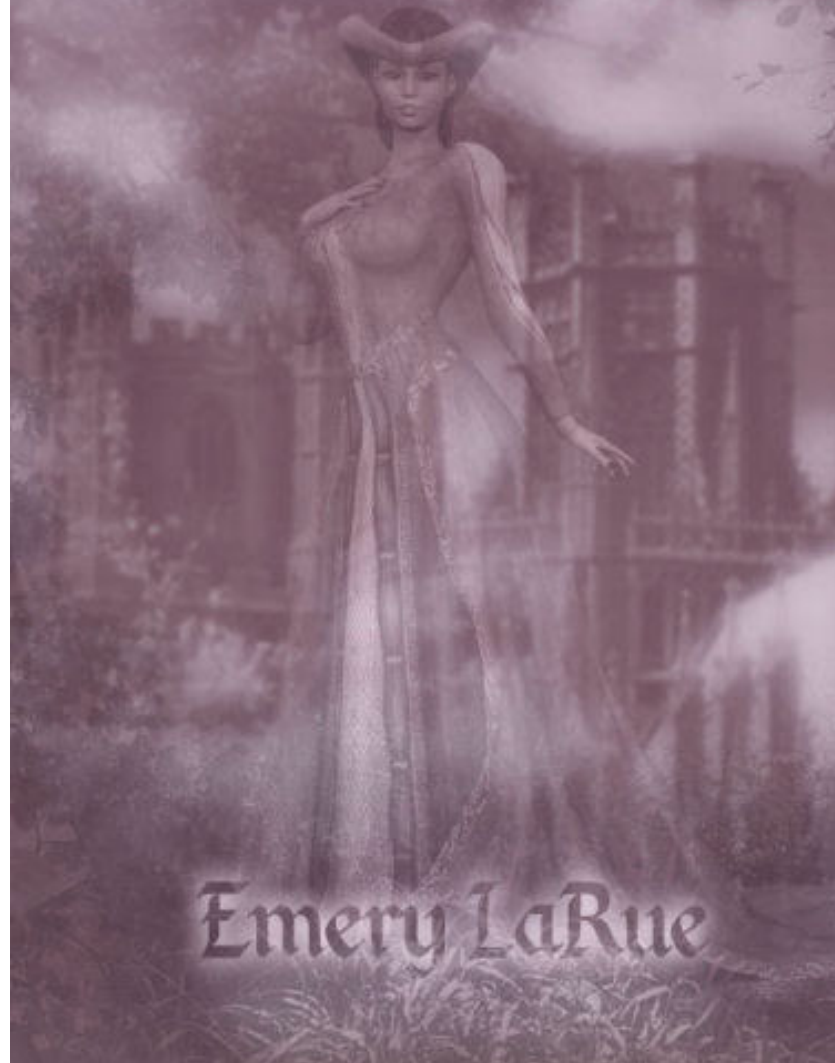


*Forbidden Publications
Presents*

Relative Dreams



Emery LaRue

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Relative Dreams

By

Emery LaRue

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Prologue

Castle Csejthe
Hungary, 1610

“Madame, your cousin comes with many men.”

The woman at the window spared only a brief glance for the maid. She knew why her cousin was sent, but it made no sense to her. She was a noble, from a very powerful family. Elizabeth Bathory feared not her cousin, nor the emperor himself.

“When will he arrive?”

“The messenger says within the hour, Madame.” Mary answered quickly.

Having served in the house of Bathory since the young age of twelve, Mary knew the Countess needed little reason for the rage to come upon her. Now that her news had been delivered, Mary prayed she would be dismissed. This woman was feared by all maids in the castle.

“Why do you tell me this?” The Countess turned to face her maid. Mary cringed at the rage slowly building in the eyes of the woman. The eyes narrowed. “I would think you would like to see me accused. You wish me dead, do you not?”

In her mind Mary screamed a resounding “yes!” The atrocities that she had witnessed would haunt her for the rest of her life. However, to admit such would mean the end of her life here and now.

“No, Madame. I would not see you dead.”

Elizabeth walked slowly across the room. Her every manner spoke of her breeding and the lady she was born to be. Mary tried not to flinch as the Countess reached out and stroked her cheek.

“Why do you cringe, young Mary? Is my touch vile to you?”

“No, Madame.” The tremble in her voice betrayed her, she knew.

Elizabeth walked slowly around Mary. Inspecting her as one would horse flesh before purchase.

“Tell me your age, young Mary.”

Mary could feel the breath of the Lady on her nape, and a ball of fear settled in her stomach. Every part of her was screaming to run, but her feet would not, or could not move. Mary knew she was in very real danger.

“Fifteen, Madame.”

“You are so young, so innocent and pure.” The countess ran her fingers through the back of Mary’s hair, her nails raking the scalp. Mary’s shiver did not go unnoticed. “You do well to fear me.”

There was no time to react as the Countess wound her fist into Mary’s long brown curls. Fire raced through her scalp and she gasped, though she was more terrified than in pain. She was going to die as all her friends and loved ones had before her. Though Mary struggled, the immense strength in the hand dragging her into the hall was no match for the smaller woman. Mary felt it ironic. The only thought she had was that the Countess would not soil her chamber floor with the blood that was surely to flow.

Mary fought for air as the Countess tossed her to the floor and straddled her torso. With hands and arms pinned beneath her, she knew she was powerless to defend herself. Wide open to attack, Mary’s fear grew as the Countess drew a dagger from her skirts, a crazed smile on her face.

Mary looked into the eyes of a woman gone mad. It was not a face filled with triumph, or even that of hate. The look upon Countess Bathory’s face was one of pure lust. Bloodlust.

Mary screamed in pain as the dagger sliced through her arms, then her face. Over and over the blade fell causing deep, painful wounds meant to bleed you before you died.

Throwing the blade aside, Elizabeth tenderly caressed Mary's bloody face as if she were a lover.

"I can smell the purity inside of you." Her nostrils quivered as she leaned forward, drawing the scent of the warm fluid into herself. "You will serve your Countess well yet again."

Wounded, frightened, and weak from blood loss, Mary could only watch as Elizabeth dipped her hands into the wounds then bathed herself in the life-giving sustenance. Once she had covered every exposed piece of flesh, she rose as if the blood were a soothing balm. Elizabeth calmed.

Hearing the pounding of feet, Mary closed her eyes. She dare not move. If she was to lie in the hall and die, she hoped to do so in peace.

"My Lady." Istvan, the Countess's manservant came to a halt beside her. "They are here, my Lady. We must flee." He reached out and took Elizabeth's arm.

"Unhand me, Istvan," she shouted. "Where do you think you are taking me?"

"Please, my Lady," he panted. "Count Thurzo is just outside the castle walls."

Elizabeth stomped her foot, resembling a small, spoiled child being refused a sweet.

"Why should I flee? I have done nothing wrong." Looking down at Mary, she sneered. "These are only peasants, my peasants. They serve me as I see fit."

For the first time, Istvan glared at his Lady. He had served her faithfully for years, never questioning her in her actions. He had always known better than to do so. He did so now.

"We have done everything wrong. They were not all peasants." He spat at her feet. "Those of us who have served you are bound to die beside you. You care not for that?"

"They would not dare try it." Elizabeth stood proudly. With blood drying on her face and hands, she stared down her nose at Istvan. "I have the blood of kings flowing through my veins."

"Not even your blood will save you this time, *Countess*." He sneered as he turned and stormed away.

The sound of horses could be heard, echoing throughout the hall. Elizabeth patted her hair and straightened her skirts before sauntering down the hall, as if she were greeting wanted guests.

Mary tried to move, but her blood loss was great. Her body had gone numb. She closed her eyes in a silent prayer.

In that same prayer, she asked to be spared any more pain. If or when she was found, she hoped for a quick death.

So she laid waiting and dying.

In the great hall below, Elizabeth stood as regal as a queen.

"Why are you here, Thurzo?"

The Count and land governor looked upon his cousin and cringed. Blood coated her body, and his hopes that the rumors of his cousin were false, dwindled.

"What has happened to you, Elizabeth? Are you injured?" In his voice was real concern.

"I am well," she snapped. "I ask but once more. Why are you here?"

Assured she was not hurt, Thurzo looked about the hall. Between the cowering servants, the blood covering their lady and her faithful companions looking ready to battle, he knew all was not well. Motioning to two of his guards, he instructed them to watch Elizabeth and her servants.

"Detain them," he commanded as he started further into the keep.

"Unhand me" Elizabeth shouted. "I will have your heads for this"

Thurzo paused, one foot on the stairway leading to the upper hall. Disgust was evident in his every feature.

"By orders of the Emperor, I am commanded to search Castle Csejthe and all its holdings. As governor of these lands it is my duty and right to do such."

"You have no right to do this. I have broken no laws."

"Elizabeth, the charges are many. The largest among them is the disappearance of several noble daughters sent here to learn their skills." He watched her for a reaction.

"Who would claim such against me?"

"The people's word, from this village and the next, has reached the Emperor's ears. Nobles have come to him demanding to know just what has happened to their daughters." He slashed a hand through the air. "Enough of this!"

Looking to his guards, he gave his order. "Not one soul is to leave this hall. They are to be detained until I have finished here."

Elizabeth shrieked in outrage. Taking only a few men, Thurzo continued up the stairs.

It was there, at the gasp of the soldier beside him that they discovered Mary. Rushing forward, Thurzo knelt beside her. He was surprised when her eyes fluttered open for she was pale as death.

"By my eyes, you live," he whispered.

The blood pooling around her and beneath her was great. If she lived another hour, it would be a miracle.

"My Lord, please take this." Viktor, his strongest soldier, handed him a cloth bearing the Emperor's seal. "It may staunch the flow."

Looking into the soldier eyes, The Count saw compassion. Thurzo was slightly unsettled at this. His men never showed a weakness and sympathy was just that. As a soldier for the Emperor one had to be strong, both in mind and heart. But as he himself looked down upon the young maid, her wounds so deep the blood flowed freely, even he could not help but feel pity. Placing the cloth on the deeper wounds, he leaned forward to catch her words.

"If you are to kill me, My Lord," she gasped through bloodless lips. "I beg you, please, do so quickly."

That she could even speak amazed and astonished him. Just what had happened here? Reaching down, he brushed the matted hair from her face. She was so young with

such a promise of beauty. He kept his voice gentle, hoping to sooth her fears, for he could do nothing for her pain.

"If death comes for you today, Little One, it will not be by my hand." He hoped his words gave her some comfort. "Save your strength for you must live." He turned to Viktor. "Take her below. Do not leave her. Let no one near her. Talk to her and try to keep her alive."

Without a word the soldier lifted Mary in his arms as if she were but a babe. Holding her close to his heart, he carried her down the stairs. Thurzo knew that Viktor would die to protect her.

Continuing their search, they found little else on the upper level. However, a diary found in the Countess's chamber was not only shocking, but led them to the lowest floors of the castle. The deeper they went, the more they discovered.

Women locked in cells were released. So many women fled, Thurzo had the image of scurrying rats. They had even found one noble daughter, though she looked half mad. Her eyes had been wild, crazed. The fight for that young lady was far from over.

On the deepest floor, they discovered things so terrifying that even the strongest of his men shivered. Thurzo himself was sure he would be haunted for years.

Cages lined with knives rested over large tubs, attached to pulleys to lift them in the air. Their recent use was evident. Blood, old and new, was proof of that fact. What wasn't still drying on the blades had already turned a rust color.

Against the wall was a throne the Emperor himself would have envied. A vision of Elizabeth sitting on that throne watching the death of these young girls, passed through his mind.

The sound of a curse drew his eyes across the room to one of his men. The man was pale and visibly shaken.

"What is it?" he asked as he approached his soldier.

They were standing beside what looked to be a box in the shape of a bejeweled woman.

"I have heard of this contraption before, My Lord. It is the Iron Maiden."

The Count had heard of this device as well. The feeling it induced in him was vile.

"My Lord, there seems to be something inside."

Careful not to touch anything, Thurzo peered inside and gasped. A pair of dark, pain filled eyes stared back.

"My God, there is someone in there." Thurzo turned to another of his men. "Go now and bring back anyone who knows of this death trap, and do so quickly."

As the man ran from the room, Thurzo thought he had glimpsed a look of relief on the young soldier's face. Thurzo could not blame him. In all his years of fighting and dealing out punishments, he could not compare anything he had ever seen to this. As they waited, he inspected the box.

"My Lord?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"I do not know how, but I believe she is still alive."

Thurzo looked again into the eyes inside. There was indeed life left in them. Again he inspected the box in hopes of finding away to open it. Looking to the feet of the maiden, he paled as he noticed the blood pooling. He was fighting inside himself, trying to grasp that another could be so cruel, much less a member of his own family. That, in itself, made this harder to bear. He spun away at the sound of his man returning.

Recognizing the woman with the soldier as the old nurse, Iloona Joo, Thurzo prayed she was not guilty of the crimes he knew had been carried out here.

"Can you open this device?" Thurzo asked, keeping his voice calm, though he felt anything but.

"Yes."

"Then do so, woman"

"What, My Lord, would be the point?" Iloona Joo replied in a cold, even tone.

Thurzo knew then that this woman had played a part in the acts committed here. He could no longer hide his contempt, or his disgust.

"Your cooperation will decide how quickly you will pay for your crimes *old woman*." He sneered into her face. "Now open that box, or die here and now, by my hand. I assure you, it can and will be slow and painful."

Though she paled slightly, she walked calmly to the Maiden. Iloona touched a stone on the neck, and with a bone-chilling grind, it opened the arms holding the girl inside, like that of some lover's embrace, opened wide as well.

Thurzo watched in horror as the young girl slid naked from the knives impaling her body. His man rushed forward, catching her and gently lowering her to the floor.

Kneeling beside her, Thurzo could read the pain in her eyes. She had to be suffering greatly. He knew she was dying slowly. He could not save her, but he could ease her pain.

Drawing his dagger, the Count brushed the hair from her face. As he placed the blade to her throat, she smiled a small smile, as if granting him her permission. Saying a prayer for her soul, he drew the dagger across her throat. The girl never flinched. Her eyes closed and she was at peace.

Standing, he wiped his dagger on his cloak. All could feel the anger radiating from his body.

"Never, in all my years as a governor, a soldier, or even a commander have I witnessed such suffering of a life so needlessly. There is much to be done." He replaced his dagger. "Bring her." He said to the man holding the old nurse.

Walking quickly back to the main hall, Thurzo spared only a glimpse for Elizabeth. He first went to Viktor. The man was guarding the girl well.

"How does she fare?"

"Her name is Mary, My lord. I believe she will survive." He smiled. "She may be as small as a child, but she is as strong as any soldier."

"That is good news, Viktor." The Count rubbed his eyes, weary of the day's events. "Has she spoken of what has happened here?"

Viktor began to tell a tale that had Thurzo feeling ill. The blood started pounding in his ears as his mind tried to reject what he was hearing. Blood baths and torture for

sport? It all sounded too horrifying. Thurzo was feeling quite shaken by the time Viktor finished speaking. With a sigh the Count turned to the people in the hall.

Many of the young women standing in the hall had been released only moments before. They were clinging to the older servants. Some looked half starved, and some looked half dead. He could only imagine at the festering wounds marking their bodies.

"Go home to your loved ones," he told the huddled group. "Tend to the wounded, and bury your dead."

"You cannot do this, Thurzo!" Elizabeth shouted. "These are my people."

The look he sent her would cause most to tremble in fear, but the Countess Bathory stood proudly. Thurzo wondered if she even realized the blood on her body was now dried and cracking. She looked very much like a demon.

"You, Elizabeth, are ordered to remain inside these walls. My men will make certain that you do. However, your faithful servants will be coming with me. The Emperor will be wanting to deal with them himself."

"I have done nothing to deserve this."

Thurzo turned his back to her ravings and looked to his men.

"Take her to the tower room. Seal the windows. The Countess is allowed food and water, nothing more. I will return quickly with the Emperor's orders." He departed, taking with him the old nurse, the manservant, the Major Domo, and two proclaimed witches. Mary was also taken from the castle. Her testimony would be needed. The young noble woman accompanied them as well, though he feared for her sanity.

Locked in her room, Elizabeth paced restlessly. She needed her people. "Who do they think they are?" she ranted. "I am a noble. They have no right."

For days she paced and ranted.

When the day arrived with the return of Thurzo, Elizabeth beamed. She was anxious to see her people again. Her smile quickly faded when Thurzo appeared alone.

"What have you done with them?"

Thurzo walked deeper into the room. His news would not be good.

"They are gone, Elizabeth. The Emperor saw to their punishments himself." He looked at her pale face. "Would you like to know their fate, before you learn of your own?"

Her glare was fierce, but she stood proud and steady.

"Your witches met a proper end." Though he was glad the madness was over, he did not relish the telling. "Their fingers were torn from their hands, and they were burned at the stake."

"No." For the first time, Elizabeth started to crumble.

"Iloona proved more difficult. In the end she confessed."

"Was she spared?"

"She met a quick end. For her testimony of the events that took place here, she was beheaded, her body cremated."

"No!" she shouted, pulling at her hair.

"Istvan and your Major Domo met the same fate," he continued. "Even though your Domo had little to do with the acts, he was involved. I am sure it means little to you, but Mary, your maid, lives and is being tended in the palace. The young noble girl took her own life. That act alone spoke for itself."

The scream that came from Elizabeth may have put sympathy in any other. Not Thurzo, as he remembered the tales of terror told to him. It was still very unbelievable to him. It always would be.

"It's over, Elizabeth. Your own words in your own diary sealed your fate."

"You dare use my given name? I am the Countess Bathory, and you will address me as such."

"You gave up that right when you turned into the vile creature you are. You are a Lady by name only, though it has been stripped from you."

Suddenly she calmed, as if being reminded of her birth was all it took to change her.

"Well, what is my fate to be then?"

The Count struggled within himself. He firmly believed that the punishment the Emperor dealt her was fair. However, it still did not change the fact that she was family. Then again, if he allowed himself to remember all the horror he had heard in the past few days, dealing her punishment would not be so hard after all.

"Elizabeth Bathory, Countess and Lady of Castle Csejthe, you are condemned to die in the very place you caused so much anguish."

Elizabeth stiffened and her fists balled at her sides. She looked alone and scared. Thurzo felt that it was only fitting that she felt the same numb terror her victims did. There had been so many.

"You will be walled into your tower with only food and water to sustain you, and with minimal light and no contact to the outside world."

She attempted to run from the room, only to be blocked by soldiers.

"You will remain in this room for the rest of your natural life. You will grow old and you will die. Though others demanded your death, the Emperor has spared you a public execution. This is what your nobility had bought you. Though, I believe, a slow death would have been more fitting."

The scream that came from the Countess was chilling. Anger radiated from her body, her eyes poured evil as she glared at Thurzo.

"Until that day, when the breath and the life leave my body, I will curse you with every fiber of my being," she panted. "I have not lived all these years and learned nothing. The future generations to come will not be safe from my wrath."

He wanted to feel such pity for this once beautiful lady. However, once the shell of her perfection had been cracked, the ugliness had seeped through. It was vile, and one could almost smell its evil stench.

"Then curse me, Elizabeth. Your murdering days are over." Thurzo shook his head. "All you have accomplished is your own end. The blood spilled here had better have been enough to sustain you. Because I, and all who know the truth, see you as you truly are. You are an ugly, bitter woman with the soul that belongs to the devil himself. I wonder if now you feel any remorse?"

Thurzo turned and left the room. He turned his back on her screams as the soldier detained her. The masons would make quick work of her new prison. In the back of his mind, he hoped her threats were empty. He would pray for his family's future if they were not.

For many years, Elizabeth's hate sustained her. The servant that passed her food and water reported to the governor that she was rambling, cursing, and talking to herself most of the time. Though the servant would never address her, she would watch her through the small door made only for the passing of food and water.

One morning, the servant heard her whispering to herself and scratching on the wall. By the next morning, when the food was left untouched, the servant opened the hatch to look inside. There on the floor, face down, was the Countess Bathory. Needing to be certain before reporting it to the governor, the servant called a guard and pried open the door so long ago sealed. She was in fact, dead.

What caught the attention of both the servant and the soldier was the writing on the wall. It looked to be written in blood, and the servant was sure it was a spell. The Countess had studied in the black arts. She was not certain what it was, however, so she crossed herself and said a prayer for the lady, then left to report to the governor that his cousin was dead.

Thurzo did not grieve, nor did the people from the village. They were now serving a new lord. However, her threats echoed in his mind once again. Whatever would come to pass he had no way of knowing, however, he asked the priest to bless his family at every opportunity.

As the word spread of her death, many sighed in great relief. Their loved ones who had died were now at peace.

Little did they know that the seed of hate planted so long ago would grow over the span of nearly four hundred years.

Chapter One

New York

Present Day

Elizabeth Shelton awoke with a scream in her throat. Her body was coated in sweat as she kicked the covers to the end of the bed. She lay panting, trying to catch her breath.

The dream had been bad this time, worse than it had ever been before. If she closed her eyes, she knew she would hear the cries of pain and terror. Smell the sickly sweet, coppery scent of blood. With each dream, the smells and sounds grew more vivid. She shivered at the memories. Who were these women in her dreams? Why were they being tortured? Why were these dreams plaguing her? There was no answer.

Glancing at the clock, she sighed. Her shoot in Central Park was in two hours. The last place she wanted to be today was in front of a camera. Then again, staying busy may help. She jumped up and headed for the shower.

The water was warm and relaxing, and Elizabeth shut her eyes. Immediately she opened them; the nightmare was still too fresh. The images just wouldn't fade. Would they ever? She quickly washed and turned the shower off.

Wrapping a towel around herself, she pulled clothes from the dresser. Sweats and a T-shirt was all that was required. They would dress her at the tent. That was the one good thing about her job. She never had to do her hair, make-up or clothes by herself. At any rate, she needed to get a move on. Max could be a bear if she was late. Timing

was everything in his eyes. She threw on her clothes, snagged her bag, and left her apartment.

The drive to the park wasn't bad at all; traffic had already started to slow. The crew was ready and waiting for her when she walked into the tent. Tara was there as well, looking beautiful and well rested. If she wasn't Elizabeth's best friend, she may have had to hate her.

"Morning Liz." Tara said with her usual smile. "You look beat."

"I am, Tara."

"Dreams again?"

"They're getting worse, Tara." Elizabeth sat down in her chair and prayed they could take care of the bags under her eyes. "I saw a girl die this time."

"Elizabeth you have got to see a doctor."

"A shrink?"

"Well, I would say no. But these dreams are affecting your life." Tara narrowed her eyes on her friend. "Not to mention you look like hell."

