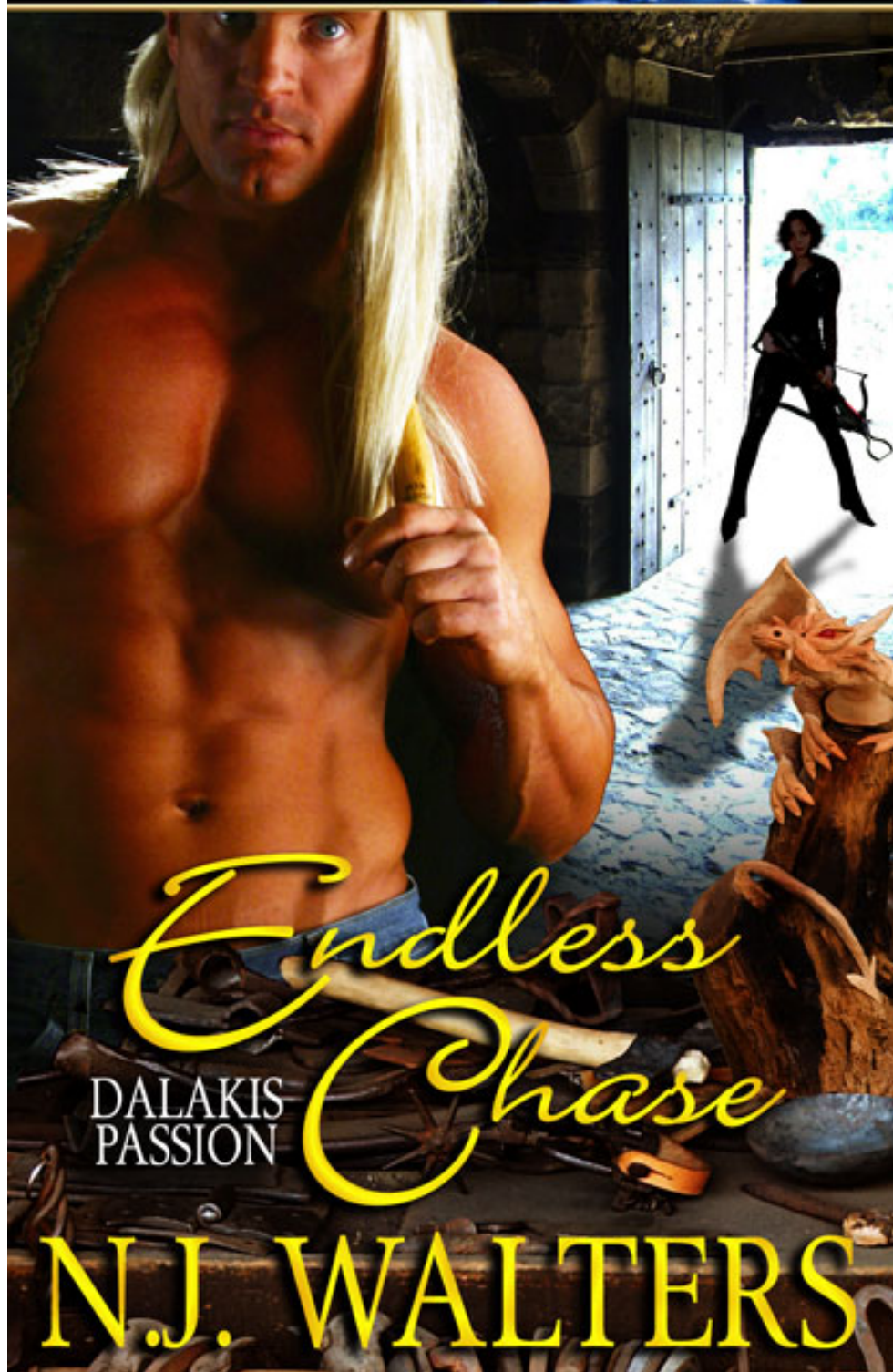


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Endless Chase

DALAKIS
PASSION

N.J. WALTERS

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Endless Chase

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ENDLESS CHASE

N.J. Walters

Dedication

This book is for all of you who have come to love the Dalakis family as much as I do, and who asked for Chase's story.

Thank you for taking this journey with me and for embracing the Dalakis brothers, the women who love them, and their extended family.

Prologue

She stood in the shadows, feeling more at home there than in the light. As the man she'd searched for these past five weeks poured rich red liquid from the decanter, the scent of blood filled her nostrils. The temptation to kill him now was almost overwhelming, but she restrained herself. Information was what she needed and dead men didn't talk. But his time was near.

Oblivious to the danger swirling around him, he strolled toward her and thrust a crystal goblet in her direction. "Drink." Suspicion darkened his eyes as he held up his glass in a silent toast. "It's too bad you didn't arrive sooner. You could have shared in the kill."

It was too bad. That was one more death on her conscience. But what was one more? He was a pawn, nothing more. She suspected they were all just pawns in this game, shuffled and moved by a master player. But she was a willing one. Taking the goblet from his outstretched hand, she raised it to her lips and drank it in one swift swallow, knowing that was what he expected.

His smile sent a shiver down her spine and she knew she was in the presence of pure evil. Laying the empty glass aside, she returned his smile as she shifted closer. "I'll bet a man of your many talents is privy to all sorts of secrets."

A name sprang into his mind almost immediately. She heard it as clearly as if he'd said it aloud. *Vasili*. She felt power and fear surrounding it. Who was this person to inspire so much awe and trepidation in a monster such as this? Something deep in her gut told her this was the information she'd been searching for.

Now that his mind was open, she focused her psychic power, grabbing on to his mind with all her might. He froze, his mouth falling open on a silent scream as he tried to fight. "Who is Vasili and where can I find him?"

An hour later, satisfied she'd learned all she could, she walked to the door, the pungent smell of gasoline trailing behind her. There was no sound from the monster she'd just dealt with. For his latest victim, it was too late, but there would be justice.

Stopping, she foraged in her coat pocket and pulled out a pack of matches she'd picked up at a local bar. Flicking one match against the flint, she watched as it sprang to life, its orange glow illuminating the scene before her.

She lit the entire package from the lone match, watching as the flames soared higher. When she tossed it into the room there was a giant *whoosh* as it rushed forward and met with the gasoline. Satisfied there would be nothing left to identify her, she turned her back on the grim scene and walked away.

She knew exactly where she was going next.

Chapter One

Katya Markova blended with the shadow of a large beech tree, the two becoming one, as she stared at the old stone church. Light shone from the few small windows like a beacon of hope, indicating that someone was inside. She'd seen many churches like it in her travels, tucked away in forgotten corners of countries that time seemed to have passed by. No matter their size or their denomination, they all emanated a sense of calm, promising sanctuary to weary travelers. But Katya knew that promise was nothing more than an illusion. She would find no peace here.

She was still, unmoving, as she scanned the area carefully, her black clothing allowing her to become one with the night. When she was certain it was safe, she crossed the grass- and weed-filled yard and climbed the stairs. Her combat boots made no sound against the stone as she climbed to the top and eased the door open. The hinges creaked slightly, but Katya ignored the sound and slipped inside.

The vestibule was dark, but there was light beyond. She stopped by the font of holy water, dipped her fingers into the basin and brought them to her forehead. The smell of incense tickled her nose as she stepped farther into the church. The scent reminded her of childhood and sent a pang of longing through her.

Her mama had loved old churches and her papa had indulged her mama as much as possible. As a result, Katya had spent many evenings such as this, sheltered in the confines of a holy edifice. Large and grand, small and humble, it hadn't mattered to her mama, she'd loved them all—the architecture and the ambiance.

Mama had once told her that all churches had a soul. Now that she was older, she understood what her mother meant. If you stopped and listened, you could almost hear the heartbeat of the building itself, brought to life from years of devout worship by the faithful. In many older buildings that beat was getting slower and slower, but still, they survived.

An elderly priest was saying evening Mass to about a half-dozen souls, none of them under the age of sixty, but he didn't even glance her way. Which was a good thing, considering she was carrying a knapsack and a crossbow strapped to her back.

Walking neither slow, nor fast, so as not to draw attention, Katya kept to the flickering shadows as she made her way to the side of the building, stopping in front of a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary. A ring of votive candles sat beneath the statue, some flickering with life, some burned out and dark.

In most modern churches, there were elaborate candleholders of iron or silver to house these prayer candles. Here there were simple stone ledges that had probably existed since the church had been built. Looking around, Katya estimated the church was at least four or five hundred years old, if not older.

Picking up a votive candle, she fingered it. The wax was smooth beneath her fingertips. They were partially made of beeswax, which was unusual. Most churches nowadays used the cheaper, wax candles, reserving the more expensive and finer ones for the altar. The smell of the beeswax reminded her of her mama. There had always been flowers and candles scattered around the house when she was growing up. It was a fragrance she associated with childhood and innocence.

She sighed, knowing what she was going to do. She couldn't stop herself, even though none of her prayers had ever been answered.

Tucking the candle into the corner on the top ledge, she plucked a long taper from its holder, using the flame to light her candle. The flame flickered, caught the wick and flared to life. She returned the taper and stared at her candle. The light danced against the stone, pushing back the darkness in this small corner of the stone ledge. Closing her eyes, she briefly offered a prayer for the souls of her parents.

Her eyes flew open as images of their brutal death filled her brain. Her breathing came quicker as her heart began to pound. Katya took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down. She needed to be in control, had to be in control if she ever hoped to find the monster responsible for their deaths.

Digging into her pocket, she pulled out some euros and dropped them in the small wooden donation box that rested discreetly beside the candles. She didn't have any of the local currency, but she didn't think they'd mind. After all, money was money.

Although she knew the candle made no difference, it gave her a momentary sense of peace. That was the best she hoped for these days. A different sort of emotion was driving her, pushing her day and night, and had for almost a year now.

Vengeance.

It was a hard, cold bedfellow, but it kept her focused and steady. She would find the person responsible for the brutal slaying of her parents, or she would die trying. It had taken her months to uncover the secretive network of evil and infiltrate it. She'd slowly worked her way into their trust, one dark deed at a time.

But she'd done it in her own way, ridding the world of demons in the guise of men. They wouldn't know what she'd done until it was too late. She was so close she could almost see the end in sight. There was only one more thing she needed—her parents' killer. And that meeting was coming soon. Very soon.

Her new path in life had already taken her down some dark roads, eating away at the person she'd been. Life was not something she took for granted. It was a gift to be cherished and celebrated.

But she had taken it this past year, ripping it from those who preyed on the innocent. She was judge, jury, executioner and death. Each step into darkness took a piece of her soul, but it was a price worth paying. The world was a little safer and she was one step closer to success.

Whirling away from the warm glow of candles, she eased into a pew near the back that was shrouded in darkness. The oak was smooth as she slid onto the seat and leaned

forward, resting her hand on the back of the pew in front of her. How many people had sat in this very spot? Their prayers had been raised to the heavens, but had they been answered? She suspected her prayers were very different. Katya prayed for the strength to continue down her dark path until she completed the task she'd set for herself.

What would her parents think of her quest for vengeance?

Her mama would be worried about her and would no doubt be slightly disappointed. Okay, more than slightly. Katya's stomach roiled, but she ignored it. Marya Markova was the type of woman who'd never met a stranger. She hadn't had a mean bone in her body, constantly laughing and bringing joy to all those around her. Katya had wanted to be more like her mama, but, in temperament, she suspected she was more like her papa.

Afanas Markova was a man who protected his family and those he considered *his*. Her papa would understand her quest for revenge even as he worried about her. He'd trained her well, and she was quite able to defend herself. But then again, her father had been trained in several martial arts and in the art of weaponry. Yet he and her mama had been brutally slain.

Katya closed her eyes and allowed the image to permeate her being. She'd been checking out the local shopping possibilities and had returned just before ten o'clock at night to the quaint, isolated mountain chalet they'd been renting in the German countryside. The few servants who had traveled with the family had been given the evening off to enjoy the local taverns.

She'd smelled the smoke as she walked up the driveway. The acrid stench never seemed to fully leave her nostrils. Even now, she was often yanked from a deep sleep, the oily smell coating her senses and making her roll from the bed in terror. But it was always a dream, a memory of what had happened.

She'd seen the tendrils of smoke and run, her feet pounding up the driveway, but it seemed to take her forever to reach the house.

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"Mama! Papa!" she screamed as she slammed the front door open, heedless of the black smoke pouring through the doorway. Coughing, she stumbled inward, bypassing the dining area and heading to the small study in the back of the home. That was where her parents had been when she'd left earlier in the evening.

Flames shot out of the parlor as she passed the open door. Crying out, she fell back and hit the wall. Her jacket was on fire and she beat the flames out, not even feeling the searing heat against her fingers as she continued onward.

The smoke was so thick she couldn't see a hand in front of her face. A dull roar filled her ears and she realized it was the sound of the fire burning out of control. She tried to call their names again, but coughed instead. Breathing was becoming almost impossible.

Using the wall as a guide, feeling its hardness beneath her fingertips, she closed her eyes and visualized the space. They'd only settled in yesterday, but she knew where she was. The wall dipped inward and she knew she'd hit a doorframe. The door to the study was closed. Groping for the handle, she ignored the pain that shot through her palm as the hot metal burned her skin. She twisted it and pushed.

Heat blasted her and she fell to her knees and began to crawl. The smoke wasn't quite as thick here, so she reached out with her foot and kicked the door closed behind her. "Mama," she whispered as she squinted, trying to see through the haze.

Her outspread fingers clutched material and she cried out in fright, praying she wasn't too late to save her parents from the blaze. Katya's fingers hit something wet and sticky. It was then she smelled it.

Blood.

She ran her hands up her mama's body and stopped, her mind unable to comprehend what her fingertips were telling her. A silent scream forming in her throat as she realized her mama's head was no longer attached to her body. Her thoughts went blank as she doubled over in pain. This couldn't be. Not her soft-spoken, gentle mother.

Katya forced herself to look for her papa. Where was he and why had he allowed this to happen? Tears flowed down her face, blinding her as she sought him. Unable to see properly, she smacked her head off the edge of a table, falling to her side. She blinked to clear her vision and met her papa's sightless eyes. His head was lying beneath the table, his mouth still open on a soundless roar.

Bile clogged her throat as horror filled her. She shook her head, screaming her denial, the raging fire forgotten as fury and terror swept over her. How could this happen? Her papa was larger than life, a man quite capable of protecting his family from any enemies. Not that he had enemies. Her papa made friends everywhere he went. Educated and cultured, without being snobbish, and having a keen sense of humor, her papa was sought out by all sorts of people—from heads of state to the local tavern owner.

Turning away, she reached out her hand and found his body not three feet from his head. She touched his chest, unable to believe he was truly dead. She frowned as her hand hit something sharp. She tugged at the small object, curling her fingers around it.

Glass shattered and the entire building creaked. Timbers fell and the ceiling caved in just a few feet from her. Flames fell into the room, shooting upward and outward, seeking more prey to devour. For a moment, the space was illuminated and she saw their bodies perfectly. Their arms were outstretched, their fingers almost touching, as if even in death they'd reached out to one another.

She frowned as a strange thought entered her mind. Where was all the blood? Their heads had been chopped off, yet there was hardly any blood. Her papa's chest was split open and there was no blood. It was if they'd been drained dry.

Katya's blood went cold. "No," she moaned, covering her mama's body with her own and rocking back and forth. This couldn't be happening.

More debris fell from the hole in the ceiling. She could hear sirens in the distance, but it was too late. There was no help to be had for her parents.

A glint of gold caught her eye and Katya reached out without thinking and pulled the cross from what remained of her mama's mangled neck. Her mama had worn it for as long as Katya could remember. It was ancient, a relic from a bygone civilization, and a gift from her doting papa. Gripping it tight, she gazed at her parents for one last moment.

Breathing was almost impossible now. She could practically hear her papa's deep rumbling voice demanding that she leave. Katya was now responsible for all the people who relied on her family for their living. She was also now Sasha's guardian. It was the thought of her eight-year-old brother that shook her out of her state of lethargy. He would have no one if she perished. He was too young to be left alone.

Turning away from the mutilated bodies of her parents, she crawled to the window. She never looked back as she punched her elbow through the glass. It shattered and she sucked in a deep breath as the cool night air hit her starving lungs. Knocking the larger pieces of glass away with her arm, she hefted her leg over the sill and pushed herself out of the fiery room. The remaining shards cut through her skin, but she didn't care. Those injuries would heal, along with the myriad burns on her hands and arms. But the memory of what she'd seen would never fade, never be healed.

As she dragged herself away from the burning building, she could hear Rina, Sasha's nanny, calling her name. Katya coughed, stumbling to her feet and heading toward the sound. She had to get them away from here. Whoever killed her parents might still be around.

Something pricked her palm as she dragged her feet forward. Opening her hand, she stared down in disbelief. Sitting beside the thick gold cross was the sharp object she'd removed from her papa's chest. She'd forgotten she was still holding it. Her eyes narrowed. It appeared to be a dart of some kind with the end cracked off. What had it been doing in her papa's chest? Rage pushed out the numbness that had settled over her. Fury surged through her veins, giving her energy as she pushed onward. Someone had poisoned her papa, and probably her mama, before murdering them.

Tucking the dart safely into her pocket, she looped the cross over her neck. The metal was hot and burned her skin, but she didn't care. She was alive, and as long as there was breath in her body, she would search for the murderer. She would not rest until she had her vengeance.

Sasha called her name and Katya picked up her pace. Right now, the important thing was to get what was left of her family to safety.

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"Are you all right, child?" He spoke first in Romanian, then in German, before trying halting English.

Katya jumped, coming to her feet and pulling a knife from her boot in one smooth motion. Luckily, she managed to stop herself from stabbing the priest who now stood beside her. She stumbled back, appalled at what she'd almost done. "I'm sorry, Father."

The old man didn't seem the least bit startled, as if having a knife pulled on him was a daily occurrence. "You seem troubled."

She laughed, but there was no humor in the sound. "That's an understatement, Father." Katya returned the knife to her boot and straightened. Her hand went to the cross, tucked safely inside the collar of her long-sleeved shirt. She could feel the heavy weight of it pressed close to her heart.

He smiled and it deepened the wrinkles around his eyes. He looked to be in his seventies, perhaps even eighties, but his eyes were a vivid blue and were quite youthful. "I'm about to have some tea at my house if you'd like to talk."

She blinked, not quite sure what to say to him. She couldn't remember the last time anyone had offered her a kindness with no strings attached. That was a stark reminder of how much her life had changed in the past year.

He waited, expectantly. Katya felt the walls closing in around her. The candles seemed to flare higher, the flames mocking her. She had to get out.

"Uh, thanks, but I can't. Not now." She backed away until she exited the other end of the pew. Whirling, she stalked toward the door. It was hard, but she forced herself not to run.

"My name is Father Patrescu," he called after her. "I am always here if you change your mind."

She didn't bother to answer as she burst out of the door and into the night, not stopping until the woods swallowed her up and the lights of the church were barely visible in the distance. Katya sucked in deep breaths, filling her lungs with the sweet, clean air of the Carpathian Mountains.

She could not waver from her course. She'd sacrificed too much, lost too much of her soul for her to turn back now. Her quest for vengeance had brought her here, to Transylvania, and to the Dalakis family.

And it was here she'd make her final stand.

Chapter Two

Chase Deveraux strolled aimlessly through the dense forest, the heavy dew coating his boots and dampening his hair. There was a path of sorts, but he wasn't afraid of becoming lost. He'd been tromping through these woods since he was a teenager, and at thirty-one, was quite familiar with them and all the creatures that dwelled there.

The moon wasn't quite full, but there was more than enough light for him to keep from tripping and falling flat on his face. He should have waited an extra hour until sunrise, but he'd wanted to be standing in the meadow, amidst the colorful riot of wildflowers when the sun rose over the peaks of the Carpathian Mountains.

It was late summer, but the nights were chilly this high in the mountains. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket and kept walking. An owl hooted, but other than that, there was little sound beyond the rustling of his boots as he stepped over ground and grass and twigs.

There was something peaceful and calming about this place. So different from the hustle and bustle of New York City, the place he called home. No matter how busy he was with work, how many demands there were on his time, he always managed to carve out two or three weeks a year to spend at Dalakis Castle with his extended family.

He paused and peered through the gloom, checking to make certain he was still on the right path. Satisfied, he continued, his hiking boots eating up the distance as his stride lengthened. A sense of urgency permeated him. He had to get there.

Life was a funny thing. You just never knew where it was going to take you. Orphaned at the age of eight, he'd been reared by his older sister Delight. They'd made a good life for themselves in New Orleans. For ten years, they'd both lived and worked in The Grande—a B&B run by Miss Nadine Grande. Well, his sister had worked, but he'd helped out doing whatever he could in between going to school, holding down a part-time job and working on his art. His sister had also moonlighted as a bartender at a local restaurant a few nights a week. It was that job that changed everything.

Delight had witnessed a murder one night while working late and had to run for her life, only to be rescued by Lucian Dalakis—who just happened to be a vampire. Chase hadn't discovered that pertinent little fact until his sister lay dying, a victim of the killers responsible for the murder she'd witnessed. Lucian had saved his sister's life by converting her. His sister was now a vampire and Lucian's wife.

It had been hard for him to deal with it at first. He'd been so happy that Delight had been saved, but it had quickly hit him that his sister was now immortal and he was not. He would age and die. His sister would forever be twenty-eight. Already, he looked slightly older than she did.

Beyond that, she could no longer walk in the daylight with him. Nor did she eat very often. He knew she could tolerate small amounts of food and she usually saved those times for when they were together, sharing small meals or hot chocolate chip cookies fresh from the oven. It was some normalcy in a world that had gone crazy overnight. But one thing that he'd never doubted was how much his sister loved him.

They'd gone from being a small family of two, plus Miss Nadine, to belonging to an extended, bossy, prying family. They'd all taken an interest in him, debating where he should live and where he should go to study art. They were loud and opinionated, and Chase loved them all.

Fatigue washed over him, reminding him that he'd been traveling for hours. Lucian had wanted Chase to take the Dalakis family jet for the trip, but he'd declined. He wanted to make his own way from New York to Transylvania, stopping in London and Paris for a couple of days to see some business colleagues before continuing on to Dalakis Castle.

He'd arrived only an hour ago. Not that he worried about waking anyone. He chuckled at the thought. Considering that his hosts were also vampires, it would have been more inconvenient for him to arrive at noon.

Cristofor Dalakis, the eldest of the three brothers, was indeed the lord of the castle. At over six hundred years of age, he exuded a strength and solidity that was most impressive, and very imposing at times. Chase had been half afraid of him as a teenager, but also intrigued.

The two of them had become unlikely friends, both of them sharing a passion for the arts. Johanna, Cristofor's wife, was a classy, friendly lady, as well as a financial wizard. They'd opened their home to Chase, welcoming him whenever he decided to drop in and visit.

Then there was Stefan—the youngest, but the most dangerous of the three brothers. Now that was one intense man. The only time Chase ever saw Stefan smile was in the presence of his wife, Laurel Rose.

The path ended and Chase stepped into the clearing. The sky was growing lighter, showing patches of pale pink, and the moon was beginning to fade. The silence enveloped him, along with the crisp, clean mountain air.

Tipping back his head, he sucked in a deep lungful and held it briefly before releasing it. With his legs braced apart, his hands spread by his sides and his head back, he felt the stress and strain of the past few months drain away. Even the headaches that had plagued him for the past six months were gone.

This place was truly special.

The entire family would be gathering at the castle in the next few days, as they did every summer. There was no particular reason, except that the Dalakis brothers were very big on family. Which meant that Zane York, a Dalakis cousin who'd come back into their lives about a decade ago, and his wife Sophia would join them. As well, Sam Cassidy, his wife Blythe and their brood of three boys would be here. Cassidy was an

ex-cop who worked security for the Dalakis family back in the United States, but he was more than an employee. Cassidy was family. They were an odd group—mostly vampires, with Chase, Cassidy and his family being the exceptions.

Chase rubbed the back of his neck as he trudged over to a rock that sat in the middle of the clearing and lowered himself down. The surface was cool, but he didn't mind. With his jeans and jacket on, he was comfortable enough.

A wolf howled in the distance. The sound, long and mournful as it rent the air, disturbing the silence. There were quite a few wolves roaming Dalakis land, but Chase had no fear of any of them. All the Dalakis brothers had an affinity with the great beasts, and Chase had met many of the wolf pack over his years of coming here. He was safer here than he was walking down the streets of New York.

Faint bands of yellow and apricot appeared on the edge of the horizon, heralding the start of a new day. The colors never failed to mesmerize him. As an artist, he always felt that nature was the best artist of all. Outside, there was a never-ending palate of possibilities and inspiration abounded.

Chase mostly sculpted, working in metal, stone and wood, but he dabbled in oils occasionally. It wasn't where he was most skilled, but he did it mostly for his own enjoyment. His work as a sculptor drove him, a hard, demanding taskmaster. Painting, he did for pleasure and relaxation.

He was on the verge of making a name for himself in the art world. His work was going to be showcased in a prestigious gallery in New York in a few months' time. Chase had finished up the last piece earlier than expected and decided to take some time off before the showing.

Not that he'd go.

He kept his face and real name out of the spotlight, going by the single name of Dev, a shortened version of his last name. The last thing he wanted was reporters looking into his personal life, or rather, the personal life of his sister. He would protect Delight, and his family, at all costs.

In fact, he'd been hesitant to agree to this showing at all. He'd made a decent living over the years selling his work through small galleries or to private collectors. Fame wasn't something he needed. It was all about the work for him.

It was Johanna who'd finally convinced him to go ahead with the showing. She'd had the business end of things taken care of by one of the army of Dalakis lawyers. His identity was shrouded in so many layers of paperwork and companies that no one would ever discover who Dev really was.

When he'd still hesitated, Cristofor had assured him that if someone did indeed discover Chase's identity, it would be a small matter for one of the three brothers to make them forget it. Chase was continually amazed by the extent of their powers, even after all these years. It would be an easy thing for them to alter or erase someone's memory. Scary stuff.

He shifted and caught something out of the corner of his eye, something that didn't belong. Slowly, he turned his head, allowing his eyes to drift, slightly unfocused. It was a technique he sometimes used when looking at his own work to help him see what was missing.

There.

Off to the left, a shadow moved. It wasn't an animal. None of the animals here would have hesitated to join him. He'd often shared his meadow with fox, rabbits and deer, along with the occasional wolf and bear. They had a mutual agreement to leave one another alone.

"You're welcome to join me." He kept his voice low and non-threatening.

An unnatural stillness seemed to swell around him. Chase frowned and sat up straighter, feeling threatened for the first time. At six-two, he was no slouch. His work kept him fit and strong. You couldn't be weak and work with large slabs of stone or huge pieces of metal. He'd also taken martial arts for years, more for the exercise and mental discipline, than for protection. Still, at this moment, he was glad he had.

Slowly, he pushed himself to his feet. "Show yourself," he demanded, irritation filling him as the peace he'd so desperately sought trickled away to be replaced by tension.

A shadow detached itself from the trees and he caught his first glimpse of the intruder. He blinked. Twice. Not quite believing his eyes.

A woman strode toward him, no hesitation in her step. She was fairly tall, but was still a half-foot shorter than him. Her hair was black as midnight and cropped short. Her body was lithe and lean, clad in combat boots, leather pants and a black leather jacket.

As she came closer, the first rays of sunlight hit her face and she blinked, throwing up her hand to shield her eyes. Unable to stop himself, Chase walked toward her. He needed to touch her to see if she was real. They met about halfway, both stopping to stare at the other.

Up close, he could see that her skin was soft and pale, almost porcelain. It was the kind of skin that only babies and young children seemed to have. His fingers itched to touch it, to see if it was as soft as it appeared.

Her chin was rounded, but tilted at a stubborn angle. Her nose was small and perfect, her cheekbones high. But it was her eyes that captivated him. Dark blue, so dark they were almost black. They were the eyes of an old soul. She blinked and her long, dark lashes swept down to touch her cheekbones.

He reached out and traced his thumb over the curve of her cheek. Her eyes flew open and she took a quick step back.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

Her eyes darkened even further and her lips thinned. "I'm afraid of nothing." Her voice was slightly accented. Maybe Russian, or maybe she was Romanian. It was hard

to say. Still, her voice was low and husky, and he liked the way she sounded. He wanted to hear her speak again.

"My mistake." He inclined his head in apology.

She snorted, but didn't turn away. It appeared he wasn't the only one fascinated. She licked her lips and Chase felt his gut tighten. God, her lips were full and rosy and totally kissable.

"Why are you here?"

Chase felt the corners of his mouth turn up. He sensed this woman wouldn't back down from anyone or anything. "That's my line, not yours," he countered. "This land belongs to extended family of mine. If anyone is trespassing, it's you."

"You're a Dalakis." Her hands opened and closed at her sides, but other than that, she was as still as a stone.

"Not exactly." He could sense her growing tension and tilted his head to one side to study her better. She intrigued him. "If you know who owns this land, then you know you're trespassing." Cristofor didn't mind the occasional hiker, but mostly discouraged folks from tromping around the land by posting warnings about bears and wolves. The place was fairly isolated in the mountains so it usually wasn't much of a problem.

"I'm just hiking." There was an edge to her words. She turned slightly, easing back toward the shadows, and he saw the crossbow on her back.

"Hunting isn't allowed."

"That is for protection only. I don't hunt," she paused, "animals."

Before he could understand the deeper meaning he was certain was underlying her words, she headed back toward the woods. "Wait!" Chase stalked after her, unwilling to let her go. Some dormant instinct within him was screaming at him not to let her leave him, to grab her and drag her back to the castle with him.

Images of the two of them naked in his large bed filled his mind. He shook his head to clear it. He must be going out of his mind. He'd just met this woman trespassing on family land. "What's your name?" he demanded as he caught her by the shoulder.

She whirled away, crouching, her body in a defensive fighting stance.

Chase held up his hands. "I'm not going to hurt you." The mere thought appalled him. "I would never hurt you. I just want to know who you are."

"You should be more worried about me hurting you." She crossed her arms over her chest.

Chase wished she wasn't wearing a jacket. He wanted to see more of her body. He'd bet that her breasts were small but firm. His artist's mind could picture it perfectly. The soft mounds would be tipped with hard nipples the color of pale pink roses. His cock stirred, pressing against the zipper of his jeans, making him uncomfortably aware of his growing arousal.

He swallowed hard. No woman had ever gotten to him this quickly. "Who are you?"

She glanced at the meadow behind him and then back at him. "Katya." She blinked again, moving more into the shadows. "I must go."

"I'm Chase." He held out his hand, willing her to take it. "Chase Deveraux."

She stared at it for the longest time before eventually wiping her palm on her pants and extending it toward him. Her hand was so much smaller than his, but he felt the calluses as they touched. She was no stranger to hard work.

What an enigma Katya was—a tough warrior exterior, but with the face of an angel.

His fingers tightened around hers, unwilling to let go and lose this small contact between them. His body felt tight and alive, humming with energy. After the fatigue of the past few months, it was intoxicating. "Katya." He said her name slowly, savoring the sound on his lips.

She was staring at his mouth, her lips parting. He couldn't resist. Tugging her closer, he lowered his head and brushed his mouth against hers.

Heat exploded throughout his body and he moaned as he repeated the small caress. A tiny cry came from Katya, echoing the passion building deep inside him. He needed more.

Releasing her fingers, he slid his hands around her waist, bringing her body in direct contact with his. He groaned as her thighs touched his and their chests brushed. It didn't matter that they were both wearing jackets. It was as electric as if they'd both been naked.

Chase's entire body tightened, but the tension was a pleasurable one that he hadn't felt in a long, long time. A grueling work schedule and personal problems had kept his social calendar empty for the past year. Longer. He'd been so buried in work he hadn't dated in what seemed like forever.

Katya was everything he'd been missing. Everything he couldn't have, a voice reminded him. Ignoring the voice in his head, he deepened the kiss. Just one taste. One kiss wouldn't hurt either of them.

Her fingers edged up his arms and around his neck, tugging him closer. He dipped his tongue into her mouth. She tasted like mint, yet the tang of something dark and mysterious lingered. Her tongue stroked his and he groaned, giving himself over to the deep pull of attraction that flowed between them.

Chase didn't know how long they stood there in the shade of the trees, mouths melded in a mind-numbing kiss. The sun peeked out from behind the mountain, rising higher in the sky. The heat of the morning soaked through his heavy coat. He slanted his mouth over hers, again and again, until they were both breathless, their lungs pumping hard.

Katya was the first to pull away. She looked stunned as she brought her fingers to her lips, touching them. Her mouth was swollen and damp. Chase reached for her again, but she stumbled backward. "I have to go."

"Will I see you again?" The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. The last thing he needed was to get involved with a woman, especially a complete stranger. He had enough problems in his life right now. That was part of his reason for coming here early. He needed time to think, time to sort out his future. But the thought of not seeing her again ate at his gut like acid. He had to see her.

"I don't know. Maybe. Probably." Her words tumbled, one over another. She looked as stunned by her reply as he'd been by his question. Turning, she raced into the woods. He took a step after her, but she'd already vanished. He listened, but couldn't detect the sound of her footsteps. Obviously, she was light on her feet.

Taking a deep breath, Chase turned back to the meadow, which was now aglow with early morning sunlight. Strolling back to the rock, he gingerly lowered himself down, careful to adjust the bulge in his jeans. At least he had one of his questions answered. He'd been worried about his lack of a libido in the past months. Obviously, all he'd needed was a change of scenery and the right woman to get everything working properly again.

Unzipping his jacket, he pulled it off and tossed it aside. He tilted back his head, soaking up the sun's rays, letting them soothe his tired body and soul. The ground around him was awash with wildflowers, swaying in the light breeze. Red, yellow, orange and purple, they carpeted the ground and perfumed the air. Lying back, Chase closed his eyes.

He knew he had to head back to the castle soon. He needed to eat and then he really needed a shower and about eight hours of uninterrupted sleep. He'd only stay for a few more minutes.

As the world awakened around him, and bees and other insects began to buzz around the flowers, Chase drifted off into a light doze.

Chapter Three

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Katya berated herself as she raced through the woods. She should never have revealed herself, especially not to him. He was one of *them*.

Chase Deveraux. She liked the sound of his name. It was strong, like him. Of course, she knew who he was. She'd done her research when she'd discovered that the Dalakis family was her target. Information was power.

But all her research hadn't prepared her for this.

The reality of Chase was so much more than she could have ever imagined. He was tall and well built. His shoulders were solid, his arms strong. And his chest... She slowed to a light jog as she neared the village, needing to catch her breath, and it wasn't the run down the mountain path that was making her lightheaded. No, it was the memory of her breasts pressed against Chase's chest.

"Get a grip." She couldn't afford any distractions in her life, not now, and certainly not with him.

Katya stopped at the edge of the woods and quickly put her crossbow into its leather case. She settled it on her back and yanked her knapsack over it. The sun was climbing higher in the sky, so she pulled her sunglasses out of her pocket and shoved them on her nose, pushing them high.

People were just beginning to stir in the tiny town as she hurried to the small inn where she was staying. It was more of a B&B really, but the owners liked to refer to it as an inn. Still, it was the only accommodations around, so she didn't care what it was called. It was clean and it was close to her target. That was all that mattered.

She needed to check her file on the Dalakis family and their inner circle. She knew that Chase had been born in New Orleans and had been reared by his older sister, Delight. It was Delight who'd been the main focus of her investigation since she was married to a Dalakis. Chase had been more of an afterthought. She knew he was an artist of some kind.

She could use that.

God, what had she become? Her mother would be ashamed of her. Manipulation and deceit were second nature to her now. Lies rolled easily off her tongue, when a year ago she would never even have considered telling an untruth.

But she wasn't that naïve young girl anymore. That girl had died in the fire along with her parents. She'd learned that life wasn't always fair, nor did the story always have a happy ending. The fire had scorched more than her hands. It had burned her to her core, altering her very being. What had emerged from the flames was a woman

born of vengeance. That was what she lived for now and nothing would stand in her way.

She yanked open the front door of the inn with more force than necessary and barely kept it from slamming against the wooden exterior. Taking a deep breath, she calmed herself, pulling her normal reserve around her like a tattered cloak. After feeling Chase's warmth, she felt colder, more alone. Which was silly. She hadn't changed. She was the same woman who'd left the inn last evening.

Even as she had the thought, she knew she was wrong. Something inside her had changed. Whether for better or worse, she couldn't say for certain, but she had an unsettling feeling that her life was about to get a whole lot more complicated. She stepped inside the building, carefully closing the door behind her.

"Good morning," a female voice greeted in heavily accented English. Olga Bratiano, who ran the inn with her husband Eugeniu, was already up and bustling around. She placed a vase of fresh flowers on the table just inside the front door and eyed Katya with suspicion. "You have been gone all night?"

Katya shook her head. "I got up early and took a walk. I couldn't sleep." That wasn't exactly a lie. She hadn't slept much in months.

The older woman clucked her tongue. "That is not good for one so young." She shook her finger at Katya. "The mountains are not safe, not at night." She gripped a thin silver cross that hung around her neck. "Not safe," she repeated.

"Olga." Her husband stepped into the foyer, his face set in stern lines. "You must not frighten the poor girl."

"I'm not easily frightened," Katya assured him. Fatigue was beginning to eat away at her already frayed nerves. Her eyes were burning behind her sunglasses and it was taking all her energy to remain on her feet. All she wanted was to curl up in the comfy feather bed in her room and sleep.

"Bah," Olga protested, putting her hand on Katya's arm and stopping her as she headed toward the stairs. "It is not to frighten, but to protect. Don't go out at night," she hissed. "It is not safe."

"I'll be fine," she assured her host. "Right now, all I want is some sleep."

Patting her arm, Olga gave her a sad smile. "I will bring you food."

Katya shook her head. "No, thank you. I'll eat something when I get up later."

She could feel both of them watching her as she climbed the stairs and headed to her room at the far end of the building. There were six guestrooms in total and breakfast and lunch were provided in the cost of the room. If she wanted an evening meal, there was one restaurant and a local pub that served meals in the evening.

The hallway seemed extra long as she trudged to the end and dug her room key out of her pocket. She'd requested the only room with its own bathroom. It had cost her extra, but it was worth the privacy and convenience. Her vision blurred and it took her

two tries to get the key in the lock. Finally, she succeeded and stumbled into the room, locking the door behind her.

She had her pack half off her shoulder, when a knock came on the door. "Miss Markova."

Katya shrugged her pack back on, unwilling to let it go until she knew what the problem was. If necessary, she could easily survive with what she had strapped to her back. She unlocked the door and swung it open. Olga held out a white envelope. "I forgot. This was delivered first thing this morning."

"Thank you." She took the envelope and closed the door, making certain it was bolted. Not satisfied with that, she shoved a heavy bureau in front of it.

It wasn't the greatest security, but it was the best she could do.

Walking over to the bed, she laid the envelope on the duvet while she removed her pack and crossbow, stowing them within easy reach. Picking up the envelope, she tore open the flap and pulled out the crisp white sheet within. A crest of five daggers was at the top. The first two crossed daggers formed a v, and next to it the other three formed the letter h. VH, one of the many unsavory people she'd met this past year had told her, stood for vampire hunter. Dramatic, but she didn't care. They could have their cutesy logo and not-so-secret society as long as she got what she wanted. Personally, she wondered if there wasn't more to it than that.

There were two words on the note, written in blood-red ink. At least she hoped it was ink.

Call me.

Her gut clenched. This was what she'd been waiting for, what she'd spent the last year of her life working toward. She looked longingly toward the bed, but knew the lure of the soft feather mattress would have to wait a few moments longer.

