



Published by Phaze Books



This is an explicit and erotic book
intended for the enjoyment
of adult readers. Please keep
out of the hands of children.

www.Phaze.com

From the Shadows

a novel of erotic romance by

JAE KNIGHT

From the Shadows © 2007, 2008 by Jae Knight

All rights reserved under the International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events or locales is entirely coincidental.



A Phaze Production
Phaze Books

6470A Glenway Avenue, #109
Cincinnati, OH 45211-5222

Phaze is an imprint of Mundania Press, LLC.

To order additional copies of this book, contact:

books@phaze.com

www.Phaze.com

Cover art © 2008 Stella Price

Edited by Amanda Faith

eBook ISBN-13: 978-1-59426-879-3

eBook ISBN-10: 1-59426-879-7

First Edition - May, 2008

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Warning: the unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Prologue

They came from the shadows...

In the year 2000, in a realm where time is of no importance:

The man restlessly paced the floor. In agitation, he twisted his long, blond hair around his fingers. His father watched his progress, saying nothing.

Shadows writhed on the floor as if alive, disturbed by the man's pacing.

"Father, I will do as you ask me. But I must ask *you*, why should we let *him* take all the credit for what we, no, what *I* will be doing?" He gazed unflinching into his father's cold eyes, eyes that showed nothing but boredom and now, a hint of contempt.

"Mikhail, you are young and the young are ignorant. Their heads are full of visions of glory and fame. I was just a young boy like you when the portal first opened. Ah, those days of old when I thought I was a *god*!" he spoke, his tones clear and calm, hardly rising above a whisper. He rose gracefully from his chair and walked sedately down the steps of the dais to stand before his son.

"We lost many in those following days when those wretched *gods* sent their people as protectors of mankind! Preposterous! Humans are merely chattel! The bottom of the food chain! So sure they are of their superior intellect!" he spoke as he walked a slow circle around his son. Mikhail grew nervous, which was exactly what his father wanted.

"What does this have to do with the *vampire*, Father?" Mikhail asked him.

"Everything, son. They have everything to do with the vampire. Those fool *guardians* are getting nervous! So many of them have lost their lives to us and their numbers are dwindling. They plan to receive aid from those borne of *us*! This particular

FROM THE SHADOWS

vampire has always been...unstable, shall we say...and has made it rather hard for himself to be redeemed in the eyes of his fellow vampires. I suggest we give them *all* a bad name by playing on this particular vampire's history of violence," he replied, watching the understanding dawn on Mikhail's face.

"Making those guardians think twice about their plans to double their numbers! Yes, I see it now, Father. But will it work? The Guardians' psychic powers rival our own," Mikhail asked. His father's eyes flashed and his lips curled viciously at the mention of the guardian's superior power.

"Those Guardians do not always utilize the full extent of their powers. It contradicts their ridiculous, narrow-minded morals, my son," Davriel ground out through his clenched teeth.

"Of course it will work, Mikhail. Davriel is never wrong. I believe it was *he* that brought about the end of the Gianni line," spoke Evonn, the mistress of King Davriel. She swayed over to Davriel and wrapped herself erotically around him, her black hair swirling as if alive, her dark wings curled protectively around her king as if she believed Mikhail would try to attack.

Mikhail hated Evonn, and he often wondered if mere hate was a gross understatement when it came to his feelings for Evonn. She had a way of turning his words against him, making him sound weak and insincere. She wanted to put herself on the throne next to Davriel and she would stop at nothing.

"My beautiful Evonn has told me of a human that can help us with our plan. She won't realize what a help she's being though because *you*, my son, are to enslave her. It is *you* that she must obey. With her help, the guardians will realize they can't possibly *recruit* any evil vampires!" Davriel explained as he fondled Evonn playfully.

Mikhail ground his teeth and fumed silently, seeing Evonn's smug smile. He massaged the spot high on his forehead that had begun to throb furiously right between his shiny black horns, which were a symbol of his rank.

"Where can I find this human woman, Father?" he asked, his voice betraying not an inkling of what he was feeling.

"In New Orleans."

Part One

"When the shadows come out to play,
When night takes over day,
You'll hear me a-tapping on your window.
Let me in, your blood roars in a crescendo.
I'll sink my teeth in as you sigh.
Be my love, you'll never die.
When the wolf howls to the moon,
I'll be seeing you soon."
- Jae Knight

"His mind is dark
In the shadows
In the corners
They creep
The monsters of another day"
- Jae Knight

"My love is like the red, red blood,
That flows from your veins in a pulsing flood.
I'll always savor the tangy spice of your essence,
Deep inside will I feel your lingering presence."
- Jae Knight

Chapter One

New Orleans, December 31, 1799

"Hurry up, Lily! Mama had the carriage sent around already. We can't be late!" Elizabeth bounded into the room, a comical expression of distress on her beautiful face.

Lily looked again in the mirror and smoothed her black hair, ignoring her sister's outburst and smiling at the reflection of Elizabeth's impatient scowl behind her. Lily looked critically at her dress; it was the color of clotted cream with an underskirt of gold, to match her light eyes. She turned away from her reflection, satisfied.

"Richard will be waiting for me!" Elizabeth was referring to her betrothed, Richard de Villiers. Although their engagement was not yet official, Elizabeth knew tonight was the night they would finally announce their betrothal and she was overeager to get to the de Villiers ball right away. Many believed that Richard should go with a younger bride as Elizabeth was twenty-three. But Richard and Elizabeth were in love and that was why Elizabeth had waited to marry. The Fontaine's had wanted their daughters to marry for love and not for money.

Lily looked at her sister and told her, "He will still be there by the time we get there." It was New Year's Eve. Tonight the ladies Fontaine were going to the de Villiers' 'New Years Turn of the Century Ball'. Richard de Villiers was Elizabeth's intended. Elizabeth, who was Lily's older sister by two years, was sure that tonight was the night Richard would announce their betrothal.

"Lillian Marie Simone Fontaine! Stop your preening! We must hurry. It is already nine o'clock!" Lady Claire Fontaine made her way into the room with the two sisters. Even though her face showed signs of age, Lady Claire's beauty still radiated from her. Her face sweet and lovely, though lined. Her black hair

was streaked liberally with gray, giving her a distinguished look instead of making her seem haggard.

"I told her that we mustn't be late, Mama," said Elizabeth with a pout. Elizabeth wore a bright gown of periwinkle with an underskirt of peacock blue. Her hair was arranged in artful, glossy black curls and peacock feathers.

Lily apologized, "I am sorry, Mama."

In the carriage, Lily did her best to cheer her sister's spirits but Elizabeth's pout remained intact. She filled the silence with her customary witty banter until they could see the grand chateau looming into view.

As they reached the Chateau de Villiers, a grand two-story Georgian style plantation house with expansive lawns trimmed in manicured hedges; they could see that the house was already full of people.

"It's going to be quite a crush, dears," Lady Claire predicted. The women were helped from their barouche by handsome liveried servants and they made their way gracefully into the crowded house.

"Elizabeth, there you are, my dear! I've been looking all over for you. Richard will be in the ballroom already." The hostess, Lady Jane de Villiers, greeted them in the foyer.

"Lady Claire, Lillian, you both look positively charming. I do hope you will enjoy this night." Lady Claire and Lily thanked her and left Elizabeth with Lady Jane.

"Oh, there is Cousin Margaret. Do go enjoy yourself," Lady Claire suggested as she headed toward her waving cousin.

With that, Lady Claire left her daughter. Lily supposed she should make her way into the ballroom. It was amazing to see this many people crowded into one house, even one of a size such as this. But then, everyone had wanted to attend the 'Turn of the Century Ball'. Half of the guests Lily did not recognize. She put on a smile as she entered the ballroom.

The ballroom could only be described as stunning. Mirrors reflected the dazzling light from the chandeliers off all the ladies' jewelry and guests' crystal champagne glasses, blinding her at first glimpse. Gold leafing covered all the furniture and mirrors in the room, further adding to the dreamlike glow. The lights made the gold wink among the dancing and chatting crowd.

FROM THE SHADOWS

There were rich, red velvet curtains flanking all the windows and the French doors leading out onto a cobbled terrace.

Lily spotted her friend, Catherine, across the room. Lily smiled at her friend, looking uncomfortable in her red silk evening dress, her blond hair tumbling in large curls over her shoulders. She stood near a window as if trying to blend in with the curtains.

Lily stopped to chat with the other guests when necessary, so as not to appear rude, and finally made it to her friend's side.

"Lily, I am so glad that you are here," Catherine exclaimed, grasping onto Lily's arm as if she were a lifeline. Lily smiled and gave her hand a little squeeze of reassurance, as Catherine was quite shy.

"You knew I would be here, Catherine. Elizabeth thinks that tonight is the night Richard will announce their betrothal." Catherine nodded and smiled wistfully, her brown eyes dreamy, as if imagining she were Richard's fiancée.

Lily danced and conversed and enjoyed herself, getting caught up in the excitement of the pressing crowd. After a dance with a charming but rather boring gentleman, someone that she had never met before stopped her. He was quite stunning.

Tall, quite pale, the bluest eyes she had ever seen. He was dressed all in black except for a stark white shirt that had elegant lace at the cuffs. He had thick, dark auburn hair that was tied back with a black ribbon.

"Excuse me, *mademoiselle*, but I could not help noticing your beauty. You are the loveliest woman here, if I may be so bold."

Lily blushed prettily and thanked him for his kind words.

"Could I possibly have this dance?" he asked her, bowing over her hand and lightly kissing her knuckles.

"Well, I would love to but I do not yet know your name."

The mysterious stranger smiled and replied, "Forgive me my rudeness, *mademoiselle*. I am called Angelo Milonne." He then took her hand and placed it in the crook of his arm.

Angelo led her out into the next dance. It was a waltz, one of Lily's favorites. As they danced, Angelo stared into her golden-hued eyes and she could swear he was seeing more than his own reflection. Lily sucked in a breath as his body languidly

moved with hers to the music. His hand on her back was scorching and her thoughts became confused.