"Well thanks a lot."

"You know, I was reading an article the other day. Lack of sex can do strange things to you."

"How did I know you would turn this into sexual frustration?"

"Well, look at me." Tara sat up straight in her chair. "I'm not lacking and I look damn good. I also sleep like a baby."

Elizabeth had to smile. Tara was by far the most outrageous woman she had ever known. Men flocked around her like a bee to honey. Elizabeth had offers, but she was more into exclusive relationships. Tara could juggle men like no other and keep them happily waiting for their turn.

"You're just a tramp."

Elizabeth ducked the brush that flew at her head. Tara knew she was teasing. They were the best of friends, and Tara was more family than anything else.

Growing up, Elizabeth had shuffled from one home to another. Her birth parents had given her up the moment she had been born. Then one day she met the Shelton's. They were a prestigious family, but could have no children. Elizabeth had led a happy life with them. Back then her dreams were few and her parents were able to console her. Until the day came that she was pulled from her high school to be told they had both been killed in a car accident. She had been devastated. However, the courts allowed her to remain in her home, as she would soon be eighteen. She received a monthly allowance until she had turned twenty-one. Once she turned of age to claim her whole inheritance, she sold the family house and moved into the city. She was well off and didn't need the work, but working kept her level headed.

That was when she had met Tara. About the same age, she and Tara had become fast friends and did everything together. When she had introduced her to the modeling world, Elizabeth was skeptical. Her looks were nothing like the vibrant red head. But the agency took to her quickly, and she had been modeling ever since.

"Well, if being sexually satisfied and doted on makes me a tramp, Liz, I'll settle for it gladly."

"Oh, Tara, you know I love you."

"I love you too." She winked. "I'm telling you as a friend to go out and get laid. It will work wonders."

This time it was Tara ducking the brush.

"All right ladies," Max said as he entered the tent, "The light's perfect and my camera is ready. I hope you girls are."

"I'm always ready, Max. It's Elizabeth who is frustrated."

"Tara," Elizabeth said in a low voice. "I'm warning you."

"Problem?" Max asked, looking between them.

"Tara is about to suffer severe bodily injury."

Her friend just laughed and walked behind the dressing screen. Elizabeth retreated to her own. She was smiling all the way. Leave it to Tara to put a little fire under her.

Once in front of the camera, Elizabeth let her worry and fatigue fade. She was in control here, and as Max called out his shots, she followed through like she didn't have a care in the world. She and Tara were modeling the new line of mink coats to hit the market in a few months. Though that was pretty much all they wore. For the life of her, she didn't understand the concept of a coat over a barely there bikini.

The time flew quickly and she rushed to dress. Tara met her in the tent, a look of worry on her face.

"Liz, I'm serious. If nothing else, take a week or two off. You need to do something."

"I know, you're right. I think I will tell Max I need some time."

"Don't let him bully you, Liz."

"Not a chance. See you Friday for movie night?"

"Of course. I'll bring the movies and wine, and you order the pizza."

"Okay. See you then. I'm going to catch Max." Elizabeth stopped at the door. "Tara, you really are my best friend. I love you like a sister."

"Now I know you're tired." Tara teased, but sobered as she looked at Elizabeth's face. "I love you to, Liz. Go on, catch Max."

She found Max loading his gear in the van and waited while he finished with the last container. He wouldn't like this, she knew, but in a sense he really had no choice.

"Max?"

"Yeah?" he turned, and his smile widened when he looked at her. "What can I do you for?"

Elizabeth didn't miss the innuendo. It was no secret he had romantic designs on her. She refused to date anyone she worked for or with, but that didn't stop him from trying.

"I need some time off."

"Excuse me?" That got his attention.

"I'm tired Max. I need some time."

"Elizabeth, we're in the middle of the largest spread ever." He raked his hands through his hair. "How much time?"

"Give me two weeks, and I will work double shoots after that."

"You do look a little tired." He closed the door on the van. "Two weeks is all we can spare. Rest up and call me if you need anything."

She was surprised when he suddenly pulled her to him and held her close. This was no friendly embrace, and she pushed him away.

"Thanks, Max."

Though he looked disappointed, he didn't push it. Elizabeth hurried to her car before he could say anything else.

Though it was still early, and shopping sounded good, she really wanted to close her eyes. Once inside her apartment, she kicked off her shoes and made a cup of tea. Then she curled up on the couch for the old movie marathon. Her eyes were heavy. It didn't take long, and she was asleep, or at least she thought she was.

She was walking through a fine mist, and then she knew where she was.

"Oh, lord, I'm back, I'm back." She whispered in her dream realm.

"So you are, Elizabeth."

She spun around, and there again was the old woman from her previous dreams. She desperately wanted to wake up.

"Who are you? Why am I here?"

"I am Iloona, and you are here for my Lady."

"Who?"

"All in good time child." The old woman reached out and touched Elizabeth's cheek. "You still believe you are dreaming."

"Of course I am." Elizabeth turned from the woman and ran down a narrow hall, or at least she thought it was. She pulled up short with a gasp as she ran once again, face to face with the old woman, Iloona.

"There is no place you can run. The Lady wishes you to be here, and so you shall."

"I'm going to wake up now. Right now. There's no place like home. There's no place like home." *Well hell, it had worked for Dorothy.*

Elizabeth's eyes darted around the room she had entered. Her eyes widened as she took in the cages and shackles on the wall. "What is this place?"

Across the room, a woman sat on a stool with her back to Elizabeth. She was dressed in white, and her hair was pulled into a tight bun. Though she never turned and looked at her, Elizabeth knew this woman was the Lady.

Looking above the woman, she cried out at the site of the girl in the cage so young and afraid. The girl's eyes said more than any scream would. When a knife inside began to slice through her tender flesh, Elizabeth screamed, watching as the blood rained down on the woman in white. The girl tried to avoid the blades, but they seemed to be everywhere.

"You cannot hide from her, Elizabeth."

"What the hell is going on?" she cried, desperate to look away from the site. "I want to leave now. I want to go home."

"You may go, for now. Remember," Iloona said as she again caressed her cheek, and Elizabeth flinched at the sticky sensation on her cheek, "This is your destiny. The more you fight it, the harder it will go for you."

Just as Elizabeth slapped the hand away, she awoke, tears running down her face. They just kept getting worse. This time, she had seen the lady in question. She wondered just how long it would be before she had to face her as well.

Elizabeth rushed to the bathroom and turned the shower to hot. The steam rolled and she had the urge to scrub herself raw.

She stripped and stepped to the mirror, intending to pull her hair up. That's when she saw the bloody print on her cheek. Eyes wide, and not sure what was happening, she stepped into the shower and washed her face, checking herself for any wounds. She found nothing. Leaning against the wall, she tried to catch her breath, and again the tears flowed.

"What is happening to me?"

She stood there until the water cooled, then turned off the shower and reached for her towel. Checking herself in the mirror, the bloody hand print was gone. However, the woman standing behind her was covered in it.

Elizabeth screamed and turned, but there was no one there. She searched every corner of her apartment, only to find nothing.

She dressed quickly in her sweats again, and reached for the phone book.

"I'm a walking horror movie, that's what I am." She said to herself as she looked for the numbers she would need. "I'm a novelist's dream come true. Pick me Koontz. I'm the next big thing!"

Finding the number to a psychologist close by, she picked up her phone and dialed the number. After speaking with the receptionist, she was told that this doctor did not deal in her type of problem. However, she gave her a number of one who did.

With a thank you, she hung up the phone and dialed the second number. It seemed to ring forever.

"Dr. Richard's office."

"I would like to speak with Dr. Richards please."

"In regards to?"

"I would just like to speak to the doctor."

"I will need some personal information, and I will see if he is available."

Elizabeth gave her name, address, number and anything else the woman wanted to know, only to be put off again.

"You will need to schedule an appointment."

"Look," Elizabeth was at her breaking point. "I am going on little sleep and a lot of fear. I am in desperate need and I want to speak to the doctor. I'm seeing people in my house for heaven's sake, and you are not helping."

"One moment, please." The woman snapped into the phone. Elizabeth knew she sounded like a bitch but she was scared and needed someone to tell her she was not going crazy.

"Dr. Ethan Richards. How can I help you, Elizabeth?"

She sat there, unsure what to say. She had demanded to speak to him, and was now at a loss for words. Chalk one up for the crazy half.

"Hello?"

"I'm sorry, Dr. Richards, for snapping at your secretary like I did."

"Well, you have my attention now. What seems to be the problem?"

Elizabeth told him of the dreams she had suffered from as a child and as an adult, and they seemed too only be getting worse now. She didn't realize she was rambling until he cut in.

"Wait a minute, slow down." His voice was soothing. "Can you come into my office today?"

"It's almost five. Won't you be closing?"

"I think I can make an exception here. Would you like to come in and talk?"

"Yes. Please. Very much."

He gave her directions, and she was relieved it was not too far away. She thanked him and hung up the phone. Elizabeth was in front of his building in less than twenty minutes.

Dr. Ethan Richards hung up the phone and sighed. It would be yet another long day. Marla would not be happy. If the woman were not so good at her job, he would have fired her long ago. She had set her cap for Ethan and he couldn't get her to understand that it would never happen. Dating employees was something he wouldn't do. He walked out into the outer office.

"Marla, you can go on home. I'm meeting a client late. I can lock up."

"Ethan, I don't mind staying."

He narrowed his eyes. She knew better than to call him by his name in the office. She was pushing the boundaries and he had never shown any signs of interest.

"Marla, I will be fine. Go home."

"But, what if you need me?"

"I can manage. I will see you tomorrow."

She gathered her purse and stormed from the office. Soon he would need to talk to her yet again. Maybe he would be better off with another secretary.

He returned to his office and pulled out a fresh notebook and file, as well as a recorder. This sounded like a classic case of paranoid anxiety disorder.

He knew who she was. There wasn't one red-blooded man around who didn't. Her face was all over New York. She was attractive, but he would bet without that make-up and glamour, she was just like every other woman. No one could be that beautiful. Not for real.

At the sound of his front office door opening, he stood and went to greet her. Ethan stood there, spell bound. If this was her, and he knew it was, he had been dead wrong. Elizabeth wore not one speck of make-up, was dressed in sweats and looked like something the cat dragged in. She was absolutely stunning.

"Dr. Richards?"

"Yes." He came out of his spell long enough to shake her hand. "Elizabeth?"

"Guilty as charged." She teased and took his hand.

"Come into my office. We can talk there."

Elizabeth followed him inside the spacious room and all the while admired the man who was before her. He was tall, and she would bet he worked out. He dressed in casual slacks with the sleeves rolled up. He looked comfortable and easy to talk to. His brown eyes were kind, and she would bet his dark hair was as silky as it looked. The same color of his eyes, he kept it neatly cut. The man was beautiful to look at.

"Please, take a chair."

"Should I lay down or something?"

"Do you want to?"

"Not really."

"Then sit, and tell me about these dreams."

She sat in front of his desk, and he took the seat behind it. Again she admired him. Why couldn't she ever meet a man like this? She could sense a kindness in him that most sorely lacked.

Elizabeth started with her first dream as a child. She remembered it vividly. An old nurse had taken her by the hand and walked her through a drafty castle. Each time she had dreamed, the nurse would take her deeper. Then she started dreaming of another woman. She didn't know her name, but she would try to draw her away from the nurse. When she turned eighteen, the dreams took on a whole new level. She witnessed torture, but never death. She had the feeling she was supposed to enjoy the scenes before her. Now, the dreams were of death and pain and despair. She also told him of the bloody handprint on her cheek, and the woman she thought she had seen in her mirror.

"This other woman you dreamed of. What happened to her?"

"I don't know. She was there and then she was gone. I saw her only a few times. But when I did, the dream always ended quickly."

"You say you had a feeling you were supposed to enjoy what you saw?"

"Yes."

"Did you?"

"Of course not." Elizabeth snapped. "It makes me ill to even think about it."

"No need to get upset. I need to ask these things."

She sat silently and watched him write in his notebook, no doubt thinking of committing her. She certainly felt crazy enough.

"What about your parents?"

"My birth parents gave me up when I was born. I was adopted by the Shelton's. I had a very happy childhood. They died in an accident when I was a teen."

He nodded and returned to his notebook, and only stopped to ask about her job.

"Yes, I work long hours. I have taken two weeks off though, to sort this out."

"That's a good idea. It sounds to me like you are overly stressed. Dreams can be very telling things." He sat his pen aside and stood. Rounding the corner of his desk,

he leaned against it. He crossed his ankles and arms and watched her as he spoke. "Even though you were a happy child, stress started with you the minute you were separated from your mother, then the death of your parents and the stress of being alone in the world. You bury yourself in your work, and I am willing to bet you are just overly tired."

"The handprints on my cheek? The woman I know I saw in the mirror? How do you explain that?"

"Again, you're tired. When your body is exhausted, it lets you know in ways you would never believe. For you, it's dreaming, as I would bet your mind is more wore out than your body."

"So plenty of rest?"

"I can give you a sedative."

"No. I want to be able to wake up."

Ethan studied her, and she did truly look tired. He didn't say anything to her, but her story sounded very familiar. Like he had heard it before but couldn't place were. For now, she needed rest, and he was positive she would feel much better after two weeks.

"Well, do me a favor. Get yourself a journal, and write down any dreams you have. If you think you see something, write that down to." He reached for his planner. "I can see you Saturday afternoon if you like."

"You're open on a weekend?"

"I have a lot of clients." He smiled. "So, get a journal and keep it with you. On Saturday we can talk about your entries."

"Do you think I'm crazy?"

"Elizabeth, the last thing you are is crazy. I'd bet my practice on it."

The way he said it sent chills up her spine. The good kind of chills; the kind that made you want to get naked and make love for hours.

"Okay, I will see you Saturday then." She stood to go.

“Here, take this. It’s my card with my office number.” He wrote on the back before handing it to her. “I also added my home and cell number. Call me at anytime.”

She took the card and nodded, walking out of his office. Ethan wondered what he was thinking. He never gave out his private numbers. However, there was something about her that made him want to protect her, like it was his job to do so, as a man, and not as a doctor.

Shaking his head at himself, he gathered his briefcase and locked up the office. He needed to take his own advice. He needed sleep.

Still, her story nagged at him. Why was it so damn familiar?

Chapter Two

Sitting in his easy chair, a cold beer in hand watching late night reruns on the television, the answer finally came to him. Elizabeth's dream story reminded him of a woman he had studied in psych class. The objective was to review the history of a killer, and try to decide what made them think the way they did.

Ethan had pulled Elizabeth Bathory. He was fascinated with her from the moment he read her story. Not that what she had done was thrilling, it was down right scary. It was her mind that drew him in, and he had studied that file for months.

Countess Bathory would bathe in the blood of young servant women. She believed it kept her youthful and her beauty intact. However, on a whim, she could decide to torture for the pleasure of it. At times, young women would be stripped naked in the snow, and doused with water. The Countess would watch from her coach as they slowly froze to death. She was even known to mutilate or burn a female's sexual area.

At one point, she decided to open a school of tutelage, offering her services to the noble young ladies of the realm. It was when several of these young noble women were reported missing that the investigation had been ordered. They had found only one alive, but she had killed herself not long after her rescue. Apparently, the ordeal had been too much for her to bear.

In the years that Elizabeth Bathory kept up her practices, and from a diary found among the Countess's possessions, it was estimated that more than six hundred and

forty women had died by torture or some means to bleed them dry. Many of the bodies buried some place along the castle lands or the marsh areas.

Ethan shivered, remembering all the gruesome tales. If he remembered correctly, a lot of the vampire myths were based around this one lady. Even with today's serial killers, one has yet to compare to the deaths that occurred in the seventeenth century by the hands of this woman. She had also been rumored to be a lesbian, though in some literature, she gave birth to a son and daughter. She was also married to one of the most powerful soldiers to live in that time, The Black Prince.

Elizabeth Shelton was a model, orphaned young and adopted by a respected family. Her childhood was a happy one. He could understand her dreams starting at a young age. It had to be a traumatic time. However, the contents of those dreams were in one word, creepy. The dreams themselves had to be frightening. He could understand her fear for her sanity.

Dreams are a product of the subconscious. Her dreams have plagued her for years. Had she heard of the bloody Countess at such a tender age? The devastation of losing her parents, and then moving from home to home until the Shelton's adopted her could have been the cause. Yet, he couldn't see her knowing enough about the woman to have the dreams she was having now.

Closing his eyes, he sighed. Until he visited with her more, there was no way to decide just what was happening. It could all be coincidence.

Ethan fell into a deep sleep, without even knowing he was sleeping. When he opened his eyes, he stood on a hillside, below him, a town. He narrowed his eyes. It looked more like a village. He turned to face up the hill, and his eyes widened.

He was looking at an honest to goodness, seventeenth century castle. He had studied enough on that century when he pulled the bloody Countess story.

Walls of stone and it looked intimidating. He knew he was dreaming. Elizabeth Shelton had opened his subconscious.

He walked up the hill toward the castle. Once he reached the top, the land leveled out and he glanced around, wondering where he should go next.

"Hello, Ethan."

Ethan spun around with a shouted, "Holy Hell!"

A young woman stood before him. Her long brown hair rested across her shoulders, and she could be no more than fifteen.

"You scared the life out of me." He took deep breaths, trying to control his pounding heart. "Can someone die in a dream?"

"You have many years yet." Her smile was kind and her chocolate eyes held the knowledge of a woman far older than the girl before him. "At least that's the plan, and yes, Ethan. Someone can assuredly die in a dream."

"I know I'm dreaming, but I have to know. Who are you?" he studied her, and noticed she carried a strong resemblance to his grandmother.

"I am Mary, and I work and live here in the castle." Her smile faded. "Walk with me, Ethan."

He followed her at a slow pace. They walked along the castle's outer walls. Mary led him to a bench along the north side.

"This all seems so real," he said as he sat beside her. "It's like I'm actually here, not dreaming any of it."

"That is something to explain later, Ethan. For now, you must listen to me." She glanced around as if she were searching out a spy. "Do not take Elizabeth's words lightly. She is in great danger."

"What?"

"I know how this may seem, but you must help her."

"Help her how?" he stood and paced. "Medication? Therapy?"

"Don't be such a doctor, Ethan."

He paused to stare at her. Only one woman had ever said that to him, and she said it frequently. Lily Richards, his grandmother, said it every time he talked to her.

"Who are you, really? What the hell is going on here?"

"Things are not always what they seem, Ethan. You are the one who can help her battle this demon."

"I am losing my mind."

Mary stood suddenly, her eyes searching the high walls of the castle. Ethan followed her gaze, and a shiver of fear slid down his spine. A woman in white looked down upon them, her gown billowing behind her. She looked almost like a poetic romance dream, until she smiled.

"I must go now, Ethan." Mary hurried to him and took his hand. "Do not be fooled by her beauty. She is pure evil."

"Who is she?"

"That, Ethan, is the demon itself." She pressed something into his hand. "It will keep you safe. Run away now, Ethan. Wake, and remember me. I will see you soon."

Before he could say more, he was running down the hillside. His foot snagged a rock, and he woke just before his head smacked another.

He bolted out of his chair, wiping the sweat from his brow, panting as if he had actually run for his life. This was all too weird. He swiped his hands through his hair, wincing at the sharp pain that nicked his ear.

Ethan looked at his hand, and there was the object Mary had pressed into it. A clear stone wrapped in leather, just enough to wear around his neck. Oddly, when he gripped it, he felt comfort. Without hesitating, he placed the stone around his neck and tied the cord.

The early morning light was just peeking through the curtains. He had slept all night, or dreamed all night.

Something was going on that he was sure he was not prepared for. Ethan knew of one person he needed to see above all others. His grandmother. There was something about that girl in his dreams.

Showering quickly, he called Marla and cancelled the day's appointments, referring them to another doctor for that day. It was Friday, and he would see Elizabeth tomorrow. That gave him one day to do some research. His gut told him he might not like all he would find.

Lily Richards had always been out spoken. The woman had always said what was on her mind and would do so until the day she died. Today was no exception.

"Don't be such a doctor, Ethan," she said as she slapped her hands on the kitchen table. He had never seen such an aggravated look on his grandmother's face. "Not everything can be explained in those books your walls are covered with."

"I know that Grams, but come on? Ghost visiting me in my sleep?"

Lily stood and walked to the old oak cabinet. As far back as Ethan could be remember, anything she felt should be treasured was in that old cabinet. He smiled at her language when she opened a door and albums tumbled out. She returned and sat a very thick and very old book in front of him. A scrapbook.

"In here, my dear boy, are photos of our family going back more years than you can count. Even before they had photos."

"That old, huh?"

"Watch it, doc. I can still spank your butt." She opened the book. "Here are my mother, and her mother, and so on."

Ethan flipped through the book, slowly. Each female family member, in some way, resembled Mary. He had never seen this album. Grams had so many, he was sure there were several he had never seen. Soon the photos became sketches and drawings. He paused when, near the back of the book, there was a sketch of a castle. It looked just like the one in his dream. Under it was a pencil type drawing. There was no color, and it was rough, but it was Mary. The same sad but aged eyes looked out at him from a girl older than she really was.

"That's her."

"Ah, our Hungarian descendant, sad story, that one. In the end, she was happy though."

"How so?"

"Mary was a woman who worked for the Bathory House. You know the sordid tale there. It was awful what these ladies endured. Our Mary here was found by the governor of the lands, Bathory's very own cousin. Poor thing was near death."

"What happened to her? I know about the rest, but not her."

"A soldier in the emperor's army, Viktor, I believe was his name, helped to save her. Eventually they married and had children. Mary died an old woman, though the scars she carried had to be there for a lifetime."

"I have never even looked at this picture, yet I know this was the girl in my dream." He reached for the stone around his neck. "I woke up with this in my hand."

Lily looked at the stone, though Ethan noted she made no move to touch it. She looked back at the black and white sketch in the book.

"Something very incredible happened to you, Ethan. Mary is wearing one just like it here, in this sketch."

"This is all so unreal."

"Sometimes, things happen for a reason we will never understand. I would say that you and this young lady, Ms. Shelton, were destined for something."

"I never knew you to be a believer in the unexplained, Grams."

"Ethan, I believe that everything happens for a reason. I also believe that there are people so evil, so vile, that not even time and death can stop them."

"So, you think that Ms. Shelton is being haunted by a dead woman?"

"Now, don't give me that look, young man. I believe what I believe. This old woman believes things are about to get nasty." She patted his cheek. "On this one, you will need to believe in yourself. This young lady will need you."

Ethan left his grandmothers house feeling no better. Mary was a relative, hundreds of greats ago, but he was a descendent nonetheless. He hated to admit it, but he was a little scared.

