

ETERNAL

Seduction



A Darkness Within Novel

JENNIFER TURNER

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by

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For my husband, my Mom, and my daughter. For everyone who stood by me and offered endless words of encouragement. For all my friends and the Originals, you know who you are.

And to Logan and Kerestyan, who decided to break the mold and not be the classic hero and heroine...thank you!

Chapter 1

"You can't have it!"

Logan Ellis stared at the seventy-something woman standing hunched in front of her then down at the purse. Big and brown, it probably gave the lady back problems, so it wasn't as though she'd really miss it. If nothing else, she was doing the old bat a favor.

She narrowed her eyes when the woman clutched the handbag tighter, wrinkled fingers splayed across the worn leather like it was an irreplaceable national treasure.

She hated having to ask twice. "I said give me your purse."

When the geriatric gulped, eyes searching the dark streets for a Good Samaritan, Logan ripped the bag from her weak grasp and took off down the sidewalk.

Did no one understand the concept of getting mugged anymore? You weren't supposed to fight back for the twenty bucks in your wallet. You weren't supposed to stand defiant in the face of the robber. You were supposed to care more about your life, more about your safety than your possessions.

What was the world coming to?

Slowing, she slid around a corner before breaking into a full out run again. The worn soles of her too small shoes made little noise against the cold pavement, save for wet, sloshing sounds as she splashed through urine tainted puddles.

No one could just be a victim anymore. Everyone had to fight. Everyone had to be a damn *Reader's Digest* cover story.

You should have taken her umbrella, too. Logan smiled as she raised an arm and wiped her rain soaked face on the sleeve of her dirty coat. If rain wasn't the closest she could get to a real shower, she might have considered it. However, running with an open umbrella didn't make for a quick getaway.

Turning sideways, she slipped between the cracked doors of an abandoned warehouse. She sucked in mouthful after mouthful of air, trying to slow the hammering of her heart against her ribs. She shook out the tight muscles in her legs between steps, moving towards the heap of soiled blankets in the far corner.

She seriously needed to find a better way to get money. This ripping off purses and wallets for twenty to forty bucks at a time just wasn't cutting it anymore.

It wasn't until after she'd sank into the damp blankets and dumped out the purse that Logan realized her manufactured bliss was wearing off. Scattering the contents with a swipe of her hand, she tore open the change purse and counted.

Thirty-two dollars.

Thirty-two dollars in the form of thirty-two one-dollar bills.

No credit cards. No ATM card. No checkbook.

Not even a drivers license with an address so she could go punch the stripper loving old lady for giving her grief over thirty-two dollars!

After standing up and shoving the money into her pocket, Logan kicked the purse. "Stupid, perverted crone!" she yelled, taking comfort in the hollow sound as it bounced off the crumbling walls. She'd intended to catch Granny before she went to the strip club, but there were too many people around.

No doubt, the hag was now standing at the police station, crying her eyes out about the hooligan who stole her purse. She was probably making up some story about not being able to buy her life saving medications with her social security.

Logan laughed as she worked through the doors and back out into the alley. Little did the officers know that Grandma was spending hundreds of dollars a month to watch young, muscled studs shake their dicks. Hell, maybe she was paying for more than just a little shaky-shaky.

Maybe she was getting some serious couch time.

Pulling the half-eaten apple she'd found in the trash outside the strip club from her coat pocket, Logan took a bite and continued down the alley. Cold rain pelted her face, acid laced droplets clinging to her eyelashes, dripping from her hair.

Some people said New York City was at its most beautiful in the rain. She truly believed those people had never sauntered down a trash strewn back alley, ankle deep in jagged potholes teeming with fetid body fluids.

Sure, Broadway and Times Square were great places. Fancy cars, expensive clothes, spoiled celebrities. Where some people would stuff more cash in a valet's pocket than most people made in a month.

But that wasn't the city Logan knew.

She knew the darker parts. Chopped cars, ratty clothes, filthy rich drug dealers. Where if you so much as looked up when you heard the crack of a gunshot, the next bullet was shattering *your* skull.

That was the city Logan Ellis had known for over a decade.

She jogged across the street intersecting the alley, unmoved by the screeching tires of an old Buick as it swerved around her. When the driver snarled a lackluster string of obscenities through the passenger window made of plastic and tape, she presented the New York one-finger salute and kept going.

Less than three blocks away, a little bag of powdered-escape lie nestled in the pocket of a greasy man with chipped teeth. She wasn't about to let a car get in her way.

Halfway down the next alley, Logan slowed to a lazy pace. Fifteen yards in front of her, shadowed figures blurred and twisted. Feral growls mingled with the steady drumming of raindrops against the pavement, a symphony of mindless rage and nature's hatred.

Vampires. She stopped and leaned against the grungy brick wall of what used to be a Chinese Buffet. She bit off another piece of apple and chewed it as she watched the three figures attack each other. All roughly the same size, they clashed then drew back, circling like starved animals before doing the same dance again.

Six months ago she'd have run away as fast as her legs would take her. Six months ago she'd have let those legs run her straight to the nearest police station. Unfortunately, six months ago she'd needed those very legs to stay upright when said police tossed her out on her ass after reminding her they didn't take statements from homeless drug addicts.

As an afterthought, she really didn't blame them. What were they supposed to do when a dirty street waif stormed through the doors, screaming about vampires fighting in an alley down the block? Run out into the night with their guns drawn and bust a cap in some undead ass?

Not hardly.

At first, she'd been convinced a bad batch of drugs made her see them. But after seeing another fight break out a week later, then watching one stalk through a dilapidated warehouse leaving a trail of bloodless, vagrant corpses in his wake, she realized no amount of drugs would make them go away.

Neither did a week without drugs.

In the end, she'd found herself with little choice to do anything other than accept that vampires were real, they had fangs, and they were everywhere. There was nothing she or the police could do about it, other than give her yet another NYPD standard issue boot print across her right ass cheek.

Having learned her lesson, now she just kept her distance and waited for the carnage to end. Eventually, they'd either kill each other or scurry away at the first signs of morning, licking their wounds like human sized sewer rats.

Shaking back her sleeve, Logan glanced down at the shattered but still working face of her recently acquired timepiece. Three o'clock in the morning. There was still a solid three hours of darkness before the sun would rear its ugly head.

She stared between the vamps and her watch. She really didn't have time for this kind of obstacle and couldn't take another route. Street dwellers were a territorial lot and she didn't have permission to follow any path but the one she was currently taking.

They left her with little choice.

Shearing off the last good piece of apple between her teeth, she smiled as she turned sideways and planted her right foot. Lifting her left knee, she bent her elbows and locked on her chosen target before whipping the apple core as hard as she could.

It smashed against the tallest vampire's head with a hollow, mushy thud. In less than the time it took her to resume her place against the wall, all three were facing her, fangs clearly visible.

She finished swallowing her dessert and grinned at their disbelieving faces. "Would you beasties mind killing each other somewhere else, or at least stopping for a minute so I can get by?"

The one she'd thrown the fruit at snarled and snapped his teeth together like an angry dog. "Whose Puppet are you?"

She arched a brow. What the hell was that supposed to mean? But she didn't have time to consider it further, focusing instead on the much larger figure fading into view behind her fanged roadblocks. As it loomed forward, the shadows gave way to a pallid face framed by long, dark hair, spilling over broad shoulders.

Now *he* was a classic vampire.

The sound of clicking teeth pulled her attention back to the pissed off puppy and his question. "Puppet? I'm not exactly sure what that means. I suppose the only frayed strings I dance on are God's."

"She's not a Puppet. She's human."

Logan watched, more than just a little amused when her three roadblocks whirled around then straightened. Apparently the new vampire scared them with his comment. Whether it was the deep, rumbling timbre of his voice or the words themselves, she wasn't sure. Either way, the man garbed from head to toe in black didn't appear to be pleased.

He stared down at the men through sharp, narrowed eyes. "How many rules have I set for my city?"

Each passed a glance between the others before the smaller one spoke. "We didn't know she was there."

He raised a large, black gloved hand. "I didn't ask about her. I asked, how many?"

"One, Sir."

"And do you recall the punishment for breaking that one, very simple rule?"

All three managed to nod before their bodies burst into a golden red haze, which quickly dissipated in the falling rain. No flash and flare, no theatric sounds, not even an angry declaration...they'd simply vanished.

Had Logan not seen a vampire die before, she might have felt a tad unnerved by the sight. But having witnessed it a time or two already, she mainly found herself intrigued by how clean the whole process was. There was no release of foul smelling body fluids, no pools of blood to clean up, not even a body to dispose of.

It must be nice to leave nothing behind. Shaking her head to clear the dark memories threatening to overtake her, Logan stepped around the stone-faced ghost and continued down the alley.

She'd barely gotten more than a few feet away before she sensed him fall into step beside her. Eyes focused ahead, hands in her pockets, she kept moving. "Am I supposed to say thank you or something?"

"You have no questions about what you just witnessed?"

"Nope."

"Why?"

"Why should I?"

"I would think, to one such as yourself, it's not exactly normal, surmise it's not something you see every day."

Great. She was being stereotyped by a vampire. She made a mental note to return the favor at the first available opportunity before shooting him a sideways glare. "Well, since *one* such as myself happens to walk these alleys rather frequently, *one* such as myself happens to see that on a fairly regular basis."

"How often?" he asked, his tone tinged with something between anger and concern.

She shrugged. "Once every two, maybe three weeks. It usually ends with one killing the others or all of them running away when the sun spills over the horizon." She balanced her arms out to her sides as she prepared to jump over a large, overflowing pothole. "Does it really matter?"

He caught her just as she landed, strong fingers closing tight around her elbow. "Look at me." He didn't leave her much choice when he whipped her around to face him.

She tipped her head back and stared up into his piercing blue eyes. Had it been a much earlier time in her life, she might have thought him handsome

and those eyes incredibly beautiful, but a decade on the street had done strange things to her perception of beauty.

Had it been a few months ago, she'd have also spit in his face and kneed him in a very special place until he let her go. But after what he'd done to the guys in the alley, she thought better of it. If he could kill other vampires so easily, she could only imagine the mess he'd make of a human.

She momentarily considered the distinct slope of his cheekbones and chiseled cut of his jaw before returning to his eyes. "Happy?"

His firm, full lips drew tight after what felt like an hour of intense scrutiny. "No."

She wrenched her arm free and started across the street towards a run-down convenience store on the corner. Casting a glance back over her shoulder, she smiled when he moved to follow. "That makes two of us."

Chapter 2

Kerestyan Nelek stared through the dingy windows of the convenience store, watching intently as the street waif pointed at something on the wall behind the clerk. Unusually tall and thin to the brink of emaciation, she nodded before tossing a few crumpled dollars on the counter.

She stepped out onto the sidewalk less than a minute later, a pack of cigarettes in one hand and a bottle of water in the other. Shards of short black hair hung in her green eyes, rain still dripping from the jagged ends even as she stood beneath the tattered green awning.

It wasn't until she'd opened the pack, discarded the wrapping in a rusty trashcan and lit a cigarette that she finally acknowledged his presence. "Why are you following me?"

He considered her for another long moment. Thus far, she appeared to have little concern for how dire her situation was. Perhaps she didn't understand. "You've seen something you shouldn't have."

She laughed. It was a light, feminine sound and far more carefree than he'd anticipated. "Buddy, I've seen a lot of things I probably shouldn't have, and done even more."

He narrowed his eyes at her dismissal. "My name is not Buddy, and what you've seen doesn't bode well for your survival."

Again, her melodic laughter filled the air. "Look, Vlad, I've lived on the street for a long time. A lot of things don't and never did bode well for my survival. But at the end of the day, you know what?"

Internally, he grinned at the Dracula reference. It was amazing what modern media had done to his kind. Outwardly, he showed no hint of amusement. "What?"

She drew in a deep breath and blew out a cloud of white smoke. "I'm still here. So spare me the threats and get on with whatever it is you're going to do."

Whatever it was he was going to do, had been decided the moment he'd learned of her presence in the alley. Even more unfortunate for her was the lethal edge the decision gained when he'd stared into her eyes and found she possessed several months' worth of memories involving vampires. However,

her apparent and decided lack of concern for not only his very existence, but her own, caused a long forgotten emotion to spark in his mind.

He stepped forward to join her under the awning. "What's your name?"

She turned and, much to his surprise, motioned for him to follow as she began walking down the sidewalk. "Logan. You?" Taking another drag from her cigarette, her words puffed out past a smile, "Unless it really is Vlad?"

"No, my name isn't Vlad. It's Kerestyan."

"Sounds old." She tucked the bottle of water into a large pocket on the side of her ragged coat, which was easily three sizes too big and made for a man. "So, Kerestyan, what brings you out into the city on a beautiful night like this?"

The sarcasm dripping from her words wasn't lost on him. He returned it. "I was watching the Children."

She coughed out a laugh. "Are you a babysitter?"

"I'm the Lord."

Another smile spanned her colorless lips, lingering somewhere between playful and devious. "Had I known God was so easy on the eyes, I might have thought twice about giving up on Him."

He ignored her appraisal of his physical body and focused on her admission. When he chose to engage with human women, they often commented on his pleasing appearance, but very rarely did they bother to share their beliefs with him. "You don't believe in God?"

She shook her head, lips pursed as she inhaled another mouthful of acrid smoke. "Oh, I believe in Him. I just don't think He believes in me anymore."

Kerestyan absorbed the irony of her statement and followed when she turned down another alley. Ambient light from faded billboards and storefronts cast a pale blue glow down the corridor. Refuse containers lined the crumbling brick walls, their contents spilling over the edges, littering the broken pavement in a rainbow of decaying colors. The stench of rotten food, wet animals and old blood hung heavy in the air, reminding him of London a thousand years previous.

He ground his teeth together, a habit he'd adopted well before his earliest memories of London. Vampires were long rumored to be the most depraved, debased species, yet what humanity allowed itself to be surrounded by never ceased to amaze him. He knew few vampires who didn't surround themselves with luxury at every turn, and even fewer who wouldn't be enraged if caught in a place like this.

A few feet behind her, Kerestyan watched as rats scurried under windblown tents of damp, yellowed newspapers, squeaking and screaming near Logan's feet. She appeared to pay them little mind as she moved for-

ward, her long legs allowing her to cover almost as much ground with one step as he could.

He stared at the back of her dark brown coat, which his heightened perception told him had once been a light caramel color. The woman moved with a confidence, a certainty that belied her familiarity with the territory, as if she knew nothing else – no other home.

Although he knew many humans did, Kerestyan had never understood how one could call a stretch of concrete their home. A lush swath of land one fought for and protected, yes. But not a cold, vapid maze of pavement that lent no comforting qualities.

He cast another glance over the dark alley. A home was a place for family, where safety was felt as easily as warmth and comfort. Even in death he knew what it was to have family, what it meant to have a home.

Did Logan have such a place, or was this truly all she knew?

He closed the distance between them in a single stride and tilted his head towards her. “Where are we going?”

“To see Larry.”

“Who is Larry?”

“A drug dealer.”

Kerestyan felt his lips curl. He only knew one dealer in the city who went by the name of Larry, and he’d never been overly fond of the man. “Why are we going to see a drug dealer?”

She brushed the glowing end of her cigarette against the wall, pinched the end then dropped it into her pocket before offering yet another smile. “So we can buy drugs. What else would we do with a drug dealer?”

He could think of hundreds of things to do with a drug dealer, none of which ended in the dealer’s favor. Unfortunately, he’d quickly learned upon assuming the throne of New York that drugs were an integral part of human society here. And like it or not, a handful of vampires, some of whom were far older than Kerestyan, had their fingers firmly dug into the profits from the trade.

He smiled internally. His systematic eradication plan hadn’t exactly gone over well with those vampires. Then again, it hadn’t gone over well with the humans, either. In the end, too much investigation which brought the wrong kind of human authorities far too close to members of the vampiric race, forced him to accept that drugs always had, and would forever be a part of New York City.

Kerestyan gazed down at Logan, noting for the first time the slightly sunken state of her eyes. “How long have you been engaging with Larry?”

She wrinkled her nose as she pulled the bottle of water and a small plastic case from her pocket. “You make it sound like I’m getting down and dirty

with him." Her body stiffened and her shoulders trembled a second before she stuck out her tongue. "Oh, it makes me want to gag just thinking about it. Yuck. Trust me when I tell you, it's a cash *only* transaction."

Although her reaction brought him great pleasure, and conjured a rather undesirable image of Larry, Kerestyan chose to focus on the matter at hand. "You do understand that whatever your chosen drug is, your life would be substantially better without it. Yes?"

She jerked open the white case, flipped one end over and jammed it into the other, revealing an unexpected but well used toothbrush. "Great. My very own vampire moral compass." Bright blue paste bubbled up from the bristles as she squeezed the end. She slid it in her mouth and held it against the inside of her cheek. "Should those words even be in the same sentence?"

He couldn't help but smile. Truthfully, those words should have never been in the same thought, let alone a spoken sentence. But he wasn't about to openly admit that to her. "Am I to infer that you believe vampires are morally corrupt?"

"Bankrupt," she said, though the word was garbled by the back and forth movement of the brush against her teeth.

Kerestyan stopped walking and crossed his arms over his chest when she turned around to face him. He'd been many things through the course of his existence, but in no way or form was he, or had he ever been, bankrupt. He gave her a hard look. "Bankrupt?"

She closed her mouth around the toothbrush, using her teeth to hold it in place while she twisted open the bottle of water. It was only after she took a large mouthful, swished it around for what felt like an unnecessary amount of time and then spit it out, that she finally returned her attention to him. "Yes, bankrupt. As in, totally depleted or ruined."

He studied the frothy, blue and white marbled puddle less than two inches from his left boot. "I am not morally bankrupt."

She took another drink of water then shoved the head of the brush in the bottle and shook it. "Oh no?" Wickedness spread across her face as she deconstructed the toothbrush then slipped it back into her pocket. "Then tell me, Great-Loving-and-Kind-Lord-Vampire," she paused to toss the bottle in a trashcan, "why you're stalking me."

It wasn't the evil smile draped across her lips he found so intriguing, but more the challenge flickering behind her emerald eyes. "I'm *following* you because I can't allow you to return to your normal life, knowing what you've witnessed."

Her eyes slowly traced the length of his frame before she stepped forward and tipped her head back. "Have you been in this situation before?"

He considered the thin strip of space separating them. Outside of feeding, he'd never had a human, male or female, approach him with such little hesitation. "This exact situation, no."

"One's similar?"

"Yes."

She cocked her head. "Did whoever was in my shoes meet the same end as the guys back in the alley?"

"Sometimes."

She chuckled as she turned and began walking away. "I may not be an expert, but something tells me murder probably strains the moral compass."

"You should know all other avenues were exhausted first."

She slowed and spun on her heel. "Like what?"

Don't explain yourself to the human. Part of him wanted to heed the voice in his mind, but the other side was curious about how she'd respond to the truth. As it was, she already knew far more than she should.

He moved forward, crowding her the way she'd done to him only moments before. "Mental manipulation, memory reconstruction, and in some instances, memory removal."

She didn't back away. Instead, she smiled again, only this time it was a wide grin revealing her perfect teeth. "I'm pretty sure death causes memory removal."

He couldn't resist any longer. "How is it you're wearing a coat which looks to have been dragged behind a vehicle for fifty miles, your pants don't appear to have fared much better, and I'd guess you haven't eaten in days...but you have the teeth of what most would refer to as a supermodel?"

She stretched up to her toes and leaned in close, her warm, minty breath searing his ear. "Most supermodels haven't eaten in days either."

This time, it was his laugh filling the air around them. From look alone, he would've never expected such a quick and intelligent retort. He reached out and brushed away a few strands of wet hair that had fallen in her eyes. "Touché."

Resting back on her feet, she eyed his hand as he withdrew it. "You know, for a bankrupt vampire who's resigned me to death, you're awfully interested in me."

"I wouldn't necessarily call it interest."

"No?"

"I'd term it more as temporary curiosity."

"Why? I'm obviously not the first human who's been in this predicament with you." She tipped her head from side to side. "Okay, so maybe not this exact predicament if I believe what you said earlier. But still, why me?"

He stared down into her distant eyes. Much to his dismay, the reasons were growing by the minute, but he disclosed the most important. "You show little concern for your own safety, not to mention your complete dismissal of what I am."

"I don't dismiss what you are." She shrugged and started walking again. "It's just...what am I supposed to do about it?" She didn't leave time for him to answer before she added, "About as much as I could do if you tried to kill me right here."

He fell into step beside her. "I assure you, should I decide to end your life, I won't do so in the middle of a vermin infested alleyway."

She walked for a few minutes in silence, seemingly transfixed by the broken pavement at her feet. It wasn't until they neared the end of the alley that she finally raised her head and nodded at Larry, who stood under a broken streetlight on the corner across from them, hands hidden in the pockets of his dirty grey trench coat.

She stepped into the street but turned, leaving him with a view of her thin profile. "Whatever you do to me, I'm sure it'll be better than any way I'd die out here." She stood quiet for another moment before inclining her head towards the corner opposite him. "I have some business with Larry. Should I expect you'll be waiting for me?"

Kerestyan slowly nodded. "We've not yet to begun to finish *our* business."

Chapter 3

Logan slid the baggie into her coat pocket then nodded at Larry, who smiled up at her, chipped teeth beaming rotten yellow. She rubbed the warm plastic between her fingers and felt her muscles relax, solely from knowing it was in her possession.

"Who's your boyfriend?" Larry asked, motioning across the street behind her.

She turned and smiled as her eyes traced the length of Kerestyan's body. He was, without question, a much better sight than the one audibly counting twenty one-dollar bills less than a foot away.

He looked out of place standing at the mouth of the alley, an image of irony with his wide shoulders and regal stance as the wind sent trash scraping across the concrete around him. His stature alone was an oddity in this section of town, but his black button down shirt, matching slacks and clean, knee length wool coat, were even more so.

Truthfully, he looked like a business man who'd made a wrong turn and ended up having to walk, because as destiny would have it, his Mercedes broke down.

She waited until Larry reached twenty before she laughed. "He's not my boyfriend. Not even close."

Larry shoved the cash in his pocket. "Then what the hell's he waitin' for?"

After pushing her rain soaked hair away from her face, Logan shook the water from her hands. "Honestly, I have no idea."

Larry looked her up and down from beneath a single raised brow, an appraisal that made her skin crawl. "He's dressed a little too fancy to be standin' out in the rain for nothin'. You start hookin'?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, Larry. I started earlier tonight and already caught myself a millionaire. He says he gets off on skinny druggies with nice teeth."

He shrugged, pulled a cell phone from his pocket and started punching numbers. "I've heard worse. Take care of yourself." He raised the phone to his ear and flashed that disturbing smile again. "If you wanna work for

someone, let me know. I know a couple a people who'd love to add a tall white girl to their stable."

She turned her back to him and stepped into the street. "Thanks, Larry. I'll keep that in mind." She lowered her voice. "Keep it in mind in case all of the Dumpsters in New York suddenly become empty and it never rains again."

When she heard Kerestyan laugh, she glared at him. Considering she was still a good fifteen feet away from where he stood, it was highly unlikely he'd heard her grumbled comment. "What are you laughing at?"

He didn't say anything until she'd rejoined him in the alley. "The chances of that happening are remote at best."

Well, apparently he did hear her. She started to ask for an explanation, but stopped and rerouted her thoughts. "I take it super bat hearing comes standard on all vampires?"

If she wasn't mistaken, the glow behind his intense blue eyes was born of pure amusement. "Super bat hearing?"

"Yes." She pulled the half cigarette from her pocket and lit it. "Don't all the movies and whatnot compare vampire abilities to bats?"

He gave a sideways nod, which caused his long, wet hair to fall over one shoulder. "I suppose they do. However, I have to admit I know very few vampires who can turn into the fabled bat."

"Really? No bats?" She let smoke roll across her tongue for a minute before blowing it out. "Well, what about turning into a wolf?"

"No. Vampires do not turn into wolves." His tone was curt, and far more serious than she expected.

Interesting. She took another drag from her cigarette and tipped her head to the side. "I remember seeing *Fright Night* when I was a kid. That guy turned into a wolf."

He closed his eyes and exhaled a gusty breath. "I don't care what modern media depicts. Vampires do not turn into wolves. That form is reserved for an entirely different species."

Logan coughed and sputtered a few times before she could force the words out. "A different species? What species?"

With the way his lips thinned and tightened, it was clear he didn't appreciate the questions or their delivery. But his displeasure became even more obvious when he stopped and spun her to face him, his strong fingers digging into her biceps. "You need to make a decision."

She tried to jerk free of his hold, but this time it didn't work. He squeezed tighter, sending shocks of pain down the backs of her arms. "Let me go. You said you wouldn't kill me in the middle of a dirty alley." She stumbled back

and dropped her cigarette when he did as she asked. "What's wrong? What the hell did I do?"

He straightened, dark eyes locked on her. His pale face was cold and expressionless, like it had been right before he'd done whatever resulted in the death of her once roadblocks. "The amount of information you currently possess calls for immediate execution. It benefits neither of us for me to add to your knowledge of the supernatural. Your choice is death, or temporary confinement while other avenues are explored. Make a decision."

Logan couldn't do anything for a moment but stare up at him. Had she known two simple questions would cause such an extreme mood shift, she wouldn't have asked. But then, maybe it didn't have anything to do with her questions. Maybe he just ran out of blood or something and it happened to coincide with the timing of her questions?

Maybe vampires suffered from some backwards version of PMS...

The deep, rumbling sound of him clearing his throat pulled her attention away from considering his potential blood related emotional problems. She tipped her head back and closed her eyes, letting the cold rain splash against her face. "You want me to make the decision?"

"Yes."

"Right here, right now?"

"Yes." For the first time, the word rolled out as a growl.

She opened her eyes to see his thick arms folded over his chest, biceps straining the fabric of his coat. "Neither choice is very appealing."

"Neither is this situation."

She sighed. She wasn't exactly thrilled with the situation either. It wasn't like she crawled out of her grungy warehouse one day and went searching for vampires. Of all the times she'd stumbled across them, aside from her first encounter, only two instances ended in her having to run away. Once, they'd even run from her. But more often than not, they just continued attacking each other or sucking on a bum or prostitute, and paid her little mind.

She considered Kerestyan's set jaw and narrowed eyes. Not one of those vampires looked like *him*. While he only appeared to be in his mid-thirties, there was something flickering behind his eyes, something dangerous about the way he held himself that said he hadn't been thirty for a very, very long time.

She shook her head. With that realization, she definitely didn't like her choices. "Why don't you just make the decision, Lord Vampire?"

He gave single, clipped nod. "From this moment forward, consider yourself remanded to my custody, duration unknown."

She threw her hands out. "Wait! What happened to temporary?"

He lowered his arms and moved forward, causing her to take small steps back until her shoulders were pressed against the slimy wall, palms flat against his hard chest. "You gave up negotiation rights when you refused to decide your own fate."

It wasn't until this moment, with her back to the wall, that she finally felt the odd tingles running the length of her spine. Fear had never been an emotion she particularly cared for, and feeling it now, in a situation she'd lost complete control of, only made her despise it more.

It also made her realize just how much smaller she was than him. At a little over six feet tall, most men were either at eye level or shorter than her. But the big, angry vampire in front of her, who still hadn't backed off, was a head taller and easily twice as wide.

She leaned her head back against the wall and cast a glance down one side of the alley, then the other. Choice one: She could knee him in the junk and hope he doubled over long enough for her to race down the alley and find a place to hide. Pro: She had to know the nooks and crannies of this end of town better than he did. Con: If she didn't, chances were he wouldn't be pleased at all and it would probably lead to memory removal.

Choice two: She accepted fate had dealt her a really fucked up hand and she'd become his prisoner – whether she liked it or not. Pro: Unless he started physically abusing her (which she didn't get the sense was his style), even prison involved a bed and three meals a day, none of which were prepared in a trashcan. Con: See memory removal.

Logan searched Kerestyan's stern face when the taut muscles under her fingertips flexed, taking on the texture of steel. "I don't really have a choice, do I?"

"No. You've had too much exposure to vampires to undergo mental manipulation or memory reconstruction, and your drug use only complicates the process."

The tingles danced a frantic number at the top of her spine, but what he'd said was only half the reason...

He didn't blink.

He didn't breathe.

The entire time she'd been staring at him, watching his eyes for any hint of emotion, not once did they close. His chest didn't rise and fall at a steady pace underneath her hands. The only air he inhaled was just before he spoke, the only air he exhaled was while he talked or as an expression of irritation when she'd asked about vampires turning into wolves.

He really was a vampire. Not that she'd doubted it, she knew they were real. She'd seen them enough to believe her own eyes, whether they were drug hazed at times or not. She'd just never had a conversation with one,

never took the time to seriously consider the ramifications of their existence or the possible affect on her life.

Maybe she should have.

She stared between her fingers at the tiny crisscrosses of black fabric that made up his shirt. "What avenues does that leave then?"

His chest rose ever so slightly. "Not many." It didn't fall.

The damn tingles exploded across the skin at the nape of her neck and shot down her arms, chilling her fingers more than the cold air and rain combined.

He inched closer and pushed an arm between her lower back and the wall. "Do you have any personal items you'd like to collect?" His voice was quiet, almost a whisper.

She closed her eyes, knowing any opportunity to enact choice one had just slipped away. "No."

"Is there anything else you need before we leave?"

She gave in to the shiver working its way through her body, focusing instead on how similar the feeling of complete resignation was to the moment she decided to leave home. How empty it felt then, how hard it was to feel now.

When she was little, her mother always told her everything happened for a reason. That life was a series of fragile moments strung together with diamond thread, and how she believed those threads led to a defining moment that forever changed a person's life.

Everything seemed to go still as memories Logan wished could be removed flashed in her mind. Images blurred and twisted. Hazy pictures of happiness melted into crudely drawn nightmares, brought to life through a soundtrack of angry screams.

She shook her head, wanting nothing more than to drown it all out. She couldn't help but wonder how many threads connected to this moment. How many glittering strands were woven around her now, while she stood in more than just the darkness of the alley?

"Logan? Do you need anything?"

Pushing her memories as far back into her mind as possible, she forced herself to smile. "How about a juicy steak and a bottle of vodka?"

A cool puff of air caressed her ear at the same moment his arm tightened around her, pulling her body tight against his. "I'll see what I can do. In the meantime, keep your eyes closed. Mystical travel tends to be easier on the human psyche if the subject doesn't watch."

Better for the human psyche it might have been, but his comment only made her very human curiosity peak. She squeezed her eyes hard, fighting the urge to open them as wide as possible. But when wind screamed down

the alley, kicking up trash, dust, and if she wasn't mistaken, a squeaking rat or two – she was more than convinced of the reason to keep them closed.

It was when the wind reached fevered pitch that she felt the pavement drop out from under her feet and a wave of nausea crash over her. Her stomach churned and tightened. The muscles of her abdomen cramped and twitched. Bile seared the back of her throat.

For fifteen seconds, she felt like she'd been sucked into icy oblivion.

But as quickly as the sense of dislocation came, it ended.

She wiggled her toes, relieved to feel solid ground against the soles of her shoes again. She had no idea where she was, though she knew they weren't outside because she wasn't getting wet. She had no clue what the hell had just happened, she only knew she never wanted to do it again.

"Who the hell is that?"

She slowly opened one eye when a deep, gravelly voice filled the room. A rather dark room she quickly realized, save a subtle blue light flickering against the white walls.

"Her name is Logan." She heard Kerestyan's voice a second before his arm left her waist and a lamp clicked on a few feet away. "She's a guest."

"Whose guest?"

Logan really couldn't do anything but blink when the owner of the voice stood up from a comfortable looking couch across the room and stared right at her. She'd seen a lot of strange things on the streets of New York City, but this...this took the cake.

A armor. The guy was wearing armor as clothing. Thick, black leather covered his body, and attached at the forearms, chest, thighs and shins were molded metal plates. The chest piece had the head of a dragon carved into it, but aside from that one simple embellishment, every inch of it was blacker than coal.

Kerestyan waved a hand in Medieval Man's general direction. "Sit down, Odin. She's *my* guest."

Odin, if that indeed was his real name, looked almost identical to Kerestyan in every way, except for their clothes, the faint scar marring his bottom lip, and the fact that his eyes were black. And not just his irises; his eyes were completely blacked out.

He raked her with a hard glare from those creepy depths then scowled. "It's wet and dirty. Where did you get it?"

Did she really just hear that? She stiffened and narrowed her eyes to match his. "I'm not an it."

He turned towards Kerestyan, mouth agape. "You brought one home that can still talk?"

Kerestyan made a good show of exhaling a deep breath as he shrugged his coat from his shoulders. "Yes, she is wet and dirty. Yes, she can speak. And yes, she is human." He stuffed his gloves into the pocket of his coat then draped it over the back of a dark grey chair. "Her name is Logan, not it, and you will address her by her name and nothing else while she's in my home."

Odin's black eyes popped wide open. "You're keeping it?"

Kerestyan disappeared through a doorway, but his voice seemed to stay in the room. "Do me a favor. Knock off the offended vampire routine. She's more than aware of what you are, and probably cares less about your undead state than you do about her dependence on oxygen."

Logan smiled as she looked around the room, but even more when Odin wrinkled his nose as her eyes moved past him. Now that she knew, she wasn't surprised this was Kerestyan's home.

It suited him.

The colors were dark but rich. The furniture wasn't fancy, more comfortable in appearance and constructed from durable materials like leather. A few black and white photographs of the New York skyline from different time periods adorned the walls. Plants set atop various dark wood end tables, matching bookcases took up the wall farthest from her, and a line of heavy black curtains covered the entire wall to her right.

And of course there was the large television situated in the corner near the bookshelves, just a few feet away from the Renaissance Reject who was still giving her the evil eye.

She took a few hesitant steps towards him. "Do I offend you or something?"

It looked as though he intended to respond, but his mouth snapped shut when Kerestyan came back into the room with a cobalt blue plate in hand.

He held it out towards her. In the center was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, surrounded by apple slices. "It's not steak, but it'll have to do for now."

"No! Don't feed it. It'll never leave!"

Logan would have responded to the Tin Can, she really would have, but there were two very different reasons why she didn't. One, Kerestyan was already striding across the room. And two, she forgot just how sticky peanut butter, jelly and bread became when mixed with saliva.

By the time she managed to clear a path between her teeth and tongue, Kerestyan already had his finger jammed into Odin's chest. "I told you what her name was. Brother or not, I'll rend the flesh from your bones if you defy my wishes again. Remember where you're standing."

Brothers? Well that certainly explained the resemblance. Content to let Kerestyan handle his own obviously dysfunctional family member, Logan

shoved a piece of apple into her mouth and savored the clean, sweet taste of it.

Besides, who was she to interrupt vampire dinner theatre?

Odin tipped his head down and stared at Kerestyan's hand for a second before knocking it away. "Yeah, yeah. Your home, your law, and all that other old bullshit I've tried so hard to forget. What the hell is she doing here?"

"She isn't here of her own accord."

"Ooh, is she food?"

"No!" Kerestyan boomed. "She is not food."

Logan covered her plate as Odin took a few steps in her direction, but relaxed when he stopped a good ten feet away. She arched a brow, feeling a sudden and rather strange kinship with the apples as he leaned forward and sniffed the air around her.

He scrunched up his face and covered his nose. "Oh, gross. She stinks like a Jersey sewer." He lowered his hands and used one to waft air towards his face. "She's also an addict. My nose says heroin, white not brown, injected. For at least three years, maybe four."

Kerestyan shook his head. "She's not a glass of wine."

Logan straightened. "You can smell my blood?"

"When you open a package of meat, can you smell if it's rotten?"

She didn't award his response with an answer. Instead, she shrugged and took the biggest bite of peanut butter and jelly sandwich humanly possible. She'd been cut down most of her life, one more person demeaning her, vampire or other, wasn't going to make a difference.

"Odin, leave her alone."

"No. She seemed more than capable of defending herself when I called her an it, she can do the same now."

Logan licked a glob of strawberry jelly from her lower lip and smiled up at Odin. Only one comment seemed to perfectly fit her current situation. "I see dead people."

He leaned forward, hands on his hips. "Me, too. It's the only explanation for what's standing in front of me. Unless some high school kids broke into the anatomy closet and stole the classroom skeleton, stretched some cadaver skin over that bitch then cast an ancient ritual to animate it."

She laughed. For as much as she now disliked the bastard, she had to admit he was amusing. "Did they do the same to that shit you're wearing? You do realize it's 2008, right?" She raised a hand. "Wait, let me see if I can reach you using your own language. You do ken 'tis year of our Lord two thousand and eight, aye?"

He stood up and turned to Kerestyan, a shit eating grin stretched all the way across his face. "I shall dub her, Bones. Henceforth, I shall refer to her by no other means. 'Tis now her title, she shall wear it well."

Kerestyan didn't respond to his brother's anachronistic declaration. Instead, he pulled a roll of bills from his pocket and tossed it at Odin. "There's still two hours before sunrise. Would you please go down to the grocery store that's open all night and buy Logan a few articles of clothing?"

Logan tried as hard as she could to keep the last piece of apple firmly in her mouth when the roll of bills sailed across the room and smacked into Kerestyan's chest with a hollow thud.

"I am so not going to buy her clothes. I'm your twin, not your bitch."

Kerestyan glared at him. "I can't very well do it myself. After witnessing both of you in childish action, by the time I returned, you'd most likely be missing a vital piece of anatomy, she'd be dead, and my home would be in flames."

Odin gave her a dirty look but smiled at Kerestyan. "Yeah, you're probably right." He reached out and pinched Kerestyan's cheek. "But I'm only doing it because my little brother asked so sweet."

It was a good thing Logan had swallowed her last bite of sandwich; otherwise she'd be choking on it. If for no reason other than the half-appalled, half-murderous look on Kerestyan's face.

Of course, by the time Odin had walked over to her, snatched the empty plate, unzipped her coat with a quick drop of his hand then wrenched it over her head...she was fairly sure her face mirrored Kerestyan's with astounding accuracy.

When he grabbed at the hem of her first shirt, she jumped back and smacked his hand. "What the hell are you doing?"

A rather animalistic and equally as unsettling growl rumbled in his throat. "I can't buy you clothes if I can't see what size you are. And I swear to God, if you so much as touch me again, I'll smear you from one end of this penthouse to the other."

Much to her relief, Kerestyan collared Odin from behind and yanked him back. "Logan, would you be so kind as to strip down to a single layer, please?"

She smiled at him. "Why yes, Kerestyan, because you asked so nicely and didn't start ripping off my clothes, I'd be more than happy to fulfill your polite request."

Odin pushed the now laughing Kerestyan away. "You two sarcastic bitches deserve each other."

By the time Logan had removed shirts one through six, all of which ranged an odd span of colors and sizes, the laughter had faded and both men

were staring at her. One mouth hung open while the other formed a thin line of disapproval.

She smoothed the long sleeve of her tight, orange t-shirt. "What? You've never seen a woman wear more than one shirt before?"

Odin's mouth closed and opened a few times before words finally came out. "She's like a fuckin' seven layer burrito someone forgot was in the back of the fridge for six months."

She had to laugh. How could she not with such vivid imagery coming from someone who dressed like he was going on an unholy crusade at any moment? "It's February in New York. Considering I sleep wherever I can, which is mainly outside or in buildings that don't have electricity, learning to layer is essential."

He actually snorted. "So is eating, Bones. Did you ever try that?"

She stepped back when Odin squatted in front of her and moved to poke her, having learned her lesson about smacking him. "Stop it."

It may have stopped him from touching her, but it didn't stop him from staring at her chest and abdomen like she was a science project. "I think I can actually see all of her ribs." He stood up, inhaled a deep breath through his nose then returned to Kerestyan's side. "You should probably call Vouclade."

Kerestyan nodded. "Agreed. Are you returning to the castle tonight?"

"Yeah, after I get her the clothes you asked for. Want me to tell him to stop by in the morning?"

"If you would, please."

Not that she was part of the conversation anymore, but she had to point it out. "It is morning. And because I just have to ask, who's Vouclade and why is he in a castle?"

Odin grinned. "Not your morning, our morning. Vouclade is our brother, and he's in the castle because he lives there."

She squeezed her eyes closed then opened them slowly. "You're two thirds of triplets?"

This time, it was Kerestyan who smiled at her. "Vouclade is our brother in blood, not birth. Odin and I are brothers in both."

Logan rubbed a hand down her face. Vampires, castles and blood brothers. What the hell had she gotten herself into?

And where did names like Odin and Vouclade come from?

She splayed her fingers and peeked between them. "I take it you're named after the Greek God of War, Odin?"

His face scrunched up in a most unattractive way. "What is this, mix and match mythology hour? Do I look Greek to you?" She didn't have time to an-

swer. "I'm a fucking Norseman, not some Greek pussy." He fisted a hand and slammed it against his chest plate. "I wasn't named after Odin, I *am* Odin."

She dropped her hand, eyes immediately jumping to Kerestyan as if she needed his affirmation. "You've got to be kidding me."

He raised a hand and rubbed the back of his neck. "I assure you, he was only worshiped as a God because of his supernatural abilities."

Logan stared between the twins. As if her night hadn't already taken a surreal turn, now she had to find a way to digest that she was standing less than five feet away from a revered mythological figure?

Maybe memory removal wouldn't be such a bad thing after all.

Odin smacked Kerestyan on the back of the shoulder hard enough the crack echoed through the room. "I'm gonna go get Bones some clothes. While I'm gone, I'd suggest a bath. Oh, and don't forget to give her a razor. Lord knows how much bush she's grown since the last time she used one." Then, right in front of her all too sober eyes, he disappeared into thin air.

In the moment immediately following, Logan felt as though she'd taken the strange train to Vampireville. Human population: one lonely addict.

Unwilling to consider the thought any further, she gathered her shirts and coat then glanced up at Kerestyan, who was already watching her. "Where should I put these?"

"Follow me."

She indulged his request and stayed close as he moved through the doorway he'd used earlier. A short hallway brought them to the kitchen, which much like the living room was decorated in dark colors and rather large. All the expected appliances were present, along with a few she didn't recognize.

Another longer hallway opened at the back of the kitchen, four doors lined either side spaced about twenty feet apart, while a single door ended the hall roughly a hundred feet away. More art decorated the walls, only now it was in the form of paintings. Most were of older city scenes, and she was willing to bet not a single one was American.

He stopped in front of the third door on the right, pushed it open, and then turned around to face her. "This will be your room for the duration of your stay. A full bathroom adjoins it, so you should have all the privacy you need. There's a range of toiletries in the cabinet under the sink, feel free to use whatever you please."

Logan peered into the room, wondering whether what was happening to her was really all that bad. Huge wasn't even the right word to describe it, and luxurious barely did it justice. She inched inside when he stepped back and motioned towards the door. If he'd looked out of place standing in the alley, right now she had to be returning the humorous image tenfold.

The large bed, a striking vision of cobalt blue velvet and silver silk, set angled in the left corner at the back of the room. Ornate chests, mirrors and dressers, all made of blackened woods and glass were scattered about. And the thick, black carpet actually squished under her feet as she slowly crept farther into the room.

She was definitely the odd one out now, with her arms full of clothes equally as dirty as the ones she still wore, and just as wet.

It wasn't until she heard a door close in the hallway that she realized Kerestyan had left her. She turned around just in time to see his large frame fill the doorway, dark fabric draped over one of his forearms, lips slightly upturned at the corners.

"Do you like the room?" he asked.

Truthfully, it wasn't her style, but she'd never say it wasn't beautiful. She also wouldn't deny it had a uniquely aged appeal. "It feels really old."

"It is. Well, not the room itself, but everything inside." His firm lips stretched into a full smile. "Including me."

She considered his position, leaning against the door frame. "Technically, you aren't in the room."

He chuckled. "Let's not argue semantics. I do that on an almost nightly basis with Odin." He slid the mass of black fabric down his arm and held it out for her. "I brought you something to wear after you bathe. I apologize if they swallow you, but there's a marked difference in our stature."

She accepted his offering and resisted the odd impulse to hold his clothes under her nose. "I thought Odin was bringing me new clothes?"

"One thing you'll learn about Odin, he's easily distracted." He raised a hand and let the genuine smile touch his eyes. "He will bring you clothes, he said he would and he never goes back on his word. However, it may not be with any kind of alacrity."

"So you're saying it could be tonight, could be a week from now, but eventually they'll turn up?"

"Yes. Eventually is a perfect word."

She jostled the arm holding her clothes. "What should I do with these?"

He seemed to consider the pile for a moment. "Honestly, I think it would be better for your health if you allowed me to dispose of them, but I can have them laundered if you prefer."

Logan stared down at her soiled layers. If someone had asked her a week ago whether making the choice to throw them away would be so hard, she would have easily said no. But right now, in a situation she had no control over, standing in a room that wasn't hers, deciding to throw away something that truly was her own, was more difficult than she ever imagined.

When he attempted to pull shirt six from the top of the pile, she tightened her arm against her chest. "I, I don't..."

"It's alright, Logan." His voice took on a gentle quality that made her shiver. "I'll have them laundered."

Relaxing her arm, she allowed him to take her clothing. Once he had everything except her coat, she moved back in an effort to put a little more space between herself and the vampire. "Thanks. So, do you have any house rules?"

"No. You're free to move about as you wish. The only thing I ask is should you move about during the day, please don't throw open any of the heavy draperies. The sun and I have a mutual disdain for each other."

Somehow, she wasn't surprised. "Roger that, Lord Vampire."

"One more thing, should you choose to explore and Odin happens to return in the midst of you doing so, consider him the mean dog and yourself the child with the sharp stick."

Her wide grin was completely involuntary. "Doesn't deal well with humans, huh?"

"On the contrary, he spends a great deal of time with humans. It's just that there are places he expects them to be, and places he doesn't. My home happens to be one of the places he doesn't."

"Oh."

He leaned forward and rested a hand on the door handle. "Don't worry, given a little time, he'll get used to you." He bowed his head as he pulled the door closed. "Goodnight, Logan."

The second the door clicked into place, Kerestyan's offered clothes, which were so neatly draped over Logan's forearm, enveloped her face. She smiled against the soft material and inhaled deep, letting the scent fill her senses. Smoky and warm, the aroma reminded her of a wood fire just after a cold rain. There was also a hint of something sweet and earthy, and she would have tried harder to place the scent had the ghostly image of a campfire, complete with the faces of her mother, sister and father, not flared to life in her mind.

Forcing the memory aside, Logan dropped her coat on the floor, tossed Kerestyan's clothes on the bed then rushed to remove her own. After opening the door a few feet away and flipping on the light to make sure it was the bathroom, she dumped her wet underclothes in the chair outside and slammed the door closed behind her.

She pressed the heels of her palms against her closed eyes and curled her fingers around her forehead, letting her fingernails dig into her scalp. Given her current situation, she didn't have the strength to relive her past. What she needed to do was wash three weeks' worth of New York City filth

from her body. She needed to focus on what was happening now, not what used to be.

She didn't need to remember how normal her life had been eighteen years ago when she was only twelve years old. She didn't need to remember how empty it'd become less than a year later. And she certainly didn't want to remember what it would never be again.

Chapter 4

“Where’d Bones go?”

Kerestyan looked up from the book he’d been reading when Odin’s much too happy voice broke the peaceful silence of the living room. “She’s sleeping.”

Odin wiggled his black eyebrows. “Is she naked?”

Kerestyan flipped the book closed and stretched in his chair. “I would assume not. I offered her a pair of sleeping pants and a t-shirt since I knew how unlikely it was you’d return in a reasonable amount of time.”

Odin dropped a canvas duffle bag on the floor. “It’s only Noon. Besides, I stopped at home and told Vouclade you needed a vet.” He kicked the bag, which landed directly in front of Kerestyan’s feet. “Her clothes are in there.”

Kerestyan picked up the bag and set it in his lap. When he pulled open the zipper and saw the contents, a smile curved his lips. “You made her clothes.”

Odin reached up and scratched the back of his head, false irritation crinkling the faint lines around his eyes. “It’s not like I had a choice. The all night grocery store doesn’t sell a size two meant to fit a six foot tall bean pole.”

And thus his brother’s true colors emerged. It was just a shame he refused to show them except for rare occasions.

“Thank you, Odin.”

He abruptly turned and headed for the kitchen. “Yeah, yeah. You know you owe me a lot more than the grand you gave me, right?”

Kerestyan laughed as he set the bag back on the floor and moved to stand in the doorway of the kitchen. Nothing was closer to the truth. The only skill that outshined Odin’s ability to make war – was his remarkable talent as a tailor.

He arched a brow as Odin, nose to the air, sniffed his way down the hallway leading to the bedrooms. Apparently his skill as a bloodhound was becoming almost as remarkable.

Odin stopped outside Logan’s door and grumbled before working his way back to the kitchen. “She’s sleeping because she’s high as a fucking kite, you know that right? I can’t believe you let her shoot up in there.”

Kerestyan slumped against the door frame. He'd caught the sweet yet chemically laced scent shortly after he'd left her room, but hadn't felt it was his place to intervene. "I'm not her keeper, Odin. What she chooses to do with her own body is none of my business."

"You may not be her keeper, but that doesn't mean you can't be her savior. Have you smelled her? I mean, really gotten close and taken a big whiff?"

If he'd intended the "savior" comment to sting, it worked. "No," Kerestyan growled. "Unlike you, I never viewed her as food."

After pulling open the door, Odin buried his head in the refrigerator. "You should. Because what she's choosing to do with her own body," his accusing black eyes peeked over the top of the door, "her very human and very fragile body...is slowly killing her. Not to mention how much it's gonna piss off Vouclade." His eyes returned to searching the shelves. "You know how he feels about drug addicts."

Kerestyan rubbed a hand across his forehead. He knew all too well how Vouclade felt about substance abusers and their dealers. After all, he'd been a more than willing participant in the short lived systematic eradication plan, and a rather happy one at that.

The impending conversation with Vouclade had the propensity to get very ugly, equally as fast.

"Kerestyan? Are you listening to me?"

Kerestyan stepped back into the living room and picked up the book he'd been reading before Odin so rudely interrupted his day. "What form of payment would you like for the clothing?"

"I wanna know what you plan on doing with Bones."

He straightened and stared at the empty slot on the bookshelf across the room.

So much for changing the subject.

He inhaled a deep breath then slowly blew it out. As much as he wanted to, lying to Odin wasn't an option. Not that he couldn't, it just never worked. "I haven't decided yet."

Only a few moments of silence passed before Odin reappeared in the living room with a sandwich almost as big as his head. He took a disturbingly large bite and somehow managed to make intelligible sounds around it. "Well, you better get your ass in gear and make up your mind before Vouclade gets here."

"I'm already here."

Kerestyan turned just in time to see his older sibling materialize through the steel elevator doors, which also served as the entrance to his home. "A little warning would have been nice."

"I told Odin I would be leaving shortly after he did."

"Oobs." This time the cheese stringing between the sandwich and Odin's big mouth hampered his annunciation.

"Would you like me to leave?" Vouclade asked.

Kerestyan shook his head. "No. I just hadn't fully prepared for your arrival. I was expecting to see you sometime after sunset."

When a rather satisfied moan followed the wet sounds of chewing, Vouclade narrowed his grey eyes. "Why don't we adjourn to the kitchen before I kill your brother?"

"Mucc Ooo, Ookie."

Fairly certain he'd understood exactly what Odin had just said, Kerestyan smiled at Vouclade. "He's your brother, too."

Vouclade melted through the wall between the living room and kitchen, but not before countering. "Genetics are thicker than blood."

By the time Kerestyan put the book away and made it to the table in the back corner of the kitchen, opposite the hallway leading to the bedrooms, Vouclade was already sitting with his hands neatly folded in front of him.

"So tell me, Kerestyan, what's so interesting about your human."

Knowing how Vouclade preferred to get right to the point, Kerestyan sat down and did his best to appease him. "Aside from needing basic medical care, I believe she's suffered some kind of emotional trauma."

"And?"

"And I would imagine she'd benefit from some kind of therapy. I thought you would be more than capable of helping her. You are the family doctor."

A single obsidian brow arched over the top of Vouclade's wire rimmed glasses. "I'm well aware of my station, thank you. However, not every human needs therapy, Kerestyan. What makes you believe she does, and that she'd even agree to it?"

"For a human, she's remarkably detached and entirely disengaged from the world around her. Her emotional responses are few and far between, and it takes an extreme amount of provocation to elicit one."

Vouclade cocked his head, his long, black dreadlocks sliding across his leather clad shoulder with the movement. "Have you tried to provoke her?"

Kerestyan nodded. "I threatened to kill her, to which she seemed completely unmoved. I also physically accosted her and forced her to make a decision between death and imprisonment, to which her emotional response was minimal at best."

