adrian opened his mouth before Charlie could say anything. "Have a nice evening, everyone."

Strolling away, Adrian kept his pace slow enough that it didn't look like he was beating a hasty retreat. The Prince inclined his head in a farewell salute to Adrian. Tempted to give Garland his own version of a salute, Adrian barely restrained himself.

Keeping focused on the front door, Adrian could still feel the prickle of eyes on his back. He still had the attention of the vampire set. Great, absolutely fucking great. He hadn't mistaken the look Garland had given him and knew what it meant. He would have the attention of Prince Garland, but he didn't want it. More often than not, Adrian avoided vamps. They fascinated some people, but he wasn't one of them. He had enough dead on his hands without the extra help.

Chapter 2

As he drove to the first house on his appointment list, Adrian's thoughts were preoccupied. The burning had faded, and it took Adrian a minute to remember he shouldn't have been able to resist Garland. So why had he? Three seconds later the answer hit him. His rider was the only thing different about him. Another firm rule of his had always been, no riders allowed. Well, maybe not as firm as he thought, since Adrian hadn't given the heave ho to his temporary extra occupant. He wasn't about to now, either. As weird as it felt, Adrian decided to let the wraith stay there until he could put the ghost to sleep later. The wraith felt safer where he was, and Adrian knew he felt way better having the ghost there. It was false notion that the dead could possess a person; they could ride in your skin, but they couldn't make anyone do anything. Who started those rumors, anyway?

Adrian felt more than a little agitated. Garland had tried to take him over; it wasn't technically allowed. Princes were supposed to police their own and keep strict account to the Bureau of Undead Affairs in Washington. Now Adrian wondered who policed the Princes.

After finishing all of his appointments, he returned home to take care of his three followers from the party. A circle of salt, a bit of blood, a few words, and twenty-seven minutes later, they were gone. He actually felt somewhat bereft without his helpful rider, but the wraith needed the rest, and Adrian still had to meet with Rich. Plus, he had promised Gray he would drop by the man's house as well. Top that off with a stop at the grocery store, and Adrian might make it to bed by six a.m.

When he parked in front of Rich's house, Adrian was only forty-five minutes late. The Mayor lived in a nice, ritzy neighborhood, tree-lined street and all, and the houses weren't crowded on top of each other. A quiet atmosphere hung over the well-manicured lawns of the estates. That was the one thing Adrian really loved about San Diego, he never had the feeling he lived in a very large city. The city planners had done an excellent job with the layout. Downtown was a distance from most of the living areas. It always felt like he lived in a suburb rather than a massive city.

Rich opened the door before Adrian got half way up the walk. Anxious, were we? "What's the problem, Rich?" There had to be one, or Adrian wouldn't be there at almost three in the morning.

"Would you like something to drink, Adrian? Soda, coffee?"

He saw the trace of tension on Rich's rugged features and decided to skip the pleasantries. "No, thanks. Why am I here?" Adrian didn't plan to stay long, and stood in the middle of the foyer, waiting for Rich to answer.

"It's about my mother."

She must have heard herself mentioned because a flicker of movement off to his side got Adrian's attention, and there she stood in all her transparent glory.

"I understand already, Rich." When he looked back at Rich, Adrian noticed Rich staring at her. "You're a seer, aren't you?"

Adrian never would have figured Rich for one. Hell, he'd had three ghosts hanging on him for a good part of the night at the party. Rich had never batted a lash and hadn't even looked at them.

"I prefer being a politician."

"You didn't want to get roped into the Seer program, huh?"

Turning to look at Adrian, Rich gave him a wry smile. "That, too."

"Don't worry. I'll keep the secret and take care of your mother. However, you get to clean up the mess. Just let me get my gear from the car." Adrian headed back out the door before Rich could say anything else. Getting his pack from the backseat, he returned to the house and set out his equipment.

"I hoped you'd have an appointment open tonight so we wouldn't have to delay."

"I have one spot left." Adrian had definitely honed his ability to look a person straight in the eye and lie without a blink. "But I wouldn't mention it to Charlie. He'd charge you an arm and a leg. Where's your bathroom?"

"Third door on the left down the hall."

Disappearing into the bathroom, Adrian stripped off his clothes and put on the ritual robe. A guide couldn't wear manmade fabrics as it restricted the energy flow, so it had to be cotton. When he returned to the living room, Rich handed him a photo of his mother. Many guides used a personal representation of the deceased; Adrian didn't, but could work with it anyway. Opening the jar of salt and earth, he slowly poured a small circle around him. The circle was nothing more than a defined shield. Once activated, it kept any other influences out and contained Adrian's power to the immediate area. It could also serve as a trap for ghosts unwillingly to be there, if one had the power to invoke it.

Adrian gestured for Richie's mother to join him. She glided over to him, and Adrian

closed the circle. "Are you ready, ma'am?"

He took her nod as a yes. Crouching down, he used his dagger to make a small cut in his palm and let the blood drip at five points as he moved around the salt circle. Blood was the catalyst that triggered his own energy. There was a lot of power in blood if a person knew how to tap into it. He didn't have to spill his own blood if he didn't want to. A relative's blood or even animal blood would do. Unfortunately, his vials of blood were low, and his new supply was supposedly in the mail. At least, that was what he'd been told when he'd called the company.

A high level of energy crackled around him and blue flames moved erratically within the circle. They touched the five spots of blood before they shot forward to surround Mrs. Carson. Kneeling in front of a silver bowl, Adrian picked up the picture and tore it into small pieces. After dropping them into the bowl, he lit the pile with his lighter and began the ritual. He softly intoned the first of five different invocations. Some guides added a lot of mumbo jumbo, depending on their religious slant. Adrian believed in God, but saved the speeches for the politicians.

Rich stood outside the circle, completely silent the whole time. As his mother's form began to fade, Adrian heard him whisper, "I love you, Mother. Goodbye."

Adrian could tell from the set expression on Rich's face that he didn't want her to leave. With a quiet "Thank you," she disappeared. It was always the hardest part for the family to get through. After dealing with the initial grief death brings, it was hard to face having to let somebody go again.

Closing his eyes, Adrian drew the unleashed energy back in. Doing the ritual fourteen times in one night wasn't too bad, but it tired him. He covered the bowl and latched the lid, then put the rest of his things away in his backpack. He never stayed around long after completing a ritual. As fast as he could, Adrian changed back into his street clothes. Giving Rich a small smile, Adrian left him to his grief without saying another word.

By 3:30, he reached Gray's house and went inside without even knocking. Adrian knew Gray would be in his home office, so he headed straight down the hallway and into the small, cramped room. Adrian stopped in front of the desk and waited for Gray to notice him. Gray was on the high side of forty and a decent guy, a bit rough around the edges, but a by-the-book mayor's sidekick and always in a suit. *How could he stand it?* Adrian would have been digging at the tie within two minutes.

Gray had worked with Adrian's dad, and Adrian had practically grown up with Gray. The man's short, peppered hair gave the squared features an extremely professional look. The dark gray business suit he wore had seen better days, and it hung loosely on his sturdy frame. At six foot five inches, Gray was definitely an intimidating man, even behind the desk.

He finally looked up, and Adrian knew that look. Double damn, it wasn't good.

Adrian made himself comfortable in one of the chairs. He really hated that expression on Gray's face, but waited patiently for Gray to tell him what was going on.

"Got another job for you." Gray could be quite a chatty fellow under normal circumstances, so his shortened speech pattern was not a good sign.

"Bad?" Adrian already knew it was, but it didn't hurt to ask and hope it wasn't.

"Bad enough."

"How bad?"

Gray shrugged.

"Worse than I've seen so far?"

"Yeah."

Adrian had seen some sick things. If this beat them, it would definitely be an 'I want to run like hell' experience. Sighing, he just nodded. "What time you want me there?"

"Four this afternoon. I'll meet you at Southside Park in the parking lot."

If Gray would be there, it meant Adrian would have a hand on his shoulder. No, it wasn't good at all. "I'll be there, Gray. Are there any personal items I can use?"

"One." Long-winded Gray wasn't.

Sighing again, Adrian gave up any questioning on the matter. "Would you mind coming into work early tomorrow for me? Charlie's got a longer list than usual."

Gray had a part time job with Adrian. He was a seer, too, but like Rich, he preferred the political field. Adrian thought Gray worked with him to keep an extra eye on him, but he let that one slide. In exchange, Gray could call on Adrian to work any oddball happenings in the city.

"I'll be there at eight."

"I'll see you at four, then." Standing, he left Gray's house, considering his to do list for the coming day. He already had the usual ten appointments booked, plus the 4 o'clock with Gray, and Charlie wanted a meeting at 7:30. Throw in any extra ghosts that might wander his way, and he had another busy day. He breezed through the open all night grocery store and made it home before dawn; that made him happy.

The guy standing by his apartment door didn't make Adrian happy. He was definitely a

vampire. Most times, they looked normal. No deathly pale or cold skin if they had fed recently. A flash of fang was what usually gave them away to normal people. *I should have been normal.*

For those who could see the dead, you could easily spot a vamp, well-fed or not. Dead was dead, even if it had a body that moved around.

Burdened by the bag of groceries, Adrian just gave the vamp the eye and stood his ground about ten feet away, praying the vampire didn't try to put him under. He'd be lost because there wasn't a ghost nearby to bail him out.

"Mr. Debrett?" The two words had a kind of seductive roll that made Adrian blink. *Do they go to school to learn this stuff?*

"What do you want?"

"Prince Garland wishes you to meet him at midnight at the Sang Erotique." He gave a polite bow with the request. "Do you know where it is?"

'Wishes' served as a euphemism for 'demand' in this case, but let the little mortals keep their illusions. Fuck, Adrian was in for it; he'd be willing to bet if he didn't say he'd be there, the vampire would try to put him under or forcefully take him there.

"Tell him I'll be there. I know where it is." The club mentioned was the latest craze among vampire lovers and the headquarters for Garland. Adrian moved to the door and shoved the key in the lock, totally dismissing the other guy. The vampire got the hint and, when Adrian looked back over his shoulder, the guy had vanished.

Chapter 3

Four in the afternoon did not find Adrian bright and chipper. It found him at Southside Park, about to undergo something that made him want to run like hell, screaming all the way there. *Gee, I get another repeat performance at midnight. I feel so special.*

Gray stood beside him, handing Adrian a small piece of material. His hair was ruffled by a slight breeze as it moved through the grass and trees. The grim look on Gray's face told Adrian again he didn't want to do this, so Adrian took a deep breath and muttered, "Let's get it over with."

Being part fae gave Adrian the ability of veiled sight. He'd been strictly forbidden by his mother to mention that little fact, so he had always passed it off as an odd quirk of his guide power. Adrian rubbed his finger over the small piece of material as he stared at it. Pink and definitely flannel, Adrian guessed it had to be a piece of the victim's nightgown.

If the spirit hadn't gone on, he could call her. If she had, he could call up the memory of whatever had happened here, and Gray would share the vision. Adrian stared ahead into the group of trees, vaguely aware of Gray putting a hand on his shoulder. The touch connected them and allowed Gray to see whatever Adrian saw. The first time Adrian had called up a vision for Gray, Gray had touched him. One of those macho 'if he can, I can too' actions. After that, Adrian thought it was more of a sympathetic thing, but he never asked, and Gray never said.

When the memory first appeared, Adrian could barely make out a figure moving toward them through the trees. He readied his pencil to begin sketching, then focused on the man coming closer to them. Finally he could make out the guy's features, and Adrian started getting the details needed. Looking away, he began drawing quickly on the pad.

When Adrian's gaze returned to the figure, he stood less than five feet away. At first Adrian's brain refused to register what the guy had dangling from his hands. Adrian blinked rapidly. *What the hell?*

In his right hand, he held a little girl by the hem of her nightgown, her limp body dangling in mid air. His other hand held onto an infant by its leg. The sight sent shock rushing through Adrian as he stared at them in disbelief. Blood drenched the girl's gown, turning most of its color from pink to red. She couldn't have been more than two, and she was definitely dead. Several tears in the material of the gown showed slash marks on her flesh, and the infant was in the same shape.

"I hate you, Gray," Adrian muttered fiercely. It was either say that, or scream. He didn't want to see this.

"Concentrate on the man, Debrett. Give me his face," Gray whispered back to him, Gray's free hand clenched tightly to his side. Both of them had to still the urge to react to the images. From experience, they both knew it wouldn't do any good; nobody could stop what had already happened.

Swallowing convulsively against the tightening in his throat, Adrian dragged his gaze back to the guy's face. The man tossed the infant toward some bushes as Adrian memorized his face. Adrian narrowed his concentration to focus solely on capturing the bastard on the paper as the man dumped the little girl.

The smile on his lips made Adrian want to hit him. Adrian's hand added the details, fleshing out his face until the man disappeared from the field of memory. Adrian worked rapidly over the sketch. He wasn't taking this one home to flesh out; Gray would have it before he went back to his office. That face would give Adrian nightmares; he already knew it. Nausea started to well up, but Adrian swallowed it down until he finished his work. He tore the sheet from the pad, thrusting it at Gray, then promptly upchucked his lunch on the pristine grass. When he was done, Adrian wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his shirt. "Whatever the hell is going on, I hope you get this bastard."

After that, Adrian walked away. Now all he wanted to do was go home and soak in a hot tub or hide under his blanket; either worked for him. But no, he did four of his appointments, listened to Charlie drone on for an hour at his meeting, and then took care of six more of his appointments in time for his midnight meeting with Garland. Adrian's luck held out, and a ghost approached him between his appointments. The wraith, whose name was Sasha, agreed to a night of riding after Adrian explained the situation. He didn't want to come face to face with Garland unprotected.

Sasha rode inside him when he parked in the lot next to the club promptly at midnight. *It figures I'd be on time when I don't want to be.*

Adrian made his way past the crowd lined up outside the door; it was full of the usual wannabe types: Goth garb, plastic fangs, and all. Apparently, the club was a popular place, and people liked the chance to hang out with vampires. Adrian couldn't see the attraction, himself.

The bouncer at the door looked like he'd been a gorilla in his previous life. Stepping in front of him, Adrian said, "Adrian Debrett. I'm here to see Garland."

The gorilla's head jerked toward the door, and Adrian took that as a sign to go in. Ignoring the jeers coming from the line, he opened the door and stepped in.

The club was decorated predominantly in black with silver and red accents, and packed

with wall-to-wall people. It surprised him as he'd expected something far more vulgar, not Better Bars and Gardens. Weaving around the bodies, Adrian headed to the bar to ask one of the bartenders where Garland was. Halfway across the room, a woman grabbed his arm and brought him up short.

"Well, well, well, the mortal everyone is so concerned about." The mocking smirk on her face gave Adrian his second reason to want to punch somebody today.

"Get the hand off my arm, lady." Adrian wasn't in the mood for fun and games, and if she tried anything funny, he could have her up on charges. She must not have cared as she decided to toy with him anyway. In a flash she struck out, her sharp nails catching at the side of his throat, slicing him.

Adrian felt the stinging pain, and in reaction his foot shot out, cracking her in the kneecap. Female or not, he wasn't about to stand there and let her kill him.

She let go of him to grab at her knee, and Adrian jumped back, waiting warily for her next move. Before he could blink, Garland and Indy were there, and they didn't look happy. *Oh, this is great.*

Grabbing the blonde in what looked like a bruising grip, Garland dragged her back, then shoved her toward Indy. "Take Trisha to my office and keep her there."

Trisha limped away, scowling, but she was already healing so Adrian wasn't worried. It was himself he worried about. Bleeding from the neck in a room full of vamps wasn't good. He fished some Kleenex out of his pocket, dabbing at the wounds. Trisha had just been playing with him.

"My apologies, Adrian." Garland took a hold of Adrian's hand and pulled it back so he could see how bad the wounds were. "I can heal that for you, if you wish."

Yeah, right, like I would let him lick my neck; I'll live with the scars. Vampires could heal wounds by licking them; it had to be magic saliva or something. That explained why they could put two holes in someone and leave no mark after they finished feeding. "I'm fine. It only hurts a bit. Just tell me where the bathroom is."

Garland gestured toward the left side of the bar counter. "Please join me at my table when you're through."

Adrian wanted to say "Do I have to?" It was a better idea to take care of his neck first. Making it to the bathroom, he wet some paper towels and dabbed at his neck to get rid of the blood. Trisha had taken some of his skin with her, but he'd heal. Thankfully, the wounds weren't bleeding anymore. After he threw the paper towels into the trash, he returned to the main area and made it to Garland's table without further incident.

As Adrian sat down across from Garland, he watched the three dancers gyrating for a

moment on the stage. Glancing back at Garland, Adrian tried to wait him out to see what he had to say.

On looks alone, a person would melt at the sight of Garland. Hair so black it had bluish tints, its length curled slightly just beneath his collar. The strands falling along the side of his face made Adrian itch to touch it.

My, it feels warm in here. Adrian mentally slapped his hand and got down to business. "What did you want to talk to me about, Garland?"

A graceful gesture of his hand motioned to the place beside him. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather sit here, Adrian? I can tell you would like to be closer."

The sound of Garland's voice felt like soft velvet over Adrian's senses. *There has to be a school to learn to do that.*

"Why am I here?"

The full force of a half-lidded gaze from Garland's warm, translucent eyes made Adrian feel like they had done something naughty already. "It seems we have a problem, Adrian."

Why do I feel like I'm drowning? Adrian shifted in his seat, clearing his throat. "Problem? What problem?"

"You resisted my control last night, Adrian. That would be the problem. Most of my court want you dead." Garland lightened the sensual tone enough for Adrian to understand the issue at hand.

Fear crashed down on Adrian's head, instantly clearing the cobwebs away, but he managed to keep it from showing in his face. *What can I say? Not too damn much.*

"I can smell your fear. No reason to hide it." Garland's smile quirked slightly wider, and the effect of his voice raised goose bumps on Adrian's arms.

"So why am I here and not dead?" Adrian finally found the question to ask; sometimes it took him a while.

"Because I have another option for you. It would be a pity to see your body drained." The weight of Garland's stare drifting downward had Adrian squirming slightly in his seat with the feeling he sat naked in front of Garland.

"What other option?" *Good, I can still talk. Options are good, it beats being dead.*

"You will be my ghoul; it's that simple, Adrian."

Adrian stared at Garland, aghast; Garland reacted by raising his brow. "The position of my Favored One is not given lightly."

Ghoul? Suck his blood? That's not an option; it's a nightmare. A ghoul was someone who drank a vamp's blood, something Adrian didn't want to be. He wasn't up enough on vampire politics to know what a Favored One meant, but the rest didn't appeal to him. To be at Garland's beck and call wasn't his notion of a fun date, and vampire blood was more addictive than any street drug could ever be. Adrian opened his mouth to say "No, thank you."

Garland must have known what the answer would be because he held up his hand for silence. "You would gain a portion of my power, Adrian, along with strength and speed. You will not even age as long as I continue to feed you every week. It's not a bad bargain."

"And what do you get out of it? Besides a slave, that is," Adrian asked, not one quaver in his voice.

"Please call me Gabriel." He paused long enough to give Adrian a considering look. "I will give you two nights to consider my option. After that, I cannot guarantee your safety." He completely ignored Adrian's question, which didn't surprise Adrian.

Adrian saw the possessive look glittering in Garland's eyes. The man already considered it a done deal, and Adrian would be his ghoul. Possessive and Adrian did not get along. Adrian had dropped a boyfriend or three for that reason, and a vampire master wasn't somebody you could just dump.

"My answer will be the same, Garland." Adrian stressed his name with a sickeningly sweet tone that would have made Mary Poppins barf. Alarm bells screeched internally at Adrian as Garland focused unblinkingly on him. Garland was damn good at it, too.

Too bad he wasn't living. Adrian would have seriously considered a relationship, but with Garland, he'd regret it, and for longer than a regular lifetime. There was nothing Adrian could do but get out of there with a whole skin.

"I'll hold my own against whatever your friends throw at me. And remember, I can turn you in for trying to put me under, Garland."

It still pissed him off that the vampire had tried to put him under at the Mayor's party. Garland didn't seem suitably impressed. There wasn't an one iota of change in his smile, and the half-lidded look returned. The glittering blue of Garland's eyes contained a feral anticipatory gleam. "But you won't. Or you would have already."

Garland seemed entirely too sure of himself and Adrian for Adrian's comfort. Abruptly, Adrian turned away from Garland and walked sedately out the door, even though he wanted to run like hell. On a scale of one to ten, his life had dropped to minus forty-four.

Chapter 4

Adrian had two days to live, at this rate, and sleep wasn't an option, so he called Yarborough instead. Dosed with several shots of coffee, Adrian settled in Yar's library less than an hour later.

Yar was a friendly, all around fountain of information, and an arsenal extraordinaire. Adrian had met him a few years back when he'd taken self-defense classes and Yar had been the instructor. If you needed to know something or have any kind of weapon, Yar was the dude who knew everything and could find the things you wanted. His short blond hair stuck out from his head at odd angles, definitely needing a comb taken to the mess. A gray, oversized T-shirt engulfed his thin body, and looked badly wrinkled, as if he'd been sleeping in it.

"What's the problem, Adrian?"

"Nothing much. I just need a crash course in vampires and figured you were the best." Sometimes flattery could go a long way, and it usually worked with Yar. This time he didn't look like he bought it, but Adrian hoped Yar wouldn't bother him with any personal questions.

"All right, tell me how much you already know."

"I don't know a lot about vampires. Just that they're strong, fast, they've got some super powers, and Diocourides invented them. He spent years figuring out how to, and a lot of dead bodies later, tada, vampire." What Adrian knew wouldn't fill a thimble.

"Never took V101, huh?" It was a rhetorical question, so Yar didn't wait for an answer. "No matter, you wouldn't have learned much useful anyway. For starters, in 11 BC, Titus Sennius Diocourides developed a formula for immortality. They had the legends of vampires, but nobody knows if any existed. I assume that's where he got his idea: blood, and you just needed the right alchemy formula."

"I bet he never won the Nobel."

"It didn't exist then." Sometimes Yar missed the point, and Adrian smirked at him. "Dio knew he was on to something with his formula. After draining his test subjects, he fed the formula to them. It took about five years to get a formula that would even make the body twitch. Thirteen years later, he had his first success. He eventually came up with

six different formulas. Of course, the first batch he perfected was a kicker. Diocourides took it and survived. If you ever have the chance to meet any of the first formula vampires, run for your life."

"I take it the Princes aren't the strongest of the lot."

"Hardly, but there aren't a whole lot of first batchers around in public. Most of the vampires you see running things are second formula, your everyday, average Princes. It continues on down with third formula being the Enforcers, fourth, and so on, each weaker than the prior formula. Got it so far?"

"Got it." Adrian knew Yar was the foremost-acknowledged expert on vampires, so Yar knew what he was talking about.

"Vampires are basically divided into twenty different families. A few off the top of my head would be Magi, Proeliatore, Umbrae, Sicarii, Mutati, Sanguinus Reges, and Caelestes. Diocourides choose most from the brightest and best families in Rome. No one is quite sure what the differences are between the families except for a basic few. Some of them are self-explanatory, some aren't, and the vampires don't say much. Not a lot is known about their powers either: speed, fast healing, strength, and long life with an ability to control others are about it."

"I don't suppose you've compiled a list, have you?"

"A few. Explanations are listed in my notebooks. Which I'll give you as soon as you let me finish. Now, where was I?" Yar paused a moment to pick up the train of his thought. "Oh, yes. A formal greeting from one of them will give you an idea of what type of vampire you're dealing with, and will go something along the lines of a bow and 'I am Rudolph, Sicarii of the first formula 489.' Any numbers mean age so in Rudolph's case he's 489 years old."

"Have you ever met any of the first ones created?" Adrian asked.

"Luckily, no. Their structure of power is based on the Roman way of running things. Diocourides is at the head of the Romanorum, with several of the first formulas. Princes serve similar to ancient senators, only they take care of their own towns and run the Senate. Centurions, also known as enforcers, make everybody obey the rules. Most of the high powered ones are in still in Italy."

"Don't certain ones run the show for each country? I think I remember reading something along that line."

"As far as I know, Selena Kerr runs things in England. Nikolai Diamond is head of the United States, and Garnier rules Europe. Their political and social infrastructure is a vast one. The rest is in here, you can have it since it's just copies of my personal notes."

"So what's in the formula besides blood, Yar?"

"I have no clue. Diocourides kept his society a secret, and it remained that way for thousands of years. Unfortunately, the society overdid things eventually. You've heard of the massacres of the sixties, right?" This time, Yar paused, waiting for an answer.

"Yeah, the government found out vampires existed and had to crack down because too many vamps were running around and snacking on their taxpayers. Not good for the IRS."

"Close enough. A faction of vampires broke from the main body because they decided vampires were meant to rule things. At first the government scrambled blindly, trying to control the resultant chaos. Diocourides' society sided with the government after their existence was revealed; the smart ones figured a planet overpopulated by vampires wasn't a good food source. The government, in their infinite wisdom, even tried to make an elite force of vampire soldiers, then quickly had to get the Society's help to eliminate them. After that, the Romanorum hurriedly cut a deal with some of the politicians."

"Way before my time, Yar, but I've read the history books." By the time Adrian was in high school, Vampire History had become a part of the curriculum along with American History.

"The formulas are a jealously guarded secret among some of the Princes and top brass in Washington, and only a designated Prince or elder member of the Romanorum can give out the magical formula. Everybody involved strictly regulates the number of vampires." Once focused on his favorite subject, Yar had a habit of going on and on. Which, for Adrian, was a very good thing.

"Then what about drinking a vampire's blood and getting to be a baby vamp?"

"Hollywood, pure and simple. You only get a ghoul if you do that; their blood plus one of the formulas is necessary for creating a vampire, and the mortal must be willing and drained."

Stretching out his legs to get more comfortable, Adrian said. "I've heard a bit about ghouls. Sounds like a fun life."

"It has its points, Adrian. Some of the ability and you still get to be alive and walk in the sunshine, too. They also have their own structure. Top dog is Omnium Dilectissimus or Dilectissima on the female side; otherwise known as Favored One, a vampire's personal favorite. Considered just as powerful as the one who created him or her. Ghouls have their own rank and specialty, and it's strictly regulated. No need to have a planet overflowing with superhuman types."

"Any safeguards for the poor mortals?" Adrian asked as casually he could.

"Adrian, I know damn well you wouldn't ask without a reason, but I'll let you keep it to yourself, for now. It's the Prince's responsibility to keep everyone in line and dispense justice to the vampires under him or her. We poor mortals can stake them, but we can't kill them. If any vampires screw up, the enforcers hunt them down."

"What about anything like crosses or garlic? Something has to work against them, Yar."

"Crosses are handy if you've got enough faith, but I wouldn't rely on them. Mother Theresa could send a vampire screaming into the night, but the rest of us at best will only piss off a vampire with a cross. There are some witch's charms that work. No truth to any water problems. You can pretty much dismiss anything Hollywood says on the subject except that sunlight will dust them, fire, too."

"Wooden stakes?"

"Staking them doesn't kill them; it paralyzes them, Adrian. It takes a few days for a vampire to mentally work a stake out of its body. That gives you time to run and get the authorities, and hope the Prince or sunlight deals with the problem. Knives and bullets don't cut it; a staker is your best bet since nobody can legally carry around a flamethrower. The staker is the only weapon you can use against vampires. It's a gun modified to shoot metal stakes, works very well on them. I can arrange for a license and some practice if you'd like to learn."

He liked the way Yar put it. It didn't make Adrian sound like he desperately needed those lessons. "Sure, that would be interesting."

"You'll owe me. It'll take some arm twisting to get that license, Adrian."

"I'll owe you one, Yar."

"Two."

"Fine, two." He was a pushover on this one. "I've got another question. You ever heard of a way to resist being put under?"

"Nothing I ever came across, Adrian. They've tried several experiments with psychics but nothing has ever succeeded. Now, answer a question for me. I heard on the grapevine that Garland is recruiting a new ghoul. Know anything about it?"

"Nope, not a thing, Yar." His eyes never left Yar's as he gave the man a faintly innocent 'what are you talking about' look.

"A guide might be a useful tool in a vampire's hands, come to think on it. So watch your step. Anything else you need to know?"

"Nah, you've helped quite a bit, and the folder should fill in the rest." Reaching for it,

Adrian quickly looked over it. It was at least three inches thick, so it had to be crammed full of what he needed to know.

"You can come back here later tonight for staker practice, Adrian. I've got a firing range in the back."

"Works for me. I really do appreciate the help, Yar."

After leaving Yar's, Adrian headed home and ended up staying awake to read the information in the folder. By later that night, he'd completely read through the folder. After a bit of practice with the staker, he crashed in his bed, vampire information dancing in his dreams.

On his last day off, Adrian stood in line with Charlie, waiting to get into the convention center. Charlie danced from foot to foot with impatience. It was interesting to attend these things with Charlie. Charlie was the believer; Adrian was the skeptic.

"Have you even read the *I Am Society* tracts?"

"Charlie, anything anybody sees while in a trance is not exactly reliable." Adrian had experimented a while back with some of those trances, and you could see some wild shit.

Charlie gave Adrian a wounded look for his trouble. "You have no understanding, Adrian; some things just have to be accepted without proof."

"I'll leave that to you." Sometimes Charlie couldn't see beyond what he wanted to believe.

Charlie broke off the discussion as they entered the hall, then proceeded to drag Adrian toward the exhibits. The first one they stopped by was about crop circles.

"Crop circles are a hoax, Charlie."

"Maybe, but not all of them."

Sighing, Adrian shook his head before looking around. The pictures displayed of the circles made for interesting artwork, about as interesting as the dress code in the convention center, with Egyptian princesses wandering the aisles alongside robed guides. Adrian gave up and left Charlie mulling over the circles.

He found the guides' booth sandwiched between the crystal power and Church of Divinity booths, his old mentor holding down the fort.

"How's it going, Dakota?"

"Give me five and I'll take you to lunch. Tell you all about it."

Adrian smirked at him. "I think the convention air is scrambling your brain. Did you say you're paying for lunch?"

Being notoriously cheap, Dakota's offer to pay for anything qualified as a sacrilegious act. "I owe you a little extra for the Trent case, Adrian. Why didn't you take it, anyway?"

"Personal ethics."

Dakota handed a business card to a browsing customer before turning back to him. "Don't make any sense to me. But thanks for it anyway. It put a nice cushion in my bank account."

Adrian waved to Dakota's sister as she joined them. Casey was a small slip of a thing with a shade of red hair you couldn't get in a bottle. Put her next to Dakota, who reminded Adrian more of an old grizzly bear, and Adrian had never been quite sure how they had managed to come from the same gene pool. "Hey, Cas, Charlie's wandering around here somewhere. I left him at the crop circle booth."

"They're a hoax." Her grimace reminded Adrian of how he felt dealing with some of Charlie's beliefs.

"I think I mentioned that to him."

"Allie has been asking about you, Adrian. She's over in the other aisle."

"I'll go over after Dakota treats me to lunch."

"Make him take you to the Olive Garden." Cas shot a grin at Dakota as she moved back behind the counter.

"Just take care of the booth while we go to McDonald's," Dakota grumbled.

"Cheap, cheap," Cas teased him.

Walking around the counter, Dakota motioned to Adrian. "I'm out of here. You coming?"

Adrian winked at Cas before following behind Dakota. After ordering and getting their food at McDonald's, they settled at a table.

"I've been hearing some rumors."

When he glanced up, Adrian saw a concerned gaze fixed on him and had the feeling he already knew what it was about. "About?"

"You, mostly."

"Me? Why am I on the hit parade?"

"Getting in over your head with the vamps, Adrian?"

"You were talking to Yar, weren't you?" Adrian took a less than wild guess. Yar had known something was going on, but he hadn't hassled Adrian with questions.

Dakota avoided answering by taking a bite of his burger.

"I had a problem, but I don't anymore." Adrian really didn't want anybody to know what was going on. He had enough problems with the dead and vampires without the living adding to it.

"Are you sure about that?"

"Positive." Adrian gave Dakota the straight in the eye, 'I'm not lying' gaze.

"Just double-checking." He finished the burger and finally stopped staring at Adrian.

"Thanks for the concern, but it's not necessary." Dakota was a gruff, cheap bastard, but he had a heart somewhere in there.

"We got a new guide in the city. Have you heard about her, Adrian?"

"I haven't had time for the news. Fill me in."

"Her name is Alexa Griffith, and I heard something about her." Dakota finished eating his fries as they talked.

"So what's the new guide up to?" Adrian cleaned up the trash and stuck it on the tray. Grabbing his soda, he stood and left the tray for Dakota to dump. "I'm going to have this cup bronzed as a trophy. Have to have a memento of you paying for something willingly."

"Make that cast in gold and give it to me," Dakota shot back before answering the first question. Contempt rang in the words he spat out, "Possibility of binding."

"Binding?"

"No proof of it. But two weeks ago, a client wanted me to bind his wife. I turned him down. I heard later Miss Griffith accepted his business."

There was no law against binding a wraith to someone, though most guides considered it

unethical to force a spirit to hang around like that. "So where is the lovely Miss Griffith operating out of?" Adrian asked as they returned to the guides' booth.

"Out of her house, Mount Soledad area." Cas answered with the same disgust Dakota had shown.

"The client was James Masterson, right?"

"He approached you, huh?" Dakota asked, not sounding at all surprised.

"I tossed him out of the office because he's an arrogant bastard. I didn't know about Miss Griffith, so thanks for the tip." It meant he wouldn't be sending any business her way.

"No problem." Dakota returned behind the counter, all business now.

"Cas, stop by the apartment later if you get a chance."

"I'll try." She was busy with another customer, so Adrian wandered off, heading down the aisle to find Allie. Most of the booths didn't interest him, though he did pick up a couple of brochures on cognitive archaeology. Now that interested him.

Allie waved him over the minute she saw him. "I hoped you would come by."

"Has it been busy here?"

"Doing good today. Charlie stopped by a while ago." Being a practitioner of Wicca, Allie defied the original conception of witches on broomsticks with pointy noses. Or was that chins? She was more on the petite, pocket Venus scale with looks to match. They'd been friends since grade school, and they shared seer ability. Adrian's had veered into guiding, and hers sidelined into witchcraft. She had him convinced there was something to it, but guiding took up most of his time so his interest never delved too deeply into the practice.

"Have you converted him yet?" he asked, laughing.