Though he had canceled appointments, he returned to his office. Marla was still inside, though she had no reason to be. Ethan wanted to do some computer research, and he had no time for Marla and her crush.

When he walked through the door, he could all but feel the daggers her eyes were shooting at him.

"Thought you would not be in today," she snapped.

"I need my computer. Why are you here?"

"Well, *someone* needs to be here. These nuts can't wipe their ass without help."

"That's about enough, Marla." He fought for control. "These clients have troubles, but they are not nuts. I will thank you to speak with a respectful tongue."

Her eyes widened and her cheeks flamed. She looked around the room, like a caged animal hunting escape. Ethan was more than confused. Marla was a pain sometimes, but she was never cruel, especially about clients.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Richards. I don't know what's come over me."

"Go home, Marla. Get some sleep."

"I'll finish these files and do just that."

Ethan hurried to his office. For just one split second, he didn't know the woman. She would hound him with her advances, but she was never like this. Marla had worked for him for years.

Pulling up the archives, he read about the Countess again. Still, until he talked to Elizabeth again he wouldn't truly know how serious the situation. Though it was hard to believe, he was starting to believe in his Grams words. Something evil was lurking, and he was about to get caught in the middle.

"Ethan?"

"Yes, Marla?" He bit his tongue. Damn he hated it when she called him that. She worked for him.

"I made some coffee," she walked into the room, and he noticed her suit jacket was off and the top buttons on her blouse were unbuttoned. "Would you like some?"

"What are you doing?" he asked as she walked behind his chair, rubbing his shoulders.

"You're so tense, Ethan."

"Marla," he turned his chair. "This is highly inappropriate."

He immediately realized his mistake when she dropped into his lap, snuggling into his chest and neck. He was too stunned to do more.

"It's only the two of us here, doc." She took his hand and placed it on her breast. "All work and no play can make you old before your time."

"I think you need to go home, Marla." He removed his hand and started to push her from his lap. Her hand wrapped in his hair and gave a vicious yank.

"To busy thinking about that Shelton bitch?" she leaned forward and nipped his ear.

"Enough," he growled, pushing Marla from his lap and she tumbled to the floor. "I don't know just what has gotten into you, but if you want a job tomorrow, you had better leave now."

She sat there, shaking her head and looking confused. Using the desk, she pulled herself to her feet.

"What the hell? Why was I on the floor? Did I faint?"

Ethan studied her, and she really did look confused. A sick feeling settled in the pit of his gut.

"You're just overworked, Marla. Go home and rest. No work until Monday. Doctors' orders."

"Are you sure?" She shook her head. "You have a client tomorrow."

"Nothing I can't handle. Go home and rest."

"I will. Good night, Dr. Richards."

He watched her go, then turned off his computer. This was all too unreal. He needed to speak to Mary. Would she return in his sleep?

Taking the chance, he lay back on the couch in his office and clutched the stone. With deep breathing exercise, he slipped into a light sleep.

She was there, waiting for him. It was as if she knew he would come. All of this because one beautiful scared woman walked into his life.

"Hello again, Ethan."

"Mary." He greeted and sat beside her on the bench. The same bench they had talked at the night before.

"What brings you to this dreary place?"

"I needed to see you." He looked around and it was indeed dreary. What should have been a flourishing garden looked like dead tumbleweed. "You look just like my Grams as a girl."

"Well I should. But you have it wrong. She looks like me. I am older you know."

"What is really happening?"

"You know of the Lady here?"

"Yes."

"Well, as you are my descendant, your Elizabeth is hers."

"She is my patient."

"For now." Mary smiled at him, and then looked to the castle. "She never truly died, you know. She has just been waiting. You and all you know, as well as Elizabeth, are pawns to her now."

"Why?"

"She wants to live again." Mary shivered. "The only reason I may visit you is because of blood. We are, in a sense, related. However, I do not hold her power. She can infect the minds of all you know."

"Marla?"

"Yes." Mary sighed. "I cannot help them, Ethan, but I can guide you."

"What am I to do? Just yesterday, I was a doctor ready to help a troubled woman. Why is this up to me?"

"A heavy weight is on your shoulders. If you turn from her, you will lose more than you would like."

"So I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't?"

"Fate is a fickle creature. Elizabeth will come to mean more to you every day."

"Are you saying we are destined for one another?"

"That is for you to accept. However, know this. Without you, she will die a death that you could never fathom."

Ethan didn't like the way his heart dropped. No, he didn't like the thought of her death at all.

"What can I do?"

"That, I cannot say. When the time is right, you will know." Mary paled and stood.
"Ethan, you must return now."

"Let me face her, Mary?"

"Please, Ethan, leave. The woman is like a poison. Once she is in your blood, it will be impossible to get her out."

"Will you be okay?"

"You will be a true protector." Mary began pushing him toward the cliff. "Go now. Watch over your Elizabeth. She will need you, and soon."

Once again, he was racing down the cliff only to wake in his office.

"What the hell have I got myself into?" he said aloud. "How will I ever get out?"

It was still early afternoon, and he had a strong urge to check on Elizabeth. Her number was in the file on his desk and he quickly dialed the number.

"Hello?"

"Elizabeth, this is Ethan Richards."

"Well, hello Dr. Richards." He could hear the surprise in her voice. "Did I forget something?"

"No, and please, call me Ethan. I just wanted to check on you. Were there any problems last night?"

"In all honesty, I slept in spurts. I would drift and wake right away."

"What about tonight? How long do you think you can remain awake?" he sighed.
"I know you're afraid, and we will get to the bottom of this."

"I certainly hope so. Anyway, my friend Tara is coming tonight."

"A girl's night, huh?"

"Every other Friday for the last few years."

"Well, you call me if you need, day or night."

"Thank you, Ethan."

"Remember our appointment tomorrow."

"I'll be there. Have a good night Ethan."

"You to Elizabeth." He chuckled. "Don't be surprised if I call again."

Elizabeth laughed as she said goodbye.

Ethan hung up the phone, but not satisfied. She was slowly wearing down. If all of this was real, and Bathory was truly back and out to get her, then her physical state would play a large factor.

Then there was Marla. After tonight's events, he couldn't doubt something was very wrong. The woman had always been after him, but she had never acted so physical. He didn't like the thought of someone screwing with him. Scratch that. The ghost of a dead woman was mind-fucking him and he was starting to get pissed.

Tomorrow he would get a little more information from Elizabeth. Even though he had told Marla to stay home, something told him she would be in the office anyway. That was just her way.

Ethan gathered his file on Elizabeth, walked out and made sure things were locked securely. He would call Elizabeth again later, just to make sure she was all right. What he really wanted to do was go right to her place, hold her to him and let nothing hurt her. Watch her while she slept. Something inside him recognized her, and he had a fierce desire to protect her. There was definitely more to what he would like to do to her, but he needed to keep his thoughts straight. Something big was about to happen. He could feel it in his gut.

Chapter Three

Elizabeth hung up the phone with a smile on her face. Ethan was by far the most attractive man she had yet to meet. She would like to think his call had more to do with her as a woman, than with her problem.

Sighing, she finished straitening the living room. Tara would be here soon. Elizabeth looked forward to these nights with Tara. Movies, wine and girlish chitchat. In the last few years, they had never missed their Friday nights.

The knock on the door signaled her friend's arrival and she hurried to open the door. Tara stood there with a stack of movies to her chin.

"How many movies do you plan to watch tonight?"

"Oh, move Liz and let me in. Between the wine and the movies I'm overloaded."

"I would suspect so," she said as she stepped back, then reached for the sack holding the wine. "There has to be ten movies here."

"I didn't know what you would be in the mood for, so I got a variety." She huffed and sat the movies on the coffee table. "Besides, the sweet clerk thinks I'm the best thing since ice cream. I only paid for two."

"Imagine that."

Tara stuck her tongue out and Elizabeth laughed. She really needed tonight with her friend. It just may be the cure to what ails her.

"So, tell me about the doctor's visit."

"It went well." Elizabeth said as she unloaded the wine into the fridge. "I see him again tomorrow."

"What are you not telling me?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"You blushed."

"All right. He is absolutely gorgeous."

"Dish, woman."

"Tall, muscled. Dark hair and eyes."

Tara started to giggle, and then busted a gut, rolling in her laughter.

"What's so damn funny?"

"You have the hots for your shrink."

"I didn't say that. He's just worth admiring."

Tara continued to giggle, and Elizabeth threw a pillow at her. If it were anyone but Tara, she would have smacked them by now.

"Oh, that's priceless. I have been after you for months to get out more." Tara wiped her eyes and patted her hair back in place. "You have to admit that it's kinda funny. The one man you show interest in, and he's your head doctor."

Elizabeth shook her head at her friend. Tara was beautiful inside and out. Her red hair and green eyes were the envy of all women in the modeling world. Men loved her and Tara soaked it up. Yet Tara never seemed to let it go to her head. She knew she was a beauty, but she was just an all around good person who people couldn't help but be drawn to.

"So, tell me what movies you wrangled from the poor clerk."

"Well," she said as she picked up the first two. "Romance, comedy, crime, drama, and my personal favorite, scary as hell."

"Let's stick to the comedy. I've had enough horror to suit me."

"Weenie."

Elizabeth laughed and called for the extra large, triple cheesy pizza. The people at the pizza parlor knew her and her residence by heart.

"Thirty minutes." She said as she joined Tara. "Want me to open a bottle of wine now, or wait."

"The movie waits for the pizza, not the wine."

Both girls moved into the kitchen. Tara grabbed the glasses while Elizabeth opened the wine she pulled from the fridge.

"Do you really think we need three bottles? This stuff isn't cheap."

"Like money is a big issue, Liz." Tara rolled her eyes. "Your money has mold on it. It wouldn't hurt you to spend some of it either."

"I have everything I need. As for my money having mold, that's stretching it."

"Come on Liz. You could buy top name designer clothes daily and still be comfortable."

"I smell a shopping trip."

"You bet your sweet ass, tomorrow in fact."

"I'm game. It will give me something to do until my appointment with Ethan."

"Ethan? On a first name basis?"

Finally removing the cork saved Elizabeth from having to answer. There was no hiding the fact that she was attracted to the man. She knew he was attracted as well. She poured the wine, sighing to herself. Maybe she would invite him out sometime.

"Elizabeth?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I said you get the door. Pizza is here. I'll finish the wine."

"Oh, right." She walked out of the kitchen, ignoring Tara's knowing giggle.

With wine and a pizza to die for between them, the two friends watched movies and laughed like there was not a care in the world that deserved their attentions. Elizabeth forgot her troubles and relaxed for the first time in weeks. The phone ringing had them both jumping.

"Who could that be at this hour?" Elizabeth said, glancing at the clock.

"More than likely, Max." Tara paused the movie. "He has it bad for you."

"No thanks," she said as she picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Elizabeth, it's Ethan."

"Hi." She felt like a ninny, but what could she say. Tara looked at her, a question in her eyes. Elizabeth silently mouthed who it was and tried not to laugh as Tara bit the throw pillow.

"I wanted to see how the girl's night was going."

"We're having a ball." She smiled. "Why did you really call, Ethan?"

"To check on you."

"Do you call all of your clients this late?"

"No."

There was silence and Elizabeth held her breath. She was very aware of this man. Even his voice over the phone caused pleasant shivers.

"So, why me?"

"Look, I know you don't know me from Adam, but would you consider having dinner with me tomorrow night? Maybe after our session?"

"That would seem weird."

"So, is that a no?"

Elizabeth gripped the receiver and decided to take a big leap of faith.

"How about we skip tomorrow afternoon and have our session over dinner?"

Tara jumped up, squealing at this bit of news.

"Would you be comfortable in a public place to talk?"

This was the leap. She couldn't believe she was going to do this.

"Well, why not have dinner here? I can cook, you know."

"I thought I was asking you out?"

"I'm asking you to stay in with me."

Elizabeth tried not to laugh when Tara faked a faint and landed on the sofa. The woman was impossible.

"I would like that."

"So, tomorrow night. How about six?"

"I'll be there not later than quarter till."

She gave him her address and they said goodbye. She didn't want to see the look she knew was on Tara's face.

"Not one word, tramp."

"Oh my, the pot calling the kettle black," Tara teased, not taking offense.

"I can't believe I did that."

"Oh Liz, it's about damn time you did." Her friend hopped up from the couch. "Now, to the closet."

"The closet?"

"Well, knowing you, we may need to just buy something for tomorrow."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she said, following her friend into her bedroom.

"What will you wear tomorrow night?"

"Clothes?"

"Very funny, hussy."

Elizabeth stood back, watching as her friend tore through her clothes, deeming the items worthy or not worthy. Tara was a fashion guru, but when it came to impressing a man, she went all out.

"Now this looks promising." Tara held up the slinky black, form fitting dress.

"I would rather be comfortable."

"Translation, plain."

"Ouch." Elizabeth pouted. "I don't know him well enough for that yet."

"With any luck, by tomorrow night, he will know you inside and out."

For the next hour she sat and watched Tara piece together her clothes. She loved her dearly, but she knew she would settle on slacks and a sleeveless blouse. After what seemed like forever, they returned to their movie.

Later, when Elizabeth crawled into her bed, she knew she would sleep like the dead. Tara had listened to her talk tonight about her dreams, and it was as if it released her from the fear. With her friend in the guestroom, Elizabeth fell asleep before her head hit the pillow.

An ear splitting scream had Elizabeth sitting up in bed. Confused, she looked around her room. Had she only dreamed it? She couldn't remember dreaming. Another scream rent the air and her brain seemed to kick into high gear.

"Tara!" She bolted from her room and ran into the room Tara used when she stayed.

The woman on that bed was struggling as if fighting for her very life. The blanket and sheets were wrapped around her and the look on her face was one of pure agony. Elizabeth hurried to wake her.

"Tara, wake up." A fist connected with her eye and for a moment, she saw stars. Elizabeth threw her body across Tara, hoping to deflect any more blows. "Tara, come on. Wake up. It's okay. It's Liz."

Tara's eyes flew open, and for a moment she didn't seem to recognize her long time friend. Then the shadows cleared and she was able to focus.

"Liz?"

"Yes. It's me."

"What are you doing?"

"Well, if you promise not to hit me again, I will move. I was holding you down, trying to wake you."

"I'm fine." Her voice was almost hard. Elizabeth figured it was the fear. "I hit you?"

"No big deal. Are you all right?"

"Oh, it was horrible. I was dreaming, and had been tied down. This ugly little woman was burning the soles of my feet."

"What else?" Elizabeth felt a cold hand seize her chest. This was not possible.

"She kept saying it was your fault because you wouldn't surrender your soul."

"Oh, Tara." Tears filled her eyes. "I guess my talking about these damn dreams has gotten to you. I'm so sorry."

"What time is it?"

"Just after nine. We slept in." Elizabeth didn't like the way Tara was looking at her. Like she didn't really know or trust her. She watched her friend stand beside the bed, and then sit back down abruptly.

"Ouch."

"What is it, Tara?"

"My foot hurts like hell." Tara said as she dragged her foot into her lap and gasped. "What the fuck is going on here?"

"What?"

"Look"

Tara's foot was badly burned with blisters forming on the sole. It looked as if someone had placed a dozen lit cigarettes to her foot and let them burn.

"Tara, how did this happen?"

Her friend said nothing as she stood again, favoring her foot, and began to scramble into her clothes. She looked terrified. Elizabeth's heart sank when she realized Tara was afraid of her.

"I don't know what sick game you're playing, Elizabeth Shelton. Hell, I don't wanna know."

"You can't think I would hurt you, Tara."

"I love you, Liz. But you need serious help. Until you figure it all out, stay the hell away from me."

"Tara, please." Her eyes filled with tears. "I would never do anything to hurt you."

Tara said nothing as she grabbed her bag and left as quickly as she could.

Elizabeth walked into the living room, sat on her couch and cried. What the hell was happening? She just lost the one person who was more family than friend. How could Tara believe she would hurt her?

For hours she cried for that loss alone. Then, when she could cry no more, she sat up, drying her eyes. If her one time friend had so little faith in her, she had to pick up the pieces and move on.

Glancing at the clock, she was shocked to see it was after three. She had been sitting here crying for the last six hours. Well, enough was enough. She had a dinner date tonight, and hoped he could shed a little light on this unbelievable event.

Elizabeth showered, dressed and grabbed the movies. She would return them, and try not to think about never having another Friday with her best friend. She had just enough time to run the movies back, stop at the store, and prepare for the evening.

Just as Elizabeth finished dressing and made sure the oven was on warm to keep dinner from growing cold, the doorbell chimed.

With a smile on her face she opened the door, only to find a very pissed off Max on the other side.

"Max? What are you doing here?" then she paled. "Is Tara all right?"

"As good as can be expected, considering the doctors won't let her work for another week." His voice was harsh and anger radiated from him. "Care to tell me how one of my best models gets her foot torched while spending an evening with you?"

Elizabeth bristled at his tone. He seemed to forget that he worked for her, not the other way around. How dare he even insinuate such a thing?

"I don't know what happened to Tara, but I will thank you to use a little respect with me."

"Excuse me, miss high and mighty. When one of my models gets hurt and another of my models is to blame..."

"Stop right there, you jackass. First of all, I didn't do a damn thing to Tara. If she believes I did, then that's something between her and me. Second, I am not one of your models. My contract states that I work with whom I want, when I want. Not the other way around."

"Until you fill this contract, you work for me." His face had turned red with anger.

"Didn't you read the contract? Or can you just not read?" she said, stepping in front of him when he would have entered her apartment. He glanced over her shoulder, seeing the table set for two.

"Company tonight?" he sneered. "I thought you needed a break. If you needed one on your back, I would have helped you out."

"You just don't know when to shut your mouth." She folded her arms across her chest. "I quit."

"What?"

"I said I quit. I refuse to work with you. If the designer wants me to continue with the shoot, they had better find another photographer."

"You can't do that."

"I can, and I just did."

Ethan appeared behind Max, a question in his eyes. How much had he heard?

"Am I interrupting something?" Ethan asked, watching the play between the two.

"No, Ethan. You're right on time, Max was just leaving."

Max stood there for a moment, then spun around and glared at Ethan.

"Keep your shoes on, Buddy." He slapped Ethan on the back and walked away.

Elizabeth tried to smile, to keep up the brave front, but Ethan read her eyes and knew something bad had happened. He stepped into the apartment, closed the door, and drew her to him. The minute his arms enfolded her, she cried.

"What happened?"

Elizabeth pulled away and tried to control her emotions. Nothing seemed to want to go her way anymore.

"I'm sorry, Ethan. I didn't mean to bawl all over you."

"It's okay. Here, I brought some wine."

She took the bottle and walked into the kitchen. He watched her, and it was all over her face that it had been a bad day.

"I didn't think to ask you, but I hope you like lemon chicken."

"Love it."

"It still needs about thirty minutes in the warmer."

"That's thirty minutes to talk."

She smiled, poured them both a glass of wine, and they sat together on the couch. She had remembered her journal and wrote down everything that had happened with Tara. Ethan read it quietly, his face giving nothing away.

"What did Max seem so angry about?"

"Well, Tara for one."

"And?"

"I was having company and he is not the company," she said, a slight blush coloring her cheeks.

"I see."

"I didn't do anything to Tara. I swear it. Last night I slept more than I have in weeks. I know I didn't wake up, get out of bed and burn her then crawl back into room."

"I believe you."

"You do?" For some reason, hearing that he believed her made her realize just how all of it sounded. If it were her, she doubted she would believe it.

"Of course I do. It's not in your nature to inflict pain on another."

She leaned forward and hugged him, her heart lighter for the first time since that morning. All she needed was to hear someone believed her.

"Thank you." She leaned back, and then as if remembering why he was here she sat forward again. "Ready to eat?"

"Are you sure you can cook?"

"Come on." She laughed and they walked to the table. "Sit down and I'll get the dishes."

Ethan was treated to skinless lemon chicken breasts, toasted French bread, green salad and a delicious twice-baked potato.

"I must admit, unless you bought it from the deli, that had to be the best home cooked meal I have ever been treated to."

"I cooked it and thank you, I think." She smiled.

He insisted on helping her clean up, and she was impressed how easily he picked up the task. She would be willing to bet his place was spotless. Ethan was not like the typical men she had dated before. The change was refreshing. With most guys, she just wanted it to be over. With Ethan, she had a feeling of home. This was the type of man a woman wanted to settle down with. Have babies and a happily ever after.

"Want some more wine?" he asked, pouring her a glass when she nodded.

"Let's go back into the living room."

Ethan followed her, watching as she kicked off her shoes and sat on the couch. He sat beside her and handed her the glass of wine.

"So, Dr. Richards. Am I crazy?"

"I don't believe that for a minute. Truly I don't."

"Well, something is going on." She wiggled her toes and he took one foot into his lap, massaging the sole. "That feels heavenly."

"In your dreams, have you ever met a girl named Mary?"

"No, I don't think so. Why?"

Ethan thought for a moment how best to tell her he was dreaming of this young girl. She was frightened, and he didn't want to feed that.

"I had a dream the night we met."

"You did?"

"A young girl named Mary told me that I was meant to help you."

Elizabeth closed her eyes and her head fell back. Everyone she comes into contact with she infects like a plague.

"I'm sorry Ethan. I guess I'm dragging you into my nightmares."

"I think it's more than that."

"What?"

"I'm not sure, but I'm not making any rash decisions." He sighed. "Do you believe in the paranormal?"

"Like vampires and such?"

"No. Like spirit worlds and spells."

"I guess I never thought about it." Her brow drew down in thought. "I would have to say that since I know nothing about it, I suppose it could be there."

"Good. You're open-minded."

"What are you getting at?"

"Until I know more, it's hard to say. But I'm starting to think we may be dealing with something we know little about."

Elizabeth looked at his profile. He was so damn handsome. He was also very serious. Could he be right? As unreal as it sounded, could something more be going on other than the dreams of a traumatized child?

"Either way, for tonight, I don't want to think about it anymore."

"What would you like to talk about then?"

She pulled her feet back under her, and moved into his lap. Her knees encased his hips and she cupped his face in her hands. Looking into his eyes, she saw the desire there. It matched her own.

"I don't want to talk, Ethan." She lightly kissed his lips. "I want to feel."

Her lips closed over his, and he was lost in the smell and taste of her. His body's reaction was instantaneous and he groaned as he felt his cock swell. Her tongue drew his into a dance that he was helpless not to follow. Her body arched against his, and he could feel her breasts against his chest through the sheer blouse she wore.

"What are we doing, Elizabeth?"