"Maybe she knew you didn't mean it."

Kerestyan relaxed in his chair and closed his eyes. He should have known his brother would try to psycho analyze him first. "At the time, I was more than serious and had every intent to do so."

"But you didn't."

He opened his eyes. "No, I didn't. She's strangely intriguing for a human. It's not often you find one who's been exposed to vampires, with no explanation for our existence, who shows such little concern for our presence. She simply accepted it and adjusted accordingly."

Vouclade didn't appear to be impressed. Then again, his cold and logical demeanor didn't lend well to emotional displays of any kind. "Odin told me he suspects she's lived on the streets for quite some time. Perhaps her survival instincts have been honed to a fine point. Maybe she realized there was little she could do about the heathens roaming your city and thought it best to stay away instead of inquiring as to why they had fangs."

Kerestyan caught the whisper of bare feet against hardwood a second before he heard Logan's voice. "Actually, I just didn't care."

He focused past Vouclade to see her, dressed in the clothes he'd given her, standing at the other end of the kitchen. He stood up and rested a hand on the back of the chair he intended to pull out for her as a flood of warm sensations rippled in his blood.

Bathed, she looked like an entirely different woman.

Her glossy black hair hung in her eyes, lending her a sexy, playful quality he hadn't noticed before. Her skin, although still pale, starkly contrasted the dark t-shirt and satin pants, making her green eyes glow with an alluring intensity. And her lips, once tight and colorless, now relaxed and taunted him with a dusky pink hue even from across the room.

The light scents of mint and juniper invaded his senses as she slowly moved towards him, the gentle sway of her stride allowing him to see the erect state of her nipples as his t-shirt shifted over her small breasts.

Though she wasn't what the general human population would consider beautiful, there was something in her confident manner, something about the way she sauntered up to him and stood only inches away that made every inch of his body acutely aware of hers.

It was the parting of her lips and the flash of her perfect teeth that pulled his attention back to her eyes. "I take it you approve of the way I clean up, Lord Vampire?"

He nodded, taken even more by her direct nature. "I do." He reached out and tucked an unruly strand of hair behind her ear, enjoying the soft, warm feel of her skin and the damningly seductive curve of her lips as she smiled up at him. "I've never wished to repossess a shirt before."

The acute sound of choking that emanated from the living room, followed by unnecessarily loud coughing, reminded Kerestyan they weren't exactly alone. He withdrew his hand and pulled out the chair across from

Vouclade. "Please, sit and accept my apologies. I meant no offense by talking about you when you weren't present."

He sucked in a sharp breath when, instead of walking around him, Logan slipped her thin body between him and the back of the chair. He stiffened as her taut nipples grazed his chest, rousing the slumbering animal inside him. He pressed his lips together, struggling to keep his fangs from growing as he moved to retake his own seat.

It'd been a long time since merely the touch of a woman had stirred the beast inside him. He shifted as a surge of blood rushed to his groin. It'd been even longer since anything but the promise of feeding had stirred that, too.

He focused back on Logan as she smiled at Vouclade, who watched her through curious eyes. "Is Kerestyan always so damn polite and courteous?"

The bastard nodded. "Yes. If you find it distasteful now, imagine being subjected to it for ten millennia."

She wrinkled her nose as she braced her hands against the arms of the chair then curled her long legs beneath her. "Now *that* would be torture." She eyed Vouclade's black leather shirt as disbelief touched her eyes. "But ten thousand years? That's just an exaggeration for effect, right?" She didn't sound the least bit convinced.

Although Kerestyan wasn't sure it was possible anymore, by the way Vouclade's spine straightened, he actually appeared offended. He narrowed his grey eyes on her. "I deal in facts, Logan, not exaggerations nor theories which hold no merit. Why is ten thousand years so difficult for you to accept? What would you say if I told you I was twice Kerestyan's age?"

She arched a brow. "I'd say you're full of shit. I spent a lot of time at the public library on subzero and blistering days, reading and watching movies. I'm pretty sure if anything more than spear chucking humans were around 20,000 years ago, science would know. Or at the very least, found signs of more than crude stone tools." She tipped her head to the side and flashed Vouclade a brilliant, taunting smile. "You're just messing with me."

Kerestyan forcefully cleared his throat. Concerned Logan might be overwhelmed by the amount of information Vouclade had the propensity to spout, he pinned his brother with a hard glare. "Why don't we focus on the matter at hand? I'm not sure now is the best time to explain ancient history to Logan."

Vouclade, whose cold grey eyes were still locked on Logan, completely ignored the request. "Human scientists and historians know of the world, only what we want them to know," he said in a dry but serious tone. He raised a boney hand and motioned towards Logan's head. "The difficulty your mind is experiencing at this moment is exactly why we release historical truths in very small, carefully timed doses. The human brain has great

difficulty reconciling advanced civilizations existed so long ago. I believe it has something to do with the human ego, which absolutely despises the thought of not being the superior species. However, it's that very ego which allows most humans to reason away any interaction with a supernatural creature. They dismiss what is sometimes obvious as a side effect of stress or an over active imagination. The human mind is our greatest ally in terms of keeping our existence hidden. That is, until our true nature is revealed to someone like *you*."

Kerestyan watched as Logan's green eyes shimmered with a dark but strangely beautiful light, which only worsened his surging blood problem. She narrowed her eyes on Vouclade. "Yeah, well, I stopped ignoring what was right in front of my face a long time ago." She relaxed and brushed the hair from her eyes with pale, delicate fingers. "I won't lie. When I realized vampires were real, it scared the crap out of me. But after a few weeks, I was shocked at how much more sense my world made."

Kerestyan smiled as she absently stroked the hollow of her throat. "The truth has an odd habit of illuminating even the darkest places."

She shifted her gaze to him. "Speaking of dark," she said, peering at him through long black lashes. "I looked outside before I came out here. I thought vampires slept all day?"

"The young ones do," Vouclade offered before he had a chance. "However, as we age, our vulnerability to the sun's crushing presence wanes. Unfortunately, our resistance doesn't extend to its rays." He glanced up at the ceiling for a moment before refocusing on Logan. "In other words, while we're more than functional during the day, we still can't venture outdoors."

The perturbed look on Logan's face said she didn't appreciate the layman's terms. "I guess that makes sense," she quipped. She switched the position of her legs, her sparkling eyes fixed on Vouclade. "So, how long has it been since you've seen the sun?" She arched an inquisitive brow, lips slightly pursed. "Do you miss it?"

Vouclade didn't even flinch at the personal question. "Far longer than it's been since Kerestyan last saw the sun," he offered plainly, "but not nearly as long as it's been since our Father last gazed upon it. And no, under no circumstances do I miss it. I revel in my undead state." He leaned forward as if he meant to stare through her. "So tell me, Logan, how is it you became homeless?"

Logan fought the urge to smile. She wasn't sure which was worse: Vouclade's challenging stare, which she was more than willing to accept; or the way Kerestyan's eyes kept lingering on her lips.

You could accept those, too. She pushed the traitorous voice aside and focused on Vouclade's question. "After my mom died, my father became a ver-

bally abusive alcoholic. By the time I turned fifteen; I'd had enough of his mouth and figured I'd be better off on my own. I don't have a diploma. I don't have a license or social security card, and," she couldn't hold the smile any longer, "I don't have any legally marketable skills."

"Where did you stay at the beginning of your independence?"

"With friends."

"Their parents didn't ask questions?"

She took a moment to laugh. "The kind of friends I had didn't have parents. I fell in with a bad crowd right after I turned thirteen. Most of them were already over eighteen."

He gave her a sharp, disapproving look, which wasn't difficult due to his hawkish features. "Are they the ones who assisted you in becoming addicted to heroin?"

She arched a brow. Was he trying to bait her? Hopefully he wouldn't be too disappointed to learn she didn't give a rat's ass what he thought of her. "Did they introduce me to drugs? Yes. Did they get me addicted? No. I did that all on my own."

He didn't visibly react, he simply fired again. "So you take complete responsibility for where you're currently at in your life?"

She nodded. If there was one thing she could say, she'd always taken responsibility for the consequences of her actions. Good or bad, although the number of the second far outweighed the first. "Yes."

"Do you blame your mother for your situation?"

Every muscle in her body tensed at once. Her mother's death may have precipitated the change in her father, but she'd never thought to blame her for it. "Why would I blame her? She didn't ask to have her insides eaten by cancer. What happened between me and my father didn't really have anything to do with her."

"Do you blame your father for your situation?"

She relaxed. Her father was a topic she felt absolutely no remorse when discussing. "No."

"You don't believe if he hadn't been an alcoholic and forced you to leave your home, things might have turned out differently for you?"

"He didn't force me to leave. I could've stayed, but I made my choice. And if you took me back to that moment, even knowing then what I know now, I'd still make the same choice. Living anywhere would have been preferable to staying with him."

Vouclade reached up and adjusted his glasses. "What about the situation you're in at this moment? You're being held captive by an Ancient vampire, The Lord of New York. How do you feel about that?"

She slid her gaze over Kerestyan and grinned when he shifted in his chair. Apparently, and without proper notice, a much earlier time in her life had just crashed into her present, because now she did see his handsome face and incredible blue eyes.

She wouldn't deny he was easy to look at when she'd first met him. But now...right now she couldn't help but wonder if some invisible, gossamer-winged creature had shot her in the ass with a horny dart.

She smiled at the thought. Hell, if vampires were real, she supposed anything was possible.

She squirmed as Kerestyan's eyes moved over her lips then down across her neck, an appraisal that made her nipples tighten and pucker again.

Damn it! The man needed to stop looking at her like that.

The insistent sound of Vouclade clearing his throat drew Logan's attention back to his question. "How do I feel?" She smiled at him. "It could be a lot worse."

"Are you sure?" Vouclade asked.

She nodded again. One possibility immediately came to mind. "I could be stuck with Odin."

A chuckle rumbled in Kerestyan's muscular chest. "I agree."

"Me, too," Vouclade added. He adjusted one of the many silver buckles on his bondage-style, black leather shirt. "He takes quite a bit of patience."

She wouldn't argue with that. "I bet he does. But to honestly answer your question," she motioned towards the covered windows, "it was snowing when I looked outside earlier, which means the temperature's either below or hovering around freezing. It was raining last night, which also means in about six hours all that water is going to ice over. The building I usually stay in leaks and the wind cuts through the walls. Most of the shelters around here know I'm a lifer and usually don't let me in for anything more than a quick meal."

She cast a slow glance over the spotless kitchen before returning to Vouclade. "It's warm in here, there's food that's probably never been in a trashcan, and Kerestyan gave me a bed with clean sheets. You may see me as just another homeless person, but that doesn't mean I'm stupid. For now, my life could be a lot worse."

Vouclade unfolded his hands and leaned back in his chair. "You have no intention of running?"

Logan laughed out loud this time. Truthfully, she'd considered it. But after looking out her window and realizing she was roughly eighty stories above the street, she couldn't come up an escape route that didn't end with her splattering the sidewalk in an array of blood and brain matter.

Being viewed as a Nouveau piece of artwork by the population of downtown Manhattan wasn't exactly her first choice of how to spend her final moments.

She eyed Vouclade when he tapped an impatient thumb against the table. "Why? So Kerestyan can hunt me down? No thanks. Besides, I've accepted I don't have a choice right now. Trust me. I spent a good two hours thinking about how to escape this morning. No matter what I came up with, it all led to something unpleasant or right back to him."

Vouclade tipped his head back slightly and stared at her. "And if he chooses to kill you when all is said and done?"

Logan rolled her eyes. What the hell kind of question was that? "Then I suppose he does. There's not much I can do about it. He's bigger than me, stronger than me, and although he comes off all polite and gentlemanly like a politician, he's probably just as mean and ruthless when he doesn't get what he wants."

It took everything she had not to laugh when Kerestyan immediately stiffened and his eyes narrowed to thin slits. "I take offense to that. I'm not a child. I don't throw a temper induced fit when denied whatever I set my sights on."

She waved a hand at him. "Take all the offense you want. Don't forget, I've seen vampires in action. I've watched them get all pissed and freak out when someone does something they don't like. They get this look in their eyes, this glazed no-one's-home kind of stare. And I've seen it more than once, on one's from completely different walks of life. So I'm guessing it's a shared trait. Am I wrong?"

Kerestyan's mouth opened, but it was Vouclade's voice she heard. "No, you're not wrong. Actually, that's a very astute observation. Granted, Kerestyan is far older than any of the whelps you've come across and it would take much more provocation to elicit that response from him, but he too is susceptible to 'freaking out' as you called it."

She stretched out her arms and folded them behind her head. "I may not be afraid to die, but that doesn't mean I'm going to go out and try to get myself killed." She stared between the both of them. "I may be a lot of things, but I'm not suicidal."

"You aren't bothered by being forced to stay here?" Vouclade asked, now watching her with a different kind of intensity. "Having your freedom taken away?"

"Am I absolutely tickled to be here?" She shrugged a shoulder. "Not really. I didn't ask for this. I didn't ask to be introduced to vampires. I didn't necessarily want to know there are people," she cocked her head, "do you call yourselves people?"

For the first time since the interrogation began, Vouclade's mouth relaxed into a smile. "You can call us whatever you like. We were all human once. Some were far longer ago than others, but we were all human in the beginning."

"Okay, well, I didn't necessarily want to know there were people out there who considered me food. I'd use the meat analogy Odin used on me earlier, but I'm not sure if an animal really knows it's someone's food. I, on the other hand, have the mental capacity to feel a little weirded out by the whole thing." She cast a tentative glance to Kerestyan. "Are you going to eat me?"

Amusement flashed behind his eyes before he gave a more thoughtful look. "Heroin thins human blood and leaves a rather bitter taste in its wake. In all honesty," he raised a hand, "and I mean no offense, but it's not a flavor I particularly care for. Besides, as I told Odin earlier this morning, I never viewed you as food."

Logan shivered as a chill skittered up her spine. There was something seriously disconcerting about being referred to as food. "I guess I never thought about what chemicals might do to my blood. But then again, I wasn't really trying to make myself taste better."

Kerestyan laughed a warm sound, which only caused Vouclade to shoot him a nasty glare. "You intend to allow her to continue using that vile substance while she's in your care?"

She watched intently as Kerestyan shifted again. Only this time he appeared much more uncomfortable. "If that's her choice, so be it."

Vouclade didn't look pleased. "And exactly how do you intend to supply the drug for her?"

Kerestyan glanced around the room before returning to his brother. "I'm fairly certain I'd be viewed as a poor Lord if I didn't know where and who sold illegal drugs in my city. Besides, if need be, you can provide her with the clean, natural version."

Vouclade's hand smacked hard against the table, sending a small crack spidering across the dark wood. "Absolutely not. If she wishes to fill her body with all manner of putrid substances when she's on the streets, *then* so be it. I, however, refuse to be party to what appears to be a very intelligent young woman, murdering herself in small doses."

Tired of watching the verbal ping-pong match in which her life was the little plastic ball, Logan leaned forward and jabbed a finger in Vouclade's direction. "No one has the right to tell me what I can put into my body, but me."

"Incorrect," he snapped. "You relinquished your freedom the moment Kerestyan ushered you into his home. Your life is in Nelek hands now, sub-

ject to Nelek whims." He stood and faced Kerestyan. "*He* will not condone it, and you well know that."

Logan unfolded her legs and stood as anger bubbled up inside her. "No one needs to condone anything. I'm an adult. If I choose to inject anything into my body, it's my choice. Not yours, or Kerestyan's, or anyone else's for that matter."

When Vouclade completely ignored her, as if she hadn't spent the last half-hour politely answering his rapid fire questions, she started around the table.

Maybe if she got in his face, he'd be more willing to acknowledge her.

She was half way around the large table when Kerestyan appeared in front of her, blocking her path. She moved to push past him but winched as his cold fingers clamped around her shoulders. "Let me go, Kerestyan."

He stared down at her, concern etched into the faint lines around his eyes she hadn't noticed before. "I'm sorry, Logan. I can't do that." His deep voice took on a soft, calming quality. "At this point, I have to ask that you return to your room."

Logan tried to pull away, but when she realized he wasn't going to let her, she straightened and stared right back at him. "It's one thing to tell me I've seen too much and make me come with you until you decide what to do. I don't like it, but I know when I'm in over my head...that I can at least accept. It's another thing to tell me what I can and can't do with my own body!"

His fingers tensed, digging even deeper into her shoulders as Vouclade's voice rose from behind them. "Perhaps one day when you have more respect for yourself, you'll start treating your body accordingly."

She was fairly sure if she had a pissed off gauge, Vouclade had just broken it. "Fuck you!"

"No thanks, Bones. After God knows how many years on the streets, drugs probably aren't the only foreign thing you've put into your nasty little human body."

Logan thrashed against Kerestyan's hold as Odin's snide voice filled the room. "Oh, great...the Tin Can's back. Maybe the stick figure over there has a scientifically advanced can opener up his ass that I can use to pry you out of that shit you call clothes!"

Odin's loud laughter echoed all around her. "That was a good one, Bones. I think I might've just gained a little respect for you." His fat head disappeared behind the refrigerator door.

She ground her teeth as Kerestyan crushed her against his hard body then pressed his soft lips to her ear. "Please. It's not my wish to force you, but I think it would be best if you returned to your room for now." Her earlobe tingled from the sting of his cool breath.

"Not your wish to force me?" She focused on her anger, anything to help lessen the impact his tangy scent had on her racing heart. "That's all you've done since I met you."

His body went rigid. "I've done my best to offer you as many choices as possible, which is a courtesy not many in this life are given." His jaw flexed like cold stone against her cheek. "Don't make me regret the decision."

Kerestyan released Logan when she attempted to pull away again, and then watched as she disappeared down the hallway in a flash of black satin. The only sound that followed was the door to her room slamming shut, hard enough to rattle every painting in the hall.

This was not, in any form or fashion, how he'd hoped her conversation with Vouclade would end. He'd half expected she'd be irritated with his older brother by the end of the discussion, but he'd hoped her anger wouldn't encompass him.

"She doesn't need therapy."

Kerestyan spun around and stared at Vouclade. "What?"

"She displays no signs of mental illness. She's a competent, functioning adult who understands her own actions have brought her to this point, and she takes responsibility for them. I agree there is a past trauma, but it's my opinion if you press her to reveal it, you'll find she's come to terms with her past and it doesn't hinder her daily life."

"And her obvious detachment?"

Vouclade gave a bored stare. "Is to be expected considering her lifestyle. To be blunt, she's the product of too many years spent alone, and too much time experiencing the worst the world has to offer. Her heart may still beat, she may still need oxygen and food to fuel her body, but at her core she's more vampiric than most of the Fledglings running around your city." He moved to retake his seat, a vicious smile twisting his mouth. "Tell me, when you found her, how deep into her memories did you delve?"

"Not very far, I only skimmed the surface of her mind to ascertain how long she'd been exposed to our kind. Once I realized the length of time I withdrew, knowing the chances for reconstruction were minimal."

"You're more correct than you know," Vouclade said, sounding slightly amused. "Having fully perused her memories during our exchange, I think it's important you know that she's had a number of encounters with your Fledglings. Some of whom completely ignored her when she interrupted them feeding."

Fury roiled in Kerestyan's gut, but he wasn't sure what bothered him more. That Vouclade had so casually traipsed through Logan's mind; or that the younger vampires of his city would be so ignorant to the presence of a human.

Unfortunately, because Vouclade was older, Kerestyan had no right to question his use of blood magic on Logan. However, he could pick his brother's Ancient mind regarding the stupidity of Fledglings and hope it lead to more answers about her situation.

He inhaled a deep, unnecessary breath. "Why would they dismiss her if she interrupted their feeding? Why wouldn't they report her or call for assistance if they couldn't contain the situation? I have an Enforcement Team for that very reason."

"I suspect the reason she's gone undetected for so long is the strong detachment in her eyes. After viewing her memories, it's clear to me that your Fledglings assumed she was already a vampire, or at the very least, a *Servio* of substantial age. Otherwise she'd have never gotten away with throwing fruit at the three she found last night. No Fledgling could believe a human would be so brazen."

"Wow!" Odin gleefully interjected. "Bones threw food at vampires? You should take her to see Dad."

Kerestyan rubbed a hand down his face. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"I do," Vouclade said. "She displays a number of traits which suit our blood."

Kerestyan lowered his hand and stared at Vouclade. "You can't be serious. Need I remind you how Father feels about modern humans?"

Vouclade drew an irritated breath, a sign his patience was diminishing. "I'm very serious, Kerestyan. Logan is intelligent, forthright, and has lived a life closer to that of a peasant than most modern humans ever will. And for the most part, aside from her addiction, she appears to have lived it successfully. She has no real aversion to our kind, has a survival instinct that would rival any young vampire's, but also realizes sometimes survival means bending to outside forces. I believe she has at least a fifty percent chance of becoming our newest sibling."

While Kerestyan struggled to digest the seriousness in Vouclade's tone, Odin could barely choke the words out between hysterical bursts of laughter. "Dad's not gonna turn her. Make her a *Servio*, maybe. But he's not gonna put the bite on her." He waved a flailing arm at Vouclade. "You're crazy."

The lethal set of Vouclade's eyes said he didn't appreciate Odin's dismissal. "*Serving* a Nelek in blood is almost as dangerous as *being* a Nelek in blood. Need I call Alfred to explain why your laughter is completely uncalled for?"

Odin quickly sobered. "Hell no, he'll kick my ass."

"Thank you for illustrating my point." Apparently finished with Odin, Vouclade turned to face Kerestyan. "Since you have no real intention of killing her, I suggest you start the process of purging her system immediately.

Father will not look favorably upon her unless her blood is free of impurities."

Kerestyan ground his teeth together. "I haven't made up my mind as to whether this life suits her yet. She's already detached from humanity. Suffering the dark urges of the beast in any capacity, be it as a servant or a full-fledged vampire, may only degrade her further."

Vouclade's gaunt frame flickered between solid and insubstantial, a clear sign his patience had reached its end. "Spare me your misplaced concern for her humanity," he sneered. "You may have begun your association with her intending to take her life, but that ended the moment you brought her into your home. And it if by chance it didn't," he raked Kerestyan with a knowing glare, "it certainly did the moment she stepped into the kitchen." He moved through the table to stand in front of Kerestyan. "As it stands, above all else, Logan is a breach of the Veil. She knows we exist and she shouldn't. That fact doesn't change simply because she's in your home. Her presence here only assures she can't run to the media or human authorities."

Kerestyan straightened to his full height and met his brother's intimidating stare. "I'm well aware of what bringing her into my home does and does not mean. I am the Lord of New York, Vouclade."

"Then start acting like it," he growled. "It's clear you have some sort of interest in her, and due to her extensive exposure to vampires her mind cannot be fixed without risk of major damage. You're left with one option, whether you like it or not. Clean her up, explain to her how much more dangerous her situation has become, and then take her to the *real* Lord Nelek. If we're lucky and she passes his tests, he'll accept her as a Nelek Child or *Servio*."

Kerestyan steadied himself as the beast in his stomach unfurled and crimson danced at the edges of his vision. While he believed Logan to be an exception to the modern human rule, that didn't mean his Father would. "You're only giving her a fifty percent chance. What if she doesn't pass his tests?"

"Then she dies, Kerestyan. But the blame for her death, should it come to that, lies at both of your feet. She allowed the degradation of this city, the breakdown of society combined with the vice available on every pathetic corner, to affect her. However, you alone bear the burden of allowing ignorance to flourish among the Fledglings *you* allow to exist." He jammed a ghostly finger into Kerestyan's chest. "You are just as responsible for Logan's situation as she is."

"You think *every* Fledgling is ignorant, Vouclade," Kerestyan snapped as he knocked his brother's hand away. "You also never, in any time period, approved of this city. Your opinion is biased by old, stagnant views, which is

exactly why I took a city full of Fledglings. I may be partly responsible for Logan's misfortune, but I'm not going to slaughter droves of young vampires who have nothing to do with this situation, simply for existing."

Vouclade's eyes snapped with grey fire. "You are just as ignorant as your Fledglings."

"Hey Mr. Mad Scientist, why don't you fuck off and leave my brother..." Odin didn't have a chance to finish his sentence, mainly because Vouclade snapped out a boney hand and severed his tongue.

Vouclade used Odin's tongue to punctuate his own words. "The next time you address me as such, you childish waste of blood, I'll remove your nervous system while you watch." He turned back to Kerestyan. "I'll be advising Father of Logan's situation. If I were you, I'd prepare to hear from him." Having spit his last bit of venom, Vouclade disappeared in a cold gust of wind.

Kerestyan stared down at the empty space in front of him. Sometimes the second eldest of the Nelek Children caused more trouble than he was worth. However, much to Kerestyan's dismay, there was little he could do to change the views of someone as old as Vouclade.

Forcing the thought from his mind, he pulled a towel from the rack by the sink and held it out for Odin. "How many times has he done that to you?"

Odin grabbed the towel and grinned as small rivulets of blood dribbled from his lips. "Aouw unce ah eek or en ousan eers."

"About once a week for ten thousand years?" When he nodded, Kerestyan shook his head. Only Odin would have such an extended learning curve. "Haven't you learned your lesson yet?"

He dabbed at his mouth then tipped his head back and laughed. "O."

In an attempt to calm his nerves, Kerestyan seized the opportunity to laugh with his brother. But what the familiar action couldn't wash away was the realization that, as much as it burned him, Vouclade was right about some of the accusations he'd made.

He felt more than just a temporary curiosity for Logan. There was something about her blatant honesty he respected, something about not being able to anticipate what she'd do or say next that excited his weary blood.

Unfortunately, neither of those qualities would assist her when it came to his Father.

Kerestyan leaned back against the counter and considered the silvered track lights cutting across the white ceiling. By now, Vouclade had returned to the castle and was no doubt ranting about the state of New York and Logan's situation. And if Vouclade was persuasive enough, which he often was, Kerestyan would be lucky if his Father didn't appear and judge Logan on the spot.

He rubbed a hand down his face. How was he going to explain to her that she had to relinquish yet another facet of her life? While he didn't approve of her drug use, he respected her choice and despised merely the thought of taking that choice away.

Then give her a choice...

He lowered his head when he felt a heavy hand squeeze his shoulder, only to find Odin's smiling black eyes staring back at him. "Ont wuhwee, bo. Sill be awite."

Kerestyan did his best to return the reassuring gesture. For once, he just hoped his brother was right.

Chapter 5

Logan slipped through her cracked bedroom door and crept down the hall towards the kitchen. She had no idea what was so damn funny that she could hear the chorus of hearty laughter through the walls, but she had every intention of finding out.

When she reached the end of the hallway, she flattened herself against the wall and peeked around the corner. Odin, with a rag stuffed in his mouth, made all manner of odd noises while Kerestyan, eyes twinkling under the gentle track lighting, twisted a black wine bottle setting in one of the odd appliances she didn't recognize.

Reminiscent of a fancy silver bowl, instead of tapering near the bottom the machine belled out into black rubber feet. The digital panel centered on the front read 88.2, but the glowing red numbers quickly changed. When the contraption emitted a loud beep as the number reached 99.0, Kerestyan pulled the bottle out, popped the cork then handed it to Odin.

"Warmed to your distinguished preference, Sir," Kerestyan laughed, with a bad English accent.

Odin pulled the towel from his mouth, grabbed the bottle and wrapped his lips around it like a hooker who'd just been paid five thousand dollars to suck off a professional athlete.

Logan mulled the scene over for a minute. This was what they were doing? She'd been herded back to her room for a time-out so they could laugh like idiots and drink themselves into a wine induced stupor?

At least it's not whiskey. She shivered as an icy chill slipped down her spine in response to the errant thought. At thirteen, she may not have known how to properly express how she felt to her father. Now thirty, her prowess for self expression was quite the opposite.

She pushed around the corner and locked eyes with Kerestyan. "This is why you sent me to my room? So you and your brother could get wasted in the kitchen?"

Every ounce of humor drained from his face. "It's not what it looks like, Logan."

Odin's lips popped off the bottle. "Op. Ot wuh eh ooks ike ah aww." He closed his eyes for a second, smacked his lips together then stuck his tongue

out to a dull point and wiggled it. Eyes wide, his head bobbed from side to side then back before he righted it and smiled. "Ahh, much better."

Logan stood still for a moment while her brain tried to reconcile his idiotic movements. "What in the hell was that? How much of that stuff have you had?"

He set the bottle on the counter and spun it. "It only takes one. That's some good shit, Baby."

Ignoring the fact he'd called her something other than it or Bones, she snatched up the wobbling vintage and tipped it to her mouth. If the wine was good enough for them, it was definitely good enough for her.

Besides, maybe her father had been right. Maybe all of life's answers were at the bottom of a bottle.

Closing her eyes, she parted her lips and let the liquid surround her tongue.

"Logan!"

"Shut up! Let her do it. It's kinda kinky."

Logan wrinkled her nose as her taste buds caught up with her. Hot and coppery, it didn't take her long to figure out what the distinct metallic taste reminded her of...

Being punched in the nose, that's what it reminded her of.

She swallowed the thick fluid, waited a moment to make sure it would stay down, and then gently set the bottle back on the counter.

"That was fuckin' hot! Kerestyan, get out another bottle!"

She opened her eyes and stared at Odin, whose face was lit up like a Gothic Christmas tree. "You could've warned me."

"And miss watching you do that?" He wiggled a finger in front of her nose. "Oh, no. No way." He lowered his hand and rubbed it affectionately over his stomach. "Watching humans drink blood gets my monster all excited. You want some more?"

"Your monster?" She eyed his leather covered groin. "Please tell me you didn't name it."

He kicked his head back and laughed. "No. *He* would have a much more imposing name." He poked at his abdomen. "I'm talking about my beast. He drives the scary, predatory vampire side of me. You know, the animal that craves blood and power and ultimate control. But he's also really old and kinda jaded, and *loves* watching humans do things they shouldn't." He pushed the bottle closer. "You sure you don't want more?"

When her mouth took on the texture of sandpaper, Logan licked her lips. It didn't taste horrible, and she had to admit it even had a sweet yet slightly tangy quality, but there was something about swallowing a mouthful of blood that made her feel a little queasy.

She pushed the bottle back towards him. "No thanks. I think one shot is enough for today."

"Oh, come on. Admit it. It wasn't that bad."

"Have I tasted worse? Yes, a lot of rotten things taste a whole hell of a lot worse than that. But, there's just something wrong about standing in such a normal looking kitchen, drinking blood with two vampires."

Logan rubbed a hand across her cheek. Of course, there was something fundamentally wrong with standing in a kitchen with two vampires to begin with.

She studied the dark blue floor tiles as a shiver worked its way down the back of her neck. There was also something seriously wrong when one of those vampires made her more aware of her body than she'd been in a long time.

When she heard Odin laugh again, she looked up just in time to see him wave a hand in front of Kerestyan's face. "Kerestyan, you still alive over there man?"

She glanced over at Kerestyan and frowned. His irises were an odd mixture of sapphire and onyx, lit from behind a sheet of glass. "Are you alright?" She stepped closer to him. "Your eyes are almost as dark as Odin's."

"I'm fine." It was the way his lips parted when he formed the "f" that allowed her to see a quick flash of his fangs.

She stared at his mouth for a minute, trying to recall the moment he'd gotten so close to her in the alley. Were they out then? Had they always been there?

She couldn't remember.

A low, evil chuckle rumbled in Odin's throat, drawing her attention away from Kerestyan's dental irregularity. He grinned wide, no fangs present. "Well, this is a good time for me to leave. Bones, your clothes are in the duffle bag out in the living room." He smacked the back of Kerestyan's shoulder. "Little brother, behave yourself." Then, just like he did before, he vanished from the room.

Logan blinked a few times then turned to Kerestyan. "Do vampires even need cars?"

"It depends on their age." There they were again, flashing between his soft lips like razor blades under a strobe light.

Most intriguing. She allowed curiosity to get the better of her and moved even closer. "Do they have holes in the bottoms?"

He snatched the bottle from the counter then turned his back to her and tucked it into a cabinet under the sink. "Do what have holes in the bottom?"

"Your fangs, Lord Vampire. Do you suck blood through them like a straw? How does it work?"

He braced his hands against the edge of the sink, his shoulder blades bunching together in a tantalizing ripple of muscle. "No, my fangs don't have holes in the bottoms."

Logan kicked her foot back and dragged out one of the stools surrounding the center island. She sat down and leaned forward, resting her hands on the leather seat between her legs. "Then how does it work?"

He exhaled a loud, obviously irritated breath. "After I bite my prey, I slide my fangs from the wound and drink until sated. When finished, I either lick or touch the wound to heal it. The human goes on their way and I go on mine. The end."

She scrunched up her face. "That's all? You make it sound so...so impersonal. I thought eating for vampires was supposed to be all sexy and seductive."

His shoulders tensed again. "Do you strive to form an emotional connection with every cow you consume?"

"Oh, that's a cheap excuse. I can't talk to a cow." She laughed. "Well, I thought I could once. The cow ended up being part of a billboard and it only talked to me because of a bad batch of mushrooms." When he didn't appear to find her comment nearly as funny as she did, she moved on. "So how do you get a human to let you bite them? Do they know you do it? Do you go out on a date, or do you just grab one and chow down?"

He spun around to face her, his dark eyes narrowed. "What do you want me to tell you, Logan? That I dress up in tight leather pants and prowl the clubs for a beautiful woman? That when I find one, I stalk her from the shadows until the power of my Ancient blood draws her to me? That once it does, because it always does, I take her home and fuck her until she comes so hard she can barely breathe? And in the second before she does, I sink my fangs into her fragile neck? That when her body shudders and she's lost in the best sensations she'll ever feel, I taste every single ripple of pleasure coursing through her blood? That I get off on the rich taste of her just as hard as she gets off on me? Is that what you want me to tell you?"

Logan opened her mouth then closed it, her mind clouded with images of black leather, sweat slicked bodies and tangled satin sheets. Her ears still rang from the way he'd said the first real curse word she'd heard him use, and the deep inflection he put on it. She'd never heard it sound so enticing, so damn inviting.

Water. She needed lots of cold, so cold it'd turn your insides to ice kind of water.

She watched the corners of Kerestyan's lips rise ever so slightly as his eyes moved over her neck, then down and across her borrowed shirt. "Perhaps that's exactly what you wanted me to tell you."

She folded her arms. So what if her nipples felt like they were going to jump off her chest and slingshot themselves at him? And really, whose fault was it that she'd just added a brand new scent to his pajama pants since she hadn't had any clean underwear to put on after her bath?

It certainly wasn't hers.

She might have been detached from the world, but she was still a flesh and blood woman, and her brain was still very much attached to every nerve in her body.

She swallowed the large knot in her throat. "I...well," she paused when he smiled and glared back at him. "You said all that on purpose! You're a bastard. That little rant was unbelievably unnecessary and completely uncalled for."

In the space of a single heartbeat, his smile turned dangerous at the edges. "So was your licking your lips after setting the bottle of blood back on the counter." He moved towards her, the powerful muscles of his thighs flexing underneath the dark material of his pants. "You didn't get it all, you know."

Logan raised a hand to wipe her mouth, but jumped when Kerestyan caught her wrist before she could follow through. She stared up into his marbled eyes as he nudged her thighs apart with his own. Her heart slammed against her ribs.

Oh no, he isn't. He is...

He leaned down, lips hovering barely above hers. "Which part was it, Logan?" The heat from his breath and the moisture on his bottom lip caught and tugged at hers. "Was it the biting that stirred you...or the fucking?"

She silently cursed her dependence on oxygen when her lips parted to allow the sharp inhale of air she was sure she'd die without. Her thighs trembled as the strong fingers of his free hand circled the wrist still folded over her chest.

Good Lord, how was she supposed to breathe with him so close?

She gasped, her thoughts scattering in a thousand different directions when he pushed her arms behind her, forcing her spine into an arch. Her nipples tightened even more, caught between the soft fabric of her shirt and his hard chest.

Flames raced across her skin as he pinned her wrists to the small of her back, then tautly sucked on her upper lip. She swallowed a moan as his warm tongue caressed the sensitive flesh inside. He took his time, teasing her with a half kiss that made her legs shake.

If this was what he did to the women he ate, she was sure he'd never go hungry.

"I think," he went quiet and pinched her bottom lip between his teeth, "it was the fucking." A deep growl rumbled in his chest when her legs jumped in response to the mind blowing sensation. "But I think there's a definite interest in the biting."

A traitorous moan, loud and throaty, escaped as he dragged his fangs across her lower lip. Tiny, passion fueled fires erupted inside each cell in her body as those razor sharp tips touched her skin. Her heart pounded a frantic rhythm in her ears. Wetness built in record time between her thighs. She couldn't stop her eyes from fluttering closed as waves of warmth coursed through her. It was the most pleasurable sensation she'd ever felt. The most erotic moment she'd ever experienced.

But the most delicious taste came when his tongue plunged into her mouth, sliding sinuously over hers. He tasted exactly like he smelled. Tangy but sweet. Smoky and earthy. Sexy. The way a man should taste, but more savage somehow.

Lost in the tantalizing friction of Kerestyan's tongue tangling with hers, Logan didn't realize he'd released her wrists until his warm hands pushed between the stool and her bare ass.

Trying to figure out the exact moment he'd managed to loosen the drawstring became a distant memory as he pulled her forward off the stool. She vaguely felt the satin pool around her knees. The thrust of his tongue, the maddening back and forth motion was all she could focus on as he lifted her up and the pants fell to the floor.

Wrapping both legs around his hips, she broke from his hungry mouth to moan as he pressed her back against the refrigerator. The cold steel of the doors bit into her skin at the same moment he ground the fabric covered ridge of his hard cock against her.

Needing to get to his skin, to feel the heat of him against her, she ripped open his shirt, undaunted as the black buttons turned into tiny missiles. He laughed a husky sound as some hit the floor while others pinged off of various appliances.

She smiled at the sight of his bare chest. Dark hairs dappled his tight, pale skin, tapering to a single line that plunged between a set of rock hard abs, rippling for her viewing pleasure.

No, he would never go hungry. Not in a million years.

His large hands blocked her view a second before he grabbed the hem of her t-shirt, and in one swift motion, tore it right up the front. She gasped as his rough fingers went to work torturing her exposed nipples. Rolling and gently pinching, filling her with a maddening ache she hadn't felt in a long, long time.

"It was only fair," he laughed as he nipped at her lips.

She smiled back at him. "It was your shirt."

Clinging to his muscular biceps, she shivered as his thumbs drew slow circles around each erect nipple before he ducked his head and pulled one into his mouth. Hot and wet, his tongue retraced the same path his fingers had blazed. She tipped her head back, giving in to the exquisite tension building inside her as he fanged one taut peak to a nearly painful state, then the other.

The man definitely knew what he was doing.

As he trailed a searing line of kisses up to her neck, she slid her hands down his chest, delighting in every dip and curve of lean, sculpted muscle on the way down to the deep grooves between his abs. He had a body to die for, nothing but firm skin and hard lines.

Logan shivered as Kerestyan's fangs scraped her throat. Her entire body was on fire, burning hotter everywhere his mouth touched her. His deep moan vibrated against her throat, urging her on as she found the lone button nestled between them.

After undoing his pants, she wrapped her fingers around the thick base of his cock and smiled. Unless he'd changed his clothes while she slept, he'd been commando since the moment she met him. She stroked the hard, throbbing length of him before he claimed her mouth again. Hot tendrils of excitement wound down her spine. Tightening her grip, she savored the animalistic growl that rumbled its way through his chest, straight into hers.

"I want you, Logan," he breathed against her mouth. He pinned her with those sultry black eyes as his thumbs resumed their assault on her nipples. "I want to taste you." She moaned as he bit at her lips. "Fuck you...feel you come."

She smiled. There was that word again, rolling off his talented tongue in a way that made every muscle in her body quiver with excitement.

Who'd have thought Mr. Prim and Proper would be such a dirty talker?

She tipped her head to the side as he nibbled his way down to where her neck and shoulder met. "I want you, too. Right here, right now."

She stroked him again then rubbed the head of his cock against her swollen clit, reveling in the way he jerked and throbbed from the slick contact, loving how her body pulsed and contracted, silently begging for more.

She wanted to feel him hard inside her, wanted to writhe against his muscled body and drown in every drop of pleasure they could give each other. She wanted to scream until her voice gave out. Hear him moan as he slammed into her over and over again, until neither of them could move.

"Kerestyan Nelek!"

Both Logan and Kerestyan froze as an angry voice thundered through the room, rattling everything that wasn't bolted down.

"Is this how you treat guests in your home?"

Logan gave an awkward smile when Kerestyan's forehead smacked against her shoulder, unblocking her view of the pissed off psychologist standing a good ten feet behind them.

"What could you possibly want, Vouclade?" Kerestyan's warm breath tickled her breast, but she didn't dare smile.

Vouclade held up a syringe filled with a bright orange liquid. "I returned to offer you medication that would assist Logan through the coming days. However, considering your current state of affairs, you must not think her situation is very serious."

"That is *not* what I think." He ended the sentence with a scowl, and she knew because she could feel his lips burning against her skin.

Vouclade's eyes narrowed on Kerestyan's back. "Have the correct conversation with her immediately, Kerestyan, lest I have it for you."

Logan shivered as an icy blast of wind tore through the room and yet another vampire somehow related to Kerestyan disappeared into thin air.

"I'm sorry, Logan. If I'd anticipated any kind of interruption, I would have stayed on my side of the kitchen." There was a tinge of humor in his quiet voice, but he didn't sound the least bit happy.

She carefully removed her fingers from around his penis. "It's okay." She blew out a disgruntled, unfulfilled breath. "But I suppose you should put me down and tell me whatever it is that pissed him off so bad. Why do I need medicine to help me through the next few days?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he brushed a light kiss across her lips then turned and set her on the stool she'd originally started out on. While a foreign part of her appreciated the soft gesture, the more dominant part of her didn't like it at all.

It was too gentle, too personal.

Sex was sex, hot sex was even better, but the intimacy that single kiss created around them wasn't what she'd been looking for.

At least, she didn't think it was.

When Kerestyan zipped and buttoned his pants then plucked hers from the floor and held them out towards her, Logan slid them back on and tied her shirt closed before settling back on the stool.

Was her body pleased with the decision? Oh, hell no. But something about the concern etched into the fine lines around his eyes told her she was missing a vital piece of information.

She frowned. "What's going on, Kerestyan?"

He raked a hand through his slightly tussled hair, fangs no longer showing. "Your days of captivity are soon to be over."

She sat up a little straighter. "Really? You're letting me go?"

The muscles in his jaw worked hard. "No. Your fate is no longer mine to judge. My Father, the man who made me a vampire, will now be doing the honors."

She tipped her head to the side as mild disappointment, which she refused to acknowledge, settled in her stomach. She wasn't sure if his father judging her was a bad thing or not, but now it was his strained voice that concerned her. "You don't expect it to go well?"

For the first time since she'd met him, he lowered his eyes. "I don't know...but your body has to be free of heroin before I can take you to him. He does not, in any way, approve of self destruction. And that's exactly how he'll view your habitual drug use. If I take you to him as you are now, he'll destroy you and punish me for offending him."

Panic tightened every muscle in Logan's already trembling body. She braced her hands between her legs and gripped the edge of the stool. All she could feel was the fear churning her stomach, the acid burning the back of her throat.

She'd been through withdrawal once before; and there wasn't a single moment while in its throes she didn't believe or feel as though she'd die at any moment.

The thought of going through it again scared her more than any vampire ever could.

She looked up at Kerestyan. "I can't do it again. I won't do it."

His face hardened, his eyes almost demanding. "You'll die for certain if you don't."

She jumped off the stool as rage exploded in her stomach, its fiery shards tearing apart her insides. "Who the hell is your father to decide what I have to do to keep breathing? What the hell makes him so important? What is it with you vampires acting like you're the only ones with say over my life?" She struggled to suck oxygen into her lungs as the white walls drew closer. "I won't do it!"

"Logan, I don't think you understand the gravity of your situation."

"My situation? My situation!" She smacked a hand down on the counter-top. "Then why don't you explain my situation to me? I'm only here because of you." She jabbed a finger at him. "You put me in this fucking situation."

Something strange flashed behind his eyes. "I may have helped put you in this situation," his fangs elongated as he slammed a fist against his chest, "but I don't have any more choice in this than you do!"

"You expect me to believe that? You're the Lord of New York, and you don't have a choice? You killed three vampires without even touching them and you don't have a choice?"

"No, I don't. I won't even spin your feeble human mind with how old my Father is. But I'm still a Child in his eyes. I have no choice but to obey him. *He* created *me*. The cost of his blood, which I accepted the day he turned me, was to abide by his rules. The only way you'll live is if I do that very thing."

The man wasn't making any sense. "What the hell do his rules have to do with me?"

He gnashed his teeth together, as if he couldn't believe she didn't understand. "His rules dictate I obey the laws the Eldest of my species have set forth. The most important being the Veil. We hide from the humans, Logan. There's a reason why you've lived the majority of your life unaware of vampires. A reason why the human population as a whole doesn't know we exist."

Is that all? She shrugged. "So what if I know? What the hell do you think I'm going to do, run off and tell everyone? For your information, aside from going to the cops the first time, who literally threw me out of the station – I've never told anyone about anything I saw. Not that they'd believe me if I did." She closed her eyes as a dull ache pulsed beneath her temples. "You know what, as much as I don't like the thought of you poking around my brain, maybe you should just try to make me forget all this. Then we can both go on with our lives."

"It's not that simple anymore. You know *too* much about vampires. Manipulating the human mind to forget even a brief encounter with a vampire takes a great deal of precision. To remove and reconstruct what you know, especially now, could very well damage your brain in an irreparable fashion. Your only options at this point are to become a vampire, or a *Servio*, which is a servant to a vampire. Either way, that involves Nelek blood, which I can't offer you without my Father's approval."

"Whoa!" She opened her eyes and stared hard at him. "What do you mean my only options are to become a vampire or a servant? That's what you meant by exploring other avenues? What if I don't want to? What if I want my life back?"

He stared back at her, his pale face a mask of disbelief and anger. "This isn't about what you want. The life you knew ended when I found you in the alley. And to be bluntly honest, it should have ended the moment you learned about vampires. You don't have any control over what you become, only whether you do. Your life has changed, forever. You need to accept that."

Logan stiffened. She'd never felt so frustrated or angry in her entire life. How could he stand there and tell her she didn't have any control over her own life? How could he expect she'd just accept it?

She folded her arms over her chest. "No."

He moved to stand in front of her then leaned down so they were eye level. "Listen to me," his breath was cool against her lips. "You're a breach of the Veil. Vampires, regardless of age, do not openly act in any way that allows humans to learn of our existence. You should have never seen a vampire feed. You should have never witnessed vampires fighting. I killed the three Fledglings in the alley *because* they broke the Veil. They wore their fangs openly, and you saw them. Not only—"

"Enough with the stupid Veil already! I get it." She pressed the heels of her palms to her temples. "Jesus Christ, if seeing vampires was so damn bad, where the hell were you all the other times I saw them chewing on people?"

When he let out an animalistic snarl, she took a few steps back. "There are almost a hundred vampires in the city of New York. Could you watch a hundred humans scattered across the city at the same time? Could you make sure every single one of them never ate without your permission? Never did what was in their nature to do?"

"The question was meant to be rhetorical, but since it seems to have pissed you off so much, no, I probably couldn't." She rested her hands on her hips. "But I also can't disappear in a burst of wind or mess with people's minds. I'm sure if I could, I'd be more than capable of watching a hundred people."

His sinister rumble of laughter sent chills down her spine. "It's not nearly as easy as it sounds. The more a vampire uses his or her powers, the more blood they require. The more blood they require, the more they need to feed. The more they feed, the more they risk breaking the Veil. To use the power my blood grants as often as you suggest, I'd be forced to drain five humans a day. Should I wish to spare their lives, I'd have to spend my entire night searching for twenty different vessels. At that rate, I'd never be able to rule a city." His gaze fell to her lips then lingered on her neck. "As you so invitingly put it, I'd be too busy chewing on people."

She swallowed the knot tightening in her throat as he extended to his full height and slowly stalked towards her. His ruined shirt hung open, allowing her to see every ripple of his hard, sculpted abdomen as he drew closer. He looked every bit the dark, deadly predator vampires were rumored to be as he ran his tongue over his fangs.

And something deep inside her was thrilled by the sight of him...

No. Don't look. Logan squeezed her eyes tight. She knew what he was trying to do, and she refused to back up and lose any more ground to him. She shivered when his hot breath touched her ear at the same time the heat from his body invaded her skin.

Why he was warm one time and cold the next, she didn't know, but right now it felt like every inch of his hard body was on fire.

"I'm only going to explain this to you once, so I suggest you listen carefully. I may be powerful, but even I can't be everywhere at once. Contrary to what you might think, I'm more than capable of guarding against accidents and have been since the night I took this city as my own. But what I can't control, is someone like *you*. Someone who's so detached you wear it in your eyes. You're not in this situation solely because of me. You're here right now because the Fledglings in the alley thought you were already a *Servio*. Why do you think they asked whose Puppet you were? 'Puppet' is the youth's slang term for a servant."

Logan opened her eyes and stepped back. "So now you think part of this is my fault?"

An eerie, almost superior smile spanned his mouth. "I don't think, Logan. I know."

She purposely fisted her hands as the urge to smack the fangs out of his mouth welled up inside her. "How the hell do you figure?"

He folded his thick arms over his chest. "Of all the times you stumbled upon a vampire feeding, how many times did you intercede on the human's behalf?"

"I didn't. Why would I?"

He shrugged a shoulder. "Why not?"

She scowled at him. "Because if some hooker is stupid enough to follow a John down a dark alley for fifty bucks and gets her ass drained dry, she chose to go with him. If a bum gets so drunk he falls down and can't defend himself, he made the choice. Nobody put a gun to their heads. Everyone else in the world has to face the consequences of their actions. Why should they be any different?"

He took a few steps back and held his muscular arms out to his sides. "Behold the consequence of your selfish choices. You're here because of *your* actions. The same actions, whatever they may be, that burned the distance into your eyes. And now you're faced with a final choice." He shifted his gaze to his left palm. "Heroin," then cast a glance at his right, "or life." He lowered his arms as the concern from before crept back into his eyes. "I could decide for you. I could manipulate your mind and make you believe the choice to give up heroin is your own, but I meant it when I said I'd give you all the choices I could."

She turned and studied the machine the bottle of blood had set in. Maybe her selfish choices had led her to this point. But considering if she wasn't more concerned about herself than the people around her, she didn't eat, she felt no compunction to apologize.

She wasn't sorry for who she'd become, and aside from one action she'd committed at the age of thirteen, she wouldn't change anything about her

life. It was her life, and up until she'd met him, she'd lived it on her own terms. She'd never claimed to be a Saint, never even claimed to be an upright citizen.

And she never would.

Focusing back on Kerestyan, Logan plastered a smile on her face. "So, let me make sure I understand this right. I have to go through withdrawal so you can take me to your father, who's going to decide whether I live or die. But even if I do get clean so I can meet him, he might kill me anyway?"

He narrowed his eyes, apparently not a fan of her special blend of sarcasm. "He decides who's worthy of his blood. Even if it's the blood in my veins that grants you immortality, it still bears his power, his name. I don't expect you to understand, but the Nelek name means something to those who matter in the vampiric world. Should you choose to give up your beloved chemicals, you'll see what I mean."

"What is he, a vampire cop? Is he some long-lived upstanding member of the D.A.R.E. program?" She rolled her eyes. "I just can't wait to meet him. He sounds like a real straight-laced kind of guy. Tell me, does he have a halo?"

Something strange charged the air as the darkness nearly eclipsed his eyes. "Our blood is the seat of our power. Would you just hand your most prized possession to a junkie, Logan?" When she didn't answer right away, he lunged forward and caught her wrist before she had a chance to react. "Would you?"

She winced as pain rattled down her arm. The answer was glaringly obvious, but something told her he wouldn't be satisfied until he heard her say it. She forced the words out between her teeth, "No. I wouldn't."

He released her as if she was suddenly poisonous. "Then don't make this situation any more difficult than it already is. This isn't what I wanted. But I know my Father, and it's only a matter of time before he demands I bring you to him. I have no doubt he sent Vouclade back to fully induce the withdrawal process."

Logan stared up at him, not even sure how to respond to that last comment. Would these creatures let her do anything on her own? "I don't need anyone's help to start going through withdrawal. I went through it alone once before, I can do it again." As another wave of anger boiled up inside her, she stepped around him and headed for the hallway leading to her room.