She swayed with fatigue, but fought it off. She would not, could not, give in to weakness. Not now. She promised herself she would rest and eat later. Once again, her quest for vengeance took priority over all else.

Grabbing her pack, she strapped it back on and went to the door, once again wishing this inn had phones in each room, considering that there was no cell phone service this high in the mountains. Shoving the dresser back, she unlocked the door and hurried down the hallway. There was a single payphone hung on the wall. Lifting the receiver, she dialed the number she'd gotten from her last contact within the society. When the operator cut in, she charged the call to a calling card she'd purchased just for this reason.

It rang once. Twice. It was answered on the third ring.

There was silence on the other end. Katya didn't speak, but waited.

A man laughed, the sound so evil it lifted the hairs on the back of her neck. "You have patience. That is good."

She wanted to slam down the receiver. Her fingers curled tight around it, but still, she held her silence.

"You have seen them?"

"Not yet."

Now she sensed impatience coming across the line. "Why not?"

Once again, she reminded herself of her quest. Vengeance didn't come cheap and she'd already paid in more ways than she could count. This was the last thing she had to do. She swallowed back the acrid words she longed to speak. "I have just arrived, but I may have found a way inside." She refused to feel guilty about using Chase to get what she wanted.

"Good." Satisfaction and pleasure tinged his reply. "You will call me when all is ready."

"Yes." Oh, she most certainly would. She was so close to achieving her goal she could almost taste it. She would soon have her parents' killer within her grasp.

The other line went dead as he hung up on her. Katya slowly replaced the receiver and strode back to her room. Once she was safely tucked away inside and her pack and crossbow stowed, she pulled down the blinds and closed the drapes. She needed to reread her files, but that would have to wait.

Her hands were shaking so hard, it took her twice as long as usually to get undressed. Yanking back the covers, she crawled into the soft bed, her body sinking into the feather mattress. Moaning in pleasure, she pulled the covers over her head to shut out all light and noise.

Sleep crept over her like a lover's caress. It seemed to start at her toes and work its way to the top of her head. A deep sigh escaped her as she surrendered to its lure.

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He came to her, like the first rays of sun in the morning, strong and powerful, ensnaring her, tempting her. His hair was loose around his shoulders, the sun reflecting off the light brown, showing highlights of blond in the mix. His eyes were as pale as the blue sky behind him. He had a roman nose, aristocratic and straight. His forehead was high, his jaw firm. A light dusting of stubble on his chin only added to his appeal. He was perfect, except for a one-inch scar just below his left eye. It seemed such a shame to mar such male perfection, yet it added to his masculine allure.

This was no pretty boy, but a man.

Chase was naked, exposing bronzed shoulders so wide they blocked out the light when he bent over her. It was only then she realized she was naked as well and stretched across the rock in their mountain meadow. He braced himself over her, the muscles in his arms rippling.

Even his smell was appealing. It was a woodsy scent, the combination of earth and trees, tinged with honest, clean sweat and musk. She took a breath and allowed it to

sink into her very pores. She'd know him by his scent alone, if she were ever to lose her sight.

Her breasts swelled, the tips puckering tight as he leaned forward. The light dusting of hair on his chest rasped over her nipples and she moaned, arching her back, wanting more of his touch.

Her sex ached. She'd had only one lover in her life, but she wasn't exactly sheltered, not anymore. She'd seen too much this past year, been in bars and seedy clubs that specialized in sex and any pleasures a man or woman could want. She'd been both aroused and disgusted by what people wanted to do to one another. But never had she seen or felt anything this powerful.

Every cell in her body was screaming at her to join with this man. She parted her thighs and tilted her hips, wanting to feel him there. Her sex was swollen and wet with need and an ache started throbbing deep within her, an emptiness that only he could fill.

"No," she groaned. She couldn't allow herself to want or need anyone. Not now. Not with her goal so close. She would not, could not, be distracted or swayed from her path.

"Yes," he countered, pressing his lower body against hers.

She felt his hard length against her belly and mound. He hooked his arms beneath her thighs, spreading them wide and leaving her open and vulnerable. Panic threatened and her breathing became fast and shallow.

Chase stroked his cock over her damp folds. Heat swelled, rippling through her core, and a craving for more filled her. She wanted him so badly her teeth ached. This time when he pushed his erection against her, she opened herself to it, accepting his right to do so.

He stared down at her, fire in his pale eyes. Then he smiled.

Katya was lost as he lowered his face to hers. Their lips touched and she felt his arms slide out from beneath her. Unwilling to lose the contact between them, she wrapped her legs around his waist, locking her ankles together at the small of his back.

He kissed her with abandon. Their tongues twined, advancing and retreating in a lovers' game as old as time itself. He cupped her face, holding her steady as he plundered her mouth, claiming it, taking it.

She slid her hands up his arms, feeling the rock-solid biceps as her fingers climbed to his shoulders. Breathing was almost impossible, but she no longer cared. Nothing in her life had ever felt this right, this good. They were strangers, yet not. It was if she'd known him forever, trusted him.

That last thought worried her. There was no one she could trust outside her small family circle. No one. Not now.

Chase tore his lips from hers and left a hot trail of biting kisses down her neck and across her shoulder. The stubble on his jaw rasped her skin, heightening the sensations.

Katya gasped as he cupped one breast in his hand, plumping it up before taking the swollen nipple between his lips. He sucked, lightly at first, but then with growing vigor. When he gently scraped his teeth across the nub, her entire body tightened.

Tipping back her head, she released a cry that came straight from the depths of her shattered soul. She was so close to coming. "Chase." She said his name because she had to. Had to taste it on her tongue.

Chase released her breast and nuzzled her rib cage, forcing her to unlock her ankles. Her legs slid back to the rock, shifting restlessly as he continued his downward passage. His clever tongue dipped into her bellybutton before he shifted to the side to kiss and nip her hipbone.

Her chest hurt it was so hard to breathe now. No one had ever touched her in this manner before. It was as if he wanted to explore every inch of her. His fingers sifted through the short, curly hair covering her mound before pushing lower.

Katya cried out as he stroked over her slick folds. She was babbling now, incoherent phrases in Russian and English, as he shifted his entire body so that his face was right in front of her sex. Tilting her head so she could watch him, she sucked in a breath when he spread her wide with his thumbs and blew softly on her heated flesh.

"You are so beautiful, Katya. Like the mountain flowers, your scent is intoxicating, your skin is flawless, your petals soft and inviting." He licked a slow path over her swollen folds, stopping just before he hit the bundle of nerves at the apex. "But there is strength in you too." He licked a path back down the other side.

She reached down, gripped his hair and tugged him closer.

Chase laughed. "So demanding. What do you want?"

"Here." She squirmed and pulled at him until his mouth hovered just above her clitoris.

"Ahh," he breathed as he sucked the nub between his lips.

Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes, dampening the hair at her temples. She'd never imagined anything this powerful or beautiful before.

His fingers probed at her opening. He pressed one finger deep. The sensitive muscles contracted around him. "You're so tight," he groaned.

Katya wanted to respond, to tell him she'd only had one other lover, but it was impossible. With his tongue and lips on her clitoris and his finger pressing deep, she was alive with sensation. The first wave hit her, taking her off guard. Screaming, she wrapped her legs around his shoulders, not wanting him to leave her.

Chase thrust a second finger into her, sending her core on a second wave of contractions. Katya felt as if her body was exploding in the center of the sun. It was so pleasurable it was almost painful. She didn't care. Surely no one could live through something like this.

Finally, the spasms stopped and she relaxed her legs, letting them drop back down to the ground.

Chase rose up, supporting himself on one hand as he gripped his cock with the other. As she watched, he pressed against her opening. The sensitive flesh was swollen, but slick. The broad head pushed inward. He stopped, breathing heavily as she adjusted to the invasion.

His chest and shoulders were slick with perspiration. He was as elemental as the mountain itself and she wanted him.

There were reasons for her to keep her distance, but at the moment, she couldn't think of any. Even the rock beneath her wasn't uncomfortable. She frowned at that thought. Why wasn't the rock digging into her back?

A dream.

The thought came out of nowhere. This was nothing but a dream.

The moment she thought it, he began to fade. She heard him yell her name, felt her body becoming insubstantial. She cried when she no longer felt him pressed against her.

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"No," she cried, coming awake in a rush. Her body was slick and her sex was wet and throbbing. She'd had an orgasm, yet she felt empty, incomplete. Burying her face in the pillow, she tried to push the dream from her mind. She ignored the tears seeping from the corners of her eyes. She didn't cry. Tears were useless and changed nothing.

"Katya." Chase came awake in a rush. His hands were clenched into fists, but she slipped away from him.

He sat up, aware of a growing wetness in his groin area. Groaning, he flopped back down on the rock and flung an arm over his face. He couldn't believe he'd had a wet dream and come in his pants. He hadn't had one of those since he was a teenager. Damn, it was embarrassing. The only good thing was that there would be no one to notice it when he got back to the castle. Everyone would be asleep.

A smile touched his lips as he remembered the dream. Katya had been everything he'd imagined and more. Her skin as soft as velvet and her taste was sweet. He licked his lips and froze. Reaching up, he touched his mouth. It was wet. He could taste a combination of honey and violets and willing woman—Katya.

Disconcerted, he sat up and looked around the clearing. The sun was high in the sky and he was alone, except for the steady buzz of insects. Pushing to his feet, he grabbed his jacket and tossed it over his shoulder.

"That was one heck of a dream." He scrubbed his hand over his face and was once again assailed by Katya's unique scent. Pulling his hand away, he stared at his fingers. "Impossible," he muttered, as he headed toward the path.

Yet the memories lingered in his brain, not fading as dreams do. He could see the fine porcelain of her skin, hear her breathy sighs and moans as he'd touched her. He

even knew the color of her nipples—pink. They were the same pink as the roses that Johanna had cultivated in the castle garden. Chase didn't know what they were called, just that they were some heirloom variety.

"Get a grip." His voice seemed unnaturally loud in the forest as he strode toward the castle. All he needed was a shower, a hearty meal and a nap. He'd be as good as new then, or as good as he was going to get.

The worries that had been pushed aside by his erotic dream came back full force. Still, the memory of him and Katya together didn't fade, but remained strong as he strode up the stone steps toward the large wooden and iron door that locked the world outside the castle.

Chapter Four

It was early evening when Chase finally made his way downstairs to the study. He'd taken a long hot shower when he'd returned this morning, helped himself to a couple of ham, cheese, lettuce and tomato sandwiches, a mound of potato chips and a large glass of milk before finally falling into bed. He'd slept a solid five hours before waking, which was longer than he got most nights.

Sleep had been in short supply as of late.

Feeling more energized and rested than he had in weeks, he found himself looking forward to the next few weeks here in Transylvania. Yes, he still had problems to deal with, but they could wait. This time was his to enjoy with his family. Katya popped into his mind and he smiled. He wouldn't deny that Katya was a big part of the reason he was anticipating his stay. He couldn't wait to see her again.

"Chase." Johanna started toward him as he entered the study, her arms open.

He allowed himself to be hugged, his hair fluffed by her loving hand. She treated him much the same way his sister did. In fact, so did Laurel Rose. It was like having a trio of sisters. He didn't mind it too much when they fussed over him, although it did seem to amuse the hell out of their men.

Cristofor leaned against the massive ornate mantel, an indulgent smile on his face. Chase kissed Johanna's cheek and then headed toward Cristofor. He straightened away from the mantel and grabbed Chase's outstretched hand and pulled him close for a quick hug. "It is good to see you again."

"It's great to be here." It had been so late when he'd unexpectedly arrived last night that he hadn't had the opportunity to really catch up with his hosts.

They all settled on the comfortable oversized chairs, which were situated around the fireplace. As it was summer, the grate was bare, but in the spring, fall and winter, a blaze usually roared, adding heat and atmosphere to the room. Above the heavy oak mantel, several large, jewel-encrusted swords hung in a place of honor.

Chase leaned back and smiled. This place never changed. There were books and manuscripts, tucked haphazardly into cubbies and shelves, which museum curators would give their eyeteeth to have.

Then there was the artwork. Paintings from old masters hung alongside undiscovered artists. Several rather large pieces of sculpture graced the far corners of the room. There was an entire cabinet devoted to glass and small sculpture.

Yet the room wasn't stuffy. The latest women's fashion magazines were strewn across the large coffee table alongside financial reports and business periodicals. This was a family home and it exuded warmth and welcome.

"How are you?" Chase heard the edge in Johanna's voice and it took all his concentration not to stiffen. She couldn't know about his health problems—the headaches and fatigue that had been a constant part of his life for the past six months. No one knew. He'd kept his visits to the doctor a secret, and had only finished the battery of tests his doctor had ordered hours before he'd climbed on the flight overseas. He figured there was no point in upsetting the family before he knew if there was really anything to be concerned about. And he'd long ago learned how to shut them out of his mind—a very necessary skill when those around you were vampires.

"I'm good. Tired," he added truthfully, "but good."

"You've been pushing too hard getting ready for your show in New York," Johanna chastised. She picked up a teapot that was sitting on the table and poured him a cup. A plate of raisin scones sat on the tray next to it. If he wasn't mistaken, the cup and plate were also worthy of being museum pieces.

Chase took the cup from Johanna and breathed deep. The smell of peppermint tickled his nose. He'd never gotten into the habit of drinking coffee, but loved the flavor of herbal teas. Johanna always stocked about a dozen different kinds in the kitchen just for him.

"Guilty." He took a sip before reaching for the plate of scones. "I pushed hard to finish. I needed this vacation."

Cristofor sat back in his chair, his long legs sprawled out in front of him, his elbows propped on the armrests, his fingers steepled in front of his face. "It is more than that."

It wasn't a question. Chase tensed, placing the plate back on the table without having taken a bite. "It is, but it's something I need to work out on my own first." His doctor had this number and would call as soon as the test results were in. In fact, Dr. McGregor had wanted Chase to remain in New York, but Chase wanted to relax and spend time with his entire family. Until the test results were in, there wasn't any point in hanging around alone in his loft apartment worrying about it. He'd deal with it when he knew exactly what he was facing.

Cristofor nodded. "We are here if you need us."

"I know." Those two words said it all. He had an extended family, all who would be more than willing to help at a moment's notice. However, there was nothing any of them could do. He wasn't sure what *he* was going to do yet.

Johanna reached out and laid her hand over his, her golden brown eyes narrowed with concern. "Are you sure there isn't anything we can do?"

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it, offering her a smile. "I'm sure, but thanks." He released her and reached for the cup and took another sip of the tea. "I need to make a few decisions."

"You're still not sure about the New York showing, are you?" Johanna was very astute.

He shrugged, replacing the paper-thin china cup back on the saucer. "I like my privacy." Especially now with the possibility of a major health problem cropping up.

"Your real name will be kept out of it," she promised. "There is still time to stop the showing. I truly thought this was what you wanted or I would never have pushed you."

Johanna frowned and rubbed her hands over her arms. Her obvious distress hit him hard and he immediately sought to dispel it. "It was what I wanted or at least what I thought I wanted. I'm going to take a few days to think."

Plus, he'd be able to make better decisions as soon as he heard from his doctor. "I plan on telling everyone what's going on before we all leave here after the reunion." Chase grabbed a scone and bit into it, barely restraining a moan when the golden biscuit practically melted on his tongue. "Speaking of which, when is everyone arriving?"

Cristofor stared at him for a long moment, before inclining his head, an acknowledgement that the subject of Chase's problems was closed—for now. "Stefan and Laurel Rose may be arriving tomorrow, the day after at the latest. Your sister, Lucian, Cassidy and his family hope to be traveling with them. Lucian had some business matters to attend to, but if he finishes them in time, they will all come together."

"So soon?" Chase had been hoping for a few days of quiet before the rest of the family arrived. But the castle was large and most of the inhabitants slept the day away. There would be plenty of time for him to be alone.

"It seemed to be the best time for everyone, and we don't mind. The castle is always ready." Excitement tinged Johanna's voice and her eyes sparkled. He knew how much she loved having them all here. As much as he loved the place, he realized it must get lonely for her sometimes tucked so far out of the way.

"I love the renovations to the place." Chase laughed as Cristofor cursed.

"She had workmen everywhere," Cristofor complained. "Luckily, Cassidy agreed to stay for a month and oversee everything, otherwise I would not have allowed it."

Johanna laughed. "You're not complaining when you climb into that large whirlpool bath every night."

Chase grinned as he watched the byplay. Cristofor Dalakis was every inch the lord of the castle—intimidating, powerful and dangerous—but he was putty in the hands of his wife.

Cristofor stared at his wife, heat in his eyes. "Not as long as you're with me, I'm not."

"Cris," Johanna scolded. Her cheeks were tinged pink when she glanced at Chase.

"I'm too young to be hearing this," he teased. "But I do like the new bathrooms, and the kitchen is incredible." It was all stainless steel, granite and oak, a gourmet cook's dream. He was definitely going to make the time to try it out beyond slapping together a simple sandwich. He didn't cook often, but when he did, he thoroughly enjoyed it. He found it relaxed him.

"Just because the castle is old is no reason it can't be comfortable." Johanna arched her eyebrow at her husband. "I may tackle the grounds next."

Cristofor held up his hands in mock surrender. "Have mercy on me, my love. The overgrown forests keep the tourists at bay."

"Speaking of tourists," Chase interjected. "Have you had many hikers around lately?"

All teasing fled from Cristofor and he pinned Chase with his laser green gaze. "Why?"

Chase was beginning to wish he hadn't brought it up, but the family's protection came before anything else. Plus, if he hoped to see Katya again, the family would eventually have to know about her. "I ran into a hiker when I was out for my walk early this morning."

Cristofor frowned. "I have not seen anyone of late."

Johanna crossed her legs, swinging one absently. "I know there are two women and three men currently staying in the village. Two of the men are academics researching the folklore of the area, one man and woman are a young couple on their honeymoon and there is a single woman on her own—an artist." When both men looked at her, she shrugged. "They are guests at the Bratianos' inn. Olga told me herself. I bumped into her when I ran into town to pick up a package two days ago."

"More than likely she was lying in wait for you," Cristofor speculated. "That woman lives to gossip."

Johanna laughed. "Which is why I always find time to chat with her. I can find out more about what is happening locally by spending five minutes with her than I could if I sat in the local tavern all night long."

"There is that," Cristofor conceded. "Did the hiker not see the posted warnings?"

It was a rhetorical question, but Chase answered it anyway. "I don't think Katya is the type to heed posted warnings." No, with her defiant air, Chase figured there was nowhere she wouldn't go if she wanted to.

"Katya?" Johanna questioned.

"Hmm," he agreed noncommittally. He could hear the feminine interest in her tone and knew she was already playing matchmaker in her mind.

"Why was she hiking around here at that hour of the morning?" Trust Cristofor to go straight to the heart of the matter.

"I'm not quite sure, but she knew this was Dalakis land."

Johanna snorted. "She's staying at Olga's. The poor woman probably had a complete history lesson of the area within the first hour of her arrival." She paused and added casually. "If she is the artist, I'm sure she'd love the chance to tour the castle if you wanted to invite her."

Chase shook his head and glanced over at Cristofor who stared stoically back. "Perhaps. We'll see how it goes with all the family arriving." Still, he couldn't say he

hadn't thought about it. An invitation to the castle would definitely be an excuse to see her again. Usually, he was wary with strangers. The problem was Katya didn't feel like a stranger.

The last thing he needed was to get involved with a woman, even a woman as beautiful and intriguing as Katya. He was only here for a few weeks. And after that...well, his life was very up in the air at the moment.

He pushed aside his dark thoughts. Perhaps what he needed was a vacation fling. That is, if Katya was willing. He couldn't just assume she'd want to crawl in bed with him. But he hadn't mistaken her response to his kiss. She was attracted to him. And he was more than attracted to her.

Echoes of the dreams pulsed through him. It might have only been a dream, but it had been a powerful one. Chase longed to touch Katya, to stroke her silky skin. He shifted in his chair as his cock stirred. No doubt about it, he wanted her in a way he'd never wanted another woman.

Maybe it was because he was on vacation. Maybe it was because he was facing a major life decision. Either way, it didn't really matter. Whatever the reason, he planned to do whatever it took to land Katya in his bed for as long as possible.

Katya prowled through the dense forest, heading steadily toward Dalakis Castle. It would have been much easier to take the road, but she didn't want anyone from the village to see her heading that way and to ask questions. Olga was nosy enough as it was without encouraging her.

As it was, Katya hadn't been able to get away from the inn without eating first. Olga had been waiting at the bottom of the stairs for her this evening, directing her straight to the kitchen for a bowl of thick, hearty soup and a hunk of homemade sourdough bread, all the while subtly questioning her. Olga was relentless, but harmless. Katya couldn't find it in her to be upset with the woman. Besides which, her sourdough bread was the best Katya had ever tasted.

Katya tried to concentrate on finding a path through the thick woods, but her mind had other ideas. Like a movie playing in her head, she relived the dream she'd had over and over again.

Her breathing increased, and the slim trail in front of her vanished, replaced by the sight of Chase's muscular form braced over her. Katya leaned against a tree, the bark rough against her hands. "Stop it!"

A raven flew up from the tree, cawing its annoyance at her. She pressed her forehead against the thick trunk of the pine and breathed in its woodsy scent. Even that could not erase the scent of Chase's skin, the rough touch of his fingertips roaming over her heated flesh or the sight of his head buried between her thighs.

"Get a grip." She pressed her legs together in an unconscious attempt to ease the ache throbbing deep inside her. Dampness coated her panties, reminding her of the

low-level arousal that had been pulsing through her veins since she'd risen from her long nap.

Her breasts felt heavy, swollen, and the tips were extremely sensitive. Putting on her bra had been an exercise in torture. The thin material seemed to rub the puckered nubs with every move she made. Her long-sleeved top just made it worse. Now she had two layers scraping over her aching nipples.

Even her skin seemed too tight for her body, as if it was pulled taut over her bones and muscles. Every cell in her body felt overly stimulated, making her flesh tingle. It took all her discipline not to rip off every stitch of her clothing, drop to the forest floor and pleasure herself until she came.

The only reason she didn't was she knew it wouldn't help. After all, she'd come in her dream and that had just left her craving more. She had an unrelenting suspicion that the only cure was to dive into bed with Chase and give over to the madness that had taken possession of her body.

She groaned at the thought of them fucking for hours and hours. She'd never been one for marathon sex, but she was more than ready to try. Her body was primed. It wouldn't take much to send her crashing over the edge. But that would be just an appetizer. She had a feeling that she wouldn't be sated until he'd wrung every drop of arousal from her. The way her body was humming right now, that would take hours, if not days.

Her inner muscles clenched hard, and she dug her fingers into the tree for support, using it as something to ground herself in this growing madness. Katya groaned, gritting her teeth as her scalp prickled. Sweat dotted her forehead even though the evening air was cooling off quickly. Taking a deep breath, she sucked in the brisk air, hoping it would ease her aching body and soul.

Since waking late in the afternoon, she'd been filled with this unrelenting need to see Chase again. It was unreasonable and it was potentially dangerous. She'd come to close to lose her focus now. Revenge for her parents and peace for herself were her main goal. Nothing else mattered. She couldn't let it matter.

That was easy to say, but she'd never met a man like Chase before. No other man had challenged her senses or incited her curiosity. She wanted to know everything about him. And that made him a danger to her.

She had secrets. Secrets she needed to protect at all costs. There was not just her life at stake, but her brother's and all those faithful staff members who'd served her parents. She couldn't throw caution away for a man.

Yes, he was handsome, but if that was the only attraction, Katya could have easily sidestepped it with no problem. After all, she'd had no problem doing so her entire adult life. At the age of twenty-five, she'd had more than a few men exhibit interest in her. She'd even indulged in a discreet affair, but it had been part physical attraction, part curiosity. Her heart had never been given. She'd always managed to hold back the deepest part of herself.

But this thing with Chase was more than that.

Chase stripped back the superficial layer of the physical, revealing her wounded soul, touching it in a way that brought tears to her eyes. He reminded her of all she'd had and lost, and what could never be.

Pushing away from the tree, she swiped her hand over her brow and straightened her pack. The crossbow was a solid reminder of why she was really here. The antique weapon was compact but effective, an instrument of death and beauty that had been in her papa's family for generations. It steadied her as nothing else could. Quickly, she threaded her way through the trees at an angle until her path intersected with the dirt road that led to the castle. There was no one around to see her, so she might as well take the easy path.

She laughed at that. She'd never taken the easy path in her life. Her papa had always called her hardheaded and stubborn, but always with a smile on his face. She knew he was proud of her.

The firm-packed earth made walking much easier, almost enjoyable. The night was alive with sound and scents. There was beauty in the night. Most people were afraid of the darkness, but Katya embraced it.

Her papa had shown her all the stars in the sky, teaching her to navigate by their position. He'd taught her how to listen with her senses and to be aware of her surroundings at all times. She knew there was a small animal off to her right, probably a fox. There were clumps of wildflowers perfuming the air, mixing with the more earthy and pungent smells of the trees and the rich earth beneath them.

It was funny, but she didn't know her biological father, wasn't even aware of his name. Her mama had never talked of him at all, except to say he was gone. Katya didn't know if that meant he was dead or if he'd just abandoned her mama when he found out she was pregnant. Frankly, she didn't care. Afanas Markova was her papa in all ways that mattered.

Her papa had always said that he'd taken one look at her mama and known she was the one for him, and that Katya was meant to be his daughter. She rubbed her chest to ease the ache and felt the cross. She lifted the heavy gold necklace and wrapped her fingers around it. The metal was warm, almost pulsing with life, a reminder of all she'd lost.

Her papa was the only father she'd known. The only one she ever wanted. He was the one who had praised her first clumsy attempt at reading, the one who had lifted her onto her first pony, the one who had listened to her girlish problems and treated them with grave seriousness. He was the man who had cautioned her during her first, and only, love affair. Not a man to stick his head in the sand, he realized his daughter was a grown woman and had lectured her on responsibility and safety. He'd been uncomfortable during their talk, but he'd done it. She'd never loved him more than she had at that moment.

And she hadn't lost that closeness when her brother Sasha had come along. Her papa had been very concerned while her mama was pregnant, watching her constantly. But he'd been overjoyed when Sasha had been born. Rather than feel excluded, Katya had been made to feel even more special.

"I will avenge you both," she vowed as she tucked the cross back inside the neck of her black long-sleeved shirt. She shifted her pack on her back and strode determinedly toward the castle.

She needed to get inside Dalakis Castle and Chase was her way in. Guilt pricked her and she shoved it aside. He was the one who said he wanted to see her again. She was only obliging him.

Katya ignored the way her breasts tingled and her core throbbed at the mere thought of seeing Chase again. Her pace quickened.

Chapter Five

Chase tossed his sketchpad and pencil aside, turned off the bedside light and lay on the bed with his hands stacked beneath his head. He didn't bother to look at his watch. He knew it was very late, or early, depending on your perspective.

He'd passed a quiet but pleasant evening with Cristofor and Johanna. They'd talked for a while, and Johanna had joined him in the kitchen while he ate some of the tasty roast chicken she'd baked for him. The baked baby potatoes with rosemary, crisp broccoli and tender carrots had all been cooked to perfection.

After he'd eaten, Cristofor had taken him on a tour of the place, pointing out all the new renovations and improvements. He might act the poor put-upon husband, but Chase could hear the pride in his voice.

By about one o'clock, he was ready to call it a night and give his hosts some privacy. He'd said his goodnights and retired to his room. He was tired, yet unsettled. His skin felt too tight for his body and he felt the familiar throb at the base of his skull, heralding the onset of a massive headache.

Hoping to fight it off, he rummaged through his suitcase and found the bottle of prescription painkillers and popped two. Then, he ran a hot bath in the massive tub, which was part of his newly renovated bathroom. When it was ready, he stripped off his clothing and slid in with a sigh of relief.

Closing his eyes, he relaxed for more than a half-hour before getting out. The heat had soothed his tense muscles and the pain medication had beaten back the headache. Chase was thankful. He'd had some awful ones in the past few months and they were getting progressively worse.

Not wanting to push his luck, he'd turned back the thick, down-filled duvet on his king-sized bed and crawled beneath the sheets. Hours later, he was still lying there, staring at the ceiling. While he admired the eighteenth-century fresco painted above him, he was sick of looking at it.

Sighing, he'd closed his eyes, willing himself to sleep. It didn't work. He tried some meditation and relaxation exercises he'd learned, but they didn't help. He'd turned the light back on and tried sketching, but that had only made matters worse. Every line he drew was of Katya's lithe body or her mysterious face. He'd filled pages and pages of his sketchpad until his body was in a state of low-level arousal, his cock partially erect. The harder he tried to keep Katya from his thoughts, the more she intruded.

There was no reason for him to be this obsessed with her. He'd only met her once. And while she was a beautiful woman, he'd known many beautiful women in his lifetime. But none of them had ever had this affect on him before.

His cock twitched and he kicked off the covers staring down at his erection. "What the hell do you know?" As if to taunt him, his shaft swelled further. "This is crazy."

Okay, he was a man and he hadn't been in a sexual relationship in a long time. That's all there was to it. Seeing Katya, and being on vacation, was just reminding him of that fact. He was horny, plan and simple.

He groaned, scrubbing a hand over his face, not buying it for one second.

Katya's face swam before him every time he closed his eyes. Even while he'd been talking and laughing with Cristofor and Johanna he'd been thinking about her. Where was she? Who was she with? What was she doing?

Swearing, Chase swung out of bed and stalked to the window. Pushing back the shutters, he shoved the window open, letting in the night wind. The light breeze washed over his heated skin, but it didn't cool him down. If anything, the contrast between his hot skin and the cool wind drove his arousal higher.

Absently, he ran his hand down his chest to his groin, circling his swollen cock. Maybe he just needed relief from the sexual tension riding him.

He pumped his hand up and down the hard length, establishing a slow but steady rhythm. Katya would be hot and wet, her body clasp him impossibly tight as he thrust into her. "Damn." He shut his eyes tight and imagined her naked beneath him. After the erotic dream he'd had it was an incredibly easy image to capture in his mind.

He pumped faster as he pictured her small but sturdy hand, stroking over his chest, his stomach, his cock.

He emitted a low groan, almost able to feel her hand cupping his sac while the other pumped up and down his length.

Then there was her mouth. Oh, yeah. She had one hell of a sexy mouth. Her lips were full and rosy. He could easily imagine them wrapped around his shaft, taking him deeper with each heavy thrust.

His chest was rising and falling rapidly. Chase braced his shoulder against the stone wall, his hand never faltering. Katya was so sexy. It wasn't that she had large breasts or exceptional curves. Her breasts were full, but barely a handful, and her curves were subtle, her body lithe and strong. But there was something about her that drew him. Maybe it was her attitude. She exuded strength, determination and intelligence.

Chase had always been a sucker for a smart woman.

Katya would be a challenge. But beneath that prickly exterior, he was certain was a woman worth the fight. Any man who could get beneath her guard would be richly rewarded for his efforts.

His hand quickened as he felt his balls draw up closer to his body. He'd almost swear he could feel her out there in the forest waiting for him, watching him. His scalp tingled and he came. Gritting his teeth to keep from yelling, he let the pleasure of his

orgasm envelop him. Liquid splashed on his belly and over his hand as he continued to pump.

When he was done, he let his back fall against the wall, needing the support. While he caught his breath, he stared out the window. The land called to him and he knew he wouldn't be going back to bed.

Pushing away from the hard stone, he made his way to the bathroom to clean himself up. When that was done, he hauled on his jeans, boots and a heavy shirt before grabbing his jacket and quietly letting himself out the door.

The night was waiting.

Katya stared up at the front of the rather imposing building. With her legs straddling a thick branch, she leaned forward, resting her elbows on the limb and her chin on her hands. The foliage surrounded her, protecting her from curious eyes and predators as she studied the place. Her crossbow was tucked safely inside the pack strapped to her back.

She'd been watching the castle for most of the night, thinking, and weighing her strategy. She had to get inside, and she had to do it without making anyone suspicious. Chewing on her bottom lip, she pondered her options.

It was the first time since she'd headed down this path of revenge that she truly loathed what she'd become—a user, a manipulator, a liar. “You don't have a choice,” she reminded herself. “You've come too far to turn back now.” Besides, if she didn't do this, the head of the vampire hunter order would send someone else.

She had all the information she needed except for the one final, vital piece. Getting into Dalakis Castle was the key to obtaining it.

Chase... Well, Chase was in the wrong place at the wrong time. She didn't want to see him hurt, would do everything in her power to keep that from happening, but she couldn't turn back now.

Her fingers went to her chest and she clutched the outline of the cross beneath her shirt. “Forgive me,” she whispered.

One of the windows on the far end of the top floor pushed open. Katya pulled back further into the shadows, making the branches rustle slightly, even though she was well concealed. She could see the outline of a man and knew it was Chase. Even from this distance she could feel the connection between them. It was if there was an invisible cord running from one to the other, allowing them to feel one another's emotions and arousal.

Katya muttered a curse under her breath as the prickly sensation crept back over her skin. It had taken her the better part of three hours to get her body relaxed and feeling normal. Now that was gone, within five seconds of seeing Chase again. And she couldn't really see him that well, more of just an outline, a shadow.

He turned and the moonlight caught him. Katya sucked in her breath. He was naked. Every sculpted muscle was outlined. His head was tipped back, his chest rising and falling rapidly, his hand wrapped around his rather impressive erection.

She'd thought the dream had been graphic, but nothing had prepared her for this.

He was like some Greek god come to life. She swallowed hard, but couldn't pull her gaze away as he continued to pleasure himself. Was he thinking about her or some other woman? Jealousy surged through her, followed by anger. He was hers.

She shook her head to try to clear the unfamiliar thoughts away. She'd never been jealous in her life, and furthermore, she had no reason to be. She'd only met the man once.

That didn't seem to matter to her emotions or her body.

As she watched him, her body softened and swelled. The folds of her sex dampened and thickened as they became engorged with blood. Her breast tightened, pressing against her clothing. Katya shifted slightly and then stilled. He'd see her if she wasn't careful.

She wanted to look away, to break the spell that he'd spun between them, but all she could do was watch as his hand moved faster and faster. His low moan drifted across the night air as he came. Her inner muscles spasmed and she barely muffled a groan. She hung on grimly, her fingers scoring the bark, not stirring until she saw him move away from the window.

Only then did she allow herself to slump against the trunk of the tree. A branch rustled, reminding her of her precarious perch. Taking a moment to get control of herself, she swung carefully from the tree branch, shimmying her way down the trunk to the ground beneath.

She didn't need to look at her watch to know that it was about an hour until sunrise. The sensible thing would be to head back to the inn and avoid having to face Olga's cross-examination about where she'd been. That would be smart.

But Katya's feet wouldn't move in that direction. Her heart began to pound heavily in her chest. She knew. She knew as sure as she was standing there that Chase would soon be on his way to the meadow in the woods.

The night surrounded her, singing its unique song. An owl hooted, insects chirped and the light breeze rustled the leaves of the trees, releasing the perfume of the wildflowers that clustered around their base. She sensed an animal off to her left, but from the level of the noise, it was a small one. Everything was as it should be.

She should head back down the dirt road to town. That's what she should do.

Silently, she turned her back on the road and melted into the surrounding forest.

A sense of urgency filled Chase as he headed up the trail behind the castle. Dawn was nearing and the sky was already beginning to lighten. Night hadn't released its grip yet, but the morning was creeping closer with each step he took.

His long legs ate up the distance as he hurried. A raven flew in front of him, squawking loudly. Chase ignored everything but the emotion burning in his chest. Katya. She was out there and she was waiting for him.

He didn't question how he knew this. He just accepted it.

Five more minutes and he'd be at the meadow.

Abruptly, he stopped. Slowly, he turned in a circle. Watching. Listening. There was no sound, no movement, nothing to give her away, but he knew she was there. "Katya."

"You shouldn't have come." Her voice was a mere whisper off to his right, but he heard her as clearly as if she was standing next to him.

He'd had an orgasm not half an hour before and he was fully aroused again. "I had to." That was no less than the truth.

She drifted out of the shadows, a figure dressed all in black. A shroud of sadness and acceptance seemed to envelop her. Chase wanted her to accept him, but he didn't like the idea of her being sad. He sensed that there had been too much sorrow in her life.

"Come here." He opened his arms and patiently waited.

Like a wary animal she hesitated, her body quivering with uncertainty. With a muffled cry, she flung herself toward him, wrapping her arms around his waist and clinging tight. "I don't understand any of this."

He kissed the top of her head, wanting to comfort her as much as he wanted to spread her beneath him and fuck her. The need to soothe her warred with his need to claim her. It was a volatile combination.

"Don't try to understand it." God knows he'd tried and couldn't make any sense of it.

"My life is complicated enough as it is." She eased back, but didn't remove her arms from his waist as she met his gaze. "I don't need this kind of involvement."

Although he felt the same way, her easy dismissal of what was between them pricked his male vanity. "I don't like it any more than you do, but there doesn't seem to be any changing the fact that I want you."

She flinched at his harsh tone, but didn't back down. "So what do we do about it?"

Chase cupped her face in his hands. "Maybe we don't fight it." Leaning down, he rubbed his lips over hers. Satisfaction filled him when they parted for him. "Maybe we let nature take its course and see where it leads." He stroked his tongue into the warm cavern of her mouth.

Her fingers dug into his waist as she moaned softly, the sound vibrating against his lips. "We both know what will happen if we do that," she countered when she finally pulled away.

"That's why we're here." As soon as he said the words, he felt their truth. They'd both sensed the other one near, felt the desire, the energy that arced between them,

connecting them. He'd known she'd be here waiting for him. And she'd known he was coming to claim her.

"Yes," she whispered.

It was enough. His body roared to life, blood pumping furiously through his veins. The need to claim her, to fuck her, to feel alive, flooded him. Yanking her toward him, he lifted her.

Katya wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms circled his neck, as their mouths met. It was hot and consuming and absolutely perfect. Their tongues twined, advancing and retreating and they struggled to get closer to one another. Katya arched her hips, finding his erection and pressing her mound against it.

Chase's jeans were suddenly way too tight. His cock was straining hard, the tip already wet and eager. He slipped his hands beneath her ass, cupping and squeezing hard. Her moan of pleasure filled his mouth.

He had to see her.

Moving farther into the woods, he pressed her back against the trunk of a large tree. He pushed his hips against hers to anchor her while he practically tore her heavy backpack and coat from her body. She struggled to free her arms from both, tossing them the ground.

The bark was rough so he knew he couldn't remove her shirt all the way. Instead, he pulled the front of the top up and over her head, leaving her arms and back covered by the material. Her bra was simply white cotton but it made his mouth water.

A quick flick of his wrist and the clasp was open. The material fell away, revealing high, firm breasts, tipped in pale pink. He shifted her higher in his grasp, bringing them closer to his mouth. Leaning in, he nuzzled the firm mounds before lapping at one of her pretty nipples. It tightened and elongated at his touch. Pleased, he did the same to the other one.

"Chase," she panted, tugging on his hair. He could feel her heat through the crotch of her dark pants, surrounding his throbbing dick.

"I know," he muttered as he nipped at her collarbone, her throat and her jaw.

"It's too much," Katya gasped as she lifted herself more firmly against him. "But not enough."

She'd described it exactly. He felt as if he was gripped by an inexplicable madness. "I have to have you." He had to know she wanted it too.

"Yes." She tugged at the front of his shirt, yanking at the buttons until they opened or were ripped away. Her hands smoothed over his chest, the tips of her fingers lightly grazing his flat nipples.