"Feeling." Her voice was husky. "Unless you want me to stop."

"No."

His hands worked under her shirt to caress her smooth back. Her kiss sent raw heat through his blood. It was all he could do not to rip her clothes from her body and have her there on the couch.

"Stay with me tonight."

"Are you sure?"

"Of all the things that have happened in the last few days, this is the one thing I know I'm sure of."

"All right." He kissed her neck. "If I stay, this won't be over in the morning."

"I was hoping not."

From there, the kiss was explosive. Ethan held nothing back as he caressed her, removing her blouse with a swift movement that drew it over her head. His lips moved to her chest, as his hands moved to the clasp of her bra. The lavender lace followed the blouse to the floor.

Ethan nibbled his way from one breast to the other, murmuring his praise at their perfection. When his hot mouth closed over a nipple, she laced her fingers in his hair, holding him tightly to her. Her soft moans and gentle cries were like music to his ears.

He pulled back to look into her eyes, and he knew in that moment he had never before gazed upon such beauty.

Elizabeth stood, took his hands, and he silently followed her down the hall into her bedroom. She turned to him then and helped remove his own shirt, the feel of her hands on his naked chest, not to mention that seductive little mouth was almost his undoing.

Slowly they undressed one another, each praising the other with touch. He laid her back on the bed, and worshiped her with lips, tongue and teeth. Her flat belly quivered when he dipped his tongue into her navel. His hot breath blew across her mound and she arched, begging him silently for more.

Gently, he pushed one long finger into her, groaning at the tightness that enveloped it. He closed his eyes, knowing she would feel like heaven around him. He wanted this to be slow and easy. A second finger joined the first, and her body rocked with the small climax that brought her. Knowing she was burning, he placed his lips against her clit.

Chapter Four

Elizabeth gasped and gripped his hair. She wasn't sure if she wanted him to stop or to go on forever. She was on fire for him, and a small part of her wanted him to take her fast and hard. The other part liked this gentle loving and wanted it to continue. She wanted to please him as much as he was pleasing her.

She gently pulled him away and pushed him to his back. His fingers were reluctant to leave her body, so she rocked back and forth against his hand.

"I wasn't done with you."

"We're far from done," she said as she turned, placing her mound over his face. She licked her lips at the site of his cock, then leaned forward and took him into her mouth.

Ethan hissed, but didn't miss a beat. His fingers stroked while his tongue played. He had never been in this position, but as her hot mouth worked him, he hoped it wouldn't be the last time with her. His fingers left her body only to hold her hips while she moved on his mouth. His hips were rocking, striving not to go too deeply, to let her mouth take only what she could. When she took him into her throat, he groaned against her clit.

"Stop, Elizabeth. I can't hold out much longer."

When she pulled her mouth away, kissing the head of his cock, he took control. With her back still to him, he lifted her, seating her on his cock. Slowly he let her slide onto him. She was so hot, so damn tight.

"Am I hurting you?"

"Only in the best of ways."

"God woman; you feel good."

He was only about half inside of her, and she wanted all of him. She placed her hands over his on her hips and slid them up to her breasts. Then she reached down, clasped his own hips, and drove herself onto him.

Elizabeth muffled the scream that ripped from her body. Just that alone had her climaxing around his cock, and the feel of him so deep inside of her was like nothing she had ever experienced before.

"Are you alright?" he asked. She could hear the strain of holding back in his voice.

"Better than alright." She flexed around him.

"How am I to be gentle with you when you're doing that?"

"Who asked you to be gentle?"

"I don't want to hurt you."

"I'm hurting with need for you." Again she flexed. "We have all the time in the world for gentle, Ethan. I want you too badly right now."

He needed no further encouragement as he lifted her before him, rose to his knees, and let her body fall forward. His hands tightened on her hips as he moved slowly at first, testing her readiness. She allowed her chest to rest on the bed and offered herself to him in total trust.

"Tell me if I hurt you."

"If you don't do something soon to ease this ache, I'm going to hurt you."

His laugh was almost feral, full of possessiveness and passion. Then he moved.

Ethan thrust into her body powerfully, pulling her onto him when he pushed forward, her cries and pants only adding to his drive. He could feel her inner walls clamping around him, desperately trying to hold him inside of her.

Over and over he drove into her, lost in his pleasure. Knowing she was close to that ultimate release was enough to drive him over the edge. So he pushed harder and deeper, hoping he had it in him to wait for her. Then she tightened almost painfully

around him, and her cry triggered his own release. Too late he realized they had used no protection, but he was too far-gone.

Elizabeth collapsed onto the bed, Ethan followed, covering her body with his own. He was reluctant to pull free of her body though he knew he had to be heavy. He gently eased from inside her, lying on his back. She curled into him, kissing his chest and laying her head against him.

"That was wonderful." She purred.

"Yes, it certainly was." He hated to ask, but he had to know. "Elizabeth, we didn't use protection. I'm clean and I know you are, but are you protected?"

"Yes," she said. He rolled until she was on her back, and he leaned over her. He stroked the hair from her face and kissed her gently.

"I meant what I said. This is not over. I won't walk out of your life so easily."

"I would hope not." She wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him with renewed passion.

He groaned at the feel of her nipples teasing his chest. His cock stirred and he gasped when her thigh rubbed against him.

"I think you have my attention, Ms. Shelton."

"Do I, Dr. Richards?"

He laughed as his body covered hers. He would never get enough of her. He looked into her eyes as he slowly pushed inside of her and loved the way they flared.

However, this time, he loved her slowly. Bringing her to peak after peak, only to stop and kiss her, and slowly build her up again. When the passion took them, it was with a sweet and gentle touch, each finding their release at the perfect time, together.

When he curled behind her, holding her close to him, he watched her sleep. She was beautiful in every way, and strong. He knew when they first touched tonight that they had something special. Now all he needed to do was fight an unknown demon to keep her.

Ethan closed his eyes and drifted, the smell of her hair teasing his senses.

The ringing of the phone pulled both Ethan and Elizabeth from a peaceful sleep. He grunted when her elbow caught him in the stomach as she reached for the phone on his side of the bed. He caught a glimpse of the clock.

"Who calls at three a.m.?"

"Hello?"

Ethan sat up and turned on the lamp. Damn, but he had been sleeping well and so had Elizabeth. However, her pale face told him this call was not a good one.

"Tara, please. Calm down."

"Liz. Help me. She won't leave me alone."

Ethan could hear the voice on the other end of the line. Tara sounded like a terrified child, a very small child at that.

"Who won't leave you alone?"

"This is all your fault. Why don't you just give up?"

"What?"

"It's you she wants."

"Tara?"

"You're such a selfish bitch."

"Please, Tara, tell me what I can do and I will do it?"

"You could die." The voice changed into that of something evil and sinister.

Ethan had heard enough. He pried the phone from Elizabeth's hand, and for reasons he couldn't explain, pulled her behind him on the bed. She wrapped her arms around his waist from behind and laid her head on his back. He could feel her body trembling, fighting her emotions.

"Tara, that's about enough." His voice was gentle yet firm. He wanted to try to break through whatever delusion she was under. "Now, can you tell me who is trying to hurt you?"

"She won't leave me alone." Again the child's voice. "Can you make her leave me alone?"

"I will try to help you in anyway I can."

"You can't help me. Only Liz can."

"I won't allow her to talk to you in this condition."

There was a silence, and Ethan wondered if he had pushed the wrong buttons. Tara seemed very unstable.

"Well, Dr. Ethan. Come to play hero?" A woman's voice purred into the phone. "How is our dear Elizabeth?"

"Who is this?" he listened carefully, but he could have sworn he heard crying in the background.

"Tell me, Ethan. How is my little namesake in the bedchamber? We Hungarians are known for our stamina."

"Where is Tara?"

"Oh, the little whiner is here, but I'm afraid she isn't feeling well."

"I think you're Tara." He took a deep breath. "Tara, let me help you."

"She could use the help." A slight laugh followed. "Come, Ethan. Run to the rescue. Bring Elizabeth with you. I should like to see her."

"I won't let you have her." He couldn't believe he just said that. This had to be Tara in a fit of delusion.

"The clock is ticking, doc. Time's running out for the little red-head." With that the line went dead.

"Ethan, what the hell is going on?" Elizabeth shook all over. She looked like she would break at any minute.

"I don't know, baby, but we'll figure it all out."

"What did she mean? Namesake?"

"Another time, sweetheart. I have a feeling Tara is in trouble." He reached for his pants and stepped into them. "Get dressed honey, and let's go see what she has done to herself."

Elizabeth rushed to dress, and together they left her apartment, racing to his car. Elizabeth was terrified. What had Tara done? Why had she done it? What have I unleashed on the people I care about the most? She glanced at Ethan, calm as he

followed her directions. Would he be in harm's way? Something evil was after her; she realized that now. He knew more than he was telling her and she wasn't sure she liked that.

Her hands felt so cold and she rubbed them together, fighting the fear. Tara needed her. She knew in her heart that if Ethan hadn't told her everything, then he was only looking to protect her. What if something happened to him because of her?

"Tara sounded very unreasonable." He said as he turned at a light. Thankfully traffic wasn't too thick tonight. "Do you think I should call EMS and have them meet us?"

"No, please. Let's see what's going on first."

"Elizabeth, I want you prepared for what we may find."

"Do you think she harmed herself?"

"I don't know, but I just don't want you surprised." He reached over and took her hand in his, offering comfort and warmth. "It will be okay."

She nodded and clung to his hand. When they reached Tara's building, Elizabeth smiled at the security guard; he recognized her and they were let inside. She led the way to Tara's door and stopped when it was ajar.

"Stay behind me," Ethan said as he pushed the door slowly open. Nothing was out of place that he could tell, but he had never been here. "Anything look disturbed in this room?"

"No, other than there was a mirror over the mantel and it's not now."

"You stay right behind me, Elizabeth."

The kitchen looked in order, but a slight sound drew his attention. He stopped, listening. It was the sound of weeping.

"Tara?" Elizabeth called out and rushed down the hall to the bedroom.

"Elizabeth, wait." Ethan caught up to her in the bedroom and his mouth fell open.

The place was in total disarray. Dressers and end tables were up turned; the mattress was off the box spring, and the clothes were scattered and torn. What drew his attention was the word written over the headboard. In bold red letters, it read:

E L I Z A B E T H

"Oh my lord, what has happened here? Where is she?"

The weeping continued and Ethan turned toward the bathroom. Slowly, he opened the door. He found Tara there on the floor, blood coating her body.

"Tara?" He knelt beside her. "Elizabeth, call the paramedics."

Elizabeth stepped into the room and immediately flew to her friend's side. Blood was everywhere. She held Tara's hand and cried. Her relief was great when Tara opened her eyes.

"Liz," Tara whispered.

Suddenly Tara came to life in a screaming, withering ball of strength. Her hand snagged Elizabeth's hair, and she proceeded to shake her until Elizabeth felt her neck would snap.

"This is all your fault! Why won't you just die and spare us all?"

Ethan fought the hand that held Elizabeth and wrestled the woman down. Her strength was incredible. Elizabeth sat in stunned disbelief.

"Elizabeth, honey, go call an ambulance." He kept his voice calm. "Go on, I'll stay with her until they arrive."

She nodded and stood, slowly walking from the room. He knew she was devastated, but he had his hands full with Tara now who suddenly went limp in his arms.

"Tara? Come on, talk to me. Help is coming."

"You can't win. She always gets what she wants." Her hands gripped his tightly. "Please, don't let her take me. She is evil, the place is evil, and I don't want to be there."

"Okay, just relax."

The paramedics arrived along with security. After hauling Tara out on a gurney, security locked the apartment so nothing more would be disturbed until the detectives could investigate. Ethan walked with Elizabeth to the car, and the officer said they were taking Tara to Memorial Hospital.

"Come on, Honey. We'll meet them there." He opened her door and she sat, white as death, and waited. Ethan hurried to the driver's side.

"What the hell happened in there? Where did all that blood come from?"

"We won't know until we see the doctor."

He drove in silence, letting her get herself together. Damn he was scared, but not for himself. It was Elizabeth he was worried about. The Countess was very powerful if she was the one pulling Tara's strings. He had to accept the fact that a woman long dead was after Elizabeth. He gripped the steering wheel. He wouldn't let her go without a fight.

They parked and walked into the hospital, then waited in the room the nurse indicated. It seemed like hours before the doctor walked in.

"Are you here for the young woman brought in?"

"Yes, Tara. Is she Okay?" Elizabeth asked.

"Are you family?"

"I'm all she has." She looked into the doctor's eyes. "She is all the family I have as well. Spare no expense. I will cover everything."

"Dr. Will Kramer." He extended his hand and Ethan shook it, Elizabeth avoided it. "I was the physician called in to care for Tara. I must say it doesn't look good. Her blood loss was tremendous, and we have started infusing her with more. Her wounds, though not bad at first glance, were inflicted with the purpose of allowing her to slowly bleed to death."

Elizabeth sat down in the chair and put her head in her hands.

"What are her chances?" Ethan asked.

"Right now? Not too promising. Her vitals are all erratic, and her organs are shutting down faster than we can get blood into her." He sighed and sent Elizabeth a sympathetic look. "I will do all I can, but I'm sorry. I can't tell you she will live. If she does, it will be a welcome miracle. The police say it all looks self-inflicted. I would truly like to know how she did all of that to herself. Especially in areas she couldn't reach."

"Thank you, doctor."

"I wish I could give you better news." He started to walk out of the room, but turned again. "I will clear it for you two as visitors. No others. I know who she is, Ms. Shelton. I will do my best to protect her identity."

"Thank you." The sincerity in her voice was genuine. "Thank you for everything."

Ethan hugged her, the doctor forgotten as all his attention settled on the woman in his arms. He wanted to take all the fear and hurt into himself, but all he could give her was comfort.

"Do you want to go in and see her?"

"Yes."

"For a short time. You're exhausted."

Elizabeth didn't argue. She was tired, but her hurt and worry over Tara far outweighed her own fatigue. She missed her friend and prayed she would recover.

The room they entered looked like something out of a horror movie. The smells of disinfectant and sickness assailed her senses. The woman on the bed had more tubes protruding from her body than Elizabeth thought was possible. Blood was being pumped into her, as well as medication to insure she slept undisturbed.

She looked small, helpless, and very near death. Elizabeth stood beside her, touching her hand gently.

"I hope you can hear me, Tara. I'm so sorry this happened to you." Her voice was full of misery. "I swear to you. I never would have hurt you. I hope you believe that. I will be here every day until you're better."

Ethan stood to the side, allowing her the time she needed. He hoped Mary would visit him the next time he slept. He wanted some answers. Whatever was happening to Tara could very well happen to Elizabeth, and he would move hell itself to keep that from happening.

The doctor didn't say it, but he didn't believe for a minute Tara did all of this to herself. Ethan could read that much in his body language. She was dying, from the inside out. Unless they found themselves a miracle, she would die. He hoped Elizabeth

would be strong enough to bare it. For now, she was tired, and he wouldn't allow her to fall from fatigue.

"Elizabeth, we should go." He placed a hand on her shoulder. "She is resting and you could use some yourself."

"I hate to leave her."

"You can't do anything for her, honey. Come on; let's get some rest. We can come back later today after you have rested."

"Okay." she stood and bent to kiss her friends cheek. "I'll be back, Tara."

The ride back to Elizabeth's apartment was a silent one. Ethan wished he knew what she was thinking. The crease in her brow showed just how deep in thought she was.

Once inside the apartment, he grabbed her arm and pulled her into the shelter of his body. She needed to talk or she would go mad.

"Talk to me, Elizabeth. Don't hold it inside you."

Her body went limp and she began to cry softly. Her fists balled up in his shirt and she held on tightly.

"Everyone close to me is at risk, Ethan. Don't you see that?"

"You think I'm in danger?"

"Something evil and vile is using those I care for to hurt me." She tried to pull away, but he held fast to her. "Don't you get it? You could be in danger just because I'm close to you."

"You're not getting rid of me, just so you can save me." He tipped her face up to look into his eyes. "There is something between us, honey. Together we can fight, and we can win."

"I don't want you hurt."

"I'm made of sterner stuff than that, baby." He picked her up into his arms and carried her into the bedroom. He removed her clothes and his own. "Come on, get some rest."

"I'm afraid to sleep," she said, but she crawled in beside him.

"I will be right here. Nothing will hurt you." He wrapped himself around her, spooning her body to his. "We do this together, honey. I won't let you push me away."

"Why? You don't even know me."

"I know you. My heart knows you."

"That's poetic." She sighed and snuggled closer.

"Rest, let me watch over you for a while." He kissed her head and held her closer.

For long moments, he listened to her deep breathing. She was asleep, and seemed to be sleeping peacefully. He closed his eyes, and drifted with her. Not knowing the woman in his arms was in a danger he could not see.

Ethan found himself back in the garden outside the castle. However, Mary was not there. A woman sat on a bench under a gnarled tree, all in white. Though her back was to him, he felt a slight sliver of fear touch the base of his spine.

The woman stood and turned, her red gold hair was pinned at her nape, and her eyes seemed to shine a green that he had never quite seen before. He fought it, but his body stirred at the site of her. However, the fear he felt earlier mounted as she walked toward him.

"Hello, Ethan. We finally meet." She stood before him, and one lone finger traced his features from forehead to chin. "I must say. The little Elizabeth has wonderful taste."

"You're Lady Bathory." It was a statement of fact, not a question.

"I am, and you are positively delicious." Her hand tugged at the ties of his robe.

"What the hell?" he looked at his attire. When had he donned a robe?

"Silly man, I brought you here. You are wearing what I wanted you to wear." Her hand slipped inside and touched his abdomen. "You are not immune to my touch, I see."

His face flushed, knowing his cock was at full mast. He brought the image of his Elizabeth into his mind, and it helped him fight the desire. She was deliberately feeding him desire and he didn't want her.

"Stop. Don't touch me, Countess."

She smiled, looking into his eyes, and grasped his cock in her hand, stroking him. He found his courage and pushed her roughly away.

"I said, don't touch me."

"Who do you think you will be fucking once I win this battle?"

"I will hold Elizabeth, my Elizabeth."

"You know not what you fight, Ethan. Besides, I will look just like her. You can pretend." Her laugh was chilling. "You will not have a choice."

"Why do you need her so desperately?"

"Why? To live, of course. I'm weary of walking this forgotten world." She approached him again, and for a moment, the illusion of beauty shifted. "You, dear Ethan, will be by my side."

"No, I won't." he studied her. "Even now, you live behind magic and illusion. Show your true self, Countess."

Her eyes narrowed and she reached for him. The sound of a door banging on its hinges brought his eyes to the castle.

Mary stood there, looking like an avenging angel. Though he knew she feared the Countess, Mary had come to help him.

"Stay away from her, Ethan," she said as she approached and stood in front of him. "She is like a poison. Once in your system, she is hard to fight."

"Why Mary, my sweet chamber maid. Come to save the day?"

"You will not hurt him, Countess."

"What, pray tell, do you think you could do to stop me?"

Mary lifted a small knife from her skirts and held it before her. Ethan could see she trembled, but she held firm.

"Oh, little Mary. Do you really think to hurt me with that?" her laugh was chilling.

"No, Countess." Mary lifted the knife to her cheek, and before Ethan could stop her, she cut a deep gash across it. "But this will."

The Countess watched as the blood ran down the young girl's cheek. Screaming in outrage, she threw her hands in the air, disappearing in a cloud of mist.

"Mary, why did you do that?"

"I angered her, but she will think twice before trying her tricks on you."

"I don't understand. She acted as if you cut her."

Mary tore a piece of her shift and placed it to her cheek. How she hated the Countess. Her life had meant so little, until she discovered Ethan. She would rewrite her history and die to protect him if she had to.

"I did cut her, and I did so deeply." She turned to look up at the castle. "By cutting my own flesh in her presence. She considers it a waste. She cherishes the life-giving fluid."

"Will she punish you?"

"I am sure of that. However, you must wake, right now, Ethan."

"What? You're hurt."

"Your Elizabeth is in trouble. The Countess used you and me as a distraction. Wake Ethan. I will see you again very soon."

Ethan didn't second-guess her. Elizabeth was in trouble and she was his main concern. The Countess had touched him and he felt dirty. He hated going to Elizabeth with that woman's tainted touch on his body. Again he ran down the hill, tripped, and awoke just in time.

Elizabeth was thrashing around, as if fighting for her very life. Her face was contorted in pain and her cries broke his heart.

He turned on the light and leaned gently onto her body. She fought him like a wild woman, but still he tried to gently awaken her.

"Elizabeth, come on baby, wake up."

She screamed again and her body arched with enough force that he was almost thrown from the bed. These were not only the screams of the frightened. She was in pain.

"Damn it, Elizabeth" he jumped on her upper body, "Wake up."

Her cries continued, and he watched in horror as a welt rose on her face, bloody scratches appeared across her chest. He couldn't bare it any longer. He bit his lip, and then he slapped her.

Her eyes opened and the fear he saw there tore at him. He could see where he had slapped her, it was already red, and tears filled his eyes.

"Ethan?"

"God, Elizabeth, I'm sorry." He sat on the edge of the bed, not looking at her. "I would have rather removed my own hand than hit you."

"You hit me?"

"I couldn't wake you, so I slapped you."

"Ethan, I'm cold. Please hold me." She turned him to her and fell into his embrace. "I'm glad you slapped me."

"What?"

"It's nothing compared to what I was going through." He hugged her tighter and she hissed in pain. "What the hell? My chest is on fire."

"Damn, sorry. Those appeared just before I woke you." He stood and walked into the bathroom, returning with ointment. "How did these happen?"

"That ugly nurse was trying to tie me down, almost succeeded too." She sat as he applied the ointment. "Oh gods, Ethan, Tara was there. She was locked in a cage and crying for me."

"I'm sorry, baby."

"This is all really happening isn't it?" Tears gathered in her eyes. "Some long dead relative is using my dreams and weaknesses because she wants to live through me."

"Yes." He shook his head. "I know it's unbelievable. Mary, the one I spoke of, visits me. She warns me of danger to you."

"I feel like a walking, talking Wes Craven movie." She giggled at that comment. "If a big ugly guy with razors for fingers jumps out of the closet, I'm going to go crazy."

"It's early afternoon. Lets get a bite and go see about Tara." He hoped that would make her feel a little better.

"Okay, I need out of this apartment anyway."

"Why not pack an overnight bag. Come stay with me a few days."

"I don't want to intrude."

"Elizabeth Shelton, I should smack your ass for that one." He pulled her to him. "Together, remember?"

"Together." She nodded. "I'll pack a bag after I dress."