The waltz ended and Angelo bowed to her.

"Thank you for the *stimulating* experience. You looked flushed. Shall we step outside to walk in the gardens?" he asked. Lily thought briefly of saying 'no'. It was deemed unseemly to wander off with a man alone but Lily's heart thundered excitedly. She smiled graciously at him and threw caution to the wind.

"Lead the way, sir." He once again took her hand.

"Please, call me Angelo."

They walked sedately through the rows of rosebushes, their heady aroma filling the night air. Angelo stopped at a beautiful fountain portraying the birth of the Greek goddess Aphrodite. All around them, yet distant, were the sounds of lovers' secret trysts. He once again looked deep into her eyes, as if peering into her very soul.

"I sense a desire in you for something more. Something different and exciting. Something dark." Then they continued walking and before she knew it, he had led her off into the trees where they would not be seen. They were too far from the house to be heard.

The shadows were thick here, cast by the hanging foliage of the willows that dripped with gray Spanish moss.

Lily swallowed nervously, wondering if she should have stayed in the safety of a crowd. But then his words had rung true and she was mesmerized by the hidden promise of fulfillment. Lily was bored by the life she led. Society was dull. She craved travel to foreign places, shimmering oceans and sandy islands. New Orleans would always be home, she knew, but adventures awaited her.

Angelo stepped closer to her, his arms outstretched. His eyes looked into hers and he nodded and said, "Yes, and I can give you adventure. I can give you a gift. A wondrous gift. Freedom. You could go anywhere, do anything and be anyone. I can show you power, hunger and so much more. Just say the word."

Angelo promises so much but could he actually give me these things? she wondered.

His eyes tugged at her, making promises she longed for him

FROM THE SHADOWS

to keep and before she realized she had even made up her mind, she heard herself say, "Yes."

Angelo smiled and leaned in toward her. It was her first kiss and it was wonderful! His hands trailed over her body, making her shiver in pleasure. Angelo slowly traced her lips with his tongue; her breath was warm and sweet on his face.

Lily struggled to keep her wits about her but all she could think of was Angelo and the feeling he was giving her. All she wanted in that moment was Angelo and what he could give her. Angelo's fingers worked at the back of her dress, loosening the laces until it sagged at her shoulders. Angelo stopped kissing her and looked down at her nearly exposed breasts. With a gentle tug, the dress fell to her waist and it was short work ripping the thin material of her gauzy chemise.

Lily could have fainted when she felt his hands touching her breasts. They seemed to get heavier, swelling in his hands. Her nipples tightened to the point of being painful. Lily couldn't think of why she was letting him do these things and at the moment, she did not care. Lily let out a small scream when he traced her nipple with his tongue.

Angelo backed Lily against an old Weeping Willow; the hanging branches seeming to embrace them intimately, hiding them in its shadows. With one hand he lifted her skirts and with the other hand freed himself from his breeches.

Lily, realizing what he was about to do, knew a moment's panic. If she allowed him to take such liberties with her there could be dire consequences and she would be unfit for any decent man to wed. Angelo, sensing her escalating fear, kissed her again, trailing his hand up her inner thigh. Lily's eyes fluttered and she moaned when he gently slipped his finger into her.

* * * *

Angelo drank in her sounds of ecstasy and smiled against her lips. All resistance fled from Lily as he moved his finger slowly in and out of her moist heat. He withdrew from her and took one of her hands and wrapped it around his erection. She gently stroked him, adding fuel to his fire. Lily, feeling empowered by the reaction she was receiving, took charge. She kissed his neck and bit him hard as she moved her hand up and

down his length.

Angelo growled as he felt her teeth on his neck, and then he smiled.

Wicked little minx! Yes, she would be ready for the blood.

Angelo lifted her legs and set them around his hips. Lily wrapped her arms around his neck and he spread her open and thrust his full length into her. He caught her scream in his mouth. Slowly, he pulled back until just the head of him was inside her and roughly impaled her again.

* * * *

Lily felt immense pain at first but then she began to delight in the subtle pain as it faded to a throb. Lily started to move her hips, wanting more of him, her rapture was climbing and she was sure she would die. Angelo trailed kisses along her jaw down to her neck, to the pulsing throb that made his heart sing. Then, Lily felt him sink sharp teeth into her neck. It was painful but at the same time exquisite. With the rough intrusion of his teeth, Lily shattered, almost screaming from the intense pleasure he brought her. Angelo growled against her neck, still feeding from the rush of hot blood filling his mouth, finding his own orgasm as her nails dug into his skin through his clothing.

Slowly, darkness began to close in and her heart slowed.

I'm dying, she thought. Lily was dimly aware of being laid to the ground. She tried to think, but it was like trying to run in water. Her thoughts were muddled.

Then, Angelo whispered to her gently, "Drink, my sweet. I give you life, a better life. That's it. Let the hunger take you." So she drank. Lily began to think clearly once again. She lay on her back in the soft grass, staring up at the swaying tree branches above her. It seemed as if they danced to the rhythm set by her languid heartbeat. The stars blinked innocently through the gaps between the branches.

Angelo spoke, "That's enough, *chérie*. There will always be more. I have made you stronger and you will forever remain beautiful, young." Lily watched as the wound on his wrist, she had been ravenously sucking at, closed miraculously right before her very eyes.

It was then that Lily fully understood what had happened.

Vampire, her mind screamed. She sat up in horror with his

FROM THE SHADOWS

blood still on her lips; it's salt on her tongue. Unconsciously, she licked the rest of the blood from her lips.

"You will be dead to your family, to the world. You must or they will try to kill you if they find what you have become. Spare yourself from seeing the fear and hatred darken their eyes," he spoke bitterly; as if he had experienced the hatred of loved ones who could not understand or accept what he had become.

Lily shook her head fiercely. How could she just never speak to or see them again? She loved them!

"Ah," he said, seeing her thoughts clearly written on her face, "but they will hate what you are now. It is human nature to fear what they cannot understand. I suggest you make a new place for yourself, somewhere no one can find you during your most vulnerable hours. You know of what I speak. You've heard the stories."

Lily looked at him in accusation while he straightened his clothing, "What have you done?"

Angelo threw back his head and laughed. "Why, I have done as you asked." And with those words, he disappeared. Or to the mortal eye he disappeared. He moved with an unnatural speed.

She looked after him forlornly, feeling panic as the unusual sensations that had been increasing during Angelo's speech, suddenly worsened. All the muscles in her body were cramping painfully and her heart beat furiously against her ribcage, surely they would break from such an onslaught! Lily's eyes welled up as she felt her stomach clench. She retched violently; vomiting until she thought she would die.

Feeling disgusted by the red mess she had left, she quickly hid it beneath leaves and broken branches from the willow tree. Lily felt hollow inside, her vision was blurred and her ears felt as though clogged with water before both organs sharpened in surprising clarity. It was night but Lily could see perfectly. She could hear the voices of the people still inside the house. Slowly, her body began to ease, muscles relaxing. She felt different, healthier and stronger.

Lily stood shakily to her feet and righted her gown as best she could. In awakening wonder at her new body and senses, she walked back to the house, keeping in the shadows so as not to be

seen.

"Lily? Oh, there you are! I was looking all over the place for you! Where have you been? What happened to you?" Catherine spoke in a rush, after nearly colliding with her as she came around the rear corner of the house. Her kind brown eyes were filled with concern as she looked over Lily's disheveled appearance.

Lily knew an instant of terror as she felt the hunger rise inside of her. She could hear Catherine's heart pounding; hear the rushing blood flowing through her veins. Damn, but she could smell it. She licked her lips eagerly, wanting a taste. Lily tried to ignore the urge but it was insistent. She was hungry.

"Lily?" Catherine asked uncertainly, a tremor of anxiety in her voice. "Lily, are you feeling alright? Should I call for some help?"

Lily shook her head in a firm negative response and stepped closer to her trusting friend. Catherine met her eyes uncertainly, at a loss. Lily could hear her thoughts as clearly as if she had spoken them aloud. Lily smiled reassuringly at her and tangled her fingers in Catherine's soft hair, and Catherine's eyes widened in shock.

"What are you doing, Lily? What has happened to you?" she asked, fear evident in her voice. Lily felt shamed at having scared her best friend. Catherine took a few steps backward and Lily let her go, wondering how she could have come so close to hurting Catherine. Catherine took quick steps around Lily and dashed to the terrace and disappeared from Lily's sight as she left Lily alone outside.

Lily was shocked at what she had almost done. *What if that had been Elizabeth? Or Mama?* she thought. Her mind raced and she remembered Angelo's words. He had been right. Catherine had been frightened! She had known something was wrong with Lily and it had scared her. Lily sadly turned to leave but was beckoned to the terrace as she heard Richard's voice inside getting the assembly's attention. He looked so handsome with his dark brown hair and eyes, smiling lovingly at Elizabeth. He called her to his side.

"Everyone, I'd like to announce that Lady Elizabeth Fontaine will be my wife."

FROM THE SHADOWS

Elizabeth beamed up at him as the room cheered its approval. Everyone was so happy. Deep down, Lily knew Angelo was right. They wouldn't understand the things that she had seen and felt tonight. They would live in fear of her. She *must* go. Lily vowed to herself that she would watch over them and protect them.

A week later, while hiding in an abandoned ruin of an old house she had luckily found before the sunrise on that night, Lily saw a plea in the paper, '*Le Moniteur de la Louisiane*', for the safe return of Lady Lillian Marie Simone Fontaine to her loving family. It was included with Elizabeth's betrothal announcement.

Chapter Two

New Orleans, Louisiana, Late May, 2000

"Vallon, you're up in ten!" called Shadow Redcloud, who owned the club 'Motel Hell' on Dumaine Street in the French Quarter with his sister River Redcloud. They had named their club after the strange 1980 movie, starring Rory Calhoun, of a brother and sister who 'farm' people for food.