But before she reached the archway, she turned around and glared at him again. "You, your brothers, and your precious Daddy may not think much of me, but my feeble human mind is capable of a lot more than you give me credit for."

In the space of a single breath, Kerestyan's face changed to the same cold stone she first saw in the alley. "I have forty-six brothers and sisters, Logan,

and not one is less than five thousand years old. It's been over six hundred years since my Father has deemed a human worthy enough to even serve a Nelek. I truly hope you are capable of more, because whether I like it or not, that one precious man holds your future in his hands."

Chapter 6

“Is she alright?”

Kerestyan nodded at his sister, Trinity, as he laid the thick cut of steak over the sizzling grill top. “I believe so.” He smiled when she leaned across the counter and sprinkled a pinch of pepper over the meat. “She’s been sleeping soundly for a little over three hours.”

“What happened?”

“You already know what happened.” He ground his teeth together. “From what Alfred said, Vouclade barely stopped short of telling the entire castle what happened.”

Trinity rolled her sable eyes. “I’m not talking about your romp against the refrigerator, which you get serious sexy points for, by the way. I’m more interested in what happened after you told her about meeting Dad.”

He slowly shook his head. Only Trinity would assign something as crass as “sexy points” to an adult rendezvous. However, considering she became a Nelek due to her prosperity engaging in the oldest profession known to man, he wasn’t overly surprised.

He reached out and removed the pepper shaker she was tapping against the counter before refocusing on her question. “I tried to explain the reasons she should give up her habit, but the discussion turned into an argument and she became unstable,” one corner of his mouth rose of its own accord, “much like a pit viper.”

Trinity’s ruby lips curved in a smile. “She’s not exactly one of the chemicals in Vouclade’s lab, K. Give your little viper a break. She’s still human, and she’s probably scared shitless right now.” She plucked a green apple from the bowl sitting a few inches away and waved it under her nose. “Don’t you remember how you felt when Dad took you?”

Kerestyan pulled a pair of silver tongs from the drawer behind him then adjusted the steak. He remembered the day his Father approached him with striking detail, but he’d felt nothing bearing even the slightest resemblance to fear. “I wasn’t afraid of him.”

“Really? I was terrified.” She clucked her tongue just before she rounded the counter, stole the utensil from his hand and bumped him out of the way

with an ample hip. "Ten thousand years old and you still don't know how to handle your meat."

He moved to take the seat Trinity had so willingly vacated, knowing she would never relinquish her new position without a fight. And truthfully, he'd had enough of fighting with the women in his life for one day. "I assure you, I'm more than adept at handling myself. I just haven't prepared a proper meal for someone since before you were born."

She brushed her long black hair over a shoulder, disbelief clouding her already dark eyes. "I'm six thousand years old, K."

"I know."

She shook her head as she flipped the steak. "Here's a thought," a satisfied smile spread across her mouth, "stop sucking on those bottles and maybe you'd have a reason to learn how to cook again."

"My feeding preferences have nothing to do with my ability to prepare a meal."

She spun on her heel and began opening and closing cabinets. "Sure it does. When was the last time you went out into the city and hunted?"

"Six months ago. What are you looking for?"

"Spices. Where are they?"

He shifted on the stool. He had no idea where the spices were, but he wasn't about to tell her that. She'd never let him live it down. "Alfred set up my kitchen the same as he keeps the one in the castle. Unless Odin has moved something, everything should still be in the correct place."

She surveyed the room for a moment then opened the door two down from where she'd been looking. Rows of small, labeled bottles lined the shelves, along with a few that weren't marked, as well as a number of packets and glass containers.

"Sweet!" She pulled one of the unmarked bottles from the shelf and sniffed it. "You've got the old herbs. I don't even have some of this stuff, and I actually use it and know where it is."

He groaned. "You couldn't just let it go, could you?"

Trinity flashed a smile over her shoulder before she returned to rummaging through the cabinet. "Not a chance. I'm also not going to let go that you haven't hunted in six months. You know, most vampires our age hunt at least twice a week. That means your sucking more bottles than Necks. Necks keep you in touch with how the world is evolving. Necks help you stay connected and stop the beast from taking over." She turned around with three bottles in hand and shook them. "Necks give you a reason to remember how to properly cook a gorgeous strip of New York steak!"

Kerestyan arched a brow at her animated movements. "I think you've spent too much time with Odin."

She laughed, but it didn't stop her from perfecting her creation. "I think *you* should spend *more* time with Odin. I'm not stupid. I know the only reason you have food in this place is because of him and Alfred. If it wasn't for them, we both know Logan would starve and wouldn't have so much as a tissue to wipe her ass with."

He stiffened at her insult. Granted, he might have been a little more detached from humanity than Odin, might have adjusted to the modern world at a slower pace, but that didn't mean he'd lost sight of human needs. "That is not true."

"Oh, please. Unless your digestive system magically started working again and you didn't tell anyone, you would've never thought to buy toilet paper. And since I've never seen you stick even a piece of gum in your mouth, I know you don't eat." When he opened his mouth to defend himself, she raised a hand. "If anything I just said wasn't true, you wouldn't have called Alfred and I wouldn't have been tapped as a steak and vodka courier."

She had him there, but only because the sun was still burning in the sky, and it wasn't as though he could walk down to the butcher. "Thank you, once again, for bringing them. But the reason I don't eat human food is because I don't particularly relish having to regurgitate it. I find the whole process rather disgusting."

"It tastes the same coming up as it does going down. Well, unless you forget for a week or two. That's not pleasant, let me tell you." She pinned him with one of those feminine looks that said she was onto him. "But back to the subject you're trying to avoid, I think spending a little more time with Odin would do you some good. He adores you, K. I've never seen him protect anyone the way he does you."

Kerestyan drew in a deep breath. While he appreciated his brother's protective instinct, he also wished he'd realize it wasn't necessary anymore. "Is he awake yet?"

"Oh, he's awake and armed again." She snickered. "But he isn't a happy camper, that's for sure. I don't know why he keeps harassing Vouclade. You'd think he'd get tired of losing body parts."

Kerestyan often wondered the same thing. He'd heard a short summation of the days' events when he'd requested the steaks from Alfred, but his version of brief was simply that Odin had attacked Vouclade. No more, no less.

"Do you know what happened today?"

She grinned. "Between Vouclade and Odin?"

"Yes. Alfred didn't elaborate."

She flipped the steak once more and set the tongs down. "I guess after Vouclade popped in here and saw your, shall we say 'compromising posi-

tion', he stormed back into Dad's chambers in a huff. He was yelling about a breach of Nelek decorum and, well, you know how he gets. But Odin heard him, and to make a long and bloody story short, it ended up in yet another Odin versus Vouclade rumble."

He cupped a hand over his eyes. "Please tell me they weren't in Father's chamber when they started fighting."

She let out a purely wicked laugh. "Of course they were. V ripped off Odin's arms. Odin kicked V across the room. Then Dad played referee and sent the bad children to their rooms. V stalked off to his lab under his own power, but Odin wasn't quite as lucky. He wasn't down long though, if it makes you feel any better."

Kerestyan lowered his hand and pushed the salt shaker across the counter, listening to the dull scratching sound. "It would make me feel better if he'd realize I don't need him to be my first line of defense anymore."

"Old habits die hard, K." He glanced up to see her studying him, but then she turned and pulled a plate down from the cabinet. "I know I've said it a hundred times before, but you two really are night and day. Were you like this when you were kids?"

He nodded. "I've always been the more serious one."

"Isn't that the truth?"

Kerestyan swiveled as Logan's quiet voice touched his ears. Standing at the edge of the hallway, eyes slightly swollen, she'd dressed in the jeans and long sleeved, navy blue t-shirt Odin had made for her, both of which fit perfectly.

She tipped her head back and sniffed the air. "Please tell me there's another one of those for me. I could smell it from my room and I think I left a trail of drool down the hallway."

Kerestyan pushed out the stool next to him as Trinity set the plate on the counter. Hopefully Logan would accept his peace offering and the silent apology it was meant to be. "It's all yours."

Delight filled her eyes. "Really?"

He nodded. "And there's more if you can talk Trinity into cooking them."

Trinity set a knife and fork on a napkin then slid it next the plate. She smiled at Logan, her eyes slowly tracing her long, lean frame. "I'm Trinity, Kerestyan's younger sister. And I'm easy, all you have to do is say please."

Kerestyan drew in a sharp breath when he felt Logan's warm hand slide down his arm as she sat on the stool next to him. She smoothed down a wrinkle in the black fabric covering his forearm before she stared at her hand, scrunched up her nose, then withdrew and folded her hands in her lap.

Either she didn't approve of the shirt he'd chosen to replace the one she'd so eagerly ruined, or she was disgruntled by her seemingly absent gesture.

Whichever reason, she quickly recovered, her green eyes twinkling like a child with an ice cream cone as she returned Trinity's smile. "Damn, I'd have been willing to get down on my knees and beg if that's what it took."

After setting a glass of ice water in front of the plate, Kerestyan couldn't help but notice how intently Trinity watched as Logan cut a piece of steak and slowly placed it in her mouth. And when she moaned in obvious appreciation, it was Trinity who shivered.

Trinity leaned across the counter in front of Logan, the rounds of her breasts spilling over the top of her red lace corset. "In no way would I be opposed to you dropping to your knees in front of me, and I'd most certainly be willing to return the favor."

When Logan arched a brow in mid swallow, Kerestyan felt he should be the one to offer a complete and expedient explanation. "Trinity is bisexual, Logan."

She took a sip of water then chuckled. "Yeah, Kerestyan, I kinda picked up on that when she started staring at my tits the second I stepped into the room." She grinned as she sliced the rest of the steak into small cubes. "And had she not already told me all it takes is please, I might have let her touch one as payment for a baked potato with butter and sour cream."

Both Kerestyan and Trinity laughed, but it was Trinity who recovered first. She picked up the apple she'd been sniffing earlier and twisted off the stem. "My orientation doesn't bother you?"

Logan simply shrugged. "No. I guess I assumed all vampires were bisexual in one way or another."

By the way Trinity's head kicked back, it was obvious she found a great deal of amusement in Logan's comment. She pointed at him then smacked a hand against the counter. "What did you and your brother do to make her think you're gay?"

Kerestyan prepared to respond, but paused when Logan's fork clanked against her plate and she glared hard at Trinity. "They didn't do anything to make me think that. It only makes sense that a smart vampire wouldn't care if their blood came from a man or a woman." She pointed at the apple in Trinity's hand. "If the only thing I can eat is apples, and though I might prefer red, all I can find in the store is green – I'm going to eat the green apple. It's still an apple."

A strange and unexpected sensation of warmth rippled through Kerestyan's blood. Had Logan just defended him? Unfortunately, his feeling chilled

as Trinity's smile, once derived from simple appreciation of Logan's human form, faded into something easily two hundred times more dangerous...

Her exotic eyes glowed with a very dark and very ancient admiration. "You are definitely one of a kind, Logan. Very, very few humans would see it that way. Most young vampires don't even see it that way."

Logan retrieved her fork and stabbed at another piece of meat. "Yeah, well, the longer I'm here the more I hear how inhuman I am." She smiled in a rather mischievous way and cast him a sideways glance. "However, I suppose it's better than being morally bankrupt."

He smiled back at her. "I told you, I am not morally bankrupt."

"I am, and I'll happily admit it to anyone," Trinity announced. She tilted her head to the side and peered up at the ceiling. "I'm not even sure I was born with morals."

"See," Logan said, motioning to his sister. "At least she admits it."

He laughed at that. "Trinity Nelek is hardly a model vampire, unless of course the supermodel is on his or her back, blissfully screaming her name."

Trinity's full lips thinned into a smile. "Very nice, K, your brother would be so very proud of you for that one."

"You don't have much room to talk, Lord Vampire," Logan teased. You had me half naked and pinned against an appliance, and you don't even know my last name."

Kerestyan inhaled a deep, calming breath. If unnecessarily loud and extended laughter could kill a vampire, Trinity would've been dead where she stood. But when she stopped abruptly and straightened, her face a mask of concentration, the calm he'd been searching for slipped away. Trinity was speaking with someone telepathically, he could sense it, but only one person made her straighten like that.

Trinity chewed at her bottom lip. "Did you want another steak, Logan? I need to leave, but I'd be happy to cook another before I go." At the same time she was speaking to Logan, Kerestyan felt an intrusion in his mind. *"K, that was Dad. He's demanding I return to the castle. He also told me to tell you he expects Logan at his feet in two days time."*

Panic rolled through Kerestyan in an icy wave. *"What? Two days? The withdrawal process takes longer than two days! Why the hell didn't he tell me himself?"*

"No, thank you," Logan said. "I've learned my lesson at least a hundred times not to cram my stomach full of food, especially when I haven't had it regularly for a while. Thanks for making this one though."

"You're welcome. Do you have any other favorites? Something that makes you drool as much as steak?"

"I don't know, K. Depending on what all V told him, he's probably pissed. All I know is I wouldn't defy him. If you do, even if he thinks she's a viable candidate for becoming a Servio, or more, he'll kill her as your punishment. You know he will."

"He'll kill her just as easily if I take her to him with heroin pumping through her veins!"

"I'm really not picky. I'm just happy if it's clean."

"Understood, I remember those days. And speaking of those days, could I talk to you in private for a minute, please? I'd like to share something with you outside of Kerestyan's heavy, protective hand."

Kerestyan sat up straight. "Trinity Nelek! What are you doing?"

"I'm going to give her some tips on how to work through withdrawal. Remember, I started this life as an addict. Maybe talking to someone who's been there will help her. Considering your new time table, even if it doesn't, it's worth a try."

"Sure, but only because you said please. Where do you want to talk?"

"Why don't you show me which room he put you up in?"

Kerestyan tried to relax. If there was a subject his sister could be considered a savant in regards to, it was addiction in all forms. "Thank you, Trinity. Your willingness to help her means a lot to me."

When Logan stood up, Trinity offered him a quick smile then followed. He watched as they disappeared around the corner, wondering exactly what she might say. Would her words help, or would they only upset Logan more?

"Are you ready to get squeaky clean?"

Logan sat down on the edge of her bed and sighed as Trinity leaned back against the door to close it. "Do I really have a choice?"

Trinity reached up to tighten the high ponytail her dark hair spilled out of. "Considering you're in Kerestyan's hands, I imagine you probably do. He's notorious for giving people he favors choices, which you should know isn't easy for him."

Logan rolled her eyes. "Well, it's not like the choices he's given me are easy ones." She mimicked Kerestyan's dramatic hand gestures from earlier. "Die or become a prisoner. Get clean or die. Go meet some old vampire and potentially die. Notice a theme here?"

Trinity tipped her head back and laughed. "At least you have a choice. You may've been forced into this whole situation, but if you don't want to try and make the best of it you can always choose death. You wouldn't be the first."

Logan leaned over and grabbed her pack of cigarettes from the night table. "I'm not going to willingly choose death, but the final say isn't mine. That's what really pisses me off. This," she pulled out a cigarette and held it up, "will most likely kill me one day. It might not, but chances are it will. Not only do I understand the risks associated with smoking, but I accept them." She popped the cigarette in her mouth, lit it, and then tossed the pack back on the table. "I liken my situation with vampires to being a smoker back in the 1920's. They didn't know how bad it was for them. They just died one day because of it." She took a drag and let the smoke roll out of her mouth. "I could go through all this, even with the best intentions, and end up dead anyway."

Trinity arched one of her perfectly shaped brows. "So just accept it. If you can accept and engage in a habit that can potentially kill you, accept the fact you've found yourself in a situation with the same consequences."

Logan shook her head. "But I didn't choose this situation."

"Technically you did."

She rolled her eyes. "Are you going to tell me it's my fault I'm here, too?"

Trinity tipped her head from side to side, a smile draped across her pouty lips. "Yes and no. I look into your eyes and can see you're just as morally bankrupt as you claim Kerestyan to be. In both cases, it's a product of your life. You chose your life on the streets, but K didn't choose to become a vampire. None of us Nelek kids did. That's why it's important you recognize K's giving you all the choices he can. He's giving you something he never got."

She moved to sit on the bed next to Logan. "Reverse the situation. If your life depended on keeping a secret, and someone who wasn't supposed to know discovered your secret, to what lengths would you go to keep them quiet? Would you give them a bunch of choices, or would you just kill them and save yourself the headache? Be honest."

She's got a point. Logan stared down at the glowing end of her cigarette. *Be honest.* As much as she'd like to say she'd be willing to give someone choices, if her life was on the line, she'd do whatever it took to save her own ass.

But in the same breath, it wasn't like she intended to run off and tell everyone vampires existed. No one would believe her anyway, and even if they did, what the hell could they do to someone like Kerestyan? He disappeared into thin air on a whim. He killed vampires without even moving. Again, she could only imagine what he would do to a human.

She relinquished her cigarette when Trinity's fingers closed around it. "I'd kill them and save myself the trouble. But, I'm not going to tell anyone about vampires, so I don't think the comparison is equal. Your secret Veil isn't in danger with me."

Trinity took a drag then expertly blew out a series of smoke rings. "It's the principle, Logan. The only way to secure you won't tell anyone is to make you a part of it. A human who knows that vampires exist is a threat to my life. It only takes one human to make another believe, and then the snowball effect happens, especially now with TV, the internet and cell phones. How do you think the whole of humanity would react if they found out we exist? And I'm not talking about the Goth kids who'd think it was cool. I'm talking about the ones who'd feel threatened to learn they're food."

Logan took her cigarette when Trinity stood and handed it back to her. She could only imagine how freaked out the nominal population would be. She certainly didn't like the idea of being food, and chances were no one else would, either.

However, it still left her with one question.

She flicked the ashes into the small mouthwash bottle she'd filled with water. "What could humans really do to you? I've seen vampires fight. Putting one of you against a human isn't even fair."

Trinity gave her a more serious look. "Imagine what would happen if even half of the human race united against a common enemy. A lot of the legends are bogus, but sunlight and decapitation can still kill me. How long do you think it'd be before sleeping Fledglings get dragged out into the street at Noon? Before someone like me or Kerestyan get our head blown off in a hail of automatic gunfire? Humanity stood up for itself once before, a long time ago when there weren't all kinds of modern weapons, and it didn't end in our favor. That's how the Veil got started. Even a young vamp is powerful in comparison to a human, but now we're outnumbered 500,000 to one."

Logan inhaled another mouthful of smoke and slowly nodded. The image her mind conjured of a lone vampire standing in a sea of angry humans only drove Trinity's point home more. In the scenario she'd described, the odds were decidedly in humanity's favor.

Well, if nothing else, at least she understood better why Kerestyan had been so adamant about the Veil.

She looked up at Trinity. "So what happens to me now?"

"You get clean," Trinity said with a wide smile. "Then K takes you to meet my Dad. If you make it through the meeting, which I honestly think you will, you'll probably end up as a *Servio*. Do you know what that is?"

"I know it's the name for a servant to a vampire, but I don't really know what it means. Do I get a fancy tattoo or something?"

"No, you don't get a tattoo," Trinity laughed. "You'll go through a ritual that makes you a half-breed of sorts. You become immortal, and will stay that way unless your body gets so damaged you can't heal it. And by damaged I mean, you step out on Broadway and get your ass mowed down by a

speeding bus. If someone shoots you in the arm, you'll be able to concentrate and heal the wound. You pretty much stop aging, you won't ever get sick gain, and you'd have to eat fast food three times a day for a year to gain a pound. You'll also be stronger and faster than you are now, and you can go out in the sun as much as you want. But—"

"Oh!" Logan groaned. She knew it sounded too good to be true. "There's always a *but*..."

Trinity laughed again. "Of course there is. Once you become a *Servio*, your Master is responsible for you in all ways. Whatever you do or say while you're interacting with other vampires or *Servios* comes back on your Master. So, for example, let's say your Master is me. If you're here in New York, Kerestyan only has one rule for his city, which is the Veil. If you break it, he doesn't punish you – he kicks my ass for not teaching you better. Then I come home and return the favor by kicking the crap out of you. And because you're a Nelek, not only will I punish you, but Stefan will, too. He doesn't suffer fools. Trust me. The last person you want to be punished by is my Dad."

Logan cocked her head. "So, I take it Stefan is your dad?"

Trinity's lips thinned in a sheepish smile. "Yes. Sorry. His real name is Lord Stefan Nelek. I've been calling him Dad for so long I forget about it sometimes."

Logan dropped her cigarette into the makeshift ashtray and listened to the hiss it made as it hit the water. The sound rather summed up how she felt at the moment. She hadn't even done anything to this Stefan vampire and he was already punishing her. "Forgive me if I don't return the caring sentiment. I don't exactly feel all warm and fuzzy about the vampire I have to get clean just to meet, especially since he happens to be the same one who decides if live or die."

Trinity sighed, long and loud. "I don't really expect you to. Just keep this in mind, if he was so bad do you think I'd call him Dad? Or that Kerestyan would call him Father? That should really tell you all you need to know."

Logan stood and narrowed her eyes on Trinity. She'd called someone dad once too, but in the end, he'd been anything but. "I don't care what you call him. You're not in my shoes right now, and I'm not in yours. After talking to you, I understand a little better why I can't go back to my old life. For you, as a vampire, it's all about your survival. I can respect that, but I don't have to like the situation your need for survival has put *me* in."

"I understand. I don't expect you to like what's happening. I didn't like being plucked out of my bed one night six thousand years ago and being turned into a vampire, either. Like I said, none of us Nelek kids got a choice when it came to immortality. But each of us makes the best of it, and to this day I don't regret it."

Logan straightened as Trinity stared into her eyes the way Kerestyan had when they'd first met in the alley. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

She smiled in an eerie way that sent a chill straight down Logan's spine. "The key to getting through withdrawal, and I know because I've been there, is finding the brightest part of your life and holding onto it with everything you have. No matter how much your body hurts, no matter how close you think you are to dying, keep a hold of it and don't let go."

Logan blinked at her. She needed to stare at her to come up with that? "Could you be any more ambiguous?"

"Believe it or not, yes." She smiled again, which she seemed to do a lot, and then extended her hand, which Logan accepted. "It was nice to finally meet you. And though I don't think you need it, good luck. It'll be nice to have another girl in the family."

Logan returned the smile. "Thanks for the whole *Servio* explanation, I appreciate it." She arched a brow when Trinity released her hand then took a few steps back as a cold breeze wafted across the room. "Are you going to disappear, too?"

Trinity's smile turned into a lopsided grin, very reminiscent of Odin. "Yes, all the Nelek kids can. Oh, and don't forget to thank Kerestyan for the steak. I did come all the way from Chicago to drop them off." She winked. "Ordering dinner from seven hundred miles away just to make a girl happy...he must really like you."

"I don't think that's why..."

Trinity disappeared in a burst of wind.

Bitch. Logan inhaled a deep breath and blew a sigh. It would've been a lot easier to go back to the kitchen and face Kerestyan had Trinity kept that last sentence to herself. She liked him, she really did, and he was definitely nice to look at – but she didn't have any illusions about what was happening between them.

She shook her head as she opened the door and stepped into the hallway. Truthfully, they were both a threat to the other's survival. He lived his life by blending in with humans, and she lived hers' by staying as far away from them as possible.

Chapter 7

Kerestyan looked up from his steaming goblet of blood as Logan walked back into the kitchen. Her green eyes appeared more distant than usual, but he hadn't heard any screaming, which meant whatever words Trinity had chosen went over far better than the previous discussion about her addiction.

He picked up the shot glass he'd placed next to the bottle of Vodka she'd requested and tapped it against the table. "You look like you could use a drink."

She gifted him a faint smile before she curled herself into the chair across from him. "Thank you for the steak."

He mirrored her gesture. "Trinity told you?"

She nodded as she twisted the cap from the bottle. "Yeah, she said you had it specially delivered from Chicago."

"Well, someone once told me Chicago had the best steaks. And I said to myself, because I often talk to myself, that you should have the best steak I could procure. So I called and had them flown in."

Her smile grew a bit. "Oh, really?" She filled the shot glass to the brim. "I heard you sent Trinity on a windy mission spanning 700 miles. Give or take a few."

He watched as she tipped her head back and swallowed the clear liquid, admiring the graceful, enticing column of her throat. Remembering what it felt like to run this tongue there, how much he'd enjoyed pulling her body against his.

How much he enjoyed her.

"Trinity gave away all my secrets, didn't she?"

Logan blew out a breath and scrunched up her face. "She might have spilled a few of yours, but she did a pretty good job of sticking to her own. Don't worry, she didn't tell me about the teddy bear you sleep with."

He arched a brow. "But I don't sleep with a teddy bear. I've never even owned one, and I don't sleep but for a few hours once every six to seven months."

Her lips finally widened enough to show her white teeth. "I was just checking." She poured herself another shot, but her perfect smile faded as

she stared down at the glass, twisting it between her fingers. "So tell me about Lord Stefan Nelek. Tell me what you think I need to know to make it through this."

Kerestyan took a sip of his chosen drink then set the blackened goblet back on the table. "He's very hard to explain. I've heard him described as an angel twisted with a nightmare, as a tyrant whose mailed fist hides a velvet glove. But in the same breath, I've watched him be called a monster, a creature, a relic who should have met the sun long, long ago. Yet I...I call him Father."

"Do you love him?" she asked in a quiet voice.

He relaxed in his chair. "That's an extremely difficult question to answer. Love changes when you become a vampire. It takes on a different texture, a richer but far more complicated hue and taste. I respect him. I obey him. I would follow him into battle and die to protect him and what he represents to me. If, to you, that means I love him, then I would say yes, I love my Father."

"Do you fear him?"

"No. I believe fear blooms when you either can't, or choose not to understand something. And while I may not understand each and every way his Ancient mind functions, I understand him enough to know why it is he does the things he does, and why he lives the way he chooses."

She still didn't raise her head. "What do I have to do to stop him from killing me?" Her soft voice wavered at the end of the question.

Kerestyan fisted his hands. He hated hearing the fear in her voice, hated feeling it radiating from her body, but despised the thick scent of it even more.

He closed his eyes when, for the second time in her presence, the beast inside him unfurled deep in his stomach. The first time he'd felt it shift, it'd done so from the pure desire ebbing in his blood. From the burning need he'd felt to touch her, to taste her skin mixed with the small, crescent shaped smear of blood just above her lips.

But now it uncoiled in anger, and its focus was no other direction than inward.

Logan may have been a threat to his better sensibilities, but she was not a danger to the vampire population as a whole.

Had he left her in the alley where he'd found her, she wouldn't be terrified now. Had he not allowed curiosity to cloud his judgment, she'd be in whatever building she called home for the night, continuing to keep the immortal secret she'd stumbled upon. She wouldn't be sitting across from him now with tears swimming in her beautiful eyes, staring through a glass set-

ting atop a table built long before any human had thought to believe in a single entity called God.

"Kerestyan? If you have any advice, I'd really like to hear it." The desperate note in her voice tore at his insides.

"Answer the questions he asks you as honestly as possible, Logan. No matter how much you don't think he'll like the answer, or how much you don't like your own answer. If you lie, he'll know you are before the words ever pass your lips. That's all you can do. I wish there was more, I truly do. But due to your human state, honesty is all you have to offer him."

She finished her shot and sat up straight. "Okay. Then that's what I'll do."

He studied her as she spun the cap on the bottle then unfolded her legs from underneath her; watched closely while she carefully pushed the chair in and began walking back towards the hallway to her room.

Leaning forward, Kerestyan rested his elbows on the table. "Logan, can I ask you a question?"

She stopped and slowly turned to face him. "Considering how many I've asked you, I suppose you deserve *one*." The corners of her lips rose slightly, but her smile went no farther.

"What happened to make you see the world the way you do?"

Silence stung the air as she lowered her eyes to the floor. She stared down at the tiles for a few moments before turning to give him her profile, a breathtaking masterpiece of haunted distance. "There's a moment when you realize all your worst fears have come true. When the fat girl stuffing her face in the corner finally recognizes food gives her the comfort she can't find in anyone else. When the gorgeous man with the body of a God realizes he changes women like shoes because he's scared one won't find enough reason to stay. When you see the world for what it really is, see it for all the horrors the news can't or won't report. There's a moment when you realize and accept that *you are* the worthless piece of shit your father always said you were, because even a diseased crack-head wouldn't kill their own sister. It was a moment, Kerestyan, a defining moment...an epiphany of imperfection."

Kerestyan felt a sting in his chest as tears filled her eyes. The last thing he'd meant to do was conjure a memory that hurt her. He wanted to know more, but he didn't dare ask. "I'm sorry if my question upset you."

She wiped a tear away as it fell on her cheek. "It's not your fault. You didn't know." She slowly approached the table and sat down on the edge closest to him, her eyes searching his face. "Do you ever regret what you are?"

He reached out and took one of her hands in his. Never once, not even by his siblings, had he ever been asked such a question. "No, I can't say I do. I

regret some of the terrible things I've done in my past, but I can't remember a time when I ever felt pity for what I am." He stilled as she flipped his hand over and traced a warm finger over the faint scar marring his palm. "When I was turned, there was no greater honor than being chosen for immortality. Giving up the sun and the fruit of the land was a small price to pay in return for what I was able to do for my family and my people."

"Your people?" One corner of her mouth curved up. "You weren't named Moses in another life, were you?"

He chuckled. "No. I wasn't Moses." He laced his fingers between hers and pressed a kiss to the back of her hand. "I used the gifts my Father's blood granted me, my superior speed, strength and resilience, to defend my family and my lands. Back then, vampires didn't hide from humans as we do now. They knew we existed the way they knew it was morning. We, rightfully or not, were cherished. Some of us were worshiped as Gods for our abilities; others didn't want the sacrifices or glory."

She sucked in a sharp breath. "So that's why Odin is *Odin*."

He studied the back of her hand, admiring the intricate framework of light blue veins beneath her soft, pale skin. "Yes."

"But you were one of the others."

He nodded as bittersweet memories flickered in his mind. "I didn't want my name scrawled across the pages of history. I fought for what was right, what I believed in. I wore the armor of a knight, in a time when causes were more than empty words and broken promises." He raised his head when he felt the heat of Logan's eyes on him.

Her expression lingered between understanding and puzzlement. "Do you wish you could go back? To those times?"

"Some days I do. Some days I wish I could step into the night and smell clean, crisp air again. Feel a warm breeze on my skin from when the world was fresh and pure, before cars and pollution and smog. But there are other days, mainly during spring and summer, when I walk through this city just after sunset, while the pavement is still hot and I can feel the heat through my shoes. Those days, I marvel at all humanity has accomplished over the last few centuries. Even in its darkest hours, this world still amazes me at times."

For an instant, her green eyes shimmered with an emotion he couldn't quite place. But as quickly as it appeared, it faded. She slowly shook her head. "We definitely view the world in a different way. I'm not sure I could ever step outside and feel like that."

"Why?"

"Because," she exhaled a fractured breath, "I've seen what happens when people think no one's looking. I've seen homeless people killed for no rea-

son. Bums lit on fire by gang members because they think it's funny." She lowered her eyes. "I watched a little girl, who couldn't have been more than six, get shot in her front yard during a drive-by at one o'clock in the morning. I used to ask myself why a kid would be playing outside at that time of night, especially in Brooklyn, but there's no good answer for it. There's never a good answer. I think that's why after a while...I just stopped asking questions." She sat quiet for a moment before she slipped her hand from his and slid off the table. "I'll be right back."

He watched as she walked away and turned down the hallway to her bedroom. Only once in his life had he felt the way she'd described, as if the world around him couldn't possibly become any darker, filled with any more hate.

It was the night he'd stumbled off a blood soaked battlefield, clutching the mortal wound in his side, only to fall at the feet of the man he now called Father. And the first demand he'd made after pulling his bloody wrist from Kerestyan's mouth, was that Kerestyan remove the armor he died in – and never put it on again.

Kerestyan pushed the memory aside as Logan walked back into the room carrying the dirty coat he'd found her in. Tears shined in her eyes as she reached into the pocket then set a worn syringe and a small bag of white powder on the table in front of him.

She stared down at the table, her green eyes more distant than ever. "I don't know how after all this time you can still see the world the way you do. But, if there's even a small chance that someday I could see it like you do, I don't want to pass it up."

His chest tightened as he gazed up at her beautiful face. "You've made your choice?"

She slowly nodded. "I don't want to pretend no one's looking anymore." Without another word, no further explanation, she turned and walked back to her room.

Although his first thought was to follow, Kerestyan listened to his instincts when they whispered that Logan needed to be alone. He didn't know why, but something deep behind her eyes told him going after her right now wouldn't help her. And the last thing he wanted was to make the situation any more difficult for her than it was about to become.

Chapter 8

Kerestyan slipped inside Logan's room then carefully closed the door behind him. It'd been seven hours since her haunting admissions in the kitchen. Seven long hours that, for him, had passed at the pace of seven hundred centuries.

After allowing his eyes a moment to adjust to the dim light, he stared at the bed in the corner, conflicted by two very different but powerful emotions: Desire and fear.

Even with her height, Logan seemed so tiny sprawled across the king size bed. And though it lent plenty of room for her to stretch out, in no way did she appear to be comfortable. Lying on her back, the silver satin sheets twisted around her legs while one arm rested on her abdomen, the other bent above her head. The heavy velvet comforter, kicked into a heap near her feet, had fared better than the six pillows however, only one of which remained on the bed.

The reason for the faint, salty scent of perspiration hanging in the air became clear as he moved closer. Having stripped off her jeans and t-shirt, which he assumed she'd done since both were strewn across the floor near the side of the bed, small beads of sweat dappled her flushed skin. Her black hair was matted to her forehead and appeared to be just as damp as her black tank top and matching shorts.

Had it been any other situation, he'd have taken more time to appreciate the scene before him. Her long, slender legs, which as his eyes traced the length of them, seemed to never end. How her shorts, even though they appeared to be a few sizes too small, hugged her thin hips and offered an inviting view of her navel. The way the flimsy fabric of her top clung to her small breasts, outlining in perfect detail the hardened state of her nipples.

Kerestyan forced his eyes away from Logan's body when the icy sting of the glass in his hand reminded him why he was standing there. She needed to be kept hydrated, needed the essential fluid to endure the hell she'd be subjected to in the coming hours.

What all that hell entailed, he wasn't exactly sure. Vouclade, who'd found it necessary to appear once again a few hours after Logan had returned to her room, hadn't been specific. He'd simply advised in his dry, scientific tone

that she receive ample hydration during the torture to come, and for Keres-tyan to keep his distance.

When Kerestyan had inquired as to why distance was necessary, Vouclade, in an exaggerated show of irritation, had adjusted his glasses and growled something about attachments and bonding during stressful experiences, then vanished.

Kerestyan allowed his eyes to return to the woman resting only a few feet away, noting the shallow and erratic rise and fall of her chest. Something told him that if she hadn't forged a bond with anyone during the stress that must have been her life thus far, it certainly wasn't going to happen now.

And it definitely wouldn't be with him.

Bothered by the thought a little more than he expected, he rested a knee on the bed and leaned forward. He gently brushed the damp shards of hair from her forehead and watched as her eyes slowly fluttered open.

A smile touched just the corners of her mouth. "I hate you."

He returned the gesture and absently tucked a shock of hair behind her ear. "I'd profess you were the first to say such a thing to me, but it wouldn't be true."

"Somehow, I'm not surprised." The words left her lips as a quiet, raspy whisper. She sounded so weak, so far removed from the woman he'd met in the alley almost twenty-four hours ago.

He stiffened. Had only such small amount of time passed?

For him, it truly felt like more.

He nudged the glass into the hand resting on her abdomen. "I brought you some water."

"I know," she breathed as her fingers closed around it. "I heard the ice tinkling against the glass when you walked in." She grimaced as she sat up and raised it to her dry lips. "Not very stealthy for an old vampire, are you?"

He couldn't help but smile as her eyes wandered across his bare chest then lingered on his abdomen. "I assure you, when necessity dictates, not only am I able to move unseen but unheard as well."

Her eyes made a slow journey back to his. "You look good in black pajama pants."

"You look better without them."

Her mouth curved into a devious grin as she moved to set the empty glass on the nightstand. Unfortunately, her smile faded as she fully extended her arm and it began shaking. Lips drawn into a tight frown, she pulled back and leaned against the lone pillow. "I hate this part."

He started to request an explanation, but stopped when the tremor crept to her other arm, moving slowly until it encompassed her entire body. It wasn't long before her teeth clicked together, despite the repeated flex of

her jaw muscles as she attempted to stave it off. If it weren't for the trickle of sweat sliding down her cheek, he might have believed she was cold with the way she sucked in deep breaths between her trembling lips.

She rolled onto her side and hugged her knees to her chest. "I appreciate the water, but you should probably go. You don't want to see this."

He cast a glance to the door then back to her. Why he'd made the movement, he wasn't sure. He had no intention of leaving her, and deep down he knew it. He couldn't leave her alone, couldn't walk away knowing with utter certainty that whether he was in the living room or his own sleeping chamber, she would be the only image in his mind.

He sat down on the edge of the bed. "I don't want to see it, or you don't want me to see it?"

She rolled her eyes. "If you want to watch me shake like the owner of a Chinese buffet when two six hundred pound men walk through the doors, by all means, stick around."

How could he not smile at that? "You, my dear, have the most interesting sense of humor I've ever had the pleasure of experiencing."

She coughed out a laugh as the muscles in her abdomen tightened and flexed. "I'm glad you approve. Now, would you be so kind as to find something you can use to tie me to the bed?"

The beast in his stomach shifted in excitement, but he refused it. "Now is hardly the time for those kinds of activities. However, I'd be more than happy to fulfill that request, and more, after you've met my Father."

Her face took on a deadly edge. "No, Kerestyan. I'm serious. I need you to tie my hands to the bed, now."

"Logan, I'm not going to tie you to the bed. You're in no condition to be bound."

She fisted her hands against her chest and squeezed her eyes closed. "You have to!" She rolled her head from side to side, tears gathering in the corners of her eyes. "If you don't...I'll scratch until I bleed."

He stood up and studied her movements, trying to understand what was happening to her. "What are you talking about?"

"When it starts to hurt," she shrieked. "When it feels like whatever's inside me is oozing out, eating my skin. The chewing, the burning...it hurts so much..." she trailed off in a painful wail.

Kerestyan lunged forward as she dragged her fingernails down her neck. He dropped a knee on either side of her midsection and seized her hands when she tried to repeat the action. Staring down at the bright scarlet trails marring her flesh, he held her wrists while she twisted and writhed beneath him. She cried out as tears spilled from her eyes, as if some invisible enemy was tearing her apart from the inside.

Chills raced the length of his spine as he listened to her scream. He wasn't prepared for this, wasn't ready to see her this way. Not knowing what else to do for her or how to help her, he summoned the one person who'd always been there for him no matter the situation.

Relief snapped like a thick rubber band in his stomach when a rather perplexed looking Odin appeared next to the bed. He tightened his grip on Logan's wrists but stared at his brother. "I need your help."

Odin clamped his hands over his ears. "For fuck's sake, she's loud." He wrinkled his nose. "What the hell are you doing to her?"

"I'm holding her down."

He rolled his black eyes. "I can see that. Why?"

"Because I don't know what else to do!" Kerestyan heard his voice fill the room, but couldn't remember a time it had ever sounded so strained, so damn desperate.

His own shock was reflected in his brother's face. "What's going on?"

"She's going through withdrawal." He ground his teeth together. "Vouclade told me to give her water. He never said anything about this. He never said I'd have to watch her fall apart in front of me!"

Odin narrowed his eyes, the concern quickly fading from his face. "Need I remind you, she did this to herself?" He reached out and grabbed her arm just below Kerestyan's hand. "Do you see those dark blotches?"

Kerestyan considered the small, dark red marks littering Logan's forearm. But when he didn't answer immediately, Odin shook her arm.

"Do you see them? Those are needle tracks, Kerestyan. She asked for this. She asked for it every time she pulled out her lighter and that infamous little spoon, and then shot herself full of heroin. Don't ask me to feel sorry for her." He released her arm and stepped back. "Right now, she's getting exactly what she deserves."

"I'm not asking you to feel sorry for her. I'm asking you to help *me*."

"Help you what? Help her?" He shook his head and laughed. "There's nothing you can do for her, aside from binding her hands and locking yourself out of the goddamn room. This is part of withdrawal. And unless Vouclade's willing to give you something to help ease her symptoms, which we both know he isn't, you're going to have to accept that there is nothing, absolutely nothing you can do to help her."

When Logan stopped thrashing and went limp, the only comfort Kerestyan found was in the rhythmic pounding against the pads of his thumbs and the rapid pace of her breathing. He shifted his grip to hold her hands and locked eyes with Odin. "There has to be something."

"There isn't." He motioned towards her. "And when she regains consciousness, it'll start all over again and probably go on for another three

days, if you're lucky." He balled his hand into a fist and growled. "What the hell is wrong with you? You're acting like you've never seen this before."

Kerestyan folded Logan's arms and laid them carefully across her stomach before climbing off the bed. He closed the distance to Odin in two large steps. "It's one thing to stand on a sidewalk and watch it happen fifty feet away in an alley. It's one thing to stand in the hall of a keep and know it's happening in a room above you. But it's something entirely different to watch it happen in front of you, in your own home, to someone you—"

"To someone you what, Kerestyan?" Odin yelled, his lips curled into a snarl.

Kerestyan thought better of finishing his thought the way he'd originally intended. "To someone you forced into the situation."

It took a moment before Odin's glare relaxed. "The only part of this situation I don't hold her responsible for is her exposure to our kind. I don't agree with Vouclade that it's her fault she learned about vampires. But I do think you've been more than amicable to her, Kerestyan. Most Lords would've killed her in the alley they found her in. She'd have been just another homeless drug addict found dead in a pool of her own body fluids. And we both know that story wouldn't even make the local news."

Kerestyan growled as his fangs slid into place. "She deserved more than that when I met her, and she deserves even more now!"

"Why? What the hell is so special about her? Your city's full of hundreds of humans just like her."

He cast a glance back to Logan. Nothing he said, no matter how well he wove the words would make Odin see her in the same light. "They aren't like her. I'm not going to stand here and list all of her qualities to someone who doesn't care. Suffice it to say I'm not the only one interested in her. Father wants her in his chamber in two days time."

Odin's jaw went slack. "Oh shit. That's not good, Kerestyan. There's no way in hell she'll be done with withdrawal by then. You'll be lucky if she doesn't puke on his boots."

Kerestyan frowned. He really didn't need Odin's vivid brand of imagery at the moment. "I know what could happen, Odin. And you're right, I asked Vouclade for help and he refused. He made it very clear that I missed my chance for his assistance."

Odin paced back and forth for a few moments. He alternated staring at Logan and mumbling to himself between closing his eyes and concentrating. Then all at once he jumped, whirled around and grabbed Kerestyan's shoulders. "Do you still have all the spices and shit Alfred gave you?"

He rolled his eyes. What was it with his siblings and spices today? "Yes. Everything Alfred gave me is exactly where he put it."

"If you want any chance of helping her, come with me."

Kerestyan did as his brother asked and followed him to the kitchen. He watched as Odin picked through different unmarked bottles, opened them and sniffed, put some back in the cabinet then placed others on the counter. He did the same with the packets and canisters.

"Odin, what are you doing?"

He smiled. "Opium has been around forever." He filled a glass with water and began dumping his chosen spices and powders into it. "Back in my war-ring and whoring days, some of the troops used it as a pain killer. Most of the time either the effects lasted too long or the guys got addicted and couldn't function without it." He pulled out a spoon and stirred the noxious brown liquid he'd concocted. "Obviously I couldn't take a bunch of strung out warriors into battle, so the healers used to make this elixir to help purge their bodies and negate the effects. It pretty much speeds up the withdrawal process at the cost of making it ten times worse."

Kerestyan took the glass when Odin handed it to him. "Are you sure this won't hurt her?"

He laughed. "It won't do any lasting damage, but for the next 45 to 47 hours she's gonna feel like her own body is trying to crawl away from her."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is she's gonna get sick as all hell. And when I say sick, I mean put a towel on the bathroom floor and keep her close to the toilet. She'll sweat like a hooker in church until her fever spikes, so keep her full of water. If she pukes it up, make her drink more. If she starts scratching, don't let her. She won't have any concept of how hard she's pushing. She'll scratch her skin off until she's a bloody mess. And for God's sake, I don't care how much she screams and begs, do not get her more heroin, Kerestyan. If you do while that mixture's in her system, she'll die instantly. If all goes well, with a little luck and your help, she should come out of the entire withdrawal cycle about two hours before you have to take her to Dad."

Kerestyan stared down into the frothy substance and grimaced. "How long after she drinks this will the effects start?"

"Within five minutes, ten at the absolute most." He rested a hand on Kerestyan's shoulder. "I know it looks bad, but believe it or not, it tastes like a really chalky protein shake." He pointed towards the hallway. "The longer you stand here and stare at it, the closer you cut it. I'd suggest you get in there and get started."

Kerestyan nodded then headed for Logan's room. For the first time since he'd become an immortal, he didn't have the luxury of time. Before he reached the hallway, he turned around and looked at his brother. "Thank you, Odin."

"You're welcome. For the record, I did this for you...not her."

With nothing else to say, Kerestyan returned to Logan's room and placed the homemade potion on the counter in the bathroom. After spreading the comforter from the bed, as well as a few pillows on the bathroom floor, he gathered Logan's unconscious body in his arms and held her close as he sat down in the middle of the makeshift bed.

Once he'd situated her between his legs, with one arm wrapped around her waist to keep her upright and the back of her head resting against his shoulder, he reached up and grabbed the glass.

Again, he stared down into the thick liquid as doubts clouded his mind. What if it didn't work? What if her modern body didn't handle it the way Odin's ancient warriors had? What if Odin had let his obvious disdain for her overshadow what she needed right now? Would he do such a thing knowing their Father had personally requested her presence?

If so, the punishment for interfering with his demand would be legendary.

Drawing in a useless deep breath, Kerestyan blew it out along with all his concerns. Right now, he had to believe Odin had done nothing but attempt to help him.

He pressed his lips to Logan's ear. "Logan? Logan, you have to wake up for me. I need you to wake up."

It took a few tries, but her eyes slowly blinked open. "Kerestyan?"

"Yes?"

"Why are we in the bathroom? Did I throw up on your bed?"

He smiled. "No, you didn't vomit on my bed."

"Oh, God." She tried to cover her face with her trembling hand. "I didn't pee, did I?" Her voice was quiet and filled with horror.

"No, Logan, you didn't relieve yourself in my bed, either."

"Good. It'd be really embarrassing to pee in such a hot guy's bed. I know if I was a guy and some chick pissed in my bed, I'd never be able to look at her without thinking, 'Hey, that's the bitch who pissed in my bed. She ruined my satin sheets'."

Although the humor was definitely her style, and Kerestyan was more than pleased to hear she thought he was "hot", the way her words rolled and slurred together told him she wasn't completely aware of what she said.

He couldn't resist. And in his own defense, he felt it was important to know if she'd simply loosened up because of her state, or if she was delirious. "Logan, did you enjoy what happened between us in the kitchen?"

She over exaggerated the nod and when she threw her head back, her skull cracked hard against his clavicle. "Oh, yeah. If your little freak of a brother hadn't shown up when he did, you'd have been screaming Logan

Ellis all night long. Well, maybe not all night...but a good fifteen minutes at least." She reached up and rubbed the back of her head. "My head hurts. What did you do to me? I'm thirsty."

He smiled again. Had she loosened up? Markedly so. Was she delirious? Not quite. But if nothing else, at least he now knew the last name of the woman he'd more than willingly "pressed against an appliance".

And when all was said and done, and she found herself safely returned to his home, he silently promised her he would finish what he'd started.

"Can I have some water?"

He raised the glass to her lips. "Drink this for me." Before he'd even finished asking, she wrapped her fingers around his and began drinking in large, eager gulps.

She'd nearly swallowed it all before she pushed his hand away. "What the hell was that?" He could hear the suction between her cheeks and tongue as she opened and closed her mouth. "It tastes like... like...chocolate covered ass." She pushed back against him and flipped over in his arms. "I'm serious, what was it?"

He set the glass back up on the counter then laid back and turned onto his side, pulling her with him. "It was a mixture of old ingredients that will help you through the withdrawal process."

"It tasted like shit."

"I'm sorry."

He felt the heated burst of her breath against his throat as she snickered. "No, you're not...but I forgive you."

He didn't comment further, focusing instead on the hollow echo of seconds ticking away in his mind. Silence seemed to still the air around them as he internally counted, knowing at any moment he would lose her to herbs that hadn't grown in the wild for thousands of years. Spices that now only grew in the mystical gardens nestled in the shadowed courtyards of Nelek castle.

Kerestyan closed his eyes and waited. Would it take five minutes for the elixir to begin working, or would luck gift them ten?

By two, he could feel the temperature of her skin rising.

Luck withdrew its support at three and a half as her body violently seized and convulsed in his arms. She screamed into his chest, her tears burning his skin, and then locked her arms around him with such force that if he'd needed to breathe, he wouldn't have been able to.

He pressed a kiss to the top of her head and tightened his arms around her, dreading the next 48 hours. "I am truly sorry, Logan. More than I'll ever find the words to say...far more than you'll ever know."

Chapter 9

Logan did her best to remain as calm as possible while consciousness worked at a furious pace to reclaim her. First, she felt her heart pounding at a slow but steady pace, rushing heat through her chilled veins. Next, it was her body and every single muscle she owned throbbing as though she'd just run a marathon, twice. Last, and certainly most disgusting, it was the hairy spider that must've crawled into her mouth at some point and woven a sticky web around her tongue.

But in spite of all that, she had to admit if someone asked her how she felt right now, for the first time in five years she could say she felt good and mean every word of it.

There was only one possible explanation...

Withdrawal had killed her.

And that thought was only reaffirmed when she slowly opened one eye, only to be blinded by bright, white light. That single brilliant pearl of light, surrounded by a thousand shimmering halos was all she could focus on.

Obviously someone had made a big mistake.

She should've seen flames and heard hundreds of people screaming. There should've been little red imps with leathery bat wings dancing around with glasses of ice water and plates of triple chocolate cake.

She smiled. She should have gone down, not up.

But as her vision gradually adjusted, it was her theory that died when she realized she was staring at one of the track lights recessed into the white ceiling of the bathroom.

She closed her eyes and rolled her head to the side, letting her cheek rest against the cold tiles. She should've known better. The only way she'd get into heaven, if the place really existed, was if she won a bet against Satan himself.

All she had to do now was find the freaky bastard.

She opened her eyes, intent on getting up to find Kerestyan, but relaxed when she realized his handsome face was only inches away. His eyes were closed, and for the first time since she'd met him, she could barely see the thin lines around his eyes. His lips, usually firm and drawn tight, seemed so soft and inviting now. And the dark stubble shadowing his jaw, which she

was sure hadn't been there before, made him look more like a slumbering medieval warrior than the serious Lord Vampire she'd come to know.

It was as she traced the length of him that she realized just how naked they both were. One of his large arms was bent, serving as a pillow under his head, the other draped over her hip, hand resting at the small of her back. While a sliver of space separated her chest from his, from the waist down there wasn't a point where their bodies didn't touch. His long legs mingled with hers, one knee nestled snugly between her thighs.

It wasn't until she noted their intimate position that she really felt him. Before, the contact of his warm skin hadn't registered in her mind as anything more than an extension of her own. But now she felt every centimeter of his hard body, each sculpted muscle pressed against her, every delicious inch of his bare flesh.

She trailed her eyes back to his peaceful face. Although she didn't know how or when they'd ended up in such an interesting position, she vaguely recalled the feel of him behind her and the cold bite of porcelain against her cheek. She remembered the hot sting of water against her back mixed with a hazy image of his intense blue eyes as he held her in the shower, remembered his gentle hands stroking her hair while she cried against his chest.

But what she did recall, with striking clarity, was the feel of his wet hair in her hands and the strained, almost brittle sound of his voice when she'd begged him to make the pain stop. *"I can't, Logan. But I promise I'll stay with you. I won't leave. I won't lose you."*

He'd sounded just as scared as she felt.

Logan reached out and brushed a wisp of still damp hair from Keres-tyan's shadowed cheek, wondering why he'd stayed with her when he should have walked away.

When the fog of withdrawal had initially begun, she'd heard Odin's angry voice somewhere in the distance. And deep inside, she agreed with every single word that echoed around her. She deserved every moment of agony, each and every shred of pain she felt. She'd done it to herself, and should've been left to endure it alone.

But the man only a handful of inches away, the moody and sometimes far too serious vampire, had promised he'd stay...and here he was.

She leaned closer and let the backs of her fingers scrape against his newly acquired stubble, wondering what it would feel like to be loved by a man like him. What it might feel like to love a man like him.