"Nope, he said something about heading over to Aiken's booth."

Adrian rolled his eyes. "Great. I read more books trying to keep up with him. Allie, you wouldn't happen to know of any charms that can ward off vamps, would you?"

"A few, why?" She paused, giving him a curious look as she leaned forward, resting her elbows on the counter. "I've got something else you might be interested in, too."

"Get back to me with whatever you can come up with on the wards. What's interesting?"

"I'll work on it, Adrian. Carla Reese sent me an email. You heard about the new proposals McCabe is trying to pass?"

"I read about it in the paper. Probably won't pass though, since the majority isn't interested in giving rights to anybody who can't vote." Adrian didn't have any faith at all in that idea passing Congress.

"The university is working on some apparatus that will alter the brain waves enough for non-seers to temporarily be seers. Reese thinks it might swing things on the wraith side."

"Might work, though I wouldn't count on it, Allie."

"She asked if I knew any seers or guides who might be interested in working with her, so I told her I would ask around."

He chuckled. "What's her number? I'll give her a call."

"I have her card right here." Allie fished a business card out of her pocket before handing it to him. "I hoped you might be interested, Adrian."

"Thanks, Allie. I'm up for anything that helps the cause. Now I just need to find Charlie and drag him out of here. I'll catch up with you on those charms."

It took him thirty minutes to find Charlie. When Adrian spotted him, Charlie had a stack of books in his arms that made Adrian inwardly groan as they left the center.

Chapter 5

His two days were up, and Adrian was on his own personal doomsday schedule. Every free minute had been spent in practice with the staker, under the patient eye of Yar. He never once bugged Adrian about any of it, not even when Adrian had a night off and haunted Yar's firing range the entire time. Adrian's aim had become deadly accurate. Well, not so deadly as long as he didn't shoot a living person.

Why was it time went by so fast when you didn't want to end up somewhere? Time was up for him, and Adrian hadn't changed his answer, so he trudged into the Sang Erotique to give it again. The name was a fancy French term for Erotic Blood. Adrian didn't know where they could have come up with such an idea. This time around he had the rider, and he carried the staker too. Of course, it was appropriately covered at his hip by the fact that he wore a long leather jacket.

Nobody hassled him this time. He headed to Garland's table and slid into the wide U-shaped booth. One of the bartenders brought him a white wine, setting it in front of him. Adrian flashed him a million-watt variety smile. A display of nervousness on his part, but the smile must have flustered the waiter because he blushed. *Oh, he's cute.*

"I'm Xander. Nice to finally meet you, Mr. Debrett."

Adrian noted the golden brown hair that fell past Xander's shoulders, framing open features. He seemed like the honest looking, boy-next-door type. So why was he here? Xander wasn't dressed in only skintight pants like the rest of staff wore, so he wasn't a waiter, either. He was definitely of the living variety, but Adrian could see a second kind of energy surrounding Xander, an energy he'd never seen before. It puzzled him.

"Thanks, Xander."

"If you need anything else, let me know." A smile crossed Xander's lips, adding a crinkling to the corners of his gray eyes. He stood there just staring at Adrian, unblinking. The smile faded to a puzzled look on his features before he turned and headed back to the bar counter. Adrian watched silently as he walked away. *Nice ass. Strange encounter, though.*

Adrian picked up the glass, taking a sip. White wine he could live with. You couldn't sneak blood into clear liquids. Yar's folder had been full of little tricks vampires liked to play, legal or not.

Adrian glanced occasionally over toward the bar and caught Xander's eyes on him. Now he started to wonder if something was wrong with him that he hadn't caught onto yet. He slid off his jacket before wiggling around some, finally settling the jacket next to him to hide the staker. He could have taken the coat off while he was standing, but there was no need to flash the gun and scare the patrons.

Ever see a tiger stalking something? That image came to mind as Adrian saw Gabriel move through the bar, his gaze never wavering from Adrian.

Now I know how a rabbit feels. Of course, the rabbit would have been running by now. It showed rabbits were smarter than Adrian. He instinctively sought out the solid feel of the staker.

"A pleasure to have you here, Adrian."

"You wanted my answer, so here I am."

Garland held up a hand so Adrian wouldn't continue. "We will discuss that later. For now, I want you to enjoy the show. It's quite good."

Adrian thought about it for a moment before shrugging. *What the hell, I need a break and now is as good a time as any. I might even enjoy it. I can relax in the enemy camp, sort of.* "All right, Garland."

"Please, call me Gabriel." The lazy half smile returned to Gabriel's lips.

"All right, Gabriel." Adrian wasn't in the mood to argue over what he called the vampire. Instead, he watched the two dancers. The movement of their bodies looked vaguely obscene and certainly held the eye, his included. Their skin gleamed silver white under the lights of the stage. Each time one man moved closer to the other, the slow, sensual slinking of their bodies matched the soft beat of music. He didn't even realize Gabriel had moved closer to him until he felt the brush of Gabriel's thigh.

He narrowed his gaze briefly on Gabriel; he wasn't comfortable with the vampire that close. Gabriel wasn't paying any attention to the dancers, just to him. Fully aware of Gabriel, Adrian put his eyes back on the dancers just as they moved together in slow motion for a kiss.

Reaching for Adrian's hand, Gabriel raised it to his lips brushing a kiss to the skin. That brought Adrian's attention right back to Gabriel. Part of him definitely liked this, while the other part screamed, *'What in the hell are you doing?'*

Turning his hand, Gabriel placed another kiss on Adrian's wrist. His eyes were a luminous blue that held Adrian enthralled.

"You are trying to seduce me."

"True. But the scent of your blood calls to me."

The soft, silky tone seemed to wash over Adrian, making him blink several times. *Bottle that voice and sell it; every man in the world would get laid.*

He tugged his hand back, having no desire to be a vampire's personal blood bank.

"Do you even know what it feels like to be fed from?"

"I heard it's supposed to feel good." Adrian didn't believe it.

"You should speak to the ghouls, Adrian. It is far more than supposedly good; it is almost as good as being made love to."

For a split second, Adrian wanted to bang his head on the table. It already felt like Gabriel was making love to him, and with just that voice. He had difficulty keeping himself from reacting to Gabriel. He'd pass on the bite. "Keep your fangs to yourself, and I'll be fine without the experience."

He saw the flicker of hunger as a low growl sounded from Gabriel. Adrian's fingers touched the solid metal of his staker.

Gabriel seemed to withdraw, an austere expression gracing his features, smoothing them into emotionless lines. "You had something to tell me, Adrian?"

The rapid change of subject surprised him, but Adrian quickly adjusted. His break had ended; he was cool with that. "My answer is no. I won't be your ghoul, Gabriel."

"As you wish. Now, if you will excuse me." Gabriel stood and executed a low bow in Adrian's direction before turning and leaving him there.

Whoa, when it did get so easy? Adrian scanned the room to make sure no other vampires were coming toward him. Adrian was suspicious because Gabriel had given up too fast. The only one watching him seemed to be Xander. Getting up, he grabbed his jacket and slipped it back on, not caring who he flashed this time. It shocked him when he made it safely to his car.

When he got home, all Adrian could think of was a glass of juice and bed. Being up for two straight days gave him a rather haggard look, if his mirror was anything to go by. Maybe that was why Xander had kept eyeing him, and was the reason for Adrian seeing things. He could have sworn the bottle of juice hadn't been opened yet. Lack of sleep had made him lose track of things.

After severely damaging his alarm clock, Adrian managed to make it on time to the university for the noon appointment he had set up with Clara Reese. As he sat across a desk from her, he listened to her explain how far they had gotten with their equipment.

"I got the general basics of operations, Mrs. Reese. Allie said you were hoping to sway the committees in Washington toward the ghost side; that part interests me."

"We've already got the general signatures for the seers. The rest is fine-tuning." Clara looked to be a no nonsense woman with an entirely professional demeanor and clothing, her dark hair tightly scraped back into bun. She pushed the paper across the desk to him. "Our list of seer volunteers is small. Any recommendations would be appreciated. Any facts that would add to the evidence wouldn't hurt, either."

Brown eyes framed by wire-rimmed glasses met his with a shrewd look. Adrian checked over the list before handing it back to her. "I know some that might help you, plus I have several case files you would be interested in. Two in particular were bindings; one of the cases was mine."

"Tell me about it, Mr. Debrett."

"Please call me Adrian. You remember Robinson?"

"The Riverside killer? Yes, I heard about him in the papers."

"He had one of his victims bound to him. Made her follow him around while he went on his killing sprees. I laid her to rest. Luckily, a friend of mine spotted her in court with Richardson and called me. Naturally, the guide involved with the binding was never prosecuted for that. They only nailed him for having knowledge of a crime. That's on the high end of appalling, but I don't think it's a common enough occurrence to sway the lawmakers."

"The more we compile, the more we can shove in their faces." Clara had a blunt way of talking that he liked.

"Most of the bindings are guides getting revenge on an enemy by binding a wraith to them. Or even a ghost to a place. Billy Randall is doing a study. I can call him and see what he's come up with. He's an old friend of mine, and I'm sure he'll be happy to send you whatever he has, Clara."

"I'd appreciate that, Adrian. Now I'll introduce you to the staff and show you around. They'll be glad to have you aboard."

Adrian stood, following Clara as she moved out from behind her desk and led him downstairs to the main lab. He spent the next couple of hours immersed in lab equipment and talking with Clara's co-workers. They impressed him both with the amount of work they'd accomplished, and the fact they actually dedicated themselves to helping out

wraiths. He had expected a bunch of students hoping to get A's on their work and no more. It was a while before Adrian wanted to leave, as each member had their own personal tales for why they were greatly interested in the field.

When Clara had to return to her office, she left him with a group discussing their own abilities in the seer department. One in particular had Adrian's undivided attention as she talked.

"It can be difficult. Sometimes I have the feeling that there is more, as if something was expected of me, but I don't know what it is."

The other two looked somewhat puzzled, uncertain of what she talked about. Adrian asked, "Do you mean family members or others who are unknown to you?"

"It happens all the time, Mr. Debrett."

"You can call me Adrian." He really wasn't one for the mister thing.

"Most of the time I only see them for a few moments, Sylvia. So I've never had that happen." Bill shook his head.

Sylvia nodded to Adrian before speaking. "That's what everybody else tells me, Bill." Shrugging, she acted as if she dismissed the subject.

"It depends on the amount of time the wraiths spend around you. For some, it's fairly common." Adrian didn't want to say too much, but just from looking at Sylvia, he could tell she had guide ability.

"The same thing happens to you, Adrian?"

"Yeah, quite often. If you want, I might be able to help you out some." He pulled one of his business cards from his card case and handed it to her. Bless Charlie's insistence that he always carry the things. "Give me a call at my office and we can talk."

"Sure, I'd be glad to." Sylvia took the card from him with a relieved smile.

Saying farewell to the group, Adrian headed out of the building to his car. It didn't surprise him Sylvia might have guide ability, but he didn't say anything in front of her friends since not everybody liked something like that being known. It'd be easy enough to take her along on one of his jobs to test her.

After he left the university, Adrian stopped by the office to pick up his list of appointments for the night. He didn't expect to see Xander standing by the desk, talking with Charlie.

"Sure, I can pick you up around 11:30. You'll just have to give me your address,

Charlie."

Standing in the doorway, Adrian looked between the two of them, nosy as hell, wondering what was going on.

"Hello, Mr. Debrett." Xander gave him a warm smile.

"Oh, hey, Adrian, Xander and I are going to Sanderson's lecture. Do you want to come?" Charlie wrote down directions to his place as he spoke to Adrian.

"Xander, Adrian will do fine. When's the lecture?" Grabbing the printout from the desk, Adrian gave it a quick look over.

"Saturday at noon," Charlie answered.

"No, I can't. I'm supposed to be at a meeting with Clara Reese at noon." He looked up from the list over to Charlie. "Scratch Mrs. Russell from the list."

"What's up with Russell?"

"I'll explain later." Glancing back at Xander, Adrian asked, "How come you're here?"

In answer, Xander handed him an envelope.

Adrian opened it and quickly read over the note. Gabriel wanted him to join the vampire at the club later that night. Frowning, Adrian shook his head. "I won't be able to make it."

"I'll let him know." Xander's tone and expression were totally neutral. Addressing Charlie, he said, "Don't forget, I'll be at your place around 11:30."

"It's pretty easy to find my house, Xander. I'll see you Saturday." Charlie handed the piece of paper to Xander.

Taking the scrap of paper from Charlie, Xander tucked it in his pocket as he left. Adrian had no problem if Xander and Charlie got chummy as long as Xander kept his mouth shut.

Curiosity showed plainly on Charlie's face as he asked Adrian, "What was that about?"

"A note from a client. And you know I hate social events." He added the last part to head off any questions about the client.

"Are you missing another night out, Adrian?" Charlie looked very disappointed.

Adrian wasn't disappointed at all. "Finish up the work and stop worrying about my social life, Charlie."

He made it out with the list before Charlie could say any more. When Adrian stepped outside, he saw Xander standing beside his car.

"Need something else, Xander?" Adrian stopped by the car door, inserting the key.

"I just wanted to ask if you were bothered about Charlie and me going to the lecture. I didn't think about it when he first asked me if I wanted to go, Adrian."

"Nah, I don't mind. As long as you never mention Gabriel to him, it'll be fine with me." Opening the door, Adrian slid into the seat.

"Thanks, I really wanted to go." Xander leaned against the door, closing it for Adrian.

"If it weren't important for me to meet with Clara Reese, I'd be joining you guys. So take some notes for me." He started to feel a wee bit of attraction to Xander. The guy was fucking gorgeous.

When Xander smiled, Adrian found himself smiling back.

"How about I just remember everything he says and tell you about it later?"

"Thanks, Xander."

"Are you sure you don't want to come by the club later?"

"No, I won't be there." He wasn't wandering into Gabriel's territory even on the off chance of seeing Xander.

"Catch you some other time, then." Stepping back from the car, Xander headed to his own. Adrian watched him for a moment before pulling out of the parking lot. Driving home, he spent more than a few moments pondering why things couldn't be easier in his life.

Chapter 6

The next morning, after a side trip to the store, Adrian returned to his apartment and checked his answering machine. There was a message from Gray asking Adrian to call him. Picking up the phone, he dialed the number.

"Adrian here. What'd you want, Gray?" He tried to talk on the phone and set down the bags of groceries at the same time.

"I need to talk to you, Debrett."

"Sure. What's going on?" Luckily, the cord stretched to the counter, so Adrian busied himself putting things away and got himself a glass of juice.

"I'll tell you when you get here. I'm right down the street at Bernard's."

"Give me a few, and I'll be there." After he hung up, Adrian drank the juice and finished putting everything away.

Since it was only a five-minute walk to the diner, he didn't bother driving. Entering the semi-crowded restaurant, he spotted Gray at the counter and headed over to join the man. As he slid onto the stool next to Gray, Adrian asked, "Got something for me or is this just social?"

"I got a few questions for you." Gray looked like he was in his professional mode, so this obviously wasn't a social coffee break.

"Questions? Shoot, then." Adrian ordered a tomato juice from the waitress while Gray sipped his coffee.

"Where were you around two p.m. yesterday, Debrett?"

His question surprised Adrian. "At the university with Clara Reese from about noon until after three. Why?"

"Easy enough to check out."

"Gray, what's going on?"

"The cops found a staked body in Serra Mesa last night."

"They need to notify Garland. Staked vamps are his territory." Obviously, it didn't have anything to do with Adrian, but he had a hunch as to why Gray was questioning him.

"It's not a vampire, Debrett, and they're checking the list of all licensed staker owners."

"That's where my name comes in, right?"

"It surprised me to see your name on that list, Debrett." Gray gave him a long, searching look. "Anything I ought to know about?"

"Nothing I can't handle." Adrian kept his features composed, meeting Gray's gaze.

"Does that include Ramirez spotting you with Prince Garland at the Sang Erotique? Is that the reason for the staker?"

"Like I said, nothing I can't handle."

"Dangerous crowd you're hanging with, Debrett. Careful you don't get stepped on."

That part Adrian already knew. "I'll watch my step. Anything on the Southside Park, Gray?"

The man shrugged, not answering the question.

"Just call me when the cops get him, Gray, okay?"

"I will. I know you want him as bad as we do."

Glancing past Gray's shoulder, Adrian saw James Masterson as he passed near them. His eyes narrowed, watching Masterson. "Son of a bitch."

Masterson had the wraith of his wife in tow, and she looked miserable. Dakota had been right about his suspicions. The poor woman followed her husband, and she looked completely unhappy.

Careful not to turn his head, Gray asked. "What's wrong?"

Adrian sent out a sliver of his energy to the woman, letting her know he was nearby. Her head jerked in Adrian's direction with a surprised look. Keeping the communication silent, he let her know who he was and that he would be trying to help her out.

"I'll explain in just a minute." Adrian said out loud to Gray. His eyes were on Masterson's wife as the two walked out the door to their car. She looked away from Adrian, giving a slight shrug. Adrian could see the plate number through the window and

quickly memorized it. "You can look now, Gray. It's the guy getting in the maroon Mustang."

Gray looked over his shoulder, giving Masterson a quick, professional once over; Adrian filched Gray's pen from the counter, writing the license on a napkin before stuffing it in his pocket.

"What was that about?"

"Guide problem."

"Not much I can do to help you there."

"Yeah, I know, Gray. I've got to go, so call me later if you need anything else." Since Gray was the one who had called, Adrian left the bill for him to pay.

Grunting a goodbye, Gray stuffed his notepad into his jacket pocket and finished his coffee as Adrian walked out.

Back home, Adrian poured another juice and called Dakota. After the necessary pleasantries, he got down to business. "You in the mood to put somebody to rest with me?"

"For who?"

"I saw Masterson a few minutes ago with his wife. Odds are, you were right about Griffith."

"Son of a bitch, I knew something was up. We'll consider this one a freebie, Adrian. I'll help out."

It'd take both of them to do it because Masterson had bound her, and even though he'd asked for Dakota's help, Dakota expected no favor in return. "Let me get some more information, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

"Call me back when you're ready. Bye."

After repeating the goodbye, Adrian hung up before quickly making another call to Yar. He could trace the plate number for Adrian and get an address. Next, Adrian called the club to set up a meeting with Gabriel. Asking for his help would be the sticky part.

Two hours later, he entered Gabriel's office. All right, he had balls and knew it. Adrian

had turned the man down and refused to see him, but now he wanted to ask Gabriel for a favor. Sitting in the seat Gabriel gestured to, Adrian said bluntly, "I need a little help."

Gabriel seemed to see the irony in it as well; his features were amused as he asked, "Tell me, Adrian, why is it that you need my help?"

"I just need one of your goons to do something for me."

"I assume this is not exactly legal." The arched brow was in high evidence. "So, remind me why I should be willing to help."

Because he asked would not be a good reason, so Adrian asked a question instead, "What do you want in trade?"

"What are you willing to give?"

Bargaining was something Adrian was excessively familiar with. Knowing he had nothing of any material value that would interest Gabriel, he figured time might be of interest as, for some God unknown reason, Gabriel was interested in him. To help Mrs. Masterson, yeah, he would trade on it. Watching him carefully, Adrian tried to gauge how he took the question. "Is my time worth anything to you?"

"You would be willing to spend time with me in exchange for one of my goons, as you put it?" Gabriel's expression appeared thoughtful, but something showed in his eyes, almost like he was laughing at Adrian. "What is it you wish them to do?"

"Break into a house." He took the piece of paper with Masterson's address out of his pocket and put it on the desk.

That astonished Gabriel. "Is that all?"

"I need something from the house. Any personal item that belonged to Mrs. Masterson."

"I see." Pausing, Gabriel smiled, obviously highly entertained by all of this. "I'll grant your request, Adrian."

Adrian had asked the all-important question, and he felt relieved Gabriel had agreed to it, as Adrian couldn't ask any of his friends to do it. He didn't want them in jail for breaking and entering if they were caught. One of Gabriel's people could get in and out unseen with no problem, and no worries about jail. "What's it going to cost me?"

"Two evenings of my choosing. Is that too much to ask?"

"One evening and no, but it depends on what you plan to do, Gabriel."

"Both will be here in the club, not in my bed. That is, unless you want to be there."

The silky soft purr wove through the words as Gabriel stood, moving around his desk to behind Adrian's chair.

Adrian got out of the chair and turned to face the vampire, not wanting his back to Gabriel. "I'll stick to the club, and it's for one night. Thanks for the help, Gabriel." His attempt to sound businesslike wasn't as successful as he'd hoped it would be.

Raising his hand, the tip of his finger ran slowly down the side of Adrian's throat. "Two."

Fuming, Adrian's lips tightened and he glared at Gabriel, but he didn't have much of a choice if he wanted to help Masterson's wife. He slowly nodded. Actually, it wasn't a high price to pay for the favor Gabriel was doing; it was just annoying as hell. Abruptly stepping away from Gabriel, Adrian whirled around and stalked out.

Without incident, he walked through the club, headed outside to the parking lot and got into his car to return home. Thankfully, in San Diego, any place you might want to go was only ten minutes away by highway. The light congestion of the streets gave him time to think, and he wasn't very happy with his thoughts. He would have to wait until Gabriel could come up with what he needed before they could free Mrs. Masterson. Leaving the poor ghost with her husband made him fume, but he couldn't do anything else. Any attempt to drag the police into it would fail. There were no laws on the books against binding one's spouse after death. There should be, but there weren't.

He pulled into his parking space and turned off the car. After he picked up his mail, he unlocked the front door and went in. He closed the door behind him, dropping his jacket and mail on the armchair. Without any warning, Trisha came walking in from the hall to the living room as if she owned the place.

Adrian sized up the blonde woman as he watched her warily and lowered his hand to the holster of his staker, unsnapping it. Keeping half turned away from her, he pulled the staker out. He didn't trust the smile hovering across her lips. She'd already nailed him once across the throat at the club. From the tense movement of her body, it was clear she wasn't going to play with him this time.

"What do you want, Trisha?"

"Time to take out the garbage, as Gabriel won't. You really should have accepted his offer." She took a step closer to him. Her tone taunted him, playing a cat and mouse game with him as the mouse. "I'm sure you'll enjoy this less than having to drink his blood."

"Why don't you take your ass on home before somebody gets hurt?" Her comments told him Gabriel wasn't behind the attack.

"It won't be me." Trisha seem to feel very positive about it. She began to step around him like she had nothing to fear and was only playing with her food. "And I'm not stupid enough to let you run around loose."

That was his signal; Adrian aimed the gun at her in a two-fisted stance. Yar had been a great teacher. And he was greatly in favor of being underestimated, which Trisha had a serious problem with. "Oh, you're stupid; you just haven't figured it out."

Eyeing the gun, she started laughing. Malice laced her tone and she slowly circled to move behind him. "That won't do much damage. What will you bring out next? A cross?"

Her stupidity was his gain; Adrian followed her every movement, not about to let her get near enough to make the gun ineffective. Before she could move closer, he fired. The look of shock on her face froze there as she crumpled to the floor. She hadn't realized he had a staker or she wouldn't have laughed. And Adrian found out Yar wasn't kidding when he'd said it would paralyze a vamp in a split second.

Adrian dialed the number to the club. Tapping his foot impatiently, he waited for Gabriel to get on the line after being put on hold.

"To what do I owe the honor of you calling so soon, Adrian?" Even over the phone, the tantalizing tone of Gabriel's voice could make Adrian shiver like someone whispered unspeakable things to him.

"I got your bitch Trisha here in my apartment. She's bleeding on my carpet like a stuck pig, and I'm billing you for the cleaning. You need to send somebody over to cart her away."

Silence reigned for a moment on Gabriel's end before he spoke, "I'm not sure whether to be angry or laugh at how you put things."

"Just get her out of my apartment, will you? I have to be at work in less than an hour. And tell your friends the same thing will happen to them if they try to come after me."

"Trisha will be dealt with."

From the abrupt change of tone, Adrian had no doubt Gabriel would do the dealing. "Do that or I'll call the cops; she needs a lesson in law."

"You will have no more problems from my court, Adrian. I will send my children over to get her."

As he put down the phone, Adrian wondered how Gabriel had gotten the others off his back. He couldn't think on it, though, as he wasn't feeling very well, and it would be a while before he could get to bed.

Adrian figured Gabriel would send somebody over quickly, and he did. It took fifteen minutes for his vampire kids, Skyler and Wolf, to get to Adrian's apartment and take

Trisha's body away. With them, Adrian had the feeling of friendly faces in a hostile crowd, but he wasn't about to trust in it. After they left, he downed several aspirin with some juice before heading into work.

Chapter 7

By eight the next night, Skye had stopped by to drop off what Adrian needed. Apparently it had been easy, since Masterson, devoted husband that he was, hadn't disposed of his wife's possessions yet.

Dakota and Adrian headed up to La Jolla to set up a circle in a vacant lot cattycorner to Masterson's property. It would take both of them to summon the poor woman because her husband had bound her to him, and they needed to be as close to her as they could get. Getting out of the car, Dakota quickly started setting up the circle. Adrian placed the rings Skye had stolen on the ground in the center.

They both concentrated on combining their energy, and Dakota and Adrian focused on summoning Mrs. Masterson into the circle, using the rings as a beacon. Instead of the normal bluish hue, Adrian's power cast red tinged ribbons, combining with Dakota's completely blue strands of energy. It puzzled both of them, but they didn't have time to focus on it. Mrs. Masterson materialized slowly within the circle, extremely confused.

"We're here to help you, Mrs. Masterson," Adrian said quickly, hoping she would remember him from the other day. "It's past time to let you sleep."

Her confusion became a great deal of pain she couldn't hide. "Sleep? I can't. James won't leave me alone. He can't hit me anymore, but..." she trailed off into silence.

"We'll take care of it, Mrs. Masterson, and he won't be able to bother you ever again."

"I don't care what he does anymore, how many women there are, I just don't want to see it." Her head drooped and she stared at the ground, whispering, "He just won't let me go." Adrian and Dakota looked at each other. Masterson had played serious head games with his wife; they both had already realized that.

"It won't take us long, I promise."

They quickly began the ritual, hoping Masterson wouldn't notice his wife's disappearance quite yet. Dakota echoed each word Adrian spoke, their movements in sync as they went through the ritual to lay her to rest. She watched them silently, but Adrian saw a small measure of hope dawning on her face as they worked.

A sudden shout came from across the street, and Masterson ran from his house toward

them. The energy within the circle whirled around them in an impenetrable barrier. Masterson wouldn't be able to get near them with the circle keeping him out, but Adrian could see his face distorted with rage as he screamed obscenities at them. His wife hovered close behind them. Terrified, slender silver threads from her body thrashed wildly around them. Ignoring her husband, Adrian and Dakota continued, focusing on the ritual.

"It's almost over, Mrs. Masterson," Adrian told her reassuringly. He would be ready to answer the bastard, but only after she'd been safely put to sleep. Between Dakota and himself, Masterson would be lucky to come out in one piece.

A heart-rending gratitude altered her expression of fear and a subtle shimmering appeared around her, startling Adrian. Shock quickly replaced the initial emotion when her arms reached for him, and Adrian could feel her solid form hugging him. Completely dazed, he stared uncomprehendingly at her. When Dakota caught sight of her, his mouth dropped. The energy that had built around them started to weaken. Neither of them concentrated on it, and a surge back lashed on them.

The sudden bolt struck both Dakota and Adrian, sending them to their knees, allowing Masterson to break the circle when his foot kicked at the line of earth and salt. Adrian heard Mrs. Masterson screaming and struggled to get off his hands and knees. His brain had been short circuited by the snapback of energy, leaving the world hazy and distant to his senses. Blobs of incomprehensible shapes floated in front of his vision as he tried to anchor himself back to reality. When it finally cleared, the lot was empty except for the two of them. Badly shaken, Dakota's face had turned ashen, and Adrian knew he probably looked the same. Dakota got to his feet before helping Adrian up.

"What the hell happened?" Adrian wasn't sure how Mrs. Masterson had gained solid form.

"I don't know, but we lost control, and we're going to have to find her, Adrian. No way am I going to let that bastard keep her."

Dakota started putting their gear away, his hands still shaking. "Legally, she's dead and therefore no concern of the law, so the police won't be able to help us with this."

Adrian knew they couldn't just walk up to the house and demand to get her back. It would take some planning because Masterson had been alerted to them now, and Adrian needed to talk to Gabriel again. He was the only one Adrian could think of with the ability to get them into Masterson's place. After piling everything in the car, Adrian made Dakota drive straight to the club. Neither of them said anything, lost in their thoughts.

At the club, he left Dakota in the car to wait while he went into the Sang Erotique. The less Dakota knew about what Adrian would be doing, the better. Wolf, after one look at Adrian's face, took him back to Gabriel without a word. Thankfully, it didn't take Adrian long to convince Gabriel to follow along with him, and to his credit Gabriel didn't ask

many questions. They would discuss the price later. Adrian really wasn't concerned about it right now as he was worried more about Mrs. Masterson.

On the return drive to La Jolla, Dakota kept giving Gabriel speculative looks.

"Nothing spectacular or funny, got it?" Adrian sat in the back seat, eyeing Gabriel as well. "Just in and out, and nobody gets hurt unless we have to."

"I understand what you want. I can get you past whoever is at the front door."

"Dakota and I will handle Mrs. Masterson; you just put whoever gets in our way under, Gabriel."

Throwing an amused look back at him, Gabriel said, "I don't think I need instructions on doing that, do you, Adrian?"

He ignored that. "We all clear on this?"

"Let's just get her out of there as fast as we can, Adrian."

"No violence unless we have to, got it?" Adrian wanted to remind Gabriel of that fact in case he forgot, and Adrian needed Gabriel to get them past any security at the front door.

"Understood."

Dakota gave Adrian a curious look before focusing on the road. The rest of the drive was conducted in silence. Adrian knew Dakota wondered who Gabriel was, and how he had gotten a vampire to come along with them. He wasn't about to speculate on any of Gabriel's thoughts. When Dakota parked across the street from Masterson's, Adrian ignored both of their looks and got out of the car. Without a word, they followed him to the front door.

A servant answered the door when Gabriel knocked. He quickly put the man under, ordering the butler to step aside and let them in. Adrian had expected more than the butler, but it seemed Masterson didn't think they were bold enough to come straight to his home.

Low-toned, Gabriel continued speaking to the butler, and from what Adrian could hear Gabriel was telling the servant he hadn't seen them. Gabriel thought way ahead of Adrian, blocking the man's memories. Dakota followed as Adrian walked away. Adrian had caught a small energy trace of Mrs. Masterson, and he followed its trail up the stairs.

Moving down the hall to one of the closed doors, he paused, hearing the soft sound of weeping behind it. Gabriel moved up behind him, whispering, "She is the only one in there that I can detect."

Adrian nodded and slowly opened the door. Mrs. Masterson was lying face down on the bed, crying. When he said her name, her head came up with a frightened look, but she calmed immediately when she saw Adrian. Her face was badly swollen and beginning to bruise.

Keeping his voice low, Adrian gestured for her to come to him. "We've got to get out of here, Mrs. Masterson."

Dakota moved over to her, taking her arm, and Gabriel stayed behind, keeping an eye on the hall. As fast as they could, they hurried back down the stairs and out the front door. Thankfully, the house was quiet, and they didn't come across any of the servants as they bolted for the outside.

Before they made it back to the car, somebody ran out of the house, yelling. When a shot rang out, the bullet hit Adrian's upper arm before he could dive into the car. The piercing sting drew him up short for a brief second as it went through his arm. Gabriel snarled, whirling around at the guard. Dakota hurriedly got Mrs. Masterson into the car before running for the drivers' side.

"We've got to get out of here now!" Adrian yelled, grabbing Gabriel's arm and dragging the vampire into the back seat with him. He'd barely gotten the car door closed before Dakota peeled out.

Breaking the speed limit, Dakota got them back to the club in record time. Adrian had decided to return there because Masterson wouldn't be able to get past Gabriel's people while they reworked the ritual. Gabriel tore off a piece of his shirt and made a makeshift bandage for Adrian's arm before they reached the bar. After Dakota parked the car in the back lot, everyone climbed out and hastily got Mrs. Masterson inside.

As they moved down the hall, nobody said a word or approached them. In the office, Dakota quickly shut the door and Gabriel grabbed Adrian's arm, examining the wound. Working quickly, Gabriel bandaged it more tightly while Dakota set things up. Luckily for Adrian, the bullet had only grazed the fleshy part of his upper arm. The bleeding had already stopped, and he would get the damage taken care of, but he wanted to get Mrs. Masterson laid to rest first. He'd never been shot before and it hurt like a bitch; any movement of his arm sent pain through him.

Mrs. Masterson joined them in the circle as Gabriel stepped away from Adrian, moving to his desk. Adrian let Dakota lead the ritual and lent him energy once the circle closed. Studying her, Adrian felt bewildered. There was solidity to her body, and he couldn't explain that.

"This just isn't possible." He frowned, trying to understand why something impossible stood right in front of him. When he reached out, his hand met the resistance of flesh where it touched her arm. He could feel her, but she still had the energy of a wraith, not alive but very much solid.

Black curls bounced slightly as she shook her head, her brown eyes showing as much confusion as Adrian felt. She clearly couldn't understand what had happened either. She quickly hugged him tight, expressing her gratitude. "I only wanted to thank you for helping me."

Gabriel stayed silently by his desk, watching both of them with an enigmatic smile, satisfactorily smug about everything. When Gabriel's eyes rested on him, Adrian could feel the touch of 'mine' and accompanying self-satisfaction.

The ritual only took thirty minutes, as Dakota worked like Adrian usually did. The appearance of Mrs. Masterson's body faded to its normal transparent state before she disappeared with the final chant. Adrian started cleaning up the circle of salt and blood with a broom and dustpan, thankful it was all over, as Dakota put his equipment away. Gabriel remained relaxed on the corner of his desk, waiting for them to finish.

"You better get that arm checked out sometime tonight, Adrian. And while you're at it, keep an eye out, I doubt Masterson will let this one go."

Adrian swept the mess into the dustpan then moved to the trashcan, dumping it in. "I will on both counts, Dakota, but there's not that much Masterson can do. He can't get his wife back now."

"Just be careful, okay? Any clue what happened out there?"

"No, but I'll find out, and keep what happened to yourself, all right?"

"There go the millions I planned on making off of it." Dakota grinned, teasing him.