The exterior of the building was plain brick and the upper level had a wrought iron balcony overlooking the street below. Inside, the walls were painted with a faux black marble with red veining for the lower panel and blood red above the black railing. The bar was mahogany and was lined with plush red velvet barstools that had a base that looked like women's legs. They were 'wearing' fishnets, striped stockings, garter belts and platform boots and heels. They had been crafted by one of the locals that frequented Shadow's club.

Horror movie posters and memorabilia decorated the walls. The light fixtures resembled medieval chandeliers and in the left corner of the stage hung an iron cage with a skeleton stuck inside, its leg hanging forlornly out. A life-size cardboard stand-up display of Bela Lugosi stood behind the bar, looking as if he were a bartender.

The rear wall of the backstage area had been left white so that signatures of bands and other performers could be written on the wall. The rest had been painted to look like a graveyard and the ceiling like a starry night sky.

Backstage, Vallon waited to go onstage. As many times as he had performed he still got a little nervous. Vallon Paige was twenty-six years old and he was front-man in a band called 'Symphonic Dream'. Vallon also played the guitar and sometimes, for certain songs, the violin. The other band

FROM THE SHADOWS

members, Adam, Cameron and Azure, would call their music 'gothic metal'. To Vallon, it was art. All his emotions were evident in his music; it had always been his dream.

Vallon met Adam and Cameron at an early age. They had gone to school together and had first developed their mutual dream of starting a band in high school. Adam Zanders was the shortest member of the band at five feet and eight inches, but he could be tough as nails. He had shoulder length red hair that was shaved on the sides and back. He was always upbeat and ready for anything.

Cameron Mayhem, Cameron Lucas by birth, was an extremely tall, intimidating black man. He shaved his head and had tattoos covering his arms. He was quiet and focused, always the steady one of the group.

They had met Azure Beaumont when they had run ads in the Times for a bass player. Azure was five foot nine with shiny blond hair and bright blue eyes. She had been energetic and possessed a beautiful operatic singing voice. She was extremely talented, so they chose her from all the others.

Vallon was considered by many to be *sinfully* beautiful. He was six foot five, with a devastating figure, night black hair that fell to the middle of his back and bold green eyes framed by long, black lashes and dark brows that arched gracefully. His arms were strong and sleeved with tattoos down to his wrists.

One sleeve was devoted to his love of silent horror films, including 'Nosferatu', 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde', 'The Phantom of the Opera' and 'The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.' Vallon especially loved the beautiful strangeness of 'Caligari's' German expressionism. The other sleeve had an ancient Celtic/medieval theme to it. With Celtic knot work, stylized writing and artwork of the likes in ancient tapestries and books, like 'The Book of Kells'. Also on his upper back, he had the Celtic Tree of Life surrounded by more of the beautiful knot work.

Women most loved the look of his lips, dreaming of his kiss. He had a full, sensual mouth, a firm jaw and a smile to make even the purest virgin blush with shame at her lascivious thoughts.

Vallon knew the effect he had on women and dressed to that advantage. He wore pants that clung to his long, muscled legs, so

that women gawked when he passed. When Vallon stepped into a room, many women would swear that the room temperature had just risen as they licked their lips and ground their hips as they lit their cigarettes. Azure was one of those women. She constantly flirted with him, tossing her blond hair and coquettishly teasing him.

He was just the man Lily craved, familiar to her, yet mysterious. She had watched him, unsure, for months now. She was drawn to him. Lily had first seen him here at 'Motel Hell'. And she waited now, amidst the crowd come to see him, for him to come onstage. Lily wanted to make this one hers. His blood called.

Out in the audience, the mass of black clad bodies surged forward as the stage lights lit up the stage. Three people came onto the stage. Adam Zanders on drums, Cameron Mayhem on lead guitar and Azure Beaumont on bass.

The band began to play a beautiful and familiar tune and Vallon came out to center stage, a bright red guitar strapped around his neck. His velvety rich voice awed the listeners, his mouth sinuously shaping around the words, making them the sweetest poetry.

'Nighttime sharpens, heightens each sensation/
Darkness stirs and awakes imagination/
Silently the senses abandon their defenses.'

It was Andrew Lloyd Weber's 'Music of the Night' from 'The Phantom of the Opera'. Lily smiled strangely at the choice of song, wondering...remembering.

* * * *

The show had been a success. 'Symphonic Dream' congratulated each other backstage and said their goodbyes. Vallon left the club and headed toward 'Under the Gun Tattoo', waving and greeting passersby until he reached his destination. He looked proudly upon the brick façade of *his* place. Vallon had owned 'Under the Gun' for four and a half years and he lived in an apartment above it.

Vallon stepped into the parlor and, as usual, let his eyes wander lovingly over the walls that signified years of hard work.

FROM THE SHADOWS

The interior of the parlor was covered with amazing flash art and framed photographs showing the work the artists had done free hand. Along with the art displayed on the walls, there were portfolios full of original and classic design laid out on the glass display cases and heaped on a coffee table in the designated waiting area. One long wall was a mural of art and tattoo design painted by Vallon and his two employees, Loki and Marlena Hartwick.

Vallon was greeted by the ever-smiling, flame-haired Loki. Loki was tall and leanly muscled. He had red hair that he always pulled back into a ponytail and had a matching goatee. He was pierced heavily; one on each side of his lower lip, three in his left eyebrow and two in the right. He had large plugs in his ears and a ring in his nose. His tongue was pierced twice and the bridge of his nose had a barbell through it.

Vallon saw no sign of Marlena, but he could faintly hear her moving around in the back room. She was muttering under her breath. Vallon arched a questioning brow at Loki who gave his head a slight shake, as if telling him that now wasn't a good time to explain.

"So, how did it go tonight?" he asked Vallon. Loki was just finishing the coloring of a stylized butterfly on the shoulder of a small blond who was biting her lip, clearly hoping Loki was nearly finished. Vallon could swear he had inked more butterflies and flowers than any other design. He longed for the day someone would ask for a skull with a snake slithering out its mouth.

"Like a charm, Loki. I'm just waiting for the day when a scout from a major record label hears us and asks us to sign on," Vallon answered in a mock lofty tone.

Loki laughed and told him, "Give it time, man. You guys have got some serious potential. Your day will come. Just be sure to remember me when it happens! Then you can hand 'Under the Gun' over to me!"

Vallon laughed and gave him a sarcastic look that said, *Over my dead body!*

At that moment, the most beautiful woman Vallon had ever seen entered the parlor. He could feel his lungs constrict as his heart slammed against his ribcage. She had smooth, pale skin,

sultry golden eyes and silky black hair that curled gently to her tiny waist. She had long, firm legs, lush breasts and hips. She had the sexiest hourglass figure he had ever seen. Vallon estimated she was five foot five; she'd just barely reach his shoulder.

The woman had a beautiful, angelic face. Heart-shaped, with a stubborn little chin, full red lips and almond shaped eyes. She was captivating. There was something familiar about her. *Had they met before?* he wondered silently.

Vallon approached her and asked, "Can I help you with something?"

She smiled as if she thought there was certainly *something* he could do *to* her.

"Hello, Vallon. My name is Lily. Lily Fontaine. I was at the show tonight and just wanted to have the pleasure of meeting you."

Vallon smiled back at Lily. "The pleasure is all mine, Lily."

"You have a beautiful voice, Vallon. Your music is like none I've heard in a long time. Your band is very serious about the music it seems; it's emotional and passionate. You have a rare talent."

Vallon stepped closer to her and smiled when he saw her eyes widen slightly at his audacity.

"Thank you, it's not often I find someone who can discern the soul of the music past the façade that most music is given," Vallon told her.

Lily leaned closer and said, "I once knew another musician as artistic as you. He taught me to really *listen* to the music."

Loki finished advising the girl on proper care of a tattoo. She paid him and started for the door saying goodbye. "I'd like to see you again sometime, Vallon," Lily told him honestly.

"We will be playing at 'Motel Hell' again the night after tomorrow," he told her.

"I'll definitely be there," and with that she ran the back of her fingers down his cheek and left, leaving him feeling breathless.

"Not that I mean to pry but...I think she may have meant...to see you...*alone*," Loki told him, counting and re-counting the money the girl had paid him, as if he hadn't been

listening in on them.

"Yeah....she made my mind feel a little..." Vallon tried to explain.

"Like mud?" Loki offered sarcastically.

"Is that girl gone now?" Marlana asked them, as she poked her head out the door to the back room. Her short, bright pink hair was spiked up as if she had been running her fingers through it agitatedly. Marlana was petite and thin, with the palest blue eyes Vallon had ever seen. While she had only one eyebrow ring, she preferred tattoos. She had two whole sleeves, one devoted to Tim Burton's movie 'The Nightmare Before Christmas', while the other had a pin-up theme, her favorite being Bettie Page. She always wore bright colors and changed her hair color regularly.

"Yeah, she's gone. What's going on here?" Vallon asked curiously, looking from Marlana to Loki and back to Marlana, who glowered at the front door of the shop.

"I told her he was my *husband* and she kept on! She was flirting and...touchy-feely! I had to leave before I strangled her!" Marlana explained.

"Can I help it I'm such a sexy beast?" Loki asked her and she giggled and pushed him playfully.

* * * *

Lily smelled the girl's blood and felt the hunger flare. She followed the scent of the girl's blood, her movements too fast for mortals to see. Lily was on the girl before she was even aware of being pursued. Lily carried the girl into a darkened alley. The girl made a pitiful mewling sound as Lily sank her teeth into the girl's neck. Images assailed her, the girl cruelly laughing in her own mother's face as she lay dying, a pale, foaming liquid bubbling from her mouth from the large quantity of rat poison that had been mixed into her food. She had killed her own mother for having her turned in over her drug habit. The knowledge erased any guilt Lily had felt at first for taking the girl.

Lily drank until the girl's heart no longer beat. She licked the blood from her lips and became suddenly aware of being watched. She turned to look down the dark alleyway and saw the

figure of a man in the shadows. Lily knew who it was before he even spoke.

"Hello, my sweet. It has been far too long. I should have come to you sooner, but I was traveling abroad. Tasting the blood of the world," he said; his face was a calm mask while he looked distastefully around the alley as if he were appalled at her choice of location.