Chase groaned, burying his face against her neck. "I can't wait. Can't go slow. Not this time." Next time, he promised himself. Next time, he'd strip her naked and taste every inch of her creamy flesh. "I need to be inside you."

Katya tore at the opening of his jeans. Chase reluctantly released her long enough to ease the zipper past his erection. It sprang forward into her waiting hand. He hadn't bothered with underwear when he'd dressed.

She made a low sound of pleasure as she wrapped her fingers around him. Chase froze as she ran her hand up and down his length. It was better than he'd imagined. He felt each brush of her flesh against his and it magnified his arousal tenfold.

Reaching for the zipper of her pants, he jerked it down and plunged his hand deep. Dampness met his fingers and he moaned in pleasure as her heat bathed him. She was so wet, so ready for him.

"You want this, don't you?" He worked one long finger into her core. She was tight, hot and absolute perfection. His head almost exploded at the thought of his cock taking the place of his finger.

"Yes." She squirmed, trying to take him deeper. The hand gripping his cock fell away as she swayed.

"God, I've never been so hot so fast for a woman." Removing his finger, he shoved her pants down around her ankles. Reaching into his jeans pocket, he yanked out a condom, thankful that he'd actually had several in his suitcase. He'd put one in his back pocket earlier tonight, not wanting to be caught unprepared. He wanted Katya. There was no denying the potent attraction sizzling between them. And thankfully, she felt the same way.

He ripped the packet open and quickly sheathed himself. She reached out to help, smoothing the latex over his pulsing flesh. It was heaven. It was torture.

He spun her around, positioning her so her back was to him and she was facing the tree. "Lean against it."

Katya did as he asked, bracing her palms against the trunk.

Chase moved in behind her, letting his erection slide between the globes of her sweet ass. Startled, she tightened them, squeezing him tight. "Damn," he muttered, dropping his head down. "You keep that up and it will be over before it starts."

She giggled and then moaned when he pressed the head of his cock just inside her opening. "Spread your legs as wide as you can," he encouraged. With her pants around her ankles, that wasn't far. "You're going to squeeze me so damn tight."

He flexed his hips, pushing inward. A bead of sweat formed on his temple as he struggled for control. "You're so small. So tight."

"You're just big," she gasped.

Chase gave a groan of laughter, which turned quickly to a moan of pleasure as she tightened her inner muscles around him. Keeping the pace slow and steady, he pressed deeper into her with each thrust. She was so much smaller than he was, he didn't want to hurt her, didn't want to give her anything but pleasure.

It took some time and patience, almost driving him insane, but eventually, she was accepting all of him, every last inch. He sighed with relief as her moist heat surrounded him.

Wrapping his arms around her, he placed one hand low on her belly. His other hand cupped one of her firm breasts, squeezing. Pulling his shaft almost all the way out, he surged forward.

He did it again. This time harder.

Katya began to move with him, thrusting her ass back to meet his every stroke. Tension filled them both as her soft moans and his heavier grunts filled the air around them. The smell of sex filled his nostrils, mingling with the elemental scent of the forest, as he fucked her.

Faster and faster, he took her. He needed to hear her scream. Needed to know she'd found pleasure before he came. His lower hand sifted through her damp pubic hair and found her clitoris. The little bud was erect and he pressed his thumb lightly against it.

Katya cried out and her inner muscles rippled around him. He yelled her name, his hips pumping faster than a jackhammer. Her feet actually left the ground on one heavy thrust. He felt her sweet pussy milking his cock. For a split second he resented the condom, hating anything that came between them. Then his own orgasm hit him with the power of a freight train. All he could do was hang on as his body bucked and he emptied himself into the condom.

Katya slumped against the tree and he barely caught her. He staggered slightly as he slowly eased from her hot clasp. Her inner muscles grasped at him, making it hard for him to leave her warmth. The minute he was out, her knees buckled.

He held her with one hand and hitched his jeans up with the other. Easing down to the ground, he leaned against the tree and cradled her in his arms. He could feel the condom sliding free. Muttering under his breath, he dug a tissue out of his pocket and used it to dispose of the rubber. Katya leaned against him, her eyes closed, her face flushed.

"Are you all right?"

Her eyelids fluttered and she stared at him. "Oh yeah."

Chase smiled, thinking that this felt right. He could easily get used to seeing her sleepy, sated face every day. His smile faded and he pushed thoughts of forever aside. They had now. That was all that mattered.

He held her in his arms until the sun rose and she stirred. "I have to go back to the inn."

His grip involuntarily tightened around her. "How long will you be staying?"

She hesitated briefly and then shrugged. "I'm not certain. My plans are fluid."

His mind was working furiously now and he remembered something Johanna had mentioned earlier. "Are you an artist?"

She stilled. "How did you know?"

A short lock of hair was plastered to her forehead and he pushed it aside. "You're staying in a small village. Not too many secrets around here. You're either the artist or the newlywed. And you're not the newlywed." The woman in his arms wasn't the type to cheat on her man. She was too upfront and straightforward for that.

"Then I must be the artist."

"Do you want to see the castle?"

Katya froze and he wondered if he was pushing too hard too fast. She climbed from his lap and yanked up her pants before closing her bra and fixing her top. When she was done, she looked around until she found her jacket and pack. Pulling them on, she faced him. "If that's what you want."

Chase didn't know what she was thinking. She suddenly seemed totally aloof and indifferent, not the same warm woman he'd held in his arms only moments before. "Don't do me any favors." He wasn't going to beg a woman for anything.

She shook her head and walked over to him as he stood and quickly zipped his jeans. "I'd like to see you again," she said.

Just those few simple words made his body react. It took all his strength not to wrap her in his arms. Instead, he shrugged. "I thought you might enjoy seeing the place."

"I would." It was Katya who made the move, shifting close enough to wrap her arms around him.

He felt that sense of sadness emanating from her again and frowned, wanting to understand it. "How about eight this evening?" That would give him some time alone with her before the sun went down and the others were up and around. The rest of the family was due today, but not until late. "I'll come to the inn for you."

She shook her head. "I'll come to you." He started to protest, but she placed her fingers over his lips. "I'm already the source of enough gossip without adding to it."

As much as he hated to admit it, she had a point. "All right."

Going up on her toes, she kissed him. This kiss was soft, but no less potent. Chase found himself wanting to sink into her, to gather her into his arms and never let her go.

Her lips were moist and swollen when she pulled away. She touched the side of his face and then turned away. He watched her as she disappeared into the forest.

Sighing, he gathered his shirt and jacket and headed back to the castle. Katya was a mystery, but one he planned to solve. She was holding back from him, but he was patient and would eventually get past her reserve to the woman beneath. He'd caught glimpses of that Katya and wouldn't rest until she was totally his.

All thoughts of playing it safe and not getting deeply involved dissolved. Now that he'd had her, there was no turning back.

Chapter Six

Katya was unbelievably nervous that evening as she trudged up the dirt road toward the castle. She'd studied these people for so long, she felt as if she already knew them. At least on paper. Meeting them in person was something else altogether.

This seemed to be her day for meeting people. She'd literally bumped into the two single men staying at the inn on her way out. Up until now, she'd managed to avoid all the other patrons. She kept odd hours and enjoyed her privacy.

"I'm sorry." She'd studied the larger of the two men, the one without glasses. He smiled at her as he held out his hand.

"It is my fault entirely. Forgive me for my clumsiness. I am Niles Becker and this is my colleague, Tomas Sullivan."

Katya had reluctantly taken his hand, giving it a quick shake. "Katya."

Tomas stared at her openly but didn't speak.

"You are on your way out?" Niles inquired, his thick German accent making his English sound stilted.

She wanted to tell him to mind his own business but rudeness would bring unnecessary attention her way. She pasted a bland smile on her face. "Yes."

"Would you join us for dinner? We are heading down to the local restaurant and then on to the pub. Those are the best places to hear local legends and lore, are they not?" He paused before adding, "We are both folklore professors currently studying the local legends of the Romanian countryside."

"That sounds fascinating." Katya remembered that Olga had already volunteered that information about the two men and then wondered what the other woman had told the men about her. "Thank you for the invitation, but I have other plans."

"Ah." Niles gave her a small nod as he glanced at her hand. "You, of course, already have a date." He'd obviously made note of the fact that she wasn't wearing a ring on her finger and now he was fishing for more information.

He was being perfectly polite, but he was beginning to make the hair on the back of her neck stir. "I have an invitation to see the local castle. As an artist, it's an opportunity I cannot pass up as it may not come again." As soon as the words were out, she wished she could call them back. She wasn't in the habit of telling complete strangers her plans. She was more nervous about this evening than she'd thought or she would never have made such a slip.

"An artist." Niles seemed intrigued. "It is beautiful countryside for an artist to explore. And of course the castle would be irresistible. I have tried to speak to the

owner, but he refuses to answer my messages.” Katya didn’t like the speculative gleam that entered his eye.

Tomas, on the other hand, frowned and spoke for the first time. “Isn’t it dangerous walking through the countryside at night?”

“No more dangerous than it is anywhere else.” They were beginning to irritate her. Her business was her own. She glanced at the clock in the hallway. “I really must go.”

“Of course.” Niles gave her another sharp nod. “I would love to hear all about the castle and its inhabitants. There are bound to be legends surrounding the place and the family that lives there. From what I understand, the same family has occupied the castle for generations.” His gaze flowed up and down her body. The man was obviously hoping to get lucky on his working vacation. “Perhaps another time.”

“Perhaps.” She didn’t plan on having dinner with them now or any time in the future, but it was better not to come right out and say so. Men got testy about such things and she was trying to keep as low a profile as possible, which was next to impossible in a village this size.

As she hurried out the door and down the road, she could feel their eyes on her. Watching. She didn’t look back.

Halfway to her destination now, she pushed Niles and Tomas from her mind. She had more important things to think about—like the fact that she was going to be late because of her unexpected run-in with the inn’s other guests and the fact that she’d spent far too much time primping in the bathroom and fretting over what to wear. Butterflies were flapping around in her stomach, so she took a deep breath to calm herself.

She couldn’t lose sight of why she was going to the castle tonight. This was what she’d worked and planned for this past year. Things were happening quickly now and revenge was close at hand. First, she had to get through this evening without giving herself away. She brushed at a smudge of dirt on the sleeve of her jacket.

Her wardrobe was severely limited, so she was wearing her usual attire of boots, long-sleeved dark shirt and her jacket. She had swapped her leather pants for a pair of black jeans instead. The gold cross was heavy around her neck, but she refused to go anywhere without it. Other than that, she wore no jewelry.

The best thing she could say about her hair was it was clean. It was short, so beyond finger-combing it, there wasn’t much to be done with it. She hadn’t exactly packed makeup for the journey, so her face was bare.

“Stop it.” Katya raked her fingers through her short hair and then muttered a curse, yanking her hand away. Her hair was probably sticking up on end but she didn’t have a mirror with which to check it. She was driving herself crazy worrying about what these people were going to think of her.

She didn’t feel dressed appropriately either, which was stupid. This was about revenge, not about people liking her. And why did she care so much?

Chase.

It was that simple and that complicated. She'd never imagined meeting someone like him. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to study her surroundings. It wouldn't pay to get careless at this late date in the game. She had no idea who the mysterious leader of the vampire hunters was, beyond his first name, or when he might show up, and she had to be ready.

Her crossbow was in its case, strapped to her back, along with her pack, but she knew she'd have to at least leave the crossbow outside. It wouldn't do to enter Dalakis Castle with a weapon at hand. She was certain her hosts would take offense.

As she rounded the curve in the dirt road, the castle came into view. Reluctantly, she removed her crossbow, and the heavy metal bolts that she shot from it, and looked around for a likely spot to hide them. She opted to stash them behind a rosebush climbing up the side of the stone wall that ringed the place.

She'd seen the castle before, of course. Had watched it for several nights now, planning and searching for a way in. Now she was here, and about to go in through the front door—a guest instead of an unwanted intruder. It was much safer this way. Not much, but some.

Trudging up the stone steps, one at a time, she studied the building. Hewn from stone, it had stood for hundreds of years. As she crossed the courtyard she took a deep breath to settle her nerves. The sun had already set and once again she cursed the delays that had made her late.

She could never forget what the Dalakis brothers and their spouses were. Vampires had great powers and if she let down her guard for even a second they would sense she posed a threat to them. Katya swallowed hard. That would be most unfortunate—for her.

No matter her mission, the castle was indeed a beautiful and imposing sight. Katya swallowed as memories of her own home crowded in around her. It was as old and as large and grand as this castle. Tears filled her eyes and she blinked them back. Never again would she return home to find the large wooden doors thrown open and her papa there with his arms held wide to embrace her.

She halted as she walked up the last few steps that led to the huge front door and she leaned on the outside wall of the castle, her head spinning. Her mother's laughter echoed around her. "Afanas, put Katya down before you make her dizzy." How many times had her mama said those words, and how many times had her papa disregarded them, spinning her around until she was, indeed, dizzy? Hundreds? Thousands?

But never again.

Katya swallowed the lump in her throat and blinked back her tears. Her parents hadn't deserved to die as they did. Straightening her shoulders, she raised her hand and knocked on the door.

Katya should have been here over an hour ago. Dusk had come and gone and night was now starting to embrace the countryside. Chase glanced at the clock in the study

for about the hundredth time since he'd come downstairs two hours ago and fought the urge to go out and find his tardy guest. Thankfully, everyone else was too occupied with one another to notice.

"She'll be here soon."

Okay, so not everyone was occupied. He turned to Johanna, who looked chic in her tailored pants and crisp white blouse, and smiled. "She might take one look at this crowd and run back to the inn." He was half joking, but only half. The entire family had arrived just before dawn this morning, only minutes after he'd left to walk in the woods. Chase had come home from his tryst with Katya to find Blythe cooking breakfast for Cassidy and the kids. The rest of the family had already retired to their rooms for the day.

Johanna laughed. "Perhaps, but perhaps not. If she's brave enough to roam the hillside before the dawn, then I doubt she'll turn tail and run from us."

"She?"

Chase closed his eyes and gave a silent groan before turning to smile at his sister. "Just someone I met in the village. I had no idea you'd all be here tonight or I would have postponed this for another time." He'd been almost certain his family wouldn't be arriving until late tonight, but they'd shown up a day early instead. He loved them all more than anything in the world, but he really wouldn't have minded if they'd been delayed another twenty-four hours.

Louis came running into the room with Andre behind them. At twelve, the twins had more energy than all the adults put together, which was saying a lot since most of the adults were vampires.

"Have you seen the new game room? There's a huge pool table and pinball and all sorts of other neat stuff." Louis came to a breathless halt near Cassidy.

"That so?" Cassidy smiled fondly at his two younger sons. An ex-cop, Cassidy's shrewd blue eyes were always in motion, taking in everything around him. In his mid-forties, he was still fit and his short blond hair was just beginning to gray at the temples. Tough was the best word to describe him.

Cassidy had found the boys running wild on the streets of New Orleans. They'd been living in a shack in the swamp outside the city. Their grandfather, who'd been their guardian, had died and ten-year-old Jacques had been trying to keep his family together, mostly by picking the pockets of tourists in the French Quarter.

Jacques had picked the wrong man when he'd tried to steal Cassidy's wallet. Or maybe he'd picked the right one. Cassidy had dragged all three boys home and they'd all fallen under Blythe's spell as she mothered them endlessly. They'd never known a woman's touch, and before they knew it, Cassidy and Blythe had adopted all three boys. The Dalakis money and power had eased the path, making the adoption happen quickly and easily. Both Cassidy and Blythe were fair with light hair and all three boys had black hair and dark eyes. But outer appearance didn't matter. They were a family.

They knew all about the Dalakis family and had easily accepted them. After all, the bayou where they'd grown up had been filled with stories of *loup-garou*, zombies and many more otherworldly creatures. Jacques, almost a man now at eighteen, strolled into the room behind them. He reminded Chase of himself at that age. "Sorry about that. I thought the monsters would stay occupied in the game room a bit longer."

Cassidy laughed and rubbed his hand over the top of Andre's head. "No problem."

"Are you hungry?" Blythe asked. With her shoulder-length blonde hair, sky-blue eyes and curvy figure, Blythe was drop-dead gorgeous. She still looked as if she were in her mid-twenties instead of mid-thirties and drew stares wherever she went. But she only had eyes for Cassidy. She smiled readily now, not something she'd done much of when Chase had first met her more than a decade ago.

The twins nodded and she herded them toward the kitchen. Blythe was a great cook. It was a hobby they both shared, and more than once over the years the two of them had whipped up a meal for the rest of the family. Chase looked forward to trying out the new kitchen in this place with her. "I'll be back as soon as I get them something to eat." Cassidy dropped a quick kiss on his wife's lips and watched as she left the room.

A pang of envy went through Chase as he watched all the couples in the room. Cristofor and Johanna stood side by side, his hand on the small of her back as they chatted with Stefan and Laurel Rose.

Stefan, with his long black hair and piercing green eyes, stood directly behind his wife, his hands linked over her belly, surrounding her with his body. Laurel Rose was slender, yet there was an underlying strength that permeated the air around her. Her waist-length black hair hung free, the thick strands mingling with her husband's hair as Stefan leaned down to whisper something in her ear.

Zane was relaxing in a chair in front of the fireplace, his wife Sophia ensconced on his lap. With his black hair and green eyes he looked more like a fourth brother than a cousin. They made an interesting pair. Zane, dark and deadly, and Sophia a slender nymph with short, spiky red hair and pale green eyes. She always reminded him of a fairy more than a vampire. But Sophia was sharp, her intelligence apparent to anyone who spent more than one minute in her company.

They were a diverse group, yet they somehow all fit together to form a stronger whole. Someday he wanted to paint them all, a family portrait of sorts. He might have to start it sooner, rather than later, if he wanted to be certain he had a chance to complete it.

"Are you okay?" He'd all but forgotten Delight was standing beside him. They looked so much alike. Same light brown hair and pale blue eyes. But it went deeper than that. They were both quiet, both thinkers. He knew she sensed there was something on his mind, but she wouldn't push too hard, just enough to let him know she was there for him if he needed her.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Really," he added when her brow furrowed with worry.

Lucian flowed up behind her, a frown on his face. For a big man he moved with uncommon grace and speed, one of the many gifts that were a part of his vampire heritage. "What is wrong?" His brother-in-law stared hard at him, his green eyes practically glowing as he decided if Chase was really telling him the truth.

Chase took a deep breath and counted to five before repeating the words again. "Nothing is wrong."

Although, that strictly wasn't the truth. While most of the family had been deep in the day sleep of the vampire and Cassidy and his family had been unpacking and reacquainting themselves with the castle, Chase had finally heard from his doctor back in New York. The test results were in and they weren't good. Dr. McGregor had wanted him to return to New York immediately, but Chase declined. The tumor they'd found in his brain would still be there a week from now.

He wanted to spend this time with his family. He needed to be with them. And at some point soon, he'd have to sit them all down and talk with them. But not now. Not yet.

Right now, all he wanted to do was enjoy his time with them, and with Katya if she'd ever arrive. Had she changed her mind?

A heavy knock sounded in the distance and Chase breathed a sigh of relief. Stefan scowled in the direction of the door, his stern face growing even grimmer. "We have company."

"A woman," Zane added, glancing at Cristofor for confirmation that this was an invited guest.

Yup, he really would have postponed this if he'd known the entire gang would be here. "I'll get it." As he strode toward the door, he heard Johanna's low voice in the background and knew she was filling them in on Katya.

He grabbed the heavy iron handle, pulled open the door and stood there staring at her. No matter how many times he saw her, it was a shot to his heart each time. Her eyes were wide, and darker than usual. She looked worried as she nibbled on her lower lip. He barely stifled a groan as he stared at her slightly swollen mouth. He wanted to feast on her luscious lips—nipping and biting—and then lick away the sting. His cock stirred in agreement.

"You're late." He hadn't meant to say that.

Katya arched a brow at him. "Does that mean I'm no longer invited?"

"Chase, why don't you ask your guest to come in?" He could sense them all behind him even as Johanna spoke. *Great, trial by fire.* If Katya was going to bolt, it would be in the next two minutes.

"Come in and meet everyone."

Her skin paled and her eyes flew behind him. He sensed her indecision, all but felt her quivering muscles urging her to run. He had the urge to reach out, drag her inside and bolt the door behind her. He managed to quell the impulse. But just barely.

Katya took a deep breath and stepped inside. She faced Johanna. "Thank you for having me in your home."

Chase stepped up. "Katya, this is Johanna Dalakis and her husband, Cristofor. Johanna, Cristofor, this is Katya..." he trailed off as the knowledge hit him like a sledgehammer. He'd slept with her, wanted to bury his aching cock in her body at this very moment, but he didn't know her last name.

Zane chuckled and then grunted when Sophia elbowed him.

Katya recovered quickly, but Chase could see the tinge of blush on her cheeks. "Markova. Katya Markova."

"Russian?" Cristofor asked as he offered his hand to her. Katya's hand was practically swallowed by Cristofor's much larger one.

She nodded. "My papa. My mama was American."

Chase noticed she used the past tense. Was her papa dead too? Was she alone in the world? It pained him to think of it. He knew her body intimately, but he didn't know the first thing about her. Usually, that's the way he liked to keep his relationships—casual and light. But not with Katya. He wanted to know everything there was to know about her. And he would before this night was out. Or at least he'd get a good start.

Chase took over the introductions, quickly presenting her to his sister and Lucian and then to the rest of the family. Blythe and the two boys had rejoined them by then, creating a din in the huge foyer.

"Do you think we might move this into the study?" He felt awkward enough with everyone standing around staring at Katya. He couldn't even begin to imagine how that made her feel. Chase glanced at his sister for help. Immediately, Delight jumped to his assistance and began to quickly shoo the family down the hallway, leaving him and Katya alone.

Katya leaned her hand against the wall for support. "They're..."

"Overwhelming," he offered.

She chuckled before giving a tiny nod.

"Don't worry. They're pretty wonderful too, once you get to know them." Chase had never cared if his family liked a woman he'd dated. In fact, they'd never met any of them. He'd always kept his family life separate from his dating life. This was a first for him, so there was no wonder his family was so curious about Katya.

He wanted her to like them as well. This was new territory for him. He'd never wanted to try to meld his two lives together before. Still, maybe this wasn't exactly the best time to be considering such a big step. Katya was almost a complete stranger who was just passing through, while his life was in complete upheaval at the moment, professionally and personally. Now certainly wasn't the time to get involved. If anything, the smart thing to do would be to give Katya a quick tour of the place and send her on her way.

His entire being rebelled at the mere suggestion. He literally got sick to his stomach at the thought of never seeing Katya again. She wasn't a stranger. Not where it counted. Not in his heart and in his soul. He might not know all the details of her life, but he *knew* her. Knew she was special.

"Chase." He could hear the worry in her voice as she placed her hand on his arm. "We can do this another day if this isn't a good time. I know you must want to be with your family."

He caught some underlying emotion in her voice. Sadness, wistfulness, anger. He wasn't quite sure. He shook off his dark mood and smiled at her. "No, it's fine."

Capturing her hand in his, he brought it to his lips. One finger at a time, he kissed her knuckles before turning her hand over and kissing the center of her palm. His entire family was a few steps away waiting for them, but it didn't matter. He had to touch her, taste her. Reassure himself that she was real and she was here with him.

Backing her up against the wall, he leaned down and captured her lips. She met him partway, an equal partner in passion. Their mouths touched and heat exploded. He moaned as her lips parted, inviting him inside. He took her offer, plunging into her, tasting her, eating at her lips. She tasted of peppermint toothpaste and woman.

He deepened the kiss as his hands roamed over her shoulders and across her collarbone before dipping lower. Cupping her breasts, he tested their slight weight in his palms. Katya caught her breath and he swallowed her moan, never breaking their kiss.

His hands continued their downward trek. He skimmed her sides, her flat stomach, coming to rest on her hips. Katya's hands clutched at his shoulders, her short nails scoring his skin beneath his shirt.

They had to stop.

Chase tore his mouth from hers before burying his face in the curve of her neck. He heard her small cry of passion as she went up on her toes and nuzzled his neck with her lips, biting softly with her teeth. Lightning surged through his body, connecting with his groin. He went from partial arousal to rock-solid in two seconds flat.

He hissed as his cock hardened. His balls grew heavy with need—a need that only Katya could sate. He tilted his head to the side, giving her better access as her teeth scraped erotically against his skin. He wanted to feel that biting caress all over his body. His erection surged against his zipper.

"Chase." Like a bucket of cold water, his brother-in-law's voice broke over him.

Katya buried her face against his chest. Chase could sense her embarrassment. He wasn't doing much better himself. He managed to nod in Lucian's direction. "We'll be there in a second."

Lucian gave him a brief, knowing grin before heading back to the study. "I won't be able to keep your sister away much longer."

Katya groaned. "How did this happen?"

As painfully aroused as he was, just knowing that Katya felt the same somehow made the situation more bearable. He wrapped his arms around her, lifting her off the floor, enveloping her in a giant hug. "I don't know. There's something about you that makes me forget everything else."

"Me," she protested, shoving at him until he let her go. "This is all your fault, not mine." She tugged at her jacket and fluffed her hair with her fingers. Her lips were rosy and wet, her eyes slightly glazed with desire.

"Mine?" He shoved the tails of his shirt back in from where it had come untucked and adjusted his jeans slightly to help find some relief from the pressure.

"You're too damn sexy for your own good." When he reached for her again, she held both hands out in front of her. "Forget it. At least until after we've chatted with your family."

Chase linked his fingers with hers and tugged her down the hallway. "I'll take you on a private tour of the place later," he promised.

"Not too much later, I hope," she added, making him laugh as they entered the study where the entire family waited.

Chapter Seven

Katya studied the artwork on the long gallery wall as Chase led her to another section of the castle. It was an eclectic mix of ancient and modern, but it somehow all blended together and worked. It reminded her of the family home in Russia.

It also reminded her of the people who lived here. Cristofor and Johanna were wonderful. Cristofor was more reserved, but that was to be expected. Katya had no idea how old he was, but she would guess he'd lived several hundred years, if not more. There was something about him that told her he would be just as at home swinging one of the gigantic swords hanging in the armory she'd toured as he would holding the remote control on the large-screen television in the entertainment room.

His brothers were no different. They were all cordial, but a natural aloofness surrounded them, as if they were used to keeping the outside world at bay. Several times, she'd felt Stefan probing her mind for information. She'd managed to keep her guard up and her mind fairly blank, filled only with superficial information. Zane wasn't a man to be taken lightly either. His vivid green eyes had tracked her as she'd wandered around the study, chatting with the women.

Cassidy was an enigma. Human, definitely, but not a man to underestimate. He'd been a cop at one point in his life and it showed in the subtle way he watched and listened.

She'd felt surrounded and scrutinized, and it was almost more than she could bear. Part of her had wanted to run, but she'd stood her ground, sweating all the while. Talking to the women had been easier, although not by much. They'd probed discreetly, asking about her work as an artist. Katya had told them she drew and painted, which was true. Her papa had made certain she'd had lessons when she'd shown an interest in the arts as a child. She hadn't picked up a pencil or a paintbrush since the day she'd discovered her parents' bodies.

She knew that all of the women had been born human, but Katya had no doubt they were all vampires now, except Blythe. Still, after they'd asked about her work and hinted around the subject of her family, which she'd easily deflected, they'd talked of fashion and business and their family. The same things women all over the world talked about when they got together.

Johanna had even produced a pot of tea and a platter of cookies. Katya had managed to drink about half of her cup, while Blythe's younger boys had demolished the plate of cookies before heading off to the game room.

All of them had subtly probed about her past and she'd kept to the truth as much as possible. When asked, she'd told them that her parents were dead. She hadn't given the

full truth—that they’d been brutally murdered, their bodies drained of blood and their heads severed.

In keeping with her cover story of being an artist, she’d talked about the mountain flora and fauna, along with the local architecture, even mentioning that she’d visited the church. The more she chatted, the more the family relaxed. Well, the women relaxed. The Dalakis men might appear relaxed, but Katya wasn’t fooled for a second.

These men were predators who could spring into action in the blink of an eye, ready to kill to protect their families. Katya admired them for that. She understood the need to defend loved ones better than they could imagine.

An image of Sasha popped into her head and she ruthlessly shoved it aside. She missed her brother so much it was almost unbearable. Only the fact that she was doing this to protect him allowed her to stay away from him. Sasha was safe in the family stronghold in Russia, surrounded by trusted servants and guards, whose families had served her father’s family for generations. Once she found and eliminated the person who’d murdered their parents, Sasha would be safe.

Not for one moment could she forget her goal.

That didn’t stop guilt from eating at her belly. She liked the Dalakis family and she hadn’t expected to. They were a means to an end, or at least they had been. Now they were real to her, very real.

That was going to be a problem.

“Hey, we can finish this another time if you’ve had enough.”

Katya jerked back to the here and now, realizing that she’d come to a dead stop in the middle of the corridor in front of a rather large portrait. From the style, it was probably from the mid-sixteenth century. The man in the painting was obviously Cristoforo, a more brutal and elemental portrayal of the man, who was now hidden beneath layers of civilization. But Katya had no doubt the warrior remained.

Chase slipped his arm around her waist. “An ancestor.”

“He looks remarkably like Cristoforo.” Katya tested the waters, wondering how much if anything Chase would share with her.

“Apparently, there tends to be a strong family resemblance from generation to generation.”

Katya nodded, but inside she knew the truth. She might be sleeping with Chase, but he would protect his family at all costs. In that way, they were much alike.

His fingers trailed provocatively down her hipbone. “I could show you my room if you’d like. There’s a wonderful eighteenth-century fresco on the ceiling and the bed is a wonderful example of seventeenth-century craftsmanship.”

She looked up at Chase. When had he become so important to her? It had happened in a heartbeat. It didn’t make sense, but there was no changing the facts. If she didn’t know better, she’d say that she loved him. But that was impossible, wasn’t it? There was no such thing as love at first sight.

He was still waiting patiently for her answer. She managed to smile at him. "I'd like that."

His fingers tightened around her waist as he guided her down the hallway and up another set of stairs. They didn't speak as they passed through a corridor filled with tapestries and other priceless works of art. Finally, they reached a heavy oak door with metal strapping.

Chase didn't say anything as he pushed the door open and ushered her inside. Katya had an impression of a cozy room with a fireplace and an inviting seating area, but the item that dominated the room was the huge four-poster bed. Intricately carved, it was solid and inviting with its thick mattress and huge pile of pillows.

The door closed with a solid thump. She could feel the heat from Chase's body as he slid his arms around her from behind. He quickly pulled her shirt from the waistband of her pants and let his hands roam across her stomach. "I've missed you." He kissed the curve of her neck before pausing to gently tug on the lobe of her ear. His teeth teased the sensitive skin, pushing all other thoughts aside.

She'd deal with the rest of it later. Now she wanted to be with Chase. If she went ahead with her plans, this might very well be her last time with him. Tears pricked her eyes, but she blinked them away. Whatever choice she made would change their relationship and not for the better. There was no getting away from the fact that she was using him.

Need clawed at her, demanding satisfaction. If this was the last time she might be with Chase, she planned to make the most of it. There were hours and hours until dawn, until she had to make her final decision.

The night belonged to them.

Chase sensed a change in Katya's mood. She'd been pensive and withdrawn most of the evening. He put it down to meeting his family. They could be overwhelming at the best of times. Now he wasn't so sure.

There were times she seemed locked in her own mind, seeing something that only she could see. He sensed there was a lot going on beneath the surface, but so far, she wasn't sharing. She was a very self-contained person. Heck, she hadn't even removed her coat or released her knapsack, keeping both next to her at all times. She'd even brought both with her on their tour. It was if she wanted to be ready to leave at a moment's notice. Maybe it was just a case of nerves, or maybe it was something more. Yet another layer of mystery for him to uncover.

It had only been a matter of hours since their steamy encounter in the woods, but he wanted her like a starving man craved food. It was illogical and out of character for him, but it was very real. She was like a virus running through his veins. He would have been more worried except that she seemed to be afflicted by the same disease.

Her chest was rising and falling rapidly, his hand on her belly moving with each breath. He inhaled her sweet scent, a mixture of her soap and the woman herself. His

cock, which had been in a state of semi-arousal all evening, twitched and began to grow rapidly, pressing against the zipper of his jeans. Pulling Katya back against him, he ground his erection into the curve of her ass.

Her hair was short, exposing her neck, and he took full advantage of that fact, nipping and sucking at the sensitive skin of her nape. A breathy moan broke from her throat and sweat broke out on his brow. He wasn't going to be able to wait.

"Now," he muttered. "I've got to have you now." Spinning her around, he backed her up against the wall. Her eyes were wide and dark, her cheeks flushed. "If you don't want this, say so now."

He didn't know what she'd do if she refused him.

Yes, he did. He'd walk away, but it might very well kill him. The depth of emotions rushing through him was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. It was almost as if he wasn't the man he thought himself to be, but a more primitive version. The need to claim Katya, mark her as his and keep her was paramount. He wanted her with a passion that bordered on madness. Maybe he was losing his mind. That thought gave him pause.

But Katya reached out and touched him, her fingers skimming over his face, and all else was forgotten. "I want this." Unhooking her bag, she let it fall to the floor. Her jacket followed.

His knees almost crumpled, but at the same time euphoria rushed through him, leaving him slightly lightheaded. Growling low in his throat, he reached for her shirt, yanking it over her head. She was wearing a lacy bra in a dark blue that matched her eyes. A heavy gold cross nestled between her breasts. She'd been wearing it in the woods as well. It looked old and seemed to be the only piece of jewelry she wore.

"Do you want to take this off?"

She hesitated and then nodded. "That would be best."

His fingers slipped behind her neck, finding the clasp and releasing it. Carefully, he let the chain sift through his fingers, dropping it carefully on top of her pack.

Falling to his knees, he buried his face in her cleavage, his hands gripping her hips tight. Her fingers raked through his hair, her nails lightly scraping his scalp. Every nerve ending in his body was alive.

"Let's get these off." He reached for her boots and unlaced them. Raising one foot at a time, he pulled them off, taking her socks at the same time. Even her feet were sexy, the feminine curve of her arch tempting him to stroke it.

Katya tugged on his shirt and he obliged her by dragging it over his head. She gave a murmur of approval, her hands sliding over his shoulders.

Burying his face against her stomach, he heaved a sigh. Just having her close, skin to skin, was enough to push back the demons beating at his soul. Something about Katya made him feel complete and at peace, while at the same time making him feel more alive and aroused than he'd ever thought possible.

"You've bewitched me."

Her hands froze and she shook her head. "No, it's you who has me under a dark spell." She ran her fingers over his face, stopping to trace the scar beneath his left eye. "You're a sorcerer."

Chase reached for the fastener of her jeans, needing to get her naked. "Maybe we're both under a spell." He slid his hands inside her jeans, pushing them over her hips. A pair of bikini underwear was revealed, the same dark color of her bra.

He kissed a trail from her hipbone to thigh as he shoved her pants around her ankles. "Lift," he ordered, and she did so, one foot at a time. He sat back on his haunches and stared up at her. Wearing only her bra and panties, she should have appeared vulnerable. Instead, there was an aura of feminine power surrounding her.

His heart pounded as he skimmed his hand over her strong calves and muscular thighs. Her hips were nicely rounded and her waist dipped inward. Her breasts, while not overly large, were perfectly shaped. His hands covered the cups of her lacy bra and he could feel her puckered nipples poking at the center of his palms.

Leaning close, he opened his mouth over one tasty peak and sucked. Katya cried out, cradling his head against her breast, as he slid his tongue over the cloth. "More," she gasped.

Chase found the hooks in the back and released them. Katya shimmied her shoulders and the straps fell down her arms. Sitting back, he watched as the scrap of fabric fell to the floor between them. Her breasts were high and firm, her pale pink areolas puckered.

She didn't try to hide, but stood proudly before him. Reaching out a finger, he traced the softer skin around her tight nipple. "You are so beautiful," he murmured.

She gave a muffled cry and shifted restlessly. Before she could move, he leaned in again, capturing one of the tight buds in his mouth. He cupped her other breast in his palm, kneading the soft skin. Her breathing got more erratic and he could feel her short puffs of breath against his skin.

He could have spent all night caressing her breasts, but he sensed the restless fire building within her. Forcing himself away, he kissed a path down the center of her torso, stopping for a moment to circle her bellybutton. She sucked in a breath and gave a small laugh. He smiled. Knowing she was slightly ticklish there might come in handy at some point in the future.

"Chase." He could hear the impatience in her voice and it filled him with pleasure. It was strange what being with her did to him. A few minutes ago, he'd known he couldn't wait to have her. But being able to touch her skin, to taste her flesh had calmed the storm brewing inside him—at least momentarily. It still bubbled beneath the cool exterior waiting to erupt.

He dipped his fingers beneath the band of her panties and pushed. Katya kicked at the material, parting her legs slightly to reveal the slick, damp folds of her pussy. Her pubic hair was as black as the hair on her head and he combed his fingers through it.

Some women shaved that part of their bodies, but he was glad she didn't. He found it sexy.

"Spread your legs wider. I want to see you." Her breath hitched, but she did as he asked. He cupped her mound with his hand, feeling the heat radiating from her core as she coated his palm with her essence. "You're so wet." He could hear the wonder and pleasure in his own voice.

"For you. Only for you."

Jealousy speared through him at the thought of another man seeing her like this, touching her. He shook his head to clear it, ignoring the light throbbing of pain at the back of his skull. Now was not the time for one of his headaches.

Pushing closer, Chase used his shoulders to nudge her legs farther apart. He could smell her arousal as he kissed her inner thighs and it made his balls tighten painfully. Freeing the metal button to his jeans, he then slid the zipper down. That released some of the pressure, but even the tightness of his underwear was too much for him to take any longer.

Chase surged to his feet and toed off his sneakers before practically ripping the rest of his clothing from his body. Katya reached out and stroked his erection, dragging a groan from him. Pearly liquid seeped from the tip, but he wasn't quite ready to give in to the need clawing at him. He'd promised himself that he would kiss and explore Katya this time.

Falling back to his knees, he used his thumbs to open her wide. She was so hot and wet, her scent surrounded him as he stroked his tongue up one side of her labia and down the other. Her hips jerked, pulling away before pushing back. He did it again and again until she was pressing her mound against his face, her body undulating seductively.

Glancing up at her, he knew he'd never seen anything half as sexy. Her head was tilted back, exposing the long white column of her neck. The urge to bite her was almost overwhelming. Her breasts swayed with every breath she took, her nipples hard and red. Her belly was flat, her hips wide enough to cradle him comfortably, and her pubic hair glistened.

"Touch yourself."

Her eyes flew to him and she swallowed. Slowly, her hands moved to cover her breasts. A low moan broke from her as she plucked at her nipples.

Chase folded his fingers over his erection and squeezed hard. The veins running up and down his hard length were dark, engorged with blood. He was very close.

With his free hand, he pressed two thick fingers into her sheath, while his thumb stroked her clitoris. "Harder," she gasped.

Releasing his cock, he reached up and took one of her hands in his. "Don't stop," he ordered her as he pulled her hand toward her pussy. She nodded, continuing to play with her nipples, alternating back and forth.

He drew her fingers over her slick folds before pushing one of them toward her core. "Put your finger inside." He withdrew his two fingers right to the rim of her opening.

"I can't." Her eyes were glazed over with pleasure.

Chase felt the fresh gush of cream against his fingers and knew the idea excited her. "Do it." She hesitated but then inserted her middle finger next to his. "Now push," he commanded.

Katya thrust her finger inward and he followed her lead, pressing his two fingers deep. Having three fingers inside her stretched her inner muscles. They clamped down hard and then relaxed. "Chase," she gasped. He liked the sound of his name on her lips.