What it might feel like to love anything again...

Fortunately, she didn't have the chance to consider it for long because her thoughts scattered in a thousand different directions when Kerestyan's arm tightened around her hip and he pulled her lower body even tighter

against his. Pleasure danced down her spine, lighting tiny fires under her nipples as a quiet growl vibrated in his chest and his hand slid from her lower back down to her ass.

She sucked in a deep breath and tried to hold it, even though what she really wanted to do was slip her tongue into his enticing mouth. Of course, it didn't help at all that she could feel something hardening against the flat of her other hip. Granted, she knew men were capable of getting an erection while they slept, but did it hold true for vampires?

He'd said he only slept for a few hours every month, but didn't say when the last time was. Was he sleeping now, or was he just pretending to be?

She stared at his face, watching for even the slightest twitch as she brushed the pad of her thumb over his nipple. She smiled when it puckered, but even more when not even the corner of his mouth rose.

Oh, the things she could do to him right now.

Squeezing her eyes closed tight, she stretched her mind, attempting to fill in the space between drinking the rotten milkshake and now. But all she could find, past what she'd already recalled, were a few blurry memories of lying in Kerestyan's arms.

She had no clue how much time had passed. She didn't know what day it was, what time of day it was, or even if it was day. If it was day, would he sleep until the sun went down? If it was night, could he wake up at any moment?

In the movies vampires slept like the dead. Nothing woke them up except the sun or getting staked by a crazed hunter. However, he'd already told her the movies had it all wrong. And right now, the only staking she was willing to consider ended in a screaming, panting orgasm for both of them.

Logan whimpered as her fingers, in blatant defiance of her mind, worked their way down from Kerestyan's chest, exploring the hard grooves between his abs. She grumbled when they found his navel, followed closely by the thin trail of hair leading to where their bodies touched, and to something far more exciting. Something her fingers wanted to touch again, right now.

Really, did he have to feel this damn good?

She pried her hand from his body and covered her face. She'd die if she had to stay here much longer. Not able to move because of the strong grip he had on her ass. Not able to crawl away for the very same reason...and not even able to dip her head enough to suck that hard nipple into her mouth for a little taste.

As it was, every time she drew a deep breath it moved her body just enough that with the way his hand was positioned low on her left ass cheek, she had to endure the maddening sensation of his fingertips grazing her intimately.

She stifled a moan by grinding her teeth together when that damn hand, as if queued, squeezed tighter, spreading her just wide enough that she could feel his powerful thigh ripple against her clit. If it wasn't bad enough that his now rock hard cock throbbed against her hip, she had no doubts that because of one well timed grope, there was a more than ample wet spot on his thigh.

She dug her fingernails into the sexy cut of muscle just above his hip and jammed her other hand between his face and the arm he used as a pillow. Once she secured a good handful of his silky hair, she shook him. "Kerestyan Nelek! I'm going to kill you!"

The bastard's soft, tantalizing lips parted in a most devious grin. "Well good morning, Logan." His eyes blinked open, two dark orbs of twinkling satisfaction. "I didn't realize you were awake."

"You're so full of shit." She pinched his side harder. "How long have you been awake?"

He growled, lips curled somewhere between a snarl and a smile, then rolled her flat on her back, pinning her between the cold, hard floor and his hot, hard body. She smiled as he rested his forearms on either side of her head and then shifted his hips to rub the thick head of his cock between her slick lips.

He nipped at her mouth. "Long enough to enjoy feeling you get wet."

She shivered in response to the wildly erotic sensations racing under her skin. Reaching up, she buried her other hand in his hair and tugged him closer, unmoved when his canines elongated to fine, sharp points between his parted lips...but oddly taunted by the way his body tensed. "Tell me how long, Kerestyan."

"Careful," he breathed. "You're in a very compromising position and we only have an hour before your meeting with my Father."

She froze and stared up at him. Had that much time really passed? She fought to hold back the unexpected tears stinging her eyes.

Maybe it was the sudden desperation she felt tightening its icy fingers around the white hot anticipation in her stomach. Maybe it was the way fear of dying intertwined with her desire for the man poised above her.

Maybe, just maybe, it was something much more complicated.

But if she'd lost two days of her life, possibly the last two days of her life, she wasn't about to give up the last hour.

Logan tightened her fingers in Kerestyan's hair and pulled him so their lips barely touched. "Then why don't you kiss me like it's the last time you..." Hot and demanding, his tongue pushed past her lips, branding her with a fierce possessiveness that sent passion winding around every nerve in her body.

She met each thrust and caress of his probing tongue with one of her own, wanting nothing more than to remember the taste of him, the way her body tingled and ached from the delectable sensation of his soft lips moving against hers.

It took no more than her fingernails scraping down his chiseled back to make his chest rumble. No more than the silent invitation of wrapping her legs around his waist before he drove his hips against her, stretching and filling her with his thick, hard cock, all at once.

When her back arched high, she broke away from his mouth and struggled to suck air into her lungs. Pain twisted with absolute bliss as he pulled out then slammed back into her, again and again, each thrust deeper than the one before.

She felt him shift, gasping as more of his weight centered between her legs and his strong fingers gripped her hips. His lips burned against the sensitive skin of her neck. "I love the way you feel, Logan...the way you smell."

She smiled at his raspy admission. Fisting her hands in his hair, she moaned as he licked and fanged one tight nipple, then the other. No drug was better, no feeling more intense than the wicked, breath stealing friction he created inside her with every fiery scratch of his fangs, every passionate stroke of his cock.

But she wanted more, wanted every inch he had to give her, needed to feel his body tense and flex as he exploded deep inside her.

Lowering her hands to his steely biceps, she moaned and tipped her head back. "Deeper. Harder. Harder. Kerestyan!"

Kerestyan groaned when Logan's fingernails dug into the backs of his arms, sending lust spiking in his blood. But it was the sight of her head kicked back as she raised her hips to meet him, the sound of her screaming his name that pushed him closer to the edge of madness.

He stared down at the pale arch of her throat, eyes drawn to the hard, quickening pulse in the delicate hollow. It taunted the beast inside him, beckoning for him to taste her in a way no man ever had, urging him to take her to dizzying heights no human ever could.

But he didn't dare bite her.

No. Not now, not when he knew he'd lose himself in her even more than he already had. He had to stay aware of the time, needed to keep tight reins on the animal stalking inside him.

Unfortunately, the beasts' instincts were just as powerful as his desire for the beautiful woman writhing beneath him.

Leaning forward, he dragged his fangs down that graceful column and pressed his tongue to the hollow of her throat. He growled when he felt her shudder, mesmerized by the rhythmic pounding of her heartbeat in his ears

and the rich, bittersweet scent of her blood filling his lungs. Knowing he was tempting more than just fate, he pushed her knees to her chest, locked his hands around her waist then rolled onto his back, pulling her with him.

He'd seen countless striking images over the course of his existence, but few stirred him the way Logan did when she sat up and spread her knees, resting her feet on the floor. Her half hooded eyes, bottomless pools of emerald fire, sparkled with a reckless, seductive power only she possessed. Her lips, moist and parted, curved with satisfaction while she held the tip of her tongue captive between her teeth.

He stilled for a moment, rapt as her hands slid down over her breasts, her dusky pink nipples teasing him as they disappeared only to peek from between her splayed fingers. Lowering her hands to rest on his, he smiled as she curled her fingers, tightening his already strong grip on her waist before she rolled her hips forward.

Kerestyan felt the animal inside roar to life when he she cried his name again. Passion exploded with the force of a hurricane in his blood, surging through his veins as he watched his cock fully disappear into her tight, glistening body.

Logan tried to breathe, tried to think as Kerestyan's hands pushed her down while his hips thrust up against her. She'd never felt so hot or wet in her entire life. He was so thick, so hard, and so damnably deep inside her, she was sure she would burst at any moment.

When he sat up and bit at her lips, his eyes dark and wild, she draped her arms around his neck and rocked her hips faster against him. She needed to release the tension he built inside her, needed to take him with her. Leaning her head back, she tautly pulled her lip from between his teeth and smiled when it audibly popped.

His gorgeous face mirrored hers just before he shifted his hands, grabbed two handfuls of her ass then slowly lifted her, inch by glorious inch, all the way to the tip of his cock. She moaned between panting out short breaths as he held her there, staring up at her, his chest rumbling against her straining nipples.

She captured his lips at the same moment he slammed her down on his pulsing cock. She tightened her arms around him and screamed into his mouth as her body shuddered, bursting into an exquisite firestorm of ecstasy. Wave after orgasmic wave tore through her, stealing her breath as he pushed even deeper inside her and groaned against her lips. She closed her eyes and whimpered in pure delight as he slowly rocked her hips back and forth, buried in her to the hilt, until he'd wrung every ragged breath from her tired body.

Kerestyan smiled as Logan shivered one last time and a soft, satisfied moan slipped passed her sweet lips. Hugging her close, he rolled over with her and leaned back on his knees before climbing to his feet.

They were running out of time.

He did his best to endure the sensuous way her long legs wrapped around his waist as he moved towards the shower. He tried even harder not to feel her hot breath searing his neck when she rested her cheek against his shoulder.

But he quickly realized dismissing anything about the woman was damn near impossible. She'd become so much of a presence in his life in such a short amount of time, he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to ignore her.

After pushing the button to turn the shower on, Kerestyan stepped inside and moved to stand under the spray with Logan still wrapped around him. He felt her body relax as the warm water pelted her back and shoulders, seemingly content to keep him inside her all night long.

He smiled. Had she woken up a night sooner, he would have gladly indulged her until her voice gave out and she couldn't move.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

He tangled his fingers into her short hair and gently raised her head, surprised at how much seeing her smiling green eyes meant to him. "As much as I despise saying this, you can't stay wrapped around me all night."

She flashed a dazzling smile before she nipped at his bottom lip. "No?"

He leaned forward and fanged her earlobe, savoring the way she gasped and leaned into it. "No." He traced the delicate line of her jaw with his tongue then made a slow journey back to her mouth. "We have to take a shower. We have a very important meeting to attend."

"How much time do we have?"

"About twenty minutes."

She squeezed his hips between her thighs, sending a burning sliver of lust straight to his cock. "I'm willing to bet," she flicked the tip of her pink tongue against his lips, "I can coax you into another ten minutes of hot, human action, Lord Vampire."

He grinned. There was no way he could pass up the challenge flickering behind her eyes. "And exactly what do you believe you can say to do that, Miss Ellis?"

He stiffened when, instead of using words, she tipped her head to the side and sank her teeth into the sensitive flesh where his neck and shoulder met. He shivered as she rolled the skin there, not once, but twice before lifting her head.

It took his mind a second to form the words. "I can't believe you bit me."

Her smile turned wicked at the edges. "Well, if that didn't work, I could always do this." He growled as she wound her fingers into his hair and yanked his head back then sucked and bit her way down his bared throat.

Darkness glazed his eyes as scarlet shadows danced in his field of vision. The animal inside him unfurled, awash in a dangerous mixture of passion and rage.

This time, it was his beast that responded as he pressed her against the wall, forced her legs from his waist and pinned her arms above her head. He growled as he pumped into her hard and fast, over and over, reveling in her tight, velvety rings of muscle as they clenched and squeezed his hungry cock.

He'd never felt anything better.

Staring down into her eyes, he watched with primal satisfaction as she twisted and writhed against him, breasts thrust against his chest. And when she cried out for her God as she came, he roared his climax then silenced her by drowning in the sultry taste of her mouth.

Kerestyan regained control of his dark side just as his fangs scraped Logan's throat. He closed his eyes and slowly pulled back from her neck, all while sternly reminding himself that before he engaged with her again, they needed to have a very serious discussion about a vampire's beast.

He released her wrists and opened his eyes, not at all surprised by the dazed expression on her face. "I'm sorry, Logan. If I'd known you intended to use *that* method of coaxing, I would have advised otherwise."

"Wow."

He chuckled. "I take it you approve?"

She smiled wide. "Wow."

He carefully separated their bodies and set her on her feet. "I'll gladly take that breathless admission as a yes."

She stepped away on shaky legs and tipped her head back under the water. After pushing her wet hair out of her eyes, she arched a brow at him. "Did you bite me that time?"

He stared at the droplets cascading down her face, still flushed and pink from their last session, then followed as they fell from her cheeks and slid down her chest, converging between her beautiful breasts.

He blinked and raised his eyes when he heard her repeat the question. "No, Logan." He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her forehead, knowing it was a far safer place than her lips. "When I bite you, you'll know."

Her eyes slid down his body, lingering just below his waist as he slowly backed away. "Are you leaving?"

He forced the shifting animal down when she licked her lips before meeting his eyes. "If I stay here with you, we'll never make it to the meeting

on time. You have five minutes to bathe and get dressed. Meet me in the living room when you're finished."

Kerestyan turned and walked away after she nodded and stepped back under the spray. If he watched her naked body any longer, they might never get out of the bathroom.

He rubbed a hand down his face as he opened the door to his room and made his way over to his closet. Nervousness clawed its way up his spine as he chose his clothes and tossed them on the bed before entering his bathroom.

Surely his Father would see the raw potential in Logan and allow her to serve the Nelek family, if not become a full member of it. He couldn't resign her to death, not when Vouclade, the second eldest, had found enough reason to comment on her intellect and superior survival abilities.

She deserved, if nothing else, a chance to prove her worth.

She'll do fine. Kerestyan nodded ascent to the voice in his mind then quickly showered, dressed in his perennial black button down shirt and black slacks, then made his way to the living room. He stepped out of the kitchen to find Logan sitting on the couch, waiting for him.

She stood up and grinned as she smoothed the arms of her tight black sweater. "What took you so long? Did you need a little extra shower time?"

He smiled at her. "I have more hair to deal with than you do."

She actually wagged her eyebrows. "Only on your head."

He reached out and curled a finger around one of her belt loops then tugged her to him. "Now is hardly the time to discuss my personal grooming techniques. Besides, it became rather obvious after our kitchen rendezvous that you indeed found the razor Odin waxed so poetic about."

She responded by burying her face in his chest like an ostrich.

With precious seconds ticking away, Kerestyan wrapped his arms around Logan and concentrated on Nelek castle. It was only after he felt the cold winds begin to swirl around them that he let his thoughts return to the woman shivering in his arms.

Under no circumstances would he stand by and allow her to be killed, even if it meant facing the very man who created him so long ago. Because not only had Logan Ellis found a way to survive when the odds were overwhelmingly stacked against her...but she was slowly filling what was once a very dark and very empty place in his Ancient heart.

Chapter 10

"You can open your eyes now, Logan. It's over, I promise."

Logan unburied her face from Kerestyan's chest and tipped her head back, trying to focus on his wavering image instead of the furious churning of her stomach. "I think I'm gonna puke."

His lips formed a fuzzy smile. "I'm sorry. I should have warned you it would last substantially longer than before. It takes a little more time to get from New York to Chicago than it does to get from one side of a city to the other."

She pushed away from him and swayed before she bent over, head firmly tucked between her knees. "You definitely should've warned me." She sucked in a series of deep breaths then blew them out, uncaring that her cheeks puffed out like an angry blowfish. She groaned and clutched her cramping abdomen. "Oh, God, Kerestyan, you really, really should have warned me."

He rubbed her back, his strong fingers tracing her spine. "Just breathe and try to focus on something else for a few minutes. You'll be fine."

She stared down at the snow covered sidewalk and gulped more frigid night air. Finding something else to focus on that wouldn't make her vomit was a lot easier said than done, especially because all she could think about were the possible repercussions the impending meeting would have on her life.

If she had a life when it was over...

The thought of dying didn't make for an effective antacid.

"She is gonna puke on Dad's boots, isn't she?"

Logan cringed when she heard Odin's loud, almost giddy sounding voice somewhere behind her. He was the last person, mythological legend or not, she had the patience to deal with right now.

She straightened then slipped behind Kerestyan and leaned back against him. "Tell him I'm having menstrual cramps. Tell him I'm PMS-ing. Tell him I'm in love with him and want to have his baby."

His shoulders tensed. "Why would I tell him any of that, most importantly the latter?"

"That's the kind of shit that makes any sane member of the male species take off running. And they don't even look back. I've seen it, Kerestyan. They'll practically chew off their own appendages to get away from a diamond or Midol wielding woman."

"Hey, Bones, if you love me and you're bleeding..."

"Odin," Kerestyan growled. "Don't even think about finishing that sentence. Logan is not bleeding, nor does she love you. She's simply having a few minor difficulties adjusting to our method of travel."

"Oh." Odin's black eyes peeked at her from around Kerestyan's shoulder. "Would a glass of water help? I can have Alfred bring one out for you."

She cast a quick glance down the desolate, tree lined street, feeling a sudden and overwhelming urge to run away as fast as her legs would carry her. "Why are you being nice to me?"

His eyes narrowed. "Considering you're about two hundred yards away from Satan himself, I thought it would be a polite gesture. But if you'd prefer I antagonize you for what could possibly be your final moments, I'd be happy to oblige. Now, do you want a glass of water or not?"

Final Moments... She ignored the new flutters in her stomach. If he was trying, as strange as it was, she might as well return the favor. "I don't think putting anything into my body is a good idea right now, but thank you for the offer."

"You're welcome. I hate to be the bearer of bad news and all, but you really shouldn't keep him waiting. Technically, you've only got about three minutes."

Logan squeezed Kerestyan's hand when he laced his fingers between hers and gently pulled her around to face him. He gazed down at her, his blue eyes burning with emotions she couldn't place. "Are you ready?"

She did her best to offer him a confident smile, but ended up shaking her head. "Honestly, no." She reached up and smoothed the cascade of black hair spilling over his shoulder. "I was just starting to come to terms with being your prisoner, Lord Vampire."

She shivered as he brushed the backs of his warm fingers down her cheeks before curling them behind her neck. He pressed his forehead to hers then closed his eyes and inhaled the steam her breath created as it mingled with the cold air.

He didn't say anything. He didn't move. He just stood there, his soft lips barely touching hers, breathing in her breath as though he needed it as much as she did.

"Oh man, you two aren't gonna start necking like two horny teenagers, are you?"

For the first time since she'd met him, Logan felt a surge of relief when Odin's snide voice interrupted. There was something about the intensity rippling the air around Kerestyan as she gazed up at him, something about the way her skin tingled and leached the heat from his fingertips that made her feel strange and uncomfortable.

When he finally smiled, she turned in his arms and locked on Odin. Just because she appreciated his rude but timely comment, that didn't mean she intended to let it go. "There's no need for necking right now." She swung her hand down and smacked Kerestyan's muscular thigh before she squeezed extra hard for effect. "I defiled your delicate flower of a little brother before we got here." When Odin's nose began the wrinkling process, she rubbed her teeth together and growled, "Twice."

Odin made the gag face, complete with tongue rolling out of his mouth before he shook out his arms. But he recovered quickly. "Well, if nothing else, at least the gaps between your ribs make for good handholds." He turned and sauntered through a gate attached to a white picket fence. "Gives a whole new meaning to 'ribbed for her pleasure'!"

Logan tipped her head back against Kerestyan's shoulder. "Where does he come up that shit? And does he ever not have some kind of barbed come-back?"

He shook his head. "He watches a lot of television. And no, Odin always has to have the last word. You'll learn that soon enough. Trust me."

She glanced back at Odin just as he disappeared through the front door of a rather small and unremarkable white house. It looked nice enough, not that it took much to impress her considering where she slept most of the time, but it didn't bear any resemblance to a castle. And the two huge rott-weilers sitting on opposite sides of the snowy front yard, although she was sure did a great job of making salesmen think twice, didn't exactly fit the whole medieval motif she'd imagined.

She cocked her head when Kerestyan moved to stand beside her. "I take it when you refer to this as a castle, it's some kind of inside joke I'm not privy to?"

The low, evil laugh that rumbled in his chest sent chills dancing up her spine. "Sure." He turned and extended an arm towards the gate. "By all means, Milady, Lord Nelek awaits you."

She started up the bricked path to the gate. "I thought you were Lord Nelek."

"I'm Lord Kerestyan."

"But your last name is Nelek, so wouldn't you also be Lord Nelek?"

"No. As Vouclade would gladly tell you if you asked, there is only one Lord Nelek...and it isn't me."

Logan pushed the gate open and held it for him. "That doesn't make any sense."

He smiled as he passed then reached around her hip to pull the gate closed. "In about five seconds, it'll make a lot more sense than anything else in your world."

She eyed the rottweilers when their ears perked up, hoping like hell they'd stay right where they were. "What do you mean in five..." she trailed off as the world around her melted into an amalgamation of vibrant colors, as though she'd just dropped 500 crayons on a hot grill.

"Oh, fuck..." It was really all she could muster when the little, innocuous white house fizzled away, replaced by a black monolith of a castle standing roughly a football field away.

Obsidian stones loomed high above her, framed by the cloudless night sky and thousands of twinkling stars. Towers rose so tall she had to squint to make out the scarlet banners flapping at the tops, all of which bore the same dragon she'd seen on Odin's armor.

Trailing down from the spires, she marveled at all the different levels, stairways, window openings and walkways she could see from so far away. They seemed to go on forever, a dangerous ebony maze lit by nothing but flickering torches and braziers.

The front door Odin had walked through was actually two black doors. They had to be wide enough at the ground to drive two buses through side by side, but tapered to a sharp point easily three stories high. A set of torches burned on either side, casting thousands of gold and red sparkles through the facets in the stones.

Logan leaned back into Kerestyan when she felt his hands on her shoulders. She'd never seen anything more foreboding, yet so breathtakingly beautiful in her entire life. This place, this dark and elegant stretch of stone didn't even touch the image her mind had built.

When she'd first heard the word castle, she'd immediately thought of grey stones and green, slimy moats. She'd thought of drawbridges and knights on horseback. She'd even pictured one of those little men dressed in bright colors blowing a horn.

But never in her wildest dreams had she expected this.

It wasn't even winter here. The breeze was warm against her face, carrying sweet scents and tantalizing fragrances she'd never encountered before. There were trees in full bloom as far as she could see, and the grass was such a rich, brilliant shade of green, it looked more like paint than something nature could produce.

She shook her head. No, this wasn't at all what she'd expected.

And what she also would've never expected, until they moved and she suddenly felt the urge to wet herself, were the two huge dragons sitting where the rottweilers had been. One was a ruddy rust color and the other ashen grey, but both were monstrous with heads the size of small cars.

Kerestyan must have felt her body tense because before she could even ask, his arms circled her waist and his stubble prickled her cheek. "No, you aren't imagining any of this. There truly is a castle and those really are dragons."

She blew out a deep breath and tried to slow her racing mind. How? Why? There were so many things she wanted to know, so many questions she wanted to ask, she didn't even know where to begin.

He tightened his hold. "It's a little overwhelming, isn't it?"

She nodded. "It's so unbelievable."

The scratch of his stubble told her he was smiling. "I know. My Father knows we're here. He says to take as much time as you need to acclimate yourself, he'll see you when you're ready."

"Kerestyan," she reached up and touched his cheek, eyes locked on the red dragon that appeared to be watching her, "how can all this be here? I mean, is it really here? You said we were going to Chicago. This is *not* Chicago."

"We're just north of Chicago, outside the city limits because Chicago itself is ruled by another Lord. As for how it's here, that has everything to do with the power of my Father's blood and the strength of his magics. To any eyes but those of an Ancient vampire, nothing sets on this land but a little white house with a perfect picket fence. However, I assure you it's really here. It's just hidden as to not completely rend the Veil."

"How do you hide something like this?"

"The castle is hidden through the use of blood magic. That's the only explanation I can offer you, Logan. You may know that vampires exist, but there's so much you don't know about vampires."

She turned in his arms when she caught the note of frustration in his voice. "I'm sorry if I'm being difficult. It's just, holy fuck...I was not expecting this."

"You aren't being difficult. This is just hard to explain. Most Fledglings have at least a basic understanding of the magic in their blood, and even they aren't aware places like this exist." He finally smiled. "Think of your current situation like this: You graduated high school with the intent to go into business, but instead of going to college and following the proverbial ladder of success, you accidentally met the CEO of a large company who decided to bring you in at the executive level."

She considered his words for a moment. "So I skipped a bunch of menial cubicle jobs that even a new vampire could do and landed myself in the cushy corner office with a vampire who's older than dirt?"

He laughed. "That's correct. You're seeing things right now most vampires never will, and you're about to meet vampires, my Father mainly, others only hear of in stories. The Nelek name is known throughout Ancient circles, but most Fledglings only come in contact with my younger siblings. And of course myself, but that's only because I rule a major modern city, packed with younger vampires."

Logan rubbed her temples. She was more than on board with the whole vampire concept, especially because of where she currently stood, but the sheer amount of information to digest made her head ache. "Can you just draw me a chart or something?"

He laughed again. "Why don't we start with getting you inside the castle?"

"That works for me."

She accepted Kerestyan's hand when he offered, figuring the dragons would keep their distance if she was somehow attached to a Nelek, and walked with him towards the doors.

She craned her neck at least a dozen times trying to see different things on the higher levels, but it quickly became obvious that she could look for two days straight and not see even a tenth of everything there was to view.

Logan turned her attention back to the blackened doors when the muscles in her neck cramped, but jumped when the destination of the smooth cobblestone path changed, leading straight to the golden, glittering eyes of the red dragon.

She squeezed Kerestyan's hand and tried not to panic as the beast lumbered forward, but when it stopped only a few feet away and lowered its head to sniff her, she was so busy trying to see she forgot about panicking. Every snout full of air the damn thing drew in sent a tiny tornado spinning around her, and if it wasn't sucking her hair into its nostrils, it was flattening it all against her face. When the air finally stilled, she brushed her hair out of her eyes and looked up at the creature – just in time to see a gaping maw full of razor sharp teeth snap closed in front of her face.

Her entire body went rigid and her heart slammed against her ribs before she let out a scream she was sure could wake the dead. The second she regained control of her limbs, she jumped on Kerestyan's back.

"It tried to eat me!" She only meant to say it once, but the same words burst out three times without any real pauses between syllables.

"Nidan!"

Logan shivered as a voice deeper than Kerestyan's rang in her ears. She peeked in the direction it came from, expecting to see a huge, burly man, but all she saw was an older gentleman with salt and pepper hair standing outside the doors.

He pointed at the dragon. "She is your Father's guest. You will treat her with all the respect that honor grants her or I will have Vouclade skin you one scale at a time. Do you understand me?"

The dragon nodded, and if she wasn't mistaken, snorted what sounded like a snicker on its way back to a worn spot in the grass.

She unfolded her arms from around Kerestyan's face and pulled his head back. "The dragon understands English?"

"Nidan is one of my older brothers. Yes, he understands English."

She blinked a few times. This night was making less and less sense by the minute. "Your brother is a dragon?"

He nodded, moving her hands with him. "He wasn't born a dragon, Logan. He's a vampire who can change into a dragon. It's a trait unique to the Nelek line."

"You can turn into a dragon?" She smacked her hands against his cheeks. "You can turn into a dragon but you can't turn into a wolf?"

"Yes, I can turn into a dragon, but it's a form I rarely wear. And no, I already told you, vampires do not turn into wolves. Werewolves turn into wolves." He reached up and squeezed her hands, hard. "Would you be so kind as to unwrap your legs from around my chest, please?"

She pressed her lips together. "Sorry. I really thought he was trying to eat me. So, how do you turn into a dragon? What color are you? Will you show me some..." she trailed off as Kerestyan loosened her legs then tossed her into the air before he set her back on her feet.

She grinned up at him. "Are you sure there isn't anything else you should warn me about before we go inside?"

He smiled back. "Where would you like me to start?"

"Why don't you start by introducing this lovely young woman to your dear friend Alfred?"

Logan turned around when the same voice that scolded the dragon resounded behind her. Now that he was closer, she realized he wasn't nearly as small as she'd first thought. Granted, he wasn't much taller than her, but he was still twice as wide. He was also rather handsome in a very regal and distinguished sort of way.

"Alfred, this is Logan Ellis. Logan, this is Alfred, my Father's personal *Servio*."

She extended her hand. "It's nice to meet you, Alfred."

He caught her off guard when he accepted her hand but brushed a warm kiss across the back of it. "It's a pleasure, Miss Ellis." He released her hand and motioned towards the evil red dragon. "Please, accept my apologies for Nidan's behavior. He found himself grounded a few centuries ago for his inability to follow the rules, and apparently has yet to learn his lesson. You have my word, it will not happen again."

She nodded and followed when both men began walking toward the doors again. "It's alright. I just wasn't expecting him to snap at me. Then again, since Kerestyan didn't bother to warn me about anything I might see when I got here, I wasn't exactly expecting to come face to face with a dragon at all."

"In Kerestyan's defense, sometimes it's better to gift someone the opportunity to draw their own conclusions from an experience, than it is to detail what they might experience."

If she hadn't seen it herself, she'd have never believed Kerestyan could puff out his chest so far. "Alfred is a very wise man, Logan. You should listen to every word he says."

She cupped a hand behind her ear. "I'm sorry, I was so distracted by your huge chest and colorful peacock tail that I didn't hear what you said. Could you repeat it for me, please?"

He rolled his eyes and cast a glance to Alfred, who chuckled in response. "I'm glad you enjoyed that. Now, imagine what it's like to be in the same room with her *and* Odin when they start picking at each other."

Logan shot him her best glare. "I'd like to openly state, just for the record, it's not my fault your walking Tin Can of a brother can't keep his comments to himself. Besides, he started it when he called me an it."

"Bones!" She stopped walking when the doors, one of which was cracked, burst open in front of them and Odin jumped out flashing an ear to ear grin. "I can't believe your fragile human mind hasn't spontaneously combusted yet!"

She rolled her head towards Alfred. "See what I mean?"

He nodded. "Odin, you needn't worry yourself, she is doing just fine. Now, if you'll excuse us, she has an overdue meeting with your Father."

Odin's face sobered almost instantly. His eerie eyes narrowed on her much the way they had the first time she met him. "I want you to know that while I don't particularly care for the way you ended up here, I really do wish you the best of luck. What you're about to go through won't be easy, but if you walk out on your own two feet at the end...you'll never walk alone again." He didn't give her time to respond before he wandered off into the courtyard.

She stared after him for a long moment, wondering not only what he'd meant by the last part of his statement, but whether all vampires were as moody as him and Kerestyan. It seemed like one moment they were laughing and joking, but the next were so intense you either wanted to scream or cry.

"I think," Alfred said, "he's getting used to you." He then extended his arm towards the doorway and bowed his head. "Miss Ellis, I welcome you to Nelek castle."

Taking that as a hint to get a move on, she stepped into the main hall with Kerestyan close at her side, and once again lost her ability to speak. The walls here were just as black as the ones outside, only these were adorned with tapestries woven from an array of dark fabrics. The largest, hanging from a railing high above yet another set of closed black doors, had the crimson head of a dragon embroidered into the darkest piece of velvet she'd ever seen.

A thick red carpet cut across the dark marble floor, running from where they stood to the second set of doors. Sculptures and statues were positioned in various places around the huge room, as well as soft chairs and wooden tables, all of which looked to be older than anything she remembered seeing in her history books.

As she moved to the center of the room, at the gentle but very persistent nudging of Kerestyan, who'd moved to stand behind her, she noted just inside the main doors on both the right and left, there were small archways leading to thin hallways lit by torches. To the sides of the closed set of doors were two large archways, each serving as an opening into wide hallways leading to the main wings of the castle.

Kerestyan nudged her again. "Well, what do you think?"

She ground her teeth. "I think if you don't get your knee out of my ass I'm going to smack you."

He laughed and moved to stand next to her. "My apologies. Now, what do you really think?"

She tipped her head back and considered the chandelier made of obsidian glass and dozens of red candles, which cast a warm glow over the room. "I think...it's absolutely spectacular." She lowered her eyes to meet his, but the proud expression on his face said everything. "But something tells me you know that already."

"I do," his eyes darkened as he slowly slid his tongue across his bottom lip, "and you have no idea how much it pleases me to see you standing here, in a place I will always call home."

Her nipples tingled and stiffened, followed closely by heat flaring in her cheeks as she noticed Alfred shift behind Kerestyan. She choked on some-

thing invisible and coughed it out. "Well, we should probably get to the meeting, huh?"

Way to speed up your death just because the hot vampire made eyes at you. She flipped her brain the mental equivalent of the middle finger then smiled at Alfred. "Which way do I go?"

He motioned to the set of black doors behind her. "Lord Nelek awaits you in his chamber."

Chapter 11

Logan turned around and stared up at the ominous doors. Unlike the ones leading into the castle, these were rectangular and made of some kind of blackened metal instead of wood. They also weren't nearly as tall or wide as the main doors, but for some strange reason felt much larger and much, much darker.

She slowly approached, pondering how a simple change in material and shape could create such a different energy. Though the wooden doors hadn't necessarily made her feel happy and welcome, these left her with an odd sense of indifference, as if her presence in front of them meant something and nothing at the same time.

She stilled when all at once, her body relaxed. Her heart slowed from wild racing back to a steady rhythm, the nervous flutters in her stomach faded away and the nausea completely subsided.

The feeling the doors filled her with was something she'd felt almost every single day for well over a decade. She felt it when she walked through Manhattan or a dirty alley in Brooklyn. She felt it when she plucked half eaten food from a trashcan or found something fresh behind a restaurant. She felt it when she stole a purse from a stripper loving old lady or lifted the wallet of a business man stumbling down Fifth Avenue in a drunken stupor.

She'd even felt it when she finally accepted vampires were real, and realized there was nothing she could do but try to avoid them.

Complete and absolute indifference.

She held her breath as the heat of Kerestyan's body seared her back. She could only recall three days in recent memory when she hadn't felt that way, two of which she'd barely been conscious.

He was the only reason she'd feared this moment.

But it wasn't because she loved him, she barely knew him. It wasn't because she needed him; she was more than content to be alone. It was because after everything he'd done for her, she didn't want to disappoint him.

Releasing her breath, Logan reached out to touch the intricate filigree embossing near the seam where the doors met, but just as her fingertips brushed the cold metal, they rattled and swung open from the inside.

The moment the doors fully parted, she forgot about what she couldn't feel for Kerestyan, forgot about wishing she'd have met him in another place, another time. All she could focus on was the creature twenty yards in front of her, sitting on a throne made of ivory bones, in the center of a moonlit chamber crawling with shadows.

Long, midnight hair framed a beautiful, almost alien face with flawless, porcelain skin. High cheekbones cut and angled down into a strong, unforgiving jaw line. Firm, pale lips were drawn tight, offering no shred of discernable emotion.

But it was his eyes, or lack thereof, that really chilled her. Two shadowed hollows occupied the space where his eyes should have been, lending the nightmare quality to the twisted angel Kerestyan had described.

Obsidian armor covered his body from the neck down, but unlike Odin's, his was made of only blackened metal. The head of a dragon was emblazoned across his chest plate, yet instead of being etched or embossed, it glowed as if it were completely separate from his armor.

Black stairs led up the stone platform where he sat on his throne, eight to ten feet higher than the rest of the room. Behind him and to the right was a huge, nearly lifelike statue of a giant in full armor, similar in appearance to the man on the throne, but much larger.

It wasn't until she inched through the doorway that she realized one wall of the chamber wasn't like the others. Where everything in the entire place seemed to be awash in black, the wall to her right was a mash of pinks and reds.

And the longer she stared at it, the more it appeared to be moving.

No, no. It didn't appear to be moving, it *was* moving.

Writhing.

In the small area she focused on, a pair of brown eyes surfaced and blinked before a set of lips formed, letting out a muffled, pained cry.

Oh, God no... She reached back and grabbed a handful of Kerestyan's hair then pulled his head down next to hers. "Is that..."

"Yes." His voice was quiet, almost a whisper.

Her eyes widened. "No."

"His favorite enemies and rivals. Consisting of vampires, werewolves and...other."

"Humans?"

"No. He doesn't traffic with humans anymore."

Logan gave in to the chill sliding up her spine and shook out her hands. She'd seen a lot of awful things living on the streets of New York, but the most disconcerting part of staring at the wall of undulating muscle, flesh and body parts...was that it wasn't the worst sight she'd ever witnessed.

What does that say about you? It wasn't a question she wanted to know the answer to.

The sound of metal scraping against stone pulled her attention from the wall and back to the horribly beautiful man sitting in the center of the room. In front of the stairs the marble floor liquefied and rose to form a simple stone chair with arms and a high back.

She swallowed hard, assuming that was his special way of implying she should get her ass over there. She moved towards him, very much feeling as though she was walking the long hallway to the principal's office. Only this time, the principal had fangs and full rights to corporal punishment, up to and including death.

Just as she reached the chair she felt Kerestyan's hand tighten around her arm. She stopped and watched as he stepped up beside her, every bit the regal and proud man she'd become, if nothing else, rather fond of over the last few days.

He bowed his head. "Father, I present to you Logan Ellis, as you requested. Logan, this is my Father, Lord Stefan Nelek."

She nodded at Stefan, who completely ignored her and inclined his head towards Kerestyan. "You may leave, Kerestyan." His voice wasn't like anything she'd ever heard. It was sinister yet oddly enchanting, deep and full of raw, unbridled power.

Kerestyan stiffened. "But, Father, I feel I should..." When Stefan raised his mailed hand, Kerestyan fell silent instantly.

"I didn't request your presence, Child. I requested only hers. Leave my chamber."

He hesitated for a second, but lowered his head again. "Yes, Father."

To say the room felt a little empty as Kerestyan's footfalls faded behind her was a gross understatement. But when the heavy doors slammed closed, she'd never felt more alone in her entire life.

This was it. She was going to die. Right here.

Alone.

When Stefan motioned to the chair, she quietly sat down but immediately wanted to jump out of it. The hard marble bit icy teeth through her jeans, stinging her skin to the brink of numbness.

"Logan Ellis, owner of knowledge no human should possess. What circumstances do you believe brought you before me this night?"

She shifted. She wanted to pay complete attention to him, but how could anyone sit in this chair without their butt cheeks freezing together? "You answered your own question. I know about vampires. I'm not supposed to." She leaned to the side, trying to keep as much of her behind off the seat as possible. "Can I stand up for this conversation?"

"Why?"

She huffed out a breath and kicked her legs. "Because I can't focus when my ass is frostbitten. I know how important this meeting is. Please? I promise I'll stand still."

His face didn't change at all. "Why would you promise to stand still?"

"Because you don't strike me as the type of guy who likes a lot of movement." She grabbed the other arm of the chair and leaned towards that side. "Call it a hunch, but when someone surrounds themselves with this much stone, they don't like things that change. Change position, change texture; change period." She started to wiggle again, but stopped when she swore the statue's lip twitched.

Stefan turned his head to stare up at it. At least she thought he was looking at it...it was kind of hard to tell since he didn't have eyes! "You find her entertaining?"

"She reminds me of Odin."

She jumped and sat up, spine straight as an arrow. Suddenly, the chair wasn't the coldest thing in the room anymore. It was the living statue. It was his frigid, powerful voice echoing through the room, crushing down on her entire body, stealing the oxygen from her lungs.

Even the demonic angel's voice didn't hit like that.

"Interesting." Stefan waved a hand and within a few seconds her chair heated to a nice and toasty temperature. "Do you find that more acceptable?"

She swallowed a few mouthfuls of air before she nodded. "Yes." She eyed the statue again before settling back on Stefan. "Why didn't you just do that in the first place?"

"I've learned over the ages, creatures of any species tend to be more honest when uncomfortable." He motioned to the wall of living flesh.

She didn't look. "I don't need to sit on a block of ice to feel uncomfortable right now, trust me. That feeling pretty much started when the dragon tried to eat me."

"I apologize for Nidan's behavior. My Children tend to be exactly that sometimes, children."

"Yeah, I've met Odin."

"Odin disapproves of you. He disapproves even more of his brother's feelings for you."

She wasn't exactly surprised. "Yeah, well, what Odin does or does not approve of, really isn't my problem. Kerestyan's more than an adult, and if he does have some kind of feelings for me, it's really none of Odin's business."

"You don't care for Kerestyan."

She ground her teeth together. What was it with vampires and their obsessive need to tell her how she felt? "Look, I like him, but I'm not going to sit here and profess—"

"It wasn't a question."

She narrowed her eyes on his hollows. Only one person knew how she felt, and it sure as hell wasn't him. "I really don't think it's your place to tell me how I feel about anything. You don't know me."

"I don't need to know you. I've seen *you* a thousand times before. Dotan, a divine priest clinging to his failing beliefs because he knows nothing else. Kerestyan, an honorable knight imprisoned inside the very armor which holds and protects him. Odin, a fierce warrior leading droves of men to their death because the rage inside him inspires nothing greater. And Trinity, a beautiful woman wrapped so tight in the fingers of pleasure, she no longer feels because she's never known pain."

He stood up and pushed a thick, black cloak from his armored shoulders. "I do know you, Logan Elizabeth Ellis." He raised his arms and held them out to his sides. "I'm surrounded by forty-seven versions of you. They may wear different faces, may have been birthed in times long forgotten, but they were all once as you are now."

She rolled her eyes. "And exactly what is it you think I am?"

"Broken. You broke her, and she continues to break you."

Logan stiffened and clutched the arms of the chair. He couldn't possibly know. She drew in a sharp breath. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Kerestyan told you not to lie. However, allow me to reconstruct your memory. You wrenched the wheel as you squinted against the morning sun, praying you could get the car back into the driveway before he woke up from the couch, where he'd passed out, the stench of alcohol clinging to his weak body. You were so concerned about what he would do if he found out; you never saw her step off the sidewalk. But you heard the impact. You heard her scream before her fragile bones crunched beneath the tires, heard the wet, sucking sound of air escaping her lungs as she tried to cry. And then you felt it when you pulled her tiny, lifeless body into your arms. You felt the warm, sticky fluid coat your hands, watched her favorite pink sweater and school bag turn crimson before your disbelieving eyes. You watched Jessica die in your arms, broken. And her memory has broken you every moment since."

Logan bit at her lips as hot tears rolled down her cheeks. She didn't know how he knew, and truthfully, she didn't care. "Are you finished? Is your scare-the-human routine complete now?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he stretched out a large arm, which disappeared all the way up to his elbow before he pulled it back, revealing a silver

disc resting in his open hand. He descended the stairs and gently placed it in her lap. "Would you care to see her?"

She stared down at the ornate silver frame of the mirror as a thousand different emotions swirled inside her. Hate. Anger. Guilt. The surface shimmered black just before a hazy image faded into view.

She fought for control of her voice. "Is she a ghost?"

"No. When her soul released, she immediately ascended to the Light Realm, which is what you humans refer to as heaven. She existed there, complete and content, reliving her most cherished memories for fourteen years before she reincarnated."

Logan watched, silent, as the image in the mirror burst into vivid colors. A girl who looked to be about three years old, dressed in pink pajamas, toddled across a hardwood floor while holding an upside down kitten in her arms. She shook her head when the cat squirmed, her glossy black curls springing around her chubby little face. "Mama, Mama, kitty was in my room. Her bite my toes! Hers a bad kitty, a bad, bad kitty."

Logan smiled in spite of the dull ache throbbing in the center of her chest. "She always hated cats."

"She still does. In a previous life, long, long ago, she was mortally wounded by a tiger. Though her mind may not, her soul remembers. In this life, and every life to come, she will also endure a short but intense fear of automobiles for the very same reason."

Logan struggled to breathe under the weight of his words. She stared up at him as her chest tightened. "I scarred her forever?"

The mirror disappeared as he reassumed his place on the throne. "You're being overly dramatic. You've given her an obstacle to overcome, one that will help define who she becomes later in life. Character is not measured by moments of success, Logan Ellis. It is measured by the grace in which you move through adversity. What you've given her is yet another chance to grow."

Anger coursed through her. "Bullshit! You can wrap it in as much philosophic rhetoric as you want, but at the end of the day she's changed because of what I did to her!"

"What you did to her," he trailed off in a low rumble of eerie laughter. "What is it with humans and guilt? Had you not killed her, she would have lived only to die at the age of sixteen."

"No she wouldn't!"

"Yes, she would have." His voice echoed through the chamber, shaking her chair. "Had she lived beyond the morning of your accident, when you chose to run away at fourteen instead of fifteen, you would have taken her with you. Your pathetic excuse for a father would have then filed the missing

persons' report he never sought for you alone. Within a matter of days you would have both been found, and much to your dismay, returned to him. Shortly thereafter, he would have remanded you to the state, claiming an inability to control you. Jessica would have stayed in his custody, and without you to protect her, your father's abuse would have escalated. At the age of sixteen, pregnant with his child, she would have died. Her body would have been just as broken, but instead of lying in the driveway, she would have been found at the foot of the staircase in your former home. Tell me, Logan, would you prefer she died in the arms of someone who loved her, or at the hands of someone who should have?"

Logan slammed her fist against the arm of the chair. "I would have preferred she not die at all!"

He shook his head. "You humans are such selfish creatures. When will you finally realize you cannot undo the past? If you wish to memorialize your sister, plant a flower. I even offer the Nelek Gardens in which you may do so. However, do *not* use your sister as an excuse to shorten your life span one needle at a time."

"That's not what I did!"

"That is exactly what you did. Before this moment, your unconscious mind was trapped in the past, sheltering your waking mind from the truth behind the horrors you've committed. I've ripped the protective blanket of heroin from you, and under no circumstances will it be returned. You now see that you are everything you believe you are. You are a murderer. You are a thief. You are as worthless as your father said you were. Yet, you are some of those *only* because you believe those words."

Logan surged from the chair. "I am a murderer! I killed her. I did it. It wasn't someone else. It was me!" She collapsed to her knees and clutched her chest as memories assailed her. "I felt it. I felt her die. I felt her leave me...alone....with *him*!"

"You gave her freedom from a man who would have abused her further."

She rocked forward as a pain she'd never known twisted through her body. "I killed her..."

"Are you a murderer? Yes, you killed your sister. Accidental or otherwise, her body died due to injuries you caused. You cannot undo your actions. They now comprise a dark sliver in your soul, and that will never change. Never. The soul forgets nothing. You must find a way to move beyond it. And that way is in my granting you what most, be they human, vampire or werewolf, never receive. I have gifted you the ability to understand that while you may have killed a flesh and blood body, she remains."

Logan squeezed her eyes closed. "It doesn't change what I did."

"Then let us explore what else you've done. Are you a thief?"

That wasn't nearly as hard to answer. "Yes," she breathed.

"I agree. You take that which does not belong to you. However, allow me to enlighten you of a single precious truth regarding humanity. All humans are thieves. They lay claim to land they do not own. They take from the earth that which is not theirs. With every sun that rises, they rob each other of hope. They purloin each other's dreams. Humans steal with every fetid breath they take. In my mind, when it comes to being a thief, you are but one of billions."

She drew in a breath and opened her eyes as cold fingers closed around her hand. Not metal, not stone, but strong, pale fingers that made her hand look like a child's.

She hadn't even heard him move.

With his assistance, she climbed to her feet and tipped her head back to stare up at him. The hard, unforgiving cut of his face softened slightly, allowing her, if only for a moment, to see why Kerestyan called him Father. Even though he didn't have eyes, it felt like he was staring straight into her soul.

"Do you truly believe you are worthless?"

She pressed her lips together as more tears streamed from her eyes. How was she supposed to answer that? How, after what she'd done to her own sister, could she be anything else?

And above all else, why was the only thing that really bothered her what she did to Jessica? Shouldn't she have felt just as bad about being a thief? Shouldn't she have felt even worse for the striking indifference she felt about everything and everyone around her?

"The answer is no," Stefan's deep voice was softer now. "You are a survivor. You are possessing of traits lost on many humans of this age. You see the world for what it is, and with that truth follows knowledge and power. You would have never learned of the existence of vampires had you never run from your childhood home. Every obstacle you faced, every choice you made, prepared you to stand before me this night.

"Until this moment, you existed with no home, and no constraints aside from those you placed on yourself. You bent knee to no human. You shunned all that society demanded you conform to. You, alone, chose and accepted responsibility for your path, and that is why you will leave this chamber on your own two feet."

She was almost afraid to believe it. "You're not going to kill me?"

"Behind you is a door leading to Vouclade's laboratory. There he will give you the medical attention your human body needs, as well as prepare you for the ritual of becoming a Nelek *Servio*. Go now."

When he released her hand, Logan turned to find a simple wooden door standing open a few feet away from her chair. She focused on following the

spiraling, torch lit staircase as she desperately tried to pull her frayed emotions together.

Before she fully rounded the first curve, Stefan's powerful voice enveloped her. "This was one of your darkest hours, Logan Ellis, and you should know you moved through it with as much grace and as much strength, as I would expect from any who bear my name. Welcome home."

Chapter 12

"I'm sure she's fine, Kerestyan."

Kerestyan stopped pacing outside the doors to his Father's chamber long enough to glare at Alfred. "How do you know? She's been in there for fifteen minutes." He cast a glance back to the blackened doors, icy guilt jacketing the beast in his stomach. "I shouldn't have left her. I should have forced the issue."

Alfred chuckled. "Kerestyan, you need to calm down."

Kerestyan spun on his heel to face him. "No! I don't. It's my fault she's in there." He raised both arms and pushed his fingers into his hair. "She's only human, Alfred. She shouldn't be in there alone with him. I should have stayed."

All the humor drained from Alfred's face. "Had you argued with your Father in front of her, she wouldn't *still* be in there. He would've killed her where she stood. You did the best you could for her with the choices available."

"Did I, Alfred? I could've let her walk out of that alley and made it a point to keep an eye on her. I could've attempted to reconstruct her memories instead of subjecting her to all of this. She's here because I was selfish, because I allowed my curiosity to cloud what was best for her."

Alfred rolled up one white sleeve of his button down shirt and shook his head. "I spoke with Vouclade after your Father separated him and Odin. He and I discussed, in length, the extent of Logan's exposure to vampires. You know, and we both agree, her interaction with our kind was far too frequent to simply be reconstructed. I'm sure you could have attempted, at the risk of leaving her in a catatonic state. Is that what you'd prefer for her?"

He lowered his arms and fisted his hands. "No. But it's better than the possible death she faces in there."

Alfred's green eyes narrowed as he rolled up his other sleeve. "Is it? Think long and hard about what you just said, Kerestyan. Would her life be better lived as a slathering invalid, or not at all?"

"I vote for not at all!"

Kerestyan turned his attention to Odin, who was exiting the wing leading to the library. "This has nothing to do with you."

Odin tucked a bright blue book with gilded silver pages under his arm. "You need to stop whining. Do you really think she's not gonna make it through his test? Please. I don't even like the bitch and I have at least that much faith in her."

Kerestyan stepped forward to stand in front of Odin when the animal in his stomach unfurled and scarlet tinged his vision. "Don't ever use that word as a means to refer to her again, especially in my presence."

He snorted and lightly smacked Kerestyan's cheek. "Screw you. We're not in New York. I'll call her whatever I want while I'm here. There isn't shit you can do about it."

Kerestyan snapped an arm out and knocked down Odin's hand when he moved to slap him again. "You don't even know her. What could she have possibly done to make you despise her so much?"

Odin stooped to set his book on the floor then extended to his full height, his black eyes narrowed. "She doesn't care about you. That's what the fuck she did to make me not like her. You look at her like she's the most precious thing in this world. And Logan," he shook his head and growled, "she looks at you the way she looks at everything else." He stomped a heavy boot against the marble floor. "Like she doesn't give a damn whether you live or die! How the hell can you find that attractive?"

When Kerestyan caught sight of Alfred in his peripheral, arms folded over his chest, he forced the stalking beast in his stomach down and focused back on his brother. "You don't know her the way I do. You haven't talked with her, haven't seen the way her eyes light up when she's happy. You haven't seen even a shred of the Logan I have."

He shrugged an armored shoulder. "I don't want to know her. What I want is for you to grow the fuck up. Good God, you two are so ass backwards it's not even funny anymore."

Kerestyan stiffened, and for a moment could only stare at the man who happened to be a minute and a half older in human age, but a full year and a half younger in blood. If anyone needed to mature in this equation, it was his brother. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Odin rolled his eyes. "It's not supposed to go this way, Kerestyan! If you're going to fall for a human, isn't she supposed to be some cute little thing who paints your world in all kinds of rosy colors," he dramatically clutched his chest, "and then lures your undead soul out of the darkness?" He sighed and feigned a sniffle. "Isn't she supposed to be some beautiful, caring creature who teaches the brooding old vampire how to love again?"

He lowered his hand and raked Kerestyan with a disgusted glare. "But you...you backwards son of a bitch. You have to fall for a girl who's more apt to piss on your foot than she is to love you. You have to fall for the most de-

tached, disinterested and sarcastic street waif the fucking world has ever seen. The human is supposed to try and save you, Kerestyan, not the other way around!"