Lily had begun to despise Angelo all those years she had watched her family grow old and die. Surviving all those generations of her beloved nieces and nephews. Even now she could feel the familiar bitterness rising inside her like bile, choking her. He had turned her into this, told her she could not be known and then had left her. She had been, and was still, so alone.

"Angelo. The name of a heavenly entity, with the heart of the cruelest demon. It *has* been a long time. Two hundred years, alone, to watch all those that I loved die. They never even knew what had happened to me."

Angelo clucked his tongue.

"My, my, aren't we feisty? You should be happy to see me." He had come closer and now had hold of a lock of her hair. He brought it slowly to his face and inhaled deeply of her scent.

"Oh, how I have missed you. And this is the greeting I get? Coldness and I believe a little hatred, as well. Ah! But I am here now," he told her in a seductive low tone.

Lily jerked her head and he let the lock of hair fall. Lily looked into his eyes and spat, "You are not needed here now, Angelo. I have thrived on my own for two centuries. I do not need you now. Not ever."

Angelo's eyes narrowed. "I would not condemn me so fast. I could do things to you that would leave you wishing you had been more *polite*!"

His voice dripped venom. "But it need not come to that. We could be together for eternity. We could hunt together!" Lily just shook her head sadly.

"Well, think on it, my sweet. We could be lovers, you and I. And I could make you marvelously happy. You could be my queen," he whispered, his eyes unfathomable.

Angelo kissed her savagely and sped off into the night. Lily

FROM THE SHADOWS

was left standing in the empty alley, feeling slightly uneasy. He had threatened her and she would have to tread lightly. She didn't know exactly what he could do but then she didn't want to find out.

* * * *

Mikhail crouched patiently on the roof of some human club, waiting for his chance to corner the human girl that Davriel had said would help them...albeit unwittingly.

Mikhail hated staying in Tellus. Many of his kind *chose* to live here...like a *human*. It was a disgrace. They had to hide their true forms in Tellus. If they revealed their true form, the mortals would run screaming and their silly government would be on his tail...and that was a little game he couldn't afford to play right now.

He had work to do.

* * * *

Azure left the club after the show and stopped by 'Under the Gun'. *Vallon is chatting up some girl*, she thought disgustedly.

With a pout and a 'harrumph', Azure stuck her nose into the air and started walking around the Quarter. Her guitar was getting heavy but she needed the time and exercise to blow off some steam. She heard a whisper of sound behind her and whirled, startled, to see what was following her.

A man walked toward her out of the shadows. He was so very tall and dressed in a long black duster that whipped around him as if by magic. Azure stood and stared, so completely mesmerized by the mysterious figure approaching her. He came to a stop before her, mere inches from her. She moaned.

His eyes were light blue and they seemed to peer into her soul, probing into her mind. She wanted to wrap herself in his long, blond hair and get lost inside him.

"W-who are y-you?" Azure stammered, unable to get a grip on herself.

"I am Mikhail, lovely one. And you, little Azure, will listen to what I have to say," he told her, his hand caressing her neck.

Azure leaned into his touch and mumbled, "Listen...say...I will."

"Good girl," he whispered and kissed her temple. Azure felt she was floating. *So this was what it was like to be in love*, she

thought and giggled girlishly, her smile soft and silly. He smiled back.

"I need you, Azure. Only you. I believe there is a man coming toward us as we speak. He will approach you. Do as he says but remember...even though he will enamor you...you belong to me. And this man, Angelo Milonne, needs to be...framed...for my crimes. You wouldn't want *me* to be punished for them would you?" he asked and she shook her head fervently.

"You *are* a helpful little thing, aren't you? I can see this plan even better now. With the others after him for my crimes...the Guardians will soon know their idea of getting their help is utterly foolish! I must leave now, sweet Azure. But I *will* be seeing you again. Speak of me to *no one*."

Mikhail left her standing there, love struck and completely under his hypnotic spell. He watched from the rooftops as Angelo approached her. He smiled widely as Angelo took the bait, seeing her for the opportunity she was. As Davriel had known he would.

* * * *

Vallon finished with the last customer for the night around one forty-five. He had sent Marlena and Loki home early as the night had been a little slow. Vallon took the man's payment and said goodnight. He cleaned up and turned off the lights. As he was locking the door, the hair on the back of his neck prickled. Vallon had the feeling he was being watched. He shrugged and tried to shake the feeling off.

Vallon was just turning from the door, depositing the shop keys in his pocket, when he heard a male voice softly say, "You will not have her." Vallon looked all around but saw no one.

Vallon decided the warning had not been meant for him. Or he had imagined the voice. He walked around to the back of the parlor, into a small courtyard enclosed by wrought iron fencing draped in wisteria. He took the winding staircase two steps at a time up to the balcony hanging over the back of 'Under the Gun'. Vallon stood staring out at the peaceful courtyard, with its softly trickling fountain in the center. He sighed and went inside.

Vallon's answering machine showed that he had three messages. The first was his mother. He smiled as he listened to

her firing off questions about the concert. She called him after every one of them that she had not made it to see personally, wanting to know how it went. It amazed him that she supported him wholeheartedly through *everything* he chose to do.

When she had learned he wanted to become a tattoo artist, she had been his first client. She absolutely adored the beautiful dragon on her ankle and showed it to anyone and everyone, boasting about her son's talent.

The next message was Azure.

"Hello, Vallon. I knew you'd be at work and I was going to stop by, but I didn't want to interrupt you. You seemed really into this *other woman* I saw you talking to." Vallon noted the jealousy in her clipped tone when she had said 'other woman'.

Vallon deleted the message without hearing the rest of it. The last message was that same voice, that same warning.

"You shall not have her."

Then, there was silence for about thirty seconds before the machine had cut it off. Now, Vallon knew he hadn't imagined the voice. *Strange*, he thought. *Shall not have Azure? No problem there. She was beautiful, yes, but there was nothing there for him.* She and Vallon had dated once, a grave mistake he now knew, as she had been acting like his wife ever since.

Who would be warning him away from his own friend? Anyone that knew him knew that he was not interested in Azure. Vallon sighed. It wasn't the first time Vallon had been warned away from a woman.

* * * *

"Vallon..."

It was her. Lily. She looked as beautiful as she had at the tattoo parlor.

"Vallon..."

Lily was beckoning him. He stalked after her but she was running too fast; he could not keep up. Suddenly, he saw her up ahead. Vallon tried to run faster, but it was as if he was sinking into the very ground. He could hear the dirt hitting the coffin.

"You shall not have her!"

He was being buried alive! He started screaming Lily's name as loud as he could. Vallon could hear her gasping sobs.

Vallon sat up in bed panting. He looked around in the

darkness and slowly came back to awareness. The alarm clock showed it was five-thirty. It had just been a dream. Yet he couldn't shake the feeling of dread the dream had left him. Vallon had just let that mysterious message get to him. His mind had run amok on him.

Vallon got up and stumbled into the bathroom. He turned on the cold water and splashed his face. Vallon caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror; his eyes were wide and looked wild. Above all things, Vallon feared being buried alive.

"It was just a dream, Vallon. No reason to fall apart and start seeing death on every corner." He shook his head ruefully, a soft laugh escaping him, and turned off the lights. He got back into bed and drifted back to sleep. Dreaming again of her...in his arms. Her laughter filled his senses and tinkled merrily in his head as he nuzzled her neck. Vallon trailed his hands over her breasts and down her body to that promised haven. Her sigh echoed erotically in his head. Lily was heaven in his arms and he would worship her with his body. He was hers.

* * * *

Vallon woke that afternoon with a smile on his face, the nightmare no longer seemed so terrifying in the bright light of day. He went into his small kitchen for breakfast. The kitchen was modern, with stainless steel appliances and dark faux granite counter tops, also topping the small island in the center of the kitchen used for a table. The island was surrounded by four barstools in varying colors, each one different, throwing off the sleek, streamlined appearance of the room.

The rest of the band would show up sometime before four to practice in the large storeroom downstairs in the parlor. Loki and Marlena would be working today. He got time off for the band because he owned the place and they were more than happy to work for him. Vallon quickly ate his meal of fried eggs and decided to take a long, steaming shower.

Vallon moaned appreciatively as warm water sluiced over his back and shoulders. Unbidden, his thoughts turned to Lily, as she had been in his dreams last night wearing nothing but a smile. Vallon lathered his body with soap and thought of how she would feel moving under him. He thought of a line from Nine Inch Nails' song 'Closer'. He had never known just how true

those words could be. Vallon *did* want to fuck her like an animal and he *did* want to feel her from the inside.

Vallon felt his body harden as his mind progressed in its wicked fantasy. He could swear he felt her lips on his skin. His cock stiffened to the point of pain and he closed his eyes tightly, trying to banish the images of her from his mind. It didn't help.

Vallon's wet hair clung to his shoulders and suds slid slowly down his body. He thought of Lily's full, pouty lips around his cock, sucking him deep into her mouth. The fantasy turned him on so much he gripped his erection and started slipping his hand over his wet flesh. He moved slowly first and the warm water slid down his legs like hands caressing him. In his mind he saw Lily naked above him, sighing his name again and again. He imagined her muscles tightening around him as he brought her to orgasm, peak after delicious peak, her breath coming out in warm little bursts against his neck.

Vallon quickened his hand and he could feel he was getting closer and closer. His muscles bunched and with a husky gasp, Vallon came and Lily's name slithered from his lips in a ragged whisper.

Vallon toweled off after his shower and walked naked to his bedroom to get dressed in a loose pair of jeans and a t-shirt.

A half hour before four o'clock, Vallon decided to call his mother back. She was really the only relative he got along with. Besides his mother, his Aunt Lisa and her three children were all the family he had left. Aunt Lisa had never approved of Vallon, thinking him a no-good punk and his cousins were just like her.