He nodded and released her. As he dressed, he wondered just what they would find at the hospital. As unreal as it seemed, he knew where Tara was. Her shell was lying in that hospital bed, but her being was lost in that dreadful castle. Maybe Mary could help him. He would ask her the next time he saw her.

"Ready?" she asked, walking out of the room with her bag in her hand.

"Ready as I'll ever be."

They locked up the apartment and once in the car, silence took over again. Each lost in their own world. Elizabeth worried about Tara. Ethan worried about the woman who was becoming so important to him. He was ready to die for her, he only hoped he wouldn't have to prove that in the end.

Chapter Five

The hospital was a busy place as Ethan made his way to the nurses' desk. While he waited to sign in, Elizabeth stood to the side of the waiting room. There were so many grieving people in one place, looks of hopeless despair on faces of the young and old. She knew how they felt. The only difference being, the doctors had a chance of saving their loved ones. Elizabeth held onto the hope for Tara, but she knew the chance was slim. So lost in her thoughts, she didn't notice Max until he was bearing down on her.

"Are you happy now?" Max snarled into her face, his face a mask of hate and rage. "You crazy bitch. All this bullshit about dreams. You were just mind fucking her and drove her nuts."

"That's crazy, Max. I love Tara." Though she tried to hide it, the hurt was there.

"Oh, yeah, I can see that." He all but spat in her face. "While she was slicing herself to ribbons, you were spreading your legs for Dr. Wonderful."

He didn't get a chance to say more. The slap she delivered him echoed throughout the hospital. Max drew his hand back and returned the slap, knocking her to the floor.

"Get up, hot pants. You wanna roll with the big boys?"

Max was lifted off his feet and slammed to the ground before he could do any more damage. Ethan pinned him neatly.

"You sorry excuse for a man. I will only say this once, so try to keep up." He leaned fully into Max's face. "Touch her again and I promise you, I'll kill you. In fact, I will make you beg for death."

"Get off me."

"Do you understand? Or do I need to beat it into you?"

"I hear you."

Ethan stood and pulled Elizabeth behind him. He itched to give the man a beating he would never forget, but this was a hospital and one of them needed to be level headed.

"I want to see Tara." Max snapped. "They won't let me unless you clear it."

"You're done talking to Elizabeth. I won't clear anything." Ethan watched as security officers surrounded them. "Do you really want to take this any further?"

"This is not over." Max stormed out of the hospital.

Ethan turned to Elizabeth and touched her cheek. Twice today she had been smacked.

"You okay?"

"Yeah." she blinked rapidly. "Let's go see Tara."

"Do you want to press charges?"

"No. He was just upset. Just let it go, Ethan."

He put his arm around her and walked her down the hall toward Tara's room. He was still seething inside. Damn but he wanted that man's blood. He had a feeling he and Max would knock heads before it was all over.

Tara's room was dark except for the monitor lights. He noticed she had fresh bandages over parts of her that didn't need bandages before. There was a soft knock on the door and Dr. Kramer entered the room.

"How are you two holding up?" he asked as he checked Tara's chart.

"Never mind us, please, how is Tara?" Elizabeth never took her eyes off her friend as she spoke. "Can she even hear me?"

"I'm sorry, Ms. Shelton, I wish I could give you a positive answer." He walked to the head of the bed and checked her eyes. "There is definite brain activity, but I'm concerned about the blood loss. I honestly don't think she can hear anything at the moment."

"What of her wounds?" Ethan asked, watching the monitor that showed her breathing pattern. It was jumping erratically. "What is the problem with her breathing?"

"Her wounds, though superficial, are appearing all the time. I have no idea how, but it's like she wakes long enough to hurt herself." When Elizabeth started to argue, he held up a hand. "I said it was what it looked like. I know there is no possible way that young lady has woke up at all."

"Why?"

"She is heavily sedated."

Elizabeth's eyes widened and she covered her mouth with her hands, knowing she couldn't voice aloud what was rolling through her mind.

"As for her breathing, that's another puzzle. I'm doing all I can, but her system is slowly shutting down. I'm sorry, but I will do all I can."

Ethan nodded, thanked him, and waited until he walked out the door before speaking his mind.

"She is in a constant, on-going dream. She can't wake because of the drugs."

"Oh gods, Ethan. What can we do?"

He took her chart from the foot of the bed and noticed Tara received intravenous sedatives three times a day. They were powerful drugs. Even with her last dose she wouldn't wake until tomorrow evening. Taking a pen from the clipboard, he did something that surprised even himself. He changed the time for her next injection.

"What did you do?"

"With the drug they're giving her, she could sleep for days. I changed her next dose to tomorrow night at nine. If we're lucky, she'll be slightly lucid by the time we visit. I just hope I didn't hurt her any more by doing so."

Ethan watched Elizabeth hold her friend's hand, talking to her as if she could hear every word. It tore at him knowing Tara would more than likely never recover. Even if she did, she would never be the same. The lack of oxygen from her blood loss would affect her and she would be a shell of the woman she once was.

"Let's go Elizabeth. We'll come back tomorrow and hopefully she will be lucid enough to talk to you."

"What if she attacks me again?" Elizabeth bit her lip. "She seemed to hate me."

"That wasn't Tara, honey. Remember that."

Once they were back in his car, Ethan reached over and took her hand. He needed to touch her, to feel the warmth of her in some way. It could very well be her in that hospital bed. Elizabeth had just been too strong. However, the more her stress pulled at her and lack of good sleep, her strength was slowly seeping away. That was what the Countess was hoping for.

"Are you hungry?" he broke the silence. "We kinda skipped that bite to eat earlier."

"I guess I could eat." She tried for a smile. "Could we have it delivered? I really don't think I wanna be around a lot of people right now."

"Sounds great. We can picnic in the living room floor." He winked at her. "Or the bedroom floor."

"Oh, that's typical." This time, her laugh was genuine.

"Well, I am a man."

"Don't I know it."

They pulled into the parking garage of his building and he carried her bag up to his apartment. He opened the door for her and she tried to hide her surprise at his home. The place was absolutely gorgeous. Not to mention spotless, but she had known it would be. A variety of art graced his walls, and one wall was dedicated to books. She never read unless she had to.

His furniture was a dark blue, and the carpet was a soft burgundy. Two colors she never would have chosen, but they looked great in his home. Everything about the apartment fit him to a "T".

"Well, care to share what has you grinning?"

"It's a lovely home." She looked around again. "It suits you."

"Oh? Here I thought I just bought the first thing that caught my eye." He smiled; glad she seemed comfortable. "Go ahead and look around. I'll put your bag in the bedroom."

She followed him into his bedroom, and was almost in love. This was the room of her dreams. His dressers were all cherry wood, as well as the huge bed that dominated the room itself. You could sleep at least six in that bed and not touch the person next to you. The large headboard has mirrors and a deep floral design carved into every nook. It was beautiful. She couldn't resist teasing him.

"Such a big bed, Ethan. Just how much room do you need?"

"Just enough to chase you around in it." He growled and lifted her. She shrieked when he tossed her in the middle of the bed then followed her down. "Wanna see how long it would take for me to catch you?"

"What if I want to get caught?"

He didn't say anything, just lowered his head and kissed her. He intended for it to be a gentle kiss, but the minute her tongue met his, it changed into something more. Her hands roamed his body, as his did hers.

"Dr. Richards? Just what do you think your doing?"

"I'm about to make love to you, Ms. Shelton."

"Just how many women have you entertained in this big, beautiful bed?" she giggled when he lightly tickled her thigh. "A girl has her standards."

"You are the first woman to grace this bed, honey. I don't want to loose such a pleasurable opportunity."

He pulled her shirt over her head, and unclasped her bra. When her beautiful mounds were bare to him, he took one nipple deeply into his mouth. He suckled her hard, and her gasp was music to his ears.

"Good lord, Ethan. Get your clothes off."

He chuckled and rose to his knees, removing his shirt. She quickly finished undressing and helped him remove the rest of his own. Then they came together again, hot kisses full of fire, hands memorizing one another.

Ethan pushed her to her back and settled between her thighs. She was so beautiful. Her blonde hair fanned out across the blue coverlet. Her eyes so bright with passion they reminded him of blue gems. He reached between her legs and found her wet and wanting.

He clasped her ankles and drew her knees over his shoulders. She would be open to him in so many ways. He would be able to reach her very depths this way. He wanted to touch her heart.

Slowly, he pushed into her, watching her face. Her mouth opened on a silent cry, and her neck arched. She enjoyed this first touch as much as he did. He steadily pushed until he was buried inside her tight warmth. Then, just as slowly, he moved within her.

"You feel so good, baby," he said as he watched himself slide in and out of her. "I could do this every day for the rest of my life."

Elizabeth couldn't answer. Her ears were ringing with the blood pumping through her body. The feel of him so deep inside her was like nothing ever before. She wanted to tell him she wanted him to do this everyday for the rest of her life.

Ethan lowered her legs and she wrapped them around his waist. Lowering his head he kissed her gently, all he felt in that one simple act. Her hands clutched his arms and he drove into her just a little harder, a little deeper.

"Tell me what you need, Elizabeth."

"Just you, right here and right now. Just us. Just this."

He rose above her, bracing his weight on his arms, and moved in a steady rhythm. He wanted this to last, to give her so much pleasure she would have nothing but thoughts of happiness when she lay down beside him tonight.

Her head tossed from side to side as her body built to a fevered pitch. Ethan reached down and flicked her clit once, twice, and then she came apart in his arms.

He leaned into her, taking those beautiful cries into his mouth and body. He was close to release, but determined she reach that peak again before he went over with her.

Her arms wrapped around him, holding him close as she moved with him. He took one hand and then the other into his own, lacing their fingers together beside her head.

He never stopped moving, just stared into her eyes while he kissed her gently and made love to her.

"God but you are beautiful, Elizabeth." He could feel her inner muscles quivering around him, drawing him deeper. "Are you ready baby?"

"Ethan..." she gasped into his mouth when he leaned in to taste his name on her lips.

"Let go, baby. I'm with you."

When her climax tore through her body, her cry tasted sweet. His own was ripped from his body as she gripped him tightly and he pushed deeply one last time.

Elizabeth lay holding him to her, not wanting to let him go. She felt safe, cherished, and maybe even loved. She kissed his neck and tasted the sweat on his skin. When he rolled from her, she reluctantly let him go, but he pulled her to him. They lay entwined, both reluctant to part from each other.

"You are one incredible woman, Elizabeth Shelton." He gently stroked her back with his fingers. "In just a few short days and wonderful nights, you have won me heart and soul. I hope you don't think to walk away. I don't think I could let you go."

"I don't want you to, Ethan." She rose on her elbow to look into his eyes. "God willing, this nightmare will end soon. Even then, when it's all over, I hope to still have this and so much more with you."

She leaned down and kissed him then flung herself across his body, her fingers tickling his sides and causing him to roll about with her on the bed. His laughter rang out in the room, and she was pleased to discover a few spots even he didn't know were ticklish.

"Alright, woman. Stop that."

"On one condition."

"Demands now?" he said, then laughed when she went at him again. "Alright, alright, what's the condition?"

"I'm starving."

"I thought I just fed your appetite."

"One is not like the other. If you want to be able to play with me again, I need food."

"Heaven forbid I should let you starve." He lightly swatted her on the rump. "Okay, let's decide what we want, order it, and shower before it gets here."

"Shower?"

"Yeah, you know. Water, soap, clean?"

"Oh you're a funny one." She grinned. "Are we showering together?"

"Absolutely."

"You think if we get in that shower together, we will beat the delivery man?"

"Good point; so we better get to it."

Laughing, he stood and pulled her to her feet. "Come on, woman."

In the kitchen, naked as the day they were born, they browsed the phone book until they settled on a dish.

"You like Chinese?" he asked as he flipped through the pages.

"Love it."

"Anything in particular?"

"Nope. I like it all."

"Get your butt in the shower before you drive me crazy." His gaze fastened on her breasts. "I can only take so much."

"You're not coming?"

"Let me order this food, and I'll join you." He winked. "Then we'll see who's coming."

She actually blushed and headed for the bathroom. Ethan watched her go, and waited till he heard the water running. First call was to the hospital. Tara showed no change. He sat that worry aside for now and called the restaurant. He placed an order for a dish made for two with egg rolls, crab Rangoon, and fortune cookies.

He hung up the phone and walked down the hall, stopping just outside the door. He smiled, listening to her sing softly to herself. He recognized the song and smiled to

himself. A woman who enjoyed the classic side of rock. "Sexy Eyes" by none other than Dr. Hook.

He stepped inside and noticed the extra towel laid out. His grin widened as he stepped into the shower, but his mouth went dry at the picture she made. Her tight body stood beneath the spray, her eyes closed as she hummed the tune and rinsed her hair. One leg slightly cocked, her body was more than perfect. It should be downright outlawed. She turned beneath the spray, and her perfectly rounded ass teased him as she bent forward to rinse the soap from her legs. He had to touch her.

Ethan stepped behind her, grasping her hips in his hands and rubbing his very erect cock into her backside. Slowly she straightened, and his hands came around her to caress her breasts. Her hands were soapy, and she reached behind her, gently washing him. His hips rocked into her hands, and she allowed just enough water between them to rinse him off.

"I want you again," he whispered into her ear.

"The food?" she gasped when he tweaked her nipples. "We don't wanna miss that, do we?"

"I have forty-five minutes to play with you, baby."

Her hands covered his own and she moved one down her belly between her legs.

"Keep your hand over mine, Elizabeth. Show me how you like to be touched."

Her hand guided him, and soon she was convulsing in his arms. He stroked her through another climax, before he turned her in his arms and kissed her.

"Ethan, please."

"Please what?"

"Don't make me wait."

"Am I not pleasing you, Elizabeth?"

"I need to feel you inside of me." She rubbed her wet, slick breasts across his chest.

Ethan lifted her and she wrapped her legs around him. Swiftly he entered her and braced her back against the shower wall. This was no easy loving. It was hot, quick and devastatingly explosive.

She cried out and his release seemed to be endless. His body shuddered over and over again deep inside her.

Slowly he released her legs and made sure she could stand on her own. Again they washed one another, but the need was sated.

Turning off the shower, Ethan stepped out and handed her a towel. They laughed with one another as they moved about the bathroom. Ethan was happy to see her smile.

With nothing but the towels draping their bodies, they sat in the living room, talking of nothing yet everything. The knock at the door caught them both by surprise and set her off in another fit of giggles. Ethan snagged his wallet off the counter and opened the door wide, then realized his mistake when the young deliveryman stared wide-eyed at the almost naked man in front of him. He handed the boy the money, and then it hit him that not only was he half naked, but so was Elizabeth. The boy couldn't take his eyes off of her.

"All right youngster. Here's your money and out you go." Ethan had to push the poor boy into the hall.

When he turned to her, bags in hand, Elizabeth let her laughter flow. She held her sides and rolled on the couch.

"You should have seen your face"

"I didn't have to, I saw his"

That caused them both to laugh. Ethan sat the food on the coffee table, and still in their towels they fed one another. For the next few hours, things seemed pretty normal.

Chapter Six

Ethan was dreaming again, however this time, he was inside the castle walls. The dreams no longer frightened him, or even surprised him. Mary was like another part of him now.

She was here now, sitting on yet another bench. This garden seemed to grow herbs, spices and a mixture of plants he couldn't identify. It looked more alive than the outside garden.

"Mary?"

She raised her face and he gasped. Her hair had been shorn to just above the collar, and her face was bruised.

"I'm glad you have come, Ethan."

"What happened?"

"You defy the Countess, and you pay." She said with a shrug of her shoulders. "It is not important. My fate is written, and she cannot change that. Only I have that power over myself."

"Was this because of me?"

"No." She glanced back at the castle. "I tried to help your friend, Ethan. There is nothing I can do and I am so sorry."

"Tara?"

"She is inside the walls."

"Then let me try." He stood and walked to the inner door, but it wouldn't budge.
"Damn it. Why can't I enter?"

"Because she won't let you."

Ethan paced between Mary and the door. Tara was inside. He wanted to help her, but couldn't see how. Elizabeth would rest so much easier if her friend were out of danger.

"Ethan, come and sit."

He joined her again on the bench.

"There must be something I can do."

"I understand your frustration. However, you must prepare Elizabeth for her friend's death."

Ethan paled. How could he tell Elizabeth her dearest friend was going to die? How could he crush the hope she had inside her?

"There is always a chance, Mary."

"Not this time, Ethan." She clasped his hand. "Before the next sunrise, maybe two, Tara will die. I hate to sound so cold, but I cannot lie to you."

"How am I to help Elizabeth then?" He put his face in his hands. "How can I fight what I can't see?"

"Do you love her?"

"Yes, I believe I do."

"Then you have the ultimate power."

"I'm afraid Tara's death will push her over the edge."

"She is stronger than you think. Otherwise the Countess would have won by now."

"I hope you're right." He stood, glancing once more at the door. "I better go now. I hate to leave her long."

"Yes. I am only a small dream away."

"Thank you, Mary."

"Have faith and believe. It's more powerful than even the Countess."

Ethan opened his eyes, glancing at the woman sleeping beside him. For once, she truly looked to be resting well. Glancing at the clock, it was still early. He would need to go to the office today, but his schedule was light and he would take Elizabeth with him. They would use the time to examine any and all information he could find on the Countess. Then he would take her to see Tara. God this would kill her. He decided not to mention his meeting with Mary. The last visit with her friend should be free of the knowledge that she would die.

Hating to wake her but knowing he had to, he leaned over and kissed her gently. Her small murmur of protest had him smiling.

"Wake up, beautiful."

"Five more minutes, mom." She grinned.

"Come on, baby." He patted her rump. "We need to go to my office."

"You go."

"I refuse to leave you. Now get up and get dressed."

Elizabeth made a show of throwing off the covers and bounding into the bathroom. He grinned when he heard the shower and again she started humming.

"It's not going to work, Elizabeth," he said, peeking into the shower. "Any other time I'd be tempted."

"That's too bad. I was starting to feel rather naughty."

He growled and left the bathroom before he caved. The woman was temptation, and today he needed his wits about him.

She walked into the kitchen wearing a towel around her head and his bathrobe, sniffing the air appreciatively.

"Oh, hot coffee." She accepted a mug from him. "Thanks."

"I'm going to grab a quick shower, and we can grab breakfast on the way to the office."

By the time Ethan had showered, Elizabeth was almost ready. He noticed that even though she had rested well, she still looked tired.

"You still sleepy? I could cancel today."

"Don't be silly. I'll be fine."

Grabbing his keys and briefcase, he waited for Elizabeth to grab her purse and they drove straight to the deli. Deciding to eat at the office, they took their breakfast to go. Once they entered the office building, Elizabeth shivered. Something felt very wrong here.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. I'm just spooked for some reason."

Ethan nodded and she followed him toward his office. Elizabeth noticed the smile on his secretary's face fade when she noticed her.

"Marla, this is Elizabeth. We'll be doing some research in between appointments."

"I just bet you will." Marla mumbled, shooting daggers at Elizabeth.

"What was that?" Ethan asked, surely he heard wrong. "I didn't quite hear you."

"Nothing, Ethan." Marla seemed to catch herself. "I mean nothing, Dr. Richards. Would you like coffee this morning?"

"A fresh pot will be good, but we're covered for now."

"Yes, sir."

Elizabeth preceded him into the office, and when she turned, she noticed Marla was red-faced and her hands balled into tight fists.

"Something I should know?"

"What?"

"She is mad as hell that I'm here."

"She has a crush, nothing I have encouraged."

"Ethan, didn't you feel the change in the air? From the waiting room to this room?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it seemed so...stuffy...thick in there."

"No, I didn't notice anything."

They sat at his desk and he handed her the file he had on Elizabeth Bathory. They ate and talked, trying to figure out just who this woman was really. How could she have this kind of power? How could they fight her?

The buzzer sounded on his desk.

"Yes?"

"Your first appointment has arrived."

"Thank you."

Elizabeth stood, and picked up the file. She would read more while he met with his client.

"Will you be okay?"

"Sure. Ill study this and when you're done we can chat about it more."

"You will stay in the waiting room?"

"I promise."

He walked her out, made sure she sat, and ushered his client inside.

Elizabeth tried to ignore the woman behind the desk. She would be dead if a person could murder with their eyes alone. Finally, she returned the woman's stare.

"Is there something you need to say to me?"

"What could I possibly have to say to you?" Marla sneered.

"From the moment I walked in here you have glared and stared. So if you have something to say, then say it. Or look elsewhere."

"I just think it is rather unprofessional, dating a client."

"And?"

"And what? If Ethan feels the need to have his little bed bug present, what can I say?"

"Are you done?" Elizabeth stayed calm. "All finished now?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now kindly do what you're paid to do and leave me alone."

She turned back to the file on the Countess. What a life this woman led. It was hard to believe they were, though distantly, very distantly, related. The woman had an evil streak that would freeze fire. How could someone torture and kill that many women and be proud of it?

Elizabeth was sure she was missing something. It had to do with right before her death, but for some reason, she couldn't place it.

A cold chill swept over her, and she looked around the room. Fear settled in her belly and she knew something was just not right.

Her eyes landed on Marla and she knew that whatever was wrong had to do with this woman. Marla sat with her head down, her hands lying on her desk. Then she lifted her head. Elizabeth could feel the violence flowing off of the woman.

"Marla?" She tried to keep her voice calm as Marla rose from the desk, grabbed a pair of scissors and slowly walked toward her. "Marla, what are you doing?"

Marla said nothing, just slowly walked forward. Elizabeth jumped from her chair, backing away and around the table set for magazines. Her mind told her to scream, but her voice suddenly froze in fear. Just when she thought she could reach Ethan's office door, Marla pounced.

Her strength was tremendous, and it was all Elizabeth could do to keep the hand with the scissors away from her face. She tried rolling, but Marla, or whoever she was, wouldn't budge. Elizabeth's hand slipped, and her eyes widened as the scissors bore down on her. As a last thought, she threw her hands before her face.

Pain radiated up her arm and into her shoulder. Elizabeth opened her eyes. The mixture of seeing those scissors buried completely through her forearm, and the pain she felt, released her voice from its paralysis. As Marla tried to pull the scissors from her arm, no doubt to take another swipe, Elizabeth fought to keep them in her arm and screamed like a Banshee.

The sound of a door banging open gave Elizabeth little comfort. This woman had lost her mind. The pain in her arm was over-riding her fear now that Ethan was in her sights.

"Ethan, get this crazy bitch off of me," Elizabeth shouted.

Marla seemed to be plucked from the air, and the minute she hit the floor, she barreled back for more. Ethan caught her and carried her screaming into the bathroom, barring the door. He hurried back to Elizabeth.