When Alfred's hearty laughter filled the room before Kerestyan had a chance to respond, he blew out a deep breath and stared at the old man. "What is so damn funny?"

He smiled. "Odin does have a point. The reversal of roles, although not quite complete, is rather interesting. Of course, that's simply the opinion of someone who's been around far longer than both of you, combined." He stepped forward and clapped Odin's shoulder. "Why don't you pick up your book and join your visitor in the side courtyard? I'd like to speak with your brother in private."

"Sure thing, Al." Odin retrieved his volume and headed for the main doors. However, he couldn't quite leave without tossing one last comment over his shoulder, "Maybe *you* can talk some sense into him."

Kerestyan considered Alfred as he unrolled his sleeves. "You knew he was coming, didn't you?"

He grinned and buttoned each cuff. "Although most of you Children, with the exception of Trinity and her spiked heels, tend to move silently, I'm still in tune with this home in a way none of you will ever be."

Kerestyan couldn't argue there. Alfred was only a few years younger than his Father, and even though he was a servant, he was as powerful as Kerestyan. "Did you anticipate we'd end up in a physical altercation?"

He chuckled. "When it comes to Odin, one never knows. Besides, you aren't exactly your usual calm and collected self, Kerestyan. I'm most pleased you chose not to 'throw down' as your brother would term it. However, I would feel even better if you'd calm yourself."

Kerestyan shook his head. "I can't." He turned to face the doors to his Father's chamber. "Not until I know she's alright."

Alfred sighed behind him. "She's on her way down to see Vouclade at this very moment."

Kerestyan whirled around as relief exploded in his chest then surged through his limbs. "She is? She made it through his test?"

When Alfred nodded, Kerestyan closed his eyes and rolled his shoulders, attempting to alleviate the tension knotting his muscles.

"Your Father wishes to speak with you now."

He slowly opened his eyes when Alfred's words were closely followed by the sound of the doors behind him creaking open. The overwhelming sense of relief he'd felt quickly faded with each crackle of the steel hinges.

There were only two reasons his Father would desire his presence at this moment. He was either going to be reprimanded for the slight struggle

he gave during Logan's introduction, or for his argument with Odin in the main hall.

After sucking in a deep, useless breath, Kerestyan squared his shoulders and turned to face the doors. Keeping his eyes on the floor, he strode into the chamber and didn't stop until he reached the foot of the stairs leading to the throne.

He leveled his gaze on his Father, whose alabaster skin glowed under the full moonlight. "You requested me, Father?"

He gave a curt nod. "I've offered Logan a place as a Nelek *Servio*. She did well in her first test."

Kerestyan staved off the urge to grind his teeth. "First test?"

His Father's face was stoic as always. "Did you truly believe there would only be one?"

Kerestyan shifted to stand with his arms folded behind him. "I don't see any reason for more tests. If you've deemed her competent enough to become a *Servio*, shouldn't one be enough?"

"Logan has the raw potential to be a very powerful and loyal servant. However, due to her minimal and modern education, she needs intensive training and guidance. She must prove her ability to learn and grow before her testing is complete. Should, for some reason, she stagnate or find herself unable to release what America has taught her are her inalienable freedoms, I won't hesitate to end her life. However, I don't believe that will be an issue for her."

Kerestyan forced himself to ignore the negatives of his Father's assessment and focused intently on what he could control. "I'm more than capable of educating and training Logan."

His Father's cold laughter boomed through the chamber, bouncing off the stone walls. "You will have no hand in Logan's training, Kerestyan. It's quite obvious you've an attachment to her that stretches beyond mild fascination or simple curiosity. I will not extend you an avenue in which to hold the rights of blood over her."

Anger burned then immediately cooled in the pit of Kerestyan's stomach. Had he been standing in front of anyone else, the animal inside him would have seized control of his body and blindly lunged for the man sitting only a few yards away.

But that same man had sent Kerestyan's beast retreating into the darkest recesses of his soul time and time again. So now it curled into a slumbering ball, refusing to be roused in his presence, no matter how much rage boiled inside Kerestyan.

His Father's stern face reflected his own thoughts. "You would fight me for Logan?"

He lowered his head and considered the striations in the marble floor while his mind and what remained of his heart silently warred. For thousands of years he'd bent knee to only his Father. He'd obeyed every edict, carried out every command. Not once had he questioned his words. Never had he hesitated.

Never...until now.

Backwards or not, he cared for Logan in a way that defied human explanation. She filled him with feelings and desires he hadn't felt in longer than he could remember. He understood her detachment, identified with the emptiness inside her. Although he couldn't declare absolute love for her, he could fight for the promise he made when she'd clung to him in the shower.

He wouldn't leave her, he wouldn't lose her.

Kerestyan raised his head and stared into his Father's hollowed eyes. "Yes. I would fight you for her."

He watched as his Father stood and descended the stairs to stand directly in front of him. "Then under no circumstances can you be her Master. You can stand here for as long as you like and try to reason with yourself, Kerestyan. I can almost hear your subconscious mind. You couldn't possibly. You've only known her for a short time. You've not seen enough yet. But if you're willing to fight for her, for whatever it is she represents to you, then as you once told her yourself...in some way, you do love her."

Kerestyan stilled as a knot formed and tightened in his throat. Maybe in some non-traditional ways he did. Maybe he just wasn't fully aware of them yet. But he would never intentionally hurt her. "I would never use my blood against Logan. No matter what, I would never take her choice away."

The blackened gauntlets on his Father's hands retracted before he rested his cold palms on Kerestyan's shoulders. "That's a very honorable notion to believe, until you realize her feelings aren't returned or have faded. The beast desires what it desires, Child, and you will taint the bond between you without realizing you've done it."

He returned to his throne and sat down. "If the request was spoken by any of your siblings, you know I wouldn't consider it further. However, for you, Kerestyan, I will weigh the potential consequences. While I do, I leave you with but one question. If I remand Logan to you, and in a matter of weeks she comes to care for you, perhaps even love you in her own ways, how much time will pass before you question whether her heart arrived at the decision of its own accord?"

Kerestyan turned and headed for the doors leading to the main hall, knowing his Father's question wasn't meant to be answered now or verbally. It was meant to make his mind race, meant to make him search the dark, animalistic vestiges of his soul in ways that made his chest ache and tighten.

Damn him.

If in a matter of weeks Logan came to love him, he would wonder if the decision was her own. It would eat at him each time she smiled with her emerald eyes, every single time her smooth, pale skin touched his. He'd question whether the feelings were truly hers, or if in some twisted way his blood had forced them upon her.

He fisted his hands, his fingernails burning into his palms. Could he live with himself knowing there was even a slight chance his thoughts and emotions would erode hers away?

Kerestyan stepped into the main hall feeling worn, as though he'd just fought his way across yet another battlefield. The question he faced now wasn't whether he could be Logan's Master and not hate himself, it was if he could ignore the beast-driven urge to challenge whichever sibling she served.

Chapter 13

Logan stared down at her naked body and blinked a few times to make sure she wasn't hallucinating. Where her clothes had gone, she didn't know. What she did know was if someone didn't come get her out of the shiny room the staircase had abruptly ended in, somebody was going to need a doctor to extract her foot from their undead ass.

It was bad enough the second she'd stepped into the room a stainless steel wall slammed into place, blocking her access to the stairs. But then, oh then, her clothes just fizzled away while some kind of gas sprayed all over her, leaving every inch of her skin stinging and cold as if she'd just been bathed in hand sanitizer.

The only bright spot, if being trapped in a cage like a wild animal had one, was the hurricane force burst of wind that followed the gas had dried her hair in a matter of seconds.

She balled up her fists and pounded on the wall in front of her, not even sure which one led to the stairs anymore. Her entire body was covered in goose bumps, her teeth chattered, and she was fairly certain had the box been glass – she could have used her hardened nipples to cut her way out.

She covered her eyes when she heard a hiss of air, but peeked between her fingers when the sound was followed by a heavy clunk. After a brief moment of silence, the wall in front of her slid back to reveal Vouclade, freak scientist extraordinaire.

Lowering her hands, Logan glared at him. "It's about fucking time. I'm freezing my ass off in here. What the hell was that shit?"

Vouclade pushed his wire rimmed glasses up on the bridge of his nose and leaned to the side, his long black dreadlocks swinging with the movement. "It would appear your ass, although not nearly as shapely as it would be had you taken better care of yourself, is completely intact."

She eyed his thin frame, covered in black leather with dozens of silver buckles. "I don't think you have any room to talk about me being skinny, especially when you look like a starved bondage slave."

He flashed a perfect but creepy smile. "Maybe I am."

Well, what the hell was she supposed to say to that?

"For your information, Logan, I was near death when I was turned into a vampire. You have no such excuse. You chose to allow your body to deteriorate."

"I didn't exactly do it on purpose."

He motioned for her to follow before he turned around. "I didn't start the plague on purpose either, but it didn't change the outcome."

She walked behind him into a large room that looked exactly like a hospital laboratory, complete with pristine white walls and stainless steel tables. Bright fluorescent lights only added to the effect, along with the thick, acrid stench of bleach.

It took a few seconds before his words caught up with her brain. "You started the plague?"

He shrugged on a white lab coat then moved to prepare an exam table. "It was an accident."

She laughed. "That's a hell of an accident."

He patted the table. "I agree. Would you lie down, please?"

She stood there for a minute. Dreadlocks, black leather and buckles, skin just as pale as Kerestyan's, nothing about this screamed sanitary. He looked like a crazed scientist straight out of a horror movie.

Logan shook her head. "I don't think so."

"If you don't, I'll make you."

She stared at him when he pulled out the stirrups and adjusted them. "Oh, hell no. I'm not getting on that table."

His grey eyes narrowed on her. "Lay down." His voice was loud, commanding.

And just like that, she did. Eyes glazed, she walked right across the clean white floor and did as he commanded. She even put her feet in the stirrups.

It wasn't until she felt him touching her stomach that she snapped back to life. She raised a hand to smack his away, but then remembered how unfavorably Odin had reacted. So she settled for poking him in the side. "That was rude."

He made an evil sound reminiscent of a chuckle. "That, Logan Ellis, was your first lesson in mental manipulation. When faced with a vampire or *Servio* older than yourself, it's better to willingly do what is asked of you than be subject to manipulation." He continued examining her while he talked, poking and prodding at her like an experiment. "As an Ancient, when I make a request of a Fledgling, I am far more pleased when they perform without question. If they force me to cavort through their mind, sometimes I get distracted by other things going on in their brain, and then I end up leaving them with more tasks to perform than the one I originally asked for. I blame

them for their stupidity. Had they simply done what I asked in the first place, I wouldn't have a new pawn to play with. Understood?"

She started to nod but squealed and drew her knees up when he pressed and wiggled the skin under her hip bones. "Don't do that!"

He smiled. "You're ticklish. I shall inform my brother." His amusement faded as he pressed harder. "You also have an abnormality in your left ovary. When was the last time you saw a doctor?"

"I think I was fifteen. You can just look at someone and make them do whatever you say?"

"Yes. However, I don't have to speak at all. I can plant suggestions in your mind just by looking at you. And once I've met you, I no longer need to see you. I can sit here in my lab while you're in New York and fill your head with all kinds of interesting things. Are you not interested in what may be wrong with your body?"

Holy crap! "Well, yeah. But learning about getting mind fucked makes for far more interesting conversation. I'm not using my ovaries, and unless you do something crazy to them, I don't think they'll be saving my life anytime soon."

"You have a truly interesting view of things, Logan. I also find your recovery time from the stress you endured in my Father's chamber rather remarkable."

She sighed. "I don't like to talk about Jessica. It's not as though I don't know on some level drugs helped me forget. But I wasn't really trying to forget...I was just trying to make it through the day. Forgetting was just a side effect."

"Forgetting is not an effective coping mechanism. You have to find a way to move past the trauma, an avenue in which to truly deal with it."

"I have dealt with it, Vouclade. But that doesn't mean when it's brought up I'm not going to react to it. Isn't there something in your life you don't like reliving? Something you wish you hadn't done?"

He stilled for a moment. "There are many things."

"Then why should it be any different for me?"

"I concede your point." He pulled a pair of latex gloves from under the table and moved to stand between the stirrups. "I need you to relax." Snap! "This is the last stage of the physical." Snap! "When I'm finished, I'll draw blood and we can discuss the state of your body."

She closed her eyes. The last thing she thought she'd have to go through after being kidnapped by vampires...was a pelvic exam. But something told her she wasn't getting out of it. "Just don't do anything funky, alright?"

"What? Like this?" He brushed a gloved finger over her clit.

She screamed and grabbed the table as an orgasm ripped through her. No warning. No foreplay. It just slammed through her body with the force of a passion fueled freight train. She squeezed her thighs together and tried to catch her breath.

That was the last thing she'd expected, especially with a single touch.

Once she regained her bearings, she lifted her head and stared at Vouclade. "How the hell did you do that?"

"Magic." When she arched a brow, he smiled. "I'm a master of the human body. Now you're relaxed and I don't have to apply ice cold lubrication to perform the exam. However, if you'd prefer I use it, please let me know."

She released the edge of the table and raised a hand. "No, no. That's fine. Carry on." She grumbled and scrunched up her face as he carried out the exam.

"When was the last time you engaged in sexual activity?"

She grinned wide, like she'd just eaten his favorite canary. "About fifteen minutes before Kerestyan brought me here."

"And before that?"

"At least ten years."

"The next time you engage with Kerestyan, you need to do so in a more genteel fashion."

She scrunched up her face. Aside from pick pocketing, she didn't really pride herself on doing anything gentle. She raised her head again. "I'm not really a 'make love' kind of girl."

Now his face mirrored that of a concerned physician. "That may very well be, but you've sustained quite a vaginal laceration, Logan. One that had you not been here, would have caused an infection that could have killed you."

She chuckled. "It's not my fault your brother's a beast. Besides, I'd like to point out that had he not kidnapped me, I would have never slept with him and there would be no laceration or potential infection. I'd have kept abstaining like a good girl."

It was obvious by the way he stood up and spiked his gloves in a silver trash can that he didn't find the comment nearly as amusing as she did. "Your body is not in good condition, Logan. The only part of you that isn't suffering from some kind of deficiency is your mouth. And from what Kerestyan told me, it's only because you have some sort of neurotic obsession with your teeth."

She gasped and sat up straight. "It's not an obsession."

He didn't look convinced. "During the withdrawal process, you asked Kerestyan to brush your teeth no less than twelve times."

"Really? I don't remember that." She accepted Vouclade's hand and stepped down off the table. "Did he do it?"

He nodded. "Every time."

She wasn't sure how to feel about hearing that bit of info, let alone what to say. She'd never considered brushing her teeth an intimate activity, but it definitely felt that way upon learning someone else had done it for her.

"You disapprove of him fulfilling your requests?" Vouclade asked.

She shrugged as he led her to a metal chair situated next to a desk with a computer. "I don't know what I think." When he motioned for her to sit down, she hesitated. "How cold is this chair?"

He gave a knowing smile. "It's been warmed for you."

She rested her hand on it first, smiling when it warmed her fingers. Sitting down, she wiggled and watched him assume his place behind the desk, his fingers flying over the keyboard. "What's next, Doc?"

He stopped typing and retrieved a syringe from the top desk drawer. "Although I can smell the vitamin deficiencies in your blood, Father has requested a complete report. Therefore, we'll do things the old fashioned way."

She flipped her arm over and held it out for him. "Some are easier to draw from than others." He didn't say anything as his eyes scanned her forearm, but she felt his disgust charge the air between them. "It just pisses you off, doesn't it?"

"Yes." He pushed the needle under her skin. "I surmise, more than anything, it disappoints me. As I said before, you strike me as an extremely intelligent woman. Why you would do this to yourself is beyond me. And at my advanced age and intellect, not understanding the why is difficult to accept."

"Sometimes there really isn't a why." She stared down at the dark scars on her arm. "Sometimes you just do things that make you feel good."

When the syringe was full, he carefully pulled the needle from her arm and brushed a finger over the small puncture wound, which tingled then closed right before her eyes. He licked the small red smudge from his finger and made a nasty face. "Disgusting."

Her mouth dropped open for a second. "Thanks, Vouclade. That's gotta be the vampire equivalent of, 'yes honey, you do look fat in that dress.'"

He laughed that evil sound again. "It's an apt comparison. You taste absolutely horrible. However," he paused to empty the contents of the syringe into a weird machine, which in turn made an odd whirring sound, "it's now my responsibility to fix your ailing human body. You have a few choices."

"Choices are good."

"At this moment, under no circumstances are you physically well enough to become a *Servio*. I can either administer antibiotics and vitamins, in conjunction with a strict dietary plan that will bring you back to a healthy state

within a few weeks, or I can purge and repair your system in a matter of minutes. Which would you prefer?"

It seemed like an easy choice, but she figured she'd better ask. "If I take the fast route, what are the drawbacks?"

"There are no drawbacks, aside from leaving you little time to prepare before your life dramatically changes."

She took a moment to look around the room. "I'm sitting with a vampire in a laboratory that's underneath a black castle, hidden from human eyes by some sort of blood magic. And I got here by a crazy means of teleportation, that just thinking about makes me want to vomit, with the guy who kidnapped me because I know vampires exist. How much more dramatic does it get?"

He smiled. "As a *Servio*, you become immortal, Logan. Unless you incur an extreme amount of damage, along the lines of a grenade exploding in your hand or being run over by a speeding freight train, your body will be capable of healing any wound or disease. You will no longer fall ill. You will have to ingest millions of calories to gain a single pound, and you will age at a markedly decreased rate. You'll also gain supernatural abilities granted by ingesting your Master's blood, and will need to be just as aware of the Veil as any vampire."

She grimaced. "Trinity already told me about everything you just said, except the ingesting blood part." She shivered at the thought. "I was really hoping to avoid that. I think I'd rather have a big, ugly tattoo."

He flicked his glasses down on the bridge of his nose. "You discussed becoming a *Servio* with Trinity? My sister, Trinity?"

"Yeah."

"When?"

"When she brought Kerestyan the steaks he asked for. She told me I'd probably become a *Servio* if I made it through the meeting. I asked her what that meant and she gave me a quick rundown of the basics."

He leaned forward. "Humor me for a moment. What exactly did Trinity say to you?"

Logan shifted in her chair. She really didn't want to disclose every word of what Trinity told her, especially the last part. "You want to know everything she said?"

"No. I'm only interested in what she said about becoming a *Servio*."

"She said I'd be immortal, I'd stop aging for the most part, that it'd be really hard to gain weight, get sick or die, and that I'd be stronger and able to move faster than I could as a human. She also said whatever I do comes back on my Master, so if I break any rules, my Master gets in trouble first then passes the punishment down to me. Then she said my punishment would

likely be ten times worse because not only would I be punished by my Master, but then Stefan, because he doesn't suffer fools."

Vouclade sat back in his chair, seemingly lost in thought until the machine her blood was in beeped. He turned his attention to the computer monitor. "As I suspected, your vitamin levels and immune system are severely depressed. And since you already seem to be informed of what it means to be a *Servio*, I see no reason not to take the shortest route between two points."

She shifted again. The strange tugging sensation at the top of her spine said something wasn't right here. "Why do I get the feeling something's going on that I don't know about?"

He smiled, shaving a bit off the edge she was felt. "You'll experience that quite often while you're here. At this moment, twenty-two of my forty-six siblings are present in the castle. With the amount of telepathy and other magics in use, not to mention the sheer power of said individuals and the fact you are still very much human, you're going to feel an egregious amount of movement around you. I would advise you pay it as little attention as possible."

Logan relaxed a little. Maybe that was the reason, but the tingles just beneath her skin said his explanation was only a part of it. "I want you to know I'll accept that answer for now, but I think you just fed me a line."

He laughed. "I'm a scientist, Logan. I look for connections in everything, visible or not. Just because I pause doesn't mean there's something you should be concerned with. Now, shall we begin the healing process?"

She stood when he did. "Sure. What do I need to do?"

It wasn't until he moved around the desk to stand right in front of her that she realized they were the same height. He pressed his cold palms flat against her abdomen. "Stand still. You're going to feel a warm sensation throughout your body but it will subside in a few minutes. In the mean time, I'd like to ask you a question."

"Shoot."

"When I informed you Kerestyan had brushed your teeth in response to your numerous requests, your heartbeat and body language suggested you found it troublesome. I find it very intriguing that you have no issue being naked in front of me, have little difficulty discussing personal subjects with me, yet learning Kerestyan tended to you when you were in no condition to take care of yourself, upset you. Why?"

She blew out a breath. She thought she'd done a good job of dodging this subject. "It didn't upset me. I just don't know how I feel about it. It's been a long time since someone's taken care of me in any way."

"I'm taking care of you now."

She stared into his sharp grey eyes. "It's not the same. You don't look at me the way he does. You look at me like you're trying to see through me, like you're searching for my motivations and all that other psychobabble bullshit. He looks at me like, I don't know. As if he wants to—"

"Know you?"

She started to nod but stopped when his eyes narrowed. "Yes. I've been alone for a long time. Not counting the time I was sleeping or half out of my mind, I've only known Kerestyan for about ten hours. It's weird."

His lips curved, slow and wide. "Yet you know how many hours you've spent with him, and you engaged in carnal activities with him."

She blamed the overall warming of her body for the flash of heat she felt in her cheeks. "Believe it or not, Kerestyan's been the most stable part of my life the last few days. And you should know, just for all that analyzing you're doing, I didn't start seeing him as a gorgeous man with a hard body until our dalliance in the kitchen. But when I woke up wrapped around him in the bathroom...like I said, sometimes you do things because they feel good."

He made the evil sound again. "I'm not surprised Kerestyan has become a pillar of stability for you. He's been that way the majority of his existence. But tell me, when was it you stopped seeing him as a vampire?"

"What do you mean?"

"Twice now, in my presence, you've referred to him as a man or a guy, but you directly referred to me as a vampire. I'm wondering why and when you began to draw a distinction, or if perhaps it's entirely subconscious. Were you thinking of him as a vampire while you were having sex with him?"

She smiled. "You want the truth?"

"Of course."

"At that moment, I really didn't care. I was thinking he was the sexiest damn thing I'd ever seen, and all I wanted to do was to fuck him hard and fast until we couldn't move anymore."

"Your heart rate is elevating."

She'd never realized how hard it was to laugh while standing still. "I'm not surprised. Your questions make me remember what we did. Thinking about him makes me hot, Vouclade. At this moment, I can honestly say he's one of the best looking men I've ever seen."

"Most vampires are, Logan. Even though I don't exude the same type of appeal Kerestyan does, and I happen to be shielding you from it right now, if I walked into any nightclub in any city I wouldn't leave alone."

"So you're telling me all vampires are hot?" She wagged her brows. "Even you?"

"No, I'm advising that you'll find any vampire of substantial age attractive. Much the way certain animals have evolved camouflage capabilities to assist in hunting, vampires become more appealing as they age as a means to attract prey. Most Ancient vampires, those who were born thousands of years ago when the average height for a man was five feet, are now six and a half feet tall. Our curse assures our physical bodies adjust to suit the time period, but the damning aspect is that it doesn't assist our minds. I'm sharing this information with you so that in the future, should you find yourself in the presence of someone who draws you like Kerestyan or my Father; you'll know you're dealing with a vampire of advanced age and power."

Her mind kicked into overdrive. "You know, you talk a lot about old vampires, but what about the young ones? Are they all ugly? How are they supposed to compete for food against someone like Kerestyan? It doesn't sound very fair."

"A young vampire is no less attractive than they were as a human, but in terms of competition, they have to work harder. And nothing, Logan, nothing about being a younger vampire is fair. Since the moment the Eldest began passing their curse, it never has been. It never will be. Kerestyan told me he used a business analogy with you, yes?"

She couldn't help but grin. "Yeah, I'm in the cushy corner office for once in my life."

He chuckled. "Yes, you are. Take the same business he described, but imagine what it would be like if you were one of those working in a cubicle. You put in day after day of hard work, but no one above you ever retires. There are no promotions, no advancements, unless of course, you manage to dispose of a supervisor. Could you imagine some of the Fledgling vampires you've witnessed in New York challenging someone like my Father, or even Odin for that matter?"

All she could picture was a thick haze of red and gold. "They wouldn't stand a chance. Kerestyan didn't even move and the three I ran into in the alley died."

"That is what it is to be a Fledgling. However, they wield the power of their blood over humans the way I wield mine over them. This is how it's been for thousands upon thousands of years. And in two thousand years, those Fledglings you've seen in New York this year, the ones who manage to survive, will treat the new vampires of that age the way they were once treated. They'll manipulate their Fledglings, using them to amass power and prestige while the true Ancients continue to manipulate them. It's a vicious circle."

"Why the hell would anyone want to be a vampire then?"

"Most humans aren't given a choice, Logan. I can count on one hand the vampires I know who sought an avenue to become what they are, and not a single one did so for any reason other than vengeance."

"Okay. So let me be selfish for just a minute. In this warped circle of dysfunction, because that's obviously what it is, where do *Servios* fit in?"

"*Servios* serve their Masters. In all honesty, the life of a *Servio* varies greatly pending who they serve. Alfred enjoys a very comfortable life here and is nearly as old as my Father. He maintains the castle and all its inner workings, as well as tending to my Father's personal affairs. He's also my Father's closest friend and even his conscience on occasion. But there are many *Servios*, of varying ages, who are traded and treated like slaves by their Masters."

Logan grimaced. That certainly didn't make her feel good. "How so?"

"I could keep you here for a century recounting stories of the horrors *Servios* have undergone. Suffice it to say, *Servios* can be subject to the same atrocities any human could, except endure it for far longer considering their resistance to death. You, no matter which Nelek Child becomes your Master, won't face such. My Father holds each of us to high standards when it comes to the treatment of our servants. You'll be trained in our ways and treated with the respect you deserve. Now, that doesn't mean you won't be punished for your mistakes, but we only torture our enemies."

A shiver ran the length of Logan's body. The smile that crossed Vouclade's face as he finished his sentence was inhuman at best, but she wasn't sure that was the whole reason for the way she felt.

"What was that?" she asked. "Did you do that?"

"Yes." He removed his hands from her stomach but caught both of her forearms. "The healing process is complete. However, I have a request of you."

She was almost afraid to ask. "What?"

His face took on a more serious countenance. "Your life as nothing more than a street waif is now over. I'm asking that you allow me to remove the final traces of that life." She glanced down to where his thumbs brushed over the dark blotches on her arms. "You are more than a drug addict. You are more than sunken eyes, pale skin and colorless lips. You are a beautiful, intelligent woman who sees the world through the eyes of a human, but processes it with the elegant mind of an Elder vampire. You, Logan Ellis, are a rarity in this age, and very much a Nelek."

She wasn't exactly sure how to take that. "Is there something wrong with the way I look?"

"Vampiric society is very brutal and maligning to someone who possesses obvious weakness. Although I've healed the internal damage your life on the streets has done, you still have the look of a street waif. I have no

doubt that in New York's society you will face ridicule, which will only reflect on your Master. I have no intention of changing your features, just adjusting your body to what it would be had you been more able to care for it. It truly is a question of whether you wish to look as you do now, for the rest of eternity."

She closed her eyes. The concept of eternity was difficult to wrap her mind around. Hell, it was hard to wrap her mind around everything she'd been through in the last three days, let alone forever.

Vampires. Castles. Dragons.

Really, what the hell had she gotten herself into?

"It appears the decision has been made for you."

She opened her eyes and stared at Vouclade. "What?"

"Father wishes for your body to be restored completely. He says it is the second step in you realizing you are more than what others believe you are."

She arched a brow. "Wait, wouldn't me staying as I am be saying I'm more than what people think I am?"

He smiled in a most devious way. "No. If someone were to look at you now, they would expect you have an intricate knowledge of the streets. If I restore you, you become extremely dangerous as no one would believe such."

"Ooh. I like the sound of that. How long does..." before she was able to finish the question, she felt another tingle, only this time it rippled across her skin.

"It's done."

"Just like that?"

"Yes."

She stared down at her arms almost unable to believe her own eyes. The needle tracks were completely gone, as if they'd never been there at all, and instead of a pale, sickly color, her skin was ivory and shimmered in a way she hadn't seen since...she couldn't even remember.

Her mouth all but fell open when she looked down. She cupped and squeezed her breasts. "Are my boobs bigger?"

He laughed. "Only slightly. Your bone structure wasn't meant for anything more than what you already had. However, in my personal opinion, the more womanly curve of your hips compensate for whatever it is you feel your breasts lack."

Logan ran her hands over her body. "I have hips!" She tried to look over her shoulder. "I think I have an ass." She groped her behind, finding a bit more than she had before. "I do! I have an ass! This is fucked up. How the hell did you do this?"

He simply smiled again. "I've reached an age where the power of my blood allows me to accomplish many things. There's nothing I can't do to the human or vampiric body with but a thought or touch."

"Can you give me more boobs?"

He frowned. "No. I told you I would only return your body to what it would be had you taken better care of it." He motioned to a door across the room as a new set of clothes appeared in his hand. "Beyond that door your Master awaits you. I suggest you don't make them wait any longer."

Chapter 14

"Holy shit, you look so good! Not that I didn't approve before, but *damn* you're hot!"

As the door disappeared under her outstretched hand, Logan found herself with the sudden urge to smile and cry at the same time. For some reason she'd believed Kerestyan would be the one sitting in the chair by the crackling fireplace, kicked back like he owned the place.

But instead, it was Trinity.

The vampiress swung her feet down from the dark coffee table. "You expected Kerestyan, didn't you?"

Logan fought against the wide range of emotions swirling inside her. Tears heated and stung the rims of her eyes but she refused to give in. She forced a smile into place. "I guess I just assumed it would be him."

"It can't be him, Logan." She motioned to the chair across from her. "It goes against Nelek decorum."

Logan walked over and sank into the soft, maroon leather, silently reminding herself she needed to listen to the forthcoming answer with an open mind. "What's Nelek decorum?"

"A set of rules my Dad's placed on all his Children. Kerestyan's interest in you goes beyond...how can I say this? Screw it. Kerestyan has feelings for you, and because of that he can't be your Master. It's one rule I happen to agree with whole heartedly." She leaned back in her chair and laughed. "And considering you don't even know how you feel about him, Kerestyan being your Master wouldn't be good for you at all."

Logan slowly nodded, staring at the table as all her emotions twisted and converged into one. "So now we've moved from telling me how I feel to what is and isn't good for me." She raised her head and glared at Trinity. "In this list of rules you have, does it also state as soon as you grow fangs you become a fucking know-it-all? Does it say as soon as your heart stops beating you get to control everyone around you?"

Trinity narrowed her tilted eyes. "You may want to think long and hard about whatever's running through your mind right now, Logan."

"What's going through my mind? You're lucky I can even think straight right now. I think I've taken everything that's happened over the last few

days fairly well. I didn't fight. I didn't run. My human brain didn't spontaneously combust, as Odin so lovingly put it. I've answered all the questions asked of me, and even accepted when I didn't think mine were being answered with complete honesty. But everybody has a limit, and I'm damn close to finding mine."

Trinity kicked her feet back up on the table. "What are you going to do, attack me? I'll warn you now – that's against the rules, too. Nelek Children and *Servios* are forbidden to attack each other while we're in the castle, and forbidden to kill each other no matter where we are."

Truthfully, attacking her hadn't even crossed Logan's mind, but since Trinity brought it up, she leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees, hands folded. "Then I guess it's a damn good thing I'm still human right now, huh?"

Trinity smiled, her black eyes twinkling in the dim lighting. "Nice way to skirt the rules. Playing the technicalities is one of my favorites, too. But attacking me isn't going to get you anywhere except hurt. I like you, which is exactly why I'm sitting here right now, but if you lunge across that table I'm going to kick your skinny ass around this room until you can't do anything but listen."

Logan ground her teeth together. "If there's one thing I've done without fail since this whole situation began, it's listen. Don't treat me like a child. I don't care how old you are. At no point in history, ancient or other, has anyone liked being treated as though they're stupid. I'm no different."

"Then I'll give it to you straight. If you ingest Kerestyan's blood, which is exactly what you have to do to become his *Servio*, you'll never know if what you feel for him is real. The second his blood passes your lips he can control you. Your emotions, your actions, even your mind. Is that what you want?"

She fisted her hands as anger coursed through her, but then inhaled a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "This really doesn't have anything to do with Kerestyan. Am I a little disappointed he's not the one sitting here? Yes. But this has more to do with being told how I feel and what is or isn't good or right for me." She stared straight into Trinity's perpetual bedroom eyes, hoping it would help drive the intensity behind her words. "I'll be your *Servio*, but I will *not* be your puppet."

She laughed. "You have a lot of nerve."

Logan shook her head and settled back in the chair. Was she speaking in another language? "It doesn't take nerve. It takes understanding yourself and what you're faced with. I appreciate your willingness to take me on, especially if Kerestyan can't. At least I know you a little bit. But if this is going to work, you need to know I'm not going to dance for you. I'll help you during the day. I'll do the things you ask. But outside of matters directly relating

to serving you, I refuse to be told how I feel or what's good for me. I may have fallen into a world I don't completely understand, but I still know who I am."

Trinity's red lips parted in a beaming smile. "You're such a cold bitch. Is it wrong that makes me like you even more?"

Logan cast a glance over Trinity's tight leather pants and matching corset before considering her perfectly colored face and midnight hair, pulled into a tight ponytail high on her head.

She looked like the Dominatrix responsible for starving Vouclade.

Logan smiled at the thought. "You're not exactly warm and fuzzy."

"I think that's why we'll get along. Look, I won't tell you how you should or shouldn't feel, but in return you need to understand as soon as my blood runs through your body, as bad as it sounds – you belong to me. I'm responsible for everything you do and say, and while I don't like exerting emotional or mental control over my *Servios*, I'll do it if I have to."

Logan did her best to say calm. She really didn't like the thought of anyone being able to control her emotions, let alone her thoughts. "How do I know you aren't going to make me feel things I don't? You seem to be pretty chummy with Kerestyan. How do I know I won't find myself in love with him because you 'controlled' me into it?"

With the way Trinity's body stiffened, it was obvious Logan had crossed a line she didn't know existed. Trinity sat up and jammed her finger into the arm of the chair. "First of all, I wouldn't force anyone to love someone against their will. Love isn't a weapon. My Father is as cold and calculating as a vampire gets, and even he doesn't use love as a tool, which is exactly why he's forbidden Kerestyan from being your Master. There are emotions and thoughts that are fair game to be manipulated, and ones that aren't. Love is one that should never be touched. Don't you ever question if what you feel around Kerestyan is my doing. Ever!"

When Trinity's bottom lip quivered just before she stood up and stalked off towards the window opening, Logan stood up, not really sure what to do.

She turned and stared at the spot on the wall where the door had been. Vouclade wasn't this moody. Stefan didn't seem to have enough emotion for more than two moods. Hell, even Alfred appeared to be in control of himself.

She moved to stand next to Trinity. But when Trinity just continued to stare out the window, Logan followed her line of sight down to an image she never would've expected. Odin lay on a blanket of lush grass with a big blue book propped open in front of him, next to a little girl who couldn't have been more than five. She twisted a tiny finger into her curly brown hair and laughed as he pointed to something on the page.

Logan was almost positive her mind was playing tricks on her this time. She blinked twice before she even thought about asking, "Is he reading a book to—"

"She's a ghost," Trinity interjected, her voice quiet and distant. "The Gianni's, another powerful family of vampires, live across the street. You might've seen their mansion from the sidewalk, but chances are it was hidden from your human eyes. In any event, the power of their blood grants them the ability to traffic with ghosts from the Light and Dark realms. I know my Dad explained a little about the Light realm to you," she motioned to the odd couple, "but Emily's from the Dark realm. You can call it Purgatory, Hell, or whatever you want, but there aren't flames or imps. It's a shadow of the living world, where you can see everything but you can't touch anything. Only tortured souls go there, the ones who are too angry, violent or confused to reincarnate.

"Emily was murdered in a rather violent fashion back in the 1800's, somewhere on the Gianni's property. I don't know all the specifics, but I do know she believes she's still very much alive. She comes over at least twice a week and Odin reads to her. He does it without fail, every single time she asks. And in return...she loves him in a way that's unfathomable to me. I've tried so many times, but I don't understand it. I've watched them for hours, and every single time I marvel at them.

"The reason I'm telling you all this, since I'm starting to sense your confusion, is because I would never do anything to disrupt what you're seeing right now. Much like I would never manipulate your feelings for Kerestyan. Love that's real and freely given rarely finds vampires, Logan, let alone Ancients."

She shot Trinity a sideways glare. "I am not in love with Kerestyan. I've only known him for three days, most of which I wasn't even awake."

Trinity leaned back against the edge of the window and crossed her arms over her chest. "I didn't say *you* love Kerestyan."

Logan rubbed a hand down her face. She hated playing word games. "Kerestyan doesn't love me either. He doesn't know me any better than I know him."

"He may not love you yet, but he's more than on his way." She broke out in an ear to ear grin. "You get to him somehow. I've never seen him so out of sorts." She balled up her fist and shook it playfully. "K's usually stone faced and stoic, a harsh and demanding vampire Lord. But when your skinny ass walks into the room...I don't think you realize what kind of affect you have on him."

Logan squeezed her eyes closed tight then opened them and stared hard at Trinity. "You know what, why don't we stick to talking about what I'm

going to be doing for you? Kerestyan is more than capable of telling me how he feels. And in the interest of honesty, I'm really not comfortable talking about my relationship with him, or lack thereof, with you...or anyone else for that matter."

An unsettling smile spread across her mouth. "Fine, I suppose now is as good a time as any to let you know I'll be basing you back in New York City. You'll be staying in the castle for a few weeks while I train you on the basics, then I'll send you back to meet up with one of my *Servios* who already lives in New York. You'll be working together on controlling my interests there. How do you feel about that?"

Logan shrugged. "Staying in New York is fine with me. I'm obviously comfortable there. I know the place inside and out and could probably walk it with my eyes closed. What kind of interests do you have?"

Trinity made her way back to her chair. "I control a few high end prostitution rings, influence some minor drug trafficking and own a few fetish and bondage clubs. Will being in that type of environment be a problem for you?"

Logan sat up on the window ledge, enjoying the sensation of the fresh, warm breeze blowing against her back. "I'd prefer not to be around the drugs for a while. I got the sense from Stefan he'd put me on his wall if I so much as looked at heroin again."

She laughed rather loud. "Yeah, he's never been fond of my love affair with chemicals, either. I'll keep you away from that end of things until you tell me you're ready. What about the rest?"

"Skin doesn't bother me. Neither do kinky people, as long as they keep their hands to themselves. What kind of work will I be doing? You're not going to turn me into a call girl, are you?"

Her nose scrunched up. "No offense, but you aren't really the call girl type. Granted, you've got the legs for it, but the kind of high class girls I run all have...shall we say 'certain qualities', none of which you possess."

Logan arched a brow. Not that she wanted to be a prostitute, but she had to know. "Like what? Vouclade gave me an ass again."

"There's a lot more to selling yourself than having a great body, Logan. You have to be willing to do things most women aren't, and you also have to be a great actress. I just don't see you keeping your mouth shut if some three hundred pound business man tells you to bend over and take it like a good little girl."

Logan could almost see the comical scene unfold in her mind. "Uh, no. That's not me. I'd most likely hogtie him with the bed sheets and steal his wallet. Then I might even be inclined to call his wife to come pick him up."

"You're so mean." She kicked her feet back up on the coffee table. "And that's exactly why I think you'd be better off starting out in one of my clubs

as an assistant manager. Vouclade's working with a Tech to get all your official documents together." She ticked her fingers off as she said, "Social security card, birth certificate, driver's license. I need to get you back on the map before I can do anything with you. It's important you have all the necessary documents while you're still within your human lifespan."

Logan rubbed a hand across her forehead. Sometimes she felt like these vampires were the one's talking in a foreign language. "Vouclade's working with a Tech? What's that?"

Trinity smiled at her and blew out a breath. "I'm not going to drown you with a bunch of history right now because that's something we can talk about later, but I'll give you a quick overview."

"In the beginning, there were six Original vampires. They, for whatever reason, shared their blood with humans and created Children, and then their Children made more Children and so on and so forth. But all vampires come from a bloodline spawned from one of the Originals, each with their own special magics. Since you'll be around mainly Fledglings and *Servios*, memorize these slang terms: Trumps, Thugs, Witches, Techs, Shades and Dolls. Those are the six lines. Fledglings toss the names around the same way they'd say, 'Oh, that's Logan, she's an Ellis'."

Logan repeated the words in her head then nodded. "So which one are you?"

"I can't tell you yet."

"Why?"

"Because Nelek decorum states you have to be in service for a year before you're trusted with that knowledge."

She grumbled. "Great. More rules."

Trinity kicked her head back and laughed. "Get used to it. This life comes with a lot of rules and restrictions. And being a Nelek comes with even more."

"Okay. So what do the words represent? Is a Tech good with technology?"

She nodded. "Yes. Think of them as high school stereotypes. Techs are computer geeks. Trumps are preps. Witches are Goths. Thugs are jocks. Dolls are burnouts. Shades are...the only ones who don't fit into a typical stereotype. The Gianni's across the street are Shades. Believe it or not, you shouldn't run into many. Of all the lines, they have the smallest numbers but tend to be the most dangerous."

"Don't mess with Shades, got it. So a computer geek is helping Vouclade get all the papers I left at home or didn't have?"

"Yes. Truthfully, it will take hours to explain the lines and reasons behind the names. And get this, the Elders and Ancients use different names for

each line. It can be a lot to digest. Not to mention going into Werewolves and Paladins and Harbingers and Celestials. There's a lot more to the world than just vampires. But luckily for you, I'm old and have a good hold on the world around me. Imagine being a Fledgling whose Sire is only a hundred years old and doesn't know the history past the age he lives in."

Logan folded her arms over her chest. Between what Vouclade had said earlier and what Trinity was saying now, it sounded like Fledglings really got the shit end of the deal. "I think I'm starting to feel sorry for younger vampires."

"Don't." She raised a hand and shook her head. "Once I get you trained and send you off on your own for a few days, you'll understand why I say that. Every now and then there's a diamond in the rough, but most of the time they think they're God's gift to humanity. I don't expect you to understand right now, but I promise you will in a few weeks."

Logan smiled. Part of her was actually looking forward to having a reason to be out on the streets, even if it was only to do someone else's dirty work. Which reminded her, "Will I be back out living on the streets or will I be staying with Kerestyan?"

"Your days of *living* on the streets and picking through the trash are over. I'll be providing you a fully furnished apartment in Soho. If you choose to spend your nights at Kerestyan's or vice versa, that's entirely between the two of you. I won't get involved there unless it interferes with what I need you to take care of or accomplish." She smiled wide. "If you're supposed to be running money and instead you spend the night riding Kerestyan, don't expect me to be pleased. Besides, he's still the Lord of New York. He has a lot of things he needs to be doing, too. He has to attend court, monitor his city and his Fledglings, and keep the Veil. Had he not been keeping a personal eye on three of his biggest trouble makers three nights ago, which he doesn't do often at all, you'd have never met him."

Wow. Logan slowly shook her head. It was wild to think if she'd gone another way or been ten minutes earlier or later, she wouldn't be sitting here right now. She'd be shivering in a wet, dilapidated building or walking the streets scoping out trashcans.

What a difference a few minutes made.

She stood up and stretched out her legs. "It's weird to think this all happened by chance. I mean, what are the odds I'd be in the same alley as Kerestyan, especially with how many there are in that part of Brooklyn."

"Yeah," Trinity laughed. "What are the chances?" Her voice wavered, as if it'd shifted an octave higher.

Logan straightened and stared at her soon to be Master. "Why did you say it like that?"

Trinity looked all around the room. "Say what like what?"

"You said 'what are the chances' like you know something." She glared when Trinity lowered her eyes. "Do you know something, Trinity? Was there more at work than just chance? Did Kerestyan know I'd be in that alley?"

Trinity quickly made eye contact again. "Of course not. Kerestyan wouldn't do anything like that, it's not his style. I'm sure he was just as surprised to find you in that alley as you were him. In fact, I'm willing to put money on it."

Logan leaned back against the window ledge. Something still didn't sit right, but she chose to let it go for the moment. It wasn't as though she could force Trinity to talk, at least, not yet. "When are we going to do this *Servio* thing?"

"Tomorrow night. Father asked you be given a night and day to peruse the castle as a human. It's not something that happens often. I think he's interested in how you see it. I can't remember the last time we had a human running around." She tipped her head to the side. "Actually, I don't remember ever having a human running around."

"Really?"

She smiled again. "We've had werewolves and ghosts, but not a regular human. I guess you're a first." Her smile faded into a snarl as she smacked a hand against her ear. "Okay, you have to leave." She motioned to the wall and a door appeared. "If Kerestyan screams in my mind one more time, I'm going to kill him."

Logan opened her mouth to ask, but stopped when she remembered Vouclade mentioning telepathy. "What's he yelling about?"

"You! He wants me to let you out. He says I've kept you to myself long enough and he needs to make sure you're alive. He needs to see you with his own eyes. Of course, he doesn't know what Vouclade did to your sexy little ass." Her covetous grin returned as her eyes moved over Logan's body. "I bet you a grand he pops a serious hard on as soon as you step through that door. And I bet you ten, he tries to screw you against the wall."

She smiled and shook her head. "I don't have any money. Besides, something tells me you have an inside line on this one."

Trinity stood, and with both arms made a grand sweeping motion towards the door. "Go! Make him scream out loud so he stops bothering me. Consider it your first real test as my *Servio*. Don't let me down!"

Chapter 15

When Logan stepped through the doorway into another torch lit room, she didn't have a chance to do anything but brace her hands against Kerestyan's hard chest before he buried his tongue in her mouth. His palms warmed her cheeks as he held her face steady, stealing her breath with every devouring lash, every sensuous slide of his tongue. Her nipples tightened instantly. Hot shivers raced down her spine then burst across her skin, raising goose bumps in their wake.

She didn't realize his hands moved until she felt him squeeze her ass and her feet left the floor. A flurry of sensations whipped through her as he pressed her back against the wall and pushed between her thighs. Her body tingled everywhere he touched her, responding to him in a way it hadn't before. She broke from his mouth and gasped for air as the hard ridge of his cock dug into her belly.

She so owed Trinity a thousand dollars.

He stared down at her through intense blue eyes as she brushed her fingertips over his lips. She wasn't sure if the healing had affected her sensitivity somehow or if his kiss was just that incredible, but she swore her heart would pound through her ribcage at any moment.

If this was now his standard greeting, she needed to leave and come back more often.

He nipped at her fingers before his lips parted in a lazy, sexy smile. "Hello." He dipped his head and nuzzled into her neck, his stubble prickling her skin. "You smell different. Sweeter." His fangs scraped her throat, causing her legs to tremble around him. "More delicious."

"Vouclade," she breathed.

His heated lips curved against her skin. "My name is Kerestyan."

She smiled, still working to catch the breath he'd stolen. As if she'd ever mistake him for Vouclade. "No. Vouclade healed me. My blood's clean. No more drugs. He fixed my body, too." She shivered as his warm fingers slid up her lower back, his thumbs grazing her tight nipples as he pushed her shirt over her breasts.

He raised his head and stared at her. The flickering torches cast shadows across his gorgeous face, reflecting golden sparkles in his eyes. His hot breath scorched her lips. "You were just as beautiful before."

Logan squirmed as her mind struggled to process his comment amid the devastating assault his thumbs waged on her nipples. How could he take her from hot to strangely uncomfortable in such little time?

She squeezed his hips tight between her thighs. "Can I ask a favor?"

He pulled back slightly, blue eyes sharp and thoughtful. "Of course."

"Can you not say things like that to me?"

His brows furrowed. "You'd prefer I not compliment you?"

"I know it probably sounds stupid, but every time you refer to me or to a part of me as beautiful, it makes me feel weird. I don't like it. I'm not sure I ever will."

His enticing lips curved into a slow, devilish smile. "You are so amazingly complicated."

She smacked a hand over his mouth. Did he not hear her? "I don't walk around comparing rainbows to how I feel about you, so don't do it to me. You can tell me you want to fuck me, lick me, taste me, but you're not allowed to get poetic about it. No beautiful, no amazing, no...whatever else you manage to come up with. That's my only rule. Got it?"

She barely caught herself when he pushed her legs from his waist and stepped back, dark eyes alight with something between confusion and anger. "No, I don't get it. You're asking me to treat you as nothing more than a common whore. I refuse. How could you ask that of me?"

She yanked her shirt down. What was it with this family and their mood swings? "That's *not* what I'm asking for. And just for the record, you didn't seem to have any trouble saying those words when we were rolling around on your bathroom floor. What? It's okay to treat me like a whore when you're fucking me, but not now? What the hell?"

He couldn't look any more offended if she'd tried. "You just told me I can't compliment you unless I'm referring to touching you. That's the way a man treats a whore, Logan, not a woman he cares for. I can stand across the room and tell you I want to fuck you, but not that I think you're beautiful?" He turned and stalked over to a large chair near the end of a huge, four poster bed. He sank into the dark blue velvet then glared at her. "I refuse to treat you that way. If you can't accept that," he raised a pointed finger, "there's the door."

She studied his stern face. Not only did he appear to be very serious, but at the moment he also bore a striking resemblance to Stefan, sitting there brooding in his chosen chair. Only his pale skin and gorgeous features ra-

diated a purely seductive power over her, a sinful, unholy attraction that made her knees weaken.

Look who's waxing poetic now. She pushed the sarcastic voice from her mind. There was a difference between reacting to someone because they were hot, and because you genuinely felt something for them. Without a doubt she was attracted to the man, every nerve in her body practically sized whenever he touched her...

She just wasn't sure about the feelings part.

Unfortunately, that thought, combined with the hurt tinge in his eyes, caused a specific question to resurface in her mind. And although the dominant of her didn't want to hear his answer, a small part of her needed to know.

She moved to stand in front of his chair. "Do you love me?"

A long, oxygen thieving, heart pounding moment of silence stretched between them before he finally nodded. "In some ways, I do."

Shock dug icy fingers into her chest and squeezed her heart. That wasn't the answer she'd been hoping for. "Why?"

He rubbed a hand across his forehead. "It's difficult to explain."

She took a step away from him as panic twisted inside her. "Try."

"I'm ten thousand years old, Logan." His voice was quiet but strained. "For as much as I enjoy the modern age, I've spent a *long* time watching history and humanity repeat itself. Since the inception of the Veil, I've personally seen maybe a hundred humans who've learned of our existence. Some fought; some begged for mercy at my feet, others committed suicide or drove themselves insane with the knowledge, and four in the last decade have asked me to turn them. But never, until I met you, had one looked at me with such little regard. Never had I been treated as though I was just another commoner, another person among the many on the street. It makes me wonder, why? What have you lived that makes you so different? What triumphs? What tragedies? Why are you the way you are?"

She frowned. "So, it's just because I'm different?"

He shot up from the chair in a surge of flexing muscle. "No! It's not *just* because you're different. It's because after thousands of years of watching the same events happen over and over again – few humans draw my notice anymore, let alone my curiosity."

"Don't yell at me!" She jabbed a finger into the center of his chest. "If you'd just give me a normal answer this would go a lot faster."

His jaw worked overtime as he glared down at her. "You aren't like anyone, anything! I don't know all the answers when I look at you. I don't know what you're thinking. I don't know what you're feeling. It's frustrating yet

strangely exciting. Do you know how long it's been since I've felt excitement?"

She motioned to the obvious and very satisfying bulge straining against the zipper of his black slacks. "You're excited right now."

"Because of *you*!" He growled, balled up his fists then splayed his fingers. "I can't tell you the last time I got an erection from simply touching a woman. But seeing your face, the thought of caressing your bare skin, running my tongue across your lips, your neck...sets me on edge. I don't think you understand what that means to someone like me."

She huffed out a breath, trying to disregard the way each body part he mentioned tingled and warmed as if it were voice activated. "Don't you have sex with the women you eat?"

"Yes, I have sex as a means to cover my feeding so I don't have to manipulate memories."

"Well you obviously get excited then, too."

He narrowed those dark eyes and stalked towards her, fangs clearly visible between his parted lips. "It's been well over a thousand years since I found a woman, human or other, attractive enough to gain an erection without forcing it upon myself."

The closer he came to her, even as she tried to back away, the more her heart raced with the same excitement he'd described. "That's not my fault. I can't help it you find me attractive for some God forsaken reason. I almost wish you'd have used me as food like your brother wanted."