Bethany Paige had always told her son to follow his dreams. He had grown up a happy child in the Garden District on St. Andrews. Since a child, Vallon had loved the savage and mysterious beauty of New Orleans. He remembered how he and his mother had used to visit his father's grave once a month and she always let him stop at Marie Laveau's grave to mark her grave with red crosses and to make a wish.

His father had been a musician as well. Marcus Paige had loved jazz and was still remembered fondly in the jazz clubs around the French Quarter. He had died in a car accident when Vallon had been only three years old. Vallon could not remember him but the stories his mother told him kept Marcus

vividly alive. She always told Vallon how much he looked like his father but that he had her green eyes.

Often Vallon went back to that old house on St. Andrews to see his mother. He had moved out at eighteen years old and had moved into a tiny, one bedroom apartment with Adam Zanders where he had slept on the couch. Bethany had been so proud when he had started his business and moved into the two-bedroom apartment above it on Chartres.

Bethany picked up the phone on the tenth ring. She didn't like to pick it up right away just in case the caller was a telemarketer or her sister, Lisa.

"Hello, Vallon. I suppose you got my message. Just wanted to see how things went. So...?" she asked him.

"Everything went great, Mom. We had more of a turn out this time. Hopefully that is a sign! It would be so great to hear a crowd shouting our names," he replied.

"Only a matter of time," Bethany replied, all the confidence in the world in her voice. Vallon stayed on the phone with her until the others arrived, showing themselves in as usual.

"Well, I have to go; the guys are here to practice for tomorrow night's show. By the way, how about getting Caller ID, Mom?"

* * * *

Lily had gone straight home after seeing Angelo. Her house looked very different than it had when she had first found the place. It had been an old, shabby, dilapidated two-story house, previously an opium den. It had been severely damaged by time and a fire sparked by an unattended oil lamp left by the careless owner during an opium high. He had died in the fire with five others. The remaining wallpaper and paint had been peeling from the walls and the roof had been partially caved in. It had taken a lot of work when she had started on it in 1925, back from traveling abroad.

The house she had first occupied the night Angelo turned her had been torn down and another built in its place. The property now belonged to someone else. So Lily had purchased a house here in the Garden District, which had once been primarily where the Americans had lived in her time. The Creoles, Lily being one of them, had not easily accepted them into their

FROM THE SHADOWS

society and so they had had to make their own.

Now her house was one of the most beautiful houses on Coliseum. Lily had had the workers remodel it to make it Victorian; the insides were remodeled also and fresh paint and wallpaper was added, giving new life to the house. The old stained and broken windowpanes had been replaced with dark opaque glass panes to keep out the sunlight and some had been filled in making little niches in the walls where she had placed candles, flowers and some favored trinkets.

The house now also had electricity and running water that was no longer murky brown in color.

Lily had decorated the house and gardens to suit her eclectic, yet elegant, tastes. Her house was decorated with extravagant and expensive works of art and sculpture. Many modern pieces of furniture and art also graced her home along with the more romantic, classical elements. She had all her rooms done in bold colors and rich mahogany wood was abundant throughout the house.

The garden was filled with colorful, aromatic flowers of all breeds: magnolias, azaleas, peonies, roses, and an array of wildflowers and, of course, lilies. A cobbled path led to a shallow, man-made pond, where fat bullfrogs croaked their unusual melody.

Lily looked affectionately at her surroundings. It was truly now her own personal paradise. It had been her home for many years, the smell of death and smoke forever gone now.

No one had ever been allowed inside her house during daylight hours. The men who had renovated her house had just thought her another eccentric when told they would only be working at night. Thus, it was an advantage living in the superstitious, supernatural Crescent City.

Lily had known only one other vampire. Angelo Milonne. She could swear that she had sensed the presence of others on her many travels, but none had ever approached her. They were apparently as wary of her as she was of them. Lily had been tempted to make another vampire so she would not have to be alone, but she never did. Once, she had come perilously close. Just once...with *him*. When she did, she decided it would have to be entirely of their own choosing. She would not trick as she had

been tricked.

Lily was very lonely. Her only remaining family members were the great-great-great-great granddaughter and the great-great-great-great grandson of her sister, Elizabeth. Her lovely niece, Jaidyn Pierce and her young son, Skye. She was living in New Orleans as well, but Lily could hardly introduce herself as her aunt. All she could do was silently watch out for them as she had with all her ancestors. She let them make their own choices, live their own lives. Sometimes their choices had saddened her...but who was she to play God with her family?

So Lily remained alone, waiting for someone she could love as much as she had loved Vincent. And she knew whom she wanted. She had seen only one other with as much passion as Vincent. Vallon. He fascinated her. Even were he bad for her she would be drawn like the moth to its own death. Lily would be seeing him again. Tomorrow night.

* * * *

Vallon looked up to the stars. It was one of those magnificent balmy, starlit nights. Tonight was the night he would be seeing Lily again. The scent of magnolias, wisteria and bougainvillea hung in the air, capturing the senses. The night was full of promise. The promise of seeing a beacon of beauty in a sea of faces smudged with eyeliner and sweat.

Vallon thought he was being overly poetic about a woman he had just met but he couldn't bring himself to care. He was in a very good mood tonight. Vallon sighed and headed downstairs. He had no car because there was really no need for him to have one here in the French Quarter. Everything he needed was right here. Vallon tilted his head back and breathed deeply of the night air, "Ah, Lily, I am such a lucky bastard." He set off for 'Motel Hell' humming under his breath.

* * * *

Lily was waiting at the bar for Vallon after the band finished their second and final set. The bartender asked her if she would like anything to drink and in a fit of personal irony, she ordered a Bloody Mary. He handed her the drink and switched on the club's sound system. The crowd started dancing to the music blasting through the speakers.

Lily turned as she heard Vallon say her name. His voice

sent a delicious shiver down her spine. She stood to face him. He looked gorgeous wearing his leather pants and a black shirt he had left unbuttoned, the sheer mesh shirt underneath hiding none of the delectable flesh of his abdomen that positively screamed for a tongue bath. Nine Inch Nail's 'Closer' pounded over the sound system.

* * * *

"Vallon, it's lovely to see you again." Vallon gave her a slow, sexy smile and gestured for her to sit and took a seat beside her. He was extremely flattered that this ethereal vision wanted to get to know him. *But what exactly is she looking for?*

"Vallon," his name on her lips sounded so good he thought. "I'd like to get to know you, as you know already. You intrigue me." Vallon wondered if she read minds, she smiled slightly conspiratorially.

"I like you, Vallon. I'm very lonely and I'd just like someone to talk to, someone to be a...friend," she told him, her voice a low purr. He felt himself falling into her eyes.

Vallon raised a quizzical brow and asked, "Why me? There are many people who could be, and would love to be your...friend." Instantly, he regretted questioning her, he should just feel damn lucky he had gained her interest.

Lily laughed gently, making Vallon shiver as her laughter ripped through him. His gut tightened and he was amazed at the reaction his body had to her.

She replied, "You have such passion, intelligence and humor. You, like myself, are lonely. Tell me, why shouldn't we lonesome people search each other out?" Lily couldn't tell him that she felt a strange kinship between them or *Hey, you're hot. Wanna screw?* Vincent had had that same inexplicable factor that just made her want to curl herself around him even though she hardly knew him.

Vallon admitted to himself that she was right and he was glad for it. He had friends, plenty of them, but he still lacked something.

Vallon ordered a scotch on the rocks and they went backstage where it was quieter and they talked about music and tattoos. He asked her about her travels and about the renovations on her house in the Garden District. The night was going so well.

They felt as if they had always known each other. Lily constantly wondered why she felt she knew him. The way he smiled, the way he slightly bowed his head when he laughed. The way his fingers twitched nervously, plainly telling her he wanted his hands on her instead of around his glass.

There was one of the bartenders backstage watching a soccer match on a small television. It was close to twelve-thirty when the soccer game ended and the bartender switched to the news to hear again how his team had flattened the opponents.

"...was found early this morning in an alley off Royal Street. The girl has been identified as twenty year old Katie Bermann. An autopsy will be performed to find what caused her unusual death. The city's coroner would only say that her body had been completely drained of blood and appeared to be a mock-vampire murder, possibly the work of a cult. Anyone with any information is asked to please come forward. Now we'll go to sports with Jim Foster. Jim?"

Vallon recognized the girl. She had been the girl getting the butterfly tattoo the night he had met Lily. He turned to tell Lily of this since she had been there but lost the words when he saw the look on her face. She looked quite horrified.

"Did you know her?" Vallon asked. Lily turned toward him.

"No, I didn't. It's just that...she was so young. And she was there the night I came to see you at the tattoo parlor. Vallon, I am so sorry, but I must go. Write down your number for me and I will call you." Vallon handed her a coaster he had hastily scrawled his number on.

"Will I get to see you again, Lily?"

Lily put the coaster into her coffin-shaped bag and smiled nervously.

"Yes, of course. I'm just feeling a bit strange and that news report has disturbed me," she paused then added, "I had a wonderful time with you tonight, Vallon."

She turned to leave but then turned back, lightly put her hand on his cheek and kissed him with all the passion she felt for him, leaving them both feeling slightly dizzy.

"I'll see you," she said and left him sitting there struggling with the feelings she had aroused in him.

Lily walked quickly back home. She had been careless.

FROM THE SHADOWS

Angelo had surprised her and she had forgotten to get rid of the young girl's body. Any more mistakes like that could mean exposure. Granted, people tend to try to come up with a safe, reasonable explanation for anything out of the ordinary, but she could not risk that. Why did Angelo have to waltz back into her life as if he had never left?

As Lily walked into her house, she sensed his presence immediately. She found him in the front parlor, draped lazily in a red Queen Anne chair and looking for all the world as if he belonged there.

He smiled at her and said, "Out with an *old* friend, dearest?"

"Don't you dare pretend that you have the right to know! What are you doing here, Angelo?" she demanded.

Angelo gestured for her to sit, letting her know with his cold blue eyes that he did not intend to leave until he said what he had come to say. Lily decided to comply. The sooner he got what he wanted, the sooner he would leave.