"What the hell happened?"

"She was acting oddly, we had words, and then we ignored each other." She cradled her arm, panting through the pain. "Then she just went nuts"

"I don't think it hit bone. I pushed the silent alarm on her desk when I saw what was going on. An ambulance will be here soon." He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and tied it above the scissors. "God, baby, I'm sorry."

"Ethan, I don't blame you. Right now, however, I hurt like hell and I want these things out of me." She tried to fight back the tears, but they were flowing. "Damn this hurts."

"I hear the sirens. They can give you something for the pain."

"No."

"Elizabeth, you're hurting."

"I don't want to sleep."

"I'll stay beside you, honey. I promise, nothing will happen."

There was no more time for talk as the doors flew open. Ethan told the officers where to find Marla, and EMS started on Elizabeth. He was right. It hadn't hit the bone. However, only a doctor could remove it.

Inside the ambulance, they started an IV for shock, and administered, much to her chagrin, a potent painkiller that took all her cares away.

At the hospital, as luck would have it, Dr. Kramer was the one on call. After much debate, he added a numbing medication and removed the scissors. He wrote a prescription for pain, but decided she needed to stay a few hours, allowing the already administered medication time to wear off.

It was early evening when she began to come to her senses. Ethan looked haggard and worried, not to mention guilty.

"Ethan? What time is it?"

"About six." He kissed her forehead. "How do you feel?"

"Hung over." She blinked to clear her vision. "Man my arm hurts."

"I had some painkiller filled for you."

"Not now. I want to see Tara."

Ethan didn't argue. Even though he wanted nothing more than to protect her, keep her locked away, he wouldn't deny her this. It would be the last time she would see her friend.

"Okay." He brought a wheelchair. "Your chariot awaits."

She tried to smile, but failed. It had been a trying day for her. He wheeled her to Tara's room and pushed her close to the bed. Elizabeth stood slowly and sat beside her friend, taking her hand.

"Tara?" she sighed. "How I wish you could hear me."

Tara's eyes flickered, and then slowly opened. Elizabeth gasped and leaned over her friend, tears spilling down her cheeks.

"Liz?"

"Yes, I'm here." There was joy in her voice. "You're going to be fine."

"No, Liz. Don't give yourself false hope. I love you, but I'm dying."

"What are you talking about? You're going to be working the runway before you know it." Elizabeth glanced at Ethan. "She'll be fine."

Ethan closed his eyes, shutting out the fear and hope that he saw in her face. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't reassure her.

"Liz, you have to let me go."

"No."

"I don't want to hurt any more." Tara fought for breath. "I don't blame you. This was beyond your control."

"Please don't die."

"Liz, you must find away to stop her." She gasped again. "If she wins, hell on earth will be an understatement."

"Tara, you have to fight. Please!" Elizabeth desperately clutched her friend's hand, ignoring her own arm, now starting to bleed from the stitching. "We can do this together."

"Ethan is your hope, Elizabeth." Tara's eyes fluttered. "Now, say goodbye to me, so you may fight and live a long happy life together. If I catch you grieving overly long, I will haunt you."

"Please don't go." Elizabeth started crying in deep sobs. "You're my best friend, my sister, my family. Please don't leave me."

"I love you too."

The heart monitor beeped once, twice, and then was a constant sound in Elizabeth's ears. Her cry of anguish ripped through the room and his own heart. His lover, his woman, was deeply hurting and he could do nothing for her.

"Please. Please. I will give myself to you, just please bring her back to me." She rocked back and forth on the bed. "Give her back her life and take mine, you bitch"

Before Ethan could reach her, Tara's body sat straight up on the bed and one hand wrapped around Elizabeth's injured arm. The once bright green eyes that were Tara's now looked yellow and frightening.

"Do we have a bargain, Little Elizabeth?" The mouth of Tara moved, but it wasn't her voice. It dripped evil and Elizabeth realized her mistake. "That's a trade I will be happy to make."

"You're not Tara"

"For a Bathory, you are quite foolish."

"I am not a Bathory."

Elizabeth struggled to remove the grip on her arm, and was relieved to feel Ethan behind her, pulling her away with such force that her arm felt it had been ripped from her body.

"I won't let you have her, Countess. Not now, not ever."

The evil laugh that followed chilled them to the very bone as Tara's body was once more still on the bed. The only sound remaining was the constant tone of the heart monitor.

Though Ethan tried, Elizabeth could not be comforted. After informing the hospital that they would handle all funeral arrangements, she pulled herself into a shell and refused to come out. He had made the call to Max as a courtesy, only to have it end with more ugly accusations. He had also made the call to the funeral home. Then he spent hours holding her, but she wouldn't cry. He was worried for her sanity.

The Countess, though he couldn't understand why, quit interrupting her dreams. Mary had only visited him once, and that was to warn him that things were not what they seemed. He was terrified.

The day of Tara's funeral dawned misty and promised rain. Ethan watched as she readied herself for the final goodbye to her dearest friend. She moved as if on autopilot. Her black mourning suit and jacket were pleated, her hair in place. The jacket was loose enough to cover the bandage on her arm. Though he knew it pained her, she still refused the pain medication.

Marla had been sent into the mental hospital for evaluation. Ethan suspected the Countess had her hand in that episode back at the office. However, he doubted the Countess would have caused such bodily harm to Elizabeth. She wanted her for other means. After thinking hard on the matter, Marla may have been influenced, but her own mind had her picking up those scissors and trying to hurt Elizabeth. Until things settled, he closed his office. His clients were sent to another psychologist, whom Ethan trusted.

Chapter Seven

The services for Tara had turned out more than even Elizabeth expected. Many of the designers Tara had modeled for had not only made an appearance, they were also deeply saddened by the loss of such a beautiful woman.

Anyone who knew them knew the two friends were as close as any family. In turn they all made their way to Elizabeth. She acknowledged them, but her eyes never left the closed casket that held Tara.

Ethan held her hand tightly, afraid that if he let her go, she would somehow disappear. He knew her pain was deep, but she had yet to truly cry. She needed to vent, to rail, to scream. Somehow, he would break through. He had to.

Max had shown in his finest. Ethan noticed, however, that his eyes never left Elizabeth. Something deep inside him warned not to trust this man.

The director of the ceremony had finished and they had decided on a few moments of silence, no music would be played. He then announced that the procession would be delayed for only a few moments, and they would all convene at the burial site.

The people mingled about, the talk that of the strange and untimely death of one so young and beautiful. Still, Elizabeth sat.

When the director and his assistant began to move Tara's casket, she jumped to her feet and followed. Ethan was relieved that she still held his hand. At least she was aware he was still there. He followed silently, ready to be there for her when she did break.

Elizabeth was silent in the limousine ride to the burial plot. She was silent as they all gathered around Tara's casket and listened to the reverend speak of ever lasting peace. When the casket began to lower into the ground, Elizabeth broke.

"Stop," she sobbed and rushed forward. "Not yet, please, not yet."

Ethan watched as she collapsed onto the ground, her hands reaching for the box holding the shell of her friend. He slowly walked to her and knelt.

"Elizabeth, come on honey." He tried to pull her back. "She's not there anymore."

"Oh, Tara. I'm so sorry." Her whisper was pained and her tears flowed freely. "I will never forgive myself."

He knew this wasn't the time to point out that none of this was her fault. She was finally facing the grief that she had held inside. Not to mention, these people standing around them silently watching, would not understand.

"Ethan, I can't leave her."

"She isn't hurting anymore, sweetheart."

Elizabeth looked down, as if just realizing she was sitting in the turned earth that would soon cover Tara. Her hands fisted in the dirt and she broke down all together. Her body curled and she collapsed.

Between the murmurs and whispers, Ethan picked her up and walked away from it all. She didn't need any more today. Enough was enough.

The feeling of being watched followed him to the limo.

Finally, she rested. Once he brought her back to his place, he had undressed her and stood with her in the shower. He didn't want the dirt left on her body. She had clung to him, and he just allowed the warm water to wash it away.

Now, he lay beside her. She clung to him tightly, her face in his chest. Her injured arm rested on a pillow across their hips. His eyes ached and burned. He was so very tired. For only a moment, he would close his eyes. He would feel her if she needed him.

His mind drifted, and he wondered if he would see Mary. His fear for Elizabeth was doubled, and he wanted this to end.

He was in the castle. He knew that. He had never actually been inside before other than the inner garden. A long table stood before him, and it looked set for two. Glancing down at himself, he was dressed in a tux. A tux? What the hell?

"You look very fetching in that suit, Ethan."

He froze, in fear or anger he wasn't sure. Glancing back to the head of the table, his eyes narrowed on the woman there.

"Why the hell am I here?"

"Because I wish for you to be."

"Why am I dressed like this?"

"Oh, come now Ethan. Even I can admit that the finery for this age is, well, appalling." The Countess stood, and walked to him. "However, this is much more to my taste." her hand caressed his chest.

"What do you want?" he pushed her hand away. Her eyes narrowed, but were soon replaced with a look of sultry invitation.

"I would think that would be obvious."

"One way or another I will find away to end all this."

"The subject on my namesake is a closed one. I will have her." She smiled and tilted her head. "Would it be so bad? We would both have what we want. I will have the body of Elizabeth. Do you really think you could tell a difference in us?"

"Elizabeth Shelton is a pure heart. Yours, however, is putrid."

"I would watch that tongue, Ethan. Better yet, I have other uses for it." She stroked her breasts in invitation.

"No."

"I like you, Ethan. Not many would refuse me." She sat on the table before him, lifted her skirts and watched his reaction. "We will get along very well."

"Not as long as there is a breath in my body." He glanced around, avoiding her display. "I want to see Mary."

"Oh, I'm sure the little mouse will be along." She sighed. "Mary has an odd way of showing up when she is least wanted."

As if on cue, the doors opened and there she was. Ethan watched as she calmly walked to him and smiled. When her eyes settled on the Countess they narrowed.

"It's just like you, Countess."

"Whatever do you mean?" A look of innocence crossed her features.

Mary took Ethan by the arm and walked him from the room. He had no idea how Mary could be so brave, knowing it could cost her.

"Mary? What is it?"

"Oh, she is a cleaver bitch."

"Aren't you afraid?"

"Not any longer. As long as you are safe, I am safe."

"What has happened?"

"While she has been trying to seduce you, that old nurse is working on Elizabeth."

"What?"

"The weaker she becomes, the better their chances." She sighed. "They torment her sleep, and that will aid them."

"What can I do? Damn it! How do I stop this?"

"Ethan, go and see your grandmother. She is far more aware of this than you know. That is all I can tell you."

"Can't you tell me what the Countess wants with me?"

"That should be obvious, Ethan. You are a man with money and influence." Mary folded her arms and narrowed her eyes at him. "Ethan, stop thinking like a doctor. Open your mind."

With that, she was gone, and he was looking up at his own ceiling. A sick feeling formed in his gut. The Countess wanted him as well. He would be allowed to live, but if she had her way, death would be preferable.

Elizabeth moaned in her sleep and he glanced down into her face. Her eyes worked frantically, though they were closed.

Today they would visit his grandmother, but right now, he needed to know Elizabeth was safe and alive.

Ethan leaned forward, careful of her arm, and kissed her lightly. When she sighed, he ran the tip of his tongue across her lips. He kissed her again and gently pushed her onto her back. Her breasts were an invitation he would not ignore, so again he leaned forward and lightly licked one nipple. When her breath caught and her back arched, he took the tight nipple deep inside his mouth.

Her hand came up, threading her fingers into his hair. He almost had her completely awake. His hand skimmed down her belly and settled between her legs, stroking her. She was wet from his play, and he groaned against her breast, sliding one finger deep inside of her.

"Ethan," she gasped, fully aware of her surroundings now.

"I needed to touch you, to know you're alive and still with me." He moved to her other breast; all the while his hand stroked her.

"I'm here, Ethan." She arched her hips, silently begging for more. "I will be here."

"Everything has happened so fast." He added another finger, groaning at her gasp of pleasure. "I just need to know we still have this fire between us. That you still have this desire for me."

Elizabeth pulled his hair until he lifted his head, and she kissed him. All the desire, passion and even love she felt was in that kiss. Still, his hand stroked her.

"Ethan, please."

"What?"

"I need you inside of me. Please."

Ethan kissed her again and started down her chest. He paused to give each breast equal attention before he looked back into her eyes.

"I will be inside of you, baby in more ways than one. Now lay back and let me love you."

She collapsed back on the bed, panting with anticipation. His fingers continued their torment, and his hot breath across her mound was almost her undoing. She

opened her mouth to beg him, if needed, and his hot mouth latched onto her clit. His teeth coming into play.

Elizabeth bucked against the hands and mouth, her own hand tweaking her nipples. She was on fire and needed him to extinguish it. Then she erupted in such pleasure. Tears of relief came to her eyes. Ethan still held her with his hand and mouth, drawing it out until she was nothing but a quivering mass of flesh. He pulled his fingers from inside, kissed her clit again, and crawled up her body.

"I love the way you taste, baby." He placed his mouth above hers. "Share it with me."

Then he was kissing her again. The taste of her juices on his lips was more erotic, more sensual, than anything she had ever experienced before. As he drew the kiss deeper, he slowly pushed into her, joining them completely.

Elizabeth moaned at the feel of her already sensitive flesh stretching around him. Her inner walls clamped around the invasion, and with a moan of his own, he continued to work his way inside her.

"Ethan..."

"Am I hurting you?"

"No." Her nails raked his flat nipples. "Just don't stop."

He moved within her powerfully. She wrapped her legs around his waist, lifting to meet his thrust.

"I can promise you this, Elizabeth." He stopped to look into her face. "Nothing on this earth or the realms we can't see will ever make me stop loving you."

"God, Ethan." She smiled up at him, her eyes misty with happy tears. "I love you, too."

He moved again, but their eyes remained locked together, each watching the emotions that crossed the others face. All the times they had loved before, this time, this moment together was the special moment they would always remember.

Elizabeth could feel it building inside her. Her belly clinched and her breaths came in time to his driving thrusts. She knew he felt her muscles working, his eyes flared with every caress.

"Together..." he rasped, moving harder within her.

"Together."

The climax that took them was powerful and Ethan knew something more had happened between them tonight. Her scream of release he caught on his lips as he took her mouth, still driving into her.

When her tongue thrust into his mouth and her fingers worked down his back to caress his ass, he exploded again and again.

He lay against her and she smiled. He was so careful of her arm. She held him close, relishing all they had discovered. Ethan loved her. Surely now they could beat anything. She swiped at the tears rolling down her face.

"Are you alright?" he whispered, leaning up to look at her. "Why are you crying? Did I hurt you?"

"No, oh no."

"I don't like for you to cry. You deserve to be happy." He wiped the tears from her cheeks.

"I am happy, Ethan. You've made me very happy."

"Really?" His smile was almost boyish.

"Really." She pushed at his chest and he rolled to his back. Elizabeth sat beside him, a look in her eyes he was coming to appreciate. "I want to make love to you this time."

His eyes flared, but he said nothing. The thought of her touching him and taking control had his cock stirring to attention. She noticed and smiled a secret smile.

"Someone likes the idea, I see."

"When it comes to you, sweetheart, he is full of ideas. Remember your arm though."

"I hadn't planned on acrobats or anything. I'll be careful."

"Damn, I was so looking forward to the acrobats." He chuckled at her.

"You just prop yourself up against the headboard with some pillows, and I'll be right back." She jumped from the bed.

"Where are you going?" he asked, but did as she instructed.

"To the kitchen."

"You're hungry? Now?"

"Trust me. I won't be gone but a minute."

She laughed at his expression, though she noted he was doing as she asked. She made her way to the kitchen and opened the fridge. Elizabeth remembered seeing some watermelon chunks in a bowl. She nibbled her lip, wondering how he would take to this game, then smiled. He would take it, all right. She grabbed the bowl and hurried back to the bedroom.

He was there, propped up against the pillows and looking delicious. His cock was ready to play she noticed as it stretched up, almost passed his belly button. She licked her lips.

"What have you got there?"

"A surprise." She walked to the bed, and sat the bowl on the floor. "Close your eyes, Ethan."

"Why?"

"Do you trust me?"

"With my life."

"Then close your eyes and don't open them until I say you can."

He did so, relaxing back against the pillows. His body was tight, the anticipation almost unbearable. He wanted to open his eyes, but would do as she asked.

The feel of something cool caressed his cock, but he knew it wasn't her tongue. It felt wet, yet not hot. His hips jerked.

"What is that?"

"Do you not like it?"

"I wouldn't say that."

"Soon, you can open your eyes."

The feeling of the cool caress started again and went the entire length of his cock. Whatever she was touching him with was wet. He felt something drip onto him and it rolled down to his balls and further still. He gasped at the feeling.

He nearly shot off the bed when her mouth, he knew that mouth, took him inside, sucking and licking away whatever she had touched him with. His hands reached up and grabbed the headboard. It was that or take her right now and ruin her play.

"You can open your eyes, Ethan."

He opened his eyes and desire slammed into him like a punch to the gut. Elizabeth sat on the bed, her beautiful body in full view. One of her hands held a chunk of watermelon, and as she squeezed the fruit, it dripped onto his straining cock.

"I always did love watermelon." He gasped as the cool juices rained down on him. Damn but she looked sexy.

He watched as she took a small bite of the watermelon, chewing slowly and looking into his eyes. When her mouth, full of the sweet fruit, enveloped him, his shout was torn from his body. He could feel the fruit heating in her mouth, and the juices that escaped ran all along his length. He felt her swallow, and then she chased the juice.

He watched, gripping the headboard, and knew that he would last only so long with her sweet torture. Damn, she was after every drop that had escaped. Her tongue touched his balls and he almost lost his control.

"Elizabeth, unless you want me to lose it before I can get inside you, you better stop now, baby."

She hummed and he had to fight harder.

"Please, baby."

"Please what?"

"I want to be inside you, with you, when I let go."

Her smile was positively wicked, but she licked her way up his body, tending to his nipples and chest before she reached his mouth. With him against the pillows, she straddled him, and they were face to face. He started to let go of his grip on the headboard, but she shook her head, placing her hands over his.

"Not yet."

He watched her raise on her knees. Her hands released his, but they clasped his cock, positioning him at her entrance. His eyes were locked on the site of him slowly entering her until finally she was fully seated. Elizabeth rocked slowly back and forth.

Her hips rocked, rotated, and moved from side to side. He thought for sure his hands would have cracked the headboard by now.

Slowly, she lifted herself on him, easing back down. It seemed she kept this pace forever, arching her back and offering her breasts, only to pull away before he could taste her. She drew her knees to his side, then took his hands and pulled him to her, chest to chest, heart to heart.

Ethan wrapped his arms around her, holding her shoulders in his palms. Her arms came around him and she kissed him with such longing, he could hold back no more. His hips surged, his arms holding her close.

She braced her hands behind her on his thighs and leaned back, ignoring any pain in her arm. He ground into her, loving the sounds coming from her.

"I'm almost there, baby." He gasped, moving deeper into her.

"Harder, Ethan."

Somehow he rose to his knees, her own still held his hips tightly. He gave her what she wanted. Her shoulders hit the bed, and she widened herself to his body, taking all he could give her.

"Now, Ethan."

He surged forward and let himself go. After their first time tonight, he didn't think it possible, but he couldn't stop the flood that left his body. Her body jerked and convulsed, and then she lay panting. He remained on his knees, watching her, trying to control his own ragged breathing.

"Wow," she purred, looking up into his face.

He gently pulled from her, lifted her and laid her beside him. He would tell her of his plans in awhile. Now, he just wanted to hold her.

"That's an understatement."

"Did you like it?"

"I will never eat watermelon again without it giving me a hard on that would crack walnuts."

She laughed at that.

"I do love you." she said when he kissed her shoulder.

"I love you." he held her tighter. "How is your arm?"

"It's okay."

"It's good to hear you laugh, baby."

"I will always miss her, Ethan."

"I know."

"I have to concentrate on the now, though. We have to figure this out, because I want this life with you. I don't want her to take it from me."

"We will, baby. No matter what it takes."

"So what's the plan for today?"

"We will visit my grandmother." He sighed. "Mary says she knows more about this than she let on."

"When did you see Mary?"

"Before I woke you."

"Do you ever see the other?"

"The Countess?" At her nod he answered. "Yes. She has her mind set on seducing me."

Elizabeth stiffened in his arms, and he realized how that must have made her feel. Damn, when would he learn to watch what he said on this issue? He dreamed about the Countess, and then woke her up with mind-blowing sex. He could see how she might not like that idea.

"Elizabeth. I love you. There is nothing she has that I want. I told her so."

"I'm sorry, Ethan."

"Whatever I say to you, whenever I touch you, it's all you."

"Just hold me awhile longer. I feel safe here."

He held her and reassured her of his love. He would beat this thing. He had to. If Elizabeth were taken from him, he may very well not survive it.

Chapter Eight

Elizabeth liked Lily Richards instantly, but was uncomfortable with the way the woman watched her sometimes. However, she was kind, and if ever she could have chosen a grandmother, Lily would have been it.

"So, you two kids set a date yet?"

"Grams don't start on that."

"Well, I would like to bounce one on my knee while I still can."

Ethan looked at Elizabeth and rolled his eyes, she smiled but said nothing. She guessed all grandmothers were that way.

Again, Lily looked at her, and each time she did, Elizabeth had the strongest urge to snap at her. The woman was pissing her off, but was doing nothing to earn that. She frowned, unsure of why she was feeling this way.

"Elizabeth," Ethan's voice pulled her from her thoughts. "You okay?"

"Sure."

Lily set her tea aside and straightened the tablecloth. When she looked back at Elizabeth, she spoke directly to her.

"You would like nothing more than to bite my head off, wouldn't you?"

"Grams?" Ethan started to defend her, but Elizabeth cut him off.

"As a matter of fact, yes." She looked around the room. "Though I don't know why."

"It's all a part of what you are going through." She sighed. "I never thought I would see this in my lifetime. However, the story has been handed down from generation to generation, and we all believed."

"Excuse me?" Ethan interrupted. "You know something about this and you said nothing?"

"Would you have believed me, before now?"

He said nothing to that and Lily turned her attention back to Elizabeth. Her eyes showed sympathy.

"You have a fight ahead of you. Not only with the evil of a woman from long ago, but within yourself. Everything that has happened to you has happened for a reason."

"Reason?"

"The pain, the grief, the fear. It's all wearing you down, little by little."

"I can't argue that."

"You are a strong soul, Elizabeth. Soon, you will face evil herself. Everything you believe in will be tested."

"You know all this from a story?"