He laughed an evil sound when she turned before he could back her into yet another wall. "If it's my prey you wish to be, allow me to grant your request." His eyes snapped with blue fire a second before the room plunged into absolute darkness.

Logan stopped dead in her tracks. Damn him! She couldn't see anything, not even her own hand as she raised it in front of her face. Her heart pounded in her ears as she frantically tried to recall the layout of the sizable room.

There wasn't much to it. A huge bed, a night table on either side, a single chair near the foot and a large armoire on the wall to her right...or was it her left? *Shit!* It'd been on her right before she'd turned to avoid being cornered. It should be in front of her now.

The door! It should've been just a few steps behind her, but Lord only knew if that door even existed now. Kerestyan and his brood seemed to have an odd fascination for rooms with no doors, save the one's they created. But she swore there was another door next to the one she'd entered through. Or was it on the wall opposite the armoire?

She fisted her hands as she took a small step back and her shoulders came into direct contact with cold, unforgiving stone. There shouldn't be a wall behind her! "Kerestyan! Turn the fucking lights back on."

"No." His deep voice echoed all around her, raising chills across her skin.

Every hair on the back of her neck stood on end as she tried to extend her senses over the room. But she couldn't feel the damn room! All she could sense, with every fiber of her body, was him. He was everywhere. His smoky, tangy scent flooded her nostrils, filled her lungs.

"If it's the vampire you want, then it's the Ancient you shall have." Rough and damningly seductive, his words rolled across her skin in a palpable wave. "But you should know," a whisper of cool air caressed her left ear, "the beast craves you every bit as much as the man," then her right.

And in that moment, she knew exactly where Kerestyan was. He'd made only one move after the lights went out.

He was the cold stone wall that shouldn't be behind her.

She shivered as his hands slid inside the neck of her t-shirt and his breath stung her ear. "Instinct is all the beast has, Logan." His cold fingers curled and in one swift motion, he tore her shirt in half. "Emotion...the only truth it knows." His warming fingers pinched her tight nipples. "Rage." He nipped then tautly rolled her earlobe between his teeth. "Passion." He delivered a hot, shivery lick to the nape of her neck. "Lust." He dragged the tips of his fangs across her shoulder. "But one feeling stirs the beast in a way nothing else can."

Logan left her feet leave the floor a second before her entire world spun. She fell back, sinking deep into a soft mattress as Kerestyan's heavy body crashed down on top of her. He pinned her wrists above her head, grinding his agile hips against hers as he punished her with a harsh, demanding kiss. The kind of possessive, all consuming kiss that made her whole body scream for more. She met each thrust, every wild swirl of his tongue with the same fervor, exploring each crevice, every soft, delicious inch of the flesh inside his mouth. She savored the rich, masculine taste of him, a heady mixture of rage and desire.

By the time he broke away to bite at her swollen lips, she was so wet and so ready for him, her jeans clung to her inner thighs.

"I love the way you smell," he growled between sharp, teasing nips. "The feel of your body under me."

"My pants," she breathed. "Get rid of them."

His deep laugh filled her ears as a single torch flickered to life above the bed. He stared down at her, his eyes an incredible mixture of onyx and sapphire, his lips parted in a wicked grin that showed off the razor's edge of his fangs.

Wow. She'd been more than ready for him before, but the sight of him poised above her like a dark and deadly predator made her clit throb, her heart pound.

He brought her wrists together above her head and clamped a large hand around both before reaching down between them. Her stomach dipped, trembling with anticipation as he popped the button and pulled down her zipper.

"Yes." She licked at his hovering lips. "Don't stop."

He silenced her with another hard kiss before he leaned back on his knees and smiled at her. In less than a minute, the remainder of her clothing had become one with the floor and he'd flipped her over on her hands and knees in front of him.

Logan grabbed two handfuls of black velvet as Kerestyan's strong hands closed around her hips, his fingers digging into her skin. He teased her with his hard cock, taunting her as he pushed the thick head between her slick lips only to pull back right before he rubbed her clit. He held her steady, resisting each time she pushed back against him. But just when she thought she'd die from the sensual torture, he slowly pushed inside her.

"Oh, God..." She squeezed her eyes closed. "That's it. Right there."

He gave her a little more. "How much do you want?" His voice was ragged, wanting.

Before she could answer, he drove himself inside her. She gasped at the exquisite sensation of him filling her, stretching her wide. There was no pain this time, only sinful pleasure as he pulled out then slammed back into her. He moaned with her each time she thrust her ass back against him. Every time she met his hard, passionate stroke with one of her own.

She kicked her head back as her muscles began to tighten. "Don't stop." She felt one of his hands slide up her spine before he tangled his fingers into her hair. "Oh, *God*, Kerestyan..."

He pulled her back against his chest, using his own knees to spread her legs wide as his other arm circled her waist. His lips burned her ear. "I love the way you feel, Logan. Hot. Tight. Wet."

She let out a deep moan as he tipped her head to the side. He drove his thick cock into her faster and faster, harder and harder, until she thought she'd die from the dizzying rhythm.

"Kerestyan!"

His fangs scraped her exposed neck just before she felt them sink into her skin. The intense pinch of pain was nothing compared to the white-hot bliss that coated every nerve in her trembling body. Orgasm after shattering orgasm tore through her, intensified by the slow rocking motion of his hips against hers.

Time and space ceased to exist. Kerestyan was all she knew, all she ever wanted to feel...all she *cared* about.

Kerestyan fell into the full throes of ecstasy as Logan's blood filled his mouth. Laced with orgasmic pleasure, the sweetest of all flavors, he savored the hot, rich liquid as it flowed over his tongue. He sucked at her soft skin, careful not to lose a single drop of the precious fluid. He'd never tasted anything better, never wanted to taste anything else. Her life essence filled him with a sense of peace, a feeling of contentment he hadn't known in centuries.

Her heartbeat pounded in his ears as her body shuddered, clenching and squeezing his cock. He climaxed with her each time, pulsing hot and thick inside her. He held her tight as he slid in and out of her tight, wet body, reveling in the feel of her skin, the sound of her satisfied moans as they filled the air around them.

He swirled his tongue over her wound then stared down at her neck. Traces of his feast glowed bright crimson against her pale skin, and the animal inside him roared at the sight. It wanted more, but he knew better. If he took too much of her blood at once, he'd leave her tired and woozy, and that wasn't what he wanted.

Under no circumstances was he finished with her.

He licked at her neck, gliding his fangs over her soft, succulent skin. "Are you okay?"

She blew out a contented sigh. "I'm absolutely spectacular. You?"

He pressed a kiss to her neck then untangled his fingers from her hair. "I would concur with your sentiment."

She wiggled free of his hold then moved to lie on the bed in front of him, her thighs resting on either side of where he still knelt. "That was incredible."

He smiled down into her half hooded eyes, darkened with lust. What a memory the sight of her made. Her pale skin flushed to an enticing shade of pink, her lips swollen from their kisses, her nipples tight and puckered. "I would tell you I think *you're* incredible, but I believe that's how we found ourselves in this position...which you apparently don't approve of."

Wickedness spread across her lips. "Oh, I approve of the position we're in right now." She trailed a hand down between her breasts, then over her stomach and lower still. "So tell me, Lord Vampire," she moaned as she spread herself for him to see, then rubbed a finger over her engorged clitoris. "How interested are you in tasting all of me? When you're finished, can I return the favor?" She wet her lips in a timeless invitation. "Didn't you say something about tying me to the bed?"

Kerestyan growled as the animal in his stomach shifted again.

Apparently, she wasn't done with him either.

Chapter 16

“Wake up sleepyhead!”

Logan’s mind crawled out of a dreamy haze and immediately went to work on processing the excited voice, followed by the sensation of someone dropping sloppy, wet kisses on her right cheek. She opened her eyes to find a steel blue pair staring back at her, set perfectly into the huge head of a black wolf. A head that cocked from side to side for a moment before a warm, pink tongue licked a stripe across the bridge of her nose.

Well, so much for dangerous. She rolled onto her back then sat up, watching as the wolf jumped onto the bed and sat down next to her in the space Kerestyan had occupied when she’d fallen asleep. She wasn’t sure if she should be more concerned that Kerestyan wasn’t in bed, or that the wolf was so large it sat taller than she did.

She wiped the saliva from her nose with the back of her hand as she eyed the creature. “Were you talking to me?”

The wolf shook its head back and forth.

Had she been sitting anywhere else in the world she might’ve had trouble believing what she saw. However, considering she was surrounded by vampires, dragons and walls of writhing body parts, she gave in rather quickly. “You can understand me?”

He nodded.

She reached up and patted his head, surprised by the soft, silky texture of his fur. “Do you know where Kerestyan went?”

He leaned down and nosed the blankets above her crotch then straightened and stared at her, tongue hanging out of his large mouth.

She grinned. “No. I’m sure if Kerestyan was there I’d know.” She laughed out loud, remembering exactly what she and Kerestyan had done the night before. “In fact, I’m positive.”

She looked up when she heard Trinity’s loud laugh and the torches at the other end of the room lit themselves. “Kerestyan had to go back home and deal with some unruly children.”

“Is everything all right?”

Trinity nodded as she stepped through the one doorway that’d been there last night, a big smile across her face. “Yeah, he just has to do his job.”

She motioned behind her. "I put some shampoo and soaps in there more befitting a female." She inclined her head towards the large armoire as she approached the end of the bed and leaned against the left post. "I also brought you some jeans and shirts to fit your new, shapely body." She blew a raspberry at the wolf. "And I see you've been properly introduced to the illustrious Mr. Syn."

Logan scrunched up her nose when the wolf licked a slobbery trail up her cheek. At least she'd been correct when she'd designated the wolf's gender as male. "Yeah, I thought he was the one telling me to wake up at first."

"Give him a few hundred more years and he might just be able to." She pointed at Logan's lap. "By the way, he was trying to tell you Kerestyan went home."

Logan looked down at the blankets covering her lower half and chuckled as understanding struck. "I get it, like home base. Very smart, kind of crude, but smart none the less."

Trinity plopped down on the edge of the bed. "Syn spends a lot of time with Odin, so you can probably imagine all the wonderful things he's been taught."

"Who's the teacher?" Logan laughed. She reached up and rubbed both of Syn's ears, to which he responded by flopping his heavy black body across her lap. "Did you show Odin how to fall off the couch without hurting himself when he tries to lick his balls?" She took the way he wiggled on his back and nipped playfully at her hands as the canine version of yes.

Trinity tautly slapped his large chest, filling the room with a chorus of hollow thuds and happy panting. "Wow, he really likes you. I haven't seen him like this for a long time." She caught his snout between her hands and kissed his nose. "What is it, Syn? Why do you like Logan so much?"

He rolled out of Logan's lap and rubbed the top of his head all over the pillows next to her. Then, without warning, he lunged at Trinity, who shrieked as she fell off the bed onto the floor with a heavy thud.

Logan couldn't do anything but laugh as he bit down on one of Trinity's boots then shook her leg until he'd pulled it off, sending a silver dagger skittering across the stone floor. Syn, with the dagger firmly between his teeth, jumped back up on the bed next to her and sat back down.

She was still laughing when Trinity picked herself up off the floor, grabbed her boot then reassumed her place on the bed. "Well, that was unexpected." She slid her shoe back on before she pushed at Syn, who gently rested his jaw on top Logan's head.

Trinity wrinkled her nose at him. "Really?"

He responded with a noise somewhere between a growl and a yelp then flopped back into Logan's lap. He nudged his head under her hand and let out what sounded like a sigh.

Logan scratched the beast's humongous head and looked over at Trinity. "What the hell was all that? Were you going to kill me or something?"

She laughed as she retrieved her blade from Syn's mouth and slid it back in her boot. "No. Apparently Kerestyan told him to protect you, and he intends to do that very thing." When Syn barked, Trinity leaned forward and patted his massive paw. "I'm sure you'll do your Master proud."

Logan stared between Syn and Trinity. "He's Kerestyan's?"

She nodded. "Syn is a *Servio*, too. He's, damn," she peered up at the ceiling through narrowed eyes, "he has to be at least nine hundred years old now. Unfortunately, the city of New York has strict laws about wolves as pets, so when K took over he had to leave him here. He's usually with Odin but it would appear he's been given a duty. I hope you didn't want to go anywhere alone."

Logan considered the monstrous lump of fur in her lap. She'd never had a pet before, and she had to admit, even though it was probably only the silky black fur, he did remind her a little of Kerestyan.

She ran her finger over the velvety fuzz just above his nose. "Are you going to follow me everywhere I go?" When he nodded and licked her fingers, she smiled at him. "I bet you get tired of me really fast."

He sat up and stared down at her through steely blue eyes that were unbelievably expressive for a dog. He whined a sad note then licked her chest just above her left breast before resting his head on her shoulder.

Without her even asking the question, Trinity answered. "He says you're in Kerestyan's heart, so you're in his, too."

Logan wasn't sure how to respond to that. With the realization she'd made last night in regards to her feelings for Kerestyan, she felt like she should be able to smile and accept the words for what they were...but she couldn't.

At least, not yet anyway.

She wound her fingers back into Syn's soft fur and focused her attention on Trinity. "So what's the plan? Do I get to go wander around the castle now?"

Trinity shook her head, her ponytail swinging wildly with the movement. "Nope. I talked to Dad earlier and we're going to skip the wandering part and go right into training. I figure you'd probably like to get back to New York as soon as possible, so I'll tour you around the castle during the parts where it's a lot of me talking and you listening. That sound good to you?"

Logan nodded. Getting her feet back on familiar ground sounded more than good to her. Not to mention who that ground lead back to. "Works for me."

"Good." Trinity reached out and shook Syn's tail. "Mr. Syn, would you be so kind as to go tell Alfred that Logan and I will take our breakfast in the courtyard, please?"

He jumped up and looked between Trinity and the door, and then snapped his jaws together a few times.

"Yes," she sighed. "You can eat with us, too. We'll meet you out there."

Syn jumped off the bed and bolted towards the wall across the room, but just before he would have clobbered himself against the stones a doorway appeared.

Logan cocked her head and stared at Trinity. "The wolf can make his own doors, too?"

"Yes, he can. And look," she motioned to the opening, "he even left it there for you."

"That's all well and good, but what happens if I'm in here alone and I want to get something to eat?"

"First off, the chances of Syn not being at your side are slim to none. He's about as loyal to Kerestyan as Odin is." She stood up and walked over to the armoire. "Second, if for some reason he isn't with you, a door will appear. Consider the castle a living extension of my Dad, it knows what you want and need as much as he does." She tossed a pair of jeans and a dark green t-shirt on the bed, followed by a bra, underwear, socks and a white pair of tennis shoes. "And if for some reason a door doesn't appear, then you don't really need whatever it is you think you do."

Logan eyed the clothes. "I take it you want me to get dressed?"

Trinity folded her arms over her ample chest, which was propped up by a light blue corset, and then shot her a playful glare. "Not yet. I want you to get your naked ass out of bed and come over here so I can turn you into a *Servio*. Then you can get dressed and we'll go eat the best pancakes and sausage you've ever tasted."

Logan arched a brow. "You realize that isn't hard to accomplish, right? Unless, of course, they're made of New York trash, because then they won't taste any different than the pancakes I usually eat."

"Even if Alfred did make them out of garbage, they'd be the best damn garbage cakes you've ever tasted. Now, are you going to keep stalling, or can we do this so at least one of us can eat the greatest pancakes the world has ever known?"

Busted. Logan flipped back the covers and stood up. "Can I have one last meal first?"

Trinity's mouth dropped open, her face a study in disgusted jealousy. "What the hell did Kerestyan do to you last night?" She gasped rather loud. "Oh my God! Are those his fingerprints?"

Logan cast a glance down her body and grinned, even as heat flared in her cheeks. On both flats of her hips there were four distinct bruises in the shape of a semi circle. And she was willing to bet, though she couldn't see them for herself, there were two more just above her ass.

But, oh, how she'd enjoyed earning every single one of them.

"Did he bite you?" Trinity asked, sounding a tinge appalled.

Logan looked up, grin still firmly in place. "He taught me a lesson about the cravings of the beast. And yes...there was definitely some biting."

Trinity clucked her tongue in rapid fire bursts. "Well," she said with a sigh, "at least you know how it feels to be a Neck."

Logan frowned at her. She didn't like the sound of that at all. "What the hell is a Neck?"

"A slang term for a human a vampire feeds from." Her red lips parted in a wry grin. "I bet you understand why most don't fight now."

She laughed at that. She'd gladly be Kerestyan's Neck anytime he asked, as long as he kept the poetry to an absolute minimum. "Yeah, you could say that. It makes all kinds of sense now."

"Alright, enough with the girl talk." She curled her index finger at Logan, wielding the age old gesture like a professional. "It's time you become mine." A flash of concentration lit her face before her fangs elongated.

A small ripple of nausea rolled through Logan's stomach as Trinity bit her twist, and with another focused look, blood welled up in the puncture wounds. If this were the movies, she'd kick her head back now and let out a really bad laugh.

Luckily, although Logan thought she was more than capable, Trinity spared her the dramatics.

It's now or never. Logan drew in a deep breath and slowly moved towards the Dominatrix, who would soon become her Master.

"Come on, Logan," she whined like a five year old. "I'll be as old as Kerestyan by the time you get over here. I'll tell you what, just close your eyes and open your mouth, okay?"

Logan did exactly that. She closed her eyes, opened her mouth and stood there waiting. Yes, she was being difficult. Yes, she was being a chicken. She'd even agree that after living on the street for as long as she had, blood was not the worst tasting fluid in the world.

However, even for as detached as she knew she was...the concept of drinking someone else's blood was still foreign and disgusting. She remembered health class. Diseases lived in the blood. She knew Trinity couldn't

have any viruses due to the whole healing factor Vouclade said she'd have herself, but still...

She squeezed her eyes tighter as Trinity's warm wrist touched her lips. The hot fluid filled her mouth in a gush, sliding down her throat with the same cold burn of alcohol. But the taste...the sweet taste wasn't anything like what came from the bottle. There was only a slight metallic tang, a small coppery hue.

Trinity's quiet voice, chanting in a language Logan didn't understand, echoed in her mind as a feverish sensation coursed through her veins. She felt a surge of power, as if the introduction of Trinity's blood into her system unlocked some long lost magic that'd always been inside her. But at the same time, something dark and heavy curled deep into the pit of her stomach and made itself at home.

She opened her eyes when she felt Trinity's wrist leave her lips. Part of her was glad the experience was over, but another part, a strange and angry part, wanted to grab Trinity's bloody wrist and keep drinking.

Trinity licked her wrist, an action that shoved an unexpected spear of envy straight through Logan's gut. "Give it a minute. Take a few deep breaths and let everything, for lack of a better word, marinate."

Logan followed her advice and drew in a series of deep breaths then slowly blew them out. After a few minutes, the room took on a brighter tone, filled with new and vibrant colors she'd never noticed before. Her body felt strong and agile. Her mind, sharp and focused.

"Feels pretty good, doesn't it?" Trinity asked.

She nodded but stared hard at Trinity. Odin had said something about a monster in his stomach. Did she have one now, too? "What the hell is in my stomach?"

Trinity smiled. "That's a discussion for a different day." She pointed at the bed. "Get dressed. Then we'll go have breakfast and talk about the physical limitations of being a *Servio*."

Logan quickly dressed then turned around and nodded at Trinity. "I'm ready."

She blinked and shook her head. "That was unnaturally fast."

Logan brushed off the sleeve of her t-shirt and laughed. "I used to hide and wait for guests to check-out of motel rooms so I could sneak in and take a shower before the maids came around. I learned to dress and undress pretty fast."

"Impressive. Come with me."

She obliged Trinity's request and followed through the doorway Syn had made. After winding through a few hallways filled with paintings and tape-

stries, Trinity pushed open a set of plain wooden doors and held them open until Logan passed.

Stepping out into the warm night air had never been such a welcomed feeling for Logan. The whisper of leaves rustling in the wind filled her ears, while the same floral scents from before filled her nostrils.

She smiled as Trinity walked her over to a table set with plates and silverware. She could only imagine this was what the world looked like thousands of years ago and completely understood why Kerestyan admitted he missed it at times.

If she was him, she would, too.

She moved to take the seat across from Trinity. "So is it always night time here?"

Trinity unfolded a white linen napkin and dropped it in her lap. "Always. Outside of the castle walls the sun is rising right now. Dad doesn't like the big ball of fire in the sky so he blocks it out. He's never been a fan of not being able to walk through his home at any given moment just because a star doesn't like him."

"I don't blame him."

She cracked a grin. "A man's home is his castle." She relaxed back in her chair as her features sobered a bit. "So here's how it goes. The blood I feed you is what sustains your 'life' and power as a *Servio*. As soon as my blood passes your lips, it bonds to yours, since you obviously can't have more blood in your system than your body can hold. Right now, all of your blood is charged from the power of mine. But every time you call on your blood to perform feats of magic, be it running fast or picking up a car, some of my power dissolves."

Trinity picked up the glass sitting in front of her plate. "Because you seem to be a fan of comparisons, think of your body right now as a full glass of purified water. Now, let's say you decide to get up, walk into my Dad's throne room and punch him in the eye. Naturally, you're going to call on the power of your blood for speed so you can run away, right?"

Logan shook her head. Had Trinity lost her mind? "Hell no. First, I'm going to pull my fist out of the man's eye socket and apologize. Then I'm going to smack myself as hard as I possibly can, and ask myself what the hell I was thinking."

Trinity's loud laugh echoed all around them. "Okay. But the point is, you call on your blood for speed, and even though the glass remains full the purity drops." She set the glass down. "If you ever get to a point where you've used up all the power in your blood, you'll grow fangs and only have twelve hours to feed from me, or a vampire older than me, or you die."

Logan took a deep breath. Well that was a damn good thing to know. "Do I get a warning or something when I'm running low?"

"No. It's something I'll be teaching you how to recognize over the next few weeks. The only real warning you get is when your fangs grow. Now, depending on how strong the bond is between us, if you pop fangs I might be able to feel it. Then, of course, I'll come get you and feed you. Try not to worry about running out of power though, because it rarely happens unless you get severely injured or just aren't paying attention."

"Well, I don't have any intention of stepping out in front of a Greyhound or playing Hot Potato with grenades, so I think I'm safe."

"You will be." She snickered. "I mean you'll be safe, not playing with grenades. But that leads right into the next topic. Healing. If you sustain a fatal wound or internal injuries, even if you're unconscious, your body will automatically begin to heal them. If for some reason you catch a disease, the same happens. I'll be teaching you how to heal other injuries during the course of your training." She folded her hands in her lap. "And, that's it. In regards to your physical condition anyway."

Logan nodded. So far, it all sounded relatively fairly straight forward. "So then, what's next?"

Trinity shrugged. "We'll eat breakfast, then probably wander around the castle and talk about what vampires do all night. I'll teach you about politics, how to play the favor game, how to survive in general, and how to keep yourself ahead of the competition. To be honest, the last part should be pretty easy for you considering your former lifestyle."

Logan couldn't disagree with that. Part of successfully living on the street was keeping track of which restaurants dumped their trash when, because a well informed veteran could pick a Dumpster clean in less than a minute. Knowing which buildings were vacant but still had utilities, how often the police or gangs patrolled a neighborhood, and who called an alley their turf meant the difference between life and death.

And something deep inside told her, although the Veil raised the stakes a little higher, life as a vampire or *Servio* wasn't much of a departure from the life she already knew.

Logan pushed her thoughts aside and returned her attention to Trinity. "What comes after the politics?"

She laughed. "There's really no formula, Logan. One subject just kinda leads into the next, and the next, and the next...until we cover everything. Don't worry, in two weeks time you'll be fully trained and back in New York." She wrinkled her nose. "And I'm sure, much to your very feigned dismay, some hot guy named Kerestyan will be there waiting for you."

Chapter 17

*New York City
Manhattan, Upper East Side*

"I miss the days when your kind lived openly. You were so much easier to hunt and kill back then."

Kerestyan chuckled as Raze, his hand chosen Head of Enforcement, stretched her long, denim clad legs across the glass coffee table situated between them. "I've only been absent a few days. Is the situation really that bad?"

She nodded, sprigs of vibrantly colored hair jutting from her high ponytail in all directions. "Your new Fledglings are reckless, Kerestyan. They push so close to the bounds of the Veil it's only a matter of time before one of them screws up, big time." Her pale pink lips curled into a scowl as golden flecks shimmered in the air around her. "And they're so God damned mouthy. They have no respect for my position as your Lead Enforcer, and I'm willing to bet the entirety of the salary you pay me that the brainless twits don't even know *what* I am. Sometimes it takes everything I have not to slaughter them where they stand."

He shifted in the overstuffed chair as the animal inside him shrank back ever so slightly. Now he knew why Raze had invaded his mind shortly before sunrise, requesting a meeting as soon as possible.

Her aura only sparkled like the sun when she was angry, and she only took her God's name in vain when she wanted to rend a supernatural creature limb from limb. Some unlucky vampire must've dug themselves firmly under her skin in his short absence.

Truthfully, Kerestyan was just glad it wasn't him.

Although she'd be a more than apt opponent when it came to crossing steel, she lacked the age and experience to keep up with a vampire as old as him. He eyed the sheathed Creator Blade lying on the cushion next to her. Of course, there was the tricky matter of not being able to heal any wounds made by her weapon.

He watched her closely as she turned a bright pink coffee mug in her sun kissed hands then blew away the steam rising from the dark liquid. As a Paladin, and an old one at that, she'd been born with the holy fire to defend humanity from vampires and werewolves. However, walking in the light and

blessings of her God had also bestowed upon her immortality, without restriction. No matter how much damage she incurred, she wouldn't die until the day He saw fit to allow her that peace.

Kerestyan cringed internally. At least if a day ever came when he couldn't bear to watch the world any longer, he could walk into the sunrise and be done with it. But to not have any say in her future, to not have a choice...he couldn't imagine how trapped she must feel.

Is that how Logan feels? He stiffened at the thought. He truly hoped Logan didn't feel trapped by him. He'd attempted to give her every choice possible in terms of her future.

Well, except for last night. He smiled to himself. The only reason he'd given her no choice then, was because she'd left him with none. The woman drove him absolutely insane. If she wasn't yelling at him, she was screaming under him. And if she wasn't staring at him through haunted, distant green eyes, she was setting him ablaze with heated emerald glances and playful smiles.

Whether he was allowed to voice it or not, Logan was amazing.

The insistent clicking of Raze's shiny black fingernails against the ceramic mug pulled Kerestyan's attention back to the present. He cleared his throat and offered an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry. My mind drifted off." He motioned around her. "What happened to upset you?"

She arched a pierced brow. "You mean, who pissed me off?"

He nodded. "That, too."

"Last night I caught Craig Anderson wearing his fangs openly again at *Fetish*. He's worn them so often, humans have begun asking questions when he doesn't."

Kerestyan rolled his eyes. With his execution of the three Fledglings who'd trapped Logan in her alley, Craig had, no doubt, ascended to leader of the wayward group. "Is he feeding openly as well?"

"Is he chewing Necks in the middle of the stage? Not quite. But he's pushing the shadowed corners exception a little too hard for my tastes."

He ground his teeth together. While he didn't blame Raze for doing her job, and certainly understood her frustration, the idea he'd left Logan to talk about a low born whelp sent the animal stalking in his gut. "Then either kill him or drag him to Court for judgment."

Raze tipped her head to the side and pinned him with her unnaturally violet eyes. "Did you just snap at me and give me rights to kill one of your vampires?" She kicked her feet down and leaned forward to set her mug on the table. "What's up with you lately? You old school execute Tom, Dick and Harry. You don't answer your phone for two days. You leave the city without telling me. Then you force me to break through Lord Evil's barrier to contact

you mentally, both of which you know I despise with a passion. I want some answers."

He groaned. "Those weren't their names. And please, Raze, much as I've asked you a dozen times before, don't refer to my Father as Lord Evil. I understand you don't care for each other but your feud has nothing to do with me."

"They're dead now." She flashed a bright but sinister smile. "And by they, I mean the three troublemakers and your moldy Sire, who probably hasn't breathed for any reason other than to ruin someone's life in more years than I care to count." She inhaled a deep breath, which he was sure she needed after her diatribe. "But I digress. I don't care what their names are, were, will never be again. I want to know what's going on with *you*."

"Tom, Dick and Harry, as you so lovingly referred to them, died because they were fighting in a Brooklyn alley, in plain sight of a human woman. Then, when she asked them to stop so she could pass, instead of calling you for sanitation assistance, they were so caught up in the beast's fury they asked if she was a Puppet."

Raze threw her head back and let out a husky laugh. "See what I mean? They're so stupid." The amusement quickly faded from her graceful features. "Why did you take her to *him*," she sneered.

He shook his head. "I'll assume by the tone of your derision, you mean my Father. I took her to him because she'd been exposed to vampires for an extended period of time. Her memories were too vivid and numerous to erase or rearrange."

"Why didn't you just kill her?"

"You would have me kill an Innocent?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Don't play that card on me, Leech. You know damn well that's not what I'd have you do, but I also understand sometimes it's necessary. If the whole of humanity were to learn supernaturals exist, it would only make protecting them that much more difficult."

Kerestyan snapped his mouth closed. What was it with the women in his life spouting off all manner of offensive comments as of late? "I can't believe you just called me a Leech. If it means that much to you, I apologize I didn't call to let you know I'd be out of contact for a few days, but time was of the essence."

Her face softened. "I'm sorry. I'm just feeling out of sorts over this whole Craig thing." She frowned. "Wait. What do you mean time was of the essence?"

He drew in then exhaled a deep breath. "Logan, the woman in question, was placed under time constraints by my Father. I needed to assist her through the withdrawal process before I could take her to him, which is why

I wasn't answering my phone. Honestly, I left it in my bed chamber without a second thought."

She stood and held a flattened hand below her right ear. "Logan? Are you talking about the dark haired heroine junkie who's about this tall? The one with the cold green eyes that just scream she's seen too much?"

Kerestyan leaned forward. "That would be a fitting description. How do you know her?"

Raze lowered her hand, hesitation flickering behind her lavender eyes. "I've run into her a couple times in Brooklyn. She's been on the streets for a long time. Did Stefan turn her?"

He wasn't sure what concerned him more. The fact that Raze seemed to know Logan; or that she actually called his Father by his given name. "No, he didn't. Logan's been remanded to Trinity, as her *Servio*. Why do you ask?"

"Why are you so interested?" Her usually whisky voice rose an octave.

Kerestyan stood up and stepped over the coffee table. "I happen to care a great deal for Logan, that's why I'm so interested." Without thinking, he let his eyes burn into hers, but gnashed his teeth when the golden Paladin haze glittered around her, blocking him from accessing her mind. "What do you know, Raze?"

Her eyes flicked to the blade resting at the end of the couch before she met his stare again. "What do I know? I know I'm not getting involved in anything with your Father's bloody signature all over it. That's what I know." She jammed a claw into the middle of his chest. "And don't you ever do that shit to me again. I'll forgive you this time because I can see that blasphemous beast stalking behind your eyes. But don't you ever try to read me with your cursed magics again."

He watched, rage simmering in his blood as Raze dropped down on the couch. If it wasn't for the fact she liked to blame everything bad happening in the world on his Father, he'd put more stock in her words. However, their hatred for each other had bloomed thousands of years ago when his Father still called Naples, Italy home, and had only grown through the ages.

Kerestyan returned to his chair and sat down. Whether she despised his Father or not, he knew he owed her an apology for his thoughtless action. "I apologize for attempting to read your mind, especially in your own home. It goes against everything I was taught, and I truly am sorry."

She set the blade across her lap and picked at the frayed golden strands braided around the sheath. "I accept your apology. No harm, no foul." She chewed at her bottom lip for a moment before offering him a faint smile. "I like you, Kerestyan, you know I do. You and Odin are the only Nelek's I'd ever consider working with. But I told you when you asked me to be your En-

forcer that I wouldn't get involved in anything my gut told me was part of a Nelek game. I'm sorry, but that's exactly how this feels."

He tipped his head to one side then the other, stretching out the tight muscles in his neck. Part of the reason he'd chosen Raze as his Lead Enforcer was because of her gut feelings. The Paladin's propensity to be correct was uncanny.

He stared into her eyes, hoping she would answer his question. "Can you at least share why you feel that way?"

"I could...but I won't. If I do, that puts me right in the mix and I'm just not gonna go there. If I were you, I'd go back to the Castle of Doom and talk to your Daddy."

If it were only that simple. He slowly shook his head. "I was only allowed to stay with Logan until sunrise, which given the time difference between New York and Chicago, was about fifteen minutes ago. I can't return to the castle until her training is complete." The corner of his mouth rose of its own accord. "I've been banned."

Raze giggled a purely feminine sound and burst into a wide smile. "You must really like her if you're not allowed to be around her. How long do you think her training will be? Is she coming back to New York when it's over?"

He nodded. He wouldn't stand for anything less. "Yes, she'll be returning. Trinity asked my permission to station Logan here and I granted the request. As for how long her training will last, Trinity, even for all her idiosyncrasies, is still rather thorough. I expect to see Logan in two weeks, maybe three."

"I have to say, Kerestyan, I'm a little surprised."

He arched a brow. "Why?"

She shrugged a bronzed shoulder then adjusted the strap of her white tank top. "I always pegged you as a lover of the curvy, voluptuous blond types. You know, the sexy chick with intense blue eyes and an ass to die for. Logan doesn't even come close to fitting that bill. I would think she's more Odin's style."

Kerestyan couldn't help but laugh, loudly. If Raze had the pleasure of watching Logan and his brother in childish action, he was sure she'd change her mind. "Logan and Odin don't get along, at all. I'm certain they'd rather strangle each other than have a friendly conversation."

She scrunched up her nose. "Really? I figured trying to crack her cold, icy demeanor would be right up his alley." She sighed. "Oh, well. So much for my holy powers of precognition," she smacked a hand against the couch, "which brings me back to the original reason I wanted to talk to you. What would you like me to do about Craig and his gang? As much as I hate to admit, they haven't breached the Veil, yet. So by your own law, I don't have any right to kill them, yet."

"Am I to infer you're simply biding your time until you have ample reason to slay them?"

Her face sobered. "No, no, Lord Kerestyan. Of course not." She leaned forward and grinned as she motioned between them. "But between me and that sliver of you that isn't the Lord of New York, I can't wait to rip their heads off."

"Do they irritate you that much?"

She relaxed and stared off at something behind him, her eyes clouded with a weariness he knew all too well. "Some of your Fledglings have a lot of potential. I won't ever deny that. They treat everyone around them, even the humans, with respect and dignity. But this new gang," she shook her head, "I've been watching them on and off for the last couple months and they're just abusive. They gorge themselves on blood and have damn near killed a vessel on a couple occasions. They lord their powers over the humans, messing with their minds to make them perform stupid, demeaning tricks. They make me sick."

Kerestyan inhaled a calming breath. He didn't approve of the way some Fledglings treated the humans of New York City, but at the end of the day, he had no choice but to remind himself the modern world was a completely different place than it was when he was turned. Honor and integrity were prized in his day. Even in death, valor and virtue were paramount.

Now, it seemed the opposite was considered and accepted as normal.

As much as he wanted to agree with Raze, he couldn't in good conscience. His species, by its very existence was innately abusive to humans. And in a time when even humans fought and killed each other for no more than a pair of running shoes, he couldn't forbid his Fledglings from engaging in any activity, degrading to humans or not, unless it threatened the Veil.

He caught Raze's wandering eyes. Unfortunately, her honesty only brought another problem to the already difficult situation. "If you witness Craig or one of his followers kill a vessel during feeding, in a situation which doesn't rend the Veil, will you be able to stay your hand?"

She held his probing gaze. "I don't know, Kerestyan. I honestly don't know. If it were anyone but them, I know in my heart I could. To be as dramatic as possible, I feel the urge to rain down righteous fire damn near every time I see them. But, thus far, I've refrained. I promised you I'd only cull those who upset the balance or were hideously violent. And, as much as I hate to admit, these ten vampires are punks, who couldn't upset the balance of the eight million humans in your city if they tried."

"Then I think you should keep your distance for a time. Have your team keep an eye on Craig and his pack. If they commit any action that breaches the Veil, contact me immediately." He stood up and rolled his shoulders. "I

hold court in nine days. I'll address the treatment of the humans and my displeasure at learning there are those among my residents who've been abusive in their dealings. If all goes well, Craig will make a fool of himself during the meeting and in return find his brethren rather unsympathetic to his cause. Perhaps when those Fledglings who do hold power in the city turn their backs on him and his group, they'll end up with no where safe to sleep and seek their fortune elsewhere."

Raze chuckled and flashed an evil smile. "You're such an iron fisted tyrant. How do you live with yourself?"

Kerestyan laughed. There was only room for one tyrant in his family. "I'll agree to strict and sometimes unyielding, but I'm no tyrant. I have one rule, and if the Fledglings can't abide by something as simple as the Veil, their life is forfeit. I refuse to allow my very existence to be put in jeopardy because an ill begotten child can't clean up after themselves."

She patted the blade still resting across her thighs. "I'm with you. I just don't discriminate based on age. I'm equal opportunity."

He smiled down at her. "If you need me, I'll be at my home or the Estate. I'll also make sure I have my phone with me since I know how much you adore speaking via telepathy."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, yeah. It makes me wet just thinking about it." She smiled then blew him a kiss. "By the way, I hope everything works out for you and Logan. Leech or not, you do a damn fine job of keeping this city running smooth. You deserve to go home to someone who makes you happy."

"Thank you, Raze."

When she waved, Kerestyan returned the gesture then closed his eyes. He concentrated on his penthouse, but as the cold winds began to swirl, he found himself wondering if maybe there wasn't a shred of truth to Raze's paranoid words. What if his Father did know more about Logan's situation than he let on?

What if she was just another piece on the immortal chessboard?

Chapter 18

Day 4 of Servio Training
Nelek Castle

Logan shrieked like a five year old who'd angered a swarm of killer bees as Trinity chased her across the polished wood floor of the training room. She didn't care if she sounded like a schoolyard sissy. The bitch had been trying to punch her for the last five minutes, and under no circumstances did she think becoming one with Superwhore's fist was pertinent to her survival as a *Servio*.

"Logan!" Trinity's exasperated voice echoed through the expansive room, bouncing off the plain white walls. "Stop running. You need to learn how to fight. You can't live in New York City without knowing how to defend yourself."

Logan glanced up at the wall of mirrors across from her, only to see Trinity gaining on her. "Bullshit! I've lived there all my life and I never got attacked. Not even by another homeless person. This is crap. I didn't sign on for getting my ass kicked."

"Fine. I promise I won't punch you. Just stop running."

She slowed when Trinity's reflection stopped pursuing her, but turned around and kept moving backwards. "Something tells me not to trust you."

Trinity rolled her black eyes. "If I really wanted to catch you, I'd call on my blood for speed and mow your ass down. You're four days old. Do you really think you can get the drop on me?" She didn't leave time for an answer. "Besides, there's a very important reason why I need to hit you."

Logan huffed out a breath and picked up the pace. "Didn't you just promise you weren't going to hit me?"

She flashed a wicked smile. "Oh, I'll keep my promise. I promise."

Before Logan could even reconcile the flash of black leather and tanned skin, pain exploded in her stomach and she found herself with a perfectly unblemished view of the ceiling. She squeezed her eyes closed and rolled onto her side, clutching her white cotton t-shirt to her abdomen.

It was a damn good thing she hadn't eaten dinner.

"I promised I wouldn't punch you," Trinity laughed somewhere close by. "I never said I wouldn't kick you."

"You're a bitch," Logan groaned. She should have known to listen to Trinity's exact words. They'd spent the last three days discussing vampire society and politics, and how the words a vampire or *Servio* chose could mean the difference between great success on an endeavor and abysmal failure.

She'd had no idea vampires were such ruthless, selfish, backstabbing bastards. The meanest, most corrupt CEO in the world didn't have shit on a well trained vampire. And the sharpest lawyer in New York couldn't find as many loopholes in a set of rules as one motivated member of the undead race. The sheer amount of power a single vampire could wield over an entire city was startling.

If anything, she'd fallen asleep last night rather content in her choice to give up drugs and learn about what really went on around her all those nights she'd spent on the street.

Logan grimaced as another wave of nausea washed over her. Of course, right now she didn't really appreciate the knowledge.

She sat up and opened her eyes for no reason other than to glare at Trinity. "What the hell did you kick me for?"

Trinity frowned. "Because we're at the point where I need to teach you about the beast, and usually the best way to get the little monster riled is through inflicting pain. But it doesn't seem to work on you."

"Nope," Logan coughed. "It just hurts and makes me want to puke."

Trinity extended a manicured hand. "Come on, get up you sissy."

Logan knocked her hand away and crawled to her feet on her own. "If you'd asked before you decided to obliterate my spleen, I'd have told you Odin and Kerestyan already explained a little bit about the beast to me."

She chuckled. "Well, if anyone would know, it'd be them. What all did they say?"

Logan rubbed a hand over her upset stomach. "Odin said it's the predatory side of a vampire that craves blood, power, and loves watching humans do things they shouldn't. Kerestyan said the beast is pure instinct and only knows emotion."

Trinity nodded. "That pretty much sums it up. It's different for every vampire, and even more so for *Servios*. Your beast will never be as pronounced as mine, but it lives in the blood, and since you have vampiric blood in your body you get to have one, too."

"You make it sound like it's a present."

She laughed. "The beast isn't bad." She tipped her head from side to side. "Well, it's not all bad. If a vampire gets too much stimulation, be it from extreme emotions or injury, or sometimes even blood, the beast takes over and they attack and try to eat everyone around them. The younger a vampire is,

the harder it is for them to control the beast, but the older a vampire is the more destruction they can cause.

"*Servios* are the same, it just takes a lot more provocation to get their monster riled. Oh, and anytime you hear a supernatural say monster, animal, predator, goblin, or pretty much any word like that, they're referring to the beast."

Logan smiled as the image of a little green goblin flashed in her mind. She could almost see it ripping out of her chest like some kind of alien and chasing people down the street with a Spork. "I think I'll call it the goblin." When Trinity frowned, Logan rolled her eyes. She'd seen that particular look a lot over the last three days, too. "I know, I know." She raised her hands in mock surrender. "This is another serious piece of information and I need to treat it that way. I got it."

"Good. I know your detached ass finds some of this funny, and it's okay, as long as you understand this life isn't always fun and games. I know Odin and I make it seem that way, but we've adapted really well to the modern world. Not all vampires and *Servios* have." She motioned around them. "Some of us get stuck in a time period we really liked and refuse to let go. I love my Dad, I really do, but he's a prime example of someone who won't take well to your humor about parts of our condition that have literally toppled entire empires."

Logan stared at her. She couldn't be serious. "Toppled empires?"

She nodded rather sharply. "Ancient history, and not the kind you read about in a schoolbook some human wrote, but the kind I was there to see with my own eyes...is chock full of disasters caused by a vampire who lost themselves to the beast. Rome fell at the hands of an Ancient Warrior, which is the old term for a Thug, who went to sleep for two hundred years then woke up and got so pissed about how the city had changed in his absence, he flipped his lid and destroyed it. You don't even wanna know how many humans died under his fangs."

Logan lowered her eyes and studied where the black fabric of her running pants covered the top of her tennis shoe. For the first time since her training had begun, she felt kind of small and a little stupid. "Sorry."

"Don't feel bad. I just want to make sure you understand, much like your life on the street, immortality isn't all roses. I've practically stuffed you full of information over the last few days, and you've done a really good job absorbing it all, even when you're laughing so hard water shoots out your nose."

Logan shook her head and smiled. "It wasn't my fault you decided to use the phrase 'testosterone driven penile fever' to explain why Kerestyan's body is cold one minute and hot the next. If you'd just said some of his hu-

man body functions kick back in when he's aroused, the water would've never gotten into a position where it could shoot out my nostrils."

"Hey, you asked," Trinity laughed. "I just wanted to make sure you had a clear understanding of what was going on. Like I said, any vampire worth their salt can will their heart to beat and make their body warm back up to 98.6. Doing so uses a lot of the blood's power, but it's a great way to keep the Veil intact. Look at it this way, if you make Kerestyan so hot that the beast does it for him, he can just grab your ass whenever he needs to have a heart-beat and save himself the blood."

Logan turned her back to Trinity when heat flamed in her cheeks. While she wasn't at all ashamed of anything she'd done with Kerestyan, being teased about their exploits was still new for her. Hell, having someone to do those kinds of dirty things with, let alone someone around her long enough to tease her about them, was strange in its own right.

"Oh my God! Are you blushing? I didn't think it was possible!"

"Shut up, Trinity."

"Come on, Logan. Don't close up on me," her voice was more serious now. "There's nothing wrong with missing Kerestyan. I know it's foreign to you, but that doesn't mean it's bad. If we're lucky, it happens to the best of us."

Logan slowly turned around. "I don't like it. It feels wrong, like it's not me." She folded her arms over her chest as an odd sensation tingled through her. "I feel like there's some other person inside me, and I don't know who she is or what the hell she wants from me. I can't figure it out."

"Stop trying." Trinity offered a reassuring smile. "You're immortal now. You have all the time in the world to learn about who you really are. Nine times out of ten, over the next few months, you're gonna learn a lot of things about yourself you didn't know before. Believe it or not, that's one of the good sides of the beast." She tapped her stomach with a flattened hand. "Your goblin will let you know what's good for you. You just have to decide if you listen."

The clatter of heavy footsteps and rhythmic clicking filled the air as Logan opened her mouth to respond. She snapped it shut and watched as Syn burst through the doorway leading back to the main hall with Odin hot on his heels.

"Syn! Get your ass back here!"

She nearly fell over as the wolf skidded to halt next to her then pushed between her legs as if he were a horse. He pinned his ears back as Odin approached, displaying every sharp tooth he owned as a menacing growl vibrated against her legs.

She glared at Odin. "What did you do to him?"

Odin looked absolutely appalled. "I didn't do shit. I was trying to keep him out of the training room since I knew Trin was doing some combat with you, but the bastard won't listen." He pointed down at Syn. "I'm telling Kerestyan you're being difficult. And I swear to Christ, the next time you boost a bone from Dad's chair, I'm gonna let him skin you."

Syn snapped his massive jaws together and growled again.

Logan couldn't help but laugh. Odin could paint the greatest picture with just a few crude words. So vivid and so damn funny, she was sure if he wasn't such an asshole they might actually get along.

Might.

She reached down and scratched Syn's head. "Don't worry, Syn. I won't let the Greek God of War hurt you."

"Norse!" Odin boomed. He stabbed a finger in her direction. "I told you, Greek's are pussies."

"Hey!" Trinity yelled. "I'm Greek."

He smiled at her, but there wasn't a shred of sincerity anywhere to be found. "Sorry. But I'm right and you know it. All those columns everywhere, it's like they were compensating for what wasn't in their pants." He clapped his hands together. "So what are we learning about? Do I need to take the mangy mutt elsewhere?"

Trinity rolled her eyes. "It's not even worth arguing with you." She shook her head in the same manner Logan often did when faced with Odin. "Logan and I were discussing the beast."

Logan finally stopped laughing. "The goblin."

He snapped his fingers and pointed at her in the shape of a gun. "Gotcha. Did you freak out yet?"

"No." She backed away from Syn, who was still between her legs, then moved to stand next to him. "Trinity kicked me in the stomach, but all that did was make me feel sick."

He cast a devilish glance to Trinity. "Want me to give it a shot? I bet I can get her to go."

Logan stared between them. "Do I really need to 'go'?"

"You should know what it feels like when the beast takes over," Trinity advised. "Like I said, it's different for everyone. If you know how the beast affects you and what kind of sensations it causes, then you can try to stave it off. The last thing I want is for you to be on the street in New York when it happens the first time. If you lose control and break the Veil," she paused to whistle, "I don't want to see K put in that kind of situation."

Logan stiffened at her words. She didn't want to see Kerestyan put in that situation any more than she wanted to be in the situation. "Okay," she looked over at Odin, "have at it."

He laced the fingers of both hands together then pushed back on them, filling the quiet air with a series of cracks. "This might just be therapeutic. You ready?"

She drew a deep, fortifying breath. "Not really, but I'll live."

He stared down at Syn. "Go over to Trinity. This is for Logan's betterment and will only help Kerestyan. You stay out of it."

Syn let out a long whine but lumbered over to Trinity, who'd moved to stand about ten feet away, and then plopped down next to her feet.

Logan stood still as Odin began to circle her, like he was some wild bird of prey and she was nothing more than an injured field mouse.

His lips curled into a snarl as he passed in front of her for the third time. "You're a dirty street waif who isn't worth the skin you're printed on. You're selfish. Detached. Disinterested. You've probably walked away or stood by and watched as some innocent person got hurt or abused, and chances are, you didn't feel a damn thing while it was happening."

She arched a brow at this feeble attempt. "You might want to try harder. Being called names doesn't bother me, and considering how long I lived on the street, your last dig is a given."

The malicious smile that spread across his lips was unsettling at best. "I'm just getting warmed up." He walked around her again, and then stopped to stare into her eyes. "My brother, the only man I would go to war for and protect with every cell in my undead body, the man who's given you more choices than he was *ever* given, deserves better than *you*. He deserves someone who knows what honor is, someone who understands what it means to believe in something with all their heart." Disgust set into his familiar features. "You don't have a heart."

Logan steadied herself as an odd shifting sensation spread behind her belly button. She clenched her jaw tight and stared right back into his blacked out eyes. His words stung like a thousand dirty needles, but she refused to let it show. She should've known this was the tactic he'd use, but under no circumstances would she give him that victory.

"You don't know what love is," he spat at her. "You can't even recognize the purest of all emotions. Kerestyan looks at you as though you're the most precious treasure in this world. And you," he paused to look her over, "you stare at him through your cold, dead eyes, as if he's just another drug to you."

She forced the words through her teeth, "Kerestyan is not my drug."

He sneered. "Yes he is. You use him for what he can make you feel, and then you discard him as though he's nothing more than a used syringe."

Logan winced as fire erupted in her blood. Crimson fell over the room like a sheer curtain. Shadows danced like obsidian flames around Odin, taunting, beckoning her to strike out.

Reaching out with both arms, she shoved him back. "I would never discard him. You don't know how I feel about him." As the sound of his laughter reached her ears, the dark essence building inside her grew larger, filling her chest. "You don't know me!"

"I know you lie there like an icy statue in his arms, and he feels it. Kerestyan feels your indifference and it tears him apart every single time. Does knowing you fill him with pain make you happy? Do you get some kind of sick pleasure out of knowing you can bring an Ancient to his knees? If one of his enemies comes knocking on your door, will you lure him into your arms so they can hold the blade to his throat? Or will you do it yourself? How long will it be before Kerestyan dies because of you?"

She squeezed her eyes closed. "I wouldn't do that to him!" She struggled for a breath, but the air felt too thin, too light to sustain her.

"Your words are nothing but lies from the lips of a woman who can't even be honest with herself. Lies," the hiss of his cold breath stung her cheek. "My brother loves you...and we both know what you do to people who love you."

The moment his last words broke over her, something in Logan changed. She felt the stranger inside her burst to life, felt the odd sensation of someone stepping into her, as if her body, her skin, was nothing more than a coat.

Her mind raced at the same frantic pace as her heart. Memories flashed behind her eyes as though she was staring through the windows of a speeding subway car. Her greatest moments of happiness merged with her darkest nightmares. Whispered voices from her past and present came from all directions, converging into a deafening scream before all but one fell silent.

"Kerestyan, an honorable knight imprisoned inside the very armor which holds and protects him. Odin, a fierce warrior leading droves of men to their death because the rage inside him inspires nothing greater."

"You're no better." Logan heard the words leave her own mouth, but her voice was twisted, filled with a quiet rage. She opened her eyes and stared up at Odin through the scarlet fog. "How many times did you lead your own brother into a battle that could have killed him? How many nights did he lie broken on a bloody battlefield because of you?" She narrowed her eyes on him. "Is it me who doesn't deserve Kerestyan's love, or is it you?"

A glassy haze claimed Odin's black eyes.

In the space of a single heartbeat, the stranger who'd taken control of Logan dissipated, leaving her with only one instruction. *RUN!*

She took off like a gunshot, heading for the doorway to the main hall as an angry, thundering roar shook the floor beneath her. She heard Trinity scream the same warning her mind had given just as she broke past the doors and into the hall.

Fear like she'd never felt before coursed through her body, pushing her legs faster and faster until the stone walls of the hallway were nothing but dark blurs.

Without giving it a second thought, for better or worse, she cut right and pushed through the blackened doors then flew across the black marble. She ran up the stairs, and didn't stop moving until all she could see was the wall of ivory bones that made up the back of Stefan's throne.