Angelo once again spoke after a minute of uneasy silence. "I came back to New Orleans to be with you, love. I left you so that you could learn on your own, the hard way if it came to that. It makes you stronger. Now, here I am and you do not want to see me. By the by, have not your years taught you to be more careful?"

Lily didn't pretend to misunderstand him.

"If you hadn't shown up that night, I would not have left her body laying there in the alley."

Angelo laughed at that, his eyes sparkling with mirth. Lily was actually surprised his eyes could look so inviting.

"You think to smooth a ruffled conscience by blaming someone else for your carelessness? How petty. But I forget what it is like to be young and carefree. You need someone like me to care for you, Lily. I could give you the world if you but asked it of me, *ma c  ur*. I'm much older and wiser and you need guidance."

Lily laughed derisively and replied, "I needed it two hundred years ago, Angelo. Not anymore."

Angelo continued gazing at her. Suddenly he leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. His face was pensive and his intense eyes searched her face.

"My dear, let me tell you a story so that you may better understand me."

* * * *

Angelo Armand Milonne was born in Paris, France to a prostitute of '*Le Maison Rouge*' in the year 1616. His beautiful mother, Marie Milonne, had been the bastard daughter of a wealthy Italian nobleman, and considered herself to have blue blood. She had small, delicate features, long, luxurious black hair and honey brown eyes.

Angelo's father had been a baron, come down from the French countryside for a bit of livelier entertainment. The man who had sired Angelo had died young due to an unfortunate carriage accident. He remembered the day Marie had told him and he had been ashamed that he could not bring himself to care. Angelo had no siblings.

Angelo inherited his father's coloring and his mother's graceful facial structure. He grew up in the bawdy house and spent his days tending to the ladies. Angelo helped them dress, readied their rooms for servicing gentlemen, cooked and cleaned for them. Angelo had no friends to play with and he was not able to read or write, being too poor to receive schooling. Therefore, Angelo was never able to just be a child. He had had to grow up too fast.

When Angelo was twelve, the Madame of '*Le Maison Rouge*', an older, graying buxom woman with hard, black eyes, decided to use Angelo for her vastly growing business. Many men came in asking if she had any boys at her establishment, so naturally she told them that she would. She had approached Marie with an offer and Marie had greedily accepted, the percentage offered to her irresistible.

Marie told Angelo that he would still be helping the women but would now also be servicing the gentlemen like the ladies did. Angelo cried for the fear and disgust he felt at what they were *forcing* him to do, wanting to run away but knowing that he couldn't survive out there on his own. He was unable to fathom how his mother could allow him to be used in that way. He loved her still, despite the indifference, despite his current situation. Despite *everything*, he still loved her.

Six years later, after Angelo had become so jaded and

cynical, he decided to leave. The men had stopped coming to him but some of the women there had enjoyed his *company*. Angelo would stay no longer. He no longer cared if he would be killed on the streets. There was a world outside of '*Le Maison Rouge*' and he was going to see it.

Angelo was hired as a cook's assistant, later becoming the head cook, in an aristocratic household in Lyon. He served there for seven years of his life, never spending a penny of his earnings unless absolutely necessary. Then, at twenty-five, in the year 1641, he started on a journey back to Paris to visit his mother. He had received a letter informing him that she was ailing. Angelo had feared the worst.

He traveled as quickly as he could, traveling northwest to the Loire River and then following it north, hardly stopping for food and rest, days and weeks flying by like the unnoticed countryside. He worried that she might worsen and die before he saw her face one last time.

Along his journey, he came to rest at the home of a compassionate farmer and his rosy-cheeked wife, in a small town just outside of Orleans. They offered him a place to spend the night and a hot meal. Gratefully, he accepted their hospitality.

During the night, Angelo awoke to answer the pressing need in his bladder. His small room offered no garderobes or even a chamber pot, so he put on a shirt just in case he ran into the farmer's wife. The thought of her stammering and blushing over seeing a half-naked man running around her house amused him and brought a rare smile to his face. Inwardly laughing at the mental picture, Angelo went outside to relieve himself. He leaned one arm against a tree behind the small house and relieved himself, softly whistling.

When he finished, he shook himself off and tied the laces of his breeches. Angelo shouted when he was grabbed roughly from behind. Angelo was dimly aware in his fright that he was being carried away at an impossible speed. The man carrying him stopped at a clearing in the sparse wooded area. Angelo struggled feebly as the man sunk sharp teeth into his neck and drank deeply of his blood.

The man stood panting over Angelo as he lay there dying. Angelo could only make out the man's dark shape, then he felt

drops of something warm and wet hit his dry, tired lips. Angelo was so thirsty; he greedily licked at the fluid, his voice rasping as he asked for more.

The man bent down beside him and offered his wrist, which had a fresh slit, bleeding more of the liquid Angelo could not deny. Angelo stared for a moment, transfixed as he watched the glistening red blood making a trail down the man's strong forearm, the blood shining invitingly in the moonlight. He seized the proffered wrist and drew on it. The blood filled his mouth with coppery warmth, trickling out the corner of his mouth, making him look slightly feral. He almost cried when the pulsing fount was removed from his reach.

Angelo stood shakily to his feet. He made a mad grab for the still bleeding wrist, but the man was too quick. Angelo felt the hard blow across his face and he stumbled backwards. The attacker was tall, slender but muscled, with tanned skin and eyes and hair as black as the night. The man moved to stand before Angelo so suddenly that Angelo was nearly thrown off balance.

Angelo felt the man's strong hand grip his neck and he wondered if he were going to be strangled. He was thrown off guard when the man brought his face close to his and slowly licked the corner of his mouth, lapping up the rest of his own blood. Angelo shuddered at the erotic contact. The man's grip on Angelo loosened and Angelo leaned in toward him. Their tongues met in a furious kiss. Angelo ran his fingers through the stranger's silky hair, groaning at the texture as it slid through his questing fingers. Angelo's senses were clamoring and he felt saddened when his beautiful stranger pulled away.

The man finally spoke. He told Angelo that his name was Lucius Eduardo Alvarez; he later told Angelo that he had been born in Madrid in the year 1324. He had once been a man of the cloth. He explained to Angelo what he had become and to fear the daylight. They became lovers, Lucius being an excellent teacher of pleasure freely *gifted* and of his new life. Lucius admitted to Angelo that he had not meant to change him into a vampire until he had tasted his blood and knew Angelo's mind and heart, who he was on the *inside*.

Lucius came with him to Paris, after hearing that he was going to see his mother despite what he had become. He gave no

warnings, fully knowing that Angelo would not listen. He was like a petulant child, but he loved him so.

They continued to travel north from Orleans until they came to Paris at last. Angelo found his mother no longer stayed at '*Le Maison Rouge*'. He found out she was living in some run down hovel with only rats for company. Angelo asked her if she would come away with him where he could set her up in a nice house with servants to attend her. He even offered her the blood. He mistook her look of fright for surprise and stepped forward to help her from her rickety bed.

Marie thrashed and screamed as she felt his hands grasp her. She fought him ferociously, clawing his face and leaving bleeding gashes that healed right before her eyes, making her scream more. In a rage, in pain at his mother's reaction, Angelo snapped her neck.

Angelo stared blankly at his mother's corpse, horrified by what he had done. Angelo had forgotten his newly acquired strength. Now, his only flesh and blood lay dead by his own cold hands.

Angelo left her there to her precious rats and confronted Lucius, who had been left waiting for him outside. Angelo raved at Lucius, cursing him for turning him into a monster. He told Lucius to leave, that he never again wanted to see his evil face. Broken-hearted, Lucius complied. Angelo had never seen him again just as he had wanted.

Angelo roamed the continent for a century, alone and bitter. Finally, Angelo went to America, hoping to leave behind the ugly memories of Europe behind him. He came to New Orleans, the closest thing to French life without the memories of France. Angelo remained alone, basking in the glory of this wonderful city, until in 1799, when he laid his eyes on a goddess, Lillian Fontaine, the belle of the ball.

After he had made her into what he was, he saw, horrified and ashamed, the blood on her lips, the hunger in her eyes. Angelo must have looked just like her on that night so long ago. So he had left her, to be alone as he had been, as revenge for something that was not her fault. And she had filled his thoughts for two hundred years, the only person aside from his mother that he had ever loved, if his black heart was capable of such

love.

* * * *

Lily sat silent, watching the shadows dance in Angelo's deep blue eyes. She felt his pain, and she pitied him though she was careful not to show it. He would hate her pity. She pitied him, yes, but forgive him? Never.

* * * *

Lily called Vallon the next night wanting his company. A delicious little thrill danced up her spine when she heard his voice.

"Hello?"

Lily almost hung up the phone for her nervousness, but then she wanted him so badly.

"Hello, Vallon. It's Lily. I wanted to ask you if you would like some company for the night." Lily could almost see the sensual curve of his full mouth as he smiled.

"Why, yes, I think I would like to have some company, Lily." He had fairly purred her name, the devil.

"Shall I come over to your place?" Lily asked him. She heard his sultry laugh resonate in her ears.

"If you'd like. I live above my tattoo parlor," was his simple reply.

Lily changed into the tightest, lowest cut dress she owned. It had thigh-high slits on either side and fell to her ankles. Underneath she wore fishnets and her patent leather 'shit kickers', as she was wont to call them. Her breasts were nearly falling out but she didn't care. Vallon could just admire the view. And maybe, just maybe, she would find an excuse to bend over and give him an even better view.

Lily had a bit of a stroll ahead of her but none of that mattered. She'd be there in no time at all. When she arrived at his door and knocked, Vallon took not even a second to answer. He must have been waiting by the door.

Damn, but this man fascinated her. Vallon wore his hair long and free, incredibly sexy. His long muscled legs were encased with smooth, black leather. And surprisingly, on top of those sexy little pants, a snug t-shirt made to look like a tuxedo. Lily smiled, amused.

"No need to dress up, Vallon." She felt she was the

proverbial pot calling the kettle black.