"Yes. I would also say that the lady has had a hand in your life from the start." She looked at Ethan. "Even you have your part to play."

"Now wait." Elizabeth sat forward. "I don't want him hurt. How do we stop this?"

"You don't want him to be hurt, but losing you would kill him." She reached out and patted Elizabeth's hand. "You two are meant to be. Believe in yourselves enough and you can beat anything."

"That's all very romantic, Lily." Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "Bullshit, but romantic."

Ethan's eyes widened at the tone of her voice, but Lily just smiled.

"Soon, it will all come to pass. I know you don't mean those words."

"No," a tear escaped her eye. "I don't. I can't seem to get control of whatever is inside me."

"When the time is right, Mary will guide you, Ethan. I have spoken to her myself. She is something."

"Mary speaks to you?" He was surprised.

"I open myself up to her, and she and Viktor visit me often."

"Why does she talk to him and not to me?" Elizabeth asked, her tone hard, but not unkind. "You would think she could at least help me a little."

"She has been helping you, Elizabeth. All you see is the black and the white."

"Lots of red as well."

"I have a feeling that when you do finally meet Mary, you will understand." Lily stood. "Now, I must lay down. This has tired me out."

"I'll see you soon, Grams. We need to be going too."

"All right." She stopped and looked between them. "In the next few days, you will both be sorely tested. If you truly love one another, don't give up. You will be surprised in that power alone."

Ethan held Elizabeth's hand as they walked to the car. He opened her door and once she was seated, he rounded to his side.

"I like your grandmother though she talks in riddles."

"She always has." He started the car. "Want to get a bite?"

"I need to go to my place. I'm going to need a change of clothes or three if you still want me to stay with you."

"Elizabeth," he cupped her face and turned her to look at him, then kissed her gently. "I always want you with me."

She smiled and kissed him back, and he pulled out of his grandmother's drive, heading to her apartment.

Once they were parked and walking into the building, Elizabeth stopped. Her body began to shiver and she wrapped her arms around herself.

"What?"

"Something's not right." She looked around the entranceway. "I feel it. Something is very wrong here."

Ethan took her arm and guided her into the hall, watching closely. The last time she felt *something*, she had been attacked.

"Come on. Let's get what you need and get out of here."

She nodded and followed behind him, but the closer they got to her door, the stronger the feeling. What she felt was instant fear.

"Ethan, I'm serious. I don't want to go in there."

"If someone is in there, we need to know." He pulled out his cell phone, handing it to her. "I'm going to go in. If you hear anything, you call the police."

"Ethan, please. Don't."

He looked at her face and she was sickly pale. He couldn't put her through this. He nodded, and they turned to leave. The sound of a door creaking slowly open had them both turning.

"It's open. I always lock my door."

"Call the police. We'll meet them in the lobby."

Elizabeth dialed as he hurried her back down the hall. She had no idea how she knew, but something terrible was behind that door.

"They're on the way."

"Alright. Let's just settle down. You're pale and I don't want you getting sick."

"I don't feel well," she snapped. "Sorry if my looks disturb you."

"Come here," he pulled her to him. "I didn't mean it that way."

"I know, and I didn't either. I don't know what's come over me."

Ethan was afraid he did know. She was tired. Tired and worn out, and the Countess was closing in.

The police arrived and together they walked to her apartment. One officer went in, followed by another. Two others waited in the hall, guns drawn, with Elizabeth holding tight to Ethan.

The first officer who went in came out pale and shaken.

"There's not a soul inside, but I don't think you want to go in there." He walked away and was on his radio.

"Ms. Shelton?" She turned to the other officer. "I'm Officer Bradley, ma'am. My partner is radioing now for the proper crime scene investigators. I would ask you to wait until they arrive."

"What the hell is in there?" she asked. "Why can't I go in?"

"Ma'am, the place is torn all to hell, excuse me for saying." He looked at Ethan, not sure how to proceed.

"Officer Bradley, I'm Ethan Richards." They shook hands. "What exactly do you need back up or other authorities for?"

"Sir, I'm sorry, but there is a body inside."

"A body?" Elizabeth started to fall, and Ethan caught her.

"Yes, Ma'am. A CSU will be here soon, along with a detective. Please, just wait here until they arrive."

"Yes, of course." Ethan answered for her.

All at once there was more activity than she could keep up with. Ethan took her back to the lobby and sat with her, waiting.

"Who could it be, Ethan?" her voice was almost panicked. "There is a dead person in my home."

All he could do was wrap his arms around her, holding her. He had no idea who it was, but he had a feeling the shit was about to hit the fan.

"Ms. Shelton?"

"Yes?" she looked up into the eyes of a middle-aged man. Though they were kind, she had a feeling he was trying to look inside of her.

"I'm Detective Rimes. Can you tell me anything about this situation?"

"I'm sorry, detective, but no, I can't."

"And you sir?" He looked to Ethan.

"Ethan Richards. I'm just as in the dark as you." He waited while the detective noted his name. "We don't even know who you found in there."

"I'm sorry, folks. I don't mean to be so hard. In all my years, this is the first time..." His voice trailed off, and he took a deep breath before continuing. "The body of a young woman, Ms. Tarina Hollister, was found on your bed."

"Tarina Hollister?" Ethan was puzzled. He had never heard that name. "Who is Tarina Hollister?"

He caught Elizabeth just before she fainted.

The paramedics were called for Elizabeth. Her vitals had dropped and she didn't appear to have the desire to come around.

Ethan paced the hospital room, still in shock over the talk the detective had with him while they had worked on Elizabeth.

Tarina Hollister was none other than Tara.

An investigation at the burial site showed that the grave had been excavated and the body removed. Who the hell had done this?

Elizabeth was okay they tried to tell him. She was in shock and her body was doing what it had to do to recuperate.

He knew that as long as she was asleep, in a deep sleep, she was vulnerable. It ate at him that he could do nothing. This put her over an edge.

He sat in the chair beside her bed and rested his head near her hand. He prayed and then talked to her, then prayed some more. Finally, the fatigue set in and he couldn't help but fall asleep.

Again he found himself at the castle.

Mary was there and she held her hands out to him, pulling him into a hug. He cried then. In the arms of a ghost, he cried for the woman he loved and was afraid he would lose.

"It's not over, Ethan. You must wake her. She is there, just break through the barrier."

"Does the Countess have her?"

"No, not yet. Wake her Ethan. Break through. The time is almost gone, and it will take you both to win this thing."

"Mary..."

"Wake her Ethan. Do it now!"

Ethan stood so quickly, the chair rattled against the wall. Mary had been desperate for him to wake her, and damn if he wasn't as well. Ethan hurried to her side.

"Elizabeth, come on baby, wake up." He kissed her cheeks and eyes. "I need you honey, please wake up."

She moaned Slightly but it was the best sound he had heard in the hours since she was brought in.

"That's it sweetheart, wake up. Come on, Elizabeth, open your eyes."

"Ethan?"

"I'm here."

Her eyes opened and she looked confused, but at least she had opened her eyes. Then her memory joined the waking world, and she began to cry.

"Who would do such a thing?"

"I don't know, baby, but I'm here and we will work this out."

"Take me home, Ethan."

"I will, baby." He reached for her call button and a nurse entered the room. "Please send in Dr. Krammer as soon as possible."

"He is just in the hall, I'll send him right away." She smiled. "Welcome back, Ms. Shelton."

Ethan sat with her, refusing to budge from her side when the doctor came inside, and said she may go home only after he removed her stitches though. He was surprised how quickly she had healed. Ethan believed the Countess had a hand in that.

Once he had her back at his place, he ran a hot bath and placed her into it. Still, he stayed beside her, sponging her body and washing her hair.

"All this attention is going to spoil me, Ethan."

"I'm not complaining."

"What are we going to do?"

"Gram and Mary both assure me that I will know what to do when the time is right."

"Time is slipping, Ethan. I can feel it."

"Tell me what you feel." He continued to sponge her body.

"I feel as if I'm falling. My mind doesn't seem to want to work with my body anymore. I want to sleep and not wake."

Ethan felt his heart drop. She looked just like she felt, tired and worn out.

"When do you feel at your strongest?"

"When I'm with you."

"Well, see, you can't get rid of me, so we fight together."

She reached for his hand and drew the sponge over her breast. Her nipple responded and he licked his lips.

"Not just with you, Ethan. I feel the strongest when you touch me and love me." She smiled and drew the sponge over her other nipple. "Bath with me?"

Ethan stood and removed his clothes, then stepped in behind her. She leaned forward until he settled, then laid back in his arms.

"I'm so tired, Ethan. What if..."

"No." he stopped her words, holding her tight. "Don't even say it. Don't hold any doubt in your heart."

"What will they do with Tara?"

"They will lay her to rest again and watch her grave site, hoping whoever did this will return."

Elizabeth picked up the sponge and began squeezing the water over her shoulders. Ethan took it from her and washed her back. Leaning into his arms, her back to his chest and her breasts barely above the water, he washed her chest and arms.

"Touch me, Ethan."

He dropped the sponge, and with his hands he caressed her arms, loving that she was free of her bandage. He moved to her breasts, molding them to his hands and gently plucking her nipples.

"If we keep this up, baby, I won't be able to resist your charms."

"I don't want you to." She gasped when he rolled her nipples. "I want to fly with you."

Her hand had reached behind her and she stroked his cock. He closed his eyes, loving the feel of her hand on his flesh.

His one hand stroked her belly, while the other continued with her breast. Her hand released him and she gripped his thighs, while opening hers wide to his caress. He wasted no time, as there seemed to be an urgency that they both felt. His hand slid beneath the water and he pushed two fingers into her welcome warmth.

Her head turned and she nipped his neck, her hips moving with his hand. Then quickly she came apart in his arms and he made sure she rode each wave.

When her tremors faded, he lifted her and impaled her on him swiftly. He was as desperate for her as she for him. Her hands gripped the tub while his lifted and lowered her fast and hard, driving him deeply into her.

Again she cried out, but he held back, only wanting to make her cry out over and over again. He took her until she collapsed back against him, and then he found release. Still her body flexed around him and locked him to her, taking his release deep inside her. He held her there until the water grew cool.

"Come on, baby. Let's get something warm to drink and maybe catch a little flick on TV."

"Okay." She stood and almost fell. "Just give me a moment."

"Was I too rough?"

"No." Tears spilled from her eyes. "I'm just so damn tired."

"I know, baby. Come on."

He helped her from the tub and wrapped her in a towel. Her feet literally dragged as she followed him out of the bathroom. Ethan lifted her and carried her to the kitchen.

Sitting her in a chair, he made some tea. Once it was done, he carried the tea into the living room and went back for Elizabeth.

"I'll just fall asleep, Ethan."

"If you do, I'll watch over you."

He carried her to the couch, both still in towels, and sat with her leaning between his legs. His cock responded to the feel of her smooth back and he bit back a groan.

"At least I know you still want me."

"I will always want you." He shifted. "No doubt about that."

He turned on the TV and flipped through the channels. Late night romance movies were on and they watched, both content to just be together.

She drifted on and off, but he stayed alert and never let her go. When she did wake fully, she was full of desire.

"Ethan?"

"Yeah?"

"Will you make love to me, again?" She reached behind her back and stroked his cock.

"Damn baby, you need to ask?"

"I have the need to be with you as much as I can."

He didn't voice what he thought about her speaking almost in the negative. He couldn't. She had crawled to her hands and knees in front of him and he could see her sweet, wet flesh just under the towel.

Rising to his knees, he positioned himself, and then drew her back onto his cock with a groan. She reached up and encircled his neck, holding him to her as he thrust into her from behind.

He reached around and flicked her clit, sending shudders through out her body. Damn, he wanted to love her slowly, but his body was demanding more. What the hell was this sudden urgency?

"Ethan?"

"Yes, baby."

"I need you."

"I'm here."

"No. Hard, hot, long, fast and unrestrained. Touch me everywhere."

"Are you sure Elizabeth?"

"Yes. Make love to me later. Now, just let go."

He pushed her forward on the couch, lifting her hips high in the air. He moved within her roughly, hoping he wasn't hurting her, but loving her cries. When she begged for more, he gave it to her.

"Touch your breasts, baby."

Her hands went underneath and she began to play with her nipples. His growl was followed by her gasp as he drove into her deeper. He seemed to touch her in new places; he was inside her so deep.

Ethan reached around and touched her clit, pinching it, pulling it until she cried out beneath him. He pulled from her body and laid her on her back, only to drive into her again, watching her work her nipples until they were as red as ripe berries. He grasped her ankles and lifted them high and wide, still driving into her. He watched himself slide in and out of her, and he could feel his release building.

"Ethan, please come for me."

Her words and her hot body drove him over the edge. He collapsed against her, his hips still jerking, and wrapped his arms around her. For a while he continued to move until he felt drained.

"God, baby. What came over us there?"

"I don't know, Ethan. My body seems to crave yours and sometimes gentle isn't enough."

He kissed her, then rolled to the side, keeping her with him so she wouldn't fall to the floor.

"I love you, Ethan Richards."

"I love you too, Baby."

Ethan held her as again she slept, wondering why her words sounded strangely like a goodbye.

Chapter Nine

"Well, Elizabeth, welcome to my parlor." The Countess reclined on a cushioned couch of some kind.

"Said the spider to the fly." Elizabeth mumbled to herself. "Why am I here?"

"You know, the more you fight the harder it will be."

"For you maybe."

"No, my dear, for you. I have been patient long enough." The Countess sat up and regarded her. "You are having quite the play time with our doctor."

"Our?"

"Well, as I have said. I'm tired of waiting. I thought the death of your friend Tara would do the trick. Now, you have pushed me to my limits. I didn't want to have to hurt Ethan. However, he seems to be your strength."

"You stay away from him." Elizabeth's voice shook.

"I want something from you, my dear. If I have to use him to get it, I will."

Elizabeth stood, wondering what she would need to do to break this evil. Bathory was strong and she would die if Ethan were hurt.

"Give me one more day."

"Excuse me?"

"One more day with him and I will willingly comply."

The moment she said the words, a small piece of her died. They all had said, "believe" and she did, but not enough to risk his life. She loved him too much.

"I give you one more day and you will give your body to me?"

"Yes."

"Very well, but if you fail me in this, he dies."

Elizabeth felt sick as she turned away from the Countess.

Ethan stood transfixed as he watched through a doorway Mary had brought him to. Elizabeth just condemned herself, and all for him.

"Mary, what can I do?"

"When the Countess begins to take her body, Elizabeth will fall into a deep sleep. Only then can you do what must be done."

"What must I do then?"

"You must destroy what makes the Countess strong. You must destroy the one thing she left behind allowing her to return."

"Riddles, all riddles."

"You will know. Just search inside yourself, and use what you know already."

"Why can't you just tell me?"

"It just will not work that way. To break this, it must all be done on good faith with your true heart."

"I had hoped she would believe in us enough."

"She just agreed to die for you. How much more could one love another?"

They woke at the same moment, looking into each other's eyes. Immediately he leaned into her and kissed her.

"What have you done?"

"I have one more day. I want it to be spent loving you."

A knock on the door drew them apart, and he wrapped the towel more securely about his hips, covering her with a blanket from the couch. He walked to the door and opened it to find Max on the other side.

"What the hell do you want?"

"I need to see Elizabeth."

"I don't think so."

Ethan sucked in a breath when he was suddenly looking down the barrel of a rather large pistol.

"Max, what are you doing?" Elizabeth slowly stood, wrapping her own towel close about her, trying to divert his attention.

"Stay back, Elizabeth." Ethan warned, deciding when he could take the gun.

"By all means, Elizabeth, come on over."

"Why are you doing this, Max?"

Stepping inside, Max kicked the door closed and kept the gun on Ethan as Elizabeth made her way closer to her lover's side.

"Did you really think the lady would believe you? That she would just let you fuck him for an entire day?"

"What?"

"The Countess. She knows about the power you generate when you're fucking him." The sneer in his voice could not be missed. "Well, she promised me that I could have you if I took care of him."

"You believe her?" Ethan spoke up, catching his attention. "She wants Elizabeth's body, Max. How will you have her then?"

Max looked confused, crazed.

"How do you know of the Countess, Max? She sent you to dig up Tara's body, didn't she?" Elizabeth was almost to Ethan's side now.

"Stop moving, damn it!" Max screamed and waved the gun. "I need to think."

"Ethan," Elizabeth whispered. "He's going to shoot."

"Just stay calm."

"I just realized what I have to do. I just hope you realize what you have to do when this is all over."

"What?"

"As powerful as she is, even she can't change fate." Elizabeth's voice shook.

Max whirled on them both, raising the gun. With a shouted "Fuck it" he pulled the trigger. Ethan waited to feel the burn of a bullet ripping through his body, but instead was knocked to the floor by Elizabeth.

"Oh, shit." Max dropped the gun and ran.

"Damn, baby, you scared me." He tried to move her, but she was dead weight. "Elizabeth?"

He rolled with her and felt the sticky fluid on her back. His hands were covered. Neighbors who had heard the blast entered the room as Ethan shouted for an ambulance.

"Elizabeth?"

"Ethan, this is it," she gasped. "The fight starts now."

"Don't die. Please don't die."

"I knew what I had to do. I knew it the minute he pulled that gun." Her breathing was shallow. "You will know too. I love you."

As the paramedics arrived, along with Detective Rimes, someone had handed him a robe. Ethan shrugged it off and went in search of his jeans.

"Can you tell me who shot her?" The detective asked, following him about the apartment.

"Her photographer, Max. He was also the one who put Tara's corpse in her home."

"Slow down son, we need to talk."

"No, we don't." Ethan pulled on his shoes. "I need to get to Elizabeth. I will be at the hospital. Furthermore, detective, don't call me son."

"Either way, you're in no shape to drive." He held up his hand when Ethan tried to argue. "I have loud sirens and bright lights. Come on, I'll drive."

Ethan nodded and followed the detective out the door.

"She took that bullet for me."

"What's that?" Rimes asked as his tires squealed into the emergency parking lot.

"She jumped in front of that bullet." He placed his head in his hands. "He was trying to shoot me, and she took that bullet for me."

"Sounds like she's a strong one. She'll pull through this."

"Stronger than you or I will ever know." He got out of the car. "I'm scared to death to walk in there."

"I can check for you first, if it will make it any easier."

"No. It's my turn to be strong."

Walking into the emergency room, the first thing that went through his mind was how familiar the place was starting to look. In the past several days, he had spent way too much time in here.

"Ethan." Dr. Krammer noticed him and walked quickly his way. "She is in surgery now, but it sounds like she will pull through just fine."

"Where was she hit?"

"Well, just a little one way or the other would have nicked the heart or even a lung. The bullet went on through the soft tissue in these areas. The main concern is her blood loss."

"Why do I feel there is something you're not telling me?"

"Ethan, she slipped into a coma."

"You said she would pull through." Ethan wanted to hit the man.

"I said she will survive the gunshot and she will. Blood loss is tricky. On that, we will just have to wait it out."

The doctor walked away when he was paged, and Ethan stood with the detective, feeling lost as to what to do next. Again, she was injured. The Countess wouldn't risk losing Elizabeth's body, and even though he feared for her, it wasn't so much the wound that frightened him. It was being in the coma that scared the hell out of him.

Sudden warmth poured over him and he felt comforted. It could only be Mary.

A hand on his shoulder caused him to jump, but when he looked down into the eyes of his grandmother, he broke into tears.

"Come on, Ethan. Let's sit and wait it out together." She led him to the waiting area.

"How did you know?"

"Through a mutual friend." She said no more, but he knew who she meant. With Detective Rimes so close at hand, nothing more needed said.

"Ethan, do you know where Max could have gone?" Rimes asked with notebook in hand.

"No."

Rimes didn't push, and Ethan waited with his heart in his throat.

"You lied to me."

"Of course I did." The Countess laughed as she walked around the cage that held Elizabeth. "Then again, you lied to yourself."

Saying nothing, Elizabeth hung her head. She knew what she meant. Had she only believed in the power of herself and the man who loved her, this would not have happened. It did happen, though, and she needed to think of a way to fight from the inside out. She was trapped in her own mind and Ethan was on the outside.

"He will find the way." Elizabeth whispered, more to herself.

The Countess only chuckled and continued to walk around her. The old nurse stood to the side, awaiting any instruction.

"Now, you're not a problem anymore. I have you where I need you." Her fingers laced together, looking like a professor about to lecture. "Ethan, however, troubles me."

"Please. You have me here. Leave him alone."

"Well, my dear, as much as I thrill to the idea of him as my lover, he is too clever for his own good." She looked to the old nurse. "Iloona, where is this man known as Max?"

"He is hiding, my Lady, though in plain site."

"Use him."

The nurse nodded and walked quickly from the room.

"What do you plan to do?" Elizabeth gripped the bars of her cell, fear for Ethan overriding her senses. "Just leave him alone!"

"You are starting to bother me, Elizabeth. Your only saving grace is I need your body. Now be silent."

"You are the definition of bitch, *Countess*. Not to mention an ugly bitch at that."

Bathory's eyes gleamed as she approached the cage. Elizabeth didn't think it was her pride she insulted as much as her vanity.

"For that little remark, I think he will die slowly."

The Countess turned her back on Elizabeth and slowly left the room.

Elizabeth sat on the cold floor of the cage. No matter what that woman did to her, she would not go willingly. She loved Ethan, but she couldn't help him trapped inside here. What the hell could she do?

"I am sorry, Elizabeth."

Jumping at the sound of the voice, she stood and whirled, ready to fight. Her eyes fell on a young woman with kind brown eyes.

"Are you, Mary?"

"I am."

"Please. Is Ethan all right?" she gripped the bars of her cage, desperate to know.

"He is. Lily is with him and he waits for news of you."

"Help him, please."

Mary sighed and walked closer to the cage. She reached out and lightly brushed her hand across Elizabeth's.

"Already, she has become a part of you."

"What?"

"I can feel her energy inside of you."

"I don't understand."

"Think Elizabeth." Mary snapped, her eyes narrowing. "What is the one thing she needs from you, and only you, the most?"

Elizabeth chewed her lip, trying to think through the fear and turmoil rolling inside of her.

"My body?"

"Do you really think you could heal so quickly on your own?" Mary said, stepping back. "She aids in your healing. I must go now. Just think on what I have told you. The answer will come."

"Please tell Ethan..." Her words faltered for a moment. "Please tell him I love him."

Mary nodded and was gone as silently as she had come.

Elizabeth sat again, her lower lip between her teeth and pondered all that Mary had told her. When the answer dawned, her fear grew enough to almost choke her.

"She looks like she's sleeping and could wake at any moment." Ethan said to his grandmother from his chair beside her bed. "What's happening to her right now?"