"Can it, Dakota. Just see if you can come up with anything to explain a solid ghost, and I'll see what I can find."

"I'll get right on it. Consider it part of the package for Denton, Adrian."

When Dakota left, Adrian plopped down in Gabriel's chair. The throbbing in his arm started to get to him, but, ignoring it, Adrian eyed Gabriel suspiciously. "All right, start explaining."

"Explain what?" Gabriel turned a mildly inquiring eye on him with no hint of knowing a damn thing showing on his face. However, the looks Gabriel had been giving Adrian earlier had told a different story.

"Why a ghost seemed to take on some flesh when I tried to lay her to rest, that would be the what, Gabriel."

"I have no clue, but it is interesting to see you become more powerful, Adrian."

Adrian could buy part of that; Gabriel being clueless wasn't that part. Adrian could sense something; Gabriel seemed inordinately pleased behind the facade. Shaking his head, Adrian just dropped the subject. Whatever Gabriel thought he knew wasn't going to be shared with Adrian. "Fine. So that leaves the price of tonight's work to be worked out, and keep it reasonable or you can kiss my ass. What's it going to be?"

Gabriel folded his arms across his chest. The movement tightened the pristine white shirt, defining the muscles beneath. Adrian's eyes had avoided the half-opened shirt for the past two hours. His record remained intact, and he kept them firmly fastened on Gabriel's face, but he hated the way he shifted in his seat.

"We will be entertaining several guests at the club on Thursday; I need you to be there. You can use that as one of the two nights you already owe me."

"I'll make sure Charlie doesn't schedule anything for Thursday."

"Formal dress is required. As far as whatever else you owe me, I will think of something later, Adrian."

He didn't like an open-ended favor owing, but Adrian let it slide because he felt like hell. If Gabriel got too outrageous, he knew he wouldn't do it, and they'd fight. "This is as formal as it gets, Gabriel, it's not like my closet overflows with designer suits."

"Then I will order several for you."

"Uh, no thank you, not necessary at all, Gabriel." Standing, Adrian wanted to get out of there before Gabriel could argue the point. Plus, he could use a painkiller, and a side trip to the hospital would take a while.

"One moment, Adrian, there is the matter of your arm."

His words stopped Adrian. "What about it?"

"Would you like me to heal it?" Gabriel patiently drew out the words as if Adrian was being slow to understand.

"Um, no, thank you. You'd take any excuse to use that tongue, wouldn't you?"

"It would take more than that to heal a bullet wound. But I do have the ability by simply touching you." Moving in a blur around the desk to get to him, Gabriel had his hand around Adrian's arm before Adrian could blink.

"Damn it, Gabriel." Before he could get anything else out, Adrian felt a warm flash in the region of his arm. Gabriel undid the bandage and Adrian's skin still tingled when he looked down at his arm. The wound had fully healed and not even a scar showed he'd

been shot.

"How did you do that?" Adrian hesitantly touched the spot, rubbing his finger over it. The dried blood had remained but there was no hole.

"A special ability of mine, Adrian." Gabriel tossed the bloodied bandage in the trash.

"Uh, thanks." He wasn't sure what else to say and wanted to get out of there before anything else happened. It wasn't until Adrian went out to the parking lot that he remembered they'd arrived in Dakota's car. Thankfully, Xander offered him a ride and took him home.

Chapter 8

Adrian's idea of fun in the sun included a swim along with lazing under an umbrella, reading a book. In hand, he had Aiken's latest. It helped to know what Adrian talked about when he argued with Charlie. It'd been more than two weeks since he'd been at the convention center with Charlie, and Adrian had yet to read the book.

Walking across the hot sand, he dropped the book on the blanket Cas had stretched out. She stood on the sidelines of the volleyball game, watching her boyfriend, Jake, play. Adrian was amazed to see Xander standing not too far away from her in the small crowd. Waving, Adrian wandered over to him.

"Taking a day off, Xander?"

"I need one every once in a while. How's it going?"

Adrian saw a spark of interest flicker in Xander's eyes. The sight of him chatting with a guy got Cas' attention. Her eyes widened, taking in Xander before giving Adrian the 'what have you been hiding' look.

"Quiet today. Just planning strategy on Charlie." Chuckling, he introduced Xander to Cas. "Cas, this is Xander, a friend of mine."

"You and I will talk later, Adrian." She waved at Xander. "Hey there."

"Nice to meet you, Cas."

She suddenly applauded wildly, yelling, "Way to go, Smith!" Jake's team had scored, and her mind had obviously returned to the game.

"You'll have to forgive her; she's a sports nut, and her boyfriend is playing."

"Not a problem."

"Do you want to join me for a swim?" Adrian didn't think Xander would mind him asking.

"Sure, Adrian. Haven't had the chance for one yet."

Adrian removed his T-shirt as they walked over to the blanket before tossing it down. Seeing the appreciative gaze from Xander, Adrian's eyes dropped to Xander's chest. The play of lean sculpted muscles held Adrian's interest as Xander threw his shirt down, and it kept Adrian's gaze pinned there until his eyes drifted upward to Xander's face. Clearing his throat when he noticed Xander had caught him staring, Adrian wandered off in a dignified walk down the beach to the water's edge. Xander ran past him, getting to the water first, and Adrian waded through the surf shortly after.

"Try and catch up, Adrian." Laughing, Xander teased him before diving into the water. He ran after Xander, splashing through the water and then swam, cutting through it to gain on Xander; Adrian never could resist a challenge. Reaching the buoy first, Xander treaded water as he waited for Adrian.

Once he got close enough, Adrian splashed some water at Xander. "Show off."

Xander appeared to be in a playful mood, and it rubbed off on Adrian. After winking at him, Xander disappeared beneath the water. He grabbed for one of Adrian's ankles and tugged on it, pulling Adrian under as well.

When Adrian surfaced, sputtering and wiping water from his face, Xander laughed at him.

"Oh, now I need revenge." With a smirk at Xander, Adrian quickly dove under, getting a hold of Xander's foot. He tickled Xander, refusing to let go. Xander tried to push him away, but Adrian stubbornly held on. When Adrian decided Xander had had enough of a thrashing, and he needed air, he pushed back for the surface.

"How about we call it a draw?"

"Help me find some seashells, Xander, I could use a few more. Then I'll consider it a draw." Collecting them was a hobby of his, along with his predilection for Scooby Doo memorabilia.

Xander joined Adrian, fishing at the bottom, though they only found a few shells worth keeping. After a very lazy, enjoyable swim, they headed for shore. By the time they got out, Jake's game had finished and the players were heading into the water.

Flopping belly-side down, Adrian placed the shells at the corner of the blanket. He rested his head on his arms as Xander stretch on his back next to Adrian.

"Are you working tonight?" Xander asked, staring up at the sky.

"Nope, it's a night off for me."

Xander remained silent for a minute before turning his head, studying Adrian intently. "Would you be in the mood for dinner?"

"Are you asking for a date, Xander?" It sounded like it to Adrian, but he couldn't resist asking for clarification.

Xander reached over, taking a strand of Adrian's hair between his fingers and tugged lightly at it. "I believe I am."

"Then I believe I'll accept," Adrian tried to remind himself that he really shouldn't be doing this. He liked Xander; anything more was a complication. Unfortunately, his brain didn't listen, and his gaze slid down to Xander's lips as he smiled.

"Where do you want to go tonight?" Getting up, Xander offered Adrian his hand. "Does Mariners sound good?"

Xander kept a firm hold of Adrian's hand, fingers twining with his. Adrian liked the sensation of Xander's thumb rubbing across the back of his hand as they walked down to the water's edge. "I could meet you there; it'd save you driving out to my place."

"I'd rather pick you up at your place. Maybe I can talk you into staying out a little later that way."

"You're taking lessons from Charlie, aren't you? I agree to one thing and before I know it, I'm roped into five."

"That was the hope."

Adrian had to laugh at Xander. "Fine, you can pick me up. How was the lecture Charlie and you attended?"

"It was very interesting; Professor Sanderson had some good points. You missed a really good lecture, Adrian."

"I wanted to attend with you guys. From the brochure I read, I have to agree with the theory, at least." It had bothered Adrian that he'd missed that one.

"Charlie got an autographed copy of his book, so you can read that."

"I'm not even through with the last one Charlie got me." Adrian would probably have to make an exception and read it. The subject of cognitive archaeology interested him a great deal.

Xander launched into a well thought out discourse on the main points of the lecture. Adrian felt bemused by the amount of knowledge Xander showed on the subject. Body, looks and brains. Adrian had the feeling he might be in trouble here.

The sun began to set as they returned to the blanket to get their stuff. After talking to Cas

and Jake for a few minutes, Adrian headed out to go home.

Near the front door of his apartment, Adrian saw Gray waiting for him. "Right here, Gray. What are you doing here?"

As he opened the door and went in, Gray followed him into the living room.

"Got a few questions, Debrett." Gray's expression stayed completely blank, which meant it had to be serious business.

"I just got back from the beach. Mind if I change first?" The damp shirt already felt uncomfortably sticky.

"I need to see your upper body, Debrett." It was an odd request, and he knew it.

"Upper body?" Adrian had a feeling he knew what this was about, but he pulled off a puzzled face. Masterson must have talked to the cops about their little escapade at his house. Adrian started to wonder if Gray had some kind of arrangement with the police department about his name showing up. Given that it was Gray who questioned him, and not the cops, gave the feeling some validity.

Adrian reached down, starting to peel the wet shirt off. "Do I need a lawyer or something here?"

"Depends on what I find," came the cryptic reply.

Tugging the shirt off, Adrian stood there, holding it in his hand. "Well?"

Gray closely examined Adrian's shoulders and arms. A deep frown creased Gray's features, the man obviously not finding what he expected. "Where were you last night at around ten?"

"At the Sang Erotique. Several people can verify that, Gray. Now what is this about?" Adrian knew if Gray asked anybody at the club, they'd say he'd been there. Which he had been, just not exactly at ten.

"There was a complaint that you broke into someone's house, and a guard claimed he fired a shot, winking you." Lifting his hand, Gray ran it through his short, already messed silver-streaked hair. It was a sign he wasn't happy with something. As he shared a bit of information, he obviously wasn't holding Adrian accountable though.

"I don't have a bullet hole in me, Gray, and ask around the club. I was there for quite a while." He'd just have to call Gabriel and let him know; he could spread the story to everyone.

"I'll be checking it out. You told me before you had a problem with Masterson, what was that about?"

"You mean at the coffee shop? I told you it was a guide problem."

"Yeah, so in more detail."

"A couple of weeks ago he came into the office and wanted me to bind his wife. I tossed him out. Later I was told that another guide might have done the job. You saw the wraith with him. It was Mrs. Masterson."

"You laid her to rest, didn't you?"

"Damn right I did." If Adrian said no, Gray would know it for a lie.

"That'd explain a few things. Better watch your back, Debrett." Gray backed off him for now. Once he had a good explanation for something, Gray would ease up. Finding out Adrian had put Mrs. Masterson to rest would be a reasonable motivation for revenge to Gray.

After he left, Adrian called to leave a message with Gabriel, warning him ahead of time that the cops might be stopping by and why. Next on his agenda, he indulged in a nice, hot shower. He wasn't too worried about Masterson. Since Gabriel's ability to heal wasn't a widely known fact, nobody would connect the fact he had been shot but quickly healed. Witnesses would give him an alibi, and there wasn't a thing Masterson could do about it.

Normally, Adrian didn't care to operate this way. A twinge of guilt nagged at him over it, but to him, the wrong of Masterson's action outweighed his own. Yeah, he knew it was a poor excuse, but it was all he had.

Luckily, Mariners wasn't a fancy place. He'd get away with jeans, but he needed something better than a T-shirt. Other than the shirt he'd had worn to the Mayor's big shindig, he only had two others that qualified as dress shirts. He had broken down and bought them so he would have something more decent to wear when needed. It looked like he might have to expand his wardrobe again.

Xander definitely had him outclassed when the man showed up, right on time. Xander wore a silk shirt, the same shade of gray as his eyes, tucked into tight jeans. Only a hint of skin showed with the top two buttons undone. Soft golden-brown strands of hair strayed across his face, screaming to be played with. Adrian behaved, keeping his hands to himself as Xander drove them to the restaurant.

"How did you get into the ghost business?" Xander showed a genuine interest in learning more about him.

"You could say I was born into it and didn't mind. I've had the ability to see them since I was a kid."

"Didn't that make it kind of hard for you, Adrian?"

"Some, but I ignored my mother, and it never really bothered me." His mother could be hell on wheels when it came to his guide ability. Relaxing in the seat, Adrian explained a bit more about his work. "Ghosts are drawn to people like me. It doesn't matter whether a guide knows about their own ability or not, and usually the ghost won't realize why either. A wraith's state of energy recognizes my power, and it unfailing draws them."

"Yeah, I know guides aren't born knowing what they are or how do rituals. But the ability does show at a young age."

"It used to upset my mother to no end to find me talking to people she couldn't see when I was five. At first, she dismissed it as an imaginary friend stage, but when it became obvious I was a seer, she did her best to suppress and deny it. If I tried to say anything, I was told to stop making things up."

Eventually I learned to shut my mouth. It wasn't until I was twelve that I met Dakota. He'd seen me playing in the neighborhood park, surrounded by wraiths. It didn't take him long to realize what was going on after he spent a few minutes talking to me. Without my mom's knowledge, he taught me everything I needed to know."

"I take it your mom didn't appreciate it."

"She still doesn't, but in a lot of ways, it's more of a choice for me. I enjoy what I do. But what about you?" Turning the tables, Adrian was just as interested in learning about Xander.

"I've spent the last few years getting a degree, Egyptology." Xander's voice carried what seem to be an ironic note, and it puzzled Adrian. "Not much call for an expert in that area. The museums are all full up right now."

"Is that why you're at the club, Xander?"

"Gabriel has an extensive collection of Egyptian art. I catalog and take care of it, plus advise a few others on new purchases or existing pieces that they have. Sometimes I find pieces and whatnot."

"I've always enjoyed reading what I could about ancient Egypt. Anything past 1840 doesn't much interest me history-wise, only Egyptian, Roman, and Georgian." Adrian laughed before adding the last part. "Odd span there, I know."

"Did you study some of it?" The warm smile Xander gave him had the oddest tingling

effect on Adrian.

"I took a couple of courses in college. Nothing extensive, but it's an interest. How'd you get into the field?"

"You could say I was born into it, too, Adrian." There it was again, a dry ironic inflection that spoke volumes that Adrian didn't understand. "My mentor was the one who suggested college. When I was growing up, it was the one era I felt comfortable with, and it seemed natural to get a degree."

"How about your parents?"

"They died a long time ago." Xander shrugged, but Adrian caught a glimpse of pain before Xander looked back to the road.

He understood. It wasn't a subject to touch. Adrian could be the same way about his dad.

"Gabriel does have some extraordinary pieces. I'll have to take you through the collection sometime. I think you'd be interested in it. Most of it is housed outside of town."

Adrian figured he'd enjoy seeing it as long as he didn't run into Gabriel. "We'll have to do that someday. I'll see what I can free up with Charlie."

"Another date with me already, Adrian?" Xander appeared to very much like the idea. Parking the car, he switched off the key.

"If you're interested, that is. Seems you made the offer first, as I recall."

"I believe I am, and I did." Xander gave Adrian a quizzical glance, as if asking 'is that a problem?'

For the rest of the evening, Adrian enjoyed himself more than he had in a long time.

After that first night, it became habit to go out with Xander when he had some time off. Over the next week, Charlie kept giving him the serious eye every time Adrian wandered into work. The simple fact that Adrian took a few nights off had Charlie's full interest. Usually Charlie was the one who had to force them into Adrian's schedule. Charlie wanted to know what was going on, and Adrian wouldn't tell him.

Each morning, Adrian's phone would ring just as he got ready to crawl into bed, and Xander's voice had the ability to relax him no matter how tense the night had been for him. A guy really could get used to this.

Chapter 9

After he canceled his date with Xander, Adrian fell into bed. For the last few days, he'd been feeling like he was coming down with the flu or something, but he was hungry all the time. Even after he ate. No matter what he ate, or how much.

He drew his knees to his chest, hugging his arms around his legs. Cramps rolled through him, sending intermittent pain across his gut. His arms tightened around his legs until they passed. At this rate, Adrian would have to call in sick to work. Charlie would love that. Looking at himself in the dresser mirror, he could see that he looked like he felt. His features were tight, paler than normal, and he was hungry. He shouldn't be at all, having eaten just a few hours ago.

Flipping off the light switch, Adrian curled on his side into a ball. The faint glow of the moon lit the room, speckling across the floor from the bay window. He closed his eyes, trying to relax; the steady tick of the clock finally lulled him to sleep.

A faint whisper echoed within his thoughts, but Adrian couldn't grasp it right away. Layers of warmth shrouded him; all he wanted to do was sink deeper, clinging to them. But the soft drift of whispering called him to wake up. Stretching slightly under the covers, the pain brought Adrian's attention back to it. Now he felt worse. *Why am I so hungry?*

"What the hell is wrong with me?"

"You are hungry, Adrian." The silky heat of Gabriel's voice rippled through the answering whisper.

Adrian's eyes flew open, body tensing, as his hand went for the staker on the nightstand. Gabriel moved faster, taking it from his reach. He put the staker in the drawer of the nightstand so Adrian couldn't get to it. "No need for that. I won't harm you, you should already know that."

Trying for normal, Adrian commented, "You're not supposed to be here." The words sounded stupid even to him.

Gabriel reached over, turning on the lamp. His voice held a comforting note. "I am here because you are hungry."

Gabriel's hand moved to Adrian's face as he sat down on the edge of the bed. His slender fingers brushed back loose strands of hair and caressed Adrian's cheek.

Adrian could use some comfort, but he didn't view Gabriel as a likely source. "What did you do to me?" Suspicion flooded him. Unfortunately, just waking up wasn't a good time for his brain to function.

In answer, Gabriel withdrew his hand and sliced a fingernail across his wrist. The action shocked Adrian, but he lost the feeling when the scent of Gabriel's blood hit him. He barely had time to wonder how he could smell it before pain skittered through him in a ravening hunger. The scent of it smelled so sweet.

Without thought, he took Gabriel's hand, pulling it to his lips. The hunger hurt so much that instinct kicked in. Adrian's mouth fastened to Gabriel's wrist and he drank as deeply as he could. The taste pooling on his tongue was incredible. The finest wine had nothing on this, and it made Adrian whimper with the need crawling through him.

A low growl sounded from Gabriel in reaction to the heat against his skin. His soft voice seemed as enticing as the darkest night, filled with erotic promises. "The hunger will be gone soon. Take what you need. My blood is yours, Adrian."

Adrian heard Gabriel, but it seemed to be from a distance. The gentle touch of Gabriel's hand brushed against the side of his face and then downward as Adrian drank Gabriel's blood. Adrian felt as if he couldn't get enough of the taste of Gabriel until the pain slowly eased, releasing him from the craving. He could feel the oddest awareness of the power within himself, his body absorbing it internally. Adrian let go of Gabriel's hand, opening his eyes to find Gabriel staring down at him. A languid satisfaction spilled over him, making it difficult to even want to move.

"You are my ghoulish now. My Favored One. You have been for almost two weeks. The night you turned down my offer, I wasn't very worried about it. The tomato juice in your refrigerator had already been laced with my blood before you even entered the club. My insurance that, no matter what you said, you would have my blood. The hunger you feel is because you need to feed from me every week. And it's almost a week past the time to feed you."

The soft, lilting tones were like a physical caress to Adrian's senses. They warmed his body, along with the blood that assuaged his hunger, keeping it at a low thrum. He closed his eyes, listening to Gabriel's voice until anger started boiling. It replaced the lethargic mood when Adrian realized how he'd been tricked. Horrified, he tried to speak.

Something shadowed Gabriel's eyes before Adrian felt a burning sensation beginning in his head. *Fuck, he would try to put me under, and there are no ghosts nearby to bail me out.* Unresistingly, Adrian's mind gave in.

As if feeling the sudden compliance, Gabriel's thoughts whispered to him. Need washed

over Adrian with the whispered command in his mind. His anger disappeared, and Adrian felt nothing but the desire to kiss Gabriel. Nerveless fingers drew Gabriel's head down to him; Adrian's lips opened eagerly to the vampire when Gabriel's tongue probed between them. Gabriel's fingers tangled tightly in his hair as he delved deeper into Adrian's mouth. Each stroke of his tongue received an answering response from Gabriel.

When Gabriel finally drew back, Adrian felt too overwhelmed to instantly react. He couldn't get anything else out, but the name. "Gabriel."

Desire intensified the blue of Gabriel's eyes as he pressed a finger to Adrian's lips, silencing him. "Listen to me, Adrian. I will ask nothing more of you, not this way. I want you to come to me willingly." The tip of Gabriel's finger rubbed slowly across his lower lip.

In response, Adrian pressed a kiss to it. *Why am I reacting this way? I don't understand.* As if he could read the thoughts, Gabriel answered, "You are under my power, and you are feeling what I feel right now."

"Stop it, Gabriel." Adrian knew he was begging, but he couldn't help it.

"Adrian, feel no anger for tonight. Tomorrow you may rant at me all you wish." The unbearable emotions slowly lifted from him as Gabriel freed him from the power.

"Why did you do this to me?" Adrian's anger felt like a distant emotion to him. He could still feel it, but he couldn't access it.

"The others wanted you hunted down, and they would have killed you. I couldn't let that happen. Ghouling you was the only way to stop them." Gabriel wore an odd smile Adrian couldn't understand.

"I won't drink from you, I don't want to." The words were definitely easier to say when he wasn't acting like a beast controlled by his hunger.

"Yes, you will, or this will happen again. I would enjoy that, personally." Gabriel very much looked like he would, too.

That comment brought Adrian up short. *No way in hell will I do this again.* His mind searched frantically for an answer he could accept, and it didn't take long to find it. "All right, Gabriel, I will drink your blood." He paused, smiling his own little smile before adding, "From a glass."

He'd found out some ghouls took their blood that way. The disappointed look Gabriel gave him made Adrian chuckle. He still felt ahead somewhere in the game, sort of. He could do nothing about being a ghoul, but he could control Gabriel's part in it.

"Checkmate, Adrian. I wonder when you will give in to me?" Amusement laced Gabriel's

soft tone.

"Hell hasn't froze over yet, Gabriel. Catch me when it does."

Gabriel's rich laughter had the effect of making Adrian shiver. It felt that good as the sound of it spilled over him. Adrian wished it didn't feel like that.

"Stop that." Adrian frowned, trying to put some emphasis into the words.

"Stop what?"

"Just go home and go to bed, will you?"

It was easier falling asleep after Gabriel left. The pain had gone, and Adrian ignored the multitude of thoughts milling around in his head, in favor of getting the rest he needed.

Several hours later, the sound of the phone ringing woke him up. The minute he heard Xander's voice, he started in on the man. "Did you know Gabriel ghouléed me?" He prayed Xander wasn't behind any of this.

A few seconds passed before Xander answered, "No, I had no idea, Adrian, but I'm not surprised. He never discusses the things he does with me."

Adrian had tried to bury the suspicion before he went to sleep, but it welled up in him and wanted answers. Without him really meaning it to, his tone sounded accusing. "Are you are dating me because of him, to keep an eye on me? Are you, Xander?"

"No, that's not true. I go out with you because I want to, because I enjoy being with you. I was supposed to keep watch on you, but that didn't include dating you. This has nothing to do with Gabriel." There was a long pause before Xander asked, "Will you stop seeing me?"

Adrian heard the note of disquiet in Xander's question, but paid no attention to it. Adrian was angry with both of them, but more so with Gabriel for starting all of this. His feelings toward Xander were more complicated. He felt betrayed, but he tried not to. Part of him knew none of this was Xander's fault. All he could say was, "We'll talk later, Xander. I need to get ready for work." Then Adrian hung up on him.

Adrian knew work would have a numbing effect on him, keeping his mind too occupied to dwell on everything else. Charlie had scheduled a meeting with Sylvia at ten p.m. so Adrian could talk to her. When she showed up at the office, it didn't take Adrian long to explain to her she possessed guide ability. Luckily, it didn't seem to bother her, and Adrian agreed to take her along for the night to test her ability. She definitely showed promise as a natural talent. He knew before he finished the first job that she'd be worth training and hiring, if she was interested in the work.

During the appointments, Adrian took the time to explain the ropes to Sylvia. Unfortunately, there were no colleges or classes to teach one how to be a guide, as there were only about five thousand of them around the world. Any training came from other guides, the way Dakota had taught him. The Guides' Guild had been built as a loosely-based organization, and Adrian belonged to it, but it offered no formal training. It was a 'fly by the seat of your pants' type of learning.

"Being a guide does make one a busy person. Sometimes the newly dead will make their way to us to get to the great beyond. Other times, it'll be a family member or friend who happens to be a seer. More often, a wraith has no such luck in having a seer nearby. So they float around until a guide chances across them."

"Do you lay them to rest as well, Adrian?"

"Anybody I come across who wants to be laid to rest. Generally, it takes an hour to do the ritual. I do it in less than thirty. I don't get the same enjoyment most guides do with the ritual; I have more of an affinity with the dead beyond seeing and putting them to sleep. It's a burden for them to be around the living. The majority want rest, not pomp and ceremony, so I try to give that rest as quickly as I can."

"I don't think the pomp and circumstance interests me, Adrian. Every time I deal with a ghost, I want to help them. I just don't know how."

"That's what I can teach you, Sylvia. It can take anywhere from a few days to a couple weeks for the newly dead to understand what's going on after they die. A lot of them eventually make their way to the place they lived, but after a time any fun hanging around the living tends to wear off. Yeah, it's nice to see the spouse and the kids, until it sinks in that they can't even touch them. They can't control anything and don't even get to enjoy the simple things they had while they were living. The longest I've ever seen a ghost last in that situation is a month. And it's worse for the ghost who has no seers in their family."

Sylvia listened attentively as he rattled off some of the things it would help her to know.

"Once in a while, there are wraiths that either hang around for revenge or get some kind of kick out of spooking mortals with the moaning and chains bit. In the former case, I usually force them to rest, in the latter I just ignore them if they aren't really bothering anybody. There are also movers, screamers, etc.; it's a long list."

"And you've dealt with all of them?"

"Pretty much. However, most guides don't have the ability to handle unwilling ghosts. That's something we'll test you on later. Right now you have enough to learn." Parking the car, he grabbed his pack from the back seat and prepared for the next appointment. "According to Federal law, guides can't do more than ten wraiths a night; supposedly, any more is risky. I think the guides' loosely organized union has something to do with

that. They told the officials ten a day was the limit, and none of us have gone out of our way to tell them any different. So Charlie will never schedule you for more than ten appointments. However, what you decide to do on your own time is your own business."

By six a.m., they headed out to the last appointment at the old cemetery on Hill Road. Normally, Adrian worked from people's homes or his own. For some reason, this client took exception to having the ghost of his father in his house. He wanted it laid to rest where they had buried the body. Adrian had charged him a thousand just for being an ass. The cemetery was filled with mostly older gravestones, but there were some newer ones here and there. Believe it or not, he had never been in a cemetery. No reason to go to one as his work came to him.

Equipment in hand, they entered the cemetery to put poor Mr. Harold Sampson to rest. A rush of energy hit Adrian all of a sudden, staggering him. "What the--" He broke off, his head dizzy with it.

Multiple ghosts rose up from their graves with a clamor of mental voices. Most were angry at being disturbed. It all filtered through his mind like a wave. Adrian stood stock still, just staring at them as they clustered around him and Sylvia. Damn, he knew he would feel obligated to lay every one of them to rest, if they wanted it, and Adrian could feel they did. But why hadn't somebody done that long ago?

Sylvia staggered backward from the effect. She reached out, grabbing at the gate for support. Open-mouthed, she stared at the ghosts around them.

"One at time, please." Adrian held up his hand for silence and the din in his head lessened. He could only do five ghosts at a time in one circle, and there seemed like a couple of hundred populating the cemetery.

One of the men, wearing an outfit Adrian identified as being from the previous century, spoke up. "Why have you called us from our graves?"

"I didn't. If there are any wraiths that want to be laid to rest, they will come to me because I'm in their territory. Not something I can control." It had happened to him before, but never with this staggering a result.

All at once, the clamor started again. There were too many voices, questioning and pleading with him, to be sorted out into any coherent words. Adrian finally had to hold up his hand again. "If you will please be quiet, I can work with this."

At least, he hoped he could, after he got the crowd calmed down enough. When everybody settled, some disappeared into their graves to await his call; the others moved back to give him some working room, including poor Mr. Sampson. Adrian began spilling salt to lay the circle.

"My cell phone is in my bag, Sylvia. You can call a cab to take you back to the office." He really didn't expect her to hang around for a massive scale operation like this.

She shook her head, a bemused expression on her face. "No, I'll help out, Adrian."

"One hell of a way to end your first day of work, Sylvia." He chuckled as she moved to join him. The young, petite brunette impressed him a great deal, and he was more than happy to have her work with him.

They both lost track of the time somewhere. At one point, Adrian went back to the car, getting a bottle of water and a couple of half-melted candy bars. The breaks they took consisted of nibbling a few pieces of chocolate and sipping water between rituals. Daylight came and went, with darkness descending slowly before it once again became dawn.

How much time had gone by? Adrian wasn't sure; he had stopped looking at his watch a while back. He spared a second to thank God his supplies had been full when they'd started. Otherwise, his arm would look even more of a bloody mess than it was. Adrian had had to start cutting himself some time after dawn when the vials ran out. The circle of salt had become almost solid red with blood. They only took the time to break the circle, wiping away a few inches of the salt, before starting the next ritual.

At some point, Sylvia ended up curling up on the grass, passing out from exhaustion. She'd gamely tried her best to help him as she could, and Adrian was grateful for that. All he wanted to do was collapse, but he pushed himself now. He could feel how badly the remaining ghosts around him wanted final peace. Most of them had waited a very long time for it.

Close to nine, he finally laid the last ones to rest. Adrian just stood there, numbly waiting, but no more calls reached him. He had been there since seven the previous morning; twenty-six hours just wouldn't register in his mind. Somehow, he managed to clear the circle, grinding the salt and blood down into the grass with his foot. Crouching down, he put his badly depleted gear back in the pack. As he tried to stand to wake up Sylvia, dizziness washed over him, sending him collapsing to the ground.

Chapter 10

Silk and velvet hangings greeted his blurry eyes when he finally came to. This wasn't his bedroom. The fact registered about the same time Gabriel came into view. The vampire sat in a chair next to the bed, close enough to hold Adrian's hand in his lap. All Adrian got out was, "Where?"

"You are in my private quarters. I wondered when you would awaken again, Adrian. You have been asleep a very long time."

The last thing Adrian remembered he'd been in the cemetery. Damn, he must have passed out. "How did I get here?" It took him another second to remember Sylvia had been with him. "Where's Sylvia?"

"When you collapsed; the connection between us snapped. I realized something was wrong, and it didn't take my servants long to find you. You've been asleep for nearly two days. I also brought Sylvia here. She woke up last night, and Wolf drove her back to your office."

Never ask a question unless you really wanted the answer would be Adrian's new motto. He didn't want to hear he was in Gabriel's bedroom and had been there for two nights. Closing his eyes, blocking it all out, seemed to be the best thing to do. At least he could relax slightly knowing Sylvia was safe. Though he wondered if she would stay on the payroll.

"Would you care to give me a reasonable explanation as to why I found the two of you passed out in a cemetery, Adrian?"

"I was working," he mumbled, gesturing to his arm to show Gabriel's the marks. "There were so many of them, I couldn't leave until they were at rest."

"I have already taken care of those wounds." The smile and words had Adrian quickly looking down at his arm. No marks showed on his skin, and he couldn't stifle the groan. *Great, he's indulging himself with midnight snacks while I snooze.*

"Enjoy yourself, Gabriel?"

"Immensely." A satisfied note purred through the one word.

That smile was about to get him hit; and Adrian started raising his hand. Gabriel stilled the movement by taking hold of it. "I also fed you when you woke up the first time. All you could tell me was that you were hungry. You seriously depleted my blood in your system. Which is why you couldn't fully heal those wounds."

Adrian didn't remember any of that, but he didn't doubt it. "It must have been the twenty-six hours I worked."

"You were in that place for that long?" Gabriel's voice tightened, anger rippling through the words, and he let it show in his expression. The tightening of his hand on Adrian's was another signal.

"I couldn't help it, Gabriel. There were so many of them, and they had waited too long." For a brief moment, Adrian paused, wondering why he felt the need to explain anything to Gabriel. "I don't owe you any explanations for what I do."

Gabriel visibly forced his own anger down, obviously not wanting to react to the baiting. "You do not believe you owe me an explanation. There is a difference."

Adrian wasn't going to argue the point, since Gabriel had chilled out. As Gabriel had obliquely pointed out, common courtesy demanded that as he'd been kind enough to help, Adrian should explain to him. However, he doubted kindness had prompted Gabriel, so common courtesy could go hang itself. But he did owe Gabriel a thank you.

"Thanks for helping me." The words came out stiffly. He felt obliged to say it; he just didn't want to.

"Well said, Adrian." Gabriel's bland manner was a rebuke unto itself.

Adrian couldn't stop the shame that crept over him either. Gabriel had gone out of his way, no matter what his reasons were, and Adrian was being an ungracious bastard. "Sorry." Quickly, Adrian looked at Gabriel's hand over his, just for something to fasten on other than Gabriel's face. "I know you went to extra effort to help me out. I do appreciate that. Thank you, Gabriel."

That time, it came out right. Adrian's eyes followed the movement as Gabriel lifted his hand, brushing a kiss against the back. He could get used to this. His next thought immediately strangled the first.

Struggling to sit up, Adrian pulled his hand away, and the sheet slipped down to his waist. He immediately wiggled out as he realized he wore the bottom half of a pair of silk pajamas. *So whose pajamas am I wearing, and who put them on me?*

He eyed Gabriel accusingly. "Gabriel."

Gabriel started laughing, which didn't help Adrian's temper as he fumed at Gabriel. "I

am sorry, Adrian, but your look."

His finger pressed against Adrian's lips to keep him silent, and Adrian almost bit it. "The pajamas are yours. I purchased several pairs for you. And no, I did not change your clothing, Wolf dressed you."