He gestured for her to come in and offered to take her light coat. When he took it off her shoulders, he thought he would die. Her breasts were gorgeous, thrusting up out of her dress to greet him. He prayed she would drop something tonight, which she did immediately after seeing the hungry look in his green eyes. She conveniently dropped her dainty purse.

Her mouth made a pretty little moue of surprise and she happily said, "Oops!" Vallon groaned aloud, he could see her nipples! There they were saying hello, peeking tantalizingly above her low neckline where they had popped out.

Slowly, oh so slowly, she rose and set her purse on his coffee table. Lily's nipples were still poking out of her dress and she pretended not to notice. Vallon was fidgeting from side to side, chewing his lip, not sure what to do. Then, all pretensions fled and he grabbed her and kissed her. Lily had had her fair share of kisses, but only one could compare to Vallon. *Vincent*. Lily had gotten the impression from both men that he would just die if he could not have her. The effect it had on her was immense. She was feeling breathless and giddy.

Vallon, himself, was feeling a bit overwhelmed. Lily tasted and felt so good. Vallon shuddered as she gently bit his lip and he tasted blood. *Lily had sharp little teeth*. He stood absolutely still as she licked the little droplets of blood from his lip. Lily then pulled back from him and he saw the wet, red drops glistening on her lips. She ran her tongue over her lips slowly, her eyelids fluttering in ecstasy.

Vallon was on her in a second; kissing the sensitive spot just below her ear at the jaw and trailed his tongue down her neck and bit her. Lily let out a small scream as jolts shot from her neck all the way down into her groin. Lily ripped his shirt off over his head and they both raced to get him naked.

Finally, he stood before her with not a shred of clothing on and she was wild to have him. Lily feasted her eyes on his erection and thanked any god listening. He was quite large. Lily licked her lips in anticipation. It thrust demandingly out of a nest of black curls. Lily's fingers itched to run through those curls and cup his sac in her hand. When she did, it almost brought Vallon to his knees.

Vallon scooped her up in his arms and carried her through the apartment to the big, four-poster bed in his bedroom. Books were stacked in corners and peeking out from under the bed. The walls were painted a deep red and the bed was black with black velvet covers. Two guitars rested on a stand next to the bed and, she was surprised to see, a violin case lying open on the coffee table in the room surrounded by comfortable looking armchairs upholstered with red and black striped damask. Tattoo magazines and music sheets lay scattered on the table. Lily thrilled as she saw a pair of handcuffs that dangled from the bars of his headboard. Oooh, he was wicked and she loved it.

Vallon placed her on the edge of the bed and started unlacing her lace-up patent leather boots. He loved it when women wore patent leather shoes with a dress because you could see the reflection of what was underneath. He looked up to see her wicked little grin and realized that was exactly why she had worn them.

Vallon reached his hands all the way up her dress, unclasped her fishnets from her garter belt and started rolling them down, inch by inch, laying kisses and nibbles on the exposed skin. Vallon tossed them aside and climbed onto the bed with her.

Lily shoved him back against the pillows and stood on the bed before him. She placed her small foot on his chest to stay him. Then, she began to remove her dress, slowly, tauntingly. She gave him a deviant smile the whole while. Her low-cut, push-up bra and panties were blood red and lacy, the garter belt was of black lace trimmed in blood red velvet.

She smelled of dark, fragrant roses.

Vallon's senses were reeling. Lily teasingly removed her garter belt and flung it across the room. Vallon licked his lips in anticipation as she slid one strap of her bra off, then the other, finally reaching behind her back to unhook it. She dropped it onto the floor.

Vallon swallowed as he took in the shape, size and color of her breasts. They were perfect. Not small, but not too big. Exquisite.

Her skin was pale cream and her tight nipples were a dusky rose. Her breasts were up thrust and firm despite their size.

Vallon itched to taste them. Next, she hooked her thumbs into those sexy little panties and started sliding them down her long, gorgeous legs. A small patch of silky black curls did nothing to conceal the folds of her sex. The woman was a goddess, she shaved! Vallon thought it wholly erotic. His long fingers were longing to slide through that small patch of curls and into her.

Lily finally allowed Vallon to get up; she was quite strong. He made a mad grab for her. Lily giggled as he brought her crashing down on top of him. It made her feel so sexy and powerful to make a man like Vallon want her so badly. Vallon laid her back and started kissing her. He nibbled and sucked his way down her neck until he reached his destination. Gently at first, he took her nipple into his mouth until he could be gentle no longer.

Lily's whole body throbbed in rhythm to his pounding blood. She struggled not to scream as he licked his way down her stomach and thrust his tongue between her thighs. Lily sucked her bottom lip, her hips rolled seductively into Vallon's caresses. A breathless moan escaped her and made Vallon smile. Vallon sucked, licked and nibbled until she screamed her pleasure and he tasted her wetness.

Lily ran her hands all over his body, still quaking from her explosive release. She grabbed Vallon's face and tasted herself on his tongue. Soon, she was hungry with lust again. Vallon spread her legs and looked hungrily at her slick sex. At long last, he thrust into her and she cried out at the sheer thrill of it. Vallon began to move inside her, creating a delicious friction.

Lily was arching her hips wildly to meet his thrusts. Never had anything felt so good. She wrapped her legs around his waist, allowing him deeper penetration. Vallon pounded into her until she screamed aloud. Then, he slowed his pace, making his strokes long and languid. He kept it up until she was writhing and moaning his name. Her hips bucked and her nails raked his back. Vallon rolled with her on the large bed until she straddled him. Lily slid up and down his cock, delighting in the feel of him.

Vallon sat up and put his arms around her to cup her sweetly rounded cheeks and she in turn wrapped her legs around his waist. They thrust together hard and fast. Lily came apart

again in his arms, hard and loud, for the third time.

Feeling the convulsions of her muscles all around his penis, Vallon growled his own release. Sated and breathless, they fell back onto the bed and fell asleep, stroking and kissing each other, their arms, legs and hair entwined.

Vallon awoke later in the night to discover Lily gone. For a moment he panicked, thinking the best sex of his life had just walked out on him forever. But then he saw the note and her blood red panties lying on the pillow next to him.

"Sorry I left without saying goodbye but I had to get back home. I'll be seeing you again, Vallon. I promise. Love, Lily."

She had signed her name with a flourish. Vallon ran his hands over the red lace, feeling another stab of desire just from her underwear! Damn, but he was the luckiest bastard on earth.

* * * *

Angelo hid himself in the shadows as Lily quickly exited her mortal lover's apartment and came down into the courtyard. Suddenly, her head lifted and she spoke.

"Angelo, why are you here? Can you not leave me be like you once did, long ago?"

Angelo stepped out from the shadows, looking elegant and quite beautiful in slim, black velvet pants, pointed toe boots and a white ruffled shirt that billowed in the late night breeze. He let go a long suffering sigh, as if repeating a conversation that they had had a thousand times before.

"My poor dear Lily. You think you can sleep with all these men, love all these *mortals* and never expose yourself? They will become suspect when you never grow ill, never age, when you dare to taste their blood! How could you let yourself think that your precious mortal could accept you for the creature you are?" He shook his head sadly as if he truly pitied her.

"Leave, Angelo. Go back from whence you came. You are not needed here. I do not need you." Lily scowled at him. What if he tried to hurt Vallon? Lily decided she would be spending much time with her 'precious mortal'.

"Lily, you have no idea what you speak of! I made you! *Never* forget that. Your insolence grows tiresome to me. I should punish you...but how?" At those softly spoken but deadly words, Angelo looked up into the window of the room she and Vallon

had just shared.

"Touch him and I will tear you apart!" she spat the words at him. Anger boiled in her blood. *Surely he would not kill Vallon just because I refuse to let him into my life!* she thought, wondering if she had underestimated Angelo's cruelty.

Angelo smiled grimly at her and said in a voice laced with sarcasm, "How *touching*. You *love* this mortal, do you not?"

Lily shook her head in a firm negative response. His eyes studied her as if he were trying to detect if she were lying to him.

"Well, not yet, it seems, but I know you, Lily. Better than you know yourself, for I saw inside you the night I made you. You seek love on every corner, waiting for your soul mate to sweep you off your feet. Well, reality check, *chérie*. It's the twenty-first century, doll. Romance has faded with time. You want it? I can give it to you. I'll give you palaces, diamonds. I would even give you the stars above." He walked slowly toward her as he spoke.

Angelo beseeched her with his beguiling blue eyes. "I need you, Lily. My most beautiful flower." He almost choked on the words. Need...he did need someone. But he had never wanted to admit it. He had his pride. Lily just shook her head sadly. He felt his heart shrivel a little more.

"You don't love anyone but yourself, Angelo. You made that painfully clear the night you took away everything that I held dear with your cunning words and left me afraid and alone to make my way into this life! And do *not* call me *your* flower."

Angelo stepped toward her, standing mere inches from her. She did not step back; loath to let him know his nearness unnerved her.

"That night...I left you without telling you anything about what I had made you. I deeply regret that, Lily. Instantly, I was aware of the danger I may have put you in. How would you find a place to stay? Could your newly awakened powers show you the way? I doubted it. Without knowing what powers you possessed...the knowledge would come slowly. Too slowly considering you needed a place soon before sunrise. I slithered my way into you mind. Watched as you stumbled around...helpless...lost.

"I guided you, Lily. I gave your instincts a nudge...to the

place where I had been staying," he told her in a soft voice, almost a whisper. She looked at him as if he had lost his mind. She lowered her head, studying the toes of his boots. He was lying. He had to be. Angelo looked after Angelo. And that was it! Right?

"What...you thought you were merely chasing shadows?" he asked her and her head jerked as if he had slapped her.

She raised her eyes to meet his and told him, "It changes nothing, Angelo. I lost everything that night, *my family*, Angelo!"

"I learned the hard way. I saw my beloved mother's fear of me. She hated me in the instant she understood. Did you want that? Well, *did you*? No. You would have suffered as greatly as I have. I spared you a lifetime of remorse. They may have died not knowing what had become of you but at least they died *loving* you, Lily.