Lily said nothing. Just being there for her grandson was all she could do. As much as she wanted to protect him, this was a fight she could not fight for him.

"Ethan, even if it's only for a few moments, you need to sleep."

He remained silent. She leaned forward and kissed his hair, just like she did when he was a child.

"I will be back tomorrow."

Still, he said nothing. His eyes never left Elizabeth's face. He had cried and railed against the world, and now it was time to piece it all together.

The door opening drew his eyes from Elizabeth, and Dr. Krammer entered, reading her chart.

"How are you holding up, Ethan?"

"I'm here, that's the best I can tell you."

"I'm ordering a few tests to recheck her organ function. It's pretty standard in a situation like this."

"Will you have to move her?"

"No. A technician from the lab will take some blood from her IV. She won't be disturbed." Krammer sighed and looked to Ethan. "I know it's hard, but what good will you be if you're exhausted? I'm ordering a tray for you, please at least try to eat and try to rest."

Ethan only nodded and Krammer left silently.

The other issue at hand was Max. They had looked everywhere and still nothing. Ethan had a feeling he was right under their noses and that scared him. He couldn't leave her side knowing Max was still out there.

His eyes felt gritty and he was exhausted. He scooted the chair as close to the bed as he could, held her hand, and once again fell asleep next to her, in a hospital bed.

"Mary, please tell me she is alright."

"I have seen her. She is frightened, but she is fine. She sends you her love."

"Where are we?" he asked looking around the room. It was dank and smelled of dirt, and it was cold.

"We are in the bowels of hell, Ethan. This is where she brings them."

"Is Elizabeth down here?"

"Yes."

"Please, let me see her."

"You know I cannot."

Ethan again looked around the room. This was the place of torture and murder he had so long ago read about. Here, young women would die, all for the sake of a sick woman and her thirst for beauty. The thought of Elizabeth down here made him sick.

"Why did you bring me here?"

"In the words of your day, to piss you off."

"Why?"

"To light a fire inside you to make you see past your fear and grief. Ethan, she is doing what she must. If you want her, the real her, to be whole again, you need to fight now."

"How?"

"Ethan, I thought you smarter than that. Use this time to find the way. It's all there in your office. Use it."

"Can you help her?"

"I was only able to see her since she is trapped here. It's up to you now. So fight."

Ethan lifted his head and rubbed his eyes. The dreams were getting shorter. He needed his files on Bathory.

Picking up the phone and dialing the number on the card he received from Detective Rimes, he waited for the man to answer.

"Rimes."

"It's Ethan Richards. I was hoping you could do me a favor."

"If I can."

"Can you send an officer to the hospital to sit with Elizabeth until I return?"

"I think that can be arranged."

"I will only need about an hour. I hate to leave her with Max still about, though."

"I'll have an officer there in twenty minutes. Need a ride?"

"That would be appreciated."

"All right. See you in about twenty."

Ethan hung up the phone and again sat beside her. He held her hand and talked to her, hoping she could hear him.

"I will find the way, baby. I won't be gone long." He kissed her lips, and hated that she didn't respond. "I promise baby, I will find it. I love you."

The door opened, and the young officer that he met at Elizabeth's appeared.

"Officer Bradley, right?"

"Yes sir." He shook Ethan's hand. "Rimes is parked out front."

"Thanks." He looked once more at Elizabeth. "No one, and I mean no one comes in here for any reason other than a doctor or a nurse. A technician will be in soon for blood work, but other than that, not even the pope walks through that door."

"I understand, sir."

"You know who Max is?"

"I know who to watch for."

"Alright. I appreciate it, officer."

Ethan was pleased when the officer took the vacant chair and sat it to where he could see not only Elizabeth, but also the door and the windows.

Once outside, he told Rimes where he wanted to go and asked him if they could hurry. Rimes smiled and hit the lights and sirens.

"You love this part of the job, don't you Rimes?" Ethan said, holding the dashboard.

"When you get to be my age, you take all the joys you can when they come your way."

Ethan closed his eyes as Rimes barreled through a busy intersection. He debated calling the hospital and reserving a bed for himself.

Chapter Ten

Pulling into the drive of his office, the first thing he noticed was the security light. It was off. Even at this early in the evening, all security lights would be on. Hell, his stayed on twenty-four hours a day.

"Something wrong?" Rimes asked, picking up on Ethan's worry.

"My security lights. I always leave them on."

Rimes pulled his police revolver from his shoulder strap and picked up the radio, requesting any available units to meet him, and to meet him quietly.

"Stay here."

"What? You're not waiting?"

"We have no idea if there is anyone even in there for one thing." Rimes checked the rounds and snapped the clip on his gun. "Second, what if whoever is in there knows what you're here for?"

"Oh, hell." Ethan ran his fingers through his hair. "I'm coming in."

"Oh no you're not."

"Look, if someone knows what I am after, they could destroy it, or you and your men could in any hostile situation. What I need means life or death. Arrest me, but I'm going inside with you."

Rimes debated this, and the look on Ethan's face said he would not relent.

"You stay behind me, you understand? No heroics or bullshit like that."

"I understand."

"All right. ETA on back up is five minutes. Let's go."

Ethan followed the detective step for step. Once inside the main doors, Rimes signaled him to look down, and Ethan neatly avoided the broken glass. He could hear the sounds of someone tearing through his office.

"Now you listen to me." Rimes whispered. "I have to get in there, but you must remain here. I can't watch whoever is in there and worry about you to."

"Alright."

Rimes moved slowly and quietly toward the office doors.

Ethan heard someone approach from behind and quickly looked over his shoulder. It was the back up officers. He motioned for silence and pointed to the office door and Rimes. They nodded and drew their weapons. Each slowly walking into the room to cover Rimes.

"I'm trying, damn it, but it won't open!" The shout came from inside the office. "Burn it? I'm not burning anything with my ass still in here!"

Rimes looked to Ethan and he mouthed the word Max. Ethan knew that voice and the man was off his rocker. He sounded absolutely crazy.

Motioning to one of the officers, Rimes took aim at the door and the other officer kicked it in and dropped to the floor.

"Hold it! Hold it right there. Drop it." Rimes shouted. Ethan slowly moved further into the room. "I will shoot you if I have to."

"I have to find it! She will kill me if I don't."

"We can talk about that."

"I have to find it!"

"Don't raise that arm, son." Rimes warned, and then a single shot split the air.

The sound of a moan and the thump of a body was all that Ethan heard next. The officers rushed inside, and the next thing he knew, a very pale and handcuffed Max was escorted from the room.

"You should have killed me." Max sneered into the detectives face.

"Not my style, boy. You'll survive and answer a few questions." Rimes looked to Ethan. "Get what you need. These officers will escort him to the hospital."

"Don't you need to be there?"

"It's only a shoulder wound for crying out loud. He'll live."

Ethan nodded and hurried into his office. It was destroyed and his steel cabinet looked like it had been beat all to hell, but it was intact. Ethan retrieved his key from his pocket and opened the drawer, retrieving the file he needed.

"That's it? That's all you needed? One file?"

"Yes. But you still caught the bad guy."

"Yeah, I guess I did." Rimes made sure the police tape surrounded the door and headed back to his squad car.

Again Ethan was reduced to hugging the dash. When this was all over, he was going to need mental help of his own. He was sure he was developing a phobia against squad cars.

Elizabeth looked through the bars when the Countess walked in. She looked mad as hell, and the fear that was coursing through her grew.

"Why have you not eaten?"

"I didn't think you could get hungry in a dream."

"You really think your dreaming?" the Countess laughed. "Oh that's just precious."

"I'm not hungry."

"Well, I will not allow you to starve the vessel I so wish for myself." She looked at Elizabeth, and her eyes gleamed. "You have not only yourself to consider."

"If eating will aid you, Countess, I would just as soon starve."

"What of the life you carry inside you?"

"What?"

"Have no fear. When I'm in that body of yours, I will be a good mother." And with that, she left the room.

She was lying. She had to be. She couldn't be pregnant, could she? Ethan had never used protection when they made love, but she had been on the pill. Then she realized she hadn't taken her pill since before Tara's death.

Her hand drifted toward her stomach. Ethan's child grew within her. She couldn't afford to let anything happen to this baby.

Elizabeth pulled the bowl of what looked like oatmeal toward her and slowly began to eat.

"What?" Ethan looked at the doctor and could feel the blood drain from his face.

"It's early stages, but she is pregnant." Krammer checked her vitals. "The surgery and blood loss seem to have had no effect. All tests indicate that she and the baby are fine."

"She's in a coma!"

"Well, yes. However, her stats are rising and her vitals are strong." Krammer walked to Ethan and touched his shoulder. "It's a lot to take in. I will leave you to your thoughts."

A baby. Elizabeth was pregnant. He touched her hand and let it all sink in. He felt the joy of knowing, but the fear of the unknown. He had to find away to beat this thing.

Ethan kissed her and then sat, reading the file on Bathory, her life and her death. What was it Mary had said?

Find the key that allows her to remain or come back?

Maybe those were not her exact words, but he knew what she had meant.

The last person to be with the Countess had been a servant. They had walled her up in her castle, only food and water. No contacts.

She had been rumored to study witchcraft. Two of her so-called witches had been executed. She died alone on the dank floor of her prison.

"Wait a minute."

Ethan skimmed to the final few pages of the file and read about her last few hours. A feeling washed over him, a determined feeling, and he knew he had just found the clue he had been searching for.

"Now, how do I go about it?" he asked no one in particular.

"It's time," the old nurse said to the Countess as she joined them in the room that held Elizabeth. "He has found the way, but unsure how to proceed."

"Well, we will take no chances."

"Shall I bring Istvan?"

"Yes. Do so quickly. That Mary is up to something. I should have made sure she was dead long ago."

Iloona left quickly and the Countess approached Elizabeth.

"Soon, I will live again."

"Yeah, well, I hope you're miserable when you do."

The Countess just laughed and walked to a closet in the dank room. Pulling out a robe of deep red velvet, she put it around her shoulders.

Iloona returned with a rather large man, and walked to Elizabeth's cage. She unlocked it, and the man walked inside with her. She cowered, but he just smiled and caught her up into his arms.

"Easy with her Istvan. We do not need that body damaged anymore than it is."

"Yes, my Lady."

His face was close to hers and she gagged on his breath.

He laid her on a table, and before she realized what was happening, her wrists and legs were restrained.

Elizabeth fought the ties, but they were just too tight.

Ethan watched as Elizabeth twitched. It was the only movement he had seen from her since the shooting. However, her wrists were turning red, and he narrowed his eyes. Setting the file aside, he walked over to her. Pulling back the covers, a sick feeling settled inside of him. Her ankles were red as well. She had been tied down.

"I have to get to her. I need to sleep." He knew his anxiety would keep him from doing so. He pushed the call button and asked the nurse to send in Dr. Krammer.

"What is it Ethan?" Krammer was anxious and rushed to Elizabeth. "Did something happen?"

"No. I was hoping you could help me."

"What do you need?"

"I need sleep. I'm so tired and my worry won't allow me to relax. Can you give me a mild sedative?"

"Well, let me get a nurse to check you over. That's standard procedure. If you check out, I can do that for you."

"Thanks."

Ethan waited patiently while a nurse performed all the checks and left with the results. Soon, she returned with a small paper cup that held a little pink pill.

"It's very mild, Mr. Richards. You will still be able to wake if you need to. I know you listen for her every move."

"Thank you."

He waited for the nurse to leave then with a deep breath. He swallowed the pill. He pulled his chair back to the bed and waited for the pill to take effect.

"I'm coming baby. Hold on."

The Countess stood over her body and began a soft chant. After a while a calm settled over Elizabeth. Her mind functioned, but her body would not obey. Then a heat started inside her. So hot she felt she would burn alive.

"It has started. I can feel my energy flowing." The Countess began to strip. "Soon, Elizabeth, we will be one and I will live again."

Inside her mind she fought and prayed. Her body was on fire, but her heart turned cold. Was that what it felt like when you lost your soul?

"Ethan, you must hurry."

"The tower room?" he panted. "I must get to the tower room."

"Up the stairs. It has begun. I will do my best to help you."

"Find her. Stay with her."

Mary nodded and watched him rush up the stairs.

"He is here, my Lady."

"Istvan, go and detain him. We are too close now."

"Yes, My Lady."

Elizabeth moaned as the heat intensified. The Countess stood over her, naked. Her body seemed to almost be decaying. Elizabeth thought of the old movie, 'Night of the Living Dead.' She never thought she would actually live it herself.

"Soon we will exchange souls and I will be young again. You, however, can stay here and rot."

The Countess ran her hand down Elizabeth's body. Her finger, now looking like that of a dead woman's, touched her in a way that made Elizabeth wish she could move. She would gladly throw up on the witch. Even her face seemed to be flaking away, aging quickly and just falling away.

Just then, Elizabeth felt a new heat enter her body and her heart warmed. The Countess narrowed her eyes and looked to her nurse.

Mary stood at the entrance to the room and a very tough looking man with a sword stood at her back.

"You are losing, Countess."

"I think not," she said as she leaned over Elizabeth, and placed her dead lips to her own.

Elizabeth's body arched and tears rolled from her eyes. Something, life maybe, was being sucked from her body. The time had come and she was going to die.

Ethan looked at the dead man on the floor. Well, technically he had been dead anyway. Still, he was almost ill at the thought. He had tried to sneak up on him, and without thought, Ethan had grabbed the scissors from the vanity and defended himself. It had felt very real, plunging them into the man's neck. He shivered and returned to the task at hand. He had found the markings in the wall just before the man had attacked him.

"You must hurry."

Ethan once again spun around, ready to fight. The man behind him was large and wore the uniform of a knight or soldier.

"Viktor?" Ethan asked, hoping he didn't have to fight this giant.

"Yes. The Countess has begun the soul's exchange. Do what you need to do, and do it now."

Not knowing how he even knew what to do, he picked up the dagger from the dead man on the floor. Taking a deep breath, he drew it across his hand and watched as his blood filled his palm. Then he placed his hand on the writings he discovered on the wall.

The Countess gasped and fell to the floor, clutching her middle and screaming out as if she had been stabbed.

"My Lady!" Iloona rushed to her side.

Elizabeth gasped and choked, finally her body felt like hers again. Still the bonds held her, but she was beginning to feel whole again.

"He has found the marks. Istvan has failed."

"I will try to stop him, my Lady." And Iloona began to run as fast as her old legs would carry her. She didn't make it far.

"Halt, old woman." Mary blocked her path. "Your deeds are finished."

"But, my Lady..."

"Is dying." Mary looked into the old woman's eyes. "Are you not ready to rest, Iloona?"

She looked back at her lady who was trying to stand. Her body was decaying and Iloona turned her face away.

"I will finish it myself." Bathory gasped, a dagger in her hand. "Better yet, let us both die. The line will end with you."

Ethan smeared more of his blood over the writing and then began to pick at the stone with the blade. Like an ice pick to a block of ice, he worked at the stone until it was dust at his feet. Then he dripped his blood over the dust. Finished, he stood and looked to Viktor, though he held tight to the blade covered in stone dust and his own blood.

"I need to find her."

"I can take you to her now." Viktor said, handing Ethan a cloth.

He followed the man down into the pits of the castle. When he entered the room, his breath caught as he watched a walking corpse raise a dagger high above Elizabeth. He didn't stop to ponder; he just rushed forward to the other side of his love's body. He plunged the dagger into the heart of the once beautiful Countess.

She shrieked, falling back into the stone wall and slowly began to crumble, her body turning to ash and dust.

Ethan untied Elizabeth and pulled her to him.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes."

Elizabeth looked around and noticed the piles of ashes from the Countess and the old nurse. Mary and Viktor stood to the side.

"You did well, Ethan." Mary said, taking Viktor's hand. "Enjoy each other. We will meet again."

A bright light engulfed the couple and they were gone. Ethan turned Elizabeth's face to his, but before their lips touched, the room faded.

Ethan raised his head quickly, the sound of Elizabeth moaning bringing him back to the present. He took her hand and sat on the bed beside her.

"Elizabeth?"

Her eyes fluttered open and she greeted him with a smile.

"How do you feel, honey?"

"Free." Her hand tightened on his. "Absolutely free."

"I was afraid I had lost you for a moment there."

"I'm here, and I'm okay."

Dr. Krammer entered the room and a pleased smile lit his face.

"Well, welcome back. You gave us quite a scare for a while." He checked her vitals. "The little one seems just as fine as mom."

She looked at Ethan and he winked. He knew, she could tell. How he felt about it, would have to wait until they were alone.

“Okay, sit forward if you can. I need to check your wound.” Krammer said, then almost scolded her when she sat forward quickly. “Easy, Elizabeth. You were hurt badly.”

“I feel perfectly fine.”

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Krammer gasped and looked between the two. “You have healed almost completely. How the hell?” He pulled her gown down.

“What is it doctor?” she asked, thinking something was wrong.

“Not a thing. Not a thing at all. In fact, I’m sending you home.” He walked quickly from the room and Ethan chuckled.

“I think your ability to heal has him baffled.” He stroked her hair. “It’s the only thing I will thank the Countess for.”

“Ethan, are you okay with the baby?”

“Are you kidding? I’m doubly blessed.” He leaned in and kissed her quickly. “Now you’ll have to marry me.”

Elizabeth laughed and wrapped her arms around him. Sometimes you find a miracle and a blessing when you least expect it.

Epilogue

Eight Months Later

Elizabeth sat holding her new baby girl in her arms while her father announced her birth to the world. It was late and the room was dim, but she could see all her little features. What a miracle.

Her little head was covered in golden hair and her eyes a darker shade like her father's. Those could change, Elizabeth knew, and she looked forward to watching those changes over the years.

Ethan walked quietly back into the room and sat on the bed beside his wife and daughter. His eyes misted looking at them.

"Have you decided on a name?" he asked, stroking the baby's head.

"How about, Mary Tarina? For your family and mine."

"Mary Tarina Richards. I like that."

Just as they leaned in for a kiss, a light began to form in the corner of the room. It grew in size and brightness. Elizabeth clutched her daughter close; still not quite believing the Countess was gone.

Then the light dimmed and Mary was there, her faithful Viktor beside her. Only Mary looked to be a full grown, older woman.

"Mary?" Ethan gasped. He had not seen her since the night he fought the Countess.

"Hello Ethan." She looked to the bed, and walked slowly to Elizabeth and the baby. She smiled and Viktor looked over her shoulder. "She is beautiful. I heard your name for her. I am honored."

"Thank you, Mary. For everything." Elizabeth relaxed her grip on her child.

"I come for two reasons. Mainly, to let you know that you can rest at ease. The Bloody Countess is no more." Mary stroked the baby's cheek. "I also wanted to bring you these."

She presented Elizabeth with a stone identical to Ethan's and another on a much smaller leather string.

"She will need to grow into hers."

"Thank you." Elizabeth allowed Ethan to tie it around her neck.

"These are not for protection or guidance any longer. These three stones represent your family and all you have done to remain together." Her smile was bright. "I will visit you again and present you another for each child you bring into the world."

"We must go now, Mary." Viktor said, placing his arm around her waist.

"One day, we will all walk together. Until then, believe in the power of your love."

Then they were gone. Ethan and Elizabeth looked at each other and knew from this day forward, all would be right in their world.

Marla, as it turned out, was released from the institution. Elizabeth had visited her and held no blame over the woman. Though she had admitted to hating Elizabeth for her relationship with Ethan, she would have never attacked her had she been in her right state of mind. However, the court insisted on jail time, so Marla would be away for a while.

Max was brought up on so many charges that he decided to end it for himself in the county jail. He hung himself before anyone could stop him.

Elizabeth decided to be a stay at home mother and ended all contracts.

"We are a lucky family." Ethan said, taking his daughter from her mother and settling her into her own bed in the hospital room. "I've been thinking that maybe we should buy a house."

"Tired of the apartment life?" She smiled up at him when he joined her on the bed. She leaned into his embrace.

"Well, I hope to have several more of these little miracles, and they need room to run."

"Several?" She rolled her eyes. "Didn't you get yelled at enough just a few hours ago?"

He laughed and pulled her closer. The day she had left the hospital after the dream episode, he had taken her home and placed a ring on her finger. After loving her into sated bliss, they had set the date to be married. A week later, she became his wife. He didn't think he could be happier that day, until he watched her bring their daughter into the world.

"I can handle you yelling at me," he said as he kissed her gently. "As long as you love me after."

"I am shocked. You know very good and well we can't be *loving* for another few weeks yet."

"He didn't say anything about my hands, and as soon as you recuperate, I intend to touch you lots."

"I'm counting on it." She yawned, snuggling into the bedding. "I'm tired, Ethan. Stay in the bed and hold me?"

"Of course."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

He held his wife as she slept, watching her and loving her more every minute. Baby Tara kicked once, and drifted to sleep herself. Ethan eased down and wrapped his arms around her, knowing they were all safe. They had fought one hell of a battle and won with the most powerful weapon of all.

Love.

Authors Note:

A little about The Countess of Relative Dreams.

Though there are many stories on this woman, this is the theory I used to write this story. However, there is much fiction as well.

Elizabeth Bathory was born into one of the wealthiest and most influential families of Transylvania. Many of her relatives held a position of power, such as a cardinal, a prime minister of Hungary, and several princes.

Her husband, Count Nasdasdy was known as The Black Hero of Hungary. When he died in 1600, this was when her reign of killings began.

It is said that while a young maid accidentally pulled the Countess's hair while brushing it, Bathory slapped the maid and some of her blood landed on her hand. She rubbed it into her skin, and thought that she took in the freshness of the maid's youth. She was sure she had found the secret of eternal youth.

For the next ten years, her followers would bring her the young girls for her blood baths. However, this differs from my story. It is said a woman escaped and notified authorities. It is also said that below the castle, fifty bodies were unearthed.

Her followers were, in fact, executed, though there are many various stories of how they met their ends.

Stonemasons were brought to the castle, and Elizabeth was, in fact, walled up into her own prison. Be it in a tiny closet (some say), or her chamber, mattered little in this story.

In 1614, Elizabeth Bathory died on the floor of her walled in prison.

As a writer, I became interested in this woman for a ghost story. I have done much research, but I cannot guarantee any of the statement as fact. Some say 600 women were killed. Some say even more. The Internet and libraries are full of different versions to this woman's life and death.

If you know of the history of this woman, and see that I wrote an untruth, please remember that Relative Dreams is first a work of fiction. This was not written with the intent to be a biography.

The Bloody Countess did in fact live and die in the 17th century, and she did in fact kill many women in her quest for youth. My goal was to write a paranormal love story.

Thank You.