She sucked in mouthful after mouthful of cold air, attempting to catch her breath as the muscles in her legs throbbed a spiteful rhythm.

"I assume you now understand what you perceived to be a stranger inside you, is in fact your beast?" Stefan asked. His usually serious voice was filled with no small hint of amusement.

Stupid goblin has a death wish. "Yeah, I got that now."

"You don't have to hide, Logan. In his current state, Odin will not follow you *here*."

She would've argued she wasn't hiding, but considering her crouched position...yeah. She stood up and shook out her legs as pain burned the muscles in her thighs. Stepping around the throne, she smiled as the sound of happy panting touched her ears. She turned her head to find Syn sitting at the bottom of the stairs, his big, pink tongue hanging out the side of his mouth.

"Congratulations," Stefan said as he plucked a large bone from the side of his chair then tossed it down to Syn. "You've successfully completed the third part of your testing."

She arched a brow. Mostly because of what he'd said, but partly because of the way Syn's bushy tail swished back and forth as he chewed on what was probably someone's thigh at one point.

She focused her complete attention back on Stefan's hollows. "I'm being tested?"

He nodded. "There are four parts. Part one was you realizing in order to progress, you had to regress, and in turn release the vice withholding your success. Part two was your acceptance and understanding of why your physical body needed to reflect the new life you've embraced. Part three," the corners of his mouth raised a bit, "was becoming one with your true self, and learning the beast is not a separate entity, but a reflection of baser truths and desires."

Logan sighed. She couldn't argue with anything he'd said, but she wasn't exactly pleased to learn she was jumping through invisible hoops.

At least he told you. That creature doesn't owe you any explanations. She stiffened at hearing the new voice in her mind. No longer twisted and angry, the voice sounded more like hers, but with a slightly sharper edge.

Stefan's faint smile lengthened. "When the beast is calm, always carefully consider the words she chooses to speak. Even when she's enraged, take comfort in knowing she still speaks a version of the truth."

Logan smiled at him. Although Stefan was more than a little scary, especially because of his lack of eyes, there was something about the calm delivery of his words that made it hard not to listen...and something even more compelling about the wisdom behind them.

She considered him for a moment, her smile still in place. "So, what's part four?"

He gave a warm but equally as unsettling chuckle. "Enlightenment."

"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"No. However, I will tell you that your mother was nearly correct. Diamond strands cocoon every being in this world, including a creature such as myself. Yet the question is not, where do the threads lead you? The question is, who do your strings lead back to?"

Logan shivered as a chill slid over her and goose bumps rose through her skin. "Let's not go there. I'm still reeling from learning how duped the humans are. How many unwitting CEO's are in the pockets of vampires, and just how many politicians are backing plays they think are their own, but aren't."

He actually laughed a rather loud and hearty sound. "Perhaps in time you'll be more prepared to discuss such topics." He turned his head away from her a little as his jaw hardened back to that line of unforgiving stone. "No!"

She followed his line of view to the left edge of the expansive platform the throne sat on, just in time to see Syn, who stood next to a black pedestal with a large chessboard sitting atop it, lowering his hiked back leg.

Stefan extended a large, metal covered arm and pointed at the doors. "Go outside."

She tried to stave it off when Syn snorted in their direction then trotted off towards the huge black doors, but she couldn't. "Of all the problems for someone like you to have," she laughed. "Who'd have thought house training would be one of them?"

"It's not funny," his deep grumble reverberated in her chest. "Odin, and that damn wolf, will be the death of me."

It took a good two minutes for Logan to stop laughing. She wiped the tears from her eyes and cast a glance back over to the chessboard. Now that she wasn't distracted by the sight of Syn preparing to defile it, she noted one spot on the board cast a subtle red glow.

She started down the steps, but stopped and turned back towards Stefan. "Can I go look?" When he nodded his permission, she continued down the stairs and made her way to the side of the board.

It wasn't until she stood right next to the pedestal that she realized the pieces were intricately carved to look like different people. Most were fashioned from obsidian glass or ivory, but the two with the scarlet light shimmering around them were unbelievably lifelike in color.

A tall, platinum blond woman wearing a red cat suit stood on a squared base made of ivory, and a shorter woman with dark hair and Spanish features stood in jeans and t-shirt on a circular obsidian base.

Unlike all of the other pieces on the board, the blond and brunette shared the same black marble space.

Logan shifted her gaze back to Stefan. "Why are there two in the same square?"

"They are in play, competing for the space."

She arched a brow at him as the goblin in her belly curled into a warm little ball, and if she wasn't mistaken, let out what felt like a strangely contented purr.

Stefan descended the staircase and in a few powerful strides moved to stand at her side. "Are you familiar with chess?"

She nodded. She'd spent time on sunny days at different parks in New York watching people play on the worn, washed out boards. Some of the homeless were known for being Master chess players, but she wasn't one of them. "I know the basics."

"The rules are very similar to the game of strategy you were familiar with as a human. However," he plucked the Spanish woman from the board and handed her to Logan, "my pawns have far more to lose than a space."

Logan stared down at the piece in her hand. "You play with people?"

"I present supernatural creatures with obstacles," he corrected. "My opponent and I arrange the circumstances, but in the end, the pawns choose their own path. Their decisions and the consequences of their actions determine the amount of time they grace the board." He motioned to the ivory likeness of a man dressed in robes. "Lucien, my gentle yet misguided bretheren, has stood proud on this board for thousands of years."

She swallowed the dry knot forming in her throat. She remembered Vouclade telling her how old vampires manipulated young vampires, but she

couldn't imagine someone who'd been on the board for 'thousands of years' being considered a young vampire.

But then again, Vouclade was twice as old as Kerestyan, and Stefan was probably a lot older than Vouclade.

She stared between the Spanish woman and the other people on the board. "Do they know? I mean, I'm sure they all know about manipulation...but do they know you actually have them on a board, like a real game?"

"Some do. However, she," he removed the Spanish woman resting in Logan's palm and placed her back in the shared space, "does not. She is but a Fledgling, and far too young to know the Nelek name." A proud smile crossed his face. "But I have great faith in her, much as I do in you. She's faced adversity, but where you chose to embrace the darkness inside you, she clings to her humanity, wielding her refusal to accept the beast as a weapon to regain all she's lost."

Logan gave the board a long, hard look before she focused back on him. "Do my strings lead back to you like theirs do?"

"No." He turned and made his way back to his chair, stopping only to retrieve Syn's forgotten bone before he climbed the stairs and sat down. "I stopped manipulating the circumstances of humans long ago. To mimic Odin's very modern and crude manner of speech, it's just not fair." His face hardened again as a chorus of laughter drifted into the stone chamber. With a sharp swipe of his mailed hand, the chessboard and pedestal vanished. "Drake, what brings you to my home this evening?"

Logan wheeled around as the laughter lightened. Trinity, looking a little worse for wear, Odin, whose eyes weren't glassy anymore, and a large, mountain of a man with long dark hair and golden skin, walked across the floor and stopped at the foot of Stefan's stairs.

The man she assumed was Drake flashed a wide grin just as lopsided as Odin's. "I popped in to see if Odin wanted to get a drink with me, but the fucker was all crazy eyed and he punched me. I wanna know what you're gonna do about it?" He clutched a hand to his massive chest. "He's offended me greatly."

Stefan's face softened, rather remarkably. "Thank you for not ending my Child where he stood?"

"I told you," Odin laughed as he smacked the back of Drake's shoulder. "You'll get no reparations from the old man. He's stingy as all hell."

"I'm just glad you showed up, Drake," Trinity said, casting a glance over Odin. "I wasn't sure I could hold him any longer." She shot Stefan a playful glare. "Thanks, Dad. Your favorite almost tore my arm off."

The faint clank of metal against metal sounded as Stefan shrugged. "I was engaged with Logan. We were discussing the beast and Odin's success-

ful failure in regards to provoking hers. However, if nothing else, I believe both of you are now painfully aware of how much you have in common, including your concern for Kerestyan."

When Odin gave Logan the come hither finger, she hesitated. She agreed with Stefan, it was more obvious than ever that Kerestyan meant something to both of them, but she wasn't about to walk right into the arms of the enemy.

"Christ, woman, I just wanted to tell you I'm sorry. The whole point was to get you pissed off so you could meet your beast." He raised an arm and rubbed the back of his neck. "I just didn't expect you'd fire back and get to meet mine."

She offered him a small smile. She could go the rest of her life without meeting his again. "I'm sorry you flipped out. I wasn't trying to make you...it just...happened. It was like all of a sudden I knew exactly what to say."

Odin sighed. "That you did. I just wish I could've gotten you to go."

"She did succumb to her beast," Stefan interjected. "But due to her nature, as she is not a physically combative person, her attack was fueled by her keen perceptions and discerning mental acumen."

Logan smiled and pointed at Odin. "Yeah, what he said."

Another chorus of laughter erupted in the chamber.

"All right," Drake said, looking up at Stefan. "I just stopped by to say hi. It'd be rude to come into your home and not acknowledge your presence." He stepped over to Logan and extended a huge hand, attached to a muscular arm littered with tattoos and jagged scars. "Logan, I'm Drake. I've heard a lot about you. Keep up the good work." He winked one of his bright, sapphire blue eyes. "Keep getting under Odin's skin, the bastard needs it. I'd stay and get to know you a little better, but I need beer." He let go of her hand and turned to face Odin. "You coming or not?"

"Hell yes, I'm coming."

Drake dropped a kiss on Trinity's cheek, saluted Stefan, waved at her, and then walked away with Odin closely behind him.

"Would you like to get some dinner with me?" Trinity asked. She wagged her eyebrows and sang the words, "Alfred is making lasagna."

Logan rubbed a hand over her stomach when it growled at the mention of food. Alfred was a hell of a good cook, and the man was determined to add five pounds to her frame before her training was over. "Yeah, I'll be there in a minute."

Trinity nodded before she turned and headed for the doors.

Logan shifted her gaze back to Stefan once Trinity's footfalls faded. "Why did you take away the board when they came in? Is it a secret?"

"Not to any who bear the Nelek name."

She arched a brow. "You didn't want Drake to see it?"

His face took on a dark and very serious countenance. "Once again, while each of us may be surrounded by diamond threads, I assure you not a single one of Drake Black's strings lead back to me...nor will they ever." When he punctuated his sentence by waving her towards the doors, Logan vacated his chamber without another word.

The whole "strings" concept made her uncomfortable. She didn't like the thought of being manipulated at every turn, especially by someone who most likely had their own best interests in mind. But the thought left her, and the goblin in her belly, with one pressing question...

Who the hell did her strings lead back to?

Chapter 19

*The Estate
New York City
Manhattan, Midtown*

“What do you have to say for yourself?”

Kerestyan scowled down at Craig, who simply shrugged his leather clad shoulder in response to Raze’s question. “A member of this city, in good standing, claims you killed two of her *Servios* last night. I suggest you find your tongue.”

Craig pushed his shaggy blond hair out of his eyes and shrugged again. “She don’t have no proof it was me. Besides, it ain’t against your rules to kill a Puppet.” He sat forward in his chair and made a strange backwards nodding gesture. “Did somebody get it on camera? Cell phone video? Anybody call the cops? Was the Veil broke?” He sat back. “I didn’t think so.”

Kerestyan drew in a breath, calling forth as much patience as he possibly could. In situations like this he agreed with Vouclade’s comments about the ignorance of Fledglings, especially those turned in the last decade. And the watery, metallic tang rolling off of Craig’s skin told him the Child wasn’t more than a few years old.

“Your idiotic exploits have the humans asking questions, Craig!” Raze shrieked. “Half the God damn patron’s at *Fetish* think you’ve had porcelain fangs permanently affixed to your disgusting little face. You may not have broken the Veil last night when you waxed Stacey’s *Servios*, but in my opinion, you break it every single time you walk out your front door with your fangs openly showing!”

Craig rolled his eyes and sneered at her. “When was the last time you was down at the clubs? I ain’t the only one sportin’ fangs. The humans wear ‘em, too. You gonna starting charging them with breakin’ the Veil? You an your crazy hair gonna make ‘em take ‘em out?” He blew out a loud breath through the side of his mouth. “Puh-leeze.”

Kerestyan slammed his hand down on the table in front of Craig. “Enough with the street slang!” He stepped around the table and sat down opposite the irritating youth. “You aren’t from the streets. You were born in Manhattan, into a rather affluent family. You received the best education money could buy. You can speak proper English.”

Disgust twisted with disbelief on Craig's narrow face. "Alright, you want proper English," he sat up straight and pulled at the lapels of his black biker jacket, "I'll give you proper English. The only rule you've instituted in this city is the Veil. Even if I did kill Stacey's Puppets, which I don't admit to doing, there's nothing you can do about it." He narrowed his eyes. "They weren't the first Puppets to get killed by a vampire in this city. It's happened before." He motioned to Raze. "You didn't send your colorful Head of Enforcement out to kill or question Stacey when she killed one of my people. So why am I here?"

Raze smacked him in the back of the head with her sheathed blade. "You're here because you're a fucking idiot." Her violet eyes landed on Kerestyan, but her words echoed in his mind. *"Can I just kill him? Please? I'm using telepathy...that has to show you just how bad I want to run my sword through his stupid ass."*

As much as Kerestyan wanted to let her, and as difficult as it was to deny he wanted to do the very same, he had no choice but to give the answer. "No."

"But why?"

"Because as much as I hate to admit, he's correct. Neither of us lifted a finger when his servant was killed, as I have no rules concerning the destruction of vampires or Servios. If we take action against him, it will be seen by the youth as heavy handed and unjustified."

Craig cleared his throat rather loudly. "I know you two are talking with your minds. Don't you think that's a little rude in front of a guest?"

"Who cares? You know damn well it's just a matter of time before the little ass-hat breaks the Veil. How much slack are you going to give him?"

Kerestyan smiled at Craig, who may have sensed the use of telepathy but had no idea what was being said. *"As much as it takes for the Child to hang himself. Then his death will be justified, within my laws, and you're welcome to him."*

"Why are you smiling at me?" Craig turned and looked behind him at the French doors then back to Kerestyan. "What, you think I'm pretty or something?"

"So you're going to wait until he actually breaks the Veil?"

"Yes." Kerestyan raised an eyebrow for Craig's benefit. "No."

"Then what the hell are you smiling at me for?"

"What the fuck, Kerestyan?" Raze smacked Craig with her blade again. "Don't curse at the Lord of New York. Show some damn respect, Leechling."

Craig bared his fangs at her and hissed, as though he'd seen far too many modern movies. "If you hit me with that thing again, I'm going to respect the hell out of you." He snapped his teeth together. "Lay off, Angel."

Raze stiffened and stared down at Craig as golden flecks burst around her, knocking him and his chair over. "You know what I am?" She drew her blade and leveled it at him. "You know what I am, and you dare tempt me?"

"Raze, don't you dare make an action against him. Under no circumstances do I wish to demean your authority in front of him, but I will if you force my hand."

Craig crawled to his feet and took a few steps back, his lips curled. "I know what you are. Like Lord Kerestyan said, I received a good education...and not just in high school."

"Your education obviously wasn't thorough enough." She lowered her blade and slid it back into the scabbard. "I suggest you go back to your Sire and request more training."

Kerestyan stood placed himself between the young vampire and the very angry Paladin. "Craig, I suggest you mind your future actions. Making enemies with the Head of Enforcement is never a wise decision."

He leaned to the side and glared at Raze again before he laughed. "In this city it is. She can't do anything unless I break the only rule."

Kerestyan growled as the beast uncoiled and his fangs broke free. "Considering her words carry more weight in this city than yours, should she come to me and admit she ended your life because she witnessed you feeding in plain view at *Fetish*, I will believe her."

Fangs gone, Craig rolled his shoulders and attempted to hide the fear ebbling from his body. "So it's gonna be like that now?"

"It has been like that for ages!" Kerestyan roared. "Perhaps you should tuck your tail and run back to your weigh-blooded Sire. You were obviously absent the night she chose to teach the intricacies of vampiric politics." He raised an arm and pointed at the doors. "Leave my sight."

To the Fledglings credit, he did exactly as instructed.

Kerestyan returned to his chair and sank into the dark leather. "Why do they do that? Why can't they just behave?"

"I try to tell myself it's because they don't know any better," Raze offered as she walked over and righted Craig's overturned chair. "But I think it has more to do with the fact that this new breed of modern Fledgling just doesn't care. They think they're the top of the food chain. They seem to forget their Sire's all came from somewhere."

He motioned to the door again. "He has enough education to know you exist."

She dropped into the chair across from him. "I know. He caught me off guard for a second there." She tilted her head and twisted her fingers around a neon blue spike of hair. "But I suppose, as much as I'd like to think other-

wise, most vampires, even the dumb ones, pass on to their Children that Paladins exist." She flashed an evil smile. "After all, we do live to kill them."

"So does Vouclade, but I don't hear his name echoing through the hallowed halls of courts the world over."

She laughed, her whisky voice filling the large room. "That's because Vookie doesn't let anyone, regardless of age, live long enough to share."

As he joined her in laughter, Kerestyan felt his fangs retract. "So what exactly would you like to do with Craig?"

Her lips pursed in a disapproving manner. "Forget him for a minute, what am I going to do with you?"

"Me?"

"Yeah, Fangs. What the hell is up with you?" She kicked her unnecessarily bright, lime green boots onto the table. "You've been quick to go primal all week. What's up?"

He considered her five inch spike heels for a moment, which he was sure not only doubled as a weapon but put her only inches from standing as tall as he did. "You have a very strange array of footwear."

She wiggled herself straight and smoothed the front of her black t-shirt, which had the German words "Das Ich" scrawled across it in letters the same color as her boots. "And you're really bad at changing the subject." She bounced her right leg on top of her left as she beamed a prying smile. "Is it Logan? Is she why you've been all pissy? Do you miss her? Do you *loooooove* her?"

"Shut up, Raze."

"Ooh. No old style 'hold your tongue, wench'? You must have it bad if you're going to modern dialect. You only do that when you don't think before you talk, which isn't often, just so you know."

He rubbed a hand down his face. Considering ordering Raze away rarely worked, which she'd proven by dragging Craig to his feet even though he'd asked her to keep her distance, he thought it best to answer her childish question. "Yes, if you must know, I find myself missing Logan. However, from what Trinity tells me, she's doing very well and is even excelling in her training."

"Which I'm sure just tickles your naughty bits," she playfully growled.

Truthfully, knowing Logan was far surpassing even his Father's expectations tickled Kerestyan in more than the places Raze had mentioned. The knowledge filled him with such a strong sense of pride and contentment, he found his beast quick to lash out any time those feelings were disturbed.

He also found it difficult to believe Logan had only been gone a week, and even more difficult to accept he cared so much for a woman he'd only known for the span of ten days.

Don't question the past, revel in the future. Kerestyan smiled at the thought. How many times had his mind whispered those words? He'd heard the quiet whisper the night he became a vampire and had heeded the same wisdom ever since.

All he could do was hope Logan wanted a place in his future. Trinity mentioned during her brief report that Logan had admitted to missing him, but had also shared the feeling was foreign and she didn't appreciate it very much.

He'd give the woman two hundred years if that's what it took for her to realize she cared about him as much as he cared for her. Immortality, while he'd never claim it was a perfect existence, offered all within its dark tendrils the luxury of time.

And considering his advanced age, not only did he intend to be around for another ten thousand years, but he had every intention of dragging Logan right along with him, even if she kicked and screamed the entire way.

The insistent snap of Raze's fingers brought Kerestyan back to the present. "Earth to Space Leech. Does it tickle you or not?"

Kerestyan frowned. Such odd names she seemed to pluck out of thin air. "Yes, it pleases me. It also sounds as though Trinity intends to release her in a few days time."

Her lavender eyes opened wide. "Really? Damn, she must be doing well then. If there's one thing I know about your Daddy, he doesn't let anyone out of the Walls of Dread until they're ready."

Kerestyan nodded at her compliment with a dash of insult. "There's a distinct reason why no Paladin blade has ever tasted Nelek blood."

"Don't pick at me," she warned. She circled her head with a finger, pointing out the golden halo still shimmering around her body. "You know damn well if I was born in the same generation as Lord Evil, I'd skewer him."

He didn't even bother correcting her on his Father's name this time. "Truthfully, I'm glad you weren't."

She arched a brow, which boasted yet another new piercing. "Why?"

He smiled. "Because then you'd be a threat to me, and in good conscience I couldn't allow you to work here, which means you wouldn't have the money to put so many holes in your body."

She patted the blade resting in her lap. "I can put a hole in your body if you'd like. Or perhaps you'd like me to carve Logan's name into your chest?" She licked her finger and made a hissing noise as she touched her own chest. "Wouldn't that be a sexy way to show her you care?"

"I'd much prefer should you need to use that blade on anyone, it be Craig."

"If only I could." She sighed a wistful note. "As tempting as your scenario sounded, you know I won't lie to kill him. The minute I start pulling those kinds of treacherous, backstabbing maneuvers, I become no better than your kind." She raised a hand and bowed her colorful head. "No offense, Lord Kerestyan."

"None taken." He stared past her at the French doors leading to the dark streets of New York City. *His* city. If there was one trait every vampire seemed to acquire upon being turned, it was the capacity for treachery in some form.

He turned his attention back to Raze. "Have your team keep an eye on Craig and his group. I have an odd feeling it's only a matter of time until he commits to some kind of purposeful action we won't be able to ignore."

Chapter 20

Day 9 of Servio Training
Nelek Castle

“What are the rules?”

Logan ducked Trinity’s leg as it came at her face. “No attacking each other in the castle. No killing each other period.” She jumped back to avoid a leather clad knee to the gut. “Don’t do anything that interferes with or compromises a Nelek’s influence or control over a person or a city. Love and loved ones are never to be used as weapons.” She smiled as she leaned back just as Trinity’s fist whizzed by her face. “And the unspoken but most important rule, carry Midol to counteract the moodiest of the Nelek Children.”

Trinity ceased her assault and smiled wide. “Very, very nice. At least you have the defense part of combat down. Now, follow me.”

Logan did as instructed when Trinity turned and headed for the doors leading to the main hall. “Where are we going?”

“To the enchanting Nelek library. I have one last morsel of information to feed you before I release you back into the wild.”

Logan stopped and stared at Trinity’s lace covered back. The vampiress had better not be messing with her. “You’re sending me back to New York? Today? Or is this a morsel that takes three days to explain?”

She didn’t turn around. “Yes, today, but you’ll only get there slower if you don’t move your feet.” She snapped her fingers over her shoulder. “Chop, chop, my little servant.”

Logan couldn’t help but smile. The excitement coursing through every cell in her body made it easy to catch up with Trinity’s long strides. “You’re not playing a joke on me, are you?”

“No,” she snapped, sounding almost offended. “I know how hard you’ve been working and I know exactly why. I’m not about to dangle Kerestyan in front of you like a carrot. See number four on the rules of Nelek Decorum.”

Logan rolled her eyes. “I *care* about him. I’m not ready to start tossing around the L-word.”

“You call the warm feeling in your chest right now whatever makes you comfortable and I’ll call it what it really is. In the meantime, I need your brain focused on what I’m about to show you, got it?”

She ignored Trinity's reference to knowing how she felt, which she didn't, and nodded. She'd pay attention to whatever the Dominatrix wanted as long as it put her on a train back to New York. "Got it."

She smiled as the clicking of claws against stone filled the air as they passed Stefan's chamber. Only a few seconds passed before she felt a cold nose and warm tongue nuzzle into her hand.

Unless she was in combat training, Syn had maintained his position at her side, day and night. He'd even found it necessary to sleep next to her in Kerestyan's bed and snuggle up against her as if he were trying to fill his Master's shoes.

She reached out and scratched the top of his head. He also snored like a banshee and had a bad habit of rolling over on her, which she hoped weren't traits he and Kerestyan shared.

Well, at least the snoring part. If Kerestyan wanted to roll over on top of her, she wasn't sure she'd put up much of a fight.

While she couldn't claim to love the man, over the last week she'd come to accept she cared about him. And for her, the realization had been rather difficult considering she hadn't cared about anyone but herself for a long, long time.

"Here we go!" Trinity exclaimed as she pushed open two heavy wooden doors. "This is the most complete library of information about supernatural creatures, our societies, and true history that the world has ever known. Or not known, depending on who you are."

As Logan stepped into the room, her mouth gaped open. She'd expected a lot of books when Trinity said library, but nothing like this. Twice the size of a football field and easily three stories tall, the room was wall to wall books. And for what didn't fit on the walls, free standing shelves created a maze at either end of the huge room, breaking only for the dozen tables and chairs positioned in the center.

She followed Trinity through the twists and turns leading to the far right wall where the bookshelves in the center separated to allow space for a mural. A dozen panels roughly six feet by two feet hung in a row, and while each was painted with a different scene, together they created what appeared to be a timeline.

Trinity stopped in front of the first panel on the left then spun on her heel. "Personally, I don't think you need to know this, but Dad holds strong to the notion you have to know your past before you can find your future. So, keeping in mind I'm only doing this because he insisted, pay attention. I'm gonna move fast, okay?"

Logan nodded. Fast worked for her. She was certain there was a lot to learn from the paintings, but the tingles still racing inside her wanted to get back to New York as quickly as possible. "Okay."

Trinity pointed to the blurry, golden image of what appeared to be a man. "This is Aligon, the being most humans worship as God, Allah, Buddha or whatever name each religion uses. Much as they believe, he created the earth. He's a Celestial, which is a heavenly body comprised of the purest magics in the universe."

She splayed her index and middle fingers between two figures, a young man and a young woman, who both stood in front of Aligon. Long hair flowed past the woman's shoulders, painted in every earth tone Logan had ever seen. She wore a blue robe as bright as the sky, and her strikingly beautiful face was drawn in a smile.

The man's hair was long as well, but was pitch black and framed a glowing white face. Dressed in black robes, his eyes were an odd silvery color and his lips formed an angry line.

"This is Semeliel, Aligon's daughter, and Levanael, his son. They're twins. The opposite kind as you can probably see, and they're very important to this story."

Trinity stepped over to the next panel, which depicted Aligon setting the earth in his children's outstretched hands. "Aligon gave the world to his kids as a gift then told them to use their magics to make it reflect the best of themselves. Semeliel gave the world the sun and flowers and trees and all the good stuff. Levanael gave the world the moon and created mountains and fire and ice and all the not so good stuff. When the kids were finished messing with things, Aligon was so happy, he created humans to inhabit the earth his brats had done so well with." She stared over at the next panel then huffed out an irritated breath. "Screw it."

Logan didn't have much choice but to follow when the obviously peeved vampiress snatched up her arm and dragged her back so they could see the entire mural. "I take it you don't like giving this lesson?"

Trinity shook her head and released Logan's elbow. "No," she grumbled. "This story pisses me off every time someone brings it up." She clapped her hands. "So for the rest of it, we're gonna rock the Cliff Note's version. Agreed?"

When Logan nodded, Trinity crossed her arms over her chest and gave the mural a disgusted glare. "Once humans got dropped into the mix, the twins couldn't leave well enough alone. They kept adding little perks here and there. Like Sem, who gave the humans animals to live with. But Lev didn't like the way the humans loved his sister's animals, so he gave man the desire to kill animals for food, clothing and whatever else they could do with

the pieces. At that point, Sem got ultra pissed and banished her brother from the world when her sun was in the sky, to which Lev responded by casting her out when his moon was in the sky.

"Everything was fine until a group of human farmers got mad when bad weather ruined their crops. So," she rolled her eyes then stared up at the ceiling, "they looked up at the sky and said, 'Why the hell do you hate us?' Lev heard their cries and, lo and behold, six farmers ended up at his feet. They promised to worship him if he gave them some of his magic, so he accepted the deal, named his new followers the Children of Shadow, and then sent them back to their human tribe where they wreaked havoc on their hunter rivals.

"Six hunters turned around a little later and committed the same stupid action the farmers did. They stared up at the sky and said, 'What the fuck?' Only this time Sem heard them, then did the same thing her brother had done. She packed their little bodies full of magic, named her followers the Children of Dawn," she finally stopped looking at the ceiling and shook one of her fists, "and then sent her hunters back to unite the tribe. Can you guess what happened?"

Logan laughed out loud. It didn't take a rocket scientist to see where this was leading. "Um, they started a war?"

Trinity nodded rather emphatically. "Fuck yes, they did. The tribe split into three factions. Children of Dawn, Children of Shadow, and all the humans who refused to take sides were called Innocents. Now," she ran over to the fifth panel, which depicted Semiel standing with her six chosen on one side and Levanael standing with his six on the other, then pointed to one follower on each side, "these two, who picked opposite sides...we're married!" She flicked the follower standing on Semiel's side. "And this chick was pregnant!" She returned to Logan and smiled. "Remember that little tidbit. It'll be important at the end of my rant."

Logan nodded at her. "I got it. Carry on."

"Okay. So, where were we?" Trinity sucked in a deep breath. "Oh, yeah, the tribe is at war. Basically, there are conflicting reports on which twin acted first, but I was taught it was Levanael who struck the first blow. He was so livid his followers hadn't conquered the whole of the tribe that he cursed the Children of Dawn to become half-kin to the beasts they loved so much. Semiel turned around and cursed her brother's followers to be forever denied the sun. Lev responded by cursing Sem's kids to always fight with each other the way animals do, and then Sem removed Lev's kids ability to subsist off of anything the land provided, including animals."

Trinity took a step back and grinned wide. "But here's where Lev kind of edges his sister out, in my opinion. Instead of tossing back another curse at

her followers, he gifts his own with fangs. Why, you ask?" She batted her long eyelashes. "So his children can drink the blood of the Innocents and his sister's followers. Very smart, if you ask me...and such a vampire style maneuver. But anyway, Sem came back and cursed Lev's children to live for eternity and be sterile. Then Lev gives his kids the ability to pass their magics onto others through rituals of blood, and also makes it so their blood and magics grow more powerful with age. I'm pretty sure that's when the curses stopped and Semiel finally gave her own kids a perk. She decided that her sun would be deadly to Levanael's followers, and if the flow of energy between the brain and the body was interrupted on a Child of Shadow, she'd pull them from the immortal coil. So there you have it, vampires and werewolves."

Logan stared between the wall and Trinity. "Wow. That's a hell of a Cliff Note's version."

Trinity flashed another grin. "Yeah, but now we get to the good part."

"There's more?"

"Yes. By this point, the twins were so pissed off at each other and screaming so loud, they got their daddy's attention. Aligon looked down at the world and was so disgusted by the position his brats had put the Innocents in, being caught between two damned races and all, that he pulled the twins out of the world and lectured them for literally eons. During which," she brushed the backs of her fingers up her chest then rolled her hand forward, "he bestowed Paladins upon humanity."

"Once a generation, a human is born with the righteous fire burning inside them to defend the Innocents. They're blessed with shreds of Aligon's magic, and are the only true immortals because they don't die unless Aligon says so. Trust me, we've tried to kill Zealot Paladins and they just don't die. But luckily, most Paladins follow the way of Balance, which means instead of killing any supernatural creature they come across, they watch and judge each individual based on their actions. Just remember, Zealots are bad, Balance is good."

Logan drew a deep breath. "Zealots bad, Balance good. I got it."

Trinity inhaled an even larger breath than before. "So basically it ends like this: While Aligon had the twins out of the world, with the help of his Paladins humanity rose up and pushed vampires and werewolves to the fringes of society. And that mass destruction led to the inception of the Veil, which was roughly seven thousand years ago. Now we all hide from the humans, carrying out the twin's rivalry every single night, and every single day. But remember the pregnant chick I pointed out?"

"Yeah."

Trinity walked over to the last panel, which showed the form of a large man whose face was mostly covered by shadows, and gazed up at it. "I don't know how long ago Aligon created the world. I don't know for sure how old the Original six vampires are, or even who they are. But I know that no more than a few months passed between Semiel adopting her followers and when the curses were levied, because he," she reached out and traced a finger over the man's darkened face, "was born as both a vampire and a werewolf. Legend states that Aligon named him the Equilibrium, and then gifted him the power to destroy both cursed races and the twins who damned him to his fate, with nothing more than a thought." She finished the last sentence in a quiet voice, brimming with different emotions.

Logan joined Trinity and stared up at the rendering. The longer she studied his shadowed features, the more the man in the painting resembled the large beer lover who'd introduced himself as Drake.

She cast a sideways glance to Trinity. "Does this picture make you sad or something?"

She nodded. "Werewolves have a beast, too, which means this poor guy has two animals inside him. And since werewolves and vampires hate each other with an innate passion, I can only imagine no matter what he puts off, he's constantly at war with himself." She backed away from the wall. "He's part of the reason why I hate this story so much. The vampire side of me hates knowing there's someone out there who can end my life with such ease. I've worked hard to get where I am, to live as long as I have and adapt so well to the modern world." She tipped her head to the side and gave a faint, sad smile. "But the woman in me still feels for the guy. He was born with a thirst for blood and the desire to kill anything that isn't natural. Considering half of him is undead, and that ain't natural...I think you see my point."

"I understand." She cocked her head. "He looks a little bit like Drake."

Trinity whirled around and began winding back through the maze of shelves. "He does, doesn't he. Are you coming?"

Don't push. She nodded ascent to the voice in her mind then hurried to catch up with the moody Nelek Child. She followed her back to the middle of the room where Syn sat atop one of the large oak tables, happily panting away.

Logan walked over to him and ruffled the silky fur covering his head. "I have one last question, Trinity."

Trinity crossed her arms over her chest and arched a tentative brow. "What's that?"

"What happened to the twins? You said vampires and werewolves carry out their rivalry, but where are they? Are they still outside the world?"

Trinity puffed out a breath, looking more than a little relieved. "Once the Paladins cleaned house, Aligon put the twins back in the world and bound them to it. They don't have near as much power anymore and can only use the little they do have when their 'sphere' is in the sky. They can't talk to each other, they can't see each other, and if you believe the stories, they can't even talk to Aligon anymore. Nobody knows who they are, and if they do they aren't talking...so life goes on." She cast a glance to the door. "Are you ready for *your* life to go on?"

Logan eagerly nodded. "Let me go get my stuff."

Trinity raised a hand as Logan started to turn towards the door. "You don't need to. Odin moved your clothes this afternoon. All you have left to do," she shifted her gaze to the lump of black fur on the table, "is say good-bye to your shadow."

Logan smiled as Syn stood up, licked her cheek, and then rested his heavy head on her shoulder. Truthfully, she would miss the supersized fuzz ball. Even though he'd been given an assignment, and one he'd performed dutifully, he'd become more of a friend than a bodyguard. He listened intently anytime she needed to vent about how strange the beast made her feel, he nodded along as though he knew exactly how she felt, but was more than happy to bark or knock her off the bed when he disagreed.

She reached up and smoothed the fur down his back. "I'll make Keres-tyan come visit you more often, I promise." She gently tapped her finger against his cold nose. "Don't teach Odin any more bad habits, and don't piss on anything in Stefan's chamber."

Syn nodded and licked her cheek again before he nosed her towards Trinity. He barked one last time then jumped off the table and trotted out the door.

Logan stared after him for a moment. Never, not even in her wildest dreams, did she ever think she'd be abducted by vampires and walk out in the end as an immortal whose best friend was a wolf.

But then, she supposed it was better than picking through trash and spending every single day alone.

"Come here," Trinity said as she curled a finger at Logan then extended her hand. "I have to be touching you to take you on the windy rollercoaster ride. Fasten your seatbelt and hold on tight."

Logan grimaced. "You people need to invest in cars." She moved to stand next to Trinity and reluctantly took her hand. "This windy brand of teleportation makes me sick every time."

Trinity made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a snort. "It shouldn't bother you as much anymore. Your blood has a natural affinity for 'windy teleportation' now. Just think, in a few hundred years you'll be able to

concentrate on any place in the world and go there in record time. The only stipulation is that it has to be a place you've been before."

Logan closed her eyes and groaned. "That's all well and good, but this is the only place outside of New York I've ever been. It's not like I'll be teleporting myself to Tahiti."

"You know, Logan, you should really get out more."

When the wind picked up around them and the floor dropped out beneath her feet, Logan realized one very important truth about Trinity Nelek: She was only right half of the time.

The only feeling that wasn't the same about the last the trip she'd made between Chicago and New York, aside from the fact she didn't have two strong arms around her, was that the bile from her stomach stayed in her stomach.

She still felt nauseous. Her abdomen still cramped and twitched. And she still felt the same strange sensation of being sucked into icy oblivion.

She gulped a mouthful of lavender scented air when the hard texture of a floor rose up to meet her feet. She waved both hands at her face, promising with every frantic swish she would use the money Trinity paid her for her service to buy a damn car.

The next time she had to go to Chicago, her ass would be pulling up to the little white house guarded by rottweilers in a shiny metal box (as Odin liked to call them) stamped with Ford or Buick.

"Welcome to your new apartment."

Logan opened her eyes to see Trinity's smiling face, standing in middle of a living room very reminiscent of the one in Kerestyan's penthouse only much smaller. It had the same couch, same television, and even the same style tables with bright green plants setting atop them.

"It's only a two bedroom, one of which I had turned into an office for you, but I think all the furnishings suit you. Nothing fancy, nothing expensive. Just functional, comfortable and meant to be used. What do you think?"

Logan walked over to the couch and sank into the supple leather. "I think..." She swept her gaze over the room, realizing for the first time since she was fifteen, she had a place to call her own. Not a boarded up warehouse. Not an abandoned building crawling with rats and insects. Not even a beautifully dark castle filled with Ancient relics, some of which talked and others that didn't. But a place where a thirty year old woman could start over, could leave her past behind and find her own future. "It's almost perfect."

Trinity flashed a mischievous smile. "I'm sorry. If it wasn't for the fact he has to attend Court in an hour and a half, I would've draped Kerestyan's naked ass across the couch for you myself. However, something told me if I

dropped you on him before Court, the Lord of New York would miss his own meeting."

Logan chuckled at that. At least they were on the same page, although she would've been more than happy just to sit down and talk with Kerestyan for a little while. "When do I get to see him?"

"You'll get to see him at Court, but you'll get to talk to him afterwards. Remember the directions I gave you from here to the estate in Midtown?"

She chuckled. "You mean the same estate that someone cleverly named, the Estate?"

"Yeah, that one, you little smartass. Anyway, Lawrence should be stopping by," she cast a glance to a large, wrought iron clock hanging on the wall, "in about fifteen minutes. You'll have about an hour to chat and get to know each other, and then he'll take you to Kerestyan's Court."

Logan nodded, even though mild disappointment settled in her stomach. Lawrence was one of Trinity's oldest *Servios*, and from what she'd been told, the guy she'd be working with to maintain Trinity's businesses in the city. However, he wasn't the man she wanted to spend the next hour talking to.

She reluctantly forced a smile across her face and tried to banish Kerestyan from her mind, at least for a little while. "Is there anything else I need to know?"

"Alfred stocked your kitchen and bathrooms, which you have two of. The keys to your apartment, an envelope containing all your legal documents plus five grand in cash, and your new cell phone with mine, Alfred and Lawrence's numbers preprogrammed, are out on the kitchen counter." She motioned over her shoulder to the hallway behind her with a puzzled look on her face. "And I guess Vouclade also sent some thirty different toothbrushes for you and a bunch of toothpaste?" She shook her head. "I don't know what that's all about, but I assume it's some kind of inside joke between the two of you."

Logan tipped her head back against the cool leather and laughed. Only Vouclade would be so evil. "Yeah, you could say that."

"Well, I'll leave that between you two. I guess the only thing left is to let you know you need to meet up with Lawrence at *Fetish* tomorrow night, no later than 9:00 PM. He'll get you acquainted with the staff, and then start teaching you the ropes of managing one of New York City's most popular nightclubs." There was no small amount of conceit in her voice.

"I'll be there. Is he picking me up here?"

She flashed that grin again. "No. I told him you'd meet him at the club. I have this odd feeling you won't be sleeping in your own bed tonight."

Logan shivered as a tingle of anticipation worked through her. "Not if I'm lucky."

Trinity blinked and kept her eyes closed for a moment. "On that note, I think I'll go let Kerestyan, your *luv-aire*, know you're back in town. I'll stop in at the club tomorrow night and check on you. Good luck at Court." She brandished a pointed index finger. "Pay close attention to what Kerestyan has to say to his residents, and more than anything, watch how the Fledglings react to him and each other. I think you'll learn pretty quickly why someone like Vouclade has such a rough time with the youth. I'm also willing to bet you'll be just as appalled."

Logan refused to take that bet because she was fairly sure Trinity was right. She stood up and smiled at her favorite Dominatrix. "I'll see you tomorrow night. And thank you for everything, Trinity. I wouldn't be here right now if it wasn't for you and I want you to know I appreciate everything you've done for me."

"You're welcome," she said as a breeze cut through the room. "You've been everything I expected...and more."

Logan stared at the empty space where Trinity had been and smiled. In less than two hours she'd be standing in front of the man who'd chosen "life" for her before she'd made the decision herself.

What would she say? What would he say?

Nervousness crawled up her spine. It'd taken almost a week to realize she cared for him, but what if something had changed for him during that time? What if she saw him again and the goblin in her belly disapproved?

Stop. He's good, I can tell. She chuckled out loud. Great. Her beast was quoting lines from Disney movies. How messed up was that?

She'd have taken more time to consider the irony, but a loud knock brought her thoughts to a screeching halt.

Logan walked across the room to her front door. No doubt, Lawrence stood outside, and all she could do was hope they had something in common. Otherwise, life as a *Servio* would be rough. She'd rather be on the street than attached to someone she didn't get along with.

She inhaled the deepest breath possible and pulled open the door, revealing a man with long blonde hair, who stood only a few inches shorter than her. Dressed in a white button down shirt and khaki slacks, his light brown eyes and hard features seemed vaguely familiar, but it wasn't until he beamed a bright white smile that realization struck.

His two top teeth were chipped at the bottom.

Logan blew out the breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. "You've got to be kidding me. Larry? Holy shit! You look so...clean." And he did, he looked nothing like the man who'd sold her heroin for the last three years. And had it not been for his teeth, she'd have never believed they were the same person.

Larry let out a laugh in a voice much deeper than she'd ever heard him use. "I could say the same about you." He motioned past her. "May I come in?"

"Yeah, of course." She stepped back and gave him room to pass. "Wow. This is crazy. Your hair isn't brown and greasy." She slowly shook her head. "Why didn't Trinity just say Larry?"

He turned around. "Probably because you wouldn't have believed it was me when you looked through the peephole." When she smiled, so did he. "You didn't even look, did you?"

"Nope." She stared at the white metal door and wrinkled her nose before she pushed it closed. "I'm not exactly used to having a door yet." She offered him a seat on the couch, and then sat down in the dark grey chair across from him. "What's up?"

"Not much. I came to take the newest Nelek *Servio* to her first Court. And I must say," he looked her up and down from beneath a single raised brow, an appraisal that didn't make her skin crawl nearly as bad this time, "the newest is looking pretty good."

She smoothed the bottom of her black sweater over the waist of her jeans. "Thanks. I don't feel too bad either."

"I heard. Congratulations on getting clean."

"Thanks." She relaxed back into the chair and shook her head again. "Why the hell do you stand on the corner down in Brooklyn and sell drugs?"

He tipped his blond head back and laughed. "Because believe it or not, I hear everything when I work down there as Larry. I know who's doing what, with who and why. Most of the Fledglings and *Servios* in the city haven't put Larry and Lawrence together yet, which only works to my advantage. I'm respected by day as Lawrence, but I'm informed when I'm a dope dealer named Larry by night. Besides, being down there doesn't bother me. Not everyone I sell to is a bad person; they're just addicted to some chemical that helps them get through their day. It's not my place to judge them."

Logan tilted her head. "Is that what you thought about me?"

"I never really considered you a hardcore addict. Most of the people I served, I saw at least once a day. You came on Wednesday and Sunday like clockwork. If anything, I'd say you were dedicated, not addicted."

She grinned wide. "What a nice way to put it."

"Hey," he thumped a hand against the arm of the couch, "I know a good apple when I see one. I just wish it hadn't taken Trinity so long to claim you. I told her about you a few months ago, but her nice immortal ass likes to take her time."

Logan stiffened as his last sentence fully wrapped around her. The goblin in her stomach surged to life for the first time since Odin had berated her,

and felt like it was roller skating on razor blades, shredding her insides to ribbons. "You told Trinity about me a few months ago?"

He nodded. "I thought you'd be a good addition. You always seemed too smart to be a street urchin." He sighed. "Besides, I had a feeling you'd started to suspect vampires were real. But it wasn't like I could just come out and ask. If I did and was wrong, I didn't want to be responsible for breaking the Veil or having to kill you to cover the breach." He straightened the collar of his shirt. "I hope you aren't mad I told her about you, Logan. You know how important the Veil is now, and I figured if everything went well you'd end up in a better place."

Stay calm... "I'm not mad that you told her about me. I guess I'm just a bit confused." She rubbed the back of her neck as heat spread through her body. "The night you saw me with Kerestyan, you obviously knew who he was, so why'd you ask if he was my boyfriend? Why didn't you just go talk to him?"

He crinkled his nose. "Kerestyan and I don't get along very well. Plus, Trinity told me the day before everything went down that she'd asked him to retrieve you for her. I just assumed that's what he was doing." He cracked a big grin. "I called her when we finished up our deal to let her know he had you, and she couldn't have been happier. But, so was I. Like I said, I wondered why she took so long to move on you."

Logan inhaled a slow, deep breath. If Kerestyan had been part of Trinity's plan all along, she'd kick his fangs so far back in his head his brother would feel it.

But it didn't make any sense. Why would he have been so concerned she wouldn't make it past Stefan if Trinity had already gotten permission? And why would Trinity have been so insistent that Kerestyan didn't know Logan was in the alley that night?

Was she covering for Kerestyan? But if she was, why did he threaten to kill her first?

Vampires and their stupid fucking mind games. She rubbed a finger in small circles over her right temple. Well, at least that thought was purely her own.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Logan nodded and gave Larry her best smile. She needed to play this just right or it could backfire in her face. "Well, since you were nice enough to save me from being homeless for another fifteen years, did Trinity tell you about what happened after I saw you that night? Did she keep you apprised of my situation at all?"

"She hit me via telepathy later that day and said she cooked you a steak. She said you guys talked about being a *Servio* and you took the info about as well as she expected."

Damn, everything he said so far was true...

She shifted and stared blindly at the lamp setting on the table next to her. "I think the worst part was going through the whole withdrawal process just so I could meet Stefan. I wasn't happy at all. Get clean so the man doesn't kill me on sight, but he might kill me later anyway...not odds I particularly cared for."

"Yeah, I heard the whole situation was pretty hard on you," he laughed. "I don't mean to laugh at you," he raised a hand and offered an apologetic look. "I know it's not funny, but Trinity said she had to hold you over the toilet for a good hour while you gave back the steak she made for you."

That lying bitch. Logan looked over at the clock. She still had an hour before Court started, which meant if she hit the subway station a couple blocks away she had a good chance of getting to Kerestyan's penthouse in Manhattan before he left.

She was willing to bet everything she owned that Kerestyan didn't know what his sister had done. Otherwise Trinity would've never needed to lie to Larry about helping Logan through withdrawal. And considering she had obviously manipulated the circumstances surrounding her and Kerestyan's "chance" meeting in the alley, he deserved to know he'd been played for a fool as hard as she had.

Logan focused back on Larry, Lawrence, whatever the hell his name was. "I know you're supposed to take me to Court, but Trinity told me how to get to the Estate. Would it be alright if I met you there?" She stood and stretched her arms above her head. "I'm going to take a quick trip to Manhattan before I dive head first into vampire politics."

He pulled a set of keys from his pocket and dangled them in the air. "Would you like a ride? After all, there are certain perks to being a *Servio*. I don't mind being your chauffeur for the evening."

She would've accepted his offer, but she wasn't sure she could trust him. "Thanks for the offer, but I think I'll pass. It may sound funny and a little stupid, but I actually started to miss a few places in this city while I was training. I think walking the cracked sidewalks and jumping over potholes might be just what the Vouclade ordered."

Larry stood up and laughed. "I'd offer to keep you company, but I rather enjoy the modern convenience of a vehicle." He tapped the face of his watch. "Make sure you're at the Estate by Midnight or before. You don't want to be late on your first day. Everyone will turn and look at you as soon as the doors open. And even though the vampires here are all young, you don't want to give them a reason to stare at you any longer than necessary."

"Understood." She walked over to the door and opened it. "I won't be late. If there's one thing I know, it's how to get around the streets of New

York." She waited for Larry to pass before she stepped out onto the landing of a thin stairway and pulled the door closed. "Where did you park?"

He started down the stairs. "Out in the lot behind the building. You haven't seen this place before tonight, have you?"

She followed his lead, wishing he'd move a lot faster. "No. I know where I am though, don't worry."

He laughed as he pushed open the heavy metal door leading to the street. "I won't. I figure if you've made it on the street for this long, your sense of direction works just fine."

She stepped out onto the sidewalk and once again did her best to smile at him. "I'll see you in an hour."

He gave a curt nod before he turned left and began walking away. "Remember," he tossed over his shoulder, "don't be late."

"I won't."

She waited for him to disappear around the corner before she cut right and broke into a full run. The cold February air bit through the single layer of her sweater, but she didn't care. She needed to get to Kerestyan and tell him what Trinity had done.

"You've been everything I expected...and more."

Logan growled as Trinity's voice echoed in her mind, flooding her veins with anger. Between Vouclade's reaction upon learning Trinity had explained to her what being a *Servio* meant, and Trinity's own high pitched comment concerning the chances of Logan running into Kerestyan in the alley that night, she should have known something was going on.

You did know...you just didn't know what to look for. She pushed her legs faster, but not so hard she risked the Veil. How fitting the training Trinity had given her was exactly what helped her uncover her dirty little secret.

As far as Logan was concerned, her strings lead straight back to Trinity Nelek. All she needed to figure out now was how many times the bitch had pulled them.

Chapter 21

“She’s baaaack!”

Kerestyan jumped and sat up when Trinity’s unexpected voice cut through the silence of his bed chamber. “What?”

She stood at the foot of his bed, her cherry red lips parted in a smile, black eyes dancing with excitement. “Logan. I just dropped her off at her new apartment in Soho. She’ll be making her debut on Lawrence’s arm at your monthly Court. And I should warn you, she can’t wait to see you.”

For a moment, Kerestyan couldn’t do anything but stiffen and blink. Had Trinity lost what was left of her sex crazed mind? “What do you mean she’ll be at Court? Why would you do that to me? How could you do that to *her*?”

She frowned at him. “What? I thought you’d be happy.”

“I’d have been happy had you brought her here first.” He threw back the heavy, velvet comforter and climbed out of bed. “I can’t talk to her at Court! If I so much as gaze at her for a little too long every vampire in the goddamn city will know I favor her. She’ll become nothing more than a target. What the hell were you thinking? And Lawrence,” he raked a hand through his hair, “for God’s sake...why would you put her back with the man who supplied her drugs? A man you know I’m not fond of?”

She stared at him, as if his concerns had absolutely no merit. “Logan isn’t going back to a life of drugs, Kerestyan. We both know that. And Lawrence happens to have a great head on his shoulders and will be able to teach Logan all she needs to know about the politics of New York. As for your Court, the Fledglings are so busy trying to gain *your* favor, most of them won’t even notice her. You need to calm down.”

“Do not tell me what I need to do. I’m *your* Elder, and you are standing in *my* home.”

She rolled her eyes, which only served to send his beast stalking. “You known damn well had I brought her here first neither of you would’ve made it to Court. Besides, did you ever think maybe she needs a little time to collect herself? She didn’t know she was coming back today until about an hour ago.”

He fisted his hands at his sides. “If it’s time she needs to collect herself, why are you sending her to Court?”

Trinity tipped her head back and stared at the ceiling, as if the answer to his question could be found amongst the white paint. "Because she's a *Servio*." She lowered her head and stared hard at him. "Because it's a perfect opportunity for her to see nearly every Fledgling in your city. You know, the ones who'll try to use and abuse her to get what they want. Going to Court her first night back gives her a chance to memorize every face in the room before she gets sucked into youthful politics and games. Don't you think she deserves any head start I can give her?"

Kerestyan drew a calming breath. "I concede your reasoning. However, you should've brought her here first. You should've allowed us, at the very least, a chance to talk before enduring a situation where we'll be forced to ignore each other." He narrowed his eyes on his sister. "You did explain to her the rules of Court, yes? She knows I have no choice but to treat her as I would any other resident?"