"Are you planning on setting up housekeeping with me?" His anger faded with the answer. Adrian couldn't accuse Gabriel of getting a cheap thrill while he'd been passed out.

The twitch of Gabriel's lips showed him to be amused, just trying not to blatantly show it. Adrian looked down at himself, examining the material for something to do.

A low growl from Gabriel grabbed his attention. The smoldering heat within Gabriel's eyes made Adrian realize he hadn't taken any sneak peeks, and more than wanted to now. Something in the pit of Adrian's stomach lurched, and he felt a distinct tingling sensation he fought like hell. He swallowed convulsively, yanking the sheet back to his shoulders as a barrier between himself and that gaze.

"I enjoy your reactions. And please don't bother denying that I do affect you."

It was obvious to both of them that Gabriel's presence elicited a very interested response from Adrian. Adrian would never try to deny anything that was stupidly evident. He just blinked at Gabriel, keeping the sheet at full mast. He wouldn't admit it, but he couldn't deny it either. For some reason, Charlie popped suddenly into his mind. Now, why think of him? It couldn't be because he desperately needed a change of subject, could it? Adrian dropped the sheet and started scrambling off the bed. "Damn, I have to get to work. Charlie will kill me."

A firm hand curled around Adrian's arm, stilling the movements. "Everything is fine, Adrian. I spoke to your secretary and told him you wouldn't be back to work for a while."

Plopping back down on the bed, he stared at Gabriel in consternation. "You called Charlie? You told him who you were, didn't you?"

"But of course I did."

Covering his eyes with his hand, Adrian started shaking his head, and his reaction obviously bothered Gabriel.

"Apparently, he will give you problems. I will take care of it."

"No, that's not necessary. Charlie won't bother me."

"Why did you seem so upset?" Gabriel wasn't letting go so easy.

"Because nobody knows I'm a ghoul, not outside your vampires. I wanted to keep it that way, that's all." With a bone like that in his lap, Charlie would bug the hell out of Adrian for every detail. He just didn't want to deal with it. Charlie would have Gabriel as another major figure in Adrian's love life. Just like he did with Xander, but Adrian felt no need to tell Gabriel that.

"The delegation from Colorado will be here shortly. You need to get dressed. There is a suit hung up in the wardrobe for you." Catching the stubborn set of Adrian's features, Gabriel quickly continued, "My guests will expect to see my ghoul appropriately dressed. You will wear the outfit."

With the parting shot in a 'don't argue with me' tone, Gabriel left the room.

Adrian found his backpack on the chest at the foot of the bed, and his jeans and T-shirt were neatly folded in it. The motto on his T-shirt was particularly fitting for tonight, proclaiming, "I hear voices. They say they don't like you." It had been kind of Gabriel to make sure the bag had been placed in the room with him. He laid the clothes out on the bed before heading into the bathroom. Adrian had agreed to attend this meeting as part of the two nights he owed Gabriel, which meant Adrian was stuck with it. Soaking lazily in a tub full of soothing hot water, it took him a while to want to get out.

Somebody had brought him a tray of food while he took his bath. Adrian snagged a few pieces of fruit in between drying off and getting dressed. He picked up a comb from the dresser, dragging it through the tangled, wet locks of his hair.

Silently, he sent out a mental signal, hoping there would be a wraith in the area that would answer. When he finished combing out his hair, a ghost slipped through the wall into the room. Without further communication, he slipped inside Adrian's skin. Adrian heard a knock at the door before Gabriel's daughter, Indy entered to tell him he was expected in the bar. The moment she saw him, her lips twitched, trying not to betray a smile. The look in her dark brown eyes was priceless and had him chuckling. After a moment, she joined him in the laughter.

Getting a good look at her, he had the feeling he would definitely look out of place in his jeans. The neckline of the red silk sheathing her body draped low between her breasts, giving more than a hint of their form. Her chestnut hair had been pinned in an elegant French braid.

Once his weapons were in place, he moved to follow her out the door. As they walked up the stairs together, she said, "It's a good thing you are equipped tonight."

The words were cryptic, and any signs of laughter were gone from her face. He got the warning behind her words, but said nothing. His usual safety measures were in force: rider inside him, staker on his hip, and dagger strapped to his thigh. It had gotten to the point he wouldn't leave home without them.

Entering the bar, Adrian scanned the gathered crowd. Gabriel stood with Xander, Wolf and Skye near the bar, talking to several strangers. One of Gabriel's enforcers, Marcus, stood guard not too far from the others. Now, he was a guy Adrian thought gave a real good impression of a bad ass vampire. An aura of menace hung around him, having something to do with the baseball bat Marcus held loosely in one hand, and mostly to do with the perpetual scowl of contempt on his face. Dark brown eyes and a shaved head set off the ebony skin. The look attracted a bevy of females clustering around him, like a harem. Adrian smirked at Marcus before he noticed Sylvia coming toward him.

"What are you doing here, Sylvia?"

"I stopped at the office to see you. Charlie said you were probably still here, as you hadn't checked in. I just wanted to make sure you were all right."

"I'll take that to mean you're still going to work for me." After the cemetery bit, Adrian had honestly expected Sylvia to quit. At this point, her tenacity astonished him.

"Why would I quit, Adrian? I've learned more in one day of work with you than I have in my entire life."

"We'll discuss your bonus for helping me out at the cemetery later, Sylvia. Right now, you probably shouldn't be here. If you want, take another night off. You can come into the office tomorrow night." He tried to give her the gentle hint that this wasn't the best place to be.

Gabriel, who had been watching them, gestured for them to join him. Adrian walked toward the group, and Sylvia followed him. She wasn't going to take his advice and get the hell out while she could.

"Really, Gabriel, you should dress your pet better. Or has the stock market turned against you?" Droll laughter sounded around them. The woman stared openly at Adrian and clearly didn't like his jeans and T-shirt. Like he cared. Occasionally Adrian could be thick skinned, and nobody could insult him no matter how hard they tried. Now was one of those times. Adrian sent a bored look at the woman who thought she'd been so funny. From the tip of her red hair to her impeccably matched toes, she looked like a designer's dream. Pale green eyes filled with contempt drifted over him.

Hearing the word 'pet,' Sylvia glanced over at Adrian, obviously puzzled. It was clear the woman had referred to him.

Standing beside Gabriel, Adrian shrugged. Sylvia headed toward the edge of their little group, watching and listening with avid curiosity and interest.

"He has his own sense of fashion, Claire. I have no wish to change it, as he carries it off so well. Better than some even in the most perfect of clothes."

He lies better than I do. It didn't look like Claire cared for the hint that Gabriel thought Adrian looked better than the rest of them. He could tell from the sour look pinching her face.

"Welcome, Adrian." Outwardly, Gabriel seemed calm as he turned his attention to Adrian, but something was wrong.

What's going on? His answer was a distinctly weird smile from Gabriel. It made Adrian nervous. Gabriel rarely smiled unless it was the seductive variety.

One of the nearby men stepped closer to them. He had Gabriel beat to flinders in the looks department. Short black hair spiked naturally, the darker olive tone of his skin something unexpected in a vampire. The black eyes had an odd silvering in their depths as they ran appraisingly over Adrian. A dark eeriness surrounded him that gave an unsettling impression. Adrian wasn't impressed. Abhorred, maybe, but not impressed.

"Nikolai, Sanguinus Reges of the first formula, 1820." The introduction was for Adrian's sake, as he didn't have the first clue who the man was. An elegant bow followed the little speech.

A first formula? And that old? Adrian managed not to mutter 'fuck' as he politely held out his hand to Nikolai. The faintly cool feeling of Nikolai's fingers made Adrian's skin crawl. Facing an almost two thousand year old vampire gave him some serious qualms, and Nikolai didn't even look a day over thirty-five.

Pulling his hand back, Adrian inched closer to Gabriel, muttering to Nikolai, "Pleasure, I'm sure." Adrian didn't even complain when Gabriel's arm casually circled his waist.

"He's an amazing toy, Gabriel, if a few of the stories I have heard are true." Nikolai examined Adrian like a bug under a microscope.

"Indeed, my Favored One is, Nikolai," Gabriel agreed smoothly. The use of the title was a less than gentle hint of Adrian's exact relationship to him.

Assuming a casual stance, Adrian folded his arms over his chest. He wanted to look away from Nikolai, but forced himself to stare calmly back at the vampire. The burning sensation he felt, building up all of a sudden, made him narrow his eyes on Nikolai. The son of a bitch was trying to take him over. Adrian had a rider, but his protection had never been tested by a first formula. Ripples of command assaulted Adrian's mind as Nikolai lifted a hand, beckoning Adrian closer. The wash of Nikolai's power felt like a tidal wave, attempting to dominate Adrian.

"Adrian." Nikolai's low voice reinforced his will, commanding Adrian to obey him.

Adrian took several steps, propelled forward before he could stop. His own will sharply pushed against the constraining weight that bore down in his head. It helped him stop

even as he fought the urge to go to Nikolai. His words were a barely audible, but clearly understood, "Ah, hell no."

When Nikolai snarled at him, the heat became relentless. Commands lashed through Adrian's head like a barrage of whip blows.

He gritted his teeth and forced himself to take a step back, saying in an insolent tone, "Fuck you."

Straining with effort just to hold his ground, sweat broke out on Adrian's forehead. His rider, just as frantic, tried to keep above the pounding influence.

"You lost, Nikolai." Gabriel's quiet voice broke the silence surrounding them as Adrian struggled with the effects of Nikolai's attack. The immediate easing of the pain allowed Adrian to take a deep breath. Gabriel moved in behind him, drawing Adrian back against him.

Adrian's body rested against Gabriel, trembling. Pressing a soft kiss beneath his ear, Gabriel whispered, "Everything is fine, Adrian."

Nikolai watched them like a hawk, clearly severely displeased. Xander stood beside Gabriel, looking on with a neutrally blank expression. Wolf, Skylar, and Indy were giving Adrian approving thumbs up. To them, he was good in a show of strength for their Father. Marcus had a tightened grip on his baseball bat, a silent witness to the unfolding events.

"He's mine, Nikolai. You couldn't control him. That was the agreement."

"Agreement?" Adrian's old self reasserted itself, and he probably looked as disagreeable as Nikolai was being. "What agreement?"

"I demanded you as a gift. But I agreed to Gabriel's condition, that I would have to control you first." From the way Nikolai spat the words out, Adrian easily figured Nikolai had thought he'd have no problem controlling a little ghoul. Adrian knew about the vampire gift giving system, but he'd never expected to be a part of it. He'd bet a thousand Gabriel looked like the proverbial cat with a canary.

Nikolai nodded to Gabriel, a faint sneer on his lips. "You won, Gabriel. He's yours."

"Try anything else funny, and I'll nail you, Nikolai." Adrian wasn't kidding. He knew this guy could probably hurt him, but he was too pissed to care.

"He threatens me. How intriguing. Do you not find it so, Claire?"

Claire moved to Nikolai and slipped her arm in his, watching with just about as much ominous interest. The creepy-crawly feeling returned to Adrian's skin as both of them

stared at him long enough to become unnerving. Adrian wasn't about to back down. He wanted to run like hell, but he stayed in place. Claire leaned toward Nikolai, whispering in his ear.

"I will pay you for him, Gabriel. Name your price." Nikolai appeared businesslike, perfectly serious. Nobody around them blinked an eye, except for Sylvia and Adrian. Sylvia appeared distinctly shocked.

He's got to be kidding, right?

"He's not for sale, Nikolai." The inflection of steel in Gabriel's voice indicated he would accept no argument on the matter.

"Damn right, I'm not." This vampire evidently didn't get out often enough to know it was now illegal to buy people.

Nikolai graciously dropped the subject as he inclined his head.

Another vampire came forward, bowing to Gabriel. "Greetings, Your Eminence. Charles Remington, Mutati of the second formula, 422."

He acknowledged Nikolai with another bow. "Your Excellency."

As Charles turned to Adrian, he inclined his head slightly.

Now, this guy reminded Adrian of a weasel with his long, thin face and deep set eyes. Adrian remained standing beside Gabriel, trying to size up the rest of their oh-so-friendly group of visitors.

"Greetings, Charles. What brings you to my territory?" Stepping from behind Adrian, Gabriel reached for his hand, drawing Adrian to his side. Adrian let Gabriel lead as he watched Nikolai suspiciously. Xander took up position slightly behind Adrian, shoulder touching his. Skye, Wolf, Indy, and Marcus took their places on the other side of Gabriel. Sliding his arm back around Adrian's waist, Gabriel listened quietly to Remington, his expression betraying nothing of his inner thoughts.

"His Excellency requested that Robert Niles and I join him while he toured the territories." Charles' voice might have been politely formal, but the disturbing fascination in his eyes had Adrian glaring at him with a cold disdain. Gabriel's arm around his waist tightened slightly as he nodded to Charles. Adrian started to feel like the choice tidbit at a buffet.

Gabriel greeted the only one who seemed immune to staring at Adrian like a ham bone. "It's good to see you here, Fernando."

After shaking hands, they both turned their attention to Adrian, and Gabriel introduced

them. "Adrian, this is Fernando Alvarez, Prince of Sacramento."

A quiet, friendly smile accompanied Fernando's handshake. Fernando gave Adrian's fingers a gentle squeeze before releasing them. "A pleasure to finally meet you, Adrian. Gabriel has told me about you a few times."

Adrian's smile echoed his. "Nice to meet you, too."

If someone was politely nice to him, he could return the favor. For a moment, Alvarez amazed him. He had to be the only vampire Adrian had ever seen who allowed his age to show. Distinctive white strands shot through the coal black hair, and there were lines on his face that hinted at a physical age of near fifty. Obviously, from his position, Fernando was a great deal older than that, though. His looks gave him the appearance of a rather fatherly figure.

Xander, Indy and Wolf relaxed through the introduction, until another man stepped forward.

"Greetings, Your Eminence. Robert Niles, Proeliores of the second formula, 782," he spoke, bowing slightly to them.

Tension thickened the air like a rubber band about to snap. No wonder, with a first formula vampire and God knew how many second formulas in the same room. Adrian kept his hand lowered near his gun. As everyone talked quietly, Adrian's hand never moved. The flash from a nearby camera intermittently disturbed his eyesight, but Adrian didn't pay much attention to the reporter. He was too busy keeping his eyes on the others. For once, it wasn't Gabriel who had him suspicious and wary. Now, that was a first.

Chapter 11

A week off, with no Charlie, Gabriel, Xander or anybody else. Adrian was in heaven. Occasionally a ghost might wander his way, but he doubted it. Nothing to do but eat, sleep, and be merry. His idea of merry was a book, so he'd be reading a lot.

His first night out, Adrian enjoyed a stroll through the woods and lost himself in admiring Mother Nature. He couldn't have been more than a quarter of a mile away from his cabin when he caught the odor of blood. His ghoulish senses were better than a normal person's, but not as good as a vampire's. Still, Adrian got the scent and followed the trail. He stopped abruptly at the sight of an injured tiger, lying on its side. *A tiger? Here?*

The sight left Adrian gaping over the fact that an injured tiger lay in front of him. Its body seem to blur, paws becoming hands and feet, and then lengthening to arms and legs. The features became distinct, a human male, and the rest of his body followed, changing his entire form. Fascinated, Adrian watched him shift. The popping noises were unnerving, and it sounded painful. Adrian remained motionless, his eyes quickly scanning the area. No scent or sound of anyone else reached him, and Adrian stepped warily around the were creature.

Gabriel had told him, several times, to stay away from weres. But what was he supposed to do when one found him? He had one in front of him and didn't know what to do with it. The creature was obviously alive, even if his upper body looked like mangled hamburger. Okay, Adrian had a naked were tiger on his hands, and the poor guy looked like he'd been in one hell of a fight.

As he moved closer, Adrian could see bruises and abrasions covering a good portion of the were's face. He knew the were would heal on his own, even looking this bad, although he could also possibly die of exposure before he healed.

Adrian already knew what Gabriel would say. But to him, a life was a life, no matter whose it was. He had an awkward time picking the were up, but his ghoulish strength kicked in. Adrian could use some of his abilities without draining Gabriel's blood too badly out of his system. Otherwise, he would never have been able to handle that kind of weight. He wasn't far from the cabin, but it sure as hell seemed longer getting back.

His arms ached with the effort of holding the creature, and Adrian laid him down on the couch thankfully. He filled a basin with water and grabbed a washcloth from the kitchen. Though he wasn't much of a nurse, he did the best he could to clean the man off. With

the worst of the blood washed off, Adrian could better assess the damage. Thank heavens he had a first aid kit. Brushing back the golden hair, he covered the wounds with ointment before bandaging the were up.

As he couldn't find anything broken, and the were would heal all right on his own, no doctor would be needed. The were's breathing sounded somewhat labored, but he was breathing. Breathing was good. From some of the signs, Adrian gauged there was some internal bleeding. He knew a were could heal naturally without medical aid, though. The aura of energy around this guy shone like a beacon visible only to Adrian's eye. His frame, while lean in build, looked muscularly developed. Adrian could sense a strength about the were, something he couldn't miss. When he finished, Adrian picked the were up again to take him into the spare bedroom and tucked him safely in. The were never moved once.

The next morning, Adrian stood in the kitchen, fixing breakfast. He had already eaten some toast with juice and now worked on his guest's food. After frying some eggs and potatoes, he added a side of toast.

Adrian entered the bedroom to see if the were had awakened and saw he definitely had. The guy stared up at the ceiling, the tension in his face showing his fear. Blue eyes, startling in intensity, fastened on Adrian as he moved into the room.

"You're looking better than you did last night." Heading toward the bed, Adrian set the glass of orange juice on the nightstand. Moving the chair closer to the bed, he sat on it.

"Ghoul." The were growled the word, as if it was the most loathsome thing that crawled on the earth. His body struggled, twisting to try to get up.

Who was Adrian to disagree? He still remembered thinking pretty much the same thing. "Yeah, and you're a were. So what's your point?"

The were stared at Adrian, like he was waiting to be jumped at any time.

"I've got some food here for you. You eat, don't you?" Adrian calmly lifted the plate higher to show the were. "Are you hungry?"

The were suspiciously eyed the plate. He looked like he thought Adrian had poisoned the food.

"Not hungry? Oh well, why waste good food." Adrian took a bite, just to show it wasn't poisoned.

"You're trying to help me. Why?"

"I found you on one of the trails behind my cabin and brought you here. Now, I'm trying to feed you. Who beat you up, anyway?"

Ignoring the question, the were reiterated his opinion. "You're a ghoul."

Adrian could tell the were still felt very weak. Otherwise, he probably would have tried to tear Adrian to pieces by now. The wounds, visible above the sheet, were already closed. But the damage had been bad enough to keep the were helpless, just from trying to heal.

"You're a were. Again, what's your point?" He speared a few pieces of the potatoes and offered it to the were. "Open up, here comes the choo choo."

The suspicious look on the were's face became total shock before he started laughing. Wincing, no doubt in pain, the were stopped laughing. "Oh shit, that hurts."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to make you hurt. I'm just trying to get you to eat. You need your strength back to get better."

"Ghouls don't help weres. So why would you?"

"A life is a life to me; it's simple. You could have died out there, before you healed. So here you are." Adrian offered the guy the plate again.

The were looked like Adrian's words had confused him all to hell.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I promise. Now, will you eat?"

Adrian received a full five-second stare from the were before he nodded slightly. He moved enough to sit up, leaning his back against the headboard. Pain etched lines in his face with each small movement he made.

"Do you want me to feed you, or try yourself?"

The were reached for the plate, and Adrian let him have it before settling back in the chair. He prayed the guy wouldn't be aggressive when he got better. A vamp could take on a were, and maybe win. A ghoul's odds were way iffy. And Adrian might find out how iffy when the were fully healed.

"My name's Adrian. What's yours?"

"Kyle. I know I should say thank you, but it's kind of hard. You're a--"

Adrian interrupted him, "A ghoul, I know. I used to think just as badly about them, until I became one."

"I thought all ghouls wanted to be ghouls."

"That's probably true for most of them, just not in my case. After it was done, I decided it beat the alternative. I didn't want to be dead. So what happened to you out there?"

In between bites of food, Kyle explained in a completely matter of fact manner, "Tribe dispute. I am the weakest because I'm young, so they left me out there to die."

"Nice tribe."

"It's the way things are."

"Where's your home, Kyle? I'm not sure you're ready to travel yet, but once you're better, I can give you a lift."

"I don't have one, not anymore." Kyle sounded very prosaic about the whole thing.

The words stunned Adrian, and it must have shown.

Blinking, Kyle eyed him. "What?"

"I'm just surprised. Do you have any money, any place to go?"

"No." Kyle continued eating, not appearing to be concerned at all.

It was a simple, short answer. Most people would have been devastated saying it, but Kyle seemed calmly accepting.

Why do I feel a headache coming on? If he lived, Adrian would probably have a were tiger permanently on his hands. He already knew that, now he just had to accept it.

Adrian went to the small town nearby to add to the grocery stores. Kyle also needed some clothes. A few days of having to stay in bed made the patient antsy. After three days, Kyle healed enough to get up. Thankfully, he had gotten over his initial hostility toward Adrian.

The books Adrian had brought along for his retreat received a great deal of interest from Kyle. Adrian hadn't expected that. Or the fact that they were getting into the habit of talking over whatever subject they had read about. Nights would find them curled up on the couch, arguing over whether or not the Gaia theory was valid. Kyle had a firm belief in that, but Adrian enjoyed playing devil's advocate. Even the subject of black holes earned a thorough discussion, one that lasted at least two hours. During the day, Kyle took him through the woods, teaching Adrian the things he knew and enjoyed.

Adrian had gotten pretty comfortable around Kyle, after he'd gotten used to Kyle behaving much like a cat. Kyle had a thing for physical contact that wasn't at all sexual in nature. Which Adrian figured he could live with. He had enough of the sexual interest problem. Adrian had also found out a bit more about tribe life and its attendant brutality. After a few tales of pack discipline, he felt doubly determined to take Kyle home with him. He just hoped city life wouldn't be too hard of an adjustment for Kyle.

No matter how hard Adrian tried not to let them, his thoughts continually drifted back to Gabriel and Xander. Most of the anger he'd felt had already faded. For some odd reason, he actually missed them. During the whole week, neither of them was far from his mind. His thoughts dwelled on the ghouling, and his reaction to Xander. Space away from the situation made Adrian view things more realistically.

He realized none of it was Xander's fault, and Adrian had behaved very badly over it. Adrian knew Xander wasn't dating him to spy on him for Gabriel. As far as Gabriel was concerned, any anger over his part in everything had already left Adrian as well. It couldn't be changed, and now he had to adjust to what had been done. When Adrian got back, he would see them both. He had to attend another of those damned meetings. Apparently, he was on the entertainment committee for Nikolai and his bunch. Adrian also had to be fed. Somehow, the notion of drinking Gabriel's blood didn't make him as queasy as he thought it should.

The last night of the vacation, Adrian and Kyle went hiking along one of the trails. Over the last few days, Adrian had gotten to know Kyle's expressions pretty well. The were wasn't one to hide his thoughts. The side-glances coming Adrian's way were a bit worried.

"What's wrong, Kyle?"

"Everything I had to ID me was destroyed. It'll be hard to get a job or prove who I am without any. You so sure you want me tagging along with you?"

Adrian could easily ask for Yar's help on that problem, and he had already phoned him to email what he had on weres. "It's not a big problem, really. I know a few people who can get what's needed."

"You still sure you want me around, though, Adrian?"

"I told you, I wouldn't have offered if I didn't want to, Kyle." As Kyle preferred the reassurance of touch more than words, Adrian reached over for his hand, squeezing it lightly.

"It just seems an awful lot to take on. And I'm not even sure what your master will think."

Adrian shot him an 'excuse me' look. "Gabriel isn't my master, and can we not use that

word again?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

Yes, he could be on the touchy side about that subject, and he knew it. Kyle just didn't understand. He saw it from his perspective of what he knew about vampires. "Don't worry about it, Kyle."

"How'd that happen anyway? I mean, you being ghouléd."

"My own stupidity, I think." Adrian had thought a few times about the first night he'd run into Gabriel. Maybe, if he'd just had a few minutes' conversation with the guy, Gabriel would have gone away. Adrian's actions had certainly had the opposite effect to what he'd intended. "Unfortunately, I was noticed when I wasn't trying to be. Blood was snuck into my tomato juice one night, and wham, I'm a ghoul."

Rather than have the subject of conversation on him, he turned it on Kyle by asking, "Where exactly does your tribe operate out of?"

"Near Joshua Tree, on the fringes of the park." Kyle really didn't seem to want to discuss much about his tribe if he could help it.

"The park allows it?"

"The tribe deals with the park, and nobody takes much exception to an occasional hunt. We're required to keep records of our kills. To work alongside the park service and manage the animal population. Not something Roman liked doing much, but he couldn't afford to piss off the rangers. It would have cost us our hunting privileges."

"If your tribal leader is forced to deal with the officials, why don't you go to them, Kyle?"

"Human law isn't like tribal law. We're pretty much left on our own, unless we commit a crime against your laws. No use going to them when there isn't anything they can do." A sudden movement between two trees in the distance had Kyle's attention riveted on it. Adrian could see the tension stiffening Kyle's frame before he released his hand.

Kyle's features began quickly shifting into cat form, and Adrian caught the hint. The deer were wanted to hunt. The deer, which had gotten his full attention in the first place, seemed unaware of their presence. Kyle slowly padded toward the deer, his movements uncannily quiet. He was obviously determined to hunt, and Adrian was about as intent on not being a witness. Adrian decided now would be a good time to head back to the cabin.

Chapter 12

Kyle settled into the apartment pretty quickly. He also continued with the habit of coming up to Adrian, nudging and rubbing against him. Cats were affectionate, right? Admittedly, the last night at the cabin, it had momentarily thrown Adrian to find Kyle curled up at the end of his bed. However, he adjusted to it. *Okay, I have a big housecat on my hands. I can handle that.*

At the moment, Adrian had to catch up on his email, and his answering machine was next. Yar had sent the information about weres he'd asked for. It made for fascinating reading and explained the various tribes. The parts about were spiders gave Adrian the creeps, though. Not something he would ever want to meet. He knew relatively little about weres except one, they hated vamps; two, vamps hated them; and three, weres were born weres.

He found out the full moon had no effect on them. The phase of the moon they were born under did determine their abilities. They were natural hunters in animal form, and their diet consisted of wild animals, which would explain why most tribes tended to stay in more rural communities. However, some were known to live just as comfortably in a city. He'd just have to make sure he had plenty of poundage of raw meat for Kyle when he needed it. In human mode, they ate pizza and hamburgers like everybody else. Their bites didn't change you into a raging were either, the only thing it meant was a trip to the emergency room. Weredom was a genetic factor, not a communicable disease.

The general public didn't consider most weres dangerous because their philosophy deeply involved a strong belief in the sanctity of life. Weres were very strongly connected to the earth itself and considered themselves protectors of both the earth and life. A lot of this seemed contrary to some of the things Kyle had told him about the way his tribe behaved. It puzzled Adrian, to say the least. After as much talking as he'd done with Kyle, Adrian realized Kyle's nature seemed more like what he had read of weres.

Their tribal hierarchy was fairly simple. One leader, and a couple of his or her buddies, to hold down the fort. They were supposed to uphold tribal law. In Kyle's case, it sounded more like they had broken it.

However, Adrian was still trying to get over the were spider notion. They were something you would not want to meet in a dark alley at night. The accompanying picture gave his nightmares an extra oomph for quite a few nights. He would have to thank Yar for that later.

After he finished reading and listened to the messages on the answering machine, he joined Kyle on the couch, phone in hand. Scooting toward Adrian, Kyle stretched out like a big cat, nestling up against Adrian. He slowly petted over Kyle's hair, letting the were watch TV while he dialed phone numbers.

Adrian's first call was to Gray, as his was the first message on the machine. All Adrian got out was his name before Gray started. "About time you got back home, Debrett. How soon can you get downtown?"

"I just got back. Why do you want me to come in?"

"They caught Denton. The child killer, remember him?"

"I hadn't heard. No TV at the cabin, Gray. I'm glad to hear he's in custody."

"While Keller was taking him to the interrogation room, Denton took a header out the window. The son of a bitch jumped on us."

"What do you need me for, then?" He really hoped Gray wasn't going to tell him Denton had returned as a sequel.

"He's haunting the station now, Debrett. Bastard is a mover too, playing games with us. Papers are coming up missing and all kinds of shit. How soon can you get down here? Payroll is willing to be billed for two thousand bucks."

"Give me a few, Gray, and I'll make some arrangements." Sighing, he clicked off before calling Dakota. He had a firm rule, no killers. He'd be more tempted to bind the bastard inside a spider or something. That would be breaking two of Adrian's rules with one stone.

"Dakota, it's Adrian. I need a favor." He could have asked Yar, but Adrian already owed him two, and didn't feel like racking up a third. In addition, he had a payoff Dakota would like.

"What do you need, and what's the coin?"

"I need some ID papers, perfectly legit, no fake name. For the payoff, the city needs a job done, and they're paying two thousand." Adrian needed the papers for Kyle to get his driver's license. Kyle's identification had been burned by his pack in some stupid official ceremony booting him out.

"I can get the papers. When does the job need to be done?"

"How soon can you get downtown? They've got a mover haunting the police department."

"That fast?" Dakota asked, laughing. "I'm there. Just give me what I need for the papers you need."

Adrian gave Dakota the information before he hung up.

Kyle stretched out on his back, putting his head in Adrian's lap. A low rumbling purr vibrated Kyle's chest.

"As soon as Dakota gets the papers, we'll get everything taken care of." Adrian's fingers brushed back the golden hair, combing through it. Kyle loved to be petted.

"It shouldn't be any problem for me to get a job." His head rubbed against Adrian's arm affectionately as Kyle rolled to his side.

"That part I'll leave up to you, Kyle. As you are a seer, you might want to keep that to yourself. Or else you'll end up working with me."

"I could do that, too. It wouldn't bother me."

A knock sounded at the door, so he motioned Kyle to get up. "Hop up, Kyle, and let me answer the door."

Kyle shifted off Adrian before curling back up on the couch.

Opening the door, Adrian paused with his hand on the doorknob. Seeing Gabriel with a box under his arm, he opened the door further. "Hey, Gabriel, come on in."

Gabriel's eyes narrowed, catching sight of Kyle lounging on the couch. "Good evening, Adrian."

He stepped back to let Gabriel in. Kyle stared at Gabriel for a moment, his nostrils flaring, before he suddenly stood, growling at Gabriel.

Gabriel stilled before growling harshly. "Were." The one word had the same 'worst thing crawling on the Earth' tone that Kyle's had had when he first met Adrian.

Damn. Their behavior had Adrian rushing to his bag, pulling out the staker and dagger. The two acted like they were ready to spring at each other's throats.

Adrian let the weapons be clearly seen as he swiftly stepped between them. "Back down, Gabriel, Kyle. Now."

Gabriel stopped the fang show, remaining absolutely motionless. "Adrian, get out of the way."

"I mean it, Gabriel, don't touch him." The tone of Adrian's voice must have convinced Gabriel, because he took a step back.

Kyle maintained his threatening posture.

"Kyle, it's okay. Calm down." Adrian moved in a side step, keeping Gabriel in the corner of his eye. Putting both weapons in one hand, he held the other out to Kyle. "Nobody will hurt you. I'll shoot him if he tries. And no hurting the vampire, either. Understand?"

Tension slowly leaked out as Kyle took Adrian's hand, putting it to his cheek and rubbing against it.

"You tamed a were. Why am I not surprised, Adrian?" Gabriel looked somewhat amused, though not that much.

"Can it, Gabriel. Anybody tries to hurt him, they go through me. So warn your court." Kyle released his hand before he sprawled back on the couch. Adrian returned to his backpack, putting the weapons safely away.

"I will tell them. Now, would you care to explain why you have a were in your living room?"

"He was injured and left out in the woods to die, so I brought him home." It sounded easier than it had been.

"So why is he here now?"

"No place else to go."

Gabriel moved closer to Adrian, his head homing in somewhere near his throat. A deliberate breath took in Adrian's scent. "You smell like him. Why?"

Gabriel's accusing tone ended in a growl as he flashed an irate look at Kyle. Kyle answered back with his own growl.

Adrian stood in the middle, playing babysitter to two natural enemies. *Is there an upside to this?*

To silence them, he ordered Kyle to watch TV before he grabbed Gabriel's hand. Adrian pulled the vampire down the hall to his bedroom, for privacy. Shutting the door, he started in on Gabriel. "What is your problem?" He glared in indignation at Gabriel. "I've got a big cat on my hands who likes to rub up against me. So will you just cut it out?"

The high arch of Gabriel's brow became imperious as he dropped the box on the bed. "And you let him?"

"It's affectionate. Like a cat, you know." His finger poked Gabriel hard in the chest, punctuating his point. "Not everybody thinks like you. He's a cat, not a sex maniac."

The jealousy thankfully simmered down, and a slow smile appeared. "I am not a sex maniac, as you so quaintly put it."

Taking his hand, Gabriel pulled Adrian to him. "I have missed you. Forgive my outburst. This wasn't how I planned to greet you."

Smiling back, Adrian started to relax because Gabriel had. "I couldn't leave him to die, Gabriel. And he has no place to go." As if the words explained everything, and for Adrian they did.

"I know your heart, Adrian. Perhaps better than you do." Gabriel lifted his hand to tuck a strand of hair behind Adrian's ear. "Sei sangue del mio sangue. Sei la mia anima gemella."

For one quiet moment, Adrian remained against Gabriel before he pulled away, not understanding what Gabriel said.

"I brought you an outfit for tonight; please wear it for me." Gabriel's voice held no command. Adrian could see an odd shadowing to Gabriel's eyes before he turned and silently left. Gabriel kept his thoughts deeply buried within himself; Adrian could see no sign of any in his expression.

Something nagged at Adrian, but he opened the box, pulling aside the tissue paper. The black material felt silky beneath his fingers when he ran his hand over it. He decided to go ahead and wear it.

After stripping out of his clothes, Adrian slid the black poet's shirt over his head. The neck was a small collar that fastened at the front with a little silver pin. An amethyst, the size of the end of his pinky, winked with the light. The pants were a very tight fit, far tighter than he normally wore. Slipping the jacket on, Adrian studied the effect in the mirror. Definitely far more out there than what he normally wore. The entire outfit gave him an oddly old-fashioned air, but it flattered his darker looks.