"In and out," he encouraged. "Feel what I feel." He moved his fingers out and thrust them inward again. Katya moved with him. "You're so slick and hot, the muscles of your pussy squeezing tight." He thumbed her clitoris again and she cried out. "I want you to come at least twice before I fuck you. Would you like that, pretty Katya? Would you like to come twice before I fuck you hard with my cock?"

"Yes," she hissed.

"Then come now." He thrust his fingers deep and she cried out. Her hips jerked and he felt her come apart. Her pussy contracted hard, sending spasms of pleasure to all parts of her body.

He watched her, loving the fact that he'd given her this. There was no holding back on her part. She gave everything, embracing every sensation. She bit her lower lip and her eyes closed as she shuddered.

Chase wanted to paint her just like this. He closed his eyes to capture the image in his brain. His cock jerked and he cursed, sucking in a deep breath. He didn't want to come until he was buried in Katya's heat.

Slowly, he withdrew his fingers from her body. Her hand slid away with his, but he didn't let it go. Bringing it to his lips, he sucked her damp finger into his mouth. Katya's eyes flew open and she gave a small squeak as he laved her finger with his tongue, tasting her sweet cream.

Her legs trembled and her knees buckled. Chase surged to his feet, catching her in his arms. Carrying her to the bed, he placed her in the center of the large down-filled mattress. Her skin was flushed and pink all over and her sated smile made his heart skip a beat.

"That was once." He stretched out alongside her, stroking his fingers over her delicate collarbone.

Her eyes widened and then she smiled as she rolled over on her side to face him.

Chapter Eight

Katya felt totally relaxed and sated. She'd never done anything like that in her life. It had been an incredible turn-on to touch herself while Chase watched. Feeling both their fingers inside her at the same time, stretching her, bringing her such pleasure, was something she'd never forget.

Now she wanted to do the same for him, wanted to touch and taste every part of him. She propped herself up on her elbow, staring down at his face. His pale blue eyes watched her every move. His hair was free, flowing around his shoulders, but a lock was plastered to his forehead. She reached out and pushed it aside.

"It's my turn now." She gave him a playful shove and he rolled over onto his back, propping his hands under his head. Sitting up next to him, she took her time, examining him from head to toe. He was incredibly strong without being muscle-bound. His wrists were thick and his arms were perfect, a combination of muscles, bone and sinew that were reminiscent of the greatest sculptures in creation.

The soft tuft of hair under his arms only served to emphasize his strength. Katya trailed her fingers over the underside of his arm, watching the muscles ripple beneath his skin. His shoulders were wide, his chest broad, his waist lean.

Placing both hands on his chest, she took her time, touching him everywhere. He jumped slightly when her fingers skimmed over his flat nipples. Leaning down, she stroked her tongue over one brown nub and was rewarded when he groaned. She sifted her fingers through the light covering of chest hair, which tapered to a thin line down his belly before thickening again at his groin.

She followed the trail, kissing a path toward his cock, which was straining upward to meet her. The head was plum-shaped and red, moisture seeping from the tip. The shaft was hard and thick, the veins pulsing with life. Katya nibbled on Chase's hipbone, never taking her eyes off his erection. He looked good enough to eat.

His fingers tangled in her short hair and he gave a low murmur of pleasure as he urged her head toward him. Katya smiled, unable to help herself. Right here, in this moment in time, she was happy. It was a gift, and one she would never forget.

Lightly grazing his sensitive skin with her fingertips, she traced one of the prominent veins running the length of his shaft. His skin was soft, but what was beneath it was incredibly hard. Her sex began to throb again and she had to bite back a groan. Chase was turning her into a sex fiend.

"Touch me," he urged. She knew what he wanted and lowered her head, flicking out her tongue to touch the very tip of his cock. She tasted him then—salty, musky and uniquely Chase. She let his essence roll around on her tongue, savoring it.

Going back for more, she swirled her tongue around the head, feeling the ridge that separated the bulbous head from the shaft, before sucking him deep. She hadn't had much practice at this sort of thing, but she was an enthusiastic learner. She listened to Chase, the small sounds of pleasure he made, the way his cock flexed as she lightly raked her teeth over him.

Cupping his sac in one hand, she massaged his balls, amazed at just how tight they were. She could actually feel them drawing up closer to his body as she stroked.

"Move your hand up behind my balls." His voice sounded strained.

She shifted her hand to the smooth skin just behind his sac.

Chase groaned. "Press. Hard. It will help keep me from coming too soon."

Katya wanted him to come, wanted him to lose control. Chase always seemed so very closed off and restrained. They were more alike than she'd realized. She was able to throw off her constraints when she was with him, to lose herself in the sensations that sprang to life whenever they were together. She wanted to give him that same gift.

Doubling her efforts, Katya began to suck hard on his cock, hollowing her cheeks as she took him deep. His low groan reverberated around the room. His hips began to move, thrusting upward to meet each and every stroke of her mouth. She slid up and down his shaft, letting her tongue and teeth play with his sensitized flesh.

He swelled, getting even larger. She shifted her hand behind his balls, scratching gently instead of pressing. His entire body jerked, bowing back in the bed. He called out her name, his hips thrusting wildly. His fingers tangled in her hair, urging her onward.

Katya captured the base of his shaft with her hand and pumped, never taking her mouth from him. She could feel the tang of him on her tongue and knew he was close.

His shaft rippled from base to tip and then she felt it—the hot, heavy spurt of his release. She swallowed, never pausing in her sucking motion until she sensed he was done. The second she eased up, he all but collapsed back into the pillows.

Raising her head, Katya gazed at him. His eyes were half closed, but she could still see their pale blue glittering in the dim light. He looked incredibly sexy with his hair tousled and his jaw shadowed with stubble. Katya squirmed as heat shot through her core.

He opened his arms to her. "Come here."

She went eagerly, wanting to feel his body next to hers. More than just the physical closeness, she wanted the emotional closeness, the feeling of belonging with someone, if only for a few moments.

His arm wrapped around her and his shoulder pillowed her head. She felt his lips press against the top of her head. "Thank you."

Feeling slightly self-conscious now, but pleased, she shrugged. "You're welcome." Her fingers played over the wide expanse of his chest, tracing the bands of muscle on his abdomen.

"That's still only once." He shifted, rolling her until she was on her back staring up at him. His large body blocked the light from her view. Propping himself up on his elbows, he let his lower body press against hers.

Already partly aroused, it only took that one small motion to have her body humming once again. Making room for him between her thighs, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer. "That's one each."

Chase nuzzled her neck. "I promised you twice before I fucked you."

"Once is fine," she assured him as she arched her hips upward. She'd just as soon get on with the fucking.

She felt Chase's lips turn up in a smile as he kissed behind her ear. "But I'm a man of my word, sweetheart."

The endearment made her heart skip a beat. She wanted to believe it meant something special, but she was a realist. It was the heat of the moment, two healthy adults engaging in hot sex. Nothing more. But, oh, how she wanted it to be more.

He pulled back and stared down at her as if sensing her mood change. "Are you okay?"

She didn't want to talk. Not now. Later, it was inevitable. She knew that she had to modify her plan. Meeting Chase had altered everything. She didn't know whether to thank him or curse him. Deep in her heart, she feared she loved him. Only an emotion that deep, that strong, could make her deviate from her course of action. That frightened her to her very core.

A relationship between them was doomed from the beginning. There were just too many variables stacked against them, the least of which was the fact that she was using him and his family to achieve her own ends.

"Katya." He looked concerned now, his full lips pursed into a thin line, his eyes shadowed. She didn't want that. Not now.

"I'm fine," she assured him, tugging him down until their lips almost met. "Now fuck me."

His pupils dilated and his nostrils flared as he lowered his head. Katya wanted to close her eyes, but she didn't. She wanted to see him, to memorize each and every curve of his face, the tiny lines around the corner of his eyes and the scar that sat high on his left cheekbone.

Their lips met. Melded. The kiss, long and hot. Tongues twined and explored, their breath mingling and becoming one.

Need, hot and fierce, sprang to life within her like a starving beast. Closing her eyes, she fought it as she tore her lips from his. Chase kissed her neck, her collarbone, her breasts and belly. There was no part of her that he didn't explore with his lips, mouth and tongue.

Her body was on fire, her soul craving only what Chase could give her. She panted hard, finding it almost impossible to breathe. She almost cried when Chase rolled off

the bed, but he was back in a flash, ripping open a condom and rolling it on. She could have told him she was safe, that it didn't matter, but talking was beyond her. Plus, she found she liked the fact that he wanted to protect her.

Chase sat back on his haunches and dragged her into his arms. Katya clutched at his shoulders for balance as she levered herself up. The tip of his cock pushed into her moist opening, making them both gasp. He gripped her hips, pulling her down one slow inch at a time until she was impaled on his cock.

Heat, need and love swirled through her. Around her. She felt half wild as she buried her face in his neck and licked at his salty flesh. The feelings were so intense, they scared her, but she faced them head-on, knowing what they meant. Chase was the love of her life, the only man she would ever love.

And before the dawn broke on a new day, she would lose him.

Tears pricked her eyes, but she refused to give in to them. Once this was all over, she would return to her homeland, curl up in the room where she'd spent her childhood and give in to the tears. But not now. Now was the time to celebrate life, which could be all too fleeting.

Raising herself up, she then pushed back down, fast and hard. Chase pulsed heavily inside her, his hot length stretching her, filling her to perfection.

"You're so perfect." His words echoed her thoughts, but she didn't want to talk, only wanted to feel.

She continued to move sinuously over him, her breasts swaying. Chase bent her back suddenly and began to lave her breasts. His tongue swiped over each swollen nipple. It was incredible. It was almost unbearable. Her core pulsed hard, promising release, but not quite delivering.

Katya was poised on the edge, unable to move in a way to bring her to completion. "Chase." She tugged on his hair, burying her face in his neck. Her teeth grazed the sensitive skin at the base and he moaned. He continued to tease her, torment her with his body. Frustration welled up inside her and she nipped at his neck. His arms tightened around her as he continued his short, hard thrusts.

Katya bit his neck in frustration. The skin broke and she felt the hot, metallic taste of his blood in her mouth. Horrified, she started to pull away. Chase groaned and pressed his hand against the back of her head, keeping her from pulling away.

He shifted, pushing her back against the mattress. As he sat back, she could see the slight trickle of blood on his neck and the bruising around it. She'd marked him. Pleasure and shame warred inside her. His face was fierce as he hooked his arms beneath her legs and pushed them wide. He planted his hands on the bed beside her shoulders and drove his cock deep inside her.

In this position, there was no way for her to control the depth or speed of his thrusts. He pushed her deeper into the mattress with each heavy stroke. She arched her back, wanting him harder, deeper. He forged inward, stretching her, filling her. She licked her lips as she watched him, still able to taste his essence from earlier. He was all

muscles and sinew, the quintessential male determined to drive them both over the edge. A fine layer of sweat made his skin glisten as their skin slapped together again and again. All she could do was hang on as he fucked her faster and harder with each stroke. Her hands fisted in the blankets beneath her, anchoring her to something solid.

"Harder," she begged, needing something more to push her over the edge.

Chase's hips began to hammer against her. Katya felt the coverings rip beneath her grasp. Her core pulsed, bathing his cock in her heat as he powered into her. Lights flashed behind her eyes. Every cell inside her body seemed to explode at once.

She cried out, her body jerking beneath his. Pleasure exploded and hunger roared to life within her, both of them pushing for supremacy. Katya grabbed Chase's shoulders, but they were so slick, her hands slipped away.

He stiffened and she felt the change in him, knew he was coming. His orgasm sent ripples to every inch of her body and she spasmed again, riding on the wave of his release.

He stayed suspended over her for several seconds and then he gave a groan and collapsed to the bed beside her. They both lay there panting, unable to speak. Finally, Katya shifted her legs, which were still spread at an awkward angle.

Chase mumbled something she couldn't quite make out and then heaved himself to the side. He managed to discard the condom before snaking out his arm and hooking it around her waist. She snuggled closer, promising to rest for only a few minutes. That was the last thought she had.

When she awoke, she sensed that the night had waned. What would Chase's family think of her when she walked down the stairs almost at dawn? There was no doubt what she and Chase had been doing. And why did she even care?

Katya opened her eyes and stared at Chase. His eyes were still closed, his breathing even. She wanted to stop time at this moment so she could be with him always. But wishing something didn't make it so.

Gathering her strength, she started to move. Chase's arm was still wrapped tightly around her, so it took some maneuvering on her part to get out from beneath it without waking him.

She rose silently from the bed and stood beside it, watching him. He looked so peaceful, and she was about to shatter that. She almost hated herself for that but it was the right thing to do. The only thing she could do.

Grabbing her clothing, she dressed quickly, saying a silent prayer when she laced up her boots that she'd stashed her knives outside behind the rosebush with her crossbow. It had been a last-minute decision, but it would have killed the mood if Chase had discovered them when he was stripping off her clothing. She'd been so into the moment, she hadn't even thought about her knives. Which showed her just how dangerous he was to her mission and her peace of mind.

She carefully lifted her mama's necklace from where it rested on top of her pack, slipping it around her neck and fastening it. Bringing the cross to her lips, she kissed it before tucking it beneath her shirt.

Grabbing her jacket, she shrugged it on and went to stand by the side of the bed. Bringing her fingers to her lips, she kissed them and placed them on his cheek. "I love you," she whispered.

Hitching her pack securely over her shoulders, she turned away and quickly slipped from the room. The hallway was quiet and dark as she crept along, keeping close to the dark shadows along the wall. Her feet made no sound against the thick carpet runner.

She felt naked without her weapons, but she wouldn't be unarmed for long. Chase had taken her on an extensive tour earlier and she'd committed the layout to memory. Moving quickly, she found what she was looking for. Two full sets of armor stood like sentinels at the beginning of a long hallway that led to the family wing of the castle. Mounted on the wall just beyond them were two magnificent swords.

Katya kept her eyes and ears open as she slid her fingers around one of the jewel-encrusted handles and carefully removed the sword from the wall. As she suspected, it was well cared for, the blade sharp and sure. Gripping it in her hand, she took a few experimental swipes through the air. The blade practically sang as it cut through the darkness.

Satisfied, she lowered it by her side.

Moving swiftly now, she listened to the sounds of the castle. Like any old building it creaked and groaned as wind whistled through crevices in the stone, settling as night deepened and the temperature outside dropped. The corridor was quiet, but Katya felt an air of expectation, of anticipation.

Her eyes never stopped scanning, checking the darkness for a stray movement, a shadow that didn't belong. A dim light pushed back the darkness outside one room. Katya put her ear to the door, listening carefully. She wrapped her fingers around the ornate brass handle and she turned it slowly. Sweat broke out on her forehead and her palms felt slippery.

Easing the door open a crack, she waited. When no one called out, she pushed it open enough to slip inside. Keeping to the shadows, she approached the bed. Moonlight steamed through the window, illuminating the couple in the bed.

Strong male arms enveloped the smaller form in the bed. Katya saw the two blond heads nestled close. Cassidy and Blythe. Even in sleep, he protected her, keeping her tucked close against his body.

She'd watched them earlier this evening, the way they communicated without speaking, the little gestures, the touches. Their love reminded her of her parents. It was fierce and deep and real. They were human, vulnerable to attack, but Katya had no doubt that Cassidy would be a formidable opponent, protecting Blythe with the last breath in his body. She only hoped it didn't come to that.

Seeing all was well, she carefully started to back out of the room. Cassidy rolled onto his back, pulling Blythe tighter into the curve of his body. Katya froze. He gave a small snore and settled back to sleep.

She waited several minutes to be sure before finally easing out of the room and closing the door behind her. Leaning against the wall, she wiped the back of her hand over her forehead. Transferring the sword to her other hand, she swiped her sweaty palm over her jeans. Taking a deep breath, she took a firm grip on the sword again before continuing her search down the dark corridor.

Several more rooms were empty, but that was to be expected. It was still night so the vampires would be up and around. This was their time.

Turning a corner, she swore when she heard the soft patter of footsteps on the carpet. Katya looked frantically for a place to hide, but she was too far between rooms. If she tried to make a run for them her presence would be felt.

Quickly and as quietly as possible, she slid her pack from her shoulders, letting it fall to the ground by her feet. Lowering the sword against her leg, she flattened her back against the wall, trying to meld with the shadows. Barely breathing, not moving a muscle, she waited.

Delight came into view, hurrying along. Katya blanked her mind and held her breath. The other woman continued on past, never even glancing her direction. *Keep moving.* Katya practically willed Delight not to see her.

A few more steps.

Delight whirled around suddenly. "Who's there?" Her eyes scanned the corridor, coming to land directly on Katya.

Knowing there was nothing left to do but try to brazen it out, she carefully leaned the blade against the wall behind her and stepped forward. "Hi, Delight."

Delight frowned. "What are you doing here?"

"I left my bag somewhere on the tour and I was trying to find it." The lie came easily to her lips even as she prayed that Delight didn't look down. "I was trying to find it and got lost." With her heel, she unobtrusively tried to push the bag away from her and deeper into the shadows.

"But why did you try to hide from me?" Katya could sense the other woman's confusion and growing suspicion.

She shrugged and held out her hands by her sides. "I felt stupid. I mean I'm wandering around your home in the dead of night looking for my backpack. I didn't want you to think I was trying to rob the place."

Crossing her arms over her chest, Delight stared at Katya as if trying to read the truth. Katya kept her face as blank as possible. Delight's eyes narrowed as if sensing the turmoil beneath Katya's placid exterior.

Damn. She had to think fast. "I'll just head on back to Chase's room. He can help me look for it later when he wakes up." She glanced away as if in embarrassment.

"Oops, I probably shouldn't have said that, should I? You're Chase's sister, after all." Sex was always a distraction.

It was working too. Delight's eyes flickered away and she let out a sigh. Katya breathed a sigh of relief. She was safe. Then Lucian suddenly appeared from out of nowhere.

"What's going on?" He kept Katya in his sights as he went straight to his wife, wrapping his arm around her shoulder. His eyes snapped with green fire as he glared at her. Katya should have known he'd sense his wife's unease. These Dalakis men were very in tune with their wives, the connection deep and powerful.

"Nothing," Delight reassured him. "Katya just lost her backpack on the tour Chase gave her."

"Really." He drew the word out and she sensed he didn't believe her.

"Yes. It was careless of me, but I got caught up in the history of the place. There's so much to see."

She sensed another presence alongside her before a deep voice seemed to whisper in her ear. "And so much to take." Cristofor's hand snaked out and grabbed the sword from behind her.

Katya jumped to the side, keeping the vampires in front of her. The two men glared at her, suspicion in their eyes. Delight's eyes were wide as she stared at the sword. Katya could practically feel the other woman's hurt and disappointment.

Her heart beat against her chest and she shivered as a bead of sweat rolled down her back. Talk or run. Those were her only two choices. And from the looks of the two men in front of her, it was going to be the second choice.

"What's going on?" Chase's voice broke through the tension. He strode down the corridor, hastily tucking in his shirt to his jeans. All signs of the sleepy, sexy man she'd left were gone, replaced by confusion. He pinned her with his laser-blue gaze. "I woke up and you were gone."

"Your little friend was roaming the castle searching for her backpack." Cristofor held up the sword. "Somewhere along the way she picked this up instead."

"I don't understand." Chase looked at the sword and back at her. "Your pack was in the room earlier." His eyes narrowed and she knew he was remembering how he practically tore it from her body earlier tonight as he'd stripped her naked.

"We need to talk." Wariness replaced the confusion in his eyes. She hated to see the closed look on his face, the suspicion in his eyes, especially knowing that she'd put it there. "There are things you all need to know."

Anger now surged to the forefront as he grabbed her arm. "What kind of game are you playing?"

Katya tugged her arm away. "No game, but it's time for the whole truth."

"Katya?" She heard the question in his voice, the plea for her to explain, but she looked away. She'd tell him everything soon. She'd tell them all. "What truth?"

"I'll get her pack from your room." Delight skirted the small group.

Sighing, Katya leaned down and grabbed her bag from the floor behind her, hooking it over her shoulder. "Don't bother." She sensed the anger emanating from all of them and did her best to ignore it. They caught her in several lies. She deserved their anger. "Where do you want to do this?" She was very aware of Chase standing beside her, watching her, but she addressed her question at Cristofor. This was, after all, his home.

"Downstairs." He held his arm wide, motioning her toward the stairs with the sword. He held it easily and Katya had no doubts that he knew exactly how to wield it, and with great skill.

Although it went against everything she'd ever been taught about protecting herself, she walked down the stairs in front of them, half expecting Cristofor to take a mighty swing with the sword. Her neck itched, and she wanted to wrap her hands around it for protection. Not that it would do any good with his strength and that sharp blade. It took all her courage to keep her hands by her side and her pace steady. Chase walked one step behind her, so close she could feel the heat from his body.

She wanted nothing more than to lose herself in his heat, but it was too late for that. Katya had made her choice and there was no going back. The somber group made their way down the stairs.

Turning, she headed for the study. Voices filtered out the open doorway. Taking a deep breath, Katya said a quick prayer as she stepped inside. She made note of all the windows in case she had to make a quick escape. Confronting a vampire in its den was never a smart or safe thing to do. Or in this case, an entire family of vampires.

The rest of the Dalakis family was there when she made her entrance with the other four behind her. Thankfully, Cassidy and his family had slept through the entire episode upstairs. It was probably safer for them to not be involved in this.

She felt Chase hovering beside her. For one second, she wished he'd reach out and touch her, but he brushed past her, going to stand beside his sister instead. Bitterness sprang to life inside her. Not that she blamed him. She'd have done the same thing as well. That didn't make it any easier to bear.

All conversation ceased and every eye turned to her. She felt all the men probing at her thoughts. She blocked them easily and then sent back a mental blast of her own. Stefan and Zane were both knocked back a step at the unexpected attack. Cristofor and Lucian stood their ground and began to growl.

The hairs on the back of her neck stirred as she felt Chase shift closer, hovering just beyond her, but she stood her ground. "Now we talk."

Anger and confusion filled Chase as he watched the scene unfold before him. What the hell had happened? He'd spent the most erotic night of his life with a woman who captivated him. That same woman now felt like a stranger.

What had Katya been doing wandering the halls of the castle with a sword in her hand? His blood ran cold and his mind refused to even imagine what might have happened. And why had she lied to Delight about her pack?

He'd sensed there was something stirring deep beneath the surface with her, but never had he imagined it was dangerous or somehow involved his family.

"What's going on?" Cristofor took a step forward, blocking Johanna from Katya's view, pure menace in every line of his body and the sword gripped tight in his hand. "Who are you, really?"

Tension radiated from Katya, yet she sounded calm as she spoke. "I didn't lie to you. My name is Katya Markova." She paused and the air in the room grew heavier. "And I know what you are."

Zane gave a guttural growl, exposing his sharp fangs. Chase noticed that she didn't flinch, didn't seem surprised at all. He felt Delight's hand on his arm, but shook it away. He didn't want his sister to comfort him. He'd brought Katya into their midst and he wouldn't relax until he knew exactly what trouble came with her.

"Cut to the bottom line." His voice was hard, tinged with a bitterness that practically choked him. "You said you wanted to talk. So talk." Chase refused to look straight at her, fearing he'd go to her if he did. Instead he fixed his gaze just off to her right.

"One year ago, I was in Germany with my family. I came home to find the house ablaze with my parents inside. I raced into the building and found them. They were dead."

Chase's gaze flew to hers. She wasn't lying. Not about this. He could all but feel her pain in each word she spoke. She didn't pause, but continued with her story, her tone flat and devoid of life.

"It wasn't the fire that killed them. They'd already been decapitated, but not before most of the blood had been drained from their bodies."

Delight gasped and Laurel Rose moaned. The men all tensed.

"I managed to escape the blaze, but I vowed then to find my parents' killer. I've spent the last year doing just that."

"What does that have to do with us?" Cristofor demanded.

"Nothing," Katya whispered. "And everything."

Zane took a threatening step forward, but Chase stepped in front of Katya, reaching out a hand to restrain him. No matter that she'd deceived them all, he didn't want her hurt.

"There are those who believe that there is power in the blood." All the hairs on Chase's body rippled. This sounded all too familiar.

Stefan roared and all but flew across the room, his boots seeming only to skim the floor, his body a blur of motion. "Who sent you?"

But Katya wasn't there. Chase blinked and found her on the far end of the room. Lucian stepped in front of Delight, his eyes never leaving Katya. "Why are you here?"

"For the past year, I've infiltrated the vampire hunters. That's what they call themselves now. They think it's clever and ironic. Instead of hunting vampires, they hunt like vampires, or how they perceive vampires would hunt. They've had other names in the past." She gave a low, angry laugh. "In truth, they're lowlife perverts and murderers. They drink the blood of their victims, thinking it transfers the power and life force of their victims to them."

"Good company you're keeping," Lucian taunted.

"I would have gone to the bowels of hell and faced Satan himself to find the one who killed my parents." Katya straightened her shoulders, looking proud and aloof, and so alone it hurt Chase's heart.

"My search took me halfway around the globe and back again. Each member of the group knows only a handful of others, that way protecting most of them. I've managed to compile a substantial list."

She reached into her bag and Stefan growled, grabbing one of the heavy, ornate swords from over the fireplace. The blade winked in the light, assuring all of them that, although it was a relic, it was a very sharp and capable weapon. "Go very slowly," he warned, moving steadily forward.

Chase strode to Katya's side, not willing to risk that Stefan might skewer her with the massive blade. Not that Katya seemed all that concerned.

She pulled a computer thumb drive from her pack and tossed it to Sophia. Zane's hand shot out, grabbing the small metallic object in midair. He examined it before handing it to his wife. "That's everything I have on them. Names, locations and whether they're still alive or dead."

"Dead?" Lucian questioned.

Katya shrugged. "It was not always easy to gain their trust to find out what I needed to know." Her eyes narrowed. "If I had to question them..." She let her sentence trail off, allowing them to draw their own conclusions.

Chase stared at her, not quite able to assimilate the fact that his lover was also an assassin. "Have you come to harm my family?" That was the one question he needed answered above all others.

Pain filled Katya's eyes, but she didn't flinch. "No."

Cristofor snorted. "Excuse me if I doubt you. You say you are one of these vampire hunters and you know what we are." He glanced at Chase. "And you've used a family member to gain access to our home." He raised the sword. "Now I find you wandering around my home in the dead of night, armed with a sword. Forgive me," he added mockingly, "if I find it hard to believe anything you say."

Katya inclined her head, acknowledging the point. "I said that I infiltrated the vampire hunters, not that I am one." She smiled then, and Chase stumbled back as the

sharp edges of her teeth came into view. Red tinged her eyes, making them glow. "I am a vampire-hunter hunter. I search for those who murdered my parents."

"I don't understand." Chase took a step toward her. Katya was a vampire. How was that even possible? As far as he knew, vampires bred only male babies, the women being converted by the male vampire. Did that mean she had a mate somewhere? Jealousy swamped him. Vampire or not, she was his. But why had she lied to him, treating him like someone who was unworthy of her trust? He took another step in her direction, stopping when she whirled to face him.

"My papa was Afanas Markova and he was seven hundred years old, born in what is now Russia. He watched the rise and fall of many czars. He saw his country being destroyed, so he left his home and traveled the world, ending up in America twenty-five years ago. It was there he met my mama. Her name was Mary, but he called her Marya. From the moment he saw her, he knew she belonged to him." Katya paused to glance at each of the men in turn. "You all understand what I mean."

None of the men moved or acknowledged her words. Chase was still trying to wrap his mind around the fact that she was a vampire. "But I've seen you out in the sunshine." Granted, it had been early in the day, but the sun had definitely been shining."

"My mother was pregnant with me when he changed her."

"You're a half-breed," Sophia gasped. "Like Spencer was."

Katya tilted her head to one side. "Spencer?"

"Long story, but that bastard was the head of a blood cult who tried to kill Sophia a few years back." Fury was evident in Zane's voice. It might have happened ten years ago, but it could have been yesterday as far as the family was concerned.

Katya nodded. "I have his name on the list as possibly dead. You can cross it off. It's the same group and they've got their tentacles everywhere. Spencer, however, was not the head of the group."

"How did they manage to kill your parents if they were both vampires?" Suspicion was heavy in Cristofor's voice.

Katya dug in her pack again, ignoring the way the men tensed and began to growl, and drew out a box. Opening it, she drew out a small dart. "I found this in my papa's chest and had it analyzed. It's a strong sedative, a designer drug that probably incapacitated him long enough for the murderer to act." She pulled out a vial. "I also had a vaccine created to counteract it. It takes thirty seconds to act after you've been shot with the sedative, but it is effective."

"How did you come up with such a thing?" Sophia looked curious, the former investigative reporter in her coming to the fore instinctually.

Katya smiled, replacing the vial back in the case alongside a dozen others just like it. "Unlike the Dalakis family who keep themselves secluded, my papa traveled the world and made friends wherever he went. There is a renowned chemist in Germany who helped me. He was my papa's friend and was devastated by his death."

Chase ignored the dig at his family, mostly because it was true. For safety's sake, the family did remain fairly isolated, although that was changing somewhat since the women had married into the family.

"So, you're a vampire?" Chase was still having a hard time with that one even though he'd seen her fangs and watched her eyes tinge red. And then there was the speed with which she'd evaded Stefan.

"I am not human, nor totally vampire. I'm a hybrid." Katya shook her head. "I can go out in the early morning or late afternoon, although I am sensitive to sunlight and will burn horribly if I'm out in midday. I'm not certain if prolonged exposure to sunlight will kill me, but I'm not willing to put it to the test. I can eat food, in fact need it, but I still must have blood to survive. I have no idea how long I will live, but I suspect it will be a long, long time. The day wears heavy on me, but I can manage to be active in the daytime if necessary. I don't get sick and I heal when I'm hurt. It takes longer for me to heal than a normal vampire, but it does happen."

She held up her hands. "The skin was burned from my hands during the fire that was set to hide my parents' murders. Now there are no scars. The burns began healing immediately, although it was nearly a month later when the last scar finally faded. I fit neither totally in the vampire realm or the human one."

Chase felt her utter aloneness and understood what she meant. He'd always felt alone, outside his vampire family, but because of his intimate knowledge of, and connection with, the vampire species, he'd never quite fit among humans either.

"That still doesn't tell us why you're here." Cristofor's harsh words snapped Chase out of his thoughts and back to the situation at hand.

"That's easy." Katya tossed the wooden case back into her pack, closing it before hooking it over her shoulder. "The head of the group is named Vasili. I don't have a last name for him. He is very interested in your family and has been searching for all of you for quite some time. I found you. The plan was to use you as bait to lure him out so I can kill him. But, as much as I want my parents' killer, I don't want it at the cost of your lives. I was searching tonight to make certain he had not already arrived. Now that you know he is coming, you can protect yourselves."

"Not again," Zane roared as he jumped at Katya. "You've brought those murderers to our door."

Chase yelled and lunged forward, but as a human, he didn't have the strength or preternatural speed of a vampire. Katya was already in motion, diving headfirst through one of the large windows. Glass shattered, knifelike shards flying everywhere.

Chase screamed her name, but she was already gone. The sky was just beginning to lighten on the edge of the horizon and Zane fell back, staggering as Chase raced to the window and searched in the distance. Blood rolled down several of the jagged spears of glass.

Katya was hurt!

Zane groaned again and Chase yanked the drapes closed. Everyone looked pale and he knew that the coming of the dawn was draining their energy. Katya had timed her confession perfectly.

"You all need to get to your rooms." Chase looked to his sister and found her already locked tight in Lucian's arms. Her face was pale, her eyes shut.

Cristofor nodded, scooping Johanna into his arms. "Do not leave the castle. We will make plans when the sun sets." Anger and retribution seethed from every line of his body. Chase didn't bother to nod as they all filed from the room, but simply hung his head.

He knew none of them blamed him, but his gut tightened all the same. He should have been more careful, not been drawn in by the immediate sexual connection that had sprung up between him and Katya.

Mixed with the guilt was worry about Katya. She was out there by herself, bleeding, hunting the monster that killed her parents. Alone in the room, he went back to the window and pushed aside the curtain, his eyes never leaving the droplets of blood that now stained the windowpane.

His chest hurt as he finally pulled his gaze from her blood and stared out over the vast countryside. Pink roses climbed the rock wall, their scent perfuming the wind as it blew amongst the petals. Trees danced in the breeze, their leaves making a soft swishing sound. A bird chirped a happy song. In the distance all he could see was thick forest and the mountains beyond—rugged and beautiful beyond description.

"Where are you?" he whispered. With her speed, and her ability to be out in sunlight, she could be anywhere on the mountain.

The urge to follow her, to find her, hit him like a sledgehammer. He staggered slightly, feeling lightheaded, like someone had sucker punched him. He caught himself against a bookcase. Something dark and dangerous stirred deep within him.

It didn't matter where she was, he'd find her.

Footsteps pounded on the stairs. Cassidy stormed into the room, wearing nothing but a pair of jeans, a deadly handgun clasped in his hand. His icy blue eyes were flat and searching as he looked over the room. "Lucian just woke me. What the hell happened?"

Heaving a ragged sigh, Chase answered.

Chapter Nine

Katya was panting hard as she all but flew through the woods, ignoring the blood seeping from the cuts on her hands and arms. They stung, but experience had taught her that they would heal quickly.

She'd paused long enough to grab her weapons, but hadn't stopped since escaping the castle. She knew no one was chasing her. These vampires couldn't go out in the sunlight as she could, and Chase wasn't fast enough to catch her. Then again, he did know where she was staying.

It was time to check out of the inn.

She desperately tried not to think about the look of anger and betrayal on Chase's face. Instead, she pulled her cloak of fury around her. She'd warned them all, hadn't she? In doing so, she'd jeopardized her own life and her mission. The head of the society was coming for them, if not now, then later. At least now the Dalakis clan knew they were under attack.

Vengeance was still her goal, but not at the expense of someone else's life. She was tired—of the lies, the constant moving, the fighting and the never-ending mistrust—but she wouldn't stop, couldn't stop, until her parents' murderer paid for what he'd done.

Her vision blurred and she swiped at the tears on her face. Useless. That's what tears were. Utterly useless. She slowed her pace as she hit the edge of town, rubbing her eyes. She was tired. That was all. Some sleep and she'd be fine.

Katya used the acute hearing gifted to her by her vampire heritage to listen and make sure the coast was clear before sneaking in the back door and up the stairs to her room. No use in raising Olga's suspicions. The last thing she wanted to do was to raise questions about why she was bleeding all over the place.

When she closed the door behind her, she finally let herself breathe a sigh of relief. Katya stared at the bed longingly but knew she couldn't risk lying down for even a moment. She was so tired. Sleep had been practically nonexistent these past weeks. Unlike with pure vampires, the day sleep didn't take her into oblivion. She had dreams. Nightmares, really.

Over and over again she witnessed the death of her parents. Sometimes her own face or that of her brother had taken the place of her parents, reminding her just how fragile life really was, even if you were an immortal.

She had to get out of here as fast as possible, but first she needed a quick shower. She had time as long as she didn't tarry. The cool water would wake her up and cleanse the blood from her cuts. Plus, her skin was sticky after last night. Katya sagged against

the wall as her body responded to thoughts of Chase. Her nipples tightened and her core began to pulse.

"Cold shower." She pushed herself away from the wall and staggered into the small bathroom. Dumping her pack and her crossbow on the counter, she turned on the taps, ignoring the squeals of the water pipes as she peeled off her clothing.

The flow wasn't strong, but she didn't care. Katya stepped beneath the cool spray, shivering when it hit her skin. Gritting her teeth, she picked up the bar of soap and quickly scrubbed herself from top to bottom. The water was tinged pink as it flowed down the drain, reminding her of her wounds. She brought her hands and forearms to her lips, one at a time, licking each cut. They began to close almost immediately. Like a full-blooded vampire, she was blessed with the chemicals in her saliva that clotted blood and closed wounds. When she was done, she allowed herself to stand for a few seconds beneath the spray and let the water sluice over her skin.

The combination of no sleep again last night and the confrontation with the Dalakis family had taken whatever small reserves of energy she'd had left.

A shiver raced down her spine and she jerked. Her eyes popped open and she swore as she turned off the taps and grabbed the towel from its hook. She'd nodded off for a second. She needed sleep. Badly.

But first, she needed to get out of here.

Katya didn't look at herself in the tiny mirror as she dried off. She didn't want to see what she'd become. When had it become easy to trade someone else's life for what she wanted? "I'm sorry, Mama. I'm sorry, Papa," she whispered.

Tossing the towel aside, she grabbed her dirty clothing and rolled it into a ball. Naked, she strode back into her room and dug clean underwear from her larger duffel bag. She pulled on her leather pants and a long-sleeved black shirt. It might be much too warm for the day, but they would protect her better if she had to hide in the woods.

She lowered herself to the edge of the bed and let her head fall forward. She was so damn tired. Tired of running, tired of lying, tired of life. Sighing, she raised her head and grabbed her socks, tugging them on before lacing up her boots once again.

Feeling sorry for herself would have to wait until later. The game was in motion and nothing she could say or do would stop it. The killer was coming for the Dalakis family. All she could do was be ready for him.

Resolve filled her. It was much easier to cling to her anger and thoughts of revenge than it was to dwell on the look of betrayal on Chase's face. The way he'd look at her, as if he couldn't stand to be in the same room with her, had shaken her to her soul.

When this was over, she needed to go home. Home would help heal her. At least she hoped so. Some days she wasn't sure she'd ever find herself in the person she'd become.

Katya stood and shoved her dirty clothing into her bag, zipping it closed. Although she knew she never left anything out, she did a quick scan of the room. There was nothing there to show she'd even been here.

Satisfied, she zipped the bag closed and slung it over her shoulder. Grabbing her pack and her crossbow, she headed for the door. Less than ten minutes had passed since she'd arrived, not long enough for anyone to reach the inn, if they were indeed after her. But she didn't think that was the case. They knew she wouldn't leave. Not until her parents' murderer was dead. There was no need for them to pursue her. Still, she couldn't take the chance.

She closed the door behind her and paused in the hallway, staring at the phone.

Coming to a decision, she lifted the receiver and made one final call. She longed to call her brother, but didn't dare. The last thing she wanted was someone checking the outgoing calls from this payphone and tracing it back to her family. She had a secure cell phone, but once again she cursed the lack of reception in the mountains. *Soon*, she promised herself.

The ringing ceased and a machine picked up, as she expected. She waited impatiently as the disembodied mechanical voice repeated the number she'd just dialed. When it was done, she left the message, knowing he'd receive it.

"I'll be out of contact. The Dalakis family is leaving tomorrow night. If you don't move tonight, you'll lose them." She hung up the phone, her hand gripping the receiver for a long second before she uncurled her fingers and let it go.

Turning, she all but banged into Niles Becker, who was just leaving his room. Her eyes narrowed as she studied him. How much had he heard?

He gave her a smile and nodded. "Good morning. You're up early." He noticed her bags then, his eyes narrowing. "You're leaving?"

Katya could hear the accusation in his voice and it made her angry. He was a total stranger who had no claim to her. "It's time." She hefted her bags and strode to the stairs.

"Let me help you with your bags." He grabbed the strap of her duffel, but Katya yanked it away from him.

"I can manage." She took the stairs quickly with Niles hot on her heels.

"I thought perhaps I could buy you breakfast before you left."

Didn't this guy ever give up? She shook her head. "Thank you, but I'm in a hurry."

"Where are you going?" When she whirled to face him, he shrugged sheepishly. "My colleague and I are traveling the countryside. I thought perhaps we might run into you again."