"Yes, Kerestyan, Logan is well aware of Courtly conduct. It's not like I didn't put any thought into this. Relax. You'll get to have her in your bed soon enough."

"My interest in Logan goes far beyond what happens between us in the bedroom! How dare you assume my only interest in her is sexual." He closed the space between them in a single stride. "How dare you stand in my home, in my city, and treat me with such disrespect. Treat her with such disrespect."

"How dare you question me about the choices I've made for *my Servio*." She flipped her hair over her shoulder. "I think you forget, at the end of the day, she's mine...not yours. And if you keep pushing the issue, I can pack her schedule full of so many meetings and so many errands she won't have time to play with the Lord."

He straightened as crimson washed over the room. "You will not keep her from me."

"Excuse me?" Her lips parted in a challenging smile. "Are you attempting to compromise my control over my servant?" She clucked her tongue at him. "Dad will not look kindly on your breach of Nelek Decorum."

She is your lesser. It took everything Kerestyan had, every shred of self control he possessed, not to free the animal raging inside him. "Leave my home and do not return this night."

Trinity laughed as wind whipped across the room. "I'll leave, but if I even think you've done something to sway my servant from me, I won't hesitate to tell Dad. And you know damn well the rules are in my favor on this one."

Kerestyan gnashed his teeth together when Trinity disappeared. Never, in all the time they'd known each other, had he ever felt such an overwhelm-

ing urge to strike her. To stand over her with his fangs bared and remind her she was, and would forever be, four thousand years his lesser.

His sister had always had a penchant for playing the rules as close to the line as she possibly could, but to stand before him and threaten to keep Logan from him...

He pushed the thought from his mind as he cast a glance to the clock on his night table. In little more than an hour he was due in Court. Perhaps the smiling green eyes of a certain woman in the crowd would return the control he'd slowly lost during the last nine days.

Kerestyan nodded to himself before he walked over to his armoire and chose his clothes for the night. Seeing Logan again would go a long way towards soothing the savage beast who craved her return as much as he did.

He smiled as he laid his clothes across the bed and headed for the shower. So would an hour of peace and quiet without someone younger than him screaming about politics, injustices or rules. Honestly, he'd had his fill over the last two weeks, and wasn't sure he could stay his hand any longer.

Logan braced a hand on the turn-style blocking her entrance to the subway platform then kicked her legs over the dull silver bars. She landed with a familiar ease and took off in a paced run again, ignoring the angry shouts of a weeble-wobble security guard, who didn't even bother to stand up from his seat. She smiled as the ring of a nightstick smacking against the metal leg of a folding chair faded behind her.

Immortal or not, some things never changed.

She rushed down the worn stairs two at a time, refusing to slow down until she reached the platform she needed to be on. Leaning back against one of the dirty columns plastered with flyers, she closed her eyes and worked to pull oxygen into her lungs.

The last time she'd felt so much motivation to run without stopping, Trinity had been trying to punch her. Strangely enough, she felt the same then as she did now. Only the hard kick to the gut she'd received for her efforts then paled in comparison to the stabbing sensation that burned in the center of her back now.

She rubbed her palms over her cold cheeks. She should have listened to her instincts when they'd urged her not to trust the lying bitch. The only difference was that while Trinity had promised not to punch her, she'd never promised not to manipulate her.

"I'm responsible for everything you do and say, and while I don't like exerting emotional or mental control over my Servios, I'll do it if I have to."

Listen to the words. Logan lowered her arms and swung her fists back into the cinderblock column behind her. Oh, she'd made it clear she didn't like using mental or emotional control but that didn't mean she hadn't.

She opened her eyes and stared down at the stained concrete floor. Trinity had made quite a show of convincing her she'd never manipulate an emotion as precious as love. But what if she'd lied about that, too? What if she'd silently channeled thoughts through the bond they supposedly shared as Master and *Servio*?

What if the feelings she had for Kerestyan weren't her own?

It was yet another question in her life she didn't think she'd like the answer to.

Logan groaned as her own thoughts were drowned out by a chorus of loud, obnoxious laughter. She watched as a group of men sauntered across the platform and stopped to stand about ten feet away near the next column. Dressed like Bikers, they hooted and hollered at a middle-age woman walking by, and two of the leather clad idiots even had the balls to grab her ass, and more, before she broke free and hurried away.

Logan shook her head as more laughter filled the chilly air. She'd committed some actions in her time on the streets that kept her moral compass firmly in the grey, but she'd never invaded anyone's personal space for longer than it took to relieve them of their money.

She narrowed her eyes as one of the Bikers met her disapproving stare through a curtain of shaggy, blond hair. He appeared to appraise her for a minute before he turned and whispered something to one of his bald buddies. He snapped his fingers then pointed at his friend's coat and made the "gimme" motion with his hand.

Logan stiffened as the guy reached into his coat. She hadn't survived on the streets of New York this long to get shanked in a subway station on a *decent* end of town. She wasn't leaving the world like that, and if for some reason fate dealt her that card this time around, she'd take every single one of their punk asses with her for the trouble.

When Baldy produced a cell phone, a surge of relief splashed over her. Unfortunately, concern recoated her nerves as the blond flipped open the phone, punched a few buttons and then stared over at her again. He cast a glance back to the phone, to her, the phone, then back to her yet again before he flashed a fanged smile.

Great. She'd been back for less than an hour and had already gained the attention of another vampire...and a stupid one at that.

She extended to her full height when he approached and stopped no more than two feet away. If nothing else, maybe forcing him to look up a few inches would make him think twice. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"It is you," he laughed. He held up the phone, screen facing him. "How'd you manage to get out alive when they got dusted?"

She glared down at him. "Get out of what alive?"

He flipped the phone around and held it in front of her face. "That."

The same heart Odin said she didn't have; sank all the way to Logan's toes. On the little smudged screen, beaming in grainy but vivid color was a picture of her and Kerestyan standing outside the convenience store the night he'd found her.

"My Techy friend Frank says this pic was snapped a few minutes after two of our peeps got dusted in an alley by his Lordship." He lowered the phone and leaned forward to sniff the air around her. "How the fuck did you get out alive? Your Puppet ass was just as much of a breach as they was. Right, Frank?"

Logan's entire body tensed as his group moved to form a semi-circle behind him. She scanned each one of their unblinking faces then swallowed the knot forming in her throat.

There were ten of them...and only one of her.

The owner of the phone gave her a hard look before he nodded. "She's the Puppet who was in the alley with 'em before King-K showed up. She walked out with King-K, our boys didn't."

She shook her head. King-K? These punks really did have respect issues. But issues aside, she needed to diffuse this situation as fast as possible. "Look, whatever you think you might know, is wrong. I wasn't a Puppet in the alley," she motioned to the cell phone in Shaggy's hand, "or when that picture was taken. I was just like everyone else in the world."

Shaggy tossed the phone back to Frank then shook the hair from his eyes. "Well you ain't like everyone else now, are ya? You wanna tell me what happened to my friends?"

She arched a brow. Was it a trick question? "They died."

"Why?" he asked as the circle tightened behind him.

The goblin in her belly shifted as the one emotion she didn't particularly care for churned hot in her stomach. Only now her fear twisted into a haze of sickened anger. "Because your idiot friends were stupid enough to fight in an alley, in plain sight of a human while Lord Kerestyan watched."

"Oh, bitch thinks 'cause she's a Puppet now she knows a thing or two." He tipped his head back and laughed before sniffing at her again. "Smells old to me. What happened? Did he take pity on your trashy little ass and pump you fulla his blood?" He looked her up and down then grinned in a leering way that made her skin crawl. "Or'd you make his dead dick hard and get yo' sweet ass pumped fulla somethin' else?" The circle finished his sentence with a round of unified laughter.

Logan didn't even flinch when a taller blond pushed his large body into the foot of space between her and Shaggy. He stood in front of her, his blue eyes dulled by a distance she knew all too well herself.

She stood still as he forcefully palmed her breasts and rubbed his cracked lips over her left earlobe. "There ain't no rules against havin' some fun with a Puppet. Did your Massa tell you that?" He traced the slimy tip of his tongue around the curve of her ear before he slid it inside. "I'll put it in every hole you got, and pop one every time you scream."

Logan relaxed as an image of him being added to the writhing wall in Stefan's chamber flashed in her mind. While she didn't have that option readily available, she'd settle for one of her own making.

Mind the Veil. She smiled as a familiar vibration shook the column behind her and the pop and squeal of air brakes drowned out the group's amused laughter. "You promise?" she asked as she reached down and grabbed the crotch of his baggy jeans. "Tell me something, do you take as good as you give?"

He raised his head and stared at her, his eyes half glazed. "I only take."

She closed her free hand around his right biceps as the tunnel to her left filled with light. *Three.* "That's good." *Two.* "Because I only give." *One.*

With every shred of strength she possessed, fueled even more by the powerful blood coursing through her veins, Logan tightened her grip and threw him into the side of the passing train. He slammed into two of the vampires who'd closed the circle on that side, taking them with him as he flew back into the windows hard enough to crack the glass.

She immediately turned right and bolted for the stairs leading up to the street, but ran headfirst into a wall of snarling vampires. Fists and boots came from all directions. Pain exploded behind her eyes in a brilliant flash of white light that surged through her limbs. Frigid concrete bit into her face as they wrestled her to the ground. The heat and taste of her own blood coated her lips.

Blinded by pain, she refused to give in. She punched and kicked at the cold bodies twisted around her. Scratched every inch of skin she could get her hands on. Screamed as loud as her lungs would allow, until her mouth filled with a coppery flavor she knew all too well.

Logan squeezed her eyes closed as a heavy boot cracked against her temple. When she felt all the weight lift off her, she rolled onto her side and let out a spiteful, gurgled laugh.

The odds hadn't been in her favor from the beginning, but there weren't many times in her life when they had.

Why should now be any different?

"The Lord takes one of mine," Shaggy growled close to her ear, "I take one of his." She winced as his hand closed around her face, his cold fingers digging deep into her cheeks. He lifted her head up. "You shoulda played nice, Bitch." She coughed and sputtered when he slammed her head back against the concrete. "You shoulda played nice."

Nelek's don't play nice... Her own laughter was the last sound Logan heard before the darkness claimed her.

Chapter 22

Kerestyan sat in his black leather chair, eyes glued to the ornate French doors of his meeting home, waiting for them to open again. With only two minutes left before the Grandfather clock in the hall chimed in the arrival of Midnight, Logan was nowhere to be seen.

Neither were Lawrence, nor Craig and his pack for that matter.

A tingle slipped down his Ancient spine as he shifted and nearly a hundred pairs of youthful eyes followed the movement in unison. His concern and anticipation hung heavy in the air, reflected in the way each Fledgling peered up at him as though they were a scolded puppy, waiting for the rolled up newspaper to drop.

If his sister removed Logan from the city without telling him, she'd taste the full fury of his displeasure from the back of his hand.

Kerestyan surged to his feet as a tall, thin figure appeared outside the frosted glass of the doors. His heart clenched of its own accord, filling his ears with a very slow, natural rhythm he hadn't heard or felt in since the day he died. He stared straight ahead, tension tightening every muscle as the silver handles turned.

The figure had to be Logan. There was no one else it could be.

With no small amount of force, the doors burst open and Raze charged into the foyer. Worry etched deep into her features, she inclined her head toward his personal office. "Now," she mouthed. She flicked her wrist, opening the door without touching it.

Kerestyan's entire body went numb as he strode across the room and through the doorway behind her. "What's wrong?" His fangs broke free before he could finish the question. When she slammed the door closed without answering, and then her golden Paladin barrier flared around *him*, his beast pushed to the surface. "What's wrong?" The roar was deafening, even in his own ears.

"Craig has Logan."

The white-hot flash of rage he felt as her words formed was nothing compared the abrupt and painful seize of his slowly beating heart. Scarlet flames licked the ceiling. Thick bands of obsidian shadow swallowed the floor.

He slammed his fists against the glittering barrier; roaring again as the animal inside him took complete control. He threw his head back as razor sharp scales pushed through his skin, stinging with the fury of a thousand poisoned arrows. The cracking of bone and muscle filled his ears as his wings tried to form but were confined by the barrier. Blinding agony twisted down his spine as the space around him grew smaller.

"Holy shit!" A familiar voice boomed in the distance. "What the hell happened? Did you put him...drop that damn thing! He can't shift in there!"

"I can't let him shift in here! He'll kill everyone!"

"Drop the fucking barrier, NOW!"

Kerestyan felt his beast hesitate as the barrier dissolved and two powerful arms wrapped around him like a vice. "Come back, Kerestyan. Whatever it is, we'll fix it. I'll fix it. I promise you." It was the desperate, pleading tone of his brother's voice that lightened the crimson haze all around him.

He pushed out of Odin's hold and closed his eyes as he struggled with the beast inside him. He had to regain control, needed to focus all the rage burning in his blood. Slowly, his half formed wings retracted and the scales sank back into his skin. His bones, which had distended and dislocated, ached as if he'd died all over again.

"Would somebody tell me what happened?" Odin yelled.

"Craig has Logan," Kerestyan growled. He closed his eyes and forced his beast down again as the words reverberated in his mind. He should have killed the Fledgling when he had the chance. Should have rent the flesh from his bones and created his own wall of displeasure.

"Raze," Odin barked. "He needs to be healed. It'll take too much blood for him to do it on his own. Then he really will go out there and eat all those kids."

She laughed, but her voice was strained. "Oh, I am so going to meet my maker for this."

Kerestyan stiffened as her warm hands pushed under his shirt and slid up to rest on his bare chest. She no more than splayed her fingers before a warm sensation rushed through his body, sizzling in his blood. His beast shrank back instantly, recoiling from the righteous magic burning under her fingertips.

"Wow! That was fast."

Kerestyan opened his eyes and glared down at the Paladin. "Where is she, Raze?"

She cringed as she pulled her hands from under his shirt. "I'm not sure," she threw her hands up between them, "but let me explain why before you or your brother hit me."

"Make it quick," Kerestyan snapped. It took every vestige of control he possessed to stop the room from turning red again. And truthfully, he grew tired of attempting to keep his beast at bay.

"Okay," Raze breathed. "I had Jared watching Craig's pack while I tended a Veil breach in Central Park. He said they attacked a really tall *Servio* down on a subway platform in Soho then hopped a train with her."

"How did he know she was a *Servio*?" Odin blurted out in a rush. "Are you sure it was Logan?"

Raze nodded. "Jared said the blood on the platform smelled old, so I flashed in and took a look. It was definitely a *Servio* who belongs to your family. I know what you guys smell like. Jared said he watched Craig and his people get on the train with her, and then he jumped in the car ahead of them. By the time he walked to the back window, Frank, Craig and Logan had disappeared. The rest of the pack got off in pairs, at four different stops, and all went different directions. He followed the last pair, but lost them when they hit the alleys in Brooklyn."

"Why the fuck didn't Jared help her?" Odin yelled. "What the hell?"

Kerestyan ground his teeth together and stared at Odin. "Frank is a Watcher."

"Oh, great." He threw both arms in the air. "We've got a Tech running around using his blood to make people invisible...which means the two fuck-heads could've gotten off the train with Logan at any stop."

Kerestyan focused back on Raze. "How long ago was the attack?"

"Thirty minutes, tops. I came here as soon as I realized it was Logan. Jared has the rest of the team checking all the places Craig's known to sleep, but so far they haven't found signs of him or Logan." She pressed her lips together as tears filled her eyes. "I'm sorry I don't have more information for you, Kerestyan, I really am. I feel like I let you down."

"No," Odin bellowed. "Jared let him the fuck down. He could've helped Logan the second they started attacking her. What the fuck is wrong with him? Is he stupid?"

Kerestyan shook his head then stepped over and pulled Raze into his arms. "Jared's a Fledgling, Odin. If he'd have gotten involved, it wouldn't have helped Logan. The fight would have only escalated. And then Logan, and the Veil, would've been torn to shreds. He did the right thing." He caught Raze's chin and tipped her head up. "And so did you." He released his hold and tried to offer her a reassuring smile before he moved to pull the blade down from the wall behind his desk.

"What are you doing, Kerestyan?" Raze asked.

"First, I'm going to find the woman I love." He pulled the Ancient blade from the scabbard and tested the weight. "Then, I'm going to kill all of Craig's

friends." He sheathed the blade and drew a deep breath. "And for the finale, I intend to stand back and watch as Craig becomes the newest decoration in my Father's chamber."

"Fuck yeah! I don't even know who Craig is, but I'm so going with you. Want me to call Vouclade? I bet he can find the little fucker."

"No Vouclade!" Kerestyan turned to glare at Odin. "He won't be able to find her any faster than we can, and as soon as he finds out what happened to her he'll go straight to Father. And while my beast would like nothing more right now than to watch him scourge every Fledgling in this city, that is not my way."

"I'm all for the culling of the ranks," Odin said as his well used blade appeared in his hand. "But screw this trying to find her shit. I'm just gonna tap on her brain, wake her up if she isn't already, and ask her if she knows where she is."

"No," Raze interjected. "Craig sensed when Kerestyan and I were using telepathy the other day. If he can sense mine, he can definitely sense yours. No one in his group, including him, is old enough to sustain a mind link. If Craig senses one go off, he'll kill Logan the minute it happens."

"How do you know?" Odin asked. "When the hell did you become a Fledgling behavior expert?"

"When I started killing Leeches for a living," she offered with a vicious smile. "I know because if I was him, that's exactly what I'd do. The first piece of information she's going to give up, aside from her condition, is her location. Craig's ignorant, but he's not stupid. If he senses telepathy he's going to kill her then skip town and let his pack take the heat."

Kerestyan tightened his grip on his blade and stared at Raze. "Craig won't be going anywhere when I'm finished with him."

"Kerestyan," she pleaded. "There has to be another way. I don't agree with what Craig and his people did, but you and Captain Black Eyes can't go running around the city with swords strapped to your backs."

Odin's laughter filled the room. "This *is* our way, Raze. Haven't you figured that out yet?"

"No! This is Stefan's way." She glared at Kerestyan as gold rippled the air around her. "You're better than this. I accepted your offer because you promised you'd run a fair and just city. You promised you'd give the Fledglings a place where they wouldn't be trampled under the boots of Ancients. That's what you said you wanted." She motioned between him and Odin. "But that's not what this is! At its core, Craig kidnapped a *Servio*. You don't have any rules against kidnapping or killing servants." She motioned to the door behind him. "You sat out there three days ago and let him go for com-

mitting the same action you're about to kill him for. How is that fair? Just because it affects you now, you want to change the rules?"

She raised her hands and backed away. "I refuse to be a part of this. You're better than this, both of you. This 'kill all who oppose or offend' mentality is exactly how your Father earned his reputation as the Butcher of Naples. Are you sure you want to follow in those footsteps?"

Kerestyan closed his eyes as his beast went to war with his heart and conscience. Those weren't the footsteps he wanted to follow in. He didn't want to be an iron-fisted tyrant. He wanted to be a fair Lord. He wanted to give the Fledglings a place where they didn't have to fear being trampled under the feet of veritable Blood Gods. He wanted to watch his city grow and thrive.

But not at the cost of the woman he loved.

There would always be another city. But there would never be another woman who stirred him the way Logan did. No woman whose distant green eyes he craved to fill with happiness, even if it was only when she gazed up at him. No woman who sauntered up to him with challenge lighting her beautiful features, and then fought to the last no matter the odds.

Kerestyan dropped his blade on the desk and stared down at it. He fisted his hands as yet another function that ceased the day he died flared back to life. Tears heated and burned the rims of his eyes. "What would you have me do, Raze? Stand here and allow Logan to die? Should I drop down on my knees and pray for your God to save her? The God who stood by and let his own Children toss around the curses that made me what I am?" He shoved the sword off his desk and glared at her. "I stopped believing in your God the day he turned his back on his own creation. But I will *not* turn my back on Logan. My city created her and I *will* save her...no matter what it costs me." He turned to face Odin. "Get Vouclade."

Odin considered him for a long moment then slowly shook his head. "No." He walked around and turned on the two lamps in the office that weren't already on. "Is the closet over in the corner dark?"

Kerestyan narrowed his eyes. "Yes. Why?"

"Because your heartfelt rant gave me an idea better than Vouclade. Raze is right. You're not Dad. Logan means as much to you as this city does, and I see that now. I heard it in your words. We can get her back without a bunch of innocent kids dying." He moved to stand next to Kerestyan. "I promised you I'd fix this and I meant it."

Kerestyan sensed the use of telepathy but before he could ask who Odin contacted, the closet door burst open and Drake Black stepped out.

Odin immediately pointed and laughed. "I got you again."

Drake looked behind him then shook his head. "Dude, the whole Drake coming out of the closet routine is getting old. Get some new material."

When Kerestyan cast a sideways glare at his brother, Odin simply shrugged. "What? I think it's funny." He motioned to Drake. "He came out of the closet, get it?"

"Yeah, yeah," Drake groaned. "Everybody gets it. Now what the hell do you want?"

"Remember meeting Logan when you popped in the other day?"

Drake nodded. "Yeah. Why?" He cracked his signature lopsided grin. "Does she want a night of Drake style fun?"

Kerestyan stiffened. "She doesn't want a night with you. She's *mine*."

Drake wrinkled his nose. "I thought she was Trinity's?"

Odin laughed. "She's Trinity's servant, but she's Kerestyan's woman."

"Oh, my bad. Sorry, Kerestyan." He waved a pointed finger back in Kerestyan's direction. "You just keep your beastie over there. Odin's I can deal with. The whole shifting right into a dragon and burning villagers...that's a little creepy, even for me."

"That's why I called you," Odin said. "One of Kerestyan's Fledglings beat up Logan and kidnapped her. Would you be willing to go get her for us?"

"Sure thing. Where's she at?"

Kerestyan closed his eyes and shook his head. Although Odin always meant well, sometimes he didn't think situations through. "We don't know. If we did, I would've traveled the wind and retrieved her myself."

Drake reached up and scratched the back of his head. "Well, do you know why the Fledgling took her?"

Kerestyan slid his gaze over to Raze. That was a very good question, and one he hadn't considered. "Why did Craig take Logan? How would he even know about her?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe it was random. It's not like he hasn't done this before."

"Who cares about the why right now guys, we can figure that out later," Odin said. He clapped his hands and grinned up at Drake. "Drake, my man, can't you teleport straight to a person you've met instead of a place you've already been like the rest of us?"

Drake let out a hearty laugh. "Why, yes, yes I can." He motioned between himself and Odin. "I'm with you. Forgive me for the momentary brain fart. Work's been a real bitch lately. I haven't gotten much sleep." He smiled again. "I'll go get her without the benefit of a formal contract, but you'll owe me."

Kerestyan nodded at him. "No matter the cost, I'll pay it."

Drake turned and headed back towards the closet. "Give me ten minutes. I'd take you with me," he added over his shoulder, "but something tells me—"

"No!" Raze shrieked. "I can't imagine Craig snatched Logan only to dump her somewhere then take off. I, as the protector of humanity, cannot have a huge dragon flying around New York City spitting fire all over the place. And I think we all know that's exactly what will happen if Kerestyan so much as sees Craig's stupid face." She pinned Kerestyan with her unnatural eyes. "For once in your life, you're going to have to let someone else be the knight in shining armor."

As much as he wanted to, and his beast wanted to, Kerestyan couldn't argue her logic. If he laid eyes on Craig before Logan was safely in his arms again, he would lose control. Then the city, all of its inhabitants, as well as the Veil, would be in grave danger.

"If you had let me finish," Drake said as he stepped into the closet. "I was going to say, but something tells me it's not a good idea. It goes back to the whole people running around on fire theory."

When the door clicked into place, Kerestyan turned to his brother. Perhaps he'd been wrong to believe he couldn't benefit from Odin's guidance anymore. "Thank you. I would've never thought to ask Drake."

"I know. Most people never do unless they want someone dead. I don't care what the rumors say, Drake's good people."

Kerestyan moved to stand in front of the closet and folded his arms behind his back. For the fourth time since he'd met Logan, time was his enemy. However, he was willing to wager the next ten minutes...would be longest ten minutes he'd ever known.

Logan winced as she opened her eyes and pain wrapped burning fingers around her skull. Although the lights in the room were dim, she squinted against them anyway, wishing someone would plunge her back into the darkness.

In the darkness her body didn't ache, her ears didn't ring...and the only person standing around her was Kerestyan. No words passed between his soft lips. He just stood there next to her, proud and regal, as if somehow he always had been.

She only wished he was here with her now.

She sucked in a sharp breath and groaned as angry shouts cut through the chiming bells in her ears. As the words became more than loud, unintel-

ligible growls, the fog clouding her eyes lifted, revealing all ten of her attackers standing around what appeared to be a rather nice living room.

But she wasn't standing. She sat on a hard wooden chair, her upright position only maintained by the chains wrapped around her shoulders and chest, binding her to the tall ladder back. And they weren't even cool, menacing chains; they were the thin, silver links used to keep a small dog in his yard. She scrunched up her face at the offense, realizing how stupid the action was the minute the cartilage forming the bridge of her nose crunched.

The bastards had broken her nose. And, if she wasn't mistaken, the orbit of her left eye, a handful of ribs, a few fingers, her right arm...and her left leg.

She knew her body had already gone to work healing her internal injuries because her mouth wasn't full of blood anymore, but she didn't dare expend any more power than she involuntarily had. The last thing she wanted was to grow fangs and put herself on a twelve hour timetable with death.

Honestly, she'd had more than her share of deadlines over the last two weeks. All of which, strangely enough, seemed to shove her towards the sickle wielding Grim Reaper himself.

She looked up from her restraints as Frank's angry voice filled her throbbing ears. "I don't fuckin' think this is a good idea any more, Craig. The bitch is awake. She's gonna tell him where we are! He's gonna kill all of us."

If only. If it were that easy to use telepathy, which she wasn't nearly old enough to do yet, she'd have done it back in the subway and saved herself the disrespect of being bound to a chair with doggie chains.

Craig, or Shaggy as she preferred, flipped Frank the New York one-finger salute. "She's not gonna tell him anything. And if she does," he tapped a finger against his temple, "I'll know. Calm the fuck down." He turned and smiled at her. "She's gonna tell us where his Lordship sleeps."

Even though it hurt in ways she couldn't begin to find words for, Logan laughed the most amused sound she could muster. "I wouldn't tell you what I ate for breakfast, let alone where Kerestyan sleeps. Go fuck yourself, Shaggy." She inclined her pounding head towards the tall, slimy-tongued blond, who stood only a few feet away. "And take Scooby Doo with you."

Heavy applause and hearty laughter thundered through the room, causing the bell symphony to perform a frantic encore in Logan's ears. She squeezed her eyes closed tight, trying to stave off the tide of nausea rising inside her.

"Now that was a great line," a deep voice laughed.

Logan opened her eyes just in time to see Drake step out of a dark doorway across from where she sat. Half of his face scrunched up as he sucked a breath through his teeth. "Wow. They really did a number on you."

Relief pounded a fast rhythm through every inch of Logan's broken body. She had no clue how Drake had found her, no idea how he'd stepped out of a dark room, but she'd buy him as much beer as he could possibly drink if he took her back to Kerestyan.

She opened her mouth to tell him those exact words but stopped when she realized the room had gone silent. Disbelief and horror marked ten wide-eyed faces. Ten mouths gaped open, forty limbs trembled, and if their bodies still worked, she was sure ten pairs of pants would have turned dark yellow right in front of her very sober eyes.

When Logan slid her gaze back to Drake, he flashed a lopsided grin. "They all know who I am, and they also know what that means. You see," he crossed his scarred arms over his chest and scanned the room, "I have a bit of a reputation in New York, among other places, for killing supernatural creatures the 'powers that be' don't believe deserve to live any more. But someone thinks our fair Logan here...definitely deserves to keep breathing. So unless I hear any objections, I'm gonna take her, and we're gonna leave." He paused for no more than three seconds. "No?" He laughed. "I didn't think so."

With nothing more than the wave of Drake's large hand, the chains binding Logan to the chair fell, tinkling against the hardwood floor. She fought to stay upright and did her best to smile up at him.

"Thanks for the save."

"Sure thing." He took a step forward, but stopped short when the tip of a blade punched through his neck, barely to the left of his Adam's apple. A red glow flashed behind his blue eyes as every shadow in the room gained some kind of tangible substance. The black patches under the chairs and furniture writhed and mottled, reminding her instantly of Stefan's wall.

Drake raised a finger and stared down at it for a second before he pushed the blade out the way it came in. He turned around to face Shaggy, whose eyes were glued to the boot knife lying on the floor. "You must be the brains of this operation." He cast a glance over his shoulder at her. "This the leader?"

She nodded, watching as the wound in his neck disappeared under a shimmer of bronzed skin. "He's the one who did all the talking."

"Good enough."

All at once, the shadows in the room came to life and wrapped around Craig, muffling his terrified screams.

"Oh, you think that's bad?" Drake laughed at the dark cocoon. "Wait till you see where they take you." He turned around and smiled at her again as the shadows vanished behind him. "Let's try this again."

She whimpered as he gently scooped her up, and then carefully adjusted her over his arms so her head could rest against his shoulder. "Can you take me to Kerestyan?"

He chuckled. "Considering he's the guy who's gonna put my house in Chicago on a Budweiser route, nothing would make me happier." He turned and walked towards the dark room he'd entered through but paused and gave the nine Fledglings one last look. "None of you saw this. You never saw Logan, you never saw me, and you aren't sure what happened to Craig. He said he was going out for some Necks, but never came back. New York doesn't seem to be the place for you. You need a change of scenery. Atlanta sounds good. You'll leave first thing tomorrow night."

Logan tipped her head back to look up at Drake. "That's how mental manipulation is done?"

"Yup. Well, I didn't have to say the words out loud. I did that for your benefit, so you could hear with your own ears why they won't be coming after you again."

"Thanks."

He nodded. "Not a problem. Close your eyes, keep them open. Whichever you choose – it's about to get dark."

She opted to keep her eyes open as Drake stepped through the doorway and her world plunged into darkness yet again. Staring straight ahead, she watched as the shadows cracked like a door, opening to a handsome face and an incredible pair of blue eyes.

There was no better sight than Kerestyan's gorgeous smile. No better feel than his strong arms as they wrapped tight around her broken body. She buried her face into the side of his neck as tears stung her eyes. She'd been waiting for this moment, but hadn't realized just how much she needed him until now.

There was nothing to wax poetic about.

No poems about love wrote themselves in her mind.

She needed him the way she needed oxygen. No more, no less.

His warm lips seared her ear. "I'm sorry I wasn't the one who saved you, but we didn't know where you were. I thought I lost you..."

Even though every fiber of her body protested the movement, she leaned back and smiled at him. "It's okay." She tilted her head and brushed her lips across his. "I didn't know where I was either."

His chest rumbled against hers, making her body ache in an entirely different way before he pressed a kiss to her lips. A soft, breath stealing kiss that wrapped a warm, fuzzy blanket around the animal inside her and for the first time in a long time, made her feel whole.

"Break it up you horny teenagers. Bones needs her bones fixed."

When Odin's happy voice filled the air and Kerestyan broke from her mouth, Logan coughed out a laugh. He always seemed to interrupt at the precise moment something good was happening. "We were having a moment, Odin."

"Yeah, I'll write Kodak about it tomorrow," he grumbled. "Kerestyan, lie her on the desk, *alone*. Raze, do your voodoo."

"I'm so going to Hell," a whisky, feminine voice laughed.

Logan smiled as Kerestyan gently placed her on top of what she assumed was the desk Odin mentioned, then sat down next to her but refused to relinquish her hand. "Not very good at following directions, are you, Lord Vampire?"

He smiled down at her. "Not when they come from my brother."

What if they come from his sister? Anger shot through Logan's veins in response to the thought just as a woman with crazy colored hair and purple eyes appeared next to Kerestyan.

"Hi, Logan. I'm Raze, Kerestyan's Head of Enforcement. Don't mind me," she slipped her warm hands under Logan's sweater, "I'm just going to heal you. It won't take long." Before she even finished the sentence, a spire of heat shot through Logan's body, leaving her feeling not only good, but a little tingly.

"Wow," Logan breathed. "That was fast."

Raze laughed rather loud. "Yeah, that's what Odin said."

"Hey! That doesn't make me sound very good."

"That's fucking priceless. The next time you make my big ass walk out of a closet, don't be surprised if I hand you a bottle of little blue pills."

Ignoring the closet and little blue pill comment, which she had to admit were funny, Logan focused on Kerestyan. "We need to talk about Trinity. Did you—"

"Damn it," he growled. "I forgot to inform her. I'm sorry. I'll do it now."

Logan jumped off the desk and glared at him. "No! Don't you tell your lying bitch of a sister anything. Larry told her about me months ago, Kerestyan. She even told him she held me over the toilet while I puked my way through withdrawal!"

"She what?" Kerestyan and Odin barked, in unison.

"I don't know how she did it," Logan said. "But she set us up so we'd be in the alley at the same time. I also think she had something to do with Shaggy and his cronies kicking my ass. He had a picture on his cell phone of us standing outside the convenience store the night we met. Well, not his cell phone," she corrected. "It belonged to some guy named Frank."

Kerestyan rounded the desk and moved to stand in front of her, his face pale twisted with more anger than she'd ever seen. He took both of her hands in his. "Are you confident in the words you speak?"

She nodded. "I'm more than confident. I don't think Larry realized what he was saying, but as soon as he mentioned Trinity helping me through withdrawal everything started to add up. That's why I was down in the subway. I was on my way here to tell you what she'd done."

He frowned. "Why didn't you wait and come with Larry?"

"Because he wasn't going to your penthouse, he was on his way to the Estate."

He looked as confused as she felt. "We're in my office at the Estate right now, Logan. Larry never arrived for Court."

"Oh." She cast a glance around the large room, which looked no different than what she'd expect to find in his penthouse. "I thought we were in one of the other rooms in your home." She eyed the dark mahogany desk and black leather chairs. "When you find a style you like, you really stick with it, don't you?"

"Good God you are such a Nelek already," Raze laughed. "The woman's in the middle of a crisis and she stops to make an offhanded comment about her surroundings." She shook her head and blinked a few times. "It's gotta be the blood, which is exactly why I'm leaving now." She jabbed a polished black fingernail in Kerestyan's direction, which Logan immediately wanted to tear off. "I told you this had Lord Evil's bloody signature all over it. Next time, listen to me." Then, *without* the wind's assistance, she disappeared.

Logan stared at the now empty space. "Can everybody in this room disappear but me?"

"Yup," Drake said with a smile. "It was a pleasure saving you, Logan, but I'm gonna check out. I have to go to Detroit in the morning and kill some people. Good luck all." He exited stage closet.

She gazed back up at Kerestyan, whose blue eyes were narrowed and thoughtful. She could almost see the wheels turning in his mind. "What do we do now?"

"I don't know about you two," Odin laughed, "but I'm gonna go kick me some six thousand year old Nelek ass." He frowned as a gust of cold wind whipped across the room. "Kerestyan, is that yours?" His blacked out eyes went wide. "Oh shit!"

Less than a second later, the icy winds of oblivion claimed her and Kerestyan, too.

Chapter 23

“Welcome home, all of you.”

Kerestyan bowed his head as his Father’s amused voice echoed through the stone chamber. He’d fully expected to appear here, knowing the moment Odin asked if the winds were his, they were being summoned home.

Truthfully, he wasn’t surprised.

Raze had been right all along. Logan’s situation most certainly bore his Father’s signature. Kerestyan just wasn’t sure how elegantly the name had been written. The chances of Logan being a pawn on the immortal chess-board were slim at best. Never, in all the years of his existence, had he witnessed a match involving a human.

Vampires, werewolves and Paladins, yes.

But never a human.

Kerestyan smiled as Logan’s small, warm hand curled around his in a tender gesture that made his chest tighten. He turned his head to where she stood on his left and gazed down into her emerald eyes. While the distance hadn’t faded, something soft flickered deep behind them each time she stared up at him. He wouldn’t be so bold as to call what he saw love, but it was more than they had before her training began.

Perhaps the old adage was true. Perhaps absence did make the heart grow fonder.

It certainly had in his case.

He cast a glance over the eerily silent room. Trinity and Lawrence stood roughly ten feet to his right. Trinity, her perfectly colored face showing no sign of emotion, stared up at their Father as if she simply waited for the punishment to begin.

Which if Kerestyan had his way, not only would it start, but it would continue for a very, very long time. And if Logan remained her servant after the punishment was handed down, she would be the only one allowed to tend Trinity’s influence in *his* city.

Lawrence appeared slightly confused, but glared at Trinity, disgust drawing his features tight. From what Logan had said, it didn’t sound as though Lawrence was fully aware of Trinity’s plan, which would only be to his benefit in his Father’s eyes.

Odin lay on the floor in an unconscious heap next to his Father's throne. No doubt, his brother had broken Nelek Decorum and lunged for Trinity the moment he appeared. Kerestyan couldn't help but to smile as Odin's leg twitched. It certainly wasn't the first time his brother had found himself in a position as such, and if history was a good judge of the future, which Kerestyan knew it was, it wouldn't be the last.

He focused his attention back on his Father when he turned his head and locked his hollowed gaze on Trinity. Displeasure rippled the air around them, and Kerestyan could feel the weight of it coursing through his own blood, even though he sensed the malice wasn't directed at him.

He stiffened when he caught sight of Logan leaning forward in his peripheral. She appeared to be following his Father's line of sight, which he knew was correct the moment her eyes narrowed and she released his hand. He'd never seen her look so angry, not even while she'd relayed what Trinity had done to her.

To both of them.

He started to reach out and stop her when she drew a deep breath and stepped around him, but stopped himself. Above all else, she'd been the one most affected by Trinity's deceit. And while he was absolutely furious, he knew better than to address Trinity or even glare at her too long in front of his Father.

This was Court. His Father's hallowed Court. And no one, save the man on the throne, was to speak or commit to action before he gave permission. However, he also made no move to intercede in whatever action Logan sought to carry out.

Kerestyan watched as Logan moved to stand in front of Trinity, who still hadn't broken her stare on their Father. Logan seemed to appraise her for a moment, then balled up her fist, drew back and punched Trinity in the left eye.

It took every shred of self control Kerestyan possessed not to burst out laughing as Trinity scrunched up her face and smacked a hand over her eye. "Oh my God! I can't believe you punched me!"

The look of sudden surprise on Logan's face said she couldn't quite believe she had, either. Fortunately, it quickly faded and she returned to glaring at his sister. "I should have never trusted you! You set me up. You set Kerestyan up. You lying bitch! Why?"

"Logan," his Father's voice echoed through the chamber, reverberating off the dark stone walls. "I will allow you that single breach of Nelek Decorum. Return to Kerestyan's side."

Logan's body stiffened for a moment, but then she did exactly as instructed. She gifted Kerestyan a wry smile as she passed and retook her

place on his left. "I don't know what came over me. I couldn't resist. She deserved it."

Kerestyan chuckled then leaned down and pressed a quick kiss to her cheek. "I won't disagree with you," he whispered. "Do you feel better?"

She shrugged as her enchanting smile faded. "A little bit." She leaned forward and stared at his sister again. "I'd feel even better if she answered my fucking question!"

"Trinity Nelek, stand at my feet and face your brother and Elder, Kerestyan Nelek, Lord of New York, diplomat of the Nelek family."

Kerestyan straightened as Trinity stepped up a few stairs then turned to face him. She folded her arms over her chest and glared at him as though he was the one who'd put her in the situation.

"Kerestyan, I grant you permission to speak freely. You need not hold your tongue, Child."

Kerestyan offered a curt nod in respect to his Father, then returned Trinity's disgusted glare with one of his own. "My only question is, why? You had no reason to go behind my back in such a deceitful manner."

"I had every reason!" she yelled. "Logan was a human resident of your city, which meant she belonged to you. If I'd come to you and told you I was looking to make her a *Servio*, you would've gone and watched her yourself. Then instead of falling in love with her, you'd have taken her as your own servant. You can't tell me you wouldn't!"

Kerestyan pushed his beast down when it rose inside him. As much as what Trinity did to Logan offended him in ways he couldn't begin to find the words to explain, there was a much larger issue it appeared his sister had forgotten. "According to Lawrence, who may correct me if I'm wrong, he told you about Logan months ago. My feelings for her aside for a moment, you allowed a human who had knowledge of our existence to roam the streets of my city. You were taught better. I would kill a Fledgling for such an offense!"

He stiffened as a new realization struck him with the intensity of a lightning bolt. He narrowed his eyes on Trinity again. "Exactly how did you arrange for Logan to meet me in the alley?"

She shrugged a bare shoulder. "Lawrence told me her schedule."

Kerestyan inhaled a deep breath. He only had so much patience and dealing with Trinity quickly eroded it away. "Do not play word games, Trinity. How did you arrange for *me* to meet Logan in the alley?"

She frowned and switched the position her arms. "I knew you were already having trouble with the three Fledglings, so I manipulated their minds to make them fight in a bunch of different alleys for a few months. I knew if Raze saw them enough, she'd run and tell you like a good little girl, and then eventually you'd watch them yourself. All I did from there was leave them

with a suggestion to fight in Logan's alley every Wednesday and Sunday around three o'clock in the morning. Then I sat back and waited."

"You put them in a position to die, just to get to me?" Logan screamed.

"Yes," Kerestyan growled. "That's exactly what she did, and they died by my hand."

Trinity snorted and rolled her sable eyes. "Oh, please. They still broke the Veil. She was human and she saw them fighting with their fangs out. End of story. It's not like you haven't manipulated Fledglings, Kerestyan."

Kerestyan couldn't argue with her point. He'd manipulated Fledglings countless times through the ages, even causing death on rare occasion. He'd been in Trinity's shoes before, not standing in front of his Father as they were now, but the Ancient behind the strings of a Fledgling.

He shook his head. "What would you have done if I'd killed Logan, Trinity? What would you have done if she didn't pass Father's tests?"

She had the nerve to laugh. "I knew you wouldn't kill her. I didn't think you'd fall for her as fast as you did, but I knew you wouldn't kill her. I've known you for six thousand years, K. I didn't need to watch her for very long before I realized you'd like her, and that was all I needed to make sure she didn't end up as your servant. That's also how I knew she's everything Dad looks for in a potential Child or *Servio*. There was no way he'd pass her up."

Kerestyan frowned. "How did you know she'd become your servant? What if she went to Vouclade or Odin? What if Father had taken her as his own?"

She shrugged again. "I didn't. But I knew if you liked her the way I thought you would, you'd want her to stay close." She motioned to herself. "I'm the only one with ties to New York other than you. Look, K, it wasn't some grand scheme against you. I took a chance. I figured with our similar backgrounds, she'd make a great servant." She cast a glance to Logan then back to him. "And I was right."

Logan stepped forward and jabbed a trembling finger in Trinity's direction. "Did you manipulate Craig and his cronies to attack me?"

Trinity shook her head immediately, which was the only action that saved Kerestyan from lunging forward and finding himself next to Odin. "Hell no, I didn't," she snapped. "Dad told me what happened. I didn't have anything to do with that. I've never had any dealings with Craig or the other Fledglings in his group."

Logan's beautiful face twisted with rage. "How the hell are we supposed to believe that? How am I supposed to believe you?"

"Trinity was not party to your incident in the subway, Logan," his Father advised. "The circumstances behind Craig learning of your existence were purely coincidental in nature. Watchers, regardless of age, have always en-

gaged in their namesake. Frank did no more than what is expected from members of his family."

Kerestyan leaned forward and laced his fingers between Logan's then gently pulled her back to his side. He could feel the anger ebbing from her body, but the last situation he wanted to deal with was his Father punishing her for misconduct.

She squeezed his hand before her green eyes narrowed back on Trinity. "So did you do anything else? Did I find out about vampires because of you? Have you manipulated any of my thoughts or emotions?"

Trinity closed her eyes and shook her head. "No. I didn't make you find out about vampires, you did that all on your own. And like I told you before, I would never manipulate your feelings for K. What you guys have is real. Aside from my plan that got you together, I didn't have anything else to do with it. For what it's worth, I'm sorry, but at the same time...I'm not. You two are good together."

Logan squeezed Kerestyan's hand again as her blood cooled from Trinity's words. As much as she wanted to punch the bitch again, if it wasn't for Trinity, she would've never met Kerestyan. And she could tell by the softer look on his face, he was thinking the same thing.

She wanted to be mad, wanted to keep screaming, but at the end of the day, she was back in New York with the man she cared about. Although it would be a long time before she trusted Trinity with anything more than an apple, she still had to make a life for herself as a *Servio*.

"I have no more questions for Trinity," Kerestyan said as he looked up at Stefan. "Do with her as you see fit."

Stefan gave a single, clipped nod. "Trinity, your punishment for breaking the Veil, as well as my Decorum, will begin when the sun rises. Vouclade will retrieve you when he has finished preparations. You may return to your chambers. Take Lawrence with you, I will address him at a later time."

Trinity, looking scared and scolded, bowed her head to Stefan before she turned and quickly made her way towards the doors with Larry in tow.

Logan almost felt bad for her...almost.

The clank of metal on metal sounded, drawing her attention back to Stefan as he shifted on his throne. "Congratulations, Logan Ellis, you have successfully completed the last segment of your testing. Do you feel enlightened?"

She sighed. "You knew the whole time, didn't you?"

He stood and descended the stairs. "Of course. The only flaw in Trinity's carefully constructed plan was in not manipulating Lawrence's memory of you. Had she done so, I would have allowed her the victory. However, much

as Kerestyan extends choices, Trinity has never found it acceptable to use such powers on those she favors."

Logan arched a brow when he stopped in front of her. "She won't manipulate Larry's memory but she'll hang three Fledglings out to dry?"

The corners of his lips rose slightly. "You say potato, I say welcome to immortality. Their strings led back to her, as did yours. You still have your life, they do not. Perhaps if they had been more concerned for their own existence, they would have never found themselves in a position to be moved as pawns. Consider their death the consequence of their ill chosen actions." He cocked his head, which she'd never see him do before. "Which reminds me," he reached into nothing and pulled out a bruised and beaten Shaggy, "what would you like me to do with this? It arrived wrapped in shadows, tied to resemble a bow."

Logan couldn't help but laugh when Kerestyan growled and nearly squeezed off her hand. He cast a glance to the wall then back to Stefan. "He is yours to do with as you wish."

Stefan held Shaggy out towards her. "What say you?"

She stared at the broken body for a few moments. "I feel like I should have this huge moment of inspiration where I suddenly realize the error of my selfish ways, and then look up at you and tell you he deserves another chance...but I'm not really feeling that. I'm all for him going on the wall of people parts."

Stefan let out an evil chuckle as Craig's body floated through the air then melted into the wall. "Spoken like a true Nelek." He moved to stand in front of Kerestyan. "I have considered the request you made when we last spoke, Kerestyan, and find myself agreeable."

Logan wasn't sure what Kerestyan had requested, but with the way his body stiffened and his eyes slowly narrowed, she could only assume Stefan's response wasn't what he'd hoped for. "I won't risk tainting the bond," he said, his voice strained. He lowered his head, and for the first time since she'd met him, a sense of defeat charged the air around him, as if he'd just lost something important. "As much as it pains me, the risk outweighs the reward for her."

She frowned. "For who? What are you talking about?"

Stefan stepped back in front on her. "I had a suspicion when we first spoke, due to your detached nature, it would be nearly impossible for you to establish a reciprocal bond with your Master. Meaning, while your Master is able to sense you, you cannot be influenced in return. Vouclade and I discussed the matter in length, and after a series of mystical tests performed on the blood he acquired during your physical examination, we concur my ini-

tial suspicion is accurate. Would it please you to become Kerestyan's *Servio*?"

Logan didn't have a chance to answer, because before her brain could process the extent of Stefan's words, Kerestyan's tongue plunged into her mouth. She moaned at the unexpected taste of him, at the exquisite sensation of his soft lips, hot and demanding, moving against hers. She returned his passion and more as she tangled her fingers into his hair.

He broke from her mouth and looked down at her, his incredible blue eyes streaked with obsidian. "I love you," he breathed against her lips. "I don't expect you to understand. I don't expect to hear you say the same. But if you say yes, I promise you'll never regret the choice."

Logan considered Kerestyan's handsome face for a long moment. She knew she couldn't return his words with the same sincerity, but her heart told her, given time...he would be the only man she ever said them to. "Yes, Kerestyan."

He flashed a devious grin, his razor sharp fangs taunting her from between his firm lips. "Does this mean I'm allowed to say I think you're beautiful?"

She nipped at his bottom lip. "No, Kerestyan."

"You know," Odin's sleepy voice interrupted, *again*. "Since the man just stood there and told you he loved you, the least you could do is pay him a compliment or something. As his brother, I know I'd feel better hearing one."

She laughed and smiled at Kerestyan. "Is that what you want?"

He tipped his head from side to side. "I could listen."

She cleared her throat. If he wanted rainbows compared to how she felt about him, she would grant his request. "Red is the color my blood flows for you. Orange is the color of the morning sky I can't see with you. Yellow is the color of the sun whose ass I'd kick for you...if it had one. Green is the color—"

"Logan," Kerestyan laughed. "Just shut up and kiss me."

Epilogue

Three months later...

Kerestyan stood on the back porch of his new home, watching as the woman he loved more than life itself was smothered by a mound of black fur. She squealed and squirmed as Syn licked her face, and then let out a loud *oomph!* when he flopped over on top of her.

Although her dark outlook on the world hadn't changed, and she still couldn't see it the way he did, not a day went by that she didn't try. She hadn't done anything drastic like join one of the many Goodwill groups that called New York home, but her desire to leave her street life behind shone in her actions.

Kerestyan smiled. He'd almost fallen over the night they walked to the butcher shop to procure the steak she enjoyed so much, and instead of running off with the purse an elderly woman dropped as they passed, Logan picked up the bag and handed it back to her.

She even earned a crisp one-dollar bill and a litany of thanks for her trouble.

Granted, she let loose with a string of curses once the old woman was out of earshot, ranting about grandmothers and their obsessive need to stuff dollars in G-strings, but when all was said and done, she gifted him the most beautiful smile and used her reward to buy him the first chocolate bar he'd ever eaten.

"Yuck! Not in the mouth, Syn. How many damn times do I have to tell you your tongue does not go in my mouth?"

Kerestyan stepped off the porch and smiled at the warm blades of lush grass cushioning his bare feet as he moved to take Syn's place. He knelt beside Logan and grinned at her closed eyes while she wiped the back of her hand across her lips.

He followed her hand with his tongue then slipped it into her mouth, savoring the soft, sweet taste of her and the instant warming effect she had on his Ancient body. There was no better taste to him, save the hot, rich texture of her blood as she writhed in ecstasy beneath him.

"Ow, das mot Smm."

Logan moaned as Syn's weight was replaced by the man who'd become the only addiction she'd ever refuse to give up. Kerestyan was as vital to her

life as the air she breathed, and she was certain if the day ever came when she was forced to give him up, more than just her physical body would suffer.

She smiled as Kerestyan broke from her mouth and trailed a line of searing kisses across her jaw line before lowering his assault to her throat. She tangled her fingers into his hair and blew out a deep, contented sigh.

Unfortunately, all the movement got her was a tongue that belonged to a member of the canine species.

"Damn it, Syn! Just because he does it doesn't mean you get to!"

Kerestyan's chest rumbled with laughter, vibrating her already puckered nipples and making her wish he'd left his pajama pants in the house. She slipped her hands from his hair, down his bare sides then pinched the sexy cuts of muscle above his hips.

She huffed out a breath when Syn interrupted by licking a stripe across her forehead. "I think Syn needs a girlfriend."

Kerestyan raised his head and pinned her with his incredible blue eyes. "If we get him a mate, not only will we have to housebreak another wolf, but it'll only be a matter of months before we have puppies running loose everywhere."

She smiled as wide as she possibly could. "We'll be parents."

"No." His eyes narrowed playfully. "We'll be grandparents. And considering your belief that all grandmothers visit strip clubs, I'm not sure I'm ready to explain to my beast why I'm allowing you to stuff money down other men's G-strings."

"I'm not interested in any other man's G-string. In fact," she slipped her hands down the back of his pants and squeezed his tight, bare ass. "I prefer my man commando."

He nipped at her bottom lip. "In that case, we can search for a she-wolf as soon as I'm finished with you."

Logan squealed as he stood then scooped her into his strong arms, as if she weighed no more than a feather. She brushed the backs of her fingers across the stubble shadowing his cheek and shivered as the goblin in her belly purred.

Kerestyan Nelek, the moody man and sometimes far too serious vampire, may not have been able to reconnect her to the world she knew, but he'd rekindled her belief in two emotions she thought she'd never feel again.

Hope...and love.

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