When he returned to the living room, Kyle wasn't there. He'd probably gone to hide out in his room. Adrian hadn't been able to pay much attention to Gabriel's outfit earlier, but now it caught his eye. He was dressed completely in black, even his shirt and vest. A very dark blue tie added to the more than pleasing effect. The jacket was longer than normal, ending at about mid thigh. He stood motionless, only his eyes traveled over Adrian. The soft murmur of his voice washed over Adrian, trailing a heated sensation along his nerves. "Truly intriguing, Adrian."

"Very tempting yourself, Gabriel." Just to avoid staring at him, Adrian headed over to his backpack, crouching to pull out the weapons.

"You won't need those."

"I won't leave the house without them."

"Just put your gun in the pocket of the jacket. I invited your were to come along with us. It will give you the chance to introduce him to the others."

Kyle came from the hall and stopped when he saw Adrian.

"No growling at the vampires. Just remember that, Kyle."

Kyle gave a nod of agreement as Gabriel opened the front door, murmuring, "I am sure one of the others at the club will have something that will fit your were."

Kyle wasn't much better in the clothing department than Adrian was. When he'd taken the were shopping earlier, Kyle had gone for jeans and casual shirts, precisely what he wore now.

By the time they entered the club, it looked like everybody was already present. Gabriel pulled Wolf aside, speaking to him. Kyle stayed close to Adrian's side.

Wolf shot a glance at Adrian, then looked at Kyle as Gabriel explained what he wanted. "I can get him some clothing from the dressing rooms. Not a problem, Father."

Adrian had a feeling poor Kyle probably wouldn't like anything Wolf found for him. Wolf already looked decked out in fine style. He'd left the black silk vest unbuttoned, giving a spectacular view of the well toned muscles of his chest and arms. The rest of him looked like it had been poured into a piece of black leather. His longish dark hair was tied back, and a pair of designer shades hid his eyes. Adrian had never asked him why Wolf felt the need to wear sunglasses at night.

"Anybody hurts Kyle and I'll be taking care of it, Wolf. So pass the word for me." Wolf gave Adrian a nod before motioning to Kyle to follow him.

Xander brought Adrian a white wine when Gabriel moved off to talk to several of his enforcers. Smiling at Adrian, an appreciative gleam lit Xander's eyes. However, he kept some distance, patently unsure how Adrian would react.

"Everything's all right, Xander." As drawn as Adrian felt to him, it would be hard to tell Xander to buzz off. The last time they'd spoken, Adrian had been angry and suspicious because Gabriel had ghouled him. But the week he'd been gone had given Adrian plenty of time to think.

It seemed his words went a long way in reassuring Xander. Visibly relaxing, he slipped his arm around Adrian's waist, hugging him tightly. "So, who's the new guy?"

"His name is Kyle. It's a long story, Xander. He's a were tiger."

"Only you would bring a were into the stronghold of vampires." His laughter made Adrian smile. Leaning toward Adrian, Xander brushed a kiss just beneath his ear before whispering, "Any chance you have tomorrow night off?"

In reaction, Adrian tilted his head slightly toward the touch. "Unfortunately, no. I have to go back to work before Charlie calls out the Marines."

"Hmm, and here I was thinking about a picnic for two on Mt. Soledad at sunset."

"I'll see what I can do." It proved to be too hard to stay angry with Xander. When Kyle joined them, the sight of him tugging at his collar made Adrian laugh.

Kyle muttered, "Is this really necessary?"

"All of us are trussed up like Christmas turkeys tonight. For my part, I am enjoying the view," Adrian commented. The gray suit Kyle wore was definitely attention getting; the smooth line emphasized the athletic body.

"It took me long enough to get on."

"Around here, you get used to it, Kyle," Xander treated Kyle in an easy manner which Adrian was grateful for.

Setting the wine at one of the tables, Adrian pulled out a chair to sit down. Kyle murmured something under his breath before he headed toward the bathroom. Xander moved the other chair closer before sitting next to Adrian. "Definitely not the suit type."

"He's a cat. What'd you expect? I can't say I blame him, he really isn't used to all of this."

"Did you enjoy your vacation, Adrian?"

"I enjoyed it so much I need to take another one. Why? Did you miss me, Xander?"

"A bit." Xander took Adrian's hand, twining their fingers together.

Adrian felt the familiar fluttering in the pit of his stomach, reacting to the almost imperceptible increase in intensity surrounding them. Needing a distraction, Adrian focused on the other side of the club and saw a tiger coming out from the bathroom. Anybody in Kyle's way steered clear as he padded back over to them. "I should have known."

Xander's eyes followed the direction of Adrian's gaze. "Impressive."

Kyle stopped next to Adrian, laying his head in Adrian's lap.

"Happier now?" Adrian asked. His nails scratched lightly near the back of Kyle's ear.

A rumbling purr answered him. Kyle was truly a beautiful sight in animal form.

Feeling just a shiver of something unpleasant, Adrian glanced up, catching sight of Charles Remington moving toward them, his attention fixated on Adrian.

"So, it's true." Remington made no attempt to hide how appalled he felt.

Instantly, Adrian took exception, cold dislike frosting his features and tone. "Whatever are you going on about?"

A low warning growl came from Kyle as he lifted his head from Adrian's lap.

The threatening posture had Remington quickly assuming a bland expression, before he said, "Nothing. Nothing at all. For now." Politely, he bowed and turned rapidly on his heel, moving away.

Adrian kept an eye on the bastard until he'd moved a safe distance away. "Asshole."

Kyle stopped growling as he settled at Adrian's feet.

"A dangerous asshole, Adrian," Xander said.

Sounds of a commotion made all three of them aware something was happening across the room. Adrian saw Robert Niles moving in on Gabriel, his demeanor definitely threatening. He quickly got to his feet, feeling in his pocket for the staker. Xander stood with him, then grabbed Adrian's arm when Adrian tried to go to Gabriel.

Adrian attempted to jerk his arm away from Xander. The chair he'd been sitting on tipped over with the motion. Kyle leapt to his feet, snarling and hissing in agitation. Xander kept hold of Adrian's arm, pulling him toward the bar.

Indy, Wolf and Gabriel's enforcers formed a half circle behind Gabriel. The rest of his court stepped back, watching Gabriel and Niles in silence. Their Prince was being challenged, and everybody but the ones directly involved stayed out of it.

Another man moved in from the crowd. He slowly advanced on Adrian as several others moved up behind Niles. Adrian's gaze followed him warily while still trying to keep an eye on the imminent fight at the same time. Twice he lost sight of the dark-haired man in the crowd. The next time Adrian saw him, the man was holding out his hand toward Adrian. Adrian saw the ripple of a brilliant yellow wave of energy before the burning blast of it threw him back, careening into the table behind him as he fell.

Somewhere, in what was left of the recesses of his mind, Adrian fought with the after effects. He had to struggle to try to regain dominance over himself. His limbs refused to obey his commands to get up, until he willed himself to override the numbing and made it to his knees. Adrian's fingers seemed frozen to the gun in his hand. He felt no pain, but movement seemed virtually impossible. Beside him, Xander struggled, trying to throw off a woman who had jumped him. Kyle fought near Adrian, trying to tear apart one of Niles' enforcers as Adrian mentally pushed past the effect of the attack on him. He just couldn't get to his feet yet.

A flash of silver glinted in the light before the dagger hit Adrian's shoulder. Even with the feeling of an enormous weight trying to pull him back down, the pain grating through him gave Adrian the momentum to struggle to his feet. A heavy sensation still made his arm useless as he tried to get the gun up. Wolf suddenly appeared and dragged the woman off Xander before throwing her across the bar counter. The force sent her crashing into the back wall mirror.

All of a sudden, Xander darted in front of Adrian. A second dagger, aimed for Adrian, hit Xander in the chest. Kyle leapt forward, landing on the knife-wielding maniac and dragged him down. Xander fell to his knees, swaying slightly before he collapsed on his side.

Dropping to the floor, Adrian rolled Xander over onto his back. Xander's sightless eyes stared at him as Adrian shook him. A thread of Gabriel's thoughts reached for Adrian's mind, pushing through the shock.

Blood poured from Gabriel's face as he staggered backward. Indy stood behind her Father, frantically grabbing him to keep him on his feet. Wolf ran across the room toward them. Another figure quickly launched itself at Wolf, stopping him from reaching his Father. Gabriel's youngest, Skye, tried to get to Gabriel from the opposite direction, but he was blocked as well.

Gabriel would lose the battle; Adrian knew it in an instant. The overwhelming need he felt from Gabriel triggered a deafening roar within Adrian's mind. It filled his head as the force of his energy was pulled upward, draining from him. Adrian couldn't stop it. Swirling, blinding colors and the sensation of enormous power surrounded him, blocking out everything. A moment later, he collapsed near Xander as darkness sucked him under.

Chapter 13

Disembodied voices surrounded Adrian in the haze of blackness that danced around him. Dimly, he could feel pain, but it wasn't enough to disturb him as he drifted within the blanketing darkness.

The sound of others talking ebbed slowly in and out of his thoughts, but Adrian couldn't grasp them long enough to make sense of them. Suddenly, a soft pressure intruded for a brief moment with the touch of fingers caressing his forehead. Adrian could feel the sensation, but it seemed somehow distant, as if it weren't him it was happening to.

"Something I already understand, Xander, but is it enough?"

Xander? Adrian tried to move, to struggle through the hazy twilight. His limbs felt as if they had shifted before he fell back into a bare awareness of everything around him. He floated for a moment back inside it. As he surfaced from it, Adrian tried to feel where his hand was. He realized it hadn't budged at all, so he tried again. Partial reality flickered at the edges of his mind, but not enough to tell him where he was, or what was happening.

"I wasn't certain you understood, Gabriel, and I'm not the one to answer that."

"As long as you accept things, I will not question it. You have my acceptance as well."

The sound of their voices began to fade. Silently, Adrian called out frantically to them, wanting to know where he was.

A quiet, comforting warmth engulfed him, stilling the panicky feelings as Adrian felt the touch of fingers again.

"He's trying to wake up." It was Gabriel's hand; Adrian understood that from everything that enveloped him. The soothing cadence of Gabriel's voice completely calmed the panic. "Rest quietly, Adrian, everything is fine. You are safe now."

Adrian couldn't stir, and he hated that, but he stopped trying. The pain continually nagged at him somewhere, and he couldn't fight against the waves trying to drag him backward into full unconsciousness.

"You need to heal, Adrian."

He barely heard Xander. Even as he tried to make the effort to cling to the sound of Xander's voice, Adrian tumbled back into the abyss.

The silk and velvet hangings surrounding Gabriel's bed were getting to be a bad habit as Adrian finally regained consciousness. *How long have I been out this time?*

A twinge of pain protested in his shoulder as he sat up, and a wave of dizziness hit him with the memory of Xander dying. His last memories of Xander were vivid in Adrian's mind as he hauled ass out of bed. His next thoughts were of Gabriel.

"You called me, Adrian?" Gabriel strolled in the door, as casual as could be.

The first thing that hit Adrian was relief at seeing Gabriel, and the second was questions. He ignored the first and concentrated on the questions. "What happened? Xander? Where's Kyle?"

"They are both fine. Now, let me make sure you are, and then I will answer your questions."

It proved to be harder for Adrian to move than he'd thought it would be. He was wobbly on his feet and Gabriel's words completely stunned him. Even with that, he made it halfway across the room to Gabriel.

"I told you I'm fine." Adrian couldn't believe Gabriel had said Xander was okay. He'd seen Xander die right before he passed out. "I saw Xander die. He..." Swallowing hard against the knot in his throat, he couldn't finish.

"I promise you, Xander is absolutely all right. Next time, I will tie you to the bed just to keep you there." Gabriel turned him around, propelling Adrian back to the bed.

"Gabriel, I'm fine. I swear. Tell me what happened."

"Lie down, Adrian."

Adrian whirled around, glaring at him. He didn't like being pushed back toward the bed.

"Please, lie down. I only want to reassure myself you're all right. I could have lost you." The look of pain in Gabriel's eyes startled Adrian. Without thinking, he sank down onto the bed.

Gabriel removed a section of the bandage around Adrian's waist to examine the wound. He gently touched the raw slash, and a warm tingle skittered over Adrian's skin, aiding the healing. "The dagger that hit you was coated with a rare substance known as Witches' Wrath. It can sap the strength of a ghoul in a matter of minutes. The liquid was used, just

in case killing you outright failed."

Pulling the bandage off, Gabriel dropped it on the nightstand.

"I'll live."

"Thanks to Xander, you will. If he hadn't stepped in front of you..." Gabriel trailed off. His hand remained on Adrian's shoulder, fingers brushing against the skin.

"He tried to save me, Gabriel." Emotional pain crashed over Adrian like a ton of rocks. He didn't understand how it could be possible that Xander would still be alive.

"He is fine, I swear to you, Adrian."

"Fine? But he was dead. I saw him." Adrian stopped because of the tightness in his throat.

Gabriel's hand traveled to beneath his chin, raising Adrian's face to look at him. "Xander is perfectly fine. He will explain things to you later."

Adrian had to take Gabriel's word for it; it didn't look like Gabriel would explain further. A small flicker of hope kept the potential grief pushed away for now. As he wasn't getting any answers regarding Xander, Adrian went back to his original question. "Why were we attacked?"

An unpleasant smile twisted Gabriel's lips, matching the cold hardening of his expression. "Robert Niles wanted my title. The one who attacked you was his full blood. Both are dead."

A wannabe Prince and his kiddy. Vampire turf war. Great. "Earth to pissed off vampire." He waved his hand in front of Gabriel's face.

"Sorry, Adrian."

"Another question for you. Before I passed out, it felt like my energy--"

Gabriel interrupted him. "I couldn't beat him alone; I needed your help to do that." Adrian scooted over slightly when Gabriel sat down beside him. "I called to you, and you answered by giving me your power before the poison in your system could work."

He remembered the enormous surge and blinding flashes before he went under; it had been Gabriel's power that he'd felt combined with his own. Gabriel could call on Adrian's energy when he needed; the idea stunned Adrian. "How in the hell can you do that?"

"We share power now that you are my Favored One. If you ever need it, you can use

mine in the same manner that I did yours. But it is only temporary."

Adrian had problems digesting that, so he didn't even think to protest when Gabriel drew him onto the vampire's lap. Everything sort of tumbled in on Adrian, and he felt even more tired than he thought possible. As Gabriel rocked him slowly within the circle of strong arms, Adrian laid his head on Gabriel's shoulder. The sound of Gabriel's heart was a reassuring solid rhythm.

His heart? "Your heart is beating?"

"It is an effort I make for you." Gabriel left unspoken his desire for Adrian to see him as more human, but Adrian could imagine no other reason why Gabriel would do that.

"Did you know this would happen before you made me your ghoul?" Everything confused the hell out of Adrian, to the point where his brain wasn't sure it wanted to function.

"A normal mortal would have increased the strength of my power somewhat, but I believed that you might do even more because of your special abilities. My blood would make yours stronger, and in turn mine would grow. I wasn't sure how strong it would be, or if it would work, Adrian."

"Bastard."

Gabriel drew Adrian's head back to his shoulder. Sleep claimed Adrian before he could add anything else. It helped bury the hurt he felt.

Gabriel wasn't there the next time Adrian woke up. Gabriel had obviously tucked him in. He was curled up in the bed, covered to his ears. Yawning, he stretched and saw Xander sitting in a chair beside the bed. He looked very much alive. Adrian stared at him in disbelief, and then quickly sat up, scooting over to him. "Xander?"

"Good morning, Adrian."

"Are you all right?" Adrian could see a vague apprehension about Xander that puzzled him. He couldn't believe Xander was still alive. He knew what dead looked like, and Adrian couldn't understand Xander's current behavior. It was also a stupid question to ask; Xander looked completely fine except for the unease. But some reassurance to Adrian would come in handy.

Hesitantly, Xander said, "I know you want me to explain what happened, but I don't know how to say it."

"Then out with it, just tell me. I know I saw you dead, but you're not." Adrian's hand

covered Xander's, trying to help him. Adrian also knew Xander wasn't a vampire, ghoul, or a were. Something was there, but Adrian didn't understand what.

Xander took a deep breath, before exhaling in a sigh. His gaze fixed on the hand over his. "Do you know anything about mummies?"

"Mummies. As in the myth, bandages and all?"

"Not exactly. Mummies are extremely rare. There are no bandages, but we do have immortality. There is no true death unless you know exactly how to kill us." He still refused to look at Adrian.

Now Adrian understood the odd sense of energy around Xander. He didn't understand everything, but it had a name attached to it. His brain tried to work from there.

Xander continued to explain, "When the dagger hit me, my body died. My soul needed to leave my body. Luckily, the damage to the body wasn't severe. I was able to return to it pretty fast, once it healed. If the damage is bad enough, it can take decades for my body to reform."

Another species linked to the dead in a way. How many were out there? "I've never heard of such a thing."

"Not many know. We like it that way. But there is one other thing."

"More?"

Xander swallowed hard. "When I died, my soul needed to enter someone. But my host died in the fight, and I had no time to find a new one."

It sounded like he expected Adrian to hate him for saying that. Interrupting him before he could continue, Adrian said, "I take it your soul entered me while I was out of it. Xander, I thought you were dead because you tried to protect me. If your soul needed a place to hide out, that's fine."

Xander still regarded him warily.

"There's more, right? Well, out with it."

"When your body accepted, you became my new host; you are part of my ka now. You are the one who keeps my soul from escaping when my body dies."

Could he take anymore? Somewhere, his mind said "Not really." "Does that mean, whenever you die, your soul will come to me?"

Xander nodded, tensely waiting in his seat as if expecting Adrian to rant and rave at him.

"Can you choose another?" Adrian dug around for a few more facts.

"Not until you die, Adrian."

Well, with any luck, that would be a really long time in coming. Adrian's hand covered Xander's again, gently squeezing. "You saved my life. What's a little soul receiving between friends? I'm all right with it, Xander."

There, he'd said it. Adrian did mind, but he bet he'd get used to it. Xander was a decent guy, and Adrian already cared quite a bit for him. Standing, he pulled Xander to him, hugging Xander tightly. Xander returned the hug as if he would never let go.

Two hours after Adrian had managed to convince Xander everything was fine, he returned to his apartment. He tossed his keys, mail, and the paper on the stand by the front door. In the kitchen, he dropped the shopping bags on the counter before heading back outside to help Kyle bring the rest in. Double the groceries meant more work.

Fifteen bags later, Kyle started putting everything away while Adrian got some juice and checked the answering machine. Since he hadn't been home in a few days, he expected to see the light blinking because the tape was full.

The first message was from Gray, wanting a call ASAP. The next was Cas asking him what was going on with Gabriel. *How'd she find out about him?* The other messages were Charlie wanting to know more about Adrian's love life with a vampire, and a dour Yar asking if Adrian knew how deep he was being buried.

Damn, what the hell was going on? Even his mother had gotten in on it. Her message was the longest. She went on and on about living with the shame of her son carrying on with a vampire. How could she hold her head up? Plus similar guilt trip inducing phrases Adrian had heard all of his life. After listening to enough, he shut it off and picked up the phone, dialing Cas. She would be the most levelheaded, and Adrian wanted to know how everybody had suddenly found out about Gabriel.

"Cas, it's Adrian. I got your message."

"I wondered why you hadn't told me what was going on, and it was a shock reading about it, Adrian."

"That's because nothing is going on. What are you talking about?"

"You haven't seen the newspaper, have you? Try page seven. At least you didn't make the headlines."

"Give me a minute." Shouldering the phone, he grabbed the paper and opened it to page seven. Scanning the page, he couldn't miss the pictures. One showed Gabriel with an arm around Adrian, and both of them were watching Nikolai standing near them. The other showed a shot of Gabriel, leaning in to kiss Adrian's forehead, a nice little close up. The caption beneath identified everyone, and hinted at the romance of the century brewing in their fair city. It was nothing more than pure speculation and gossip.

"Damn. They were taken at the club when we were meeting with Nikolai, Cas." Closing the paper, Adrian tossed it back to the stand.

"And the great romance?"

"Not an ounce of truth. It was just a stupid meeting I agreed to attend because some bigwigs were coming from out of town. One of them wanted to buy me, and Gabriel staked claim." He grumbled, definitely put out.

"Your life is getting more exciting than mine is. I'm going to have to start hanging around you more often." Cas was getting a serious kick out of this, he could tell just by her tone.

"Believe me, you wouldn't like it. Just take my word for it, Cas."

"Oh, come on, Adrian. I'm looking at those pictures right now. Two men that gorgeous are worth getting dragged out of the house for."

"And I'd keep one of them, if he wasn't who he is. My mother must have read the article, and Gray, too." Adrian had already figured a way to turn this one to his advantage with his mom. She was the one who called him every couple of days just to ask who he was dating. Now he could rub it in that she knew. It'd be good for at least three months of quiet from her.

"And just about everybody else you know. I doubt if many of your friends missed this one. And I sympathize with you on your mom, but Gray will be harder to get off your back than her."

"Thanks for the words of encouragement, you've been a great help."

"You're more than welcome anytime, ole man. You had better call your mom before she gets too far out of hand. And get back with me later, will you?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'll think about calling you later." With a laugh, he hung up and then dialed Gray's number. Talking to Gray would be harder than Adrian's mom would be, so Adrian dealt with it first.

"All right, Debrett, what the hell is going on?"

"You mean, about those pictures?"

"Yeah, what the hell else would I be talking about?" Gray snapped back.

"Look, I was there doing staker duty. Nothing more. Garland asked me for some help, and I backed him up with a little extra muscle. That's all." Adrian kept it as simple as possible without going into any truth.

"You two looked a lot more cozy than just providing back up."

"Yeah, well, one of the other vampires tried to get up close and personal with me. Garland pretended to stake claim to get the bastard to back off."

A long moment of silence stretched between them. Adrian wasn't sure if Gray would buy it or not. There was no way he could tell Gray what was really going on.

"You're getting in way over your head, kid. You better watch your back because those things will stab you."

"I already know that. And believe me, I am."

"By the way, Debrett, call your damn mom, all right?" Apparently Adrian's mom had called Gray as well.

At this rate, Adrian wasn't sure he wanted to know what else was going to happen. Things had gotten way too lively for him in the last few weeks, and it didn't look like it would let up. That was a depressing thought.

Chapter 14

Over the next few days, Adrian spent more time working with Sylvia. He had to teach her the guide ropes and help her choose the equipment she needed. It gave him a chance to replenish his own supplies as well. A stop by the Magical Unicorn put him back about five hundred bucks, because they both ordered new robes. The elaborate silver embroidery on his, and ornate design on hers, made up most of the cost. Adrian's old robes were getting a touch shabby, and Sylvia wanted her own, so he bought hers as a gift.

It didn't take Sylvia long to catch on. Her control and concentration were proving strong enough to work the ritual with a fair amount of ease. After their first night working together had turned into a twenty-six hour marathon, Adrian had no doubt Sylvia had the stamina for the job. She'd already proven herself.

Clara Reese had planned the trip to Washington, DC and wanted Adrian included in the group. As he'd offered to pay Sylvia's and his own way, it made it easier for Clara. Clara wouldn't have to eliminate one of her staff from going along.

Kyle was in and out of the office, working with Charlie. All the work being done added to Adrian's profits, or so the accounting books told him. Adrian ended up hiring a new secretary, too. Paperwork had increased long past the point where Charlie could manage it, especially with everything else that he had to do. When Adrian decided to increase salaries, they had a small party in the office.

Gray poked his head in, halfway through the party. After a few minutes of joining in with everyone, he took hold of Adrian's arm, drawing him away from the others. They both disappeared into Adrian's office, shutting the door behind them.

"What's up now, Gray?"

"Wanted to ask you about Masterson."

"What about him?"

"He's come up missing. Know anything about it?"

"Missing?" He had no clue where Masterson was, but a suspicion immediately took hold of him. Adrian wondered if Gabriel had been behind it. Keeping his expression

completely puzzled took some effort. "When did that happen?"

"The report came in this morning, and since you'd had a problem with him in the past..." Gray trailed off, expecting Adrian to fill in the blanks.

"I don't know anything about it, Gray." Which was actually true. Adrian could only surmise and really didn't know anything.

"Debrett, your name is starting to show up quite a bit lately in unexpected places. You're hanging around a dangerous crowd. Are you sure there isn't anything I should know?"

"If there was anything I needed you for, you know I'd tell you. But nothing is going on, and things are under control." Adrian was fast on his way to becoming the world's best liar.

Gray couldn't do anything but take Adrian word for it, unless something showed up to prove him wrong. Adrian hoped Masterson had been well enough hidden that no body would surface.

"Are you staying for the party?" Adrian moved to open the door and rejoin the others.

"For a few, then I need to get some sleep."

"Let Charlie know what hours you can work next week. There's still plenty to go around."

When they returned to the party, Adrian saw Charlie talking to some woman he had never seen before. He walked over to them because Charlie looked pretty damn uncomfortable. Gray followed him. "I can give about ten hours next week, Debrett."

As they joined the other two, the woman gave Adrian a look of intense dislike, but it had no impact on Adrian. "Anything wrong?"

"I want you to stay out of my business."

"And what business is that?" He didn't even know the woman, so he wasn't about to guess what she was talking about.

"Masterson. I'm Alexa Griffith."

The Masterson part grabbed both Gray's and Adrian's attention. This woman was the fucked-up guide who had bound Mrs. Masterson to her abusive husband. Adrian's eyes narrowed on her, sizing up the tiny brunette. A delicate fineness to her features and body hinted at the fact she might not be much of a physical fighter. Her chocolate-colored hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail, a businesslike appearing pair of spectacles perched on her nose.

"Stay out of binding, and you wouldn't have to worry about it."

"Stay out of my way, or you'll be sorry. I'll make sure of that." Her attitude took on a definitely threatening tone.

"Miss Griffith, I'm Daniel Gray, the Mayor's supernatural bureau liaison. I have a few questions to ask you about Mr. Masterson."

Gray put her off balance. Before she could say anything else, Adrian said, "Take the trash outside, Gray. I don't want it littering up my office."

With that parting shot, he pulled Charlie away to leave her in Gray's tender care.

When Adrian finished up at the office, he drove over to the club for his weekly feeding, and the next blasted meeting. Allie had agreed to meet him there to help him out with a ward. Hopefully, it wouldn't take her long to show up.

After Marcus let Adrian in, he made his way toward the bar. Nodding to Wolf, he sat on the barstool.

"He'll be out in a minute, Adrian. Do you want the usual?"

"Yeah." It'd give him something to wash down the blood with.

Indy settled on the stool next to Adrian, giving him a careful, searching look. "I know you don't want to be here, Adrian. There was a time when I didn't want to be either, but things will get easier. They aren't as bad as you might think."

Wolf set the glass of white wine in front of Adrian, shaking his head at Indy before he moved off to finish cleaning glasses. Gabriel and Jade entered the room as the Prince issued the night's orders to her.

Wrapping his fingers around the stem of the glass, Adrian pretended to pay no attention to them. His heightened sense of smell homed right in on Gabriel, causing a twinge in his gut. *Damn ghoul senses.*

Determinedly, he stared at the glass in his hand and twirled it slowly before taking a sip. Glancing in the mirror behind the bar, Adrian could see Gabriel watching him, expression amused. It told Adrian Gabriel was well aware of what was happening in his ghoul, and that Gabriel enjoyed it. The hunger for Gabriel's blood stirred through Adrian, though not as badly as when he had missed a feeding for a week. He could control it, and Adrian kept his features composed as he went back to eyeing the glass he held.

"I appreciate you talking to me, Indy, and you are right. I really don't want to be here."

"Don't judge him too harshly until you understand more. That's all I ask. There's nothing that can undo you being a ghoul."

Moving to the end of the bar, Gabriel took the glass Wolf set down in front of him. Gabriel cut his wrist and let the blood spill into the glass. Wolf walked away, pretending to be busy as the scent of Gabriel's blood sharpened in the air. The amount of blood in the glass was no more than a mouthful. Adrian drew in a deep breath, a stupid reflex or something. He should've been disgusted with this, but he could only feel an answering rise of appetite, making him swallow hard.

A degree of sympathy showed in the quick side look Indy gave him. Concealing the expression, she nodded to her Father. A slight gesture of Gabriel's head indicated she should go elsewhere, but she didn't budge. Adrian had occasionally seen her turn stubborn on Gabriel, a quality Adrian definitely appreciated.

Gabriel's eyes held his as he deliberately licked the wound closed and then picked up the glass. Adrian pointedly looked away from Gabriel again, trying to act unconcerned. Gabriel walked over to him, setting the glass on the counter in front of him.

"Are you sure you wouldn't prefer it from the source, Adrian? There is a part of the hunger that can only be satisfied with the contact and intimacy of feeding."

"This will do." Adrian picked up the glass and drained it. The flatness to the taste wasn't exactly pleasant. Adrian made a face, setting the glass down. At least the hunger became dormant, but he could feel a sense of something missing.

"As I tried to explain, it lacks a certain something for both of us now."

"It took care of the hunger. I don't need anything else." Adrian tried very hard to maintain the distance between himself and all of this.

Indy opened her mouth to say something, but the expression on Gabriel's face stilled her words and had her fixing her gaze back on her drink.

Wolf took the dirty glass away as Gabriel sat down on the other side of Adrian. For once, nothing sensual emanated from him. "Is that all you think there is to this?"

"You don't get it, Gabriel. I don't fit into this world, but I'm doing the best I can." Adrian already felt like he had no place anywhere, and it bothered him. He kept getting odd looks and quite a few cold shoulders from some of his friends. Just because they believed he was involved with Gabriel. God knew how they would react to Adrian being Gabriel's ghoul. Some people had a bad prejudice toward the dead and living mixing.

"Adrian, the harder you struggle against this, the harder it will be for you." A quiet concern sounded in the words and reflected in Gabriel's eyes.

Adrian had no argument for that, but he also knew he had to find his own way. Once the hunger had been taken care of, logic inserted itself. There was no way in hell he should be sitting there downing blood like it was a glass of Pepsi. "I'll deal with it, just like I do everything else."

"You will have a very long time to do that. As well as many other problems you haven't even thought of yet. I can make things easier for you if would just let me." Gabriel laid his hand over Adrian's.

Adrian studied Gabriel as he examined his own thoughts. There was an attraction between them, Adrian wouldn't bother denying it. It flared even with a simple touch from Gabriel. Adrian's perception of living his life just didn't include Gabriel. The vampire would go on long after Adrian died. Only that had changed now. Adrian had a potential lifespan that could equal Gabriel's. He had been losing space in his own world, a rift that would grow wider with time, and Adrian wasn't yet willing to find a place in the world Gabriel had thrust on him.

"I'll manage one day at a time. Right now, it's all I can do."

"It doesn't have to be this hard. You are not alone; I will always be here."

He heard the soft promise in Gabriel's voice but had trouble believing it, and Adrian change the subject. "Care to tell me what happened to Masterson, Gabriel?"

"What about him?" Gabriel didn't even blink at the question.

"He's missing, or so I heard. Can you enlighten me on the subject?"

"I doubt if it is something you really want to know about, Adrian." Gabriel easily dismissed the matter as being unimportant to him.

The ambiguous answer made Adrian feel like Gabriel was probably right. Relief flooded him when Adrian heard Allie's voice over by the front door. Allie was suppose to meet him, to gauge exactly what kind of charms he could use in his fight against the trouble he had landed in.

Jade tried to block Allie from entering the club because it wasn't open yet.

"It's all right, Jade. She's with me." Adrian called out to her, and the enforcer let Allie in.

"Were you planning on staying for tonight's entertainment, Adrian?" A half-lidded gaze from Gabriel took in Allie as she approached them, before it leveled on Adrian. The seductive quality had returned to both Gabriel's voice and manner.

"Now, that might be interesting." Allie grinned as she stilled near Adrian, busily checking Gabriel out.

"I wasn't planning on it as there's a lot we need to get done." Adrian gave Allie a pointed reminder of what they were supposed to be doing before he addressed Gabriel again, "I will be back for the meeting later."

"Nonsense, we have plenty of time, Adrian. Now introduce me to your friends."

"Allie, this is Prince Garland and his daughter India." He paused, and then added, "And this is my friend, Allie Kingston."

"A pleasure, Miss Kingston." Gabriel stood, bowing to her. He took her hand, drawing it to his lips in a courtly gesture. Indy just nodded to Allie, watching them silently.

"Please, call me Allie. I'm terribly informal, I know. Hope you don't mind."

Adrian could tell Gabriel had made a hell of an impression on her, and he hoped she would remember she'd come here to help *him* out.

Gabriel gave her a charming smile. "Not at all, and you must call me Gabriel. I hope you will stay for the show; I think you will both find it intriguing."

Allie spoke before Adrian could get his mouth open. "Certainly, we'll stay. I must admit to some curiosity about the place."

Adrian wanted to kick her, but refrained. "I'm sure you have plenty you need to do, Gabriel. Allie and I can find our own table."

"Nonsense, Adrian, you will both sit at my table." The velvet-warm tone rippled over Adrian's senses, having little to do with the actual words. It even made Allie shiver. He could see the gears turning behind Allie's expression and knew she was curious as hell now.

Adrian just smiled politely. "That's nice of you. Thank you, Gabriel."

"Wolf, take care of Adrian and Allie until I return. I won't be long."

"Will do, Father." Wolf turned his attention to Allie, asking what she wanted to drink.

His eyes followed Gabriel as the vampire moved through the bar. Adrian hoped it'd be a while before Gabriel returned. When he turned his attention back to Allie, he noticed she'd been watching Gabriel, too, while she ordered her drink.

Sliding onto the barstool Gabriel had vacated, she asked, "You want a love potion, right? Can't say I blame you there, hon. But it doesn't look like you need one to me."

Allie had completely misunderstood the situation. He shot Allie a warning look as Indy

was still nearby.

Indy caught the exchange and said, "Adrian, I do understand everything. He is my Father, and I care very deeply for him. But as long as you don't harm him, I won't tell him anything."

He could see something in Indy's eyes that went beyond simple understanding, and Adrian recognized it. "As long as he doesn't attack me first or push things with me, Indy, I won't do anything like that.

And I do *not* need a love potion, Allie. I asked for some wards, remember, and you needed to see what I was up against. Which, I will remind you, is why you are here."

"Are you nuts? He is way too lush to pass up, hon, and already deep there."