Katya studied him. He was tall and lanky, with sandy-colored hair and blue eyes. All in all, Niles was unremarkable in looks, although there was no mistaking the intelligence and determination in his eyes. But it wouldn't matter what he looked like. He wasn't Chase. And Chase Deveraux was the only man she wanted. Now and forever.

"I don't know where I'm headed." Which was sort of true. She didn't know where she was spending the day, but she did know where she'd be by sundown tonight. "Maybe we'll meet again."

Niles' eyes narrowed and he opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again when Olga bustled into the hallway, broom in hand. "Good morning. You are all up early this day." She saw Katya's bags and sighed. "You are leaving us?"

"Yes." Not offering any more information, she waited for Olga to tally her bill. She'd paid cash upfront so she wouldn't have to use a credit card. The less people knew about her, the better. Olga actually owed her money, but she shook her head when the older woman told her to wait. "Keep the rest. It was a pleasure staying at your inn."

Olga beamed. "Thank you. You come back again and visit."

"Perhaps." Katya was very aware of Niles watching and listening to the entire proceedings and he was beginning to annoy her. Fatigue pulled at her and she barely bit back a yawn. She had to get somewhere safe where she could sleep.

She sensed Niles following her to the door and hoped he didn't follow her. Not that she couldn't shake him from her trail, but it would take time, and time was something she was running out of.

Tugging her sunglasses out of her jacket pocket, she popped them on. The sun wasn't overly bright, but with her sensitivity to it, it was strong enough that her eyes were already beginning to water and it was hard for her not to squint.

Hoping to head him off, she turned and gave him a small wave. "See you around." *Not if I can help it*, she thought, but she kept all traces of her distaste from her face, offering him a polite smile.

"Count on it." His voice was low, but she heard it all the same.

Pretending she hadn't heard him speak, she headed down the road to the edge of the village, paying no attention to the quaint houses and shops. She sensed his eyes tracking her until she was out of sight. Once she was certain no one was watching her, she ducked into the woods, breathing a sigh of relief when the cool shadows enveloped her.

Veering back the way she'd come, she doubled back and headed toward the church. It would be quiet there during the day. Her body needed rest and her soul needed peace.

It was hard going. The farther the sun rose in the sky, the harder it got for her to press on. The only thing that kept her going was the certainty that, one way or another, it would all be over tonight.

She might not know who the leader of the vampire hunters was, beyond his first name, but she knew how badly he wanted the Dalakis family. He wouldn't let this opportunity slip through his hands, no matter what it took to get him here.

Katya had checked the phone number she'd been given to contact him. She couldn't trace it to an exact location, not without her computer, which she'd left in storage in

Bucharest in favor of speed. She'd felt time running out on her, plus in such a remote village internet hookup hadn't been something she'd expected to find. It should have occurred to her that the Dalakis family would have paid to have it put in and shared it with the village. Olga had boasted that the tiny schoolhouse had internet.

Not that it mattered now. She knew that the leader of this unholy society was already in Romania, which meant that either he'd already suspected where the Dalakis family was or he was having her followed. She thought the latter was the most likely case. Trust wasn't high on the list of any member of this depraved society. Vasili was close. Close enough to get here by tonight.

She stumbled over a branch. Her bags dragged on her arms, making it impossible to catch herself. Falling to her hands and knees in the dirt, Katya barely caught herself before she ended up flat on her face. Lowering her head between her shoulders, she sucked in several deep breaths. She was perspiring heavily now, her breathing strained. But she knew she couldn't stop. Not yet.

Grabbing on to the trunk of a tree, she used it to pull herself upward. Hefting her bags over her shoulder, she squinted through her sunglasses, checking the path. The church was close.

Putting one foot in front of the other, she plodded along. The woods ended suddenly and she stumbled into the graveyard that sat adjacent to the church. Hurrying as fast as she was able, she made her way to the stone steps.

Sanctuary was within her grasp.

She reached the top of the stairs and grabbed the handle. More and more churches locked their doors these days, but Katya was banking on this being an old-fashioned, isolated community that lived by the old rules where a church was never locked.

Not that she couldn't get in if it was locked, but that would take concentration, something she was short on at the moment.

The handle turned easily. Sending up a prayer of thanks, Katya stumbled inside. After the brightness of the day, the inside of the church seemed as dark as a tomb. Removing her sunglasses, Katya blinked several times to clear her vision. She sent her senses soaring outward, something she should have done before she stepped foot inside the place. Exhaustion was making her sloppy and that was dangerous.

Luckily, there was no one about.

Dragging her tired body farther inside, she made her way to the altar. For a moment, she stood and stared at the large cross. Looking away, she moved to the left, searching for a safe space. Off to the side, she spied several pews that, at one time, might have been reserved for the choir. She doubted they had much of a choir these days given the size of the village.

Dropping her bags to the floor between them, she raised a small cloud of dust as she lowered herself to the floor and scooted beneath the one receding farthest into the shadows. Not the most comfortable of beds, but not the worst place she'd slept this past year. The stone was cool beneath her and she sighed with relief. Pillowing her head on

her duffel bag, she wrapped her arms around her pack and crossbow. Her nose twitched as some of the dust floated down around her. She sneezed several times before the dust settled. All was still.

She was safe for now. Or at least as safe as she ever was.

Closing her eyes, she tried not to think of her parents or the Dalakis family. Most of all, she tried not to think of Chase. Unable to stop herself, she sent a mental message of love winging his way. She knew he wouldn't hear her, since only mated couples could communicate that way. Still, it made her feel better.

She would protect Chase and his family and kill her parents' murderer. There was no other option. Gradually her breathing slowed until, to the naked eye, it would appear she wasn't breathing at all.

Chase paused in mid-sentence and cocked his head to one side. For a second, he was certain he'd heard Katya's voice. "Did you hear that?"

"What?" Cassidy tensed and his gaze shot around the room. His eyes narrowed as he turned back to Chase.

Maybe it had been in his head, but for a moment, he thought he'd heard Katya saying that she loved him. He shook his head. Obviously it was wishful thinking on his part. "Nothing. I'm guess I'm just jumpy."

"We all are. I can't believe I slept through all this." Cassidy hadn't been pleased when Lucian had banged on his door just before sunrise this morning, demanding that he go and talk to Chase. Unfortunately, Chase was the one left to deal with Cassidy's bad mood.

"I still can't believe I didn't suspect anything." Chase felt torn in half. No matter which way he turned, he felt as if he were betraying someone. His family was everything to him. For years, he'd kept his relationships superficial to protect them. Somehow, Katya had gotten through his defenses and become special to him in a very short period of time.

"Don't beat yourself up over it. You couldn't have known what Katya was up to or the fact that she's a vampire." Cassidy scrubbed his jaw. "I still can't wrap my head around that one. It goes against everything I've learned about the species."

"Maybe you should look at this from her perspective." Blythe, her blonde hair bouncing with each step, strode into the room, a tray filled with mugs of coffee, a plateful of scones and a pot of jam in her hands. She laid the repast on the table, swiping her hands on her faded jeans before picking up two of the mugs.

"What do you mean?" Cassidy leaned down and kissed his wife's forehead as he took the mug of coffee she offered him.

"I mean she didn't have to tell you anything." She handed Chase his coffee and then went back for the other one for herself. Curling up in one of the large comfortable chairs, she tucked her bare feet under her bottom. "She could have just left here without

telling you about this unknown enemy. We'd never have known. If we'd uncovered him ourselves, we would have assumed it was somehow connected to that mess years ago."

She took a sip of coffee and sat her mug on the table before continuing. "It's like when I tried to leave the message to warn the family years ago. If Cassidy hadn't figured out who I was, none of you would ever have known anything about me. I didn't have to try to warn you, but it was the right thing to do. Katya could easily have just disappeared without telling us anything. It would have made her life a whole lot simpler and safer."

Cassidy went to his wife, lifted her out of the chair and wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close. "I'm so glad I found you. You're my life." There was no doubting the sincerity in Cassidy's voice. Anyone who knew him knew that his wife and family, which included all the Dalakis brothers, wives and assorted family, were everything to him and there wasn't anything he wouldn't do to protect them.

Chase sat down heavily in a chair, the mug still clasped in his hand. He hadn't thought about this from her perspective at all. He'd been so filled with thoughts of her betrayal, plus his own illness and how to tell the family about it, he hadn't been able to get past them. He also kept replaying this morning's confrontation in his mind. God knows, he'd pictured it a dozen times since, just like the phone call from his doctor in the States.

Katya hadn't flinched from their scorn or anger, but had expected it. Still, she'd done what she felt was right. Dalakis Castle was a fortress when it was locked down tight. With vampires and humans alike, all on alert, it would be impossible for someone to take them unawares. But Katya...Katya was out there somewhere. Alone.

"I'm going to call her." Decision made, he plunked down his coffee and went to the desk phone. Digging into the desk drawer, he found the local phone book and looked up the number. He'd been in the village hundreds of times and knew the Bratianos owned the inn.

"Are you sure that's wise?" Cassidy took a mouthful of coffee, his expression thoughtful. Blythe patted her husband's chest and shook her head as if warning him to stay out of it.

"Wise or not," he said as he dialed, "she's out there alone, and the murderer knows where to find her." He broke off when the phone was answered. "Good morning, Mrs. Bratiano, I was wondering if you might tell Katya Markova there is a phone call for her." He listened to the woman on the other end and his gut churned. "I see. Thank you."

He hung up the phone. "She checked out this morning." Damn, he should have gone after her, but he'd been too angry, felt too betrayed, hadn't wanted to chase after her like some animal in heat, needing his female. The analogy had hit too close for comfort. Now he'd have to live with the regret.

"So she is gone." Cassidy shook his head as he reached for a scone.

Chase shook his head as certainty filled him. "She's not going anywhere. She's out there somewhere, hiding. That man killed her parents. There's no way she's leaving until one of them is dead." Even as he said the words, he sensed their truth.

She was out there, alone, thinking he despised her. That couldn't be further from the truth. He loved her. Just thinking of her being hurt or worse was unbearable. She belonged to him, with him.

Vampire or not, liar or not, it no longer mattered.

In many ways, he understood her. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do to protect his family. If that meant telling a few lies, so be it. He held on to the fact that in the end, she had told him the truth, told all of them the truth. And that hadn't been easy.

He wanted to be with her for however long he had left in this world. She would outlive him. That was a given, but he'd take whatever time they had and thank God for every moment.

Chase wandered to the window and looked out at the sunny summer day. The stone battlements were imposing in the sunlight, a reminder of days gone by. The mountains in the distance were tall and forbidding. The forest, thick and lush, was alive with activity as the birds and animals went about their day.

Where was she?

Coming to a decision, Chase swallowed the last of his coffee. "I'm going after her." Ignoring Cassidy as he called after him, Chase strode to the front door and yanked it open. He'd start in the village and then he'd comb the woods. She was out there somewhere and he would find her.

The anger that had been riding him for the past few hours slipped away, revealing the underlying worry that had always been there, but he'd just refused to see it for what it was. Anger was easier, keeping the fear for her safety at bay.

Katya belonged to him, with him. No matter what else happened, he felt the rightness of that all the way to his very bones.

Ignoring the headache that threatened, he hurried his pace toward the village.

Chapter Ten

Katya came awake in a heartbeat, her eyes flying open. She was no longer alone. Cocking her head to one side, she listened with her acute hearing. The low scuff of footsteps shuffling against stone was mingled with the sound of a single heartbeat.

Her first instinct was to run, but she fought it. She was well-hidden where she was, and any movement would give away her location.

Was it a member of the Dalakis family? Her heart skipped a beat. Perhaps Chase?

She held her breath and sent her senses soaring. It was late afternoon, but the sun had not yet set. That ruled out any of the Dalakis brothers. Her hopes plummeted when she recognized the person moving around the church. It was the elderly priest, Father Patrescu.

She contemplated staying right where she was until he left, but quickly decided against that course of action. If he was preparing to say the evening Mass, he might not leave at all. As the time of the service got closer, the church would also fill up with people.

No, she was better off brazening it out. She'd slept here. It wasn't such a big deal. She hadn't hurt anything. Still, she felt as if she'd done something wrong. Sighing, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She'd felt more guilt in the past few days than she had in the past year. *Must be the church.*

Dust tickled her nose and before she could stop herself, she sneezed. The noise seemed to echo in the rafters and bounce off the walls. Knowing there was no hope for getting away undetected, she hauled herself from beneath the bench.

The elderly priest stared at the pew. When he caught sight of her, his puzzled expression vanished to be replaced by a huge smile. "Welcome, my new friend."

Katya was once again taken aback by his openness. To cover her awkwardness, she swiped some of the dirt from her clothing. She grabbed her duffel and the rest of her gear and slung it all over her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Father." She motioned to the bench. "I needed somewhere to stay." *Somewhere to hide is more like it.*

"It does not matter." He waved away her apology. "Why did you not come to the house? I have a guestroom."

Stunned silenced followed. It never would have occurred to her in a hundred years to do such a thing. He was a priest, and she was...well, some of the things she'd done this past year didn't bear repeating.

"I was fine here." She hitched her belongings higher on her shoulder. "I should be going." Her boots made no sound on the stone as she moved toward him. He wasn't a

big man, about her height, older with a shock of white hair. Yet he seemed to block the aisle with his very presence.

"You will join me for tea." Father Patrescu laid his hand on her arm when she tried to slide past him. She froze in place, unable to just shake him off. "Please," he added. "Humor an old man."

The back of her neck itched and all her instincts were telling her to flee. Couldn't this man of God tell what she was? She wasn't fit to be in his presence. "You don't want me in your home, Father." Her voice was sharper than she intended.

His shrewd blue eyes narrowed and he nodded. "The path you follow has not been an easy one."

Katya shook her head. Her burdens were her own to carry. No one had made her choices for her. She'd made each and every one of them knowing they were eating her soul one piece at a time.

"We will talk." The old man's grip tightened on her arm.

She yanked it away and glared at him. She could feel the edges of her vision blurring and knew her eyes were tinged red. Her fangs started to extend, reminding her she hadn't fed in days. "I am a murderer," she whispered. "An abomination."

The priest's eyes widened, but he stood his ground, reaching for her arm once again. "No, my child. If you were truly a cold-blooded killer, you would not be so worried about this old man."

As simple as that, her anger fled, replaced by a bone-weary fatigue. Acceptance was something she hadn't had much of in her life. With her papa and mama dead, there was only her brother Sasha and two trusted servants. Even most of the servants were suspicious of her because she was a half-breed. They stayed for love of her papa and Sasha, who was a true vampire, born years after her mama was converted.

"I have to go. There are things I must do." She could not forget her mission.

"Hmm," the priest responded. "If I am correct, these things you must do probably have to wait until after dark." Not waiting for an answer, he continued. "If that is so, then you have time to join me in a cup of tea." He already had her halfway down the aisle before he paused. "Can you drink tea?"

"Yes," she wearily replied.

"What about sunlight?"

"I can manage as long as we're not going far." She gave up trying to fight him and let him pull her along.

"Good. Good." Keeping his hand on her arm, he guided her out the front of the church. The sun hit her face and she threw up her hand, digging in her jacket pocket for her sunglasses.

Her senses felt scrambled and before she knew what was happening she found herself across the yard, in the house and ensconced in a comfortable wooden chair in Father Patrescu's kitchen. The sun was not coming directly in through the window,

which was a relief. The room was small, but light and homey at the same time. The walls were a pale yellow, the cabinets light wood and the floor a worn hardwood, scuffed from many years of wear.

The older man bustled around, filling the teakettle before setting it on the stove to boil. He dug into his cupboard and unearthed some biscuits, piling them on a plate. As she watched, he shuffled over to the tiny refrigerator and pulled out some cheese. Nodding to himself, he went back to the counter and cut several hunks, adding them to the plate with the biscuits.

He pulled down two cups and saucers, setting them on a tray. The plate with the biscuits and cheese quickly followed. Katya watched, slightly bemused as he added several tea bags to a china pot.

The kettle began to whistle and he removed it from the stove, pouring the hot water into the teapot. He placed the pot on the tray and carried the works to the table. Belatedly, she jumped to her feet. "Let me help."

"I'm fine," he assured her. "I may be old, but I can still carry the tea tray." Placing the tray on the table, he set everything out in front of her.

Katya's heart hurt as she noted the china cups, plate and teapot. Her mama would have loved this. She hadn't realized she'd said the last aloud until Father Patrescu spoke.

"Tell me about your mama."

"She's dead." Her voice was as dull and lifeless as she felt.

He reached out his hand and placed it over hers, which was fisted on the table. "I'm sorry."

Katya nodded. "Me too."

"What happened?"

"She and my papa were murdered." Suspicious by all his questions, she yanked her hand away. "Why haven't you asked what I am?" Had she walked into a trap? "Why aren't you afraid of me?" She stood suddenly, knocking her chair to the floor.

She flared out her senses and felt...nothing, only the two of them. Her eyes narrowed. Was Father Patrescu more than he seemed?

The older man picked up the pot and poured two cups of tea. Setting the fragile china pot back on the table, he lifted his mug and had a sip before replacing it on the saucer. "I am too old to be frightened by much, my dear child."

He motioned to the chair and she reluctantly righted her seat and sat back down.

"What is your name?"

With a start, she realized she'd never told him. She'd slept in his church and somehow ended up in his kitchen with a cup of tea in front of her, telling him about her parents' murders, but she'd never even told him her name. Her hand trembled slightly as she picked up her mug and sipped cautiously. She'd watched his every move and thought the tea was safe, but she wasn't taking any chances.

"No matter," he continued when she didn't offer her name. "I haven't asked what you are because I know. You are a vampire." Plucking a biscuit from the plate, he took a bite, munching several times before swallowing. "Although, how that can be so when you can go out in the light, I do not know."

Katya was stunned. The casual way he said it unnerved her. Most people didn't believe in such things. They were legends—folktales to entertain the uneducated inhabitants of remote corners of the earth. Those who did believe usually feared her kind, or at least had a healthy respect. But Father Patrescu was completely matter-of-fact about it.

"Katya," she blurted out, feeling slightly petty for not telling him sooner. "My name is Katya."

He smiled again, making the lines around his eyes crinkle. Dressed all in black, with his shock of white hair, he looked as if he should be a wizard or sorcerer instead of a priest. She still had no idea why he had invited her here, but sensed nothing but sincerity from him.

"A pretty name for a pretty girl."

Unbelievably, Katya felt her cheeks heating. She couldn't believe she was blushing. To hide her discomfort, she went on the attack. "How do you know about vampires?"

"I have lived in these mountains for all of my eighty-two years, child. You are not the first vampire I have come across."

"The Dalakis family."

He inclined his head. "It doesn't take much to notice that Cristofor Dalakis looks exactly the same as he did after the end of the Second World War." He waved his hand. "Many believe he is the grandson of that man, of course, but I know better. It is easier for the villagers to believe that the family resemblance is heavy in their lineage. And better economically as well. The Dalakis family puts much money into the local economy."

"I see." And she did. Her papa did the same thing in their homeland, going away for several decades at a time and returning as his own descendant.

"But you are different. I have never seen a vampire out in the daytime, even with sunglasses."

Katya had forgotten she was wearing them. Removing the glasses, she tucked them into her jacket pocket. "I am a half-breed, a hybrid. My mama was pregnant with me when my papa changed her. It affected me as well. I am neither human nor vampire." Peering at him, she blurted out her greatest fear. "I am an abomination."

A look of horror crossed his face. "No, child. No. You are not an abomination." Standing, he shuffled around to her chair and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. "God made you as you are," he paused slightly before continuing, "and I like to believe that he knows exactly what he's doing."

Katya snorted when she saw the humor in the priest's eyes. But behind the humor, she saw the sincerity as well. "I've murdered people this past year, Father. Five men."

"What happened?"

There was no judgment in his tone, no condemnation in his face. Only the desire to know and understand. He reminded her of her papa. Her tale tumbled from her lips. She told him about the fire, her parents' death, her younger brother and the dark path she'd been on this past year as she'd tracked the murderer.

"So you see, Father..." She paused and took a deep breath. Katya wished she felt something for these men, anything other than the bone-deep satisfaction of knowing she'd rid the world of these monsters, giving some kind of justice to the people they'd killed. The only other thing she felt was the loss of something vital, deep within her. The loss of innocence, of self. She'd become as much a killer as the men she'd killed. She consoled herself with the justification that she was on the side of the right and the just. That rationalization didn't always help her sleep late at night, but it was something to hang on to. "I killed all five of those men after they told me everything they knew."

"Good."

She was shocked by the hard tone of his voice, and the vehemence. Wasn't he a priest? Shouldn't he be condemning her for her actions? "Good?"

Father Patrescu ran his hand over the back of her head. "Did you think I would condemn you?" He dropped his hand and returned to his seat, lowering himself slowly to the chair. "I do not condone murder, child, but what you did was to protect yourself. They would not have let you live and we both know that. It was self-defense."

To have her own thoughts put into words that plainly lifted some of the weight from her shoulders. "I always believed that."

"Now you must protect the Dalakis family from this man who would harm them."

"Yes." She'd brought this down on them and she would protect them at all costs. Never mind that the men were older and full vampires. This was her doing and she would see it through to the bitter end.

"Then you must give up your quest for vengeance."

Katya swung her head up and shook her head. "No." How could she let her parents' murderer get away from her?

"Yes," he said forcefully. "Do you think it is your parents' wish for you to die or to throw away your life on vengeance? Did they not love you?"

"Of course they loved me." Pain laced her voice. How could he even suggest they didn't love her?

"Of course they loved you," he repeated, nodding slowly. "Then they would want you to take care of your brother and find happiness in your life. Vengeance does not bring happiness."

He was right about that. She bit her bottom lip as thoughts of Chase intruded. She'd done a good job keeping them at bay for a short time, but it always came back to Chase. She loved him – enough to protect him and his family, and then leave him.

"You're absolutely right, Father." She took another sip of tea and grimaced. It was cold, and not what she truly needed. She had to make a quick trip to town before she made her way to the castle. She needed to be at peak strength tonight and that meant she needed blood.

The old man stood and came toward her. "You will be careful."

She nodded. "I will." She hesitated. "Can I leave my duffel bag here?" She'd take her pack and her crossbow, but the duffel held only clothing.

"Of course. I will keep it safe for you."

"If I don't return for it tomorrow, burn everything in there." She narrowed her eyes, willing him to understand the importance of her request. "It is better for you if no evidence of my stay here remains."

"I will do as you ask." He reached under his shirt and drew out a small gold cross. "You will take this with you for protection."

Katya smiled and pulled out the heavy gold cross from beneath her own shirt. The priest's eyes widened as he reached out to touch it.

"That is very, very old, child." He ran his fingers reverently over the heavily carved piece.

"I know, Father. It was a gift to my mama from my papa."

He wrapped both hands around it, bowed his head and said a quick prayer. "It has brought you this far and will keep you safe."

Katya put more faith in her own skills than in an inanimate object. Still, she figured the extra prayer would never hurt. "Thank you." She motioned to the table and the room. "For everything."

Father Patrescu smiled at her. "You realize that I expect you to return and tell me all."

Once again, he made her smile and feel accepted. It was a balm to her ravaged soul. "If I am able, I will return." On impulse, she leaned down and kissed his weathered cheek.

Katya shouldered her pack and her weapon and was almost to the door when he spoke. "You are forgetting something."

She turned, her brows narrowed in question. The old man stood there with his shirt collar undone and his neck exposed.

"You need to be at your full strength tonight."

She shook her head and backed away. "I cannot."

"I am old, but my blood is still good." He sighed when she took another step away from him. "There is nothing wrong with taking what is freely offered. I trust you to stop before you take too much."

Katya went to him and slowly redid the buttons of his shirt. "You have no idea what your offer means to me, Father."

He sighed. "Will you risk going to the village? The sun is all but set."

Glancing out the window, she realized he was right. They'd been talking longer than she'd thought. The sun was almost gone and the night was beginning to awaken. Time had run out.

"Are you certain?" No one had ever offered her his blood freely. At home, the blood came from a blood bank. While she'd been on the road, she'd taken it from strangers, wiping their minds clean of the encounter so they would have no memory of her or what she'd done.

"Do it." He glanced out the window. "Before it is too late."

Thoughts of Chase filled her mind as she lowered her mouth to the priest's neck. Only to save Chase would she do this. The priest was old and couldn't spare much. Sinking her teeth into his throat, she groaned when the fresh, warm blood hit her tongue. His blood was surprisingly potent given his age.

Katya took only a small amount, enough to give her a boost this night. She knew that by the next sunrise either she or the murderer would be dead. Father Patrescu might want her to give up her quest for vengeance, but it was too late now no matter what she wanted. With the game in motion, only one of them would see the next sunrise.

Pulling away, she carefully closed the two small holes and stepped back. "Thank you."

The priest swayed and sat down heavily in his chair. He raised his head. "Go. Hurry, child. But be careful."

Nodding, she hefted her gear over her shoulder and strode out the door into the night.

Chapter Eleven

Chase was pacing the confines of the study when the rest of the family arrived, alert and ready for anything. Delight came straight to his side, her blue eyes filled with worry. "Are you okay?"

He wasn't okay, but he wouldn't tell her that. "Yeah."

She sighed and wrapped her arms around him, hugging him gently. "If you need to talk, I'm here."

He gave her a brief squeeze in return and released her. "I know." But this was something he couldn't talk about. Not to his sister. Not to any of them.

"Cassidy?" Cristofor's voice was strong and clear as he stood in front of the fireplace, arms folded across his chest. He made quite an impressive picture dressed completely in black with his black hair flowing to his shoulders and his green eyes blazing.

"So far the identities of the guests in the local inn have been verified, but I haven't had time to do a real heavy background dig." Cassidy flipped through the pages of his notebook. "Katya has checked out and we don't know where she is."

Zane growled, pulling Sophia closer.

Cassidy continued, ignoring the interruption. "As my wife pointed out earlier, Katya didn't have to warn us. We could have been taken totally unawares by this attack. We would have figured it tied into the problems with the blood cult in the past." He closed his notebook and tucked it in his back pocket. "We would never have known anything about Katya Markova if she hadn't stepped forward."

"She has put my family in danger." Cristofor's voice was low, but there was no mistaking the underlying fury.

"Technically, this unknown man has put the family in danger," Chase pointed out. Cristofor whirled around to face him and Chase felt the blast of anger like a physical force. It almost blew him backward but he held his ground. "If Katya hadn't found us then another of his people would have. There would have been no warning."

He had no idea what had prompted him to take up Katya's defense with his family. Hell, yeah, he did. He cared about her. A lot. So much so that he wanted his family to like her in spite of everything.

He was a mess — physically and emotionally. Chase scrubbed his hand over his face, the heavy stubble on his jaw a reminder of his sleepless night and the long day. He'd spent most of searching for Katya. His first stop had been the village, but it hadn't taken him long to realize that was a dead end. She was gone and had left no trace of herself behind. The rest of the day he'd spent trekking around the surrounding woods,

searching everywhere for Katya. He'd hoped to find her in *their* meadow, but it was empty and there was no sign that she'd ever been there. Finally, late in the afternoon, his feet dragging and his heart aching, he'd given up the search and returned home, praying she'd come to him tonight.

Exhausted, defeated and twice as worried as when he'd started, he'd showered and changed, but hadn't bothered to take the time to shave. He'd thought about eating, but hadn't been tempted by the sandwiches that Blythe had tried to press on him earlier.

Lucian lounged on the sofa, Delight tucked under his arm, his fingers absently toying with his wife's hair. "As I see it, now that we are aware of the danger, we can take steps against it. Obviously we must find the leader of this band and eliminate the threat."

His relaxed appearance was misleading. Chase knew his brother-in-law was a dangerous man. He'd killed to protect Delight before and would have no qualms about doing so again.

Cassidy reached for a printout on the table. "I thought you'd say that, so I took the liberty of going through the information on the external drive that Katya left us. There are quite a few names, many in the United States, but just as many across Europe." He flipped through several pages. "It's going to take time to investigate each one. Thankfully, a good many names on the list are no longer a problem." He handed the pages to Lucian. "Some are already dead. I crossed Spenser's name off the list."

"That bastard deserved to die." Zane began to pace and Chase knew he was thinking how close he'd come to losing Sophia to that maniac years before.

"No argument from me," Cassidy continued. "If this group is going to continue to be a threat, we need to deal with it now."

"I agree." Stefan stepped forward, pure menace radiating from every inch of his body. "Enough is enough." Laurel Rose placed her hand on her husband's arm, but it did no good. Tension rolled from Stefan in waves, his body coiled to strike out at their enemies.

Sophia sidled up to Lucian and peeked over his shoulder. "This list gives us a good starting point. A few days back home and I'll be able to find most of these folks." As a former investigative reporter, Sophia had skills and contacts. Chase knew if she said she could find them then she probably could, especially with her husband's help. Zane was very motivated.

While the rest of them discussed strategy, Chase found his mind wandering, once again, to Katya. Less than twenty-four hours ago, he'd had her in his arms. Felt her soft skin against his as he'd thrust into her welcoming heat. Katya was strong physically and emotionally, yet yielding at the same time, able to let go and embrace the sensual connection between them.

His bed still smelled of her—honey and spice—mingled with the scent of sex. He hadn't changed the sheets. When he'd showered earlier, he'd stood beside the bed wrapped only in a towel, staring down at the rumpled bedcovers. The urge to just lie

there and bask in her scent was incredibly overwhelming. He'd almost given in to the temptation, but worry for his family, and for Katya, had made relaxing impossible.

Instead, he'd leaned forward and caught a whiff of her sweet scent, his body hardening immediately. Katya brought him alive in a way he'd never been before.

His cock flexed, a tangible reminder that brought him back to the here and now. Chase swore under his breath and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. He didn't need an erection, not now. Stalking to the window, he peered out. Dusk had settled over the land covering it in darkness, but it still remained, rugged and unyielding, yet utterly beautiful.

Where was she?

His search had turned up nothing. Less than nothing. It was as if she'd disappeared into thin air. Yet he knew she was out there somewhere.

Anger and need warred within him. Katya belonged with him, to him. Yet she had lied to him, used him. His body vibrated with the need for action, but all he could do was wait.

He snorted. Given she was a hybrid vampire, she was no doubt stronger than he was. She didn't need him to protect her.

Chase stilled. That was part of what was making him crazy. She didn't need him. In fact, she was able to survive quite well without him. He, on the other hand, knew he'd never be the same. Katya had changed him in a fundamental way. There was a hole inside him, growing larger each moment she was away from him. If he didn't find her soon, he was afraid that darkness would swallow him whole.

Was it the same for her? Or had she already put him from her thoughts?

A savage fury welled up within him. He would not be forgotten. He would find her no matter where she went. She was his.

Chase shook his head, ignoring the dull throb at the base of his skull. What was wrong with him? It was as if the emotions swelling inside him weren't even his. They were primitive and dangerous and very, very real.

Stefan's voice rang out across the room. "She's here."

None of them needed to ask who "she" was. Chase started for the door, but Cristofor stepped into his path. He stared up at the man whom he respected more than anyone else in the world, besides his sister. "Get out of my way."

Cristofor's features turned cool and remote, his green eyes hardening, but he took a step back. A heavy pounding came on the main door just as he reached it. Stefan was close on his heels, but Chase ignored him. All his focus was on getting to Katya.

He yanked the door open and she surged inside, slamming it shut. "What are you doing answering the door? Aren't there any vampires around here?"

Indignation and anger filled him at the insult. "I may be a puny human, but I manage." She flinched slightly, but recovered quickly. If he hadn't been watching her closely, he would have missed the telltale sign.

"I was with him," Stefan drawled.

Katya nodded. "I need to talk to all of you."

"By all means." Chase swept out his arm, barely able to control the cocktail of violent emotions surging through him. He wanted to shake him for all the worry she'd put him through. Then he wanted to fuck her, marking her once again as his. Instead, he motioned her forward. "Everyone is in the study. You know the way."

Katya almost stumbled, but caught herself. Emotions bombarded her at every turn. She pulled up her defenses, shutting everything out. She had to if she was going to survive.

She hadn't meant to anger Chase, but she'd been appalled when he'd opened the door. As a human, he was the most vulnerable. She couldn't bear the thought of anything happening to him.

Every female cell in her body sprang to attention the second she'd laid eyes on Chase. Her core clutched and dampness seeped into her panties. Her breasts tightened, her nipples hardening as she took in every inch of his hard, male body. Oh, she'd missed him. It had only been a matter of hours since she'd seen him, lain in his arms, felt his lips on hers, but it seemed like forever.

She was no longer willing to lie to herself. She loved Chase Deveraux. But more than that, she knew he was her mate, her chosen one, her only love. Nature or fate, whatever you wanted to call it, was playing a cruel trick with them both.

A hybrid vampire and a human. Impossible.

All her life, she'd wondered if there was a mate for her somewhere out there in the world, if it would work the same way with her that it had with her parents. Her papa hadn't known, had cautioned her that only time would tell.

Now she knew. The attraction between them was almost alive, like silken threads binding them tighter to one another each time they were together. There would never be anyone for her but Chase. When she left here, she would be alone for as long as she lived.

Because of her all-consuming need for vengeance, she'd thrown away her only chance at love.

Not that there had really been any choice. She'd been too far down the road of revenge before she'd ever laid eyes on Chase. Besides which, he was human. His life span was so much shorter than hers. A hybrid vampire had never converted a human. Katya didn't think it could be done. Her papa had thought it might be possible, if the hybrid was male and the human was female. He'd tended to be a bit chauvinistic at times, but she'd love him anyway.

Hostility hit her like a sledgehammer as she passed through the open doorway and entered the study. All of them stood there, a solid force against her and any who threatened them. Blythe gave her a tentative smile, but Cassidy watched her carefully,

tracking her movements as she came farther into the room. Katya was glad to see that none of their children were around.

Lucian had his arms wrapped around Delight, while Laurel Rose looked almost as if she were restraining her husband. Stefan eyed her like the predator he was, ready to pounce if he thought she posed any immediate danger to his mate. Zane was alert as he stood beside Sophia. The redheaded ex-reporter looked as if she had a million questions she wanted to ask, but kept silent. Johanna and Cristofor stood in front of the fireplace, a united force, the lord and lady of the castle.

What had she expected? They hadn't come to any changes of heart overnight. She was still the enemy.

Not giving them time to speak, she went on the offensive. "The attack will come tonight."

"How do you know?" She faced Cristofor, who radiated sheer power. Whether it was natural or for intimidation, she couldn't be sure, but it sure as heck was impressive.

"Because I called him and told him you were all leaving tomorrow. The number I have for him is within the country so I know he can mobilize." Zane swore and Stefan looked as if he were on the verge of attack. The walls seemed to pulse and shift as the vampires struggled to control their rage.

She was aware of everyone in the room, but kept her attention focused on Cristofor. She didn't look at Chase, couldn't bear to see the anger and betrayal etched on his beloved features. She'd made her choices and there was no going back. "This is the only way to end this. You know that."

Cristofor sighed. "Unfortunately, you are correct. I would have liked some time to send the humans and the women to safety."

Katya felt Chase's blast of anger of being lumped in with the women and children.

Johanna snorted. "If you think I'm leaving you to face this alone, you've got another thing coming."

"We humans can take care of ourselves," Cassidy pointed out.

"You have children and a wife." Cristofor raked his hand through his hair in sheer frustration.

Katya regretted they were here, caught up in the crossfire of this bloody war. She honestly liked Blythe, who was kind and seemed less hostile than the rest. The comparison to her mother popped into her head. That's who Blythe reminded her of. Not in looks, but in the way she interacted with her children and her family.

"And they'll be fine locked in the safe room in the tower. Blythe knows how to use a gun if she has to." Cassidy turned to his wife, who nodded. Resting his hands on his hips, he faced the Dalakis family. "I stand with you."

"I'm not going anywhere," Chase stated firmly, speaking for the first time since they'd entered the room. Katya shivered at the hard tone of his voice.

"What do you know?" Stefan snapped at her, all business, his patience obviously at an end.

"Not much." Katya removed her crossbow and backpack, setting them both on the floor at her feet. "The attacks are always different. This Vasili is smart."

"Vasili?" Zane crowded next to Stefan, making certain Sophia was safely behind him.

"I only have a first name. He seems to be the one the rest of them answer to." She crouched down and dug into her bag, pulling out the wooden box. "They fear him."

Standing, she strode to the table and opened the box. She loaded the vial into a pressure syringe. "You need this vaccine, otherwise you're more vulnerable than the humans are. One dose of that sedative they have and you're out like a light."

"And we should trust you, why exactly?" Stefan prowled closer, a predator circling possible prey.

"Because you have no choice." She baldly stated the fact. Katya knew what she had to do. It wasn't something she was particularly looking forward to, but it had to be done. It also went against everything her papa had ever taught her.

"Keep your defenses up at all times, Katya," he'd warned over and over. "The only one you can truly trust is your chosen mate, and then only if there is deep love and commitment."

"I'm sorry, Papa," she whispered under her breath. "Stefan, you are the strongest here." The other men started to protest but Katya raised her hand to silence them. "Fight amongst yourselves later. There's no time for male posturing. Stefan is the strongest mentally. Even I can sense it."

She faced him, squaring her shoulders. "You know you can read me if I let down my guard."

"I can read you regardless." Stefan's arrogant response set her blood boiling.

Her fists clenched at her sides. She wanted to yell at him, scream at all of them. They had a warning, a chance her parents never had. Swallowing back her anger, she managed to reply. "Don't count on it, vampire. I was taught how to guard myself by the best." She felt him probing and gave him a mental shove to make her point. His eyes narrowed. "You can waste time on macho crap or you can take what I offer."

Taking a deep breath, she dropped her mental barriers. Stefan sprang, seizing her mind in an iron grip, probing deeper than she'd ever thought possible. He spared her nothing. Pain rocketed through her and she clasped her hands over her ears. Blood pounded heavily in her temples and she feared her head might explode with the pressure.

Katya fell to her knees, her legs no longer able to support her. She thought she heard Chase yell, but she couldn't be sure. Pain was her world, cold and unrelenting, as her entire life played out before her, flickering scenes of great happiness, fear and death.

She began to shiver and her teeth began to chatter. Cold. She was so very, very cold.

"Stop it!"

She didn't know who was yelling, but she wished they'd stop. It hurt her head even more. Strong arms wrapped around her. Heat. Blessed heat seeped into her cold skin. It occurred to her that her head no longer hurt quite so much. She felt Stefan withdrawing and instinct took over. She gathered her energy and shoved him from her mind, erecting her barriers at the same time.

She heard Stefan grunt as she curled herself into a ball. She felt battered and bruised, physically and mentally. That was not an experience she ever planned to subject herself to again. Not for anyone.

Gasping hard, she managed to pry her eyes open. "Are you satisfied?" She felt something wet on her upper lip and swiped at it with her hand. It came away red. Great, now she had a nosebleed, but at least she was still alive.

Stefan stared down at her, his legs braced and his hands clenched into fists at his side. He nodded and reached for her.

She automatically jerked back, not wanting him to touch her, and hit something solid. Chase. His arms were wrapped tight around her. How had she not realized that? Katya allowed herself to wallow in his strength, his care, but just for a moment. There was work to be done and when this night was over, she would leave Chase to his life and return to what was left of her own.

Slowly, she eased from his arms. They tightened briefly before setting her free. Perversely, Katya wished Chase had put up some kind of protest, but his arms fell away as she rolled to her side. Gripping the side of a chair, she pulled herself upright. Sweat rolled down her temple and she pressed it against her shoulder, swiping it away as best she could. She needed both hands to keep her upright.

"Jesus, you're bleeding." Chase was by her side, holding a tissue to her nose.