His tone was brusque as he dismissed Allie's notion. "Nonsense, he's a vampire. You can't mistake lust for love."

The faint look of pain crossing Indy's expression drew Allie's attention, but Adrian fixated on the bar counter, ignoring them both. Frowning slightly in concern, Allie said, "Oh, I think you are far off the mark on this one."

Everyone stayed silent as Wolf set their drinks in front of them. Indy remained at the bar, but Wolf joined them as Adrian and Allie headed toward Gabriel's table.

Conversation became general after that until Gabriel rejoined them, slipping into the booth next to Adrian. Adrian felt strongly tempted to scoot closer to Allie, but stayed where he was. The lighting dimmed as the show began. Gabriel leaned in closer to him to whisper, "If you watch closely, you might learn a few things, Adrian." Lowering his head slightly, he brushed a soft kiss beneath Adrian's ear.

Whatever would happen, Adrian doubted it would be something he wanted to learn. His head jerked slightly away from Gabriel as he fastened his gaze on the stage, just to avoid Gabriel. He could hear fragments of conversation between Allie and Wolf, her light laughter mingled with Wolf's deep tones. Again, Adrian resisted the urge to kick her. She was a big girl and could handle herself, he hoped.

Chapter 15

On the stage, a woman stretched on a couch, her long blonde hair spilled over the edge, brushing the floor. The lighting highlighted the play of light and shadow over her body, partially revealed by the red sheet draped over her. Darkness surrounded the rest of the stage. A young male approached from the right side of the stage, slowly stalking around the couch. He stayed mostly outside of the low lightning, except for an occasional glimpse of his hand or a fleeting glance of his beautifully pale face. The tension in her body became visible as it arched slightly upward in invitation to him, trying to bring him closer to her.

Whatever would happen, she badly wanted it. He made deliberately slow movements, zeroing in closer to draw out the moment of anticipation. When he stepped fully into the light, the man stared at her, enthralled.

This was a play of seduction and desire between the two people on stage. Adrian noticed Allie seem to be as entranced as he was by the scene. Wolf had a slight smile on his lips, watching her. Adrian didn't dare glance at Gabriel, and his attention went back at the stage.

The vampire moved to sit on the edge of the couch, his head bent toward the woman's throat as his hand leisurely drifted over her trembling body. A veil of his honey gold hair concealed his face before the woman's hand reached up, tucking it back behind his ear. Adrian realized they were about to see a public display of feeding, and he froze.

No wonder Gabriel had wanted him to stay around. Double damn, he really didn't want to see this, but he couldn't get out of there gracefully. The sound of the woman's moan reached Adrian as she lifted her hand to the man's head, holding him at her throat. Her expression was a taut mask of pleasure as her body twisted slightly before shuddering. The vocalizations from her joined with the low growl of the vampire. They were lost to everything and in their own little world, no matter that the entire room found themselves a witness to it. When he finally lifted his head, a whimper of protest came from her, and the lights dimmed completely.

Adrian could feel the play of Gabriel's finger drifting slowly back and forth against the side of his throat. As the lights brightened, Gabriel leaned toward Adrian, whispering, "I have wanted to taste you ever since that first night, Adrian."

The low tone sent an immediate quivering through Adrian. Trying to ignore it, Adrian

focused on Wolf and Allie. Their heads were bent slightly toward one another as they conversed quietly. He felt a fluttering in the pit of his stomach, and his heartbeat began an erratic pace. As Gabriel drew his head back, his hand captured Adrian's, slowly turning it to expose his wrist and raising it to his lips. The sharp tips of his fangs pressed slightly into Adrian's skin.

The only thing Adrian could do was whisper, "Please, not here."

The fierce hunger quickly dimmed in Gabriel's azure eyes, forced to retreat by the words. As he raised his head, a faint strain on his features showed the effort it cost him. Adrian understood that hunger and the price of denying it.

"It is not just blood, Adrian. There is more than that to it. You understand now, don't you?"

Part of Adrian wanted free of it, the other half wanted to drown in everything Gabriel could offer him. Thankfully, Allie's voice disrupted his thoughts. "I hope you don't mind, Adrian. I can catch up with you later."

"What?" He blinked at her, realizing he must have missed something.

"I need to get a bite to eat since I missed dinner. All right if I catch up with you later? We should be back before the others get here."

The things Adrian wanted to say to that went unsaid. "Sure, Allie."

Grinning, completely ignoring the warning look he sent her, she stood with Wolf, heading toward the door.

Adrian really wasn't happy that she was taking off with Wolf.

"Wolf will not harm your friend, I promise."

"I realize that, Gabriel, but just in case, I will hold you to your promise." He felt fairly sure Wolf would behave, but there was always the off chance something would happen.

"And when will you realize I will not hurt you, either?" A faintly brooding quality descended over Gabriel's face.

Silence stretched between them as Adrian tried to find the words. "That isn't what I'm afraid of." He already knew Gabriel wouldn't hurt him; it was everything else. "What do you want from me?" Adrian wanted the answer to try to make sense of things that were becoming blurry to him.

"Only what you are willing to give." Gabriel's searching gaze traveled slowly over Adrian's face. "Whatever you will give me."

"And if I don't give you anything?"

"Then you don't, but I will never stop trying to reach you, Adrian."

"I believe you want more of me than I am willing to give. You want everything I am; that is not something I'm up to." Adrian drew the words out, not really wanting to say them.

"If that is what the future brings, then so be it." Gabriel remained unperturbed by his words.

"You want everything and give only lust in return."

"Lust?" A hint of anger made Gabriel's tone rise. "Is that all you believe I am capable of?"

"You're a vampire."

Gabriel's bitter laugh surprised him. "Being a vampire is no safeguard from emotions. In us, they are not only present, they are far stronger than you can understand."

A twinge of doubt nagged at Adrian as he considered what Gabriel said. "Then what is it you feel, Gabriel?"

He smiled faintly at Adrian but his expression shuttered, betraying nothing. "I feel whatever it is I wish to feel."

Gabriel had neatly avoided the question in his own way. That puzzled Adrian. Usually Gabriel could be very blunt about things. Rethinking their conversation, Adrian realized Gabriel hadn't told him exactly what the vampire wanted from him, either.

Taking his hand, Gabriel slid out of the booth, pulling Adrian with him. "Come with me, Adrian. There are some things I would like you to see."

Adrian didn't expect the change of subject, but he followed along as Gabriel led him through the bar. Xander had been watching them the whole time; Adrian only became aware of it as they passed by him. Xander leaned against the wall near the bar, his arms folded over his chest. The look he gave Adrian had a knowing hint to it, as if he understood something Adrian didn't. Adrian just shook his head at Xander before moving down the hall with Gabriel.

Gabriel drew him downstairs to the vampire's sanctuary. This place was guarded like Fort Knox, the door to it hidden behind a panel in Gabriel's office. The rest of the underground complex could be accessed from the conference room upstairs, but this section was private, and its existence, it seemed, was known only to a very few.

Adrian had never seen this room before. There were various pieces of antique furniture, statuary, knick-knacks and even paintings. Adrian walked over to one of the portraits of Gabriel to study it. The young face astonished him. The hair and eyes were the same, but a carefree, youthful innocence lightened Gabriel's face. Something Adrian had never imagined Gabriel having. The artist had captured it in Gabriel extremely well.

"I had just turned eighteen when my father commissioned that. Ten years before I was changed."

Adrian found himself wondering what Gabriel had been like when he'd been alive. Compared to the picture, Gabriel looked slightly older and nowhere near as carefree, yet Gabriel really didn't seem to have changed all that much. Up until now, Adrian had never really thought of Gabriel as ever being human. "What was your life like?"

"I was born in 1544. A far different age than now, but my father was titled, and I lived a very ideal childhood. My mother was a very beautiful and loving woman. Most of those well to do around me were raised by servants; however, my mother thought differently. She died when I was twenty-two. Everything seemed to end then, especially for my father. In a space of moments, I saw him age before my eyes and become withdrawn. After the funeral, he refused to speak to anyone, and shortly after, he killed himself."

Adrian watched the play of emotions before he moved to Gabriel. Taking the vampire's hand, he curled his fingers around it, giving his own show of sympathy and understanding.

"It was a long time ago, Adrian."

"Who changed you, Gabriel?" Adrian released Gabriel's hand to wander around the room. He had never bothered asking Gabriel questions about his past, but many things in the room made him very curious.

"My creator was a very ambitious man, and my estate was a rich one. One night, I went gaming in one of the notorious hellholes with a few of my friends. In the middle of one of the games, I passed out. The next night I woke up as I am now. Later, I found out my friends were members of Diocourides' Society, and they had drugged me. Alistair fed me his blood with the formula, and I managed to live."

Confused, Adrian said, "I thought if you weren't willing, the formula wouldn't work."

"That is a misconception the society has never bothered to correct, and Diocourides never wanted it known."

As he listened to Gabriel, he ran his hand over a large wooden box. The dark wood was intricately detailed and smooth, the design of ancient origin. When Adrian opened it, the glitter of gemstones sparkled in the light.

"Oh my lord." Astonished by the overabundance of jewelry and loose stones, he picked up one of the necklaces. The delicate filigree of silver, set with emeralds the size of the tip of his finger, gleamed in the light.

"Each piece has its own history, everything in the room does. That necklace was a favorite of Elizabeth I, given to her by a paramour."

Adrian very carefully replaced the necklace and shut the lid. He hadn't meant to sidetrack the conversation with jewels. "Is Alistair still alive?"

"He is. He reigns over Paris now." The terse way Gabriel spoke matched the tight, withdrawn look on his face.

"Something you'd prefer not to talk about."

"It is not a pleasant subject, Adrian." A bitter smile twisted Gabriel's lips, but no other emotion showed.

Adrian had already learned the face Gabriel used to hide things, so he left off with the questions. He knew Gabriel wouldn't answer what he didn't want to. Two miniature portraits caught Adrian's eye. The first showed a young woman holding a young boy in her lap. The second picture showed a woman sitting with two children. Her hair seemed almost white, yet she looked about twenty-five at the most. The young girl, no more than three, was seated in her lap and had the same odd coloring as the woman. A dark haired boy of around eight stood by her side.

He picked up the first one, examining it more closely. A smilingly sweet serenity framed the young woman's face as she held her child. The resemblance between the raven-haired woman and young boy was striking enough to tell him this was a mother with her son. Her head was slightly turned, caught for eternity in a soft kiss brushed to the child's hair.

"My mother." Gabriel took the small portrait from Adrian's hand.

"The child is you?" The child in the portrait couldn't have been more than five, and it was hard for Adrian to swallow, seeing Gabriel as a little boy.

Gabriel nodded as he set it down.

"The other picture?"

"My wife and children." The low tone had no inflection or emotion.

He glanced quickly over at Gabriel in shock. It was a lot of information to digest, and Adrian wasn't sure how to take any of it. The thought of Gabriel growing up and even being married seemed alien to Adrian. He couldn't ask anymore on the subject.

Turning away from the miniatures, he intently studied some of the small statues. One in particular held his attention, as it was of Sekhmet.

Gabriel moved behind him, placing both hands on his shoulders. "I told you, it was a very long time ago, Adrian. This place is no more than memories. They are precious, but they do not feed the soul."

The familiar silkiness had returned to Gabriel's voice as his head bent to the side of Adrian's throat. Adrian shivered slightly with the trailing touch of Gabriel's lips.

"What are you feeling?" Gabriel whispered before nipping lightly at his skin. A dart of longing jittered through Adrian, refusing to be ignored.

Good question. He had no clue as he tried to form the stray thoughts into words. Gabriel's actions distracted him. "You want me in your bed. That isn't something I can do."

"You want me, though, I can smell that."

He turned to face Gabriel, searching for something Adrian wasn't sure he understood. "It's not enough, Gabriel. And everything else is too much."

To Adrian, lust wasn't enough. Even if Gabriel had been living, it wouldn't have been enough. Everything else required would be too much for Adrian to contemplate with a vampire.

"I will not give up, Adrian; my patience is endless." Gabriel dropped a soft kiss to Adrian's lips, and then took his hand, leading him back upstairs.

When they returned to the bar, Gabriel left him with Kyle to attend to a minor dispute between two of his court. Kyle stood next to Adrian, practically jammed against his side. Adrian had gotten Kyle over his habit of growling at every vampire he saw, but the were eyed Nikolai warily as the first formula approached them.

He couldn't blame Kyle because Nikolai put him on guard, too. Adrian had already been through enough, and he'd bet Nikolai had been behind Robert Niles' attack.

"I had heard you charmed a were, Adrian."

"Yeah." Adrian wasn't much up to being polite to Nikolai.

"They would make very effective guards. You must tell me how you managed it."

"I'm nice to him." Smirking at Nikolai, Adrian wondered how much trouble the vampire would have with the concept. Kyle stayed stiffly silent and out of the conversation.

"How do you control him, then?" Nikolai moved closer to Adrian, taking his hand. Vampires, in their own way, were as touchy feely as weres. However, in vampires, touch would often as not denote possession. Not in this case as Nikolai didn't own him, though Nikolai wanted to. Technically, Gabriel owned Adrian.

Adrian shrugged, resisting the urge to yank his hand away. He couldn't answer as he didn't control Kyle, so he stayed silent.

Nikolai continued, his tone filled with an intimate invitation that had nothing to do with the words spoken. The color of his eyes slowly changed to a molten silver hue, edged in black. "You impress me very much, Adrian."

Christ, Nikolai's eyes were fascinating. Like staring at a cobra. You should look away, but it had your attention. Not to mention if you looked away it might strike, repellent yet captivating. Smiling slowly, Nikolai exposed the tips of his fangs, dazzling white against his lips. His thumb ran lightly back and forth across Adrian's palm.

"I lengthened my stay here just to learn more about you. So far, the Romanorum has not questioned my decision to remain."

He stayed longer because of me? That part really threw Adrian. Shit, it made him feel bad for the other vamps around him. He wasn't the only one Nikolai made nervous and twitchy.

"What will it take to get you out of here?"

"Now, that would be easy enough to accomplish, if you agreed to join me for a week. I have a beautiful place in Colorado I'm sure you would enjoy seeing."

"I don't think--"

Nikolai didn't let him finish. "It would be a pity if you turned me down, Adrian. The others are growing even more restless, and they will most likely continue to test Gabriel. I might be tempted to do so myself."

Adrian didn't need the faint warning in Nikolai's tone to tell him what Nikolai was trying to do. The temptation rose to shoot Nikolai right where he stood and have done with it, but Adrian knew that would mean all out war. "You mean, you'll clear out if I spend a week with you?"

Kyle started growling in warning, clearly not liking the suggestion.

"Kyle, why don't you go talk to Jade?"

The growling stopped as Kyle muttered, "I'm fine where I am."

"Please, Kyle. I can take care of this." Adrian figured Kyle wouldn't know when he told a lie, and Kyle would be better off not hearing the discussion.

He gave Adrian an abrupt nod before he reluctantly walked off toward Jade. She was one of the few Adrian really trusted around Kyle. He thought she actually had a bit of a crush on the were.

Chapter 16

"Certainly, things will calm down when I leave, that is a given. If I stay, I can't guarantee the behavior of the others." Nikolai continued as if Kyle hadn't interrupted.

"If I do agree, what are the rules?"

"Rules?" Nikolai looked like he had no concept of the notion.

"Rules like no snacking on the mortals or feeding them blood, no use of force, no torturing. You know, that sort of thing." Adrian couldn't believe he was contemplating going along with this, but Nikolai wasn't leaving him much choice.

"Of course, I would not torture you, Adrian. That is understood."

"Not by me. What about the rest?"

"It will be as you wish." Nikolai didn't seem to have any problem agreeing to the conditions, and it made Adrian wonder how well he would stick to them.

"When it's over, I come back here, and you go on your merry way to wherever it is you are going, right?"

"You have my word it will be so."

He had to wonder what Nikolai's word would be worth, but if Nikolai reneged on any of it Adrian could shoot him, and nobody would take exception. Well, Nikolai would, but nobody else would. Moreover, the Romanorum would back Gabriel if Nikolai broke any part of the bargain. "And we get left alone to live happily ever after? No retaliation if you don't like what happens?"

"If you wish to leave by then, I won't stop you, Adrian."

When Adrian saw Allie had returned, he tried to signal her to get her ass over to him. He kept his head turned slightly away from Nikolai so the vampire wouldn't see his desperate facial contortions in Allie's direction. Thankfully, Allie got the message and headed over to them.

"Three days, Nikolai, providing I bring some backup."

Allie and Wolf joined them as Nikolai nodded to Adrian in agreement, a begrudging admiration lighting his eyes.

"Allie, how *charming* to see you." Smiling widely at her, Adrian continued, "Let me introduce you to Nikolai. Nikolai, this is a business acquaintance of mine, Allie Kingston."

Wolf didn't say a word about Adrian's strange behavior, and Adrian hoped Allie would get his message in the bizarre behavior and words.

Immediately, she smiled at Nikolai, offering her hand to him. "Delighted to meet you."

Nikolai took her hand, raising it to his lips. "The pleasure is mine, Allie."

The subtle caress over her name brought out a shiver in Allie. At least Adrian wasn't the only one there with that problem. Nikolai released her hand before stepping back. "If you will excuse me, I must attend to a few matters."

When he'd walked far enough away, Allie started in, "All right, what's up?"

"How soon can you get a charm for me, Allie? I'll explain it all later."

"One that strong? A day at least. It's going to have to be a really good ward for that guy."

The moment he saw Gabriel's face, Adrian could tell by the mounting fury that Nikolai had opened his mouth. "Fuck," he muttered as Gabriel came striding toward them, his features set in a towering rage.

"Adrian, what is going on?"

Nikolai strolled more leisurely behind Gabriel, clearly enjoying the show.

"Going on?" Adrian was at a loss for what to say for once in his life.

"Did you agree to join Nikolai?" Anger made Gabriel's voice tight. His eyes blazed with the barely confined emotion.

Wolf obviously knew it would be better to stay out of it, and he remained silent as he drew Allie slightly back with him.

"But of course he did, Gabriel," Nikolai interrupted smoothly before Adrian could say a word. "He has already agreed to my request." The words fanned the flames, and Nikolai knew it.

Grabbing Adrian's arm, pulling him away from Nikolai, Gabriel growled, "He is mine."

Adrian stiffened in Gabriel's grasp as Nikolai retorted, "He will be with me for several nights. Perhaps longer, if he changes his mind."

Yanking his arm back, Adrian said, almost spitting through clenched teeth, "If you two are through with the studs-r-us act, can I get a word in?"

When Nikolai started to open his mouth, Adrian hissed at him, "Shut up, Nikolai, you've done enough talking. Say any more and I will hurt you right now."

The smile he directed at Adrian said 'you look so cute when you threaten me,' but to his credit, he just nodded. Adrian turned to Gabriel, ignoring Nikolai.

"We need to talk." Adrian shouldered his way through the crowd that had gathered, heading for the back hall. His spine stayed stiff as he ignored the stares directed at them. Gabriel followed him silently, but Adrian could feel Gabriel's rage at his back, threatening to explode. When they reached the quiet of Gabriel's library downstairs, Adrian faced him. "Please, Gabriel, calm down and let me explain."

"Why did you agree to go with him? Why?" Gabriel growled the last word as he took a step toward Adrian, wrapping a painful grip around his wrist.

Winching, Adrian tried to pull back. "I didn't have much choice."

"You are mine." The low vibration of words became a possessive growl. The hold on Adrian's wrist remained tight as Gabriel drew Adrian against him. "I will not allow you to go."

"Damn it, Gabriel, I don't want to go. It's either that, or he will remain here and the attacks will continue. He said he might even test you himself. If he does, you can't win even with my power. We both know that. Then what happens?"

Letting go of Adrian, Gabriel's arms tightly circled him. The anger finally started to fade from his expression as he began to understand what was really happening. "He will try to take you away from me, Adrian. Let me bond you, he will be unable to break that."

Adrian already realized that, but no way in hell would he let Gabriel bond him. It'd been to Gabriel's credit he hadn't forced the issue on Adrian. "No, you can't bond me. I'll have my own protection."

"I want you safe." Gabriel had to know there wasn't anything he could do to stop things, and the knowledge no doubt added to his anger even as he so obviously tried to keep it leashed.

"I will be. If he bothers me badly enough, I'll just shoot him." Adrian hoped and prayed he could take care of whatever Nikolai thought he could throw at him. He just had to

convince Gabriel that he would be okay.

Gabriel's lips hovered close to his as the vampire spoke, "You belong to me, Adrian. Do not forget that."

He opened his mouth to refute that claim, but Gabriel's kiss sent all thought flying to the wind. The intensity of Gabriel's need pulled an answering response without thought from Adrian. Gabriel's hands slid down his body to his hips, then lifted Adrian up against him, encouraging Adrian's legs to wrap tightly around him.

Adrian's breath came out in a low moan as Gabriel's mouth lifted from his. When Gabriel set him down on the table, long fingers ran over Adrian's legs, rubbing gently over the material covering Adrian's inner thighs. Heated emotions and sensations controlled Adrian, proving Gabriel could too easily play havoc with him.

Slowly, Adrian unbuttoned Gabriel's shirt, wanting to feel skin. His fingers slid beneath the material, pulling it aside before running slowly downward over Gabriel's skin.

A low growl vibrated from Gabriel's throat in reaction, the sound sending a shiver through Adrian. He lifted his head, wanting to see Gabriel's face. Desire, hunger, and something else Adrian couldn't understand stared back at him.

"I don't want to control this; tell me I don't have to, Adrian." Gabriel's voice held no seduction, only a very deep need. A darkened gaze slid down to Adrian throat, the strain showing in Gabriel's face.

Some moments, odd whims were known to possess Adrian, and he was in the thrall of one of them as he got off the table. Standing, he tilted his head in a very clear invitation. He knew what Gabriel asked of him.

A half growl, half groan sounded from Gabriel as his head descended to Adrian's throat. He held Adrian's body in place with the tight grip of his hands. As Gabriel's fangs pierced Adrian's flesh, the pricks of sharp pain made him cry out, trying to pull away from Gabriel.

Gabriel refused to let him go. An exquisite liquid sensation coursed through Adrian's body, pushing the pain away. It left him gasping as the pressure of Gabriel's lips drew life from him. Adrian melted with the stunning pleasure rippling over his senses. Tangling his fingers tightly in Gabriel's hair, Adrian kept the vampire to his throat; he was no longer fighting. The tightening of Gabriel's lips caused Adrian to shudder with the waves pulsing through him. Each time Gabriel drank from him, it intensified the feelings, verging on the ecstatically orgasmic. Only Gabriel's tight grip on him kept Adrian upright, his knees were weak and shaking with mindless drowning.

The sudden cessation of it all as Gabriel stopped brought out a protest from Adrian. Gabriel's tongue bathed the wounds, healing them before he spoke in a whisper, "I can't,

Adrian. Any more and I will be beyond control."

His own response totally floored Adrian as he slowly came down from the high. "Oh God, I wanted you to..." He broke off, staring in wide-eyed fear at Gabriel. Adrian wondered if he would have let Gabriel drain him. The earlier arousal he'd felt faded at the frightened feeling.

"This is nothing to fear, Adrian. I promise you that."

"Would I have let you drain me?" He couldn't help giving voice to the question that haunted him.

"No, Adrian, your will is too strong. If I had tried to take too much, you would have fought."

Adrian wanted to believe that, but wasn't so sure of himself.

"Enjoy it as it is, and trust me never to take it too far." Gabriel gently lifted Adrian's chin to look up at him.

"I trusted you enough when I offered you my throat, Gabriel; it's myself I don't trust."

"Part of me wanted to show you how it could be, to try to keep you away from Nikolai as much as I can. If I could stop this, I would."

"I will be very careful, Gabriel." The nagging fear that bothered Adrian subsided. He would have to deal with it when he could.

"You will also take Xander and Kyle with you for extra protection."

"Already planned on it. And a few other things."

"I am not going to handle this well. If he does anything to you--"

Adrian didn't let Gabriel finish. "I'll take care of him. If he forces me in any way, all bets are off, and I leave. I already told him that."

Gabriel clearly didn't like what was going on, but he accepted Adrian's decision without further argument. As he placed his palm flat against Adrian's shirt over his heart, a sharp sting burned Adrian through the thin fabric.

"What the hell is that?" A flare of temper rose in Adrian's voice.

"My assurance none other will touch you. It will keep you safe from Nikolai's court."

The word 'safe' cooled the fast spurt of anger; at this rate, Adrian could probably use all

the help he could get.

Chapter 17

Taking Kyle home, Adrian dropped him off in front of the building before driving off to park the car. When he got upstairs, he saw Kyle talking to two people by the front door. Both were sitting on the floor, propped against the wall.

"Adrian, this is Michael and Sarah. They are part of my tribe," Kyle said by way of introduction.

As Sarah stood, her tall, willowy frame became apparent. She held out her hand to Adrian, and he took it, giving it a slight shake. She appeared to be around his age. Her light blue eyes held a curious, inquisitive look as she returned his gaze. The most unusual feature about her had to be her cropped, dark purple hair.

Michael looked older than both Kyle and Sarah, definitely closer to thirty. The sherry colored eyes held the same curiosity as Sarah's. Oddly, the ends of the sable darkness of his hair were tipped in white. He seemed relaxed, but Adrian saw the tightly coiled strength within him.

Stopping in front of the door, Adrian unlocked it. Two more weres? *This ought to be interesting.* Adrian opened the door, inviting them in. The flashing two on the answering machine told him messages were waiting, but he ignored them for now. "Go ahead and make yourself comfortable. You guys want something to drink? I've got soda or juice if you're thirsty."

Both asked for a soda, and Adrian headed toward the kitchen to get it. Kyle followed right behind him. "I'll help you."

As Adrian didn't need help getting a few sodas, that would be Kyle's signal he wanted to talk to Adrian. Opening the fridge, Kyle grabbed the juice, handing it to Adrian, before getting out the Cokes. "There's a problem."

"What kind of problem, Kyle?" Something told him Kyle's friends needed help, and Adrian was the only one Kyle could turn to.

"Michael and Sarah ran away from the tribe. They're hoping I can help them out. I'm not sure what to do."

"No place to go, right?" It was rhetorical question. "They can use the spare bedroom for a

while until they get on their feet."

Grinning, Kyle launched at him, wrapping Adrian in a bear hug. "You're the greatest, Adrian."

"Yeah, yeah, now let me go so I can breathe again." Laughing, Adrian tried to hold his glass out so that it wouldn't spill. "How'd they find out you were here, Kyle?"

"I called Michael after I got here."

"Take the sodas out. You can explain it all later."

Kyle stilled suddenly before pulling away from Adrian. Kyle's head ducked down, refusing to look at him. Adrian knew in an instant the right question to ask. "What are you hiding, Kyle?"

Kyle shifted nervously. "I didn't tell you the whole truth about what happened to me; I never wanted anybody to know."

Adrian recognized shame in the downcast attitude. He'd be the last one to throw stones over something like this, since he'd gotten to be a regular repository for secrets lately. "We'll talk about it later, after I get back from work."

"I'm sorry. I should have told you before." Turning away, Kyle took the sodas out to the living room.

It didn't really worry Adrian because he knew Kyle would tell him everything. However, his home was being overrun, and Adrian considered checking into a motel. Finishing his juice, he poured another. Seeing as he didn't have many options, he didn't mind helping out Kyle and his friends, but Adrian had begun to detest his own nature. He liked his privacy for the most part, and he had just gotten used to sharing his space with Kyle. Sighing, he pushed away from the counter, figuring he'd better join them.

As Adrian sat on the couch, Kyle scooted to his side, taking up the were's favorite place next to Adrian with a low rumbling purr.

"We really appreciate this," Michael said with a friendly smile. Sarah's was a smaller, shy version, but the gratitude was evident.

"It's no problem. I've got the extra bedroom Sarah can use, and you can bunk with Kyle."

"We'll probably all stay in the same room. Tribe habit." Kyle spoke with an unconcerned attitude.

Suddenly, Adrian had visions of waking up and finding all three of them in his bed. He really hoped nobody other than Kyle decided to stake their territory in his bedroom.

Every once in a while when Adrian woke up, he would still find Kyle curled up somewhere on his bed. Sarah slid to the floor, moving on her knees toward Kyle. Stilling next to him, she rested her head in his lap.

"Are you all were tigers?" Adrian asked.

Michael answered, "I'm a panther and Sarah is a cougar."

Michael watched Adrian somewhat warily, as if he wanted to join the group but didn't feel sure how Adrian would react. "Our tribe has several different species."

Three affectionate cats were more than Adrian wanted to face on any given day, but he could handle it. *If I keep telling myself that, maybe I'll believe it.*

After staring at Adrian for what seemed an unbearably long time, Michael leaned over in his seat, placing his hands on the floor and sliding out of the chair. It looked like an odd, but extremely graceful motion as he moved on all fours toward Adrian.

Sarah draped the upper half of her body across Kyle's legs, watching them with bright, curious eyes.

Michael's head tilted to look up at Adrian. He stilled briefly before lowering his head, sniffing at the back of Adrian's hand. Adrian felt he should head to his room, but he stayed put as Michael licked his hand. Kyle had done that to him before, so Adrian had gotten used to it. Well, not really, but he sat still while it occurred and didn't instinctively wipe off his hand afterward. It was a strict no-no that had severely upset Kyle the one and only time Adrian had done it.

Michael's body nudged against Adrian's legs, pushing them open as his head moved toward Adrian's belly. Kyle winked at Adrian as he sprawled comfortably on the couch. Sarah crawled up toward Kyle's chest, and her body wedged between his legs. It felt like a kitty commune with Adrian in the middle, but it wasn't sexual. It was about constant contact and affection, and Adrian seemed to be the center of it. Sarah and Michael were giving some serious gratitude. Sarah's hand drifted lightly over Adrian's arm before it moved upward, petting his cheek. Kyle leaned against Adrian's side, and Michael made himself at home on Adrian's chest.

"May as well turn on the TV, Kyle, so we can be comfortable," Adrian said dryly.

Laughing, Kyle reached for the remote and flicked on the Cartoon Network, his favorite after the Discovery Channel.

Sylvia's arrival, and Adrian's subsequent departure with her, ended the kitty-free-for-all-on-Adrian night.

They arrived at the first appointment already dressed in their robes, and found the family

gathered in the living room, ready to say farewell. Things went smoothly as Adrian worked with Sylvia, and used her energy to aid his with the invocations and dismissal. It wouldn't be long before she worked without him in the circle. With the gratitude of the family, they left for the next appointment.

Things ran right on schedule until midway through their third appointment, when the wife broke down. Dropping to her knees outside the circle, she started crying hysterically, pleading with her husband not to leave her. He watched her helplessly as Adrian looked to him to see what he wanted to do. When the wraith tried to leave the circle, Adrian reluctantly pulled back the energy, ending the ritual and dispersing the circle so the wraith could go to his wife.

Sylvia tried to deal with the mental shock of the resulting temporary chaos as Adrian stood motionless in the center of the circle, absorbing all he could. As long as he deliberately controlled the flow, it wouldn't bring them to their knees. When no more than faint sparks were left, Adrian moved to help Mrs. Jordan, who remained on her knees, trying to speak to her husband through her sobs.

Adrian silently sent a mental message to her husband. He could join Adrian and Sylvia when they left, and Adrian would complete the ritual later. If he needed time to think, he could find Adrian when he wanted to be put to rest. As long as he had the feeling of Adrian's energy signature, the ghost would be able to get to Adrian. A quick nod from the ghost signaled he understood. Obviously, Adrian couldn't say anything openly in front of his inconsolable wife.

"Sylvia," Adrian said, "would you help Mrs. Jordan while I get everything put away?" The older woman still cried, and her words were incoherent as Sylvia led her to the couch. Her husband followed, though there wasn't much he could do except talk to her. The look of anguish on his face showed the helplessness he felt at being unable to at least hold her.

Adrian packed up the equipment as quickly as he could. By the time he had everything put away in the backpack, Mrs. Jordan had calmed enough to realize they weren't going to finish the ritual.

As she repeatedly apologized to them, Adrian interrupted her. "It's all right, ma'am, I understand. Give yourself a few days to think about everything. If you want, you can call my office and tell my secretary to refund your money."

Adrian realized how hard it was to let go, even when you knew you should, so he didn't blame her. All they could do now would be to leave quickly, and they did. He felt deep sympathy for the Jordans, but there wasn't a thing he could do to help either of them right now.

Back in the car, Adrian began to explain some things in more detail to Sylvia. "It's not unusual to have that happen. The only way to handle it, if the ghost doesn't want the

ritual continued, is to stop and leave gracefully. Just let the poor ghost know they can contact you later, that's about all you can do."

"I didn't expect that, Adrian." Blinking rapidly against unshed tears, Sylvia clearly still felt a little rattled by the experience.

"It's something you eventually get used to if you want to do this." Better for Sylvia to learn now rather than later. "And you should sign up for some self-defense classes."

"Self-defense classes?"

"You need to know how to protect yourself, Sylvia. I've already been knifed by an irate sister who didn't want her brother laid to rest. Dakota can tell you worse stories. Sometimes not all grieving relatives approve of having their loved ones put to rest. Bereaved spouses, parents, kids or siblings can do strange things."

"How often does that happen?"

"I've been lucky. Usually, if somebody disrupts the ritual like Mrs. Jordan did, the wraith wants it stopped, so nothing else happens. But if Mr. Jordan had wanted to continue, it's possible his wife might have reacted violently because I would finish the ritual for him. Those are the kinds of things you have to watch out for, Sylvia, and be prepared for. It's always been my policy to listen to what the wraith wants, rather than what their upset family wants."

"I think I would prefer to do what the ghosts want, too, Adrian."

"I'll leave that decision to you, when you've gained more experience. Whichever way you decide to do it is fine, but take the self-defense classes first, and for now just back down if anybody gets upset in the family. I'll ask Dakota to take you along on a few of his cases. It will help seeing the different ways the ritual is performed. Some guides prefer more ceremony than I do. You'll find your own personal pace on how you like to do things."

"I'll sign up for a class next week. It hasn't been too hard getting down the key phrases I need, and I'll learn to work the rest."

"That's about how this business works. Most rituals are individualistic things, except for the main components. They can take upward of an hour or more to perform with due pomp and costuming. That's not my style though. Dakota can show you more of that. I can give you the practical advice, like wear only black robes; if you get blood on one, it doesn't show up as bad."