She was grateful it was only her nose that was seeping blood. For a while she'd thought her head would truly explode. "It's nothing." Taking the tissue, she rubbed it against her nose and sniffed.

Everyone was watching her. "Well?" she said.

Stefan stepped forward and rolled up his sleeve.

Bitterness filled Chase as all the vampires stepped up to be vaccinated one by one. As one of the *humans*, he stood by in silence and watched. For once in his life, he wished he were like his brother-in-law and his sister. Heck, he wouldn't even mind being a hybrid vampire like Katya. He'd noted almost as soon as he'd set eyes on Katya that her forearms and hands were healed, not even a scar remaining to remind her of her desperate flight through the window. That was something positive.

The attack on Katya's mind had been swift and brutal. He'd never witnessed anything like it in his life. Chase had always known that Stefan could be ruthless, but this was beyond anything he could have imagined.

His own skull throbbed and he wasn't sure if the headache was totally his or partially remnants of Katya's experience. Like a faint echo in his brain, he'd felt what she was enduring. But what he'd felt was only a fraction and it damn near debilitated him.

The sight of Katya falling to her knees, her hands covering her ears as a silent scream parted her lips, was something that would haunt his dreams for the rest of his life. At that moment, he hated Stefan. If Chase had the power, he would have ripped Stefan's heart from his chest with his bare hands. He'd never felt so violent in all his life. Like a man possessed, he would have done anything to protect Katya.

But all he could do was hold her and yell at Stefan to stop.

Thankfully, he'd done so, but Katya had already paid the price. Chase sensed the difference in her. Some part of her had closed itself off. He felt her emotional and mental withdrawal. Which was crazy because there was no way they could have that kind of connection.

Like a volcano ready to erupt at any second, he stood by as Katya gave them all shots to protect them. She was calm and confident, acting as if nothing out of the ordinary had just happened, as if her mind had not been brutally invaded.

Jealousy seeped through his soul that Stefan was the one to experience her mind and her memories and not him. Chase rolled his shoulders, trying to relax, but it was no use. His thoughts and emotions were a jumble.

He was moving as Katya gave the final shot to his sister. By the time he reached her side, she was already packing away the empty vials, stowing them in the pack that was never far from her side. She looked at him, her face void of any emotion.

Unable to stand it, he grabbed her arm and began to tow her from the room. She shook him off. "What are you doing?"

"We need to talk," he managed to get out from behind his clenched teeth. His head throbbed, but he ignored it. He had more important things to worry about.

Katya glanced back at the family, who were all watching with varying degrees of concern and interest. "There's no time."

They'd have to make time. He couldn't go on like this for another second. "We'll be back." Wrapping his hand around her wrist, he tugged her toward the door. He felt her dragging her heels, but she followed.

He didn't go far. Down the hall and into the formal dining room, the door slamming shut behind them. Spinning her around, he pinned her against the door and swooped down to meld his lips against hers.

Chapter Twelve

Katya barely had time to breathe before Chase's mouth ground against hers. Teeth clinked. He cursed, pulling away and tilting her head to one side before slamming his lips back down on hers. Her lip split against the violent onslaught, a second of pain before it was lost in the swirling emotions powering through her. She tasted blood and desperation and need.

Responding immediately to the exploding passion between them, she hooked her right leg over his thigh, needing to get closer. Pelvis tilted, she rubbed herself against his erection, reveling in the fact that at least this hadn't changed. He still wanted her. There was no way to hide the hard length of his cock pressing against the zipper of his jeans or the desperate way his hands moved over her body—touching, squeezing, caressing.

She had no idea what would happen tonight. Death waited beyond the doors, but here, here there was life. She needed to reach out and touch it, take a piece of it for herself.

His fingers speared through her hair, digging into her skull as he tore his lips from hers. She moaned in protest, already missing the pressure and the heat of his mouth against hers. "Now," he gasped. "I've got to have you now."

Not giving her time to respond, he kissed her again, his tongue dueling with hers. Katya felt the wildness springing to life within her, pushing aside her calm, cool logic. There was no time for this. An enemy was almost upon them. It was stupid. Crazy.

It didn't matter.

Blindly following instinct, she ran her hands over his powerful shoulders and thick biceps. Having him inside her was the most important thing at this moment. It didn't matter that his family was just down the hallway. It didn't matter that they viewed her with suspicion and dislike.

She'd brought trouble their way. Intentionally.

But none of that made any difference. Not now. Not with Chase's arms around her and his lips melded with hers. There was only heat and need.

Easing up slightly, he ran his tongue over her upper lip. He captured her lower lip between his teeth, nibbling softly. "I'm sorry," he whispered as he touched the tender spot where the skin had been broken by the violence of his kiss.

"It doesn't matter." She squirmed to get closer, plastering her breasts against his chest. Her nipples were so tight they ached. The pressure helped, but not much, and soon it became more of a torture than a relief. They had way too much clothing on.

He kissed her jaw, forehead, cheeks, even her nose. Hard, hot kisses that enticed rather than soothed. His teeth scraped the slender column of her neck, making her groan with need. Her fangs elongated, pressing down past her lips.

The sound of Chase's blood pumping through his veins roared in her ears. Hunger beat at her mind and body. She wanted to taste him. She licked her lips and lowered her head toward him, swiping her tongue over his neck. The tang of salt and musk filled her mouth. She could feel his pulse against the flat of her tongue, urging her to bite, to feed.

Heat blasted through her core and cream flowed. A pulsing rhythm, primal and unrelenting, filled her. She wanted Chase with a fierceness that bordered on madness.

He groaned when her teeth scraped his skin. The erotic sound skittered down her spine, raising goose bumps on her flesh. He pulled back and stared down at her.

For the first time, she held nothing back. She knew her eyes were tinged red, her fangs were sharp and white.

She was a vampire.

He stared at her, his eyes narrowing, his pupils dilating. His chest bellowed in and out with each breath he took, barely grazing the peaks of her breasts until she wanted to scream at the unrelenting torture.

Neither of them moved. Time shifted, elongated, as they stared.

Then Chase smiled.

Grabbing the hem of her shirt, he yanked it over her head. While she struggled to free her arms from the garment, he'd already moved on to her bra. She felt the fabric parting and the cool air on her skin as he skimmed the flimsy barrier away. His hands, calloused and large, covered her breasts. She moaned as he plumped them in his palms, his thumbs circling her tight nipples. The gold necklace seemed to warm against her skin.

"I want you." He ground his hips against hers. "I want to strip you naked and bury my cock so deep inside you that I'll be a part of you forever."

If she could have found the breath to speak, she would have told him it was too late for that. No matter what he did or what happened, he was already a permanent part of her.

His hands left her breasts and she almost cried out at the loss, but he slid them down her torso, across her hips and behind to cup her butt. Chase gave both cheeks a squeeze before lifting her. She automatically wrapped her legs around his waist, loving the way his erection pressed against the crease of her mound. She shifted slightly, the motion causing his hardness to slide over her clitoris. A deep moan escaped her. Even through the barriers of clothing, it felt delicious.

Chase gave a dark laugh, hoisting her higher so that her breasts were directly across from his mouth. She gripped the back of his head, her fingers tangling in his long hair

as she urged him forward. His breath was warm and moist against her skin as he blew on the puckered tips. "Chase," she wailed, dragging him forward.

She heard another muffled laugh and then heat, blessed heat as he dragged his tongue over her flesh, curling it around the softer skin of her areola before teasing the peak. "More," she demanded.

He gave it to her. His mouth opened over her breast and he sucked hard. Katya shifted, rubbing her groin against his, feeling the connection between her breast and her core as he bit gently on her nipple. Tipping her head back against the hard stone wall, she cried out. She was so close.

Panting hard, she used her strength to work her leather-clad pussy over his jean-covered cock. The clothing didn't matter. She could feel his heat, his hardness through it. She wanted him inside her, but couldn't bear to move apart from him to make it happen.

His mouth teased, plundered, claimed, as he shifted from one breast to the other. "Damn, you're hot. You're close, aren't you?"

She moaned, her chest rising and falling with each harsh breath.

"At least this isn't a lie." He shoved his hips against her, angling them so his cock rode the entire seam of her mound.

She sensed the pain beneath his words, wanted to comfort him, but speech was beyond her. Her hands slid inside the opening of his shirt, pushing the fabric wide. She heard the tear of fabric as her hands found his skin.

Chase growled low in his throat and pulled away. Her feet hit the floor with a thud and she was thankful for the wall behind her. Without its support, she would have slid to the floor in a puddle of need. Katya felt bereft without his hands touching her.

Yanking his shirt over his head, Chase faced her. His wide shoulders blocked her view of the rest of the room.

For her, there was only Chase.

Reaching out, she stroked her fingers over the hard planes of his chest, letting them sift through the light covering of hair to the flat nipples. He sucked in a breath when she flicked the tips before lightly scratching his muscled abs.

She didn't stop, pushing her hand behind the waistband of his jeans, teasing the very tip of his erection. He wasn't wearing any underwear. The thought beat at her brain as she strained to get her hand lower. Pulling back in frustration, she ripped open the button and tugged at the zipper.

"Easy," he hissed, taking over from her. The whisper of the zipper was music to her ears.

She licked her lips as his cock sprang free. Dark veins ran the entire length, pumping life-giving blood to that part of his body. Closing her eyes, she concentrated, hearing the *whoosh* of his blood as it flowed throughout him.

His hand closed over hers and her eyes flew open. Chase pulled her hand toward his cock, wrapping her fingers around his shaft. The dark, plum-shaped head was wet with arousal. Katya squeezed, pumping her hand up and down, feeling every inch of his hot, hard length against her palm.

Chase grunted, his hips jerking toward her as pearly white beads of liquid seeped from the tip. She licked her lips, almost tasting him. She started to lean down, but he wrapped his hand around her wrist, tugging it away.

"Not now. I have to fuck you. I need to feel your hot cunt squeezing my cock."

Katya licked her lips. "Yes." Her vaginal muscles contracted tight as if to prove her readiness.

She thought he'd take her against the wall, but he surprised her, striding toward the gigantic table in the center of the room. She hadn't even realized it was the dining room until that moment. It was a huge room and the table was ringed with heavily carved chairs. It would easily seat two dozen people.

With his hand still manacled around her wrist, Chase dragged her to the end of the table, shoving aside the massive chair that blocked it. He reached for the opening of her pants, but she beat him to it. It took her two seconds to get them open. He thrust his hands beneath the fabric, shoving it down her hips and thighs.

The pants caught around her ankles. She was still wearing her boots. "I need to get my..." Her words were lost in a moan when he pushed his hand between her damp thighs, pressing two fingers deep into her core. She couldn't even remember what she was going to say.

She caught the edge of the table, clinging to it for support. He curled his fingers inward as he pulled them back to the entrance, hitting her sweet spot and making stars appear before her eyes. Her knees buckled, but he caught her, lifting her onto the table. She leaned back, her spine coming to rest against the smooth wood. Her necklace slid over her shoulder, the cross hitting the table with a dull thud.

"Boots," she gasped. That's what she'd meant to tell him. She had to take off her boots.

"No time." He pushed her knees back toward her shoulders, opening her wide. Shifting closer, he fit the head of his cock against her slit, pushing inward. The muscles flexed and gave, sucking him into her depths.

Slamming his hips forward, he filled her totally in one stroke. It was tight because of the position, bordering on pain, but her body took him. She felt every inch of him as her body molded around his shaft, relaxing, softening and finally accepting him. Her hands flailed for something to hold on to. The only thing she could reach was the edge of the table. Her fingers curled around it, grasping on for dear life as he began to pound into her. Using her grip on the heavy wood, she angled her hips upward on his downward stroke, wanting him as deep as he could go.

This was no gentle loving, but a primal claiming. She knew he felt betrayed by her, even angry. None of that mattered now. He was inside her, a part of her.

Chase's hips pistoned in an unrelenting rhythm. He was inside Katya, but it wasn't enough to feel her wet heat surround him, to feel her cunt clutch at him with each stroke or to hear her soft cries of pleasure. He wanted to imprint himself on her body and mind until she knew they belonged together.

He knew his family was only a few doors away. They also knew what he was doing. They were vampires after all, with preternatural senses. But even if they didn't have special powers, they weren't stupid. They all knew he'd brought Katya in here to fuck her.

He still felt betrayed by her lies, but that feeling couldn't overwhelm the need for her that pulsed through him. When her eyes had changed, their dark blue tinged with red, it didn't matter. He'd even found her fangs sexy, wanting to run his tongue over the tips to see if they were as sharp as they appeared. The veins in his neck had throbbed when she'd lightly raked her fangs over them. He'd wanted her to bite him, wanted to provide her with whatever she needed.

She'd pulled back from that.

But she had no problems with him touching her, taking her. It was a start. She might think this was over between them. He knew her well enough to know that she planned to walk away after tonight, after the threat had been dealt with. But he wasn't done with her yet, not by a long shot.

Intellectually, he was smart enough to know that their relationship was doomed from the beginning. She was a hybrid vampire, an anomaly. No one knew what her real powers were or what her lifespan was. Those were things that only time would tell. All he did know was that she was strong and blessed with enhanced speed, maybe even hearing and sight. But whatever her powers, they were less than a full-blooded vampire.

He was a human facing a long, tough health battle. His headaches and fatigue had turned out to be more serious than he'd ever imagined. No one knew about the tumor lurking in his brain, just him and his doctors. Not for the first time in his life, he cursed the fragility of his human form. His doctors had hope, but death was a possibility, one he'd thought he'd faced until he'd found Katya. Now everything was changed. He wanted to live forever, but barring that, he wanted to live as many years as possible, and spend them all with her.

None of that mattered now. He'd deal with the reality of the situation later. It might be stupid, but he didn't give a damn. Right now, the only thing that mattered was Katya.

He pumped his hips, driving hard into her heat. Without the thin latex of a condom separating them, the sensations were more pronounced. He'd never had sex without a condom before, but Katya wasn't a normal woman. It was extremely rare for a female vampire to get pregnant, and it had never happened with a non-vampire partner. A

primal part of him wished she could get pregnant, binding her to him on at least that basic level.

On some level he knew he was being too rough, but he couldn't seem to stop himself. She wasn't stopping him either, in fact, was encouraging him. His fingers dug into her hips as he plunged again and again.

Katya was so damn hot and sexy. At least this wasn't a lie. There was no way to fake the wet clutch of her cunt, to have perspiration pop out on her skin as they fucked. Her cries were raw and real.

The wet slap of flesh mingled with their grunts and moans as he pushed them both harder. Although they weren't overly large, her breasts jiggled with every hard thrust. The tips were hard and red, like juicy berries he longed to taste. The tangle of her leather pants kept him from being able to lean forward and suck her breasts.

Later, he promised himself, he'd suck them later.

She tilted back her head, opening her mouth on a groan, exposing her sharp fangs. Chase felt a rush of energy surge through him, wanted to feel those sharp teeth piercing his skin as she sucked his blood. He knew that some people would figure he was sick for wanting such a thing. He didn't care. Vampires were a part of his world, and for the first time he could really understand how his sister was lured past the fear of the unknown and into the world of the vampire. It really was seductive and elemental.

What was more basic to life than blood?

He shortened his strokes, making them harder and faster. His balls swayed, slapping against her with each thrust. His scalp tingled and his sac pulled up tight against his body.

Leaning forward, he pushed her knees tighter to her shoulders. He never took his eyes off her. In the throes of passion, she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

"Now, Katya." Releasing one hand from her hip, he angled it between their bodies, brushing it over her distended clitoris. He felt her cunt grab his cock in a death grip. He swore under his breath as he continued to fuck her hard.

"Chase!" Her eyes widened, her breathing increased. She gave a long, low keening sound as she came.

He wanted to just watch her, but his own orgasm swept over him. His cock surged and jerked as he emptied himself in her depths. He kept hammering, wanting to drain every last drop of pleasure from the experience. His vision dimmed and he began to sway. Gradually he became aware of Katya beneath him, her body lax, her arms sprawled on the table.

Stopping, he slapped both hands on the table for support. His chest heaved as he caught his breath. He'd never felt so sexually drained in his life. Yet restlessness still ate at him. They'd had sex, joined their bodies in the most intimate of acts, yet something was missing.

Katya was still apart from him.

Easing his still-semi-erect cock from her body, he lowered her legs down until they were hanging over the edge of the table. Leaning forward, he lapped at both red-tipped nipples. Katya moaned, raised her hand and gave his head a halfhearted swat.

He ignored her as he lowered his body over hers, feeling his chest against hers. Katya's eyes flew to his face as he touched his lips to hers. "This isn't over."

Panic filled her eyes, but he ignored it. He was still angry about what she'd done, that she'd manipulated him, put his family in jeopardy. But he understood her need to avenge her parents' murders. In the end, she'd tried to make things right. That went a long way to soothing the fury that seethed inside him. She'd lied to him and used him, but he still wanted her, still felt the connection between them like a tangible, living thing.

"It has to be over." Her voice was slightly hoarse and, as he watched, a lone tear leaked from the corner of one eye and rolled down her temple to be lost in her hair.

"No, it doesn't, and it's not." He stretched over her, putting his neck in front of her mouth. "Drink."

She turned her head away. "No."

The rejection stung. "You need to feed."

"I already did."

Fury roared through his veins with the speed of a locomotive. Logically he knew that she'd had to feed at some point. But the thought of another person, another man, giving her what she needed to survive had jealousy eating at his stomach like battery acid. "Who?" he demanded.

"That's not your concern." She shoved at his shoulder.

He thought about pushing the point, about holding her face to his neck until she gave him what he wanted, but the reality of the situation was that she could get away from him any time she wanted. As a vampire, even a hybrid one, she was stronger and faster than he was.

Although it gnawed at his gut, he stepped away, hitching his jeans back around his waist and zipping them. He grabbed Katya's hand, tugging her into a seated position. She looked a mess, not that he was much better.

As if she could read his thoughts, Katya raked her hands through her hair before sliding off the table. She wobbled, but leaned against the edge for support as she bent down and tugged her pants back up.

Her necklace was tangled behind her and he gently pulled the pendant around to the front. The gold was warm from resting against her skin. He held it in his hand for a moment, wrapping his fingers around it as he said a prayer. Releasing it, he stepped away.

Neither of them spoke as they finished dressing. When they were done, Chase took her hand and led her to the door. Before he opened it, he leaned down and kissed her.

Katya went up on her toes, returning the caress. Unlike their earlier kiss, this one was soft and gentle.

"Katya," he began, but she kissed him again, smothering his words.

"Later," she promised. Squaring her shoulders, she pulled open the door and marched back down the hallway to the study.

The family was still there, discussing matters when they stepped into the room. Katya ignored all of them as she grabbed her pack, slinging it over her shoulders. Grabbing up her crossbow, she headed back to the door. "I'm going to set up outside. I suggest that one or two of you do the same. We can't assume that Vasili is coming alone, not against all of you. He thinks that I'm on his side, so that should help."

"Wait." She stopped at Cristofor's command. "We've got an idea." She turned slowly, her entire body stiffening as Cristofor laid out the plan the family had come up with during their absence.

"That's dangerous." She chewed on her bottom lip and then nodded. "But it could work." She scanned all of them, one by one. "I'm sorry I brought this trouble to your door."

Stefan shrugged as if he hadn't been ready to kill her with his bare hands just hours before. "If you hadn't brought it, someone else would have." He glanced at Cassidy and Blythe. "It's been pointed out to me that if that had been the case, we might not have been as well prepared as we are now."

Katya inclined her head slowly. "I'll set up outside and do my part." Whirling around, she strode from the room.

Chase followed her out into the hallway, leaving the rest of them to prepare to face their enemies. "Wait." She stopped, but didn't turn around.

"We've already wasted too much time. It's pure luck that he hasn't already attacked."

Her shoulders hunched slightly, but she held her ground as he took her by the arm and turned her to face him. "Why don't you use the back entrance? It's probably safer."

She stared at him, her dark eyes giving nothing away. The soft woman was gone, replaced by the warrior. Nodding, she headed toward the back. He walked beside her and watched as she slid out the door into the darkness, never once looking back.

Chapter Thirteen

Katya was barely keeping it together as she melded into the shadows of the castle. She felt raw, exposed, as if her skin had been turned inside out. The encounter with Chase had shaken her to her core. How was she going to live without him?

She snorted and notched a bolt into her crossbow, positioning her quiver for easy access. The question was a moot one. She didn't expect to live the night, but there was no way she was allowing her parents' murderer to escape. Nor would she allow any harm to come to Chase and his family. The most likely outcome from that scenario was her death.

Vasili wasn't stupid. She expected him to try to kill her. He didn't have a reputation for being a trustworthy soul and he hadn't become the leader of this organization of sick and twisted degenerates by being anything less than utterly ruthless. Once she saw his face, her death sentence was signed.

Or perhaps he'd already decided to kill her simply because she knew of his plans for the Dalakis family. Either way, it didn't matter. She was ready to face death.

Crouching in the notch of a large oak tree, hidden by its foliage, she opened her senses to the night. An owl hooted in the distance and she could hear the steady swoosh of a bat in flight as it hunted down prey. A fox darted through the bushes and a wolf howled. All the nocturnal hunters were out tonight.

There was no sense of the Dalakis brothers anywhere. They were good.

But so were the people hunting them. Letting her breathing deepen, she relaxed her muscles. She needed to be fluid, not tense, able to move at a second's notice.

The night seemed to hold its breath and all movement ceased. Katya cocked her head to one side. Listening.

Off to the right, she heard the first footstep, then another. Closer and closer they crept. She counted at least six, maybe more. Her fingers reflexively tightened around her weapon. She preferred it to a gun. It was quieter, more deadly and more personal somehow. The crossbow might be an antique, a weapon that had been in her father's family for generations, but the bolts it shot were the best money could buy.

She all but ceased to breathe when she sensed someone passing below her. Not moving a muscle, she waited, all her senses open and attuned to the forest around her. The animals had all hidden and even the insects were quiet, as if sensing the evil slowly penetrating the woods, tainting it with its presence.

Katya licked her lips. She could almost taste the foulness on her tongue.

She waited. It was hard not to jump down and take out the first man. He was definitely human, his thoughts easy to read. Some people were closed up tight and it

took a lot of energy and focus to even sense their emotions, but others practically broadcasted their thoughts to the world around them. The man who'd just passed below was in the latter category. He was afraid and excited all at the same time. The promise of blood, strong blood, lured him.

It would also bring him death.

Katya felt no pity for him as he proceeded closer to the castle. He'd chosen his path. The Dalakis brothers would show no mercy and neither would she. She could see or sense a half dozen of them now, spreading out as they approached.

As planned, the front door opened and Cristofor stepped out into the night. The humans might be hampered by the night, but none of the vampires were. Katya saw Cristofor as easily as she would have in full light.

He tugged the door closed behind him and cocked his head to one side as if listening. The whistle was low, but with her preternatural hearing, she heard it, saw Cristofor jerk as the dart struck him. His hand shot to the side of his neck. He grunted as he yanked it out and tossed it aside.

Whoever had fired it had a hell of a shot.

Cristofor stumbled, his hands blindly searching for support. He barely caught himself on the outside wall. A low curse split the night and loose stones crunched beneath his feet as he slowly side down the side of the wall, coming to land on the walkway with a heavy thud.

Katya slipped from her perch in the tree, as soundless as a wraith. She was one with the darkness as she moved steadily closer. The man who'd passed under the tree was between her and Cristofor. Without a moment's thought, she slung her bow over her shoulder and moved in behind the intruder. His shoulders tensed, as if he sensed her at the very last second, but it was too late. She slapped one hand over his mouth and nose, even as her other arm slipped quickly around his neck. With a quick snap, she broke his spine, easing his body to the ground.

She kept her gaze forward, aware of her surroundings as she shifted through the shadows. A man moved from the left, separating himself from the trees, as he closed the distance between himself and Cristofor.

The surge of energy struck her like a bolt of lightning. Hidden until now, it flared outward, searching. Unlike the power she'd felt from Stefan and his brothers earlier, this was tainted. It made her skin crawl, but she didn't move from her position.

"I know you're there, Katya." She recognized the voice immediately. It was the same one she'd heard over the phone.

She jerked, unable to contain the involuntary movement. Squaring her shoulders, she shifted her weapon from her shoulder, holding it steadily in her hands as she stepped forward into the dim light of the moon. Cristofor was still slumped by the wall, not moving. It appeared the vaccine hadn't worked after all. Either that or Cristofor was very good at playing possum. She just couldn't afford to take the chance.

"Vasili, I presume." Her voice was calm, steady, and for that she gave thanks as she stared into the face of the man who had beheaded her beloved parents. No doubt, the same fate awaited Cristofor, maybe even herself, if she didn't come out the winner in this deadly contest.

"It is never good to presume." His voice was pleasant, almost melodic. He glanced down at Cristofor's inert body. "The others are inside?"

"Yes."

"You have done well. What I wonder is, why?"

"Why?" She didn't know what his game he was playing now, but she knew he was toying with her.

"Hmm." Suddenly, brutally, he kicked Cristofor in the ribs. The vampire didn't cry out, didn't try to defend himself.

Katya's palms began to sweat, her heart beating rapidly. She had to keep him talking and give the other vampires time to take out the humans in the woods.

Vasili smiled at her and it sent a shiver down her spine. She was in the presence of pure evil. "I know you betrayed me." Reaching down, he grabbed Cristofor's inert body with one hand, dragging him away from the castle wall. "I tranquilized the two in the woods. They will not help you."

Oh shit. Something had gone wrong.

A wolf howled. Then another. Their howls were getting closer with each passing second.

The vaccine didn't seem to be working. Katya had no time to think. She could only hope that the other two were still alive. Stefan, Lucian and Zane had all taken positions in the woods. That meant at least one of them was still out there.

"You are a mystery to me, Katya." Vasili dragged Cristofor's unmoving body beside him, as if it weighed nothing at all, as he walked farther away from the castle and closer to the woods. His strength was enormous.

"Who are you?" she whispered. He was more than human. Her mind couldn't seem to wrap around the horrible possibility.

"The real question is, what am I?" He laughed. "Isn't that what you really want to know?" He smiled then, his fangs gleaming in the moonlight. "My name is Vasili Harkov and I am a vampire." He shook Cristofor's limp body. "Not like these ones. They're babes in comparison to me. I have lived for fourteen hundred years."

Katya's mind reeled. Her papa had been killed by another vampire. "But you're like them."

"No!" His temper flared for the first time. "They are a pale imitation of me. They're not worthy of the name vampire. Drinking blood from blood banks, rather than taking all they want from the human sheep who populate the earth. The power is in the blood, but the most powerful of all is vampire blood."

He suddenly yanked Cristofor's body closer, leaning down toward the vampire's neck. "Your papa's blood was especially thick and rich, Katya. I hadn't had blood that powerful in more than a century. And your mama..." He laughed again. "Your mama's blood was innocence personified. I can still taste it on my tongue." He smacked his lips.

Katya stood frozen in horror. He'd known who she really was all along. She thought she was luring him into a trap, but he'd been playing her right from the very start. This creature had killed her beloved parents.

"Don't worry, I'll get to you...eventually." Ignoring her, he started to sink his fangs into Cristofor.

She started to move and felt the sting of a dart in her neck. Her hand automatically slapped at it. Ignoring the dizziness, she raised her crossbow. The sensation would pass. She knew it would. The vaccine had been tested on her several times to ensure it worked.

Planting her feet, she took a breath and let out half. Steady as a rock, she fired.

The bolt flew through the air, hitting its mark. Vasili jerked back, a look of pure disbelief on his face. He dropped Cristofor's body and grabbed at the heavy bolt that went all the way through his neck. Blood covered his hands, rolling down his forearms.

Katya quickly reset her bow, notching another bolt as she hurried closer. "You are a murderer." She fired again. This one went straight through his chest.

Vasili fell to his knees, murder in his blazing red eyes. "This is not finished," he growled. He yanked both bolts from his body. Blood sprayed in all directions and he spat blood as he struggled to his feet.

Standing four feet from him, she stared into his soulless eyes, her bow at the ready. "Yes, it is. This is for Afanas Markova and Marya Markova and everyone else you've slaughtered for your own gain."

He pounced just as she fired and her bolt went wide. She heard the heavy *thunk* as it sank into a tree and cursed her rotten luck. He hit her hard, taking them both to the ground. Her crossbow flew several feet away. A knife appeared in his hand. Katya jammed her hand into the wound on his neck and an unholy shriek sprang from his lips.

He sliced downward with the blade. She barely managed to jerk her head out of the way. The blade glanced off the thick gold cross that sat over her heart, deflecting it so that it hit her shoulder instead.

In the distance, she detected yelling mixed with the sounds of fighting. A human scream was abruptly cut off. A wolf snarled and another howled.

At least some of the Dalakis brothers were on the move. Grateful for that small blessing, she fought for her life. Using the strength in her legs, she managed to shove him off her, rolling to her feet. Vasili pushed himself to his feet. Katya stared in horror as the wounds in his throat and chest began to close before her very eyes.

"Somehow the sedative did not work on you." Vasili seemed more fascinated than upset.

Katya drew the knife from her boot, wondering how in the hell she was going to kill him with this small blade. He was truly a monster, seemingly indestructible.

"That makes you even more intriguing," Vasili continued. "Give yourself up and I'll make it quick. Otherwise it will be long and painful." His lips parted, his fangs glistening white as a grotesque grin split his face. "Personally, I'd enjoy the second option, but the choice is yours."

"If you want me, you'll have to come get me." She clutched her weapon in her hand, not taking her eyes off him. With his speed, he could be on her in a fraction of a second.

"You cannot kill me," he taunted, spinning his knife through his fingers. The blade flashed in the moonlight, a promise of death.

"But I can." A heavy *whooshing* sound split the night. Vasili started to turn, but it was too late. The four-foot blade hit the side of his neck and kept going. Blood sprayed in every direction as Vasili's head was separated from his body. Katya stared in disbelief as Chase stood, legs braced apart, the huge sword held in both hands.

Blood-splattered, he was like an ancient warrior come to life. Chase's eyes glittered as he lowered the bloody sword. Katya couldn't look away from the fearsome sight.

"Is he alive?" Chase moved toward Cristofor.

Katya sprang forward, dropping to her knees beside the lifeless body. "He should be."

Chase kept a watch on the forest as another scream ripped through the night. "Well?"

Her heart was slamming against her chest as she placed her fingers against his neck, searching for a pulse. It was impossible to feel anything with the heavy pounding of her own pulse echoing in her ears. What if she miscalculated? What if the vaccine and the poison in the dart reacted differently in a full-blooded vampire? What had she done?

"Katya?" She heard the strain in Chase's voice, the agony of not knowing.

"I don't know." She bit her lower lip and started to lower her head to his chest. Cristofor's eyes flew open, his lips peeling back. Eyes glowing, fangs protruding, the promise of death blazed in his dark gaze. He took in everything in one glance and grunted, rolling to his side before propping himself up with one hand. He pinned Katya with his green-eyed glare. "What the hell happened?" His voice was hoarse, his words biting. "I could hear and see everything, but I couldn't move."

Relief surged through her, making her lightheaded. "I don't know," she confessed. "You're much heavier than I am, and a full-blooded vampire. Maybe you needed a stronger dose or maybe less. You've been out about three minutes."

Three minutes – such a short time, but a lifetime.

Zane strode from the woods, his long strides eating up the distance. Lucian and Stefan followed a bit more slowly behind him. "What the hell happened? Those two were hit and fell like a ton of bricks. It was all I could do to keep the humans out there from decapitating them."

Katya was glad for the interruption. Anything to keep from having to face Chase after what had just happened. Members of his family had almost been killed because of her. Like some avenging angel, he'd swooped down in the end and saved Cristofor's life, hers as well. He'd saved all of their lives. She wasn't certain that even the Dalakis brothers could have defeated a monster like Vasili. She was glad they hadn't been required to put it to the test.

Her fingers were still wrapped around her knife and she relaxed them, letting the weapon fall to her feet. She didn't need it anymore. It was finally over. After so long, she thought she'd feel something more. Some sense of satisfaction, of peace, of closure. Something.

A shiver raced down her spine and she tensed. A sensation of danger washed over her and she swiveled her head toward the woods. There was someone out there.

Tomas Sullivan stepped out of the woods, gun in hand, firing as he came.

The vampires reacted as one, speeding toward the woods, but even they, with their incredible speed, were too late. Katya screamed, throwing herself in front of Chase. She felt the rush of the bullet as it grazed her shirt, passing her by. It hit Chase in the chest, the force so great it knocked him from his feet.

"No!" The scream burst from her lungs. She hit the ground hard, stone and dirt scraping her skin. Ignoring her superficial wounds, she scrambled to his side, slamming her hands over the pulsing wound.

The door burst open and Delight raced out, Cassidy and the other women close behind her. "Chase!" She screamed her brother's name, falling to her knees beside him. "What have you done?" she yelled at Katya.

Chase managed to raise his hand, touching his sister's face. "No," he whispered, and then coughed, blood burbling from his lips. "Not her fault. My decision."

Katya felt her heart breaking. Chase couldn't die. He couldn't. How could she live without him?

"Inevitable." Chase's voice was growing weaker with each word he spoke.

Katya sensed the men all gathering around them and knew Tomas was dead. But it was too late. The damage had been done.

"Dying eventually." Chase coughed. His breathing was little more than a wheeze. "You know how fragile we humans are."

Stefan shoved her hands to one side and slapped a piece of cloth over Chase's chest, pushing down hard on it. Katya recognized it as Stefan's shirt.

Delight gasped. "What are you saying?"

Chase's hand fell back to the ground and Katya clasped it between her two palms, ignoring the blood that stained her palms. She'd had blood on her hands for the past year.

This wasn't how it was supposed to end. His skin felt so cold. Or maybe it was she who was cold.

"Headaches for months. Brain tumor." He coughed again, this time spitting up blood. "Was going to tell you. Wasn't time."

How could she not have known? Katya was screaming on the inside as bitterness filled her. Why Chase? Why not one of the evil souls who had come here tonight with no other purpose than to kill and maim innocent people? If only she'd taken his blood earlier, there would have been a blood connection between them. She would have sensed something, would have known.

"We can get you treatment. Surgery." Delight was chafing her brother's arm. Lucian sat behind her, his arms around her waist as if to comfort and strengthen her at the same time.

Chase released a deep sigh. "Too late now."

He slowly turned his face toward her. His hair was matted against his skull and his usually vibrant blue eyes were dull and lifeless. Katya didn't even try to hide the tears rolling freely down her cheeks. This couldn't be happening. If anyone had to die, it was supposed to be her.

"Katya." His voice was so low she wouldn't have heard him if it weren't for her enhanced hearing. He tried to say more, but just didn't have the strength, sinking into a stupor. His eyelids fluttered closed and his mouth went slack.

An idea came to her then. It was crazy. Insane. It probably wouldn't work, but anything was better than sitting here watching Chase's blood pump from his body. "Get out of the way." Her voice was deeper, more guttural. She felt her fangs elongating and descending.

"You've done enough," Delight spat at her.

"I'm his only chance." She focused on Cristofor. "He only has a few seconds left. You know that. Let me try to convert him."

"It's never been done," Cristofor said slowly. "I've never heard of a hybrid vampire converting a human. And I've certainly never known a female to convert a male. That's not the way it's done."

She could hear the faint edge of hope in his voice and pounced. "What do we have to lose?" She held out her bloody hands. "Let me try."

"I should be the one to attempt it. I'm stronger," Cristofor insisted as he crouched next to Chase.

Katya shook her head. "He may love you as a brother, but I have a deeper emotional connection to him. He's the one for me. Do you understand what I'm

saying?" Time was running out while they debated this. She was the only one who could do this.

"He's your mate." Cristofor swore under his breath even as Delight protested. Katya knew the Dalakis family all understood the implications of that statement. There was only one mate for a vampire and that connection was stronger than any other.

"Yes."

Cristofor glanced at his brothers. In that split second, they seemed to come to an agreement between them.

Lucian tightened his hold on Delight, pulling her out of the way. "Hurry," he urged.

Katya blocked out everyone else as she lifted Chase's limp body, cradling it against her chest. Leaning down, she sank her fangs into his neck. She almost moaned when his blood hit her mouth. Rich and thick, it ran into her body, absorbed into every cell until Chase was a part of her. She'd never felt anything like this before in her life.

There was no time to question the difference, to savor the sensations. Chase's heart beat once. Twice. Then stopped.

Ripping her shirt from her shoulder, she gouged at the knife wound that was still seeping. Lifting his head, she pressed his mouth against it, letting her blood trickle between his lips, and hopefully down his throat. "Drink," she commanded, her voice no more than a hoarse whisper.

Using all her strength, she grabbed control of his mind, using the connection that now existed between them. She begged and pleaded with him to drink. Yelled and screamed. It was all in her mind, but it was as real as if she was doing it aloud.

She was losing him. She needed more strength.

Her eyes met Stefan's and she did something she'd sworn she'd never do again—she opened herself up to him, to all of them. Katya didn't care how much it hurt. She didn't care if they killed her with their surge of power. As long as Chase drank, as long as he lived, anything was worth the sacrifice.

Her body bowed back as energy surged through her, their power joining hers in the fight for Chase's life. Her mind went blank, but she kept Chase's head cradled against her. Every cell in her body was focused on one task.

She heard Delight crying, heard several of the men cursing and knew she had failed. She felt them withdrawing from her mind, one at a time, resigned to the inevitable.

Despair overwhelmed her and she grabbed on to the power they fed into her, stealing more, focusing it more finely. Determined, she wrapped the tendrils of her mind around the threads of their power, keeping it in a stranglehold. She would not let go, not until there was no life left in her body.

They fought her, sending spears of pain through her skull. She didn't care. Physical pain was nothing in comparison to the reality of Chase being dead. Through the

overwhelming agony that pounded in her skull, she felt it. A whisper of a sound, the lightest beat.

Tipping back her head, she screamed. "Chase! Come back to me."

The tiny sound came again. This time stronger. She began to laugh and cry at the same time. There was no fighting her now as the family all sent their combined power through her. She could hear their voices in her head, encouraging Chase to drink.

His lips moved against her shoulder, slowly at first, then harder. Chase surged upward, latching on to her suddenly, swallowing mouthfuls of life-giving blood. She would have let him drink forever, would have given up her last drop of blood for him.

It was Delight who leaned over and forced her brother to release his grip on her. As his head lolled back, Stefan carefully peeled back the makeshift bandage, peering beneath it briefly before slamming it back in place. The hole in Chase's chest was already beginning to close and Katya knew it would soon be sealed and on the way to healing as good as new.

Katya shut her eyes for a brief moment, her hand going to the cross that was visible through her torn shirt. A heavy scar marked the gold where it had deflected Vasili's knife. Father Patrescu was right. The amulet had protected her against evil. She sent up a prayer of thanks to God and whoever else was listening.

Lucian shouldered in beside her, sliding his muscular arms beneath Chase and lifting him. Sitting in the dirt, covered in blood, she watched as he carried Chase inside the castle. His family would take care of him.

Planting her hands on the ground, she pushed herself to her feet, weaving from side to side as she found her balance. A hand came out to steady her, but she shook it off. Stumbling, she righted herself and headed toward the woods. All she wanted to do was go off by herself and lick her wounds. Her heart was broken, but she would survive. Chase was alive. That's all that mattered. She knew she wasn't welcome here.

"Where are you going?" Delight's voice gave her pause. Chase's sister sounded more curious than angry, but Katya didn't stop, didn't turn around. She could still see the horrified look on Delight's face, hear the accusation in her voice. Knowing that Delight was right didn't make it easier for Katya to bear. This was her fault. Tears all but blinded her, but she kept going.