That one made her laugh. Thankfully, the rest of the night remained quiet for them. Before dawn, he dropped her off at her apartment and returned to his own.

Michael and Sarah were sprawled on the floor in front of the TV, and Kyle lounged on the couch. Shutting the door behind him, Adrian dropped his keys on the stand and moved to the closet to put his bag away. When he turned around, Kyle patted the place next to him in invitation, giving Adrian an endearing grin. It was Kyle's best I-want-to-be-petted scam. Laughing, Adrian settled next to Kyle. Instantly, Kyle scooted against him, stretching onto Adrian's lap and laying his head on the armrest. Adrian let him get comfortable, not saying anything.

"You want to ask me about the tribe." Kyle's tone sounded resigned as he held Adrian's hand between his. Adrian could see he needed the extra contact just to reassure him that Adrian couldn't go anywhere.

Schooling his features to a more reassuring expression, and mentally trying to prepare himself not to be shocked, Adrian said, "It's about time you tell me everything, Kyle."

"When you found me in the woods, it had nothing to do with me being weak. Roman had picked me to lead with him in the inner circle, and I refused to go along with it."

"Why would you do that?" It wasn't hard to figure out that if Kyle had refused, then something had been seriously wrong. His action amounted to an act of treason, according to the tribe law.

"They were killing people. Not just weres or our families either. They hunt them like animals."

Adrian saw Michael and Sarah had crept nearer to them, both of them watching Adrian with the same look of fear in their eyes.

He smiled at them, letting them know they could come closer. Sarah quickly tried to wedge herself between Adrian's legs as Michael approached him more hesitantly, nudging his body up against the side of Adrian's leg. Adrian tried to take in what Kyle had said and comfort all three of them at the same time. He felt somewhere beyond shock, but thankfully nothing showed. "What's Roman's last name?"

"Kelly."

"That's why we ran away. Kyle got away, so we thought we could, too." Michael bent his head in shame, refusing to meet Adrian's gaze.

Tugging his hand out from under Kyle's, Adrian reached over to Michael, grasping the were's chin gently between his fingers to make Michael look up. "Michael, it's all right, I understand. None of you is strong enough to take on your leader. Given that, you did the same thing I would have done."

All of them were obviously afraid Adrian would see them as cowards, and he wouldn't understand about the situation. However, Adrian knew enough about their law to know

they couldn't stand up to Roman.

Michael lowered his head enough to rub his cheek against Adrian's palm, showing how grateful he felt.

Once they realized Adrian wasn't going to give them any kind of attitude over the truth, they managed to let him go long enough for him to get to his feet and head to bed. Adrian wasn't surprised when the three trailed him to the bedroom. He'd already had a feeling he would be in for this one. As Adrian fell asleep, each one of the cats had some part of their body wedged against his, seeking the contact that told them everything was all right.

Late afternoon, a knock at the door woke Adrian up. He got out of bed, trying not to disturb the slumbering cats.

It surprised him to see India when he opened the front door, but he stepped back to let her in. "Anything wrong, Indy?"

"No, I just wanted to talk to you."

As Adrian moved to the couch to sit down, she shut the door behind her and began a pattern of pacing in front of him.

After watching her restless movements for a few moments, he decided to speak as she hadn't said anything yet. "Indy, spill whatever it is that's bothering you."

"This trip to Colorado. I already asked Gabriel's permission to join you, and he told me I could. Father wants as much protection around you as he can get away with. So both Skye and I will be going with you."

"That's fine, Indy. The more the merrier, and hopefully more to occupy Nikolai's attention. But that isn't what is bothering you, is it?"

"Nikolai is very powerful. That can be attractive to some, Adrian."

"Fortunately, not for me. If it were, I would've fallen into Gabriel's arms long ago, just as he wanted me to."

"It would hurt my Father very badly if you decided to stay with Nikolai."

"We've already talked about things, Indy. I have no plans to remain with Nikolai. The only reason I'm doing this is to protect your Father from any further attacks. Nikolai told me the Romanorum knew he'd decided to remain here, and they had no problem with it. You know they wouldn't have supported Gabriel. Yeah, Nikolai blackmailed me, but by the terms of his agreement with me, if he doesn't back down from Gabriel after this trip

to Colorado as he promised, then the Romanorum will support Gabriel."

"Nikolai is confident you will remain with him. I heard him taunting my Father." A glint of anger showed in her eyes.

"Nikolai believes there is no way I could turn him down. He hasn't figured out that I already have enough problems in my life, and I refuse to invite more. If he breaks one part of our agreement, the Romanorum will let Gabriel have his revenge."

Indy crouched in front of him, laying her hand down on the couch next to him. "Then you truly aren't interested in Nikolai?"

Sighing, Adrian pushed back deeper into the cushions. "Honestly, if either Gabriel or Nikolai were mortal, I probably would be. Neither of them is interested in me, just these damn odd quirks of power I have. It isn't enough. It never will be for me."

"And if there is more to it for my Father?"

"Indy, he tricked me into this because of the power he sensed I had. I am a tool to him, his possession, as he sees it. He already admitted to me that he believed my power would increase when he ghouléed me. And that would boost his power even more. It was why he beat Robert Niles." Adrian had no illusions on that score and decided to be frank with her. "It doesn't appeal to me, it--" Adrian broke off, not wanting to complete the thought.

"It hurts." Indy's quiet voice broke across his internal reverie. "I know, Adrian."

"I am no more to Nikolai either. He wants my power just as much as Gabriel does." Having had enough of this conversation, Adrian stood, dismissing the subject. "I need to finish my packing and get ready for work."

Indy straightened, moving silently for the door. After she left, Adrian picked up the phone, dialing Gray's number. Without saying too much, he asked Gray to run a check on Roman Kelly. Gray naturally wanted to know what was up, but Adrian didn't want to mention the full story or Kyle's knowledge of it. He told Gray he'd heard a few things and wanted it looked into. Satisfied with that for the moment, Gray agreed before he hung up.

Adrian needed to get ready for work so, after checking on the three in his bed, he headed to the bathroom. He needed to leave early in order to stop by Allie's and pick up the charm she promised to make for him.

Chapter 18

For Adrian, the trip to Washington, DC had been a complete waste. Sure, Clara had gained two senators to her case, plus a few industrial types had shown an interest in funding her project. But overall, none of the committees had been the least bit interested in listening to either her or Adrian.

By the time everything had finished, Adrian was able to relax on the flight before arriving in Colorado. The two-hour drive gave him a chance to nap before he got to Nikolai's home. Adrian had no comment on the road that took them from the airport to Nikolai's house. While the views were breathtaking, it was a once in a lifetime trip because if you did it more than once you were stupid. Million Dollar Highway couldn't be any reference to the amount of money the state might have spent building the damn frightening thing. Which explained why he curled up in the back seat and slept for most of the drive.

His first glimpse of Nikolai's home left him speechless. The only place he had ever seen like it was in a book of Charlie's about European castles. It was definitely a castle; mansion didn't qualify. As they drove down the lane leading to the house, Adrian could see manicured lawns, gardens, and fountains. Nikolai had told him there were even mazes and an animal sanctuary, plus several temples there. You needed a map to get around. Something very close to complete amazement had Adrian trying to comprehend how the place had gotten to the mountains of Colorado. The view spread out in an incredible vista, and he could see for miles across a valley to another range of mountains.

Once inside the house, a servant escorted Adrian through the entryway and upstairs. Adrian felt overwhelmed by the 'from another world' decor. The bedroom he was taken to was a suite of rooms including bedroom, bathroom, sitting room and huge walk-in closet. All of it looked larger than his apartment. The bed was the centerpiece of the room. Its canopy was suspended from the ceiling, draping around the bed in the sheerest cloud of gray. The warm wood and soft color made for an oddly tranquil effect, and the rest of the room was just as lavishly appointed.

Skye, Indy, Xander and Kyle had arrived a couple of hours before Adrian had, and Indy already stood guard in his bedroom. As he unpacked, Adrian noticed the closet was already full of clothes, expensive clothes. Nikolai seemed to be as bad as Gabriel could be in the clothing department, but Adrian still preferred his jeans and T-shirts. Opening what he assumed was a chest of drawers to put his clothes away, it shocked him to find out it was an oversized jewelry case and a full one at that. He'd never seen that much jewelry outside of a jewelry store, and most of it looked like something from Tiffany's.

Adrian never wore that damn much jewelry either.

Indy, hearing his gasp of surprise, moved behind him, eyeing the display over his shoulder.

Without knocking, Nikolai walked in.

"There's a reason doors are closed, Nikolai."

Nikolai smiled as if he hadn't done anything wrong. "I will remember that next time, Adrian."

"Just knock, all right?"

"I will do so." Nikolai shrugged, apparently not getting the problem. "I thought you would appreciate an escort downstairs. The house can be bewildering at first. I see you have found my gifts."

"Appreciate it," Adrian said, nodding politely. The last part of Nikolai's comment had Adrian choking out, "Gifts?"

Indy had a distinct pursing to her lips as she stepped back to stand with her brother, Skye.

"Certainly, I thought you might appreciate them." Seeming to think nothing of his own gesture, Nikolai asked, "Do you want to change before we go downstairs?"

"I, ah, thanks but no thanks. I hardly ever wear jewelry, and I have my own clothes." Adrian stumbled over the words. *Talk about a magnanimous gift. Holy shit.*

Xander and Kyle came in from the connecting door between the two rooms. Both of them were dressed in jeans and T-shirts, the same as Indy, Skye and Adrian.

A wry smile crossed Nikolai's lips at seeing them. "I made sure there were numerous outfits for everyone to choose from. I hope you will indulge me some evening."

Nikolai earned himself a point of credit for not pushing it. Politeness would get you further. Given Nikolai had blackmailed Adrian to get him there, the vampire had a lot of points to make up for.

Following Nikolai, with the others behind him, Adrian couldn't help noticing the servants as he passed by them. There were a large number of them, and they seemed well trained to stay out of the way. After walking down a flight of stairs and numerous corridors, they entered an enormous, lavishly decorated three-story room. Looking up, Adrian could see it completely opened to the ceiling with a gigantic chandelier suspended in the middle. Against one wall was a throne on a dais with several smaller chairs on each side. Several ancient coats of arms lined the walls, and tall pillars rose to the ceiling at strategic spots

around the room. The vampires parted as Nikolai moved toward the dais. Adrian followed more leisurely, taking in the sights before stopping in front of the throne as Nikolai sat on it. *I should have figured.*

Gesturing to the seat on his right, Nikolai said, "Please join me, Adrian."

Adrian heard several snarls from the group nearby, which Nikolai silenced with a look. Adrian wasn't going to be a favorite there, big surprise. As he sat, Kyle positioned himself at Adrian's feet, wrapping one arm around his leg and resting his head against the side of Adrian's knee.

Xander stood beside the chair, and Indy and Skye moved to stand next to Xander. As two other vampires approached, Kyle gave them a warning growl. Adrian almost laughed because Kyle had done it for show. Both vampires stopped abruptly before looking to Nikolai. He said nothing, so they turned their gazes to Adrian. Adrian leaned forward, laying his hand on Kyle's shoulder. "We'll find you a better snack later."

He would give Kyle a big hug for this one, and a thank you to Nikolai later. Kyle had established Adrian's position in the group, and Nikolai had allowed it. Everybody else in the room watched them very closely, trying to ascertain exactly what to make of Adrian. Xander placed his hand on Adrian's shoulder, gazing impassively back at the others half circling the dais.

Two of the vampires took another step forward, and one glanced at Xander with a distinct hungry intent before addressing Adrian with a patently fake smile. "I am Simone, Proeliatores of the fourth formula, 220, and this is my companion Saphon, Magi of the fourth formula, 152."

Both of them were fair-haired, and dressed in the same tight, clinging silver jumpsuits. The fronts were left unzipped to their navels, and Adrian wanted to lay bets as to who would pop out first.

Adrian didn't smile back at her, not with the way she had been eyeballing Xander. Raising his hand, he laid it over Xander's as he said politely, "Nice to meet you."

His eyes locked with hers as Adrian touched Xander's hand. Normally, Adrian wasn't prone to this kind of display, but vampires understood actions better than words. He flat out told her Xander belonged to him, just as he had with Kyle a few moments earlier. Simone shot another speculative look at Xander, which he deliberately ignored, keeping his attention on Adrian.

Chuckling, Nikolai waved her off. "I believe Simone would like to share your friend."

"She wouldn't like what would happen to her if she tries, Nikolai. You probably wouldn't either."

"Do I look worried about it, Adrian?"

Glancing around, Adrian noticed the ones who were serving Nikolai's court wore a great deal less than the other servants did throughout the house. In fact, they wore nothing at all, and occasionally a vampire would help themselves to a little snack on the servants as they passed by. It all happened so casually, Adrian could hardly believe it. In response to the tension of Adrian's body, Kyle held tighter to Adrian's leg. He rubbed his face against Adrian, a low purr rumbling from him.

Each member of Nikolai's court appeared resplendent in rich colors and twinkling jewels nestled against their pale skin. They were a totally indolent and beautiful group, lazing like sleek cats, enjoying the hedonistic pleasures before them. Nikolai's quiet voice brought Adrian's attention back to him.

"You have yet to cease to amaze me."

"I amaze myself lately." A couple of months ago, there were no men in his life, and now there were several. *What have I done to deserve this?*

"I would think it overwhelming at times."

Adrian wondered if Nikolai could read him.

"It would give me an unfair advantage if I didn't answer that."

Damn, Nikolai could read him; Adrian's shielding skills were going to get plenty of practice. "Mind keeping out of my head, Nikolai?"

"My apologies, Adrian. I didn't mean to intrude where you don't want me." The tinge of amusement in the words made the apology suspicious.

Others of Nikolai's court moved toward the half circle gathered in front of the dais. They first introduced themselves to Adrian, and then spoke to Nikolai. Most of them didn't look too happy with the arrangement. Nikolai laid his hand casually over Adrian's.

He felt Nikolai's nail lightly scratching back and forth over against his hand. Adrian would have liked to yank it away, but he knew better. Tolerating it would get him further than problems with Nikolai's court would.

One vampire in particular had an extremely arrogant attitude as he strode to the dais. After acknowledging Adrian with a sneer, but no introduction, the man completely ignored him. That was fine with Adrian.

Adrian could see a barely suppressed agitation in the guy's movements. His straight brown hair brushed the broad shoulders that seemed to stretch the green silk shirt at the seams.

"Is everything in order, Ash?"

"Yes, Father, Felix is in New York, working with Gordon. Prince Raleigh is contesting several of the claims, but he lacks the support of the Romanorum. His court refuses to back him as well."

"Very good. I expect Simone to be in New York by the end of next week to settle things."

"I can handle everything, Father. There's no need for Simone to go." Ash sounded insolent, like a child denied a treat. A flash of annoyance lit his hazel eyes.

"Simone will take care of it, Ash." An edge of steel crept into Nikolai's voice. The nail moving over Adrian's hand added a bit more pressure. It wasn't hard to tell when Nikolai was annoyed.

Ash bowed his head, but not before Adrian caught the expression of resentment. "I'll make the arrangements."

"There will be no more mistakes. I have endured enough of them. Is that clear?"

Ash's head remained low as he answered, "Yes, Father."

"Good. Now see to the arrangements." Clearly dismissing him, Nikolai turned his attention back to Adrian.

Adrian caught a fleeting glimpse of barely-concealed fury as Ash glared at him before Ash turned his back, walking away. Hearing Skye muttering behind him, something about "spoiled brats," Adrian asked mildly, "Child problems?"

"Best for you to see it all first so you know what you are in for."

"You're surprising me. I thought you would attempt to hide things so I wouldn't want to run screaming into the night." Adrian could fake a mellow mood as long as he didn't pay attention to the appallingly-casual feeding around the room.

"Somehow, I don't think anything could send you screaming anywhere."

"Never said it would. But wanting to is another thing."

"You would like to be free of Gabriel. What better way to achieve that goal, Adrian?"

"And out of the goodness of your heart, you blackmailed me into this, right?" He glanced down at his hand, where Nikolai's nail had resumed its light scratching over his skin. Adrian could feel the tension in Xander's hand, which was still on his shoulder and could almost hear the grinding of Indy's teeth, but neither of them could say anything.

"Any advantage that can be used is fair in the game, especially when the stakes have a potential worth the risk."

"Nice to know you realize my value, Nikolai."

"Just as Gabriel recognized it when he marked you."

"Marked me?" Confused, Adrian had no idea what Nikolai referred to.

"It blazes even beneath your clothing." He moved his hand away from Adrian's long enough to gesture toward Adrian's chest, before returning it to its prior position. "No one can mistake you for anything other than his property."

"Son of a bitch," Adrian muttered, remembering the particular incident before he had left San Diego. He reached up, tugging at his shirt as he tried to keep his own emotions from showing. He should have known to ask Gabriel more questions.

Nikolai took the opportunity to add further commentary. "He controls you far more than you realize, Adrian. Or is it that you know, but you won't admit it?"

"Nobody controls me, Nikolai. Get that straight right now. Not you, not him, not ever." Kyle shifted against Adrian's leg, responding to the anger in his voice. His fingers kneaded into the material of Adrian's jeans. Xander's hand tightened even more on Adrian's shoulder. Indy's hand moved to rest on the opposite side as Skye's rested against the nape of Adrian's neck. All of them were trying to help him regain some calm without a word being said.

Adrian fell silent as Claire moved to stand beside Nikolai. She leaned over, whispering to him. Suddenly grabbing her throat, Nikolai's hand squeezed to silence her strangled cry. Her eyes widened in fear, but she made no attempt to get away.

"Claire, when I wish to be interrupted, I will tell you. Do you understand?"

Blood seeped down her skin where his nails dug into her as he waited for her answer. When she nodded, he released her, wiping the blood from his fingers on her skirt. "Now go."

Claire got the message and moved in back to the group she had been with in a hurry.

Adrian had seen Gabriel do similar things when angered. He understood the type of action on the level that most vampires seem to respect violence more than just telling them off. In this case, Adrian didn't think it'd been necessary, but the interruption gave him the chance to swallow his anger at Gabriel. He'd hurt Gabriel later. No need to show division in front of Nikolai; Adrian wasn't that stupid.

The scent of blood, both mortal and vampiric, strongly permeated the air. Everywhere Adrian looked seemed to be a feeding free for all. The smell didn't disturb him. If it had been Gabriel's blood, it would've been a different story. But Adrian could feel the occasional restless shifting of Indy and Skye behind him.

"What are the arrangements made for India and Skye's feeding?" Normally, the host would be responsible for such little courtesies, and Adrian would judge if Nikolai's offer would be acceptable.

Nikolai's gesture brought Ash back to the dais. "My son will take care of their needs whenever they wish."

Adrian blinked, and both Skye and Indy stared at Nikolai, trying to hide their astonishment. The offer was an exceptional one: Nikolai offering his own son. It meant he viewed Adrian worthy of his blood, and by extension, both of Gabriel's children. He trusted neither would drain Ash. It wasn't something any of them had expected.

This time, Ash showed a lot less attitude as he spoke, "I will be happy to accommodate your needs whenever you desire." He watched both of them with a faint quirk of a smile on his lips, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"Unless either decides that is not satisfying enough; in which case, they can choose among my court," Nikolai smoothly added, even though it would be a considerable insult to turn down his offer.

Graciously inclining her head toward both of them, Indy's words were pure polite form in the protocol. The formality was required because of the magnitude of the gesture. "You honor us greatly with your arrangement, Your Excellency."

Skye bowed his head slightly in agreement with his sister.

With a slight nod, Nikolai acknowledged their answers before murmuring to Adrian, "I thought it would please you."

Simply nodding, Adrian turned his gaze back to the room in general. Several members of Nikolai's court had stretched out on cushions along low tables; blood, at this point, was flowing very freely. The meals reclined beside their diners, being openly fondled. Now Adrian didn't dare look in any given direction other than Nikolai's.

The vampire sat on his throne, utterly unperturbed by their surroundings. The chandelier above the room winked out, leaving the room bathed in the light from the two massive fireplaces and numerous torches. The darkening of the room seemed to intensify the glitter of Nikolai's eyes as they rested on Adrian. The atmosphere began to feel charged with sexual tension as the erotic undertones of sound reached Adrian ears.

Xander leaned forward to get Adrian's attention. "About time we get the hell out of here,

don't you think?"

"We will let you take care of business, Nikolai." Standing, Adrian stepped off the dais, walking toward the huge double doors. Indy, Xander and Kyle followed close at his heel.

"Back off!" The sound of Xander's pissed off voice made Adrian turn around abruptly.

He saw Simone had grabbed Xander, one hand pinning him against a nearby wall. Adrian's hand automatically went to his hip right near his gun. "Simone, let go of him now."

"No reason to waste a perfectly good meal."

Kyle shifted quickly to animal form as Indy and Skye took several steps toward Xander and Simone.

Adrian had the staker aimed at Simone before she'd even finished her sentence. "Now, Simone." He started to pull back on the trigger as he repeated, "Now."

Both Kyle and Indy stopped their advance, and Skye took several more steps before he paused. Xander pushed Simone's hand away, taking a sidestep to get some distance between them before Adrian fired the gun.

"Your Excellency, this is ridiculous. I will not let a ghoul order me around." Simone turned to Nikolai, clearly frustrated and exasperated.

"I would suggest you listen."

Armed with a staker, daggers, and his charm, Adrian felt fairly confident. Adrian knew Nikolai didn't doubt his ability to handle it; however, Simone must have taken Nikolai's lack of interference as a signal Nikolai wouldn't mind whatever she did. Her smile of triumph faltered when Adrian fired the staker. The stake embedded into her chest, and her body collapsed to the floor.

Xander stepped casually over her, walking back to Adrian.

"Anybody else feel like challenging me?" Adrian asked the room in general. In the ensuing silence, he noticed none of them made any effort to stir from their places. Addressing Nikolai, Adrian said, "She tries again, and one of us is going to have to kill her."

"I doubt she will want to, Adrian, but agreed, and I don't think the rest of my court will push matters." An indolent wave of his hand sent Nikolai's enforcers over to Simone's body to cart it away.

Chapter 19

Back in the bedroom, a servant brought in a cart of food for dinner as Adrian changed his clothes in the bathroom. The aroma reminded him he hadn't eaten since the night before. Leaving the bathroom, Adrian eyed the assortment as he headed over to the cart. Teriyaki steak, onion rings, and potato salad were on the menu, along with a dessert of peach pie. "I wonder how Nikolai found out my favorite foods."

"He seems to be pulling out all the stops, Adrian." Xander watched him loading up a plate.

"Xander, what's bothering you?" The food tasted as good as it smelled and. Xander filled his own plate, not saying anything as he settled next to Adrian. "Start talking. I can see something is bugging you."

Kyle came in, helping himself to the food and disappearing back into the other room without a word. Xander didn't answer, he just continued eating, keeping his eyes on his food.

"I'm not going to let it go once I get done eating, Xander."

Xander didn't seem to have much of an appetite, only taking a few bites and mostly moving the food around the plate with his fork. As Adrian was starving, he finished the steak and onion rings, then went back for seconds and added a piece of pie. After he finished everything, Adrian took Xander's still full plate from him and put the dirty dishes on the cart. Returning to the bed, he plopped down beside Xander and started in. "Going to tell me what you're thinking now?"

"I worry, that's all."

"About?" Adrian prompted Xander to go on as he stretched out back on the bed, leaving his feet dangling over the edge.

"You wanting to stay here, Adrian." Xander changed positions, lying on his side, propped on his elbow. He half hovered over Adrian.

"Not something to worry about since I don't want to stay here. You worry about as much as Gabriel, Xander. I am stuck here for a few days only, and that's it."

He half expected the gentle touch of Xander's lips and wasn't disappointed; Xander needed to convince himself as well as Adrian. Xander's body partially leaned against Adrian's, pressing him into the bed.

"Xander." His name came out husky as Adrian's hands slipped beneath Xander's shirt. His nails dug into Xander's back, raking downward against his skin. Just the touch of Xander's body drove Adrian half-crazy.

The play of emotions crossing Xander's features was an odd mixture, reflecting the deepening of his own feelings for Adrian. Adrian realized Xander had started to care for him a bit too much, but Adrian wasn't sure how he felt other than physically wanting Xander. He moved one leg, twining it over Xander's. He drew Xander's head back down to him, giving Xander a deep, hungry kiss. An aching, empty sensation spilled over Adrian as their tongues slid slowly over each other's. This time Adrian ended the kiss. Keeping his eyes closed, he turned his head slightly away from Xander.

Xander placed a lingering kiss to the corner of Adrian's lips.

"Xander, I'm sorry, I don't--" Adrian tried to explain, but Xander wouldn't let him finish.

"I understand more than you think, Adrian. There is time for everything, but this is not the time. It's okay. I just needed to know you wouldn't stay here."

Adrian rolled to his side, facing Xander. *Why can't it be easy just to let myself go and accept everything he offers?* "I want things to be simple, so why aren't they?"

"Even I realize things never work out as simply as you want them to." Xander's hand smoothed comfortingly over Adrian's hair. The gentleness of his voice washed over Adrian, stilling the disquiet inside him. "I'm not going anywhere, so you have all the time in the world."

He really should've been pissed at himself. All Adrian wanted to do was snuggle into Xander, accepting the security Xander gave him, but Adrian couldn't offer the man anything in return. Xander was the best thing Adrian had in his life, and Adrian knew he cared about Xander. But would it be enough? That was where the uncertainty came in.

The bed became a very empty place when Xander left.

Once alone with his thoughts, his anger at Gabriel returned. Adrian ended up staring at the ceiling, unable to fall asleep between the thoughts of Xander and Gabriel. As soon as he got back, he would make sure Gabriel got rid of that mark. More than an hour passed before his thoughts slowed down enough for him to sleep.

The next afternoon, Adrian went on a tour of the house with the housekeeper. Nikolai had

outdone himself to keep Adrian entertained and happy. He felt somewhat impressed with Nikolai's attention to detail in the matter of his comfort. The house made Adrian feel like he'd stepped back into ancient times. He should've been wearing lace and velvet, or whatever they wore back then.

He followed along side the housekeeper, Mrs. Applebee, listening to her. The name astounded him, along with the fact she was a nearly two thousand year old ghoul. The woman didn't look a day over fifty. The admission that she was married, and had been for the last three hundred years, to Mr. Applebee, gave new meaning to committing oneself to marriage. She proved to be a fountain of information about "her master"; her words, not Adrian's.

It left him wondering about the praise she heaped on Nikolai, but her expression seemed one of genuine fondness. She told Adrian she'd taken care of Nikolai back when he had been alive and kicking. That threw Adrian, too. Her stories of Nikolai as a child had him laughing, but he still had the same problem he'd had with Gabriel. Vampires being kids just wasn't a comprehensible thing to Adrian.

The woman had an amazing memory, though, and he had to admit he enjoyed talking with her. When Adrian mentioned he wanted to see the animal sanctuary, she guided him to the rose gardens, telling him the entire grounds were the sanctuary. The animals were under Nikolai's control and therefore harmless to his guests. Leaving Adrian to the solitary splendor, Mrs. Applebee returned to the house.

Adrian took a slow stroll through the lavish indoor rose gardens. Several overhead trellises carried the sweet fragrances of the blossoms, just tempting his senses to heighten to take it all in. This place looked simply incredible. He walked outside and through the formal gardens that gave way to a more riotous scattering of horticulture. Bypassing the huge maze, not wanting to get lost in it, he came upon one of the fountains scattered among the gardens along with statuary and topiary in interesting mythical animal shapes. It must take a legion of gardeners just to manage the place.

Sprawled next to one of the fountains, a lioness relaxed with her cubs, and a lounging leopard slept on the wide rim of the fountain. The centerpiece was a fifteen-foot representation of Neptune in a chariot pulled by Pegasus. The front of the fountain was scalloped shaped, and water spilled from three large shells into the large pool beneath them. Three life-sized, nude water nymphs graced the shells.

A pantheon of the gods, off to the right, was three-tiered in white marble and emerald enamel, decorated by fourteen life sized bronze statues portraying Roman gods and goddesses.

Not too far away, Adrian could see what looked like a Roman temple. Although he knew it was supposed to be there, he still felt surprised by the sight as he wandered toward it. It had gotten dark already, and the garden was lit with what seemed to be faerie like lights artfully hidden along the paths. Torches in metal bowls flanked the way up the temple

stairs, illuminating the temple. The entire thing looked like it was constructed of white and black marble. Delicate pink tiles were inlaid in an intricate design in the white marble on the ground flooring. A statue, at least twenty feet tall, of Venus stood on a pedestal at ground level. The stairs wrapped around the two-story temple, leading to a marble altar in front of huge metal doors. As Adrian found it locked, he didn't venture inside. It was amazing enough just to wander around the massive pillars lining the temple, viewing it from the outside.

As he headed back to the front, he saw Nikolai staring up at the statue. "The goddess of love. She is a fitting *patrona* in the search that drives us to find any meaning to make sense of the world."

Adrian descended the stairs, listening to Nikolai's philosophical bent. "Shouldn't Bacchus be more appropriate in that search, Nikolai?"

"Only from the outward look of my court, Adrian. But peer closer; you will see the desperate need that drives them. In time, the pursuits of Bacchus become jaded, and the desperation starts for better pleasures. It is a trap that enthralls many of my kind."

"What about you, then? I didn't see you joining them." As things had degenerated in the throne room the night before, Nikolai had remained beside Adrian. He had watched the others, neither stopping them nor making any attempt to join in.

Nikolai's hand reached for his, fingers curling around it. His voice softened, but Adrian could detect no seductive effort in it. "I ceased the frantic pursuit of those things over a thousand years ago. Now I look for far more than the next titillation to sate my appetite."

In the depths of Nikolai's eyes, a slow silvering had begun to take over the blackness. "Then why bother with me? I'm not the next dish on the menu for you to devour, Nikolai."

"No, you are far from that, Adrian. The potential strength and power radiates from you. I haven't seen your like since--" Frowning, Nikolai stopped.

Adrian could see the memory of something painful touch Nikolai's expression before Nikolai grew silent. Giving him a questioning look, Adrian waited to see if he would continue.

"You are much like my first child, headstrong and defiant even when facing the worst odds. And his heart protected many just as yours does. I never thought I would see his spirit again." A bittersweet smile tugged at Nikolai's lips. "Virgil was taken from me too soon. He was barely a young child in my life before I killed him."

"Killed him?" That part of the story glared out at Adrian, making him take a step back. He tugged at his hand, wanting Nikolai to let go.

Nikolai released him before turning his back on Adrian and staring up at the statue again. "My Father and I were fighting. Virgil tried to stop me from attacking him. Wisely, he knew I was no match for Seneca, but I didn't care. I shoved Virgil to the side before he could be hurt for interfering. I didn't realize how close Virgil was to the fireplace. Flames caught his clothing, but I was so intent on getting at my Father that I didn't know what had happened. Even when Virgil screamed in panic, I dismissed it. Only the sudden sound of Father's laughter brought me up short, confusing me. When I turned to look at Virgil, the flames were already engulfing his body. Before I could go to him, Father grabbed me."

Guilt threaded heavily through Nikolai's voice; his head bowed with its weight. "I tried to struggle against him, but I wasn't strong enough to free myself. I listened to Virgil's screams of agony as I watched him burn."

Adrian laid his hand on Nikolai's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Nikolai."

When Nikolai finally turned to face Adrian, the half smile showed bitterness. "I made Seneca pay for that death three hundred years ago."

Even Adrian could see Nikolai still made himself pay for it. "You didn't kill Virgil; it was an accident."

"Logic never works on the memory of what I saw, Adrian." Adrian could see the memories were once again behind a closed door. "I had already heard stories about you. The first time I met you, you resisted me and then turned around and threatened me. You do remind me of Virgil."

Nikolai's hand nudge Adrian's chin, lifting his face gently and giving him a searching look. "You will allow me the same chance as the others, will you not?"

"I don't think that is something I can be fair about, Nikolai. I have more than enough." Ruthlessly, Adrian suppressed any kind of reaction. Nikolai was undeniably a compelling man; however, Adrian's life was already a mess. The gentle touch of Nikolai's lips replaced his thumb, trying to coax a response from Adrian, but Adrian wouldn't allow it and drew quickly away from Nikolai.

"Then I will be content with the fact that I sense you would like to. In time, you will allow more."

Refusing to say anything, Adrian kept a bland expression on his face and some distance between them.

"Are you returning to the house with me, Adrian?"

"I'll be in soon. Don't let me keep you from your court."

Nikolai nodded slightly to him before taking a quick step toward Adrian. The brush of his lips wasn't as gentle this time, and a harder intensity marked the brief press of Nikolai's lips against Adrian's. He moved back before Adrian could say anything and walked away, leaving Adrian staring at his back.

Chapter 20

Adrian remained standing there for at least fifteen minutes, staring up the statue of Venus. His thoughts refused to be sorted out, even with the quiet peace around him, and he knew the others were waiting for him. He headed reluctantly away from the temple, ambling back along the path.

Rounding the corner of one of the large hedges, Adrian saw Charles Remington leaning against a tree near the maze. The hard edge to his expression told him Charles wasn't there to be social. Tensing in reaction, Adrian's hand moved to his staker, but he wasn't fast enough.

With preternatural speed, Charles tackled him, sending both of them crashing to the ground. Adrian got the gun out, but Charles' hand slammed Adrian's down, breaking his wrist with a sickening snap. The gun skittered out of Adrian's hand, his fingers rendered useless with the pain.

"Not so fast, ghoul." Remington straddled Adrian, his hand pinning Adrian's to the ground. The other traveled to Adrian's face, fingers grabbing his chin in a painful grip as Charles leered down at him. The weasel like features of his face didn't improve up close. His pale blue eyes fastened on Adrian's throat.

"Get the fuck off me, asshole." Jerking his head to the side, Adrian twisted slightly to see where his gun had gone. It wasn't close enough to him to grab.

"Now, now, no need for that kind of language. I'm not here to kill you." If Remington had meant that to be reassuring, it wasn't.

"Then get off me."

"The others were right about you. You are feisty." In a blur, an open-handed blow from the back of his hand struck across the side of Adrian's face. Sparkling pinwheels of flashing light danced across his vision. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth as Adrian grappled to get his senses back from the hit.