"Katya." Cristofor appeared in front of her and she practically ran into him. She stopped, but kept her gaze pointed toward the ground. She couldn't bear to see their disdain. What she'd done was unforgivable. She'd risked all their lives for her own vengeance. That made her as much of a monster as Vasili.

"No, it doesn't." His voice was gentle.

She hadn't spoken the last aloud. Realization came too late. Her mind was still open to all of them. She slammed her defenses into place, but it was too late. They'd sensed her vulnerability, felt her self-loathing.

He put his hand on her arm, but she dug in her feet, refusing to move. He swore and reached down, scooping her into his arms. She tried to fight him, but she was too

damn tired and worn out. "Chase will want to see you when he wakes. He'll need to talk to you."

She stilled, sensing the sincerity of Cristofor's words. Unable to fight any longer, she nodded. She closed her eyes so she wouldn't have to look at the others as he carried her into the castle.

Chapter Fourteen

Chase came awake slowly. He'd been having one hell of a dream—a fight in the courtyard, decapitating a vampire, getting shot. What had he eaten before crawling into bed last night?

His head ached, a low throb at the base of his skull, but that was normal these days. He ignored the discomfort as he pried his eyes open. Everything blurred before him, a mass of color with no distinction. He blinked several times, thankful when his vision gradually began to clear. A noise off to his right startled him. He swiveled his head to look, barely swallowing back a groan as the movement sent a shaft of pain through his forehead and down his neck.

He closed his eyes and counted, concentrating on each number, until the pain receded. Opening his eyes again, he peered at corner of the room where the noise had emanated. There were no lights on, but he could see perfectly.

Katya was slumped in the hard-backed leather chair, her neck twisted to one side as she snored softly. Her arms were folded across her chest, her hands tucked under her armpits as if she were cold, and her legs were sprawled out in front of her.

Chase started to smile at the picture she made, but frowned as he noted more details. Dark circles were evident beneath her eyes, made even more pronounced by the pallor of her skin. Even her lips appeared pale and lifeless. Dirt smudged her right cheek.

Her shirt, dirty and bloodstained, was torn away from her shoulder. He could see a thin pink line, about six inches long, with dried blood around it—obvious remnants of a serious wound. His eyes narrowed, anger surging through him. She was injured. What the hell was she doing sitting upright in a chair when she was hurt?

She shifted slightly and one of her hands came free. It too was stained with blood, from fingernail to her knuckles, all the way to her wrist. He could smell it. The sharp metallic tang filled his nostrils. That realization stopped him cold. It was dark, but he could see every inch of her perfectly.

It hadn't been a dream.

His memories came flooding back—the mind-numbing anguish that had filled him as he'd waited inside the castle, all the while knowing Katya was outside with the monster who had killed her parents, the absolute feeling of helplessness, and the utter fury that anyone would dare threaten his woman or his family.

He'd paced like a man half crazed. When no one had been paying him any attention, he'd grabbed one of the ancient Dalakis' swords from the wall and raced for the front door, flinging it open. The scene outside had been something from a

nightmare. Cristofor was lying on the ground at the feet of the monster, his body unmoving. Katya was fighting for her life, a knife clutched tightly in her hand, while her opponent taunted her.

Without thought, he'd thrown himself into the fray, raising the blade and swinging it with all his might.

With the momentum and strength behind it, the blade had easily sliced through the villain's neck. Chase could still see the sightless eyes of the man he'd just decapitated staring up at him as the head rolled close to his feet. Blood. There had been so much blood.

Then pain.

He'd felt the bullet slam into his chest, stealing his breath and knocking him backward. Excruciating agony came next, quickly followed by a bone-deep numbness, along with the inescapable knowledge that he was dying. He'd been so cold as he'd felt his life slipping away.

But he was still here.

He shoved the covers down and stared at his chest. It was tender and there were several faint scars, the largest about four inches. They radiated out from a common center, as if the bullet had torn his chest open. But other than that, it looked perfectly fine. The wound was incredibly close to his heart, missing it by a mere inch.

What the hell happened?

"You're awake." Katya's voice was low, filled with concern, yet she made no effort to move closer to him. If anything, she pulled her legs closer to her body and wrapped her arms tighter around her waist. "How do you feel?"

"Like I've been shot." His voice was raw and he could taste something metallic in his mouth. Blood. He licked his lips, tasting it on the tip of his tongue.

She flinched, but steadied herself quickly. "You were."

Chase pushed himself upright. He was weaker than he thought, each movement a strain on his muscles. It wasn't an easy process, but he managed to prop himself up. The crisp white sheets pooled around his waist. He was naked. Obviously, someone had stripped him out of his clothes last night before putting him in bed.

He was sweating by the time he managed to lean his back against the headboard. His stomach roiled, but he ignored it. A minute passed before he understood that Katya wasn't going to volunteer any information. "What the hell happened?"

She moved then, rising slowly to her feet. With her arms still wrapped around her body, she began to pace back and forth. Just watching her was making him dizzy. Finally, she came to a halt by the side of the bed. Bloodstains marred her shoulder and neck. Chase's entire body tightened and he felt an unfamiliar hunger welling up inside him.

"What do you remember?"

"I was shot." Her mouth tightened, but she said nothing as he continued. "I was dying. I died. Or thought I did."

She nodded, confirming what he already knew. "You did."

"Yet I'm still here." What he was thinking was impossible.

Katya sighed, released her death grip on herself and shoved her hands through her hair. "I had to do it. Had to try."

Her agitation hit him like a ton of bricks. He didn't want her upset. "Hey." He patted the mattress next to him, wanting her closer. He needed to touch her, to reassure himself that she was all right. "Whatever it is, it's okay."

A laugh, more like a sob, broke from her lips as she took a step away from him. He tried to ignore the blast of hurt that passed through him at her withdrawal.

"It's not okay, but it is my fault you were injured. I should have checked to make sure the woods were clear, but I didn't, and you were shot. The man who shot you was a skilled mental blocker, able to keep me out of his head for a split second too long."

Chase could feel the guilt weighing down on her, could practically see it in the way her shoulders curled inward. He didn't like it. "Were you the only vampire out there in the yard? I seem to remember seeing Cristofor, Lucian, Stefan and Zane. None of them picked up on the threat until the last second either. None of them were able to stop him in time."

Katya firmed her lips, the muscles in her jaw clenched. "It was my responsibility. I brought trouble here."

Chase's head was pounding so hard he could barely think. "Fine. It's your fault," he snapped. She reeled back as if he'd hit her. Almost as soon as the words left his lips he wished he could take them back. Regret was a bitter pill.

His stomach lurched again and he could feel his body breaking out in a cold sweat. Obviously, he wasn't quite recovered yet. "What happened then?"

Katya stood still as a statue, her gaze just beyond him, as if she couldn't quite bear to look at him. "You were dying, so I attempted to convert you."

Holy hell! Chase's mind whirled with the implications. "You're saying I'm a vampire."

She nodded then shook her head. "We're not sure. We think you're a hybrid, like me. Not quite full vampire, but not human anymore either."

Leaning his head back against the hard headboard, Chase swallowed. Did that mean he would live long? What about his brain tumor? He had so many questions, but couldn't manage to utter one.

His stomach lurched, bile surging up his throat. He was going to be sick.

Shoving the covers aside, he rolled to the edge of the bed. Katya was beside him immediately, her hands gentle as she half carried, half dragged him to the bathroom. He reached the toilet just in time, heaving his guts up.

It was humiliating to have her see him like this. He tried to send her away, but she wouldn't go. Chase had no idea how long he knelt on the cold stone floor with his head hung over the commode. This was worse than the bender he'd gone on when he'd turned twenty-one and vowed never to drink to excess again. Every muscle in his body ached. His head felt like it was one second away from exploding and he was certain his stomach had been turned inside out.

Throughout it all, Katya stayed by his side. She dampened a cloth in tepid water, sponging the sweat from his face and torso. When he shivered with the cold, she went back into the bedroom and got a blanket, wrapping it around his shoulders. When he was sick, she supported him, holding his head when his neck was too weak to hold it upright.

She talked to him in a language he didn't understand. He knew it was Russian, could pick out one or two words, but that was all. There was one phrase she whispered over and over, but he had no idea what it meant. He wanted to ask, but even just thinking about talking was too much for him to handle. It took all his energy to keep from toppling to the floor.

After what felt like hours, Katya helped him stand long enough to wash his face and brush his teeth. While he did that, she washed his back and chest, both of them ignoring the fact that he was totally naked.

His cock stirred, but he was too exhausted to even think about doing anything about it. Still, it was a sign that he was on the mend.

With his arm slung over her shoulders, he managed to stay upright and make his way back to bed. Katya eased him down onto the mattress. She started to leave him, but he grabbed her hand and tugged, tumbling her down beside him. "Stay."

Not giving her a chance to deny him, he rolled to his side, wrapping his arm around her to keep her close. She tensed, but slowly began to relax. "Sleep," he whispered. "We'll get a shower and talk more later." His words were slurred as exhaustion finally took him under.

Katya knew the second that Chase slept. All vampires were attuned to the rising and setting of the sun and she knew that daybreak was upon them, could feel the shift from night to morning.

Slowly, she disengaged herself from his arms. It was an almost impossible task. Not because he held her so tight, but because she really didn't want to leave him. She knew his family expected her to stay, but she couldn't. Chase would be fine without her. The worst was behind him now that the conversion was complete. She still couldn't believe that she'd managed to do it. Even with all the combined strength of the Dalakis family, it had been close. They'd almost lost him.

Tears welled in her eyes, but she blinked them back, staring down at his handsome face. Even tired, and with dark circles under his eyes, he looked good. His hair was

tangled, his skin pale, but she knew that by the time he woke at dusk, he would be as good as new. Better, in fact.

His senses would be sharper, his reflexes faster. She wasn't quite sure what his reaction to daylight would be. Only time would tell. She worried about that. Chase was an artist. Being able to see the world in daylight, to capture shadows and textures and colors, was important to him. More than just important, it was his life, his livelihood, who he was. Katya had no idea if he would still be able to go outside like she could. There was no precedent for their kind. Every day would be a day of discovery for him.

Very lightly, she trailed her fingers down the side of his face, noting that the old scar beneath his left eye was almost gone. The dark stubble on his jaw rasped the pads of her fingertips, making a scratching sound. Rather than make him look unkempt, it made him look more handsome and just a bit dangerous.

She worried about the brain tumor he'd said he had. She was almost certain that it would be gone now, that the conversion would have healed it. It would be so easy to force her way into his mind and check, especially in his vulnerable condition, but she wouldn't do that. She didn't have any right to do so. He would be able to discover that for himself when he awoke.

Chase's family would help him adjust to his new life and powers. They would have blood ready for him when he woke hungry, needing to feed. Her time here was done.

Jealousy surged to life within her and a low growl escape her throat. She wanted to be the one to feed him, to be by his side as he discovered the world anew. She wanted to walk outside with him and protect him until he knew the extent of his new powers. But it would all happen without her. All feelings of jealousy slowly drained from her, replaced by an overwhelming sadness.

The villain had been slain, Chase had made it through the conversion and none of the Dalakis family had died. It was exactly what she'd wanted, what she'd prayed for.

Why, then, did she feel so hollow and empty inside?

Chase had his life now and she had hers. Her brother Sasha was still a boy and needed her with him. Katya wished she could see Chase's eyes one more time. Those pale blue eyes never failed to make her heart skip a beat.

It was foolish to linger. Although all the vampires were deep in their day sleep, she sensed Cassidy moving around in another part of the castle. Blythe and the boys were still sleeping. It had been a hard night for everyone.

Chase mumbled when she shifted away from him. Katya stilled. It seemed Chase was going to be more like her, not so deeply affected by the sun.

When she was certain he was settled back into a deep sleep, she slid off the bed. Ignoring the exhaustion pulling at her, she crept across the room. She stopped in front of a large oak armoire and helped herself to one of Chase's shirts, tucking it under her arm as she continued on to the door.

She didn't want to look back, but she couldn't help herself. Chase lay sleeping, the covers bunched at his waist. His head was nestled against the pillows, a lock of his light

brown hair covering his cheek. He mumbled again, his lips parting on a sigh. She'd kissed those lips many times. They were soft and warm against her mouth and other parts of her body.

Heat suffused her skin. Her breasts swelled and low in her belly a pulsing ache grew. Katya ignored the signs of her obvious arousal as she took one final look at Chase. His broad chest was scarred, but that would fade in time. He was everything to her. It hurt her heart to look at him.

Leaving him was the hardest thing she'd ever done, but it was necessary. Katya had to be content with knowing he was alive and well. That was all that mattered.

She tuned the door handle and eased out of the room, closing it gently behind her. Squaring her shoulders she walked to the staircase, her boots making no sound on the carpet. The Dalakis family was safe, their part in this over, but hers wasn't. There was still one more thing she had to do.

Keeping an ear out for Cassidy, she let herself out the front door. The sky was painted a pale pink, tinged with peach as the sun rose over the mountains. Purpose in every stride, Katya crossed the courtyard. Her crossbow was gone. She gave a moment's regret that she had to leave it behind, but obviously someone in the Dalakis family had taken it inside last night. The bodies were gone, presumably burned or buried. They all knew what had to be done to protect the family and she had no doubts they had done it.

The woods seemed to welcome her, absorbing her into the cool shade of the trees. She moved swiftly, her goal set. Tomas Sullivan had been among the men last night. He'd been the one to shoot Chase.

She berated herself for not suspecting them sooner. Vasili had obviously had men watching her every move, as she'd suspected. She'd been nothing more than a pawn in his game since the very beginning. Her stomach churned, but she ignored it. That was done. Past. Her parents' murderer had been brought to justice and it was time to return to her life.

Almost time.

There was one more loose end to tie up. Niles Becker. She had to find out what his role in all this was and take care of him. There was no way she could let him walk away from here. Alive, he was a threat to her family and to the Dalakis family. More important, he was a threat to Chase.

The path was a familiar one and, in no time at all, she saw the village through the trees. She tugged on the shirt she'd taken. It was way too big for her, practically a short dress, but she rolled up the sleeves and tied the tails around her waist. It smelled like Chase. She leaned her face against her shoulder, breathing deeply. The scent of his sandalwood and spicy soap mingled with the compelling aroma of the man himself. It comforted her and intensified the ache in her body at the same time.

Katya felt half naked without her weapon, it had become such a part of her this past year. She flexed her hands, rolled her shoulders and let it go. She still had a single knife

tucked into her left boot. Beyond that, she herself was a formidable weapon, honed and ready for action.

The village was stirring as she skirted the back of the houses, careful to stay out of sight. The inn was at the end of the street and backed onto a heavy copse of trees. Katya was grateful it was fairly isolated. Crouching low, she watched and waited. When she was satisfied there was no one watching she made a dash for the back of the building, flattening her back against the outside wall.

Using her preternatural hearing, she listened. When she detected no movement, she eased the door open and slipped inside. There was a set of stairs just inside the door, and Katya kept to the side, her back to the wall, as she eased her way up to the second floor.

She paused near the top, letting her senses flare outward. Olga was in the kitchen and Eugeniu was out in the front garden. Most of the guests were still sleeping. All but one.

Katya eased the knife from her boot, tightening her hand around the handle as she tucked it down by her side. Niles' room was the last one to the right. She took a deep breath, and in one motion, opened the door and rolled inward, keeping her body low.

The door slammed shut as she came to her feet. She jumped to the side, but felt the prick of a dart in her shoulder. A feral smile lit her face as she stared at Niles Becker.

"I've got you now, bitch." Rumpled from head to toe, he exuded a combination of trepidation and exhaustion. The fear grew as he realized she wasn't falling to the ground unconscious.

Katya once again gave thanks to the vaccine that her father's friend had formulated. It had saved her life more than once.

Niles quickly leveled the dart gun at her, ready to fire a second shot. This time she was faster, jumping at him and knocking the gun from his hand. He fainted to the left, but she was with him. With one hand, she grabbed him by the throat and pinned his back against the wall, bringing the blade to his neck.

He struggled, but she held firm. His eyes widened, horror dawning in them, when he finally understood just how much stronger she was. "Are there any more of you here?" She had to be sure.

He made a choking sound and she eased her hold slightly. He coughed. "I'm not telling you anything, bitch."

She tightened her hold for another minute and then finally loosened it. Niles wheezed, desperately trying to suck in air. "You want to try that again?" She dragged the flat of the blade down the side of his face, not cutting him, but taunting him with the possibility.

"He'll kill you. He'll kill all of them."

"If you mean Vasili, I'm afraid he met with an unfortunate accident. A sword separated his head from his body."

Niles' gaze flickered and, for the first time, showed real terror. She could smell his fear, see the beads of sweat that dotted his forehead. "That's right, Niles. They're all dead, including Tomas. What happened last night? Did you run or were you just not invited?"

He pursed his lips, refusing to speak.

"Niles, Niles, Niles." Shaking her head, she made a tsking sound. "I don't need your permission to find out what you know." Focusing her energy, she blasted into his mind. He had strong mental blocks, but she was stronger than she'd been before. Maybe it was the remnants of all the energy she'd drawn from the Dalakis family the night before. Maybe she just had more at stake than he did.

Whatever the reason, she shoved through his barriers, ferreting out names and details. By the time she finished, his eyes were wide and unfocused. Katya felt sick to her stomach. Niles had a penchant for teenage girls. He liked to torture them before killing them. She was a bit old for him, but he'd planned to make an exception for her.

Without a scrap of remorse, she tightened her hold, gripping his neck until he took his last breath. He struggled, clawing at her hands and forearms, kicking at her shins. His body shook from head to toe as he desperately tried to stay alive. But she was too strong and too determined.

When his heart was finally silent, she tossed him onto the bed, tucked her knife away and began to gather his belongings. There could be nothing left behind for anyone to find that might link him and Tomas to her or the Dalakis family.

Ignoring the dead body lying on the bed, she methodically cleared the dresser drawers, dumping everything in the two suitcases she found in the tiny closet. Thankfully, the men had shared a room. That made things much easier.

When she was certain nothing of theirs remained in the room, she grabbed the two suitcases and sneaked back down the stairs, stashing them in the woods. Then she went back for Niles. Hoisting him over her shoulder, she was halfway down the stairs when she sensed Olga coming.

Concentrating, she sent out a mental message to the older woman, telling her she'd heard a knock and there was someone was at the front door. She wished she could just make the front doorbell ring. That would be much easier, but she wasn't certain she could do it. And quite frankly she didn't have the energy to try something new.

Katya sensed Olga's brief hesitation before the other woman and headed for the front door, muttering under her breath. Heaving a sigh of relief, Katya hurried out of the inn through the back door and into the woods.

With Niles still over her shoulder, she picked up both bags and began to walk. Thankfully, the woods were thick and not much sunlight could get through. It was an arduous trek up the side of the mountain with her heavy burden.

She hadn't wanted to come back here, but there was no other choice. Dalakis Castle loomed large in the distance, getting closer with each step she took. Bypassing the front

door, she went around to the back. Laying down the suitcases, she banged on the heavy oak panel.

She sensed Cassidy peering out the window before he pulled the door open, gun drawn and ready.

"You need to dispose of him."

Cassidy holstered his weapon and swore. "Who the hell is he?"

"Niles Becker. I recognized one of the men last night. He was staying at the same inn as me, along with his partner." She toed the suitcases. "This is all their stuff. There's nothing to link either of them to me or the Dalakis family."

Cassidy raked his hand through his hair and she sensed his hesitation.

"If it makes it any easier for you, he's personally tortured and mutilated a dozen teenage girls, some even younger. He'd already decided to make an exception for me. He might have decided to do the same for your wife." She dumped the body to the ground. Cassidy could do whatever he liked with it.

"Where are you going?"

She didn't answer, heard him swear as she raced to the woods, nothing more than a blur to his eyes. Katya stopped at the tree where she'd positioned herself last night and grabbed her pack, which was still hidden high in the branches.

She stumbled as exhaustion threatened to overwhelm her. The sun was getting higher, and in spite of her abilities as a hybrid, it was wearing her down, eating away at her already depleted energy.

Katya knew she wouldn't make it very far so she went to the one place she knew she'd be welcome. The back door opened before she even knocked and Father Patrescu filled the doorway.

"I need a place to stay." Her knees buckled and the elderly priest caught her, pulling her inside.

"Can you make it upstairs?"

"Yes." She wasn't sure she could, but there really wasn't any choice.

They took the stairs one at a time, a hybrid vampire and a priest. It was like a bad joke, except there was no punch line and neither one of them was laughing.

"Just a few more steps," he coaxed. Katya pushed hard, her entire world reduced to putting one foot in front of the other.

She followed the priest blindly as he tugged her down a hallway and into a bedroom. He eased her down onto a bed and pulled a cover over her. The mattress was hard, but it felt like heaven to her tired body.

A small voice reminded her that she could have stayed with Chase.

He pulled the drapes and returned to the bed. "You'll be fine here. No one will bother you." She felt Father Patrescu pat her on the shoulder.

"Thank you." Closing her eyes, she sought oblivion.

It was over.

Chapter Fifteen

Chase came awake in the blink of an eye. One moment he was asleep, the next, wide-awake. Before he even opened his eyes, he knew that Katya was gone. There was a void, an emptiness both in the room and in his heart.

Swearing, he sat up slowly, letting the covers fall away. The room was shrouded in darkness, but he could see as well as if every light were blazing. His hearing was more acute too. He could hear the others all moving around. It might have overwhelmed him if he hadn't been expecting it, but he'd been around vampires for more than a decade and knew what he had to do.

He already had a protective barrier in his mind, built over the years to protect his family from snooping in his brain. Not that they did it intentionally, but he didn't want to broadcast his thoughts so anyone could hear. He used that skill now, concentrating on blocking out the noise. It receded into the background until all was silent again.

Hunger gnawed at his belly. He was a little surprised that he could even consider eating. Damn, but he'd been sick last night. He never wanted to go through anything like that again. And Katya had witnessed it all, had held his head while he'd puked his guts up.

He shuddered, blocking last night from his mind. That was not a memory he wanted to revisit anytime soon.

Could he even eat food? He knew that Delight and the rest of them could consume small amounts, but not much. He knew he needed blood. His stomach clenched and his teeth began to ache.

He raised the pads of his fingers to his mouth, stroking the fangs that now protruded from his gums, as the need for blood built. *Bloodlust*. He'd heard his brother-in-law and the rest of them speak of it, but he hadn't really understood it until now. It was like a living, breathing beast inside him, demanding satisfaction.

He wanted Katya.

His cock stirred to life and a low growl came from deep in his chest. He wanted to climb on top of Katya, bury his cock in her delectable body and fuck her until she screamed with pleasure. Then he wanted to drink from her while she fed from him.

His balls drew up tight at the mere thought. Oh, yeah. He wanted to thrust into her over and over, feel her cunt clench around every inch of him, drawing it out until neither of them could stand it any longer.

If she were still here, she'd be under him now. But she was gone.

Why had she left? And, more importantly, where was she? He rubbed his hand over his chest, feeling the ache in his heart grow larger with each passing moment. He'd

known she was going to run. Sensed it last night, but he'd been too damn sick to keep her here. He knew she felt that everything was her fault, and it was to a certain extent. But he understood why she'd done it. When it came to his family there wasn't anything he wouldn't do to keep them safe or to avenge them.

Besides which, the maniac vampire and his minions would have turned up here eventually. At least with Katya's help, they'd had a warning and a chance to formulate a plan of attack.

A knock came on the door and Chase stared at the thick oak panel. He wasn't in the mood to see anyone. Before he could reply, the door was shoved open and Lucian strode in, closing it behind him. Sighing, he leaned against the headboard, knowing he wasn't getting rid of his brother-in-law until Lucian had said whatever was on his mind. Luckily the tented covers hid his erection.

"How do you feel?" Lucian carried a large mug in one hand.

"Like I've been run over by a truck," he automatically replied. Lucian raised his brows in question and Chase shook his head, really taking stock for the first time. "I feel tired, but other than that, not too bad all things considered."

"You look good for a man who was shot in the chest last night." Lucian sat on the edge of the bed and held out the mug.

"Coffee?"

Lucian shook his head and it was then Chase smelled it. *Blood*. It tantalized his nostrils, teasing his senses. Intellectually, he knew his family survived on blood, but actually wanting it was hard for him to reconcile.

"Sip slowly," Lucian advised. "It would be easier if Katya was still here, although she probably wouldn't be able to feed you after last night."

Chase had the mug to his lips but lowered it without drinking a drop. "What do you mean?" Worry for Katya spiked through him.

"She had to give you quite a bit. You'd bled heavily and her blood is not as potent because she's a hybrid."

"What happened?" He needed to know exactly what had gone down last night. He knew Katya had told him some of it, but his memories were fuzzy. Most of what he remembered included him puking up his guts, and that was a road he didn't want to go down ever again if he could help it. Other than that, he didn't remember much from the time he was shot, only bits and pieces.

"Drink." Lucian waited until Chase had taken a sip before continuing.

As his brother-in-law told him everything, Chase drank. At first it was hard to swallow, his mind rebelling against drinking blood even as his body craved it. He stopped after a couple of mouthfuls to let it settle in his stomach, which lurched when Lucian told him how Katya had let down her guard, opening herself up to all of them in order to save Chase. He knew that would have been extremely hard for her after the incident with Stefan. Yet she'd done it. For him.

"I talked to Cassidy and he said that Katya came back and dumped two suitcases and a body for us to deal with."

"Who?" Chase felt his entire body begin to vibrate. At first he didn't know what was happening. Then he recognized the emotion flowing through his veins. Fury. While he'd been sleeping the day away, Katya had been out slaying enemies, pushing herself, draining her energy to protect him.

It wasn't to be borne.

She was his. It was up to him to protect her, and as soon as he found her he was going to make her understand that fact even if he had to lock her away somewhere to keep her safe. Lucian was still talking to him, but he hadn't heard a word the man had said. "What was that?"

Lucian shook his head. "Don't worry about it. We'll talk more later. We don't know the exact extent of your powers, but you'll learn. I'm very interested to see if you can tolerate sunlight like Katya can."

It hadn't even occurred to him, until Lucian brought it up, that he might not be able to go out in the sun again. He swallowed heavily. The sun and the light were vital to him and to his art. But, he realized in that moment, Katya was more important than any of it. He'd live in darkness forever if it meant he could be with her.

"Why didn't Cassidy keep her here?"

Lucian stood, staring down at Chase. "Cassidy is a human and Katya is part vampire. There is no way he could have held her without hurting her."

A low rumble, much like a growl, rose from deep in his belly. Chase felt the hair on the back of his neck stir. He'd kill anyone who hurt her.

Nodding, Lucian crossed his arms over his chest. "I thought you'd feel that way and so did Cassidy. She was gone before he could even think to follow her."

"How am I going to find her?" Desperation was beating at his brain. He had to find her. The fact that she was out there, alone and possibly weak, hurt him more than any physical injuries could. For better or worse, Katya was a part of him.

The corner of Lucian's mouth tilted upward in a lopsided grin. "You're a vampire now, Chase. Or at least a hybrid one. Her blood is in you. Yours is in her. Seek her with your mind. The connection is there."

Why hadn't he thought of it? It was so simple.

"What about your brain tumor?"

Chase sensed Lucian's hesitation, his reluctance to intrude. He focused inward, his consciousness centered on his brain. He sensed nothing out of the ordinary. "I feel good."

Lucian raised his hands. "May I?"

He nodded, needing to know for sure. Lucian moved closer, placing the palms of his hands on the sides of Chase's head. He felt a burst of heat permeating his skull,

seeping into his brain. Lucian smiled and stepped away. "Your sister wants to see you before you go out. I'll tell her the good news."

Chase nodded absently. He sensed Lucian leaving, but the reality of his room seemed far away. His mind was already flaring outward, journeying beyond the confines of the walls surrounding him, searching for Katya.

Like a hound dog sniffing out a scent, he raced through the night, never hesitating, never deviating from his path. He found her in the most unlikely of places. She was staying in the small house next to the old church just beyond the village. He could sense her presence there, knew she was breathing slow and deep, locked in sleep.

For the first time since he'd wakened, Chase felt the panic that had welled within him begin to recede. He hadn't even realized he'd been in such a state until he'd felt it loosen its grip.

Lifting the mug, he drank the rest of the blood, felt it soaking into his cells, rejuvenating him. He set the mug down on the bedside table and looked down at his chest.

There were only a few puckered scars there and some redness. It would probably fade completely in a few days. So he healed like a vampire, just not as quickly. Good to know. Kicking the covers away, he swung his feet around and let them hang off the side of the bed. Supporting himself on the mattress, he stood.

So far, so good.

His first step was tentative, but the next one was surer. He felt...fine. No, he felt better than fine. His muscles were fluid, his body strong. Raising his arms over his head, he stretched. Satisfied that everything was functioning properly, he headed for the shower. After last night, he needed to get cleaned up.

Then, he was going in search of a certain woman, and this time she wouldn't get away from him.

Katya's stomach growled, the noise startling her. When had she last eaten? She tried to remember, but couldn't. Unlike a pure vampire, she needed a certain amount of human food, along with blood, to keep her functioning properly.

She knew it was just past sunset, but she wasn't sure what day it was. Had she slept the day away, or had it been longer? It felt strange to just lie here knowing that, for the first time in a year, there was nowhere she had to go, nothing she had to do. Her existence had been so focused for the past twelve months that she didn't quite know what to do next.

She tried to remember what she'd done before that fateful night of her parents' murders, but it escaped her. Things had been so much simpler then. Different. So much had changed, including her.

Rolling over onto her side, she let her eyes roam over the tiny bedroom. It was sparse, with just the bed, a small chest of drawers and a straight-back chair. The drapes

were drawn tight over the window and the door was closed. Katya could hear Father Patrescu rummaging around downstairs in the kitchen.

She was putting off the inevitable and that wasn't like her. She normally met the world head-on, doing what had to be done. First thing she needed to do was grab a quick shower and change her clothing. She was still wearing Chase's shirt over her ripped one and leather pants, which felt dirty and disgusting. Then she'd need to get something to eat, gather her belongings and head back home.

But where was home? She'd traveled the globe this past year, never staying anywhere for long. The thought of returning to her family home in Russia didn't appeal to her. It was no longer a haven, no longer felt as if she even belonged there. She'd changed too much to fit comfortably back into her role as daughter and doting sister. But Sasha was just a boy and he needed her.

A tear trickled down her cheek. She wasn't a daughter anymore. Her parents were dead. "I have avenged you," she whispered. Katya wished she could feel her mama kiss her forehead or her papa swing her in his arms just one more time, but that would never happen.

Tossing back the covers, she rose from the bed. Father Patrescu had laid her pack and her duffel bag by the end of the bed. Once again, she said a prayer thanking whatever force had led her to this man. He'd been such a help to her and a comfort.

Grabbing both bags, she opened the door and went down the hallway, finding the bathroom. Ten minutes later, she was clean. All the blood that had stained her body was gone, washed down the drain. It was too bad that she couldn't cleanse her mind and soul as easily. Dressed in fresh clothing, she gathered her belongings and made her way down the stairs to the kitchen.

Father Patrescu sat at the table, a mug of steaming coffee in his hands and a plate of sandwiches on the table in front of him. "Good. You are awake and hungry, yes?"

"Yes." She laid her bags by the door before pulling out the chair across from him. "Thank you."

He waved away her thanks, motioning for her to sit. When she was settled, he pushed the plate of sandwiches her way. "It is ham and cheese. I wasn't certain if you could eat this or not. I have tomato soup on the stove as well."

The soup sounded better. It would be easier on her body. "I'll get it." Jumping back up from the table, she found a bowl and another mug, dishing up the steaming soup and pouring herself a mug of coffee. Settling back at the table, she picked up her spoon and began to eat. "How long have I been here?"

The priest's eyes widened. "Just for the day." He glanced at the clock. "Perhaps seven or eight hours."

She nodded, letting the warm soup slide down her throat. "Thank you for letting me stay here."

"It is nothing." He waved away her gratitude.

Placing her spoon back in the bowl, she pushed it aside, unable to take any more of this man's hospitality. "It is something. You have no idea what I've done."

"What have you done, child?"

It all came pouring out of her in a torrent of words. She told him everything that had transpired since she'd left him last evening until she'd shown up at his door earlier today. He already knew the rest. She was crying by the time she finished, big gulping sobs that hurt her chest.

Arms came around her, cradling her, lifting her, and she knew that she and Father Patrescu were no longer alone, hadn't been alone for quite some time. Chase was such a part of her now that his presence hadn't really registered, although subconsciously she'd known he was there.

"Katya," he breathed her name into her hair as he kissed the top of her head. "My poor Katya." Chase held her tight, cradling her in his arms.

She shook her head. She didn't want his pity. She didn't want anyone's pity. "It was my choice." She sniffed back her tears and swiped at her eyes, hating her weakness.

"Not weak," he whispered in her ear. "Human."

She tensed in his arms, realizing that he'd read her thoughts. "But I'm not human."

"Just because you're extra special doesn't mean you're not still human."

"Extra special," she snorted. "I'm a hybrid vampire." Chase's gaze shot to the priest and Katya immediately understood his concerns. "Father Patrescu already knows what I am." She turned to the priest. "Father, this is Chase Deveraux. Chase, this is Father Patrescu."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Chase." He stared at the younger man. "You are from Dalakis Castle, are you not? You are as Katya is?"

"Yes."

The priest nodded. "Good. Good. She will need someone strong beside her."

"Father." She couldn't believe the elderly man was trying to play matchmaker at a time like this.

He laughed. "What? I am old, but I am not dead." Reaching out, he touched her hand. "You want me to revile you. You despise yourself for what you have done."

She didn't want to talk about this now, not with Chase here. "Father..." She didn't know what to say to him. Everything he said was true.

"God works in mysterious ways, child. How do you know that you are not an instrument of justice, able to find the monsters that human law cannot?"

Chase's arms tightened around her and she snuggled closer, drawing strength from his presence. She hadn't even questioned how he'd found her because deep inside she knew they were connected on a deep soul level, the kind of connection that could only be broken by death, and maybe not even then.

"He's right." Chase shifted her until she was looking at him for the first time since he'd arrived. The color of his eyes seemed paler, like a blue flame, burning hot and steady. His hair was lustrous, his jaw smooth.

"You shaved." It was a totally inane comment and she felt her cheeks heating. She could only blame the lack of food and sleep and the stress of everything that had happened.

Chase grinned. "I showered too."

She knew that. Could smell his soap mixed with his unique scent. Her nipples tightened and she had to resist the urge to squirm in his lap.

"I'm sorry." She rubbed her hands over her face and tried to slip off his lap, but Chase tightened his grip. She knew he wouldn't let her up, not without a struggle.

"No need, child. You've been through a lot, seen more of the worst of mankind than any person should have to." The priest sighed and stood. "I have to go and get ready to say Mass." He leaned over and kissed Katya on the forehead. "Forgive yourself for what you've done. Forgive your papa for not protecting himself and your mama. Forgive yourself for what you are. You are a good person in your heart, Katya Markova. God knows that."

He straightened, pinning Chase with his sharp gaze. "You will take care of her?"

"I can take care of myself," she protested.

Both men ignored her as Chase nodded. "Yes. You have my word."

"Good." Father Patrescu shuffled to the door. "I hope to see you again, Katya Markova. You have brought excitement into this old man's life." With a smile and a wave, he left them alone.

The silence around them thickened and Katya began to feel uncomfortable. She shifted off Chase's lap and this time he let her go. Picking up her dishes, she carried them to the counter, piling them in the sink.

Looking out the small window, she watched a crow perch on one of the headstones in the cemetery, heard its caw of warning. "Why did you come?"

She heard Chase's chair scraping against the floor as he pushed away from the table. Felt the heat from his body as he moved in behind her. She flinched when his arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her back against his chest.

He was aroused, his erection heavy and throbbing as it pressed against the small of her back. Her core began to pulse in response and her breasts grew heavy. His hands slid over her stomach until they were barely grazing the bottoms of her breasts.

Katya sucked in a breath and moaned as her panties grew damp. He moved his hands back and forth, barely touching the sensitive mounds. Her hips moved, circling instinctively.

A low groan came from behind her and she felt Chase's cock swelling even more.

One of his hands slipped down her belly, hovering just over her mound. She was so close to coming. One touch was all it would take for him to send her plummeting over

the edge. She'd never been aroused this much this fast. It was as if what had been between them before had been magnified ten times—no, a hundred times.

Heat buffeted her, blurring her senses, making it hard for her to think straight. She shouldn't be doing this. She knew there was a good reason why, but she just couldn't remember what it was, not with Chase touching her like this.

"Why?" His breath feathered over her neck, teasing her earlobe. "Why did I come?"

He kissed the sensitive skin behind her ear and she felt a fresh gush of cream between her thighs.

"Because, sweet Katya, I'm not done with you yet."

Chapter Sixteen

Chase was holding on to his control by a thread. If Katya rubbed her sweet ass against his cock one more time he was going to come in his pants. The heat had always been there between them, but this was something even more intense, hotter.

She stiffened in his arms, and he felt her shifting away from him, physically and mentally.

Anger flowed through him. She wasn't getting rid of him that easily. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her back. She struggled, but he held her tight, careful not to hurt her. "Stop it, Katya. You can't get away from me that easily. I'm as strong as you are now. Stronger. And healthy."

She froze. "The tumor?"

"Gone." It was amazing how in tune he was with his body. He'd known immediately, but Lucian had confirmed it for him.

He felt the shudder go through her body at his words. "I'm so glad." She stilled, but she didn't rest against him, gathering her composure around her like a cloak. "What do you want from me?"

"Everything." Whirling her around, he captured her mouth. She stiffened as he thrust his tongue inside, but then moaned, digging her fingers through his hair and holding him tight.

Chase felt everything inside him relax and the tone of the kiss changed, gentling slightly. Now that she'd accepted him, the need to claim her wasn't riding him quite so hard. It was still there, but it was manageable.

Talk, he reminded himself. They had to talk first. As much as he wanted to lose himself in the heat building between them, he couldn't deny the fact that she'd left him. Disappointment, anger and hurt all swirled just beneath the surface. No matter that she was in his arms now. She'd left him.

He slowly pulled his lips from hers. Katya's eyes were closed, her lips moist. As he watched, her tongue came out to slowly lick across her bottom lip. Her eyes fluttered open, the blue so dark they appeared almost black.

"Why?" He kept his arms locked around her waist. "Why did you leave?"

She swallowed hard. His eyes followed the light ripple just beneath her skin. He admired the curve of her neck, his gaze drawn to the fluttering pulse. His body hardened and his teeth began to ache.

"You know why?"

He shook his head. "No, I don't. I went to sleep with you in my arms and woke alone." Taking a breath, he forged onward. "Is it because I'm like you now? I admit it wasn't very pretty what you had to watch me go through."

"Stop it!" She grabbed his shoulders and shook them. "It was my fault you had to go through that, my fault you were shot, my fault that your life has been changed forever. You had no choice. None." She was breathing hard now, her chest heaving. Her eyes flashed, the black tinged with red.

"I thought we already went through this." Exasperation tinged his voice. "It's not your fault."

"Then whose fault is it?"

"It's Vasili's fault for murdering your parents. It's the fault of every man who was part of that blood cult. They all chose their own paths, Katya. All you did was try to find justice for your parents."

"By putting innocent people in jeopardy." She tried to pull away, but he gripped the counter on either side of her, keeping her effectively caged in his embrace. "I'm no better than they are."

Chase hung on to his temper by reminding himself of how much Katya was hurting. It couldn't have been easy for her this past year. "Yes, you are." He nodded when she shook her head. "You're not God, Katya. You're not responsible for everyone else's fate." He asked the question he'd wanted to ask from the first. "Are you sorry you converted me?"

She frowned, her brow wrinkling. "I changed your life without your permission."

His gut clenched. "That's not what I asked you." He feared that she regretted tying herself to him, because that connection now existed whether they wanted it or not.

Her scowl deepened. "I am not sorry for saving your life." She threw back her shoulders and tilted back her head, meeting his gaze straight on. "But it should not have been necessary."

He reached up and tucked a short lock of hair behind her ear. "I'm human, Katya, or I was. I would have died in another thirty or forty years, fifty if I was really lucky. And that's if I managed to survive the brain tumor." She jerked in his arms, shaking her head in denial. "I always knew my family would outlive me, never growing old. That was hard to deal with, to watch year after year, but you changed that."

"I have no idea how long we'll live."

Chase stared down at Katya. "How old are you anyway?" It had suddenly dawned on him that he had no idea.

"Twenty-five."

"You're just a baby," he teased. It was a bit of a shock to realize that she was younger. Every vampire he knew was older than he was.

Her expression turned fierce and then sad. "Not anymore."

He knew she was referring to everything that had happened. Her innocence was long gone, lost in a sea of lies, desperation and blood. "I know." He took her into his arms, pressing her cheek against his chest. "I heard everything you said to Father Patrescu."

He felt her shrug. "It was easier to tell him everything than to tell you."

"You knew I was there?"

She nodded, her hair tickling his chin. "At first I didn't notice. You're such a part of me that it felt normal. But later, yes. I knew you were there."

Chase nodded. "No more secrets."

"I have a brother," she blurted.

Chase felt her tense, but continued to rub his hand over her shoulders and up and down her back. "Does that mean I'll have an older brother coming after me for compromising his baby sister?"

Katya snorted. "His name is Sasha and he is nine years old."

The enormity of the situation hit him. Here she was at twenty-five responsible for a child of nine. It wasn't much different than the situation that he and Delight had found themselves in years before. "Where is he?"

"He is with his nanny and a contingent of loyal servants at the family home in Russia. Sasha is full vampire so they serve him. Me, they do not trust so much. Not all of them."

Chase heard and felt the underlying hurt in her voice. He was so attuned to her now, her voice vibrated through him, giving him more information than just mere words. He could sense her emotions, as well as her physical state. It was as if she were a part of him. "I'm sorry." He didn't know what else to say.

"It is what it is." Her acceptance of the situation hurt him even more. "It was different when Papa was alive. They did not treat me with so much mistrust then."

Anger whipped through him. How dare they treat her in such a manner?

She patted his chest. "It is okay, Chase. I am neither vampire nor human. Nor am I a Markova by blood. Yes, Papa's blood mingled with Mama's, affecting me in the womb, but it's not the same as it is with Sasha. My mama was a vampire when she had him, so he is a full vampire like his papa."

"So, Afanas Markova wasn't your father."

She frowned. "He is...was my papa."

"No, he wasn't. He wasn't anything to you at all." Chase's voice was hard. "He was nothing to you."

"He was my papa," she cried, beating her fists against his chest.

"Shh," he crooned, hugging her tight. "Of course he was your papa, and you were his daughter. It didn't matter to him that you weren't a full vampire. To him you were a Markova."

Katya pulled back and glared at him. "You did that on purpose."

He couldn't keep the smile from his face. "Yes."

She smacked his chest. "That was mean."

"I'm sorry." He captured her hand, holding it against his chest. "I didn't mean to hurt you, but it was necessary. It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. Your parents loved you and I'm sure your brother does too."

"I haven't talked to him in two weeks. This is the first time we've gone that long without speaking. I've always managed to contact him every week since I left."

"You miss him." Chase couldn't imagine not being in constant contact with his sister and extended family. How much worse was it for a nine-year-old boy?

"I do." Her fingers curled into his shirt and she shifted restlessly. "It is time for me to go home."

"Your home is with me." The words came out of nowhere, but as soon as he'd said them, he knew they were true. "We belong together."

She shook her head. "You might feel that way now, but what about twenty years from now or two hundred years from now? We have no idea how long we'll live."

Damn, she was stubborn. He wanted to shake her until her teeth rattled and love her until she'd agree to anything he said. The second idea had merit. "Let's find out together." He cupped her face in his hands. "Katya, I wanted you when I thought you'd betrayed me and put my family in danger. Even then, I would have killed Stefan with my bare hands if he'd harmed one hair on your head."

She shook her head in denial.

"Yes." He knew they belonged together, felt it down to the marrow of his bones. "You're everything to me. You make my heart sing and my world brighter."

"You deserve better," she muttered.

That, he knew, lay at the heart of her objections. This past year had changed her, left her feeling tainted. He didn't quite know how to counter her fears except to love her. But she had to stick around for that to happen. He decided to try a different tact. "You owe me."

Her head jerked up. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. You owe me. You waltzed into my life, tore it to shreds and changed things forever. You have to stay." His heart pounded against his chest. If this didn't work, he was going to drag her to the castle and lock her in one of the rooms until she came to her senses.

Which reminded him of something else. "You should not have gone after that man by yourself this morning."

"I could not just leave him there."

"You should have waited for me, or at least taken Cassidy with you."

Katya made a rough, unpleasant sound. "I have been taking care of problems like Niles for the past year, and I've been doing it alone."

"Not anymore." He felt a tic under his left eye. "You are no longer alone." He saw the brief flicker of hope in her eyes and it almost broke him. "I'll never let you go, Katya. Don't you know that by now?"

"Your family?" She glanced away, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth. "They will not approve."

"It doesn't matter what they think. This is my life." When she started to object, he planted a quick, hard kiss on her lips to silence her. "Besides which, you saved my life. That goes a long way to them forgiving you. Once they get to know you, they'll like you. And," he continued, "they'll accept you because you're important to me."

"Oh, Chase." She went up on her toes and plastered herself against him.

The heat that had been banked flared to life again, consuming them both as their lips met. He tasted acceptance in her kiss and it made his blood sing. He wanted to tilt back his head and roar to the heavens. Katya was his.

He tore his lips from hers, peppering her forehead, nose, cheeks and chin with kisses. He couldn't get enough of her. Would never get enough of her. His vision changed, getting sharper, more focused. The world faded until nothing existed but Katya.

He had to have her.

Katya lost herself in the maelstrom of emotions that flowed between her and Chase. She could barely believe that he knew everything and he still wanted her. She'd lied to him, used him and cost him his humanity. Still, he wanted her.

She almost smiled as she played his words over in her head. She owed him. Which was his way of trying to give her a reason to stay. She was truly beginning to believe that they might have a chance. Oh, there were still a lot of details to work out. She didn't know where they'd live. His work and home were in New York and her home was in Russia. His family wouldn't exactly welcome her with open arms, and he hadn't met her brother yet, but still she felt the first stirring of hope deep inside.

She sensed the change in Chase, the tensing of his body. Felt the heat from his skin as he pressed his erection against her belly. A ripple of pleasure rolled through her. Her nipples hardened to sharp points. She rolled her hips, loving the heavy thrust of his pelvis grinding against hers. His fingers dug into her hips, holding her to him as he repeated the motion.

Katya had always been attracted to him, but she had to admit that his new strength was hot. The fact that he was as strong as her now, probably even stronger, turned her on. That was so not politically correct, but she didn't care. Her body craved his in ways that went beyond any rational explanation.

She felt his fangs elongate and moaned as he gently dragged them over her throat. Her core clenched hard as she arched her neck. She'd never experienced anything like this before. It would be a first for both of them – feeding and sex at the same time.

"Now." Chase grabbed the hem of her shirt and yanked it over her head.

She fisted the top of his shirt, ripping it open. Buttons flew, pinging off the counter, the walls and the floor. Flattening her hands on his chest, she absorbed the heat coming off his body. Leaning forward, she lapped at his flat brown nipple, teasing it with her tongue. She could hear the hard pump of his heart and the *whoosh* of blood beneath his skin. Her teeth elongated, her fangs pushing past her lips.

Carefully, she scraped one nipple than another. Teasing. Tormenting. Chase groaned, clasp ing her head tight to his chest. "Witch," he groaned as she flicked his nipple with the tip of her tongue.

His nimble fingers made quick work of the front hook of her bra. She was forced to move back when he tugged on the straps of her bra, pulling them down and tossing the scrap of fabric aside. The cool air made her already tight nipples pucker even more. "Perfect." He lifted her, sitting her on the edge of the counter. Her legs widened as he made a place for himself between them.

He touched the cross that nestled between her breasts with the tip of his finger, slowly tracing the scar embedded deep in the gold. "This saved you last night."

She tensed at the memory of the knife blade striking off the gold cross that had covered her heart and deflecting to her shoulder. "Yes."

"It's special to you." His finger reverently caressed the edges of the pendant.

"It was my mama's. My papa gave it to her as a present. She wore it always." Tears pricked her eyes, but she blinked them back. Now was not the time for tears. Now was the time to celebrate life.

Chase leaned forward and brushed her lips. It was a soft kiss, a kiss of understanding and acceptance. He straightened, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiled. She caught a flash of his fangs and it sent her heart soaring once again.

His hands cupped her breasts, his skin darker against the pale mounds. She felt the calluses brush her sensitive flesh as he squeezed. Katya swallowed hard as he lowered his head. There was no tentative exploration, no hesitation. Chase opened his mouth over her nipple, took it into the hot, wet cavern and sucked. Hard.

Her back arched and she almost came off the counter as pure fire shot from her breast to her core. She felt his rumble of pleasure as he released her, blowing gently on the swollen nipple before shifting to do the same thing to the other one.

She was panting heavily now, her sex clenching hard. Katya felt empty and she knew only Chase could ease the ache building inside her. Plunging her hands into his hair, she tugged him closer. Chase growled, his mouth feasting on her breasts. He made her feel very desirable and wanted.

No one else had ever made her feel that way. Only Chase.

She felt his reluctance to leave her, but he pulled away, staring at her breasts. They glistened where he'd sucked them. His eyes were amazing, pale blue tinged in red fire. Even his fangs were sexy. Leaning closer, she licked at one, then the other. Chase tilted back his head and roared. She knew that the bloodlust was urging him to feed, to claim her. She understood the primal emotion because she felt it too.

His hands were hard, insistent, as he pulled at the opening of her pants. "Lift your hips," he ordered as he began to pull. Katya braced her hands on the counter and lifted her lower body. Chase stripped her pants and underwear at once. He swore when her clothing got caught around her ankles and he went down on one knee, removing her boots and socks before pulling the rest of her garments aside.

"What about Father Patrescu?" Katya panted. It felt disrespectful to be having sex in the man's kitchen.

Chase looked up at her and smiled. "My sweet, he may be a man of God, but he had a good idea of what could happen if he left us together."

That made it even worse. "Do you really think so?" She moaned with pleasure as Chase stroked a path on the inside of her leg from her ankle to top of her thigh.

"Shhh," he soothed. "Don't worry. Father will be gone for a while yet."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he stroked her inner thigh again, this time letting the back of his hand graze her slick folds. Pure fire shot through her.

"Are you sure?"

He didn't reassure her. Instead, he sat back and stared up at her. "Put your feet on the edge of the counter." That would leave her wide open to him. She hesitated briefly, but the rumble in his voice was extremely sexy and very insistent.

Slowly, she lifted one foot, then the other, placing them on the edge of the counter. Her cheeks got warm and she knew she was blushing, which was ridiculous really. It wasn't as if he hadn't seen her before, but this felt different somehow. There were no longer any secrets between them, plus they were equals now, both different from anyone else around them.

It struck her then that she was no longer alone in the world. There was someone with whom she could share her concerns, someone who she would be able to talk to, someone who would understand. Tears filled her eyes as emotion threatened to overwhelm her.

Chase's head jerked up. It was in that moment that she truly understood how connected they were. He'd sensed her discomfort and reacted immediately. "I'm okay," she promised. "It's all just a little overwhelming."

He smiled at her then and it made her heart turn over. "You'll get used to it." Still kneeling between her legs, he reached out and ran a finger over her slick folds. "You're so wet." She could hear his pleasure and it pleased her to know that she was responsible for it.

"Wrap your hands around your ankles and spread your feet as far apart as you can."

She did as he asked with no hesitation this time. He grunted, shifting closer. He had to crouch in order to be able to reach her. Katya watched, unable to look away as his tongue rasped over her folds, bottom to top and back down again. His fingers skimmed over her inner thighs from knee to the crease at the top and back down again. Her legs began to quiver as he licked her again. His tongue teased her clit, the tip circling 'round and 'round the swollen bud.

She leaned back, resting her head against the hard cupboards as she tried to catch her breath.

"Touch yourself." She blinked, not quite certain she'd understood him correctly. Chase raised his head, his lips damp with her cream. "Feel how wet you are, how soft and ready."

His voice was pure magic. She released her grip on her ankles, sliding her hands between her legs.

"That's it," he crooned as she sifted her fingers through her damp pubic hair and then lower. Wrapping his hand around one of hers, he guided her. She let her fingers glide over her sex until they were coated in her cream. He released her hand, letting her continue on her own.

It was incredibly arousing to know he was watching her. She dropped her mental barriers slightly and was immediately blasted with Chase's arousal, his heat. His mind was filled with images of him fucking her over and over until she came, screaming her pleasure. She moaned and her pussy clenched. To ease the ache, she dipped two fingers inside her slit.

"You're so damn hot." His voice was almost reverent as he watched. His hair was tousled and damp, and he never took his eyes off her as he popped the button open at the top of his jeans and lowered the zipper. His cock sprang free.

Katya licked her lips, imagining herself taking the thick head of his cock into her mouth and sucking on it. Chase swore and groaned. Fluid seeped from the tip. It was then she realized he was sharing her fantasies as she was sharing his.

"That's right. We're part of one another." He stood, crowding closer until his thick shaft was flush against her sex. He flexed his hips, rubbing his hard length over her.

Katya moaned, her eyes fluttering closed.

"No. Watch." She was unable to resist his sensual command. With his broad shoulders, flat stomach and muscular arms, he was a sight to behold. Then her gaze shifted even lower. Veins, thick and prominent, ran the length of his cock. He was large and hard and she wanted him inside her.

"Come inside." Using her fingers, she spread herself wide in invitation.

Chase gripped his erection, angling the head to her slit and pressing just past the initial resistance at the opening. "How can I resist?"

But he stopped when he was barely inside her, his entire body tense. "Chase," she moaned, trying to rock her hips. Her position made it impossible for her to move more than an inch. With her feet spread wide on the counter, Chase in front of her and the cupboards behind her, she was effectively caged in. Chase would fill her when he was ready and not a moment before.

It was frustrating and arousing at the same time. She wiggled her hips and moaned, needing more. She was truly at the sexual mercy of Chase, and from the hard look on his face, he didn't have any mercy in him.

"Be certain, Katya. If I take you now there is no going back. I'll never let you leave me. You'll be mine for eternity or for however long we live."

Katya felt the cocktail of emotions roiling within him. It was hard to distinguish individual ones, as there were so many, but among them she sensed anger and betrayal. She almost flinched away and slammed up the mental barrier between them then, but something made her hesitate.

Overlying all of the emotions was hurt. She'd hurt him by leaving him. Her heart began to pound so hard against her chest it felt as if it may explode from her body. She'd never meant to hurt him, never meant to hurt anyone, but it had happened.

His face was a rigid mask, not a speck of emotion showing. But he couldn't hide it from her. She felt his pain. Beyond that, she felt his need for her, recognizing it easily because it matched her need for him.

Reaching up, she cupped his beloved face in his hands. "Make me yours."

Emotion filled his eyes to such a depth she almost cried. Want and need and caring and, dare she hope, love were all there. Chase slammed home in one hard stroke. Katya cried out as her body adjusted to the swift invasion. Her inner muscles clutched hard as he pulled back and drove in again.

"Katya." His voice was strained as he locked his arms around her, his hands gripping her shoulders, his fingers digging into her.

She wrapped her legs around his hips, crossing her ankles together at the small of his back. "Harder," she urged.

His hips slammed forward and back over and over. Katya took every inch of him easily, her body making no secret of how much it wanted him.

"I can't get deep enough," he gasped. Dragging her off the counter, he lowered them both to the floor. He released her and unwrapped her ankles from around him and flipped her over onto her stomach. She reared back, coming up on her hands and knees as he drove into her from behind.

Katya cried out and Chase stilled. She could sense his hesitation, feel the powerful shudder go through him as he tried to gain control of himself. She wasn't having any of it. "No! Don't stop." She shoved her hips back, trying to take him deeper.

"I can't be gentle. Not now." His voice was a deep growl that sent shivers up her spine. "I have to fuck you."

"Then do it." She moved again, this time shifting forward. "Fuck me hard."

As if her permission was all he needed, he gripped her hips and rammed forward. Katya's entire body jerked and she almost lost her balance. She lowered herself down onto her forearms and held on as he pounded into her from behind.

Heat consumed her and her barriers dropped even further. Their emotions touched, mixed and became one. She could not only experience all she was feeling, but what Chase was as well. She knew his pleasure as he drove into her with each stroke. She felt full and complete when he was inside her and she knew he could sense that as well.

It was strange, but somehow perfectly natural. With the erotic sensations doubled, Katya felt herself hurtling toward an explosive orgasm.

Chase released her hips, sliding his hands around her body until he was cupping her breasts. He pumped his hips hard, his balls slapping against her clit over and over again. Katya bit her lip, tasting blood.

She was totally surrounded by him and she loved it. She sensed his rising hunger as he scented the blood she'd drawn from her lip and knew that the bloodlust was fully upon him. She felt the answering call within her, hungering for a taste of him.

He tugged on her nipples as he thrust hard from behind. Katya came undone. Pure fire seemed to consume her, but she went willingly into the flames, knowing he was there with her. Her body clenched hard and she was suspended for one brief second before plummeting over the edge. She shook from head to foot as her orgasm washed over her.

Chase sat back on his haunches and used his grip on her to pull her upright, her back to his chest. He was still seated inside her and the angle sent another blast of heat through her, prolonging her orgasm as he used his incredible strength to move her up and down his cock. He yelled and she felt his cock ripple inside her, felt the hot spurt of his seed filling her.

His teeth grazed her nape and her neck fell back, offering him everything. His fangs sank into her skin and she arched back as another orgasm shook her. He sucked hard, taking her blood into him. Her hips circled and she could feel him growing hard again. The fingers of one of his hands toyed with her nipples, while the other one dropped between her legs, stroking her clit.

Shockingly, her body began to shake again, but before she could orgasm again, he withdrew his fangs and licked her skin, closing the two tiny wounds. He lifted her then, their bodies making a wet slurping sound as he pulled out of her.

"No," she protested, grabbing at his cock, trying to put him back inside her. She wasn't finished yet.

Chase gave a half-groan, half-laugh as he turned her to face him, lowering her once again. Katya gripped him hard, guiding him back to her opening, sighing with relief when he pressed back inside.

"Drink." Chase drew her face to the curve of his neck. "Drink from me, Katya. Take what you need."

There was no hesitation as she slid her fangs into his flesh. His blood filled her mouth, hot and sweet. The taking and giving of blood was the most intimate of things, even more so than sex. Experiencing both at the same time was beyond imagination.

She shared everything she was feeling with him and absorbed his emotions in return. She loved the taste of him, loved the way every cell in her body soaked in his blood, clamoring for more. No blood had ever made her feel more alive than his. Their bodies were still joined together and another orgasm washed over her, this one gentler, not as intense as the others. She moaned as her mouth continued to suck at his neck and her pussy sucked at his cock.

All too soon, she had to pull away. She'd taken enough. Taking care, she licked the pinprick wounds closed and sat back.

Chase brushed his finger over the side of her face and smiled. "That was incredible."

Katya started to answer, but her contented feeling fled, replaced by sheer panic. She all but jumped out of Chase's lap. He yelped, barely managing to get his cock out of the way of her knee. He tried to grab her, but she danced out of the way, grabbing the tangle of clothing scattered on the floor. "Father Patrescu." Chase gave her a blank look and she hissed again. "He's coming."

Swearing, Chase rolled to his feet and yanked up his jeans, which were bunched around his ankles. Katya shot him a glare. He was already half dressed while she was a mess.

"You've got time." Chase laughed as she hopped on one leg, then another as she hauled her pants on. She didn't bother with underwear. There was no time.

Giving up, she gathered the rest of her clothing, shooting him a glare. The man had the audacity to laugh again. "Fine. You deal with him. Maybe he won't notice that there are no buttons left on your shirt."

Chase muttered under his breath as he tucked in his shirt. "I heard that," she called out just before she slammed the door on the downstairs bathroom. She wasn't certain exactly what he'd said, but it felt good to tease him.

Katya froze, staring at the smiling woman in the bathroom mirror. The corners of her lips were turned up and her face glowed. She felt happy. It was a strange and foreign feeling, one she hadn't experienced in a long, long time. She felt Chase probing at her mind, as if he sensed her emotional upheaval. She sent him back waves of reassurance as she hurried to pull on the rest of her clothing. There wasn't much she could do about her mussed appearance, but she turned on the taps, splashing water over her face. She was drying off when she heard the back door open.

Katya sent up a prayer of thanks that Mass hadn't finished any sooner or they would have had to stop at a most inopportune time. And it would have been their own damn fault. She still couldn't believe they'd actually done something so risky. Heat suffused her cheeks and she muttered as her cheeks turned red. Ignoring it, she finger-combed her hair, and gave herself one final look in the mirror.

It wasn't the best, but it would have to do. She wished Father Patrescu's vision wasn't as good, but the old man had the eyes of a hawk. Opening the door, she hurried out. "Father, you're back. I thought we'd be gone by now, but we were...delayed." Katya prayed she didn't look as guilty as she felt. Her gaze skittered over the counter and then to the floor. She bit her bottom lip to keep from groaning. They'd just had wild sex in the priest's kitchen. His kitchen! Chase, the devil, just leaned against the counter, his arms crossed and a grin on his face.

Even she could hear the strain in her voice, but the elderly priest just smiled at her, giving her no indication that anything was amiss. "Mass finished a while ago, but I had a few things to do around the church."

She searched his face, but could sense nothing out of the ordinary on his part, no knowledge that he knew what they'd been doing. Katya relaxed and smiled at him, thankful that he'd been delayed. "Thank you for everything, but we must go now." She went to the priest and gave him a quick hug as Chase pushed away from the counter, collecting her pack and her duffel bag.

"You will come back and visit?"

Katya nodded. "I have no idea how long I'll be here, but I'll see you before I leave." It was true, she didn't have any idea where they would live. There was her brother and Chase's family to deal with.

"It will all work out," the priest whispered to her as he patted her shoulder.

"We need to get going." Chase had the door half open, waiting for her. She went to his side and stepped out into the night.

"By the way," Father Patrescu added. "You can come back for your buttons anytime. It shouldn't take me too long to find them all."

Katya's gaze flew to the priest, but instead of censure, she saw his lips were turned up in a grin and his eyes were twinkling.

She couldn't think of anything to say, but Chase filled the breach. "Thank you, Father. We'll do that."

The priest laughed. "I knew I was right about you, boy. Take care."

Chase wrapped his arm around her and led her toward the woods. They could both still hear Father Patrescu's laughter as it carried through the open window.

Katya buried her face in her hands. "How will I ever face him again?"

He gave her a squeeze. "You will because you care for him and he cares for you." Her humiliation receded, replaced by a warm feeling inside. "But no one will ever care for you the way I do," Chase whispered as he spirited her through the forest toward the castle waiting in the distance.

Epilogue

Chase lay in bed with Katya nestled in his arms, marveling at how much his life had changed. They'd returned last night and gone straight to his room. He hadn't been able to wait to make love to her again.

Unlike their joining in Father Patrescu's kitchen, he'd made love to her slowly and thoroughly. He'd started at her toes, nibbling on them as he worked his way up her calf. When he got as far as her knee, he stopped and went back and started on her other foot.

He smiled as he remembered how she'd moaned, begging and berating him by turn as he kissed her inner thighs, then her belly. He'd paid particular attention to her hipbones before moving upward, over her torso and around her breasts. He'd teased and tormented, coming close, but never touching the places she'd wanted him to.

She'd turned the tables on him then, rolling him onto his back and sitting on his stomach. Like liquid fire she'd flowed over him, stroking his shoulders and chest, working her way down his stomach. Like him, she'd allowed her fingers to trail around his cock, her laughter low and sexy as his erection had jerked, straining to touch her.

When he'd taken as much of the torture as he could, he'd flipped Katya onto her back and mounted her. One inch at a time, he'd pressed deep. When he could go no farther, he'd laid his forehead against hers, absorbing the sensation of being a part of her. With his hands beneath her, he'd rocked them both to completion.

They hadn't talked. Last night had been about connecting on the physical and psychic planes. They'd shared their bodies and minds, allowing their thoughts and blood to mingle. It was an incredibly erotic experience.

After it was over, they'd managed to drag themselves into the bathroom for a quick shower before stumbling back to bed. They fallen asleep in each other's arms, both of them exhausted.

His cock stirred, but he ignored it. They were both sore after last night. They'd slept the entire day away and it was evening once again.

Sharing blood with her was the most incredible experience in the world. He loved the feel of her mouth on his neck, sucking hard as he gave her what she needed. His stomach growled, reminding him that, unlike a full-blooded vampire, both of them needed real food as well as blood to survive. He still had so much to learn.

He'd have the family start doing some research. Surely someone out there had gone through the same thing that he and Katya were going through. Spenser, the maniac who'd almost killed Sophia and tried to bring down the entire Dalakis clan more than ten years ago, had been a hybrid as well. Knowledge was power and Chase had a deep need to know as much as he could about his newfound abilities.

Katya stirred, rubbing her foot over his leg. Her hand shifted on his stomach, moving upward and tangling in his chest hair. Her breast was pressed against his side and her head was nestled on his shoulder.

Chase basked in the sensation of well-being that surrounded him. He knew there were challenges ahead, but together, they could face all of them. "How did you sleep?"

"Umm," she purred as her hand stroked his stomach. "I slept like a baby."

He captured her hand in his, bringing it to his lips and placing a tender kiss on her palm. "Good." He didn't want to do anything to shatter the mood, but there were things they needed to discuss.

Katya tensed and he knew that she sensed his change of mood. Ever since they'd both dropped their mental barriers the night before and exchanged blood, neither one of them were able to completely shut the other one out. It made them closer, but it wouldn't always make for a comfortable relationship. It was unsettling to think that another person could read his emotions and understand him as well as Katya could.

"What is it?" She sat up, pushing her hand through her hair. Tucking the sheet beneath her breasts, she peered down at him.

"When I went through the conversion, you kept saying something to me over and over again." He watched her carefully, trying to gauge her mood. He could sense she was pensive and worried.

She glanced down at her lap, picking at the fabric. "I did."

Even though most of the night of his conversion was a blur, those words had echoed in his heart and in his mind. Before he'd left last night, he'd logged on to the internet and looked them up. Those words had given him hope.

"Katya." Chase waited until she looked at him. Her face was heart-shaped, her dark blue eyes, deep and fathomless. Her short cropped black hair stood on end. He knew her intimately, yet in many ways she was still a stranger. None if it changed how he felt inside. Call it instinct or call it fate. Whatever it was, Chase knew down to his very core that Katya was the woman he'd waited for his entire life.

"*Ya lublu tebya.*" He repeated the words that had been engrained on his very soul.

She gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. Tears welled in her eyes and one rolled down her cheek. Chase sat up and pulled her into his arms. "How...how did you know?"

"I couldn't get those words out of my mind. I think in my heart I already knew what they meant."

She met his gaze and nodded. "*Ya lublu tebya.*" She smiled at him then, her white teeth flashing as her lips parted. His heart soared and he felt like laughing. "I love you," she repeated in English.

Chase growled and playfully nipped at her neck, making her laugh until she was breathless. Tumbling her down beside him, he kissed a trail down her rib cage and nipped at her stomach. Katya smacked his shoulders, her entire body convulsing with

laughter. "I knew this weakness would come in handy." He was glad to see the tears disappear from her eyes. Her laughter filled his heart to overflowing.

"You're a beast," she giggled, the corners of her eyes crinkling as she smiled at him.

"Marry me?"

Her laughter fled as quickly as it had come. "What about your work? New York? We're not even certain if you can go out in sunlight at all yet."

He sighed, knowing they couldn't put this off any longer. He pulled himself up until he was alongside her, propping himself up on one elbow and resting his chin against his palm. "We'll find out about the sunlight soon enough. I've got a good feeling about it. I seem have most of the same abilities that you do."

"But what if you can't?" Katya's eyes darkened with worry.

"I admit that I've always gained inspiration from nature, from sunlit days. I think because most members of my family are vampires I appreciated what a gift it was to be able to enjoy it." He traced the curve of her cheek, letting his finger trail down the seductive curve of her neck. His cock flexed. He tried to ignore the growing ache in his groin. "But none of that matters. I'll sculpt and create no matter what. There is much to be learned from the darkness as well."

"Oh, Chase." He could hear the sadness in her voice.

"None of that. It wasn't that long ago I was facing the possibility of death. Now I'm alive and with you. Every day is a miracle."

She nodded, her eyes going liquid with unshed tears. "You are a miracle."

He felt his face heating, slightly uncomfortable with the compliment. "I've got a showing coming up in New York, but I don't have to be there for that. I keep my real name and face out of it. My privacy is important to me. Even more so now. I'm still considering canceling the show. My work will sell regardless."

Her eyes were wide with concern as she nodded. She nibbled on her lower lip and he barely suppressed a groan. He realized that she did that when she was worried about something. It was incredibly sexy and made him want to lick her full bottom lip.

"I love New York and wouldn't mind keeping my apartment. It's got a great view of the city and there's plenty of room, even with my studio taking up a large amount of it. Lots of great clothes shopping too," he teased, wanting to see her smile.

Katya just snorted at him. "I'm not big on shopping for clothing in case you haven't already figured that out. Or is that a dig at my wardrobe?"

Chase laughed. "Black looks good on you." He grinned when she began to tap her finger against his chest. "There are lots of shows to go to and museums. You'd love it."

"I haven't been there in years," she murmured.

"Your parents?"

"Yes." Her hand flattened over his heart. "We lived there for a few years when I was a child. I wouldn't mind visiting."

Compromise, he reminded himself. It was all about blending their lives together. "Good. We can spend several months a year there, a few weeks here, and after that we can live anywhere you want."

"Truly?"

"Absolutely." Anything to make her happy.

"Your family?" she countered, nibbling on her bottom lip.

"No time like the present." Chase rolled out of bed, dragging Katya with him. "Get dressed, woman." He playfully swatted her behind. He was in a fantastic mood and nothing could change that. His mate, his woman, was with him and he was healthy. Life didn't get much better. The rest was just details.

Glaring at him, Katya stuck out her tongue as she strode into the bathroom. Chase barely suppressed a laugh. In spite of the problems ahead, he felt great. It didn't take him long to dress. It took Katya a bit longer, not because she was a fussy woman, but because he sensed her reluctance to actually leave the sanctuary of his room.

Finally, she was ready. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, tucking her close to him. "Everything will be fine." She looked skeptical, but said nothing. Truthfully, he had no idea how things would go, but he was hoping for the best. Whether he and Katya stayed for a few more days or left immediately would depend on what happened in the next few minutes.

They made their way down the staircase to the floor below. The family was gathered, as usual, in the study. Beside him, Katya took a deep breath. He gave her a quick squeeze. The quicker this was done, the better for all of them.

"Chase." Delight pulled away from her husband's side and ran to him. "Are you all right?"

Katya moved aside as Delight threw her arms around Chase, hugging him tight. He gave her a brief hug before putting her aside. "I'm fine. We both are." Reaching out, he took Katya's hand in his, sensing that if he didn't hold on to her, she might bolt.

Cristofor came forward, his face set in stern lines. Before he got to them, his head came up like a wolf sensing danger. "Someone is coming. Two people."

Katya began to shake, all color draining from her face. "Katya?" Chase tried to pull her closer, but she cried out and tore her hand from his grasp, racing out of the room toward the front door.

Cristofor and Chase were close behind her. A loud knock came on the door, but when she yanked on it, the heavy wooden door wouldn't budge.

Whirling around, she glared at Cristofor. He cocked an eyebrow at her. "This is my home. It is not your place to invite anyone in."

"Then I'll leave. Just open the door."

Cristofor glared at her, but Chase stepped between them. He could sense a woman and a child. What harm could they be?

Stepping around them, Cristofor opened the door, looming large in the opening. A small boy, no more than nine, stared up at him, his face perfectly calm and composed. Chase sensed no fear from the boy, although the woman standing behind him was clearly petrified.

"Greetings, Lord Dalakis." The boy gave a short bow. "I am Sasha Markova, son of Afanas Markova. I come in peace and seek my sister. I have reason to believe she was headed this way." The boy spoke slowly, but his English was perfect.

Katya cried out and lurched for the door. "Sasha."

Cristofor stepped aside as Katya fell to her knees, gathering the boy into her arms. Before their eyes, the façade fell away and the boy threw himself into his sister's arms, dissolving into tears. "You were gone so long. You didn't check in this time. Not like before. I was so worried."

"It's all right. Everything is all right. No one will hurt you now."

Sasha swiped his hands over his eyes and straightened his shoulders. "Rina was more worried than I was." He glanced over his shoulder at the woman standing behind him. She gave him a watery smile and placed her hand on his shoulder.

"Thank you for your concern, Rina."

The older woman nodded. "I am sorry, Katya. I could not keep him away. I was afraid he would go on his own if I did not accompany him. There is a small contingent of guards back at the local inn."

"You did well, Rina."

Chase barely suppressed a smile, even though his own eyes were suspiciously moist. The boy was obviously embarrassed by his emotional outburst. He was at that awkward age, still a child, but wanting to be more adult.

"It is done." Still on her knees before him, she bowed her head. "I promised Papa and Mama I would always protect you. Our parents' murderer is no more and those around him are gone as well."

"You will come home?" Chase could hear the hope in the child's voice. He glanced at Cristofor, who was staring at the boy. It occurred to Chase that it had been hundreds of years since Cristofor had seen a vampire child.

Cristofor stepped forward, sweeping his hand back. "Come in. You are welcome in my home, Sasha, son of Afanas Markova." The greeting was formal, but beneath it Chase could hear the warmth in Cristofor's voice.

Katya climbed to her feet and pulled her brother to her side. Chase sensed her uncertainty and went to her. Sasha stared up at him with interest. Chase nodded to him. "My name is Chase Deveraux and I will be your brother-in-law." He held his hand out and waited.

He heard Katya gasp, but he didn't care. She was his and they belonged together. Her family was his family.

Sasha's eyes widened as he looked to his sister and then back at Chase. He slowly extended his smaller hand, joining it with Chase's. "I am Sasha."

As their palms touched, Chase sensed the boy's uncertainty. "It is a pleasure to meet you. I'm sure you can tell me many stories about your sister and about your home. I look forward to seeing it all."

Sasha nodded slowly and then grinned. "I know all kinds of stories."

"Brat." Katya scrubbed her hand over his head, making him laugh.

The entire clan was behind them when they turned. The women were all staring at Sasha and the men were stoic. The mood was strained as they all moved back into the study. Sasha stayed close to his sister, obviously sensing the unease among the adults.

Cristofor stared at the brother and sister and Chase was instantly aware of the picture they made standing there. Katya was behind Sasha, her hands on his shoulders. Chase stood behind Katya, his arms around her waist. They were a unit, a family.

Katya's heart was frantically pounding, her body was tensed, ready to fight. Yet, unlike before, she was no longer alone. Chase stood behind her, and she knew he would protect her with his life. It was a strange feeling, yet it felt right.

She still couldn't believe he'd blurted out that they were getting married in front of everyone. He'd pay for that later. She almost smiled as she thought of all the sensual ways she might torture him. He stirred behind her, his cock getting harder. This sharing of emotions and thoughts could prove to be very useful. He had no idea what he was in for later.

Sasha was still uncertain, but she sensed he found Chase intriguing. That was a start. Cristofor stared at her, his green eyes blazing. Her fingers tightened around her brother's shoulders. "I understand why you did it now." Cristofor's gaze flicked to her brother before returning to her. "If I had such a treasure, I would protect it with my last breath."

Katya was speechless. He hadn't said it, but she understood he was forgiving her for what she'd done, for the harm she'd led straight to his door. She shook her head. "I should have found another way."

A grin played around the corners of Cristofor's mouth. "Was there another way?"

She shrugged. She hadn't been able to find one. Cristofor shook his head and turned his attention to Chase. "You will have your hands full."

Chase laughed and squeezed her tight. "I know."

Katya didn't know whether to feel insulted or pleased. There had been admiration in both men's voices. Men could be confusing creatures at times.

Delight stepped forward with Lucian right behind her. "I think congratulations are in order."

Katya could tell that Delight wasn't one hundred percent behind their union yet, but she was trying for her brother's sake. Katya could ask for more than that. Time was

on their side now and Delight would eventually come to realize how much Katya loved her brother.

Chase cupped Katya's jaw with his hand, tilting it back until she was looking at him. "Are congratulations in order?"

She really was going to make him pay later. This was no way to propose to a woman. She narrowed her eyes and tapped her toe, pretending to think about it.

"Katya," he growled.

"Oh, all right. Since you asked so nicely." She heard several of the women laugh, while some of the men groaned.

Chase winced as he leaned down to kiss her. "I'll make it up to you," he promised just before his lips touched hers.

The rest of the night passed in a blur. It would take some time for the family to truly accept her, but they were trying. That was more than she'd hoped for. Sasha, on the other hand, was already thick as thieves with Cristofor. The large, stern man seemed enthralled with her brother and vice versa. They made an unlikely pair as Cristofor lifted yet another ancient sword from the wall for Sasha to inspect. Katya suspected the elder Dalakis reminded Sasha of their papa. Her brother asked a million questions, yet none of the Dalakis men seemed impatient, all of them taking the time to talk with him.

Chase caught her gaze as he left his sister's side and came to her. As he crossed the room, pure love flooded through her. This past year had been the worst of her life, yet it had brought her here, to Chase, to love.

"What is it, my love?" He hovered beside her, concern pouring from every pore of his body.

"Nothing." She didn't want to dwell on the past. Not tonight. Tonight was for new beginnings. "I was just thinking how much I love you."

A sexy grin spread across his face. "Hold that thought. It will be hours until we can get away." He'd barely finished when Cassidy's boys raced over to Sasha and dragged him away from the adults, yelling about the cool game room he had to see. Sasha went with them without a backward glance with Rina trailing behind them.

It made her heart soar to see him so happy.

Chase's hand slid over her ass, squeezing gently, before it landed on the small of her back. "Don't forget," she warned him. "You owe me for earlier and I plan to collect payment."

"I'm looking forward to it." Wrapping his arm around her, he led her toward his family and toward a new life.

About the Author

N.J. Walters worked at a bookstore for several years and one day had the idea that she would like to quit her job, sell everything she owned, leave her hometown and write romance novels in a place where no one knew her. And she did. Two years later, she went back to the same bookstore and settled in for another seven years.

Although she was still fairly young, that was when the mid-life crisis set in. Happily married to the love of her life, with his encouragement (more like, "For God's sake, quit the job and just write!") she gave notice at her job on a Friday morning. On Sunday afternoon, she received a tentative acceptance for her first erotic romance novel, *Annabelle Lee*, and life would never be the same.

N.J. has always been a voracious reader of romance novels, and now she spends her days writing novels of her own. Vampires, dragons, time-travelers, seductive handymen and next-door neighbors with smoldering good looks all vie for her attention. And she doesn't mind a bit. It's a tough life, but someone's got to live it.

N.J. welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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