Remington leaned down to lick at the blood, and Adrian's hand came up, grabbing a fistful of the auburn hair and yanking back hard. Charles' nails cut into his hand as the vampire tried to force Adrian to let go. Strands of his hair came away in Adrian's hot little grip. That made Adrian happy.

"Do we talk, or do I continue breaking things?" Remington kept his hand curled painfully tight around Adrian's uninjured wrist, just in case.

Adrian needed at least one of his hands intact. Hissing in a breath, he calmed slightly. "What do you want?"

"Now, that's better." Releasing the hand, Charles patted his cheek before tilting Adrian head to the side, eyeing Adrian's throat. "Do I feed from you first, or feed you, Adrian?"

"Nikolai and Gabriel will kill you, and you know it." This little shit thought he could make Adrian *his* ghoul. *Moron.*

"Nikolai won't mind at all. As for Gabriel, he'll try, but he won't have your power anymore. I will." Remington seemed very positive about everything, which made Adrian wonder who had given him the idea Nikolai wouldn't mind.

He wanted to strike the mocking smirk from Charles' face, but he'd had enough of the who was stronger than whom game. His gun lay too far to reach, and his strength would be only half Charles'. Adrian was in deep shit and knew it.

"It would take three weeks to do that. There is no place you can hide where Gabriel won't find you."

"It's already taken care of." Standing, he dragged Adrian with him.

Adrian screamed mentally for Gabriel. He prayed even with the distance between them, that Gabriel would answer. Both of his hands struck at Charles' chest, shoving him back as Adrian felt the immense rush of power almost drowning him. The energy overrode the jarring pain riding up Adrian's arm. Adrian scrambled for the gun even before his mind could finish the thought of getting it. His power more than equaled Charles' now, drawing on Gabriel's.

The enormous tidal wave of energy swept through Adrian, setting his body inwardly on fire. Shock made Charles hesitate for the split second it took Adrian to shoot him. The stake hit Charles, but, left-handed, Adrian wasn't as accurate with the staker. He got the second shot out before Charles could advance on him, and it took the vampire down.

Groggily, Adrian shook his head. The sense of Gabriel's presence overwhelmed him as he rode the intoxicating rush. He looked around, expecting to see Gabriel. It quickly faded as the burst of power left him. Holstering the gun, Adrian staggered toward Charles. Adrian would have bruises to show for this later and dull pain jolted up his arm in repeated throbs. He knelt beside the prone body, trying to work out the best way to do what he needed to do.

Kyle wandered out into the garden, searching for Adrian, then quickly took in the scene

as he moved to stand beside Adrian. "What the hell happened this time?"

"I need your hunting knife." Adrian could tell Kyle instantly understood what he wanted to do, and Kyle had the knife in hand right after Adrian asked for it.

"His heart?"

"Yeah," One handed, Adrian tore open Remington's shirt, popping the buttons. Adrian knew Charles was aware of them, but there wasn't a damn thing the vampire could do. Staked, Charles was paralyzed and helpless. And Adrian would kill him.

"Let me take care of it, Adrian. I know the anatomy better than you do."

"I'll help anyway."

Kyle started to carve into the chest cavity, slicing open the skin to get at the heart. He made a bloody mess in his enthusiastic work. It wasn't easy opening a body to get to the heart. It didn't bother Adrian, though. This wasn't exactly a living body. Remington was already dead. He'd just never stopped moving around until now.

They worked together silently, their hands slippery with blood. Kyle continued determinedly until Adrian got his hand around the dead heart. With a hard yank, Adrian ripped it out of Remington's chest, his own strength enough of a match to achieve it. That took care of Remington. The loss of blood wouldn't do him in, and he remained alive because his dead body didn't need the heart to survive. However, his body would disintegrate the moment the morning sun touched it, as he'd lived way past his natural lifespan. Charles would remain paralyzed for eternity now without his heart, or until the rays of the sun got him.

Leaving the carcass, they went back into the house, heading for the throne room. A few shocked looks greeted them as they walked down the halls, but the servants didn't intervene. As they entered the throne room, the buzz of voices faltered before going completely silent in complete astonishment. Nikolai rose from his seat, staring at Adrian. Before Adrian could say anything, another servant, ignoring the bloody mess in Adrian's hand, tugged at his sleeve.

"Sir, Prince Garland wants to speak to you urgently." He held out the phone, waiting for Adrian to take it.

"This is not the time. Tell Prince Garland everything is fine, and I'll call him later." Adrian started moving toward Nikolai as the servant repeated the message to Gabriel. Xander, Skye and Indy crossed the room to intercept Adrian. Nobody had said a word yet except for the servant and Adrian, though the tension level in the room had tripled.

"Whose heart is that, Adrian?" Nikolai asked calmly, as if he'd already expected something like this to happen.

Adrian doubted Nikolai would be in on this because Nikolai would never have agreed to let him be Charles' ghoul. However, Adrian had a fair idea of someone who might have supported it. The look on Ash's face pretty much confirmed he was behind it; he seemed stunned to see Adrian, and he never once looked at the heart in Adrian's hand.

Another tug on his sleeve stopped Adrian from answering. The servant held out the phone to him again with a pleading look. Apparently, Gabriel hadn't accepted the explanation and had unleashed his anger on the poor servant.

Adrian grabbed the phone awkwardly. Now that the adrenaline rush had faded, pain throbbed through his arm. With his wrist broken, he had to use one hand for the heart and phone. His arm held the phone to his ear and blood dripped on his hair from the heart. "Gabriel, everything is fine. Can I call you back later?"

Gabriel's voice sounded at the edge of panic when he answered, "I felt the energy drain. What happened, Adrian?"

"Another coup attempt, I took care of it."

"I want you home right now, Adrian. No arguments, do you understand me?"

"I won't be arguing with you on that, I promise. We will be returning tomorrow." Adrian looked directly at Nikolai who had stopped in front of him, listening to Adrian's part of the conversation. "But I need to explain a few things to everybody else, so if you don't mind, I'll hang up now."

"If I have to come get you myself, you will come home." Gabriel wasn't about to let go so easily.

Adrian dropped the phone, and Skye grabbed it from him, talking in a low tone to his Father. Nikolai stared down at the heart in Adrian's hand, before the vampire took it from him.

"I never doubted you could take care of yourself, but tell me exactly what happened, and why I have--" he paused, nostrils flaring slightly as he took a breath before continuing. "Why I have Charles Remington's heart in my hand?"

"He attacked me in the garden." Adrian's tone remained casual as if they were having a normal, everyday conversation. "Seems he wanted to ghoul me, and he didn't think you would be bothered by it."

"Now, I wonder where he got that idea?"

Ash stared at Adrian, not bothering to hide his contempt as he stepped forward. Xander, Kyle, Skye and Indy stood behind Adrian, keeping Ash in their sight. Several of

Nikolai's enforcers stepped behind Ash with one look from Nikolai.

"I think I have a fair idea, don't you?"

"I believe I agree with your assessment." The casual tone turned to steel as Nikolai addressed his son. "Ash, what have you to say to this?"

"He serves a better purpose that way, Father. Either that, or dispose of him, then we need not be bothered with him."

"You don't seem to realize this is my business, not yours, child, and you have overstepped your bounds." As he spoke, Nikolai strode over to Ash, grabbing his son's face.

Ragged slashes marred Ash's face when he didn't even try to block the attack. His voice remained quiet, not once rising despite the blood that dripped down his face. "You can't do this to me, Father. He is nothing but a ghoul."

"You will be silent, my boy. Accept your fate quietly, or it will be the worse for you." Stepping back, Nikolai spoke to his enforcers. "Take him downstairs, and I will deal with him later."

As they hauled Ash away, Adrian stood to the side, ignoring his angered curses. Nikolai would deal with his kid however he thought best.

"I will be leaving tomorrow, Nikolai." It would be one night less than Nikolai bargained for, but Adrian didn't care. He'd had enough.

"I would argue; however, I understand." Nikolai didn't push at all. It vaguely surprised Adrian, as he had expected some show of force. "Will you at least allow me to talk with you later tonight?"

After nodding to his request, Adrian hightailed it out of the room. He needed to clean all the blood off and get his wrist attended to. The pain had already subsided, but it still needed to be taken care of. After Kyle checked it over to make sure it would heal right, he taped it to keep it immobile.

Adrian had settled comfy-cozy in his bed for the night, enjoying a great dream involving Xander, him, and a deserted beach. Something disturbed his sleep, awaking him from the pleasant dream. When Adrian opened his eyes, the sight of Nikolai sitting on the edge of his bed made him freeze.

"Nikolai, can't you just knock?"

"I didn't think you would answer, and I wanted one more chance on my own terms to convince you to stay with me."

"At least you are honest, but what makes you think I will allow it?"

"You are not exactly immune to me, Adrian." The silvering of Nikolai's eyes flared as they slowly roamed over him.

"That is a problem I have with a few people lately. It doesn't exactly make me eager for everything. Now get the hell out of here." Adrian started to edge away from Nikolai, moving cautiously to the other side of the bed. "No tasting the mortal, remember?" He quickly reminded Nikolai, catching where the vampire's gaze was headed.

"Not unless he agrees, and I wish you would." Nikolai made no effort to seduce him, which puzzled Adrian to say the least.

"Get out of here, Nikolai." Adrian grabbed at the sheet as he eyed Nikolai warily. Moving to the edge of the bed, Adrian stood, tugging the sheet and drawing it with him.

"I could easily force you into this, Adrian. You know that as well as I do. I gave you my word I wouldn't, but my word can be broken without much thought on my part."

Adrian stepped back, trying to reach the nightstand where his weapons were. He didn't quite like the bad sense he felt.

Tendrils of shiny blackness uncoiled from the shadows in the far corner. They danced eerily like snakes as they lengthened over the floor, moving toward them. Adrian had never seen anything like it, and he didn't want to see it now. One strand wrapped around his ankle as another slid up over the sheet like a shot and coiled around his wrist. "What the hell is this?"

Trying to jerk himself free of them only tightened their grip. The attempt caused Adrian to lose hold on the sheet.

"The shadows sense my frustration and are acting accordingly, Adrian." Nikolai didn't seem too terribly upset. "I haven't quite made up my mind yet on you."

In the blink of an eye, two more black threads confined Adrian's other wrist and ankle as another slithered slowly over him, creeping up his leg. When Adrian stumbled, trying to get away, he tumbled back, falling onto the bed. The free ends of each ribbon of black tangled to the posters of the bed, and Adrian started to panic. "Get them off me!"

"Unfortunately, I don't control them."

Adrian knew Nikolai lied. The cold chill crawling over his belly made Adrian frantically pull against the ones that held him.

"Do you even realize what I can do for you?" The soft voice took on a carnal darkness. The relentless grasp of the shadows tightened, keeping Adrian held down as Nikolai bent over him, trailing one finger downward on Adrian's thigh. "With a touch, I can show the true meaning of darkness, or give you mindless pain and unbelievable pleasure."

The room disappeared, and a haze of ebbing shades of black danced around Adrian. The expanse revealed a yawning chasm: hidden within, darkness beyond comprehension, painfully slow in revealing itself. Adrian could see it, yet in the seeing, couldn't grasp it all. Infinity opened before him in an endless ream of blackness.

He could see nothing but blinding night, the understanding of it opened deep in Adrian's mind. He knew it to be a living thing, but the thought was impossible. The overwhelming realization that it was real, and not a hallucination, hit him. Its very existence summoned Adrian to it as he felt the brush of things he couldn't see, crawling over him.

Sudden pain rushed through the emptiness, engulfing Adrian and driving out all sanity except the need to escape. His body writhed in torment, trying to free itself from the restraints as he screamed. He couldn't even hear the sound. Barely aware of anything, Adrian struggled for breath in the airless cavity of nothingness as it sought to claim him.

"Ride with it, learn from it." Disembodied words that had no form reached his mind. A dim perception of someone else briefly touched Adrian. *Nikolai?*

The sense faded as the darkness swallowed him whole into a bottomless void. Only the pulse of relentless, agonizing spasms wracked his body, leaving him torn and broken into hundreds of fragments. Adrian's entire awareness had been taken over by it until there was nothing else. It left him adrift with no place to ground himself, nothing to hold on to, and no way out.

Just as quickly as it had come, it left him. Disoriented at first, he lay unmoving on the bed. With no other way to deal with it, Adrian's fear became uncontrollable rage. He hardly noticed the loud banging on the doors to the room. Outside, Xander and Kyle were yelling, demanding to be let in.

"You respond so beautifully, Adrian. No wonder Gabriel prizes you so highly. Do you want to feel the rest? The pleasure will send you over the edge."

"Stop it now, Nikolai, or I swear you'll regret it." If Adrian had to break both of his wrists to get out of this, he would. The shadows around his limbs cut into his skin as he struggled with them, refusing to give up. He tried to reach Gabriel, hoping to access his power, but nothing happened.

A snap of Nikolai's fingers dissolved the bands confining Adrian. With some small shred of sanity, once freed, Adrian scrambled off the other side. He kept the bed between them instead of trying to attack Nikolai outright. Slipping his hand behind his back, Adrian

dipped down, managing to open the drawer. His hand searched for the first thing he could find.

Turning to Adrian with an angry flash in his eyes, Nikolai snarled.

Once he felt the cool metal of his staker, Adrian got it out, aiming it at Nikolai before firing it. Shadows moved nearby in reaction to Nikolai's agitation. In an instant, Nikolai disappeared as they swallowed him. The stake embedded in the wall behind where Nikolai had been. A second later, Adrian felt hands on his shoulders, turning him to face Nikolai.

Nikolai's lips covered his in a bruising kiss. An overwhelming welter of sensations, ones of pleasure, poured over Adrian nearly bringing him to his knees.

In desperation he brought his knee up, grinding hard into Nikolai's crotch and catching the vampire off guard.

Nikolai abruptly released Adrian, doubling over in pain. The shadows over the doors suddenly dispersed. The connecting door flew open, and Xander and Kyle stumbled into the room. The other door burst open and Indy ran in.

"We are leaving now," Adrian said in a tight voice as he hurried over to the nightstand, grabbing the rest of his weapons. Already armed with the staker, he activated the charm, placing it around his neck before Nikolai could recover. Kyle and Indy advanced threateningly on Nikolai from different directions as Xander moved to Adrian, putting an arm protectively around him. A moment later Skye came barreling in the room with a sword.

"Don't bother, you guys. Nikolai is leaving so that we can pack."

Straightening finally and faced with a staker, an irate were, vampire, and mummy, Nikolai said in a calm voice, "Of course, Adrian. The car will be available for your use, and I will call the airport to let them know you are coming."

He'd lost the game and had obviously decided to be temporarily gracious. Stepping up to Adrian, Nikolai had to stop when the barrier of the charm forced him to. Barely suppressing a snarl, he quickly recovered, remaining eerily still. "You are a very worthy prize. Gabriel is lucky."

Nobody said a word until Nikolai left, and then Adrian said, "We're going home."

The comforting safety of being in Xander's arms went a long way toward calming Adrian. Xander's quiet murmurs were muffled against Adrian's hair as he held him close, his body slightly rocking Adrian's.

The others disappeared into their rooms to start packing. It took Adrian a few moments to

get himself together enough to do the same. Without a word, they quickly packed and took their luggage down to the front entryway. The car waited in the drive as promised, and Nikolai watched motionless from a second story window as they put the suitcases in the trunk. Adrian never looked back as they drove away.

Xander tried to pry into what had happened as he sat next to Adrian on the plane. Adrian couldn't answer and kept changing the subject. After a few attempts, Xander stopped. Slipping his arm around Adrian, Xander drew Adrian's head to his shoulder and told Adrian to sleep. It was a long while before Adrian could relax enough to do just that.

Chapter 21

Adrian holed up in his apartment after they got back. Only Kyle and Sylvia kept him company. Both Sarah and Michael had taken off to Adrian's cabin for a few days, and the only reason Adrian stirred out of his home was to go to work. He'd made sure Charlie booked him solid for the week, no days off. Yes, he was being a coward and knew it; he just didn't want to face Gabriel yet. Xander gave Adrian some welcome space to sort things out.

Nightmares disturbed any peace Adrian should've gotten from sleep. His dreams were of darkness, engulfing and suffocating him until he woke up in a sweat, terrified. How could he combat shadows and touches that could leave him insensible in the blink of an eye? There were no answers in Yar's notes; not many vampiric powers were listed, and nothing about shadows or touches of hellish torture.

Up until Nikolai had nailed him, Adrian had felt confident of the measures he'd taken to protect himself. Nikolai had caught him seriously off guard. He hated that, and it scared him. How much of that power did Gabriel have? There were too many questions with no answers. Adrian had been trapped in a world of darkness with no way safely through it. Since he still had a bottle of Gabriel's blood left, he didn't have to face Gabriel right away. And the way Adrian planned it, he wouldn't have to bother with the vampire at all.

Gray called about the background check he had done on Roman Kelly. Nothing showed up in the records, but a call to the local authorities up north had filled him in on some their suspicions. Forty-two missing persons, with no bodies found over the last five years, fueled those suspicions. Unfortunately, there was no proof to link Roman to any of it.

Joining Dakota on one of his mentor's appointments, Adrian debated how to rope some help out of Dakota on his own problem. Dakota silently set up his equipment, ignoring the glances his way. Finally, he straightened and faced Adrian. "All right, you wanna tell me what's going on?"

"Going on?"

"You wanted to tag along on one of my jobs and all you do is stand there staring at me. So what the hell is going on?"

Leaning against the wall, Adrian slid down to sit on the floor. "Just wanted some help. I did two jobs this week and the ghosts went solid on me."

"You ever figure out why you can do that? "

Leveling a measuring look at Dakota, Adrian knew he didn't have much of a choice but to tell him the truth. "Gabriel ghoulded me. That's the only thing I can figure."

"Ghoulded you, huh?"

At least Dakota didn't appear disgusted, and Adrian relaxed slightly. "Yeah. I think that's why the solid thing is happening."

"That would make sense. Vamps are dead, solid bodies that walk around. Having their blood in you could transfer the ability to wraiths. That would be the only thing I can think of, 'cause I've never heard of anything like it before."

"I practiced on a few, and they don't seem to mind it, though none of them wanted it for long. I'm not sure how long a ghost could sustain it. Most of them weren't interested in it at all."

"You're in deep, kid. I don't know in the long run how it will affect you. And if word ever got out, people would be banging at your door, wanting their family members made solid. It's damn close to necromancy. And I don't even want to know what that group would have to say about it."

"You know I'm not interested in necromancy." Adrian grimaced at the idea. "I thought for sure you'd come up with at least twenty ideas of how to make money off it."

His cheeky comment made Dakota laugh. "Yeah, yeah. But not on this one. Too much at risk for you if it became public knowledge."

"Well, only you, me and Gabriel know about it. So I'm not worried about that." Adrian deliberately didn't mention Masterson, figuring Dakota would probably get the hint.

Other than a shrewd look, Dakota didn't react at all. Instead, he grabbed Adrian's arm, dragging him up. "Come on. You're supposed to be helping me with this job."

Before he left for work, Adrian called the club to leave a message for Gabriel to send him another bottle of blood. To Adrian, it would be the easiest way to do things. Gabriel could send him bottles of blood, and Adrian wouldn't have to deal with anything else.

After two o'clock the next afternoon, Adrian made it back home. Pressing the button on his machine, he headed to the kitchen, getting some juice as he listened to the messages. He almost choked hearing Gabriel's. There would be no bottles sent to Adrian. If Adrian wanted to be fed, he would have to come to the club. The sun had already come up, and

he knew Gabriel would probably be asleep, but Adrian called anyway. In no uncertain terms he told Sam, the daytime manager, to tell Gabriel to send a bottle, or he would find somebody else to feed him. There were plenty of vamps around the city that would be willing to oblige Adrian, even if he had to make them at the end of his stake.

Adrian already felt edgy from being a day late for his feeding time. The thought made him feel like an animal at the zoo. Sharp images of trails of blood that became waterfalls haunted his dreams; he was starting to get hungry.

Adrian wasn't at all surprised when Marcus showed up at the door later in the evening. Letting him in, Adrian looked pointedly at his hand. "Where's the bottle?"

"Gabriel said you have to come down to the club, Adrian."

Adrian opened the door further, leaning against the edge. "Too bad. Not what I want to hear."

The open door was meant as a clear invitation for Marcus to leave.

"It won't do you any good asking anybody else, either. Gabriel already sent word out; he'll kill anyone who feeds you."

Adrian's hand tightened on the doorknob. "Son of a bitch."

"He sent me here to take you to the club. If I don't bring you back with me, I'm the one that gets nailed. It's up to you, I'll be out in the car waiting." Marcus shrugged nonchalantly, but Adrian knew better than to buy his act.

That did it for him; no way would Adrian let Marcus get hurt because of his own cowardice. With a sigh, Adrian gave in. "Tell him I'll be there later tonight, around midnight. There's no need for the escort, Marcus."

Sylvia appeared in the doorway. "Hey, Adrian, I got the list from Charlie for tonight. You about ready?"

Her smile faltered the slightest bit, and she showed a twinge of fear as she saw Marcus. "Hi, Marcus." She had gotten over her initial reaction of expecting to be jumped by a given vampire at any given time. But she still had a wary respect for vampires.

"I'm just getting ready, Sylvia. Come on in."

Sylvia slipped past him, never taking her eyes off the vampire. After politely greeting her, Marcus nodded to Adrian before he left, closing the door behind him.

"What's going on now, Adrian?"

"Long story and one I won't go into. Get yourself something to drink while I change." Adrian disappeared into the bedroom to undress. He called out to her as he slipped his robe on over his head. "You feel like handling some alone tonight?"

"Sure, I can do it."

"Good, because I'll need to leave around 11:30." After making sure all his weapons were firmly in place, Adrian headed back to the living room.

Sylvia had a Pepsi and was checking over the list of their appointments. "We can do the first four together, and I can take the rest. There are only six after that. I've got the pattern down pretty well."

"Yeah, you do, so I won't worry about you being on your own. You can reach me on my cell phone if you need to. Remember, if in doubt, just stop the ritual. No messing around until you finish your defense class."

"Yes, Mr. Boss, I hear you loud and clear." Sylvia grinned at him as they headed for the door.

By 11:15, they had finished the fourth appointment and parted company. Adrian felt confident she'd have no trouble going it alone. Otherwise, he would've called Gabriel and told him he'd be late. After reminding Sylvia again not to risk any trouble, Adrian drove off to the club. If things went well, he'd have Charlie schedule her for his slots tomorrow night, and Charlie could set up other appointments to keep Adrian busy. Business had been booming enough to keep them all working overtime.

Marcus appeared relieved to see him when Adrian showed up shortly before midnight. To avoid being late, he hadn't bothered changing out of his robe. Gabriel was already waiting for Adrian at his table. Sliding into the booth, he noted the hard set of Gabriel's face. The charm around Adrian's neck had already been activated, so Gabriel wouldn't be able to get near him now. As Adrian had already done his fuming over Gabriel's high handedness in blackmailing him there, Adrian was able to calmly hold Gabriel's gaze.

"I would like to know what happened, Adrian. Skye has been behaving oddly, and you refuse to see me. What is going on?"

Adrian had already learned the quieter Gabriel seemed to be, the more pissed off or upset he was under that quiet. Either that or Gabriel was hiding something.

"What are you talking about?" Adrian pretended to have no idea as he rested his hands neatly folded on the table.

"None of the others could tell me anything other than when they finally managed to break

into your room, Nikolai was hunched over, and you were in a panic. And when you return, you refuse to see me even to be fed. Now tell me what happened."

"Nothing I'm not better off knowing, Gabriel. I came here to be fed and that's it. You'd make things easier if you just sent me a bottle now and then." He managed to shield his nervousness and fear fairly well, but he knew Gabriel could sense it nonetheless.

Frowning, Gabriel continued studying him even more closely. His tone gentled as he raised his hand to reach out to Adrian. "Something is horribly wrong, Adrian. This is not like you."

The same instant Adrian flinched away from him, the charm's barrier kicked in, fed by Adrian's sudden rise of fear. A surprised snarl sounded from Gabriel as he yanked his hand away as if burnt.

"Don't touch me, Gabriel, don't ever touch me."

"You have never been this afraid of me. What did Nikolai do to you?"

Adrian felt the projection of a soothing calm in Gabriel's voice. Abruptly, he shook his head to clear it. "It doesn't matter. Now, are you going to feed me or not?"

Adrian avoided that gaze, staring down at the glass of white wine Wolf set in front of him. Wolf backed away without saying a word, returning to the bar.

"I will feed you in a moment, but how can I help you if you won't talk to me, Adrian?"

"Help me? Why in the hell would you do that?"

"Something badly frightened you. You are my ghoul and entitled to my protection, but how can I protect you if I have no idea of what scared you?" Gabriel tried to reach him with both words and voice, which maintained a soft, soothing cadence that was hard for Adrian to ignore. The sound brushed over his senses in warm ripples, enveloping Adrian in a cocoon that enticed him to let go and not be afraid.

"I can handle it, Gabriel."

"Obviously you can't, or you wouldn't be hiding in your home refusing to come to me unless I make you." Reasonable words, and Gabriel was right, so Adrian couldn't argue with him.

"And if I need protection from you? You're the one with the power, not me." He hadn't wanted to say that and reveal the central theme of what Adrian feared, but it came out anyway.

"Have you yet needed serious protection from me? You have refused me everything at

every turn, Adrian. After I ghouléed you, I resorted to no trickery or force with you. The only thing I have done is make you come to see me tonight."

Adrian's fingers clenched tightly enough around the stem of his glass, making his knuckles white.

"Talk to me, Adrian, please. I don't like to see you like this. Whatever Nikolai did, it seriously affects your behavior with me." Gabriel's hand moved toward him, clearly wanting to touch Adrian, but stopped short before connecting with the barrier Adrian had around him.

"If I tell you, will you leave me alone?" Gabriel wouldn't leave him alone until he talked, so bargaining to make sure Gabriel did back off seemed like a good idea to Adrian.

"I believe I can help, if you would listen to me and let me. But if that is what you want, then I will consider it."

Biting his lower lip, Adrian tried to find words before suddenly just blurting out, "He used shadows, this... this void--" He started stuttering, not wanting to remember any of it, but the memories were right there. He couldn't look at Gabriel.

Adrian saw everything again as his own words gave voice to his nightmares. He wasn't aware of Gabriel anymore as the words poured from him, leaving nothing out. Faltering several times when it became too hard to continue, Adrian forced himself to go on. The images, branded in his thoughts, continually rose in stark relief. At the end, he took a drink of the wine, nervously falling silent and making the effort to push everything back down. It didn't feel good getting it all out.

A muscle twitched near the corner of Gabriel's lips, and the stem of the glass in his hand snapped in two, revealing how close to the surface Gabriel's rage had become.

"I can tell you how to protect yourself, Adrian. That is what you need." When Gabriel spoke, the quiet tone was filled with a compassion that almost overwhelmed Adrian. He hadn't expected it from Gabriel, or the look of understanding softening Gabriel's expression. The voice Gabriel used drew Adrian into him, the surrounding essence of it spilled over Adrian like the soft caress of a warm breeze. He could feel Gabriel struggling with his own anger. There were parts blocked off to Adrian, he could sense that, something locked behind doors Gabriel wouldn't allow open.

The sensation of being inside Gabriel's mind for the first time didn't disturb Adrian. Maybe it should have; it was another vampiric power he couldn't control. Nothing there frightened him though, not even Gabriel's rage. He wanted to hurt Nikolai, not Adrian. For the oddest moment, everything wrapping around him became a safe haven. But Adrian couldn't avoid the inescapable fear that had kept him away from Gabriel. It returned and voiced itself in the question Adrian asked abruptly. "Can you do the same things Nikolai did, Gabriel?"

He had to ask, this time refusing to look away from Gabriel. Adrian remained more intent on Gabriel's answer than on what he'd just said.

"Yes, I can, to a degree. But first, I would not do them to you." Gabriel instantly understood the fear and addressed it. "And second, you also have the ability, in a smaller way, to do them."

Gabriel's answer startled him completely. He understood the words, but his comprehension of them came up short. "What do you mean, I can do them?"

"Shadows thick enough to hold onto something can be cut with a knife. They are also flammable, and, once set on fire, will burn the one using them. Although, as a ghou, you will never be able to shape solid shadows, you can learn to use them to hide yourself."

"How am I supposed to learn that?" For once, the edge of fear that had been a constant presence in Adrian faded slightly. It was like being given hope when you believed there wasn't any.

"It is my responsibility to teach these things to you, Adrian. I have neglected that aspect, but I didn't want to force you into it. Having my blood inside you does grant you certain abilities; you need to learn and practice them."

He watched Gabriel warily, knowing his options were once again limited. Either he accepted Gabriel's help, or stayed holed up in his apartment, not knowing how to fight against what had frightened him. Gabriel gazed neutrally back at Adrian, waiting for him to answer.

For a very long time Adrian just stared at him, weighing everything Gabriel had said. "All right, Gabriel."

It was either do or die. And the world had become a lot more dangerous place than Adrian had thought it was. Normal crazies he could handle; vampiric powers were not something Adrian knew how to combat.

"Then we will begin. The movement of shadows is one of the more basic ones I possess, so, by extension, you do, too. It takes concentration and effort to control them to shield yourself." A small patch of darkness shifted from the top corner of the booth, before moving over Gabriel's shoulder toward his hand.

It took everything Adrian had to remain in his seat instead of screaming and running away, and it must have shown on his face.

"Adrian, there is nothing to fear, it will not harm you. You need to remove the charm so I can help you work with this."

Reluctantly, Adrian nodded as he muttered the word to deactivate the ward.

"Good, now hold out your hand."

Sighing, he lifted his hand, holding it out to Gabriel. Adrian knew he had to do this, and tried to push past everything that told him he would be better off at home.

The tiny, snakelike tendril slithered between Gabriel's fingers as he spoke. "Focus and concentrate on calling the shadow to you, Adrian. There is a rudimentary intelligence to it that will understand what you want. The power of my blood inside you creates your ability to work with it. Use that as well."

Adrian tried to focus his thoughts on the shadowy form. Frowning in deep concentration, he willed it to come to him. His hand remained steady, which surprised him. The shadow snake looked like it raised its head, stilling its dance between Gabriel's fingers.

"Once it has come to you, use your power to expand its shape to cover your hand. See it in your mind, and the ability in you will trigger the reaction."

Nodding, Adrian kept his mind on the slender shadow as it leaped from Gabriel's hand to the table. Lowering his hand to the table, he laid it palm up to let the snake, for lack of better words, slip onto his hand. Fear crept along his nerves, but the movement felt more like something seeking to know him than to tie him up. The simple visualization of the action in his thoughts made it expand and quickly engulf his hand.

"I should have realized your guide abilities would make things easier for you, Adrian." He lost some of his fear as the darkness clung to his hand. Adrian could feel a warmth tingling over his skin. "It's not as bad as I thought."

"Nikolai showed you the source of this darkness, but you weren't prepared for it. To those of us who have the ability to use them, there is nothing to fear in Barathrum. You can use its power to protect yourself from being seen. It will hide you from the world, letting you watch everything around you unobserved. Only those who have mastered the ability will be able to see you. It can be its own source of safety and comfort if you relax enough to let it be."

A small gesture from him had the shadow unwrapping from Adrian's hand and moving back to him. It started to gain a larger shape, forming into a ball as it settled on the table near Gabriel's hand.

"Have you been there, Gabriel? I've never been so scared of anything in my entire life."

"My abilities are higher than yours, Adrian. I travel there quite often. It is a way for me to move far more quickly than I normally do. Slipping through Barathrum is a very handy form of transportation." Just a pulse of anger echoed in Gabriel's words as he added, "You were scared because you didn't understand it; you should never have been taken

there until you did."

"You go there willingly?" Adrian felt astonished by that, and by the fact that the small blob near Gabriel's hand had begun to undulate. It expanded again, growing arms, legs and a body. A head slowly defined itself as wings sprouted from its back. The whimsical form of a small dragon, about the size of a full-grown cat, sat on the table.

"I am used to it; you are not." Smiling slowly at Adrian, Gabriel gestured to the dragon. "A companion for you. To help you get used to everything."

The sight of it made Adrian laugh. "A dragon?"

"Would you prefer something more ordinary?"

"No, a dragon is fine, Gabriel."

The tiny wings fluttered, and it leapt toward Adrian, landing on his shoulder. As it opened its mouth, its long tongue uncurled, flicking over Adrian's cheek. The dragon had solid form, and it startled him somewhat as he felt the weight of it settling on him.

"I am giving it substance, but it still will not harm you. As long as we feed it, it will remain with you if you want. It can help you practice as you need to."

It seemed rather bizarre to have a dragon perched on him, but interesting as well, now that Adrian understood the ability better than he had before.

"Adrian," Gabriel's voice became very quiet, signaling what he had to say was very important to him. "What happened at Nikolai's made you extremely fearful; it broke the trust you were beginning to have in me. But Nikolai broke it, not me. Whatever happens, always come to me first. Please, never shut me out as you did this time."

"I will try, Gabriel." That's all Adrian could promise.

Nodding, barely hiding the disappointment in his expression, Gabriel accepted what Adrian could give.

Gabriel released his hand. With a practiced flick, a sharpened nail slit into his wrist, spilling blood into the empty glass.

A soft breath caught the strong scent as Adrian stared at the crimson drops, wanting the taste of Gabriel's blood. He realized he didn't want it from the glass, but from Gabriel. With no thought, Adrian's hand moved toward Gabriel's, but then he yanked it back, trying to deal with the urgent need. Placing his hand back on the seat between them, Adrian's nails dug into the leather to keep his fingers there. Hunger crawled through him, a gnawing pain at his insides as Adrian looked away from the glass to Gabriel.

Gabriel said nothing as he pulled his arm back, quickly healing the slash. Adrian forced his hand to move, grabbing the glass tightly and lifted it to his lips, draining it. A tiny sound of protest betrayed him as he swallowed the flat taste. The sharper need of Adrian's body for Gabriel's blood slowly burned down, pacified, but the rest still clamored, wanting more than this. Sighing, Adrian set the glass down back on the table. How much longer could he fight against this? Hell had begun to freeze over, and him without a nuclear bomb to melt it.

He started to look back with great nostalgia on the days he had been just a guide. *Now I'm a guide, ghoul, host and pack leader. Is there anything else left out there? Please tell me there isn't.*