"I gave you a gift of eternal life and this is how I am repaid? I am a cruel man, Lily. You have been my only weakness and you misunderstand me every step of the way. Yes, I would kill your mortal in a heartbeat but *never* could I harm you."

Lily was surprised at his words. Yet they also angered her. She knew that in his own selfish way he really cared for her and he didn't seem to realize that by hurting Vallon, he would in turn hurt her. He also misinterpreted her anger toward him. He didn't seem to know that it was not that he had left her but that he had left her *and* told her to never see her family again. He had left her utterly alone.

Lily could not allow Angelo to hurt Vallon. Angelo was right, she may not love Vallon but she definitely had strange feelings for him. Confused feelings.

"Angelo, please do nothing to the mortal. It is me you are after."

Angelo smiled at her in a way that said she was talking nonsense.

"Lily, *ma fleur*, you make me laugh. You would die for this mortal? Do not push me. I hold such love for you and if I have to kill *him* to preserve that love, so be it!"

He wrapped his arms around her and held her head to his chest. She could feel his heart thudding beneath her cheek and

she was surprised he even had one.

"I do not want to have to hurt you, my sweet. Always remember, loving a mortal will bring you nothing but pain when he dies." He gently stroked her hair as he whispered those words in her ear.

Roughly, he bent her head sideways and sank his teeth into her neck and sucked lovingly.

Lily stiffened as she felt his teeth break her skin but then relaxed as pure ecstasy flooded her. Suddenly, she was released and she sank to her knees in front of him. Her cheeks flamed, embarrassed of the way she had responded to him. Breathless, she rose to her feet to stand before him once more.

Angelo looked deeply, searchingly, into her eyes and warned, "Remember Vincent."

"Damn you, Angelo," she breathed, shocked to her very core. Old pain and confusion washing over her anew, an old wound reopened, freshly bleeding.

With his hateful words leaving a foul taste on his tongue, Angelo kissed her fiercely and possessively and sped off into the night, leaving Lily standing there in the darkened courtyard.

* * * *

The next day, Vallon cringed as Azure came shrieking into the tattoo parlor. Luckily, it was still too early in the afternoon for customers.

"Who was that woman you let into your apartment last night? Was it the same one I saw you with here the other night? Vallon, I thought we had something."

Vallon looked up from his work; he had been rearranging the display case and adding new body jewelry that had just shipped in that morning.

"Azure, we do not have 'something'. Even when we dated we had *nothing*!" he told her exasperatedly.

Azure shook her blond head, "Vallon, you kissed me just last week! I had hoped we would get back together."

"*You* kissed *me*. I didn't pull away from you immediately because you had the element of surprise on your side. We are friends, band mates, nothing else."

Azure blushed to the roots of her hair.

"I'm sorry that I misunderstood you. I found someone else

anyway," she told him spitefully. "He is romantic, gorgeous and so very eloquent in his speech. He treats me like a lady."

Vallon smiled, "I'm glad to hear it. Adam, Cameron and I would have to kill him otherwise."

Azure shyly returned his smile.

"So what *is* this Romeo's name, might I ask?"

Nodding, she replied, "His name is Angelo. Angelo Milonne."

They talked for a while on her new beau and were surprised when two police officers came into the shop.

The first nodded a greeting and asked, "Are you Vallon Paige? I'm Detective Charles Phelps and this here is Detective Braxton McKenna."

Det. Phelps was a tall but portly man, probably in his late forties with thinning sandy brown hair, a bristly mustache and beady brown eyes. His nose was hooked and gave him the appearance of a vulture. He had a look on his face that said he thought everyone was a suspect. He reminded Vallon of the kind of cop that would shine his flashlight in your face even during the day, just to be an ass.

Det. McKenna was probably in his late twenties with dark, chestnut brown hair that was loosely tied back in a ponytail. Certain tendrils had escaped his band and curled romantically around his face, giving him the look of a poet. His face was angular and yet almost classically beautiful. His nose was straight and long, cheekbones were high and lips full and curved in an inviting smile. His eyes were a vibrant sky blue and he had deep dimples when he smiled. Azure looked him over with a coy smile on her face.

"Yes, I'm Vallon. This is my friend, Azure Beaumont. How can I help you?" Vallon asked them, wondering what had warranted this visit.

"Good afternoon, Miss Beaumont, Mr. Paige. By now I'm sure you are aware of the death of a young lady by the name of Katie Bermann. She was found dead with a fresh tattoo. We've asked around the other shops and no one has seen her. Were you the one to give her the tattoo?" Det. McKenna asked, brandishing a recent picture of the victim before her death and another that was a close-up of the tattoo on her shoulder.

FROM THE SHADOWS

"No, that would be my employee, Loki Hartwick. But he was here with me for awhile after she had left the shop," Vallon answered.

"Was there anyone strange that was with her or someone that had followed her that you know of?" asked Phelps, looking at Vallon as if he might be that someone 'strange'.

"No, I didn't see anyone that looked suspicious," he answered.

"Was there anyone else here that night?" asked Phelps.

"Marlena, my other employee, was working in the back while the girl was still here and didn't come out until she had left. A friend of mine was here as well," he told them. He hated the way Phelps was walking around as if expecting to see a weapon or a sign pointing to Vallon saying, *Murderer! Right here!*

"Who is this friend and where can we find them?" McKenna asked him. Azure was tearing the man's clothing off with her eyes.

"Her name is Lily Fontaine and I'm not sure where you could find her, actually, but I can assure you that she could not have done it," Vallon answered.

"How is that?" McKenna wondered aloud.

"She is *not* that kind of person, Detective. I found her to be a very good person. I don't believe that she would be capable of murder," Vallon told him honestly. He could've kicked Azure when she rolled her eyes at him. Thankfully, both men missed the exchange.

"One never knows though, Mr. Paige. Keep a sharp eye and call us if you have any further information," said Phelps and the two officers left the shop.

"Wow, Vallon, this is serious! Are you sure this Lily girl is all that you seem to think?" Azure asked him worriedly.

"Absolutely," he answered her.

Chapter Three

The next night, after her disturbing encounter with Angelo, Lily restlessly paced her library, the deep royal blue of the furniture and drapes doing nothing to wake her from her sorrowful mood but more like creating a depressing ambience to match her thoughts. She glanced every now and then at a violin case, laying on her desk, having removed it from the deep trunk she stored it in along with some items of clothing and old sheet music, *his* music. All these years and she had never once suspected his disappearance had anything to do with Angelo.

Had Angelo been in London then? Had he always been with her, just hidden? She shuddered and suppressed another violent wave of emotion as she ran her fingers lovingly over the old, cracked leather of the violin case. She had never opened it. It would mean releasing whatever scent or feel of him, the lingering essence of him, which remained on the instrument.

It was the very same instrument that had made her smile, laugh and weep. Vincent de Leone's written music came back into her head. He had composed a song for her once. Tears, unbidden, sprang into her eyes.

It had been a beautiful June night in London of 1912. Lily was one hundred and thirty-four years old, having already had one hundred and thirteen solitary years when she had met him.

Lily had been traveling for over a century all over the globe, having left the States to their brutal warring in 1812, finally coming to England. Lily had gone to the theatre to enjoy the music of French violinist Vincent de Leone. Apparently, the man was quite popular, having taken the *ton* and London by storm with his own compositions.

Ladies came dressed in the most flamboyant finery. Feathered hats, fur stoles and dresses of all colors! Lily got the impression of being a wren among peacocks. She had come

dressed simply in a jade green evening dress with simple, elegant lines, devoid of any frippery. The men were distinguished as they lifted monocles, pinched snuff and talked excitedly about upcoming races.

"Oh, he is simply divine! And such a handsome man, too!" giggled one elderly matron, for an instant looking young again in her excitement.

Another nodded fervently and added, "A bachelor, as well. And not too despondent either if my resources are correct. His father is a wealthy French baron and his mother was said to be such a beautiful young woman before she died."

Lily drank in the conversations around her with ease, even catching all the slight whispers with her sharp preternatural hearing. Soon enough, Lily went to her box. The curtains parted and a single man could be seen standing near the edge of the stage, violin in hand. She raised her small opera binoculars to her face as he made a bow, not that she really needed them but she wanted a closer look at the musician.

Lily's breath caught as he straightened. Handsome did not apply to Vincent de Leone. He was *beautiful*. Even from her position up in a balcony she could tell he was a tall man, he had black hair that shone blue in the lights. His eyes were piercing, a shocking vivid green. Lily licked her lips as her focus shifted to his lips, full and sensuous, with a sultry pout. Lily could hear the pulse of his blood, the beat of his heart, resounding in her head. Her heart beat in tune.

Despite his calm façade, Lily knew he was nervous. His thoughts swamped her, instructions and curses running through his head, begging himself not to err. Vincent settled the violin under his chin and set bow to catgut. The result left the viewers completely silent, all engrossed of the music that seemed to flow *through* him, a look of ecstasy and concentration etched on his face.

After an hour of the most heart-rending music she had ever heard, there was a quick intermission. Silence reigned in the hall. No one wanting to break the spell he had woven for them. Lily could see in their faces that the music was still coursing through their veins as it was in her own. Her senses were clamoring. Lily had never reacted so strongly toward a man, not even Angelo.

There was something about this Vincent de Leone. Lily resolved to meet this amazing musician. Where that would lead her, she did not know, but she could not help herself, she was drawn to him.

Back in her box after the intermission, Lily enjoyed another enraptured hour of Vincent de Leone's emotional, provocative music. For the second half of the concert, he was being backed by a small orchestra. The music had been written by him. The crowd surged to a roar as Vincent lowered his violin and bowed. The mass was clapping furiously, all on their feet.

Lily had become a very wealthy and influential woman over the years and people treated her with utmost respect, sensing she was a lady of stature. Lily used that to her benefit and got backstage. The theatre's owner showed her backstage himself, introducing her formally to the bright-eyed musician, triumphant in his success.

"It's my absolute pleasure to meet you, *mademoiselle*. I hope that you have enjoyed my music," he told her, as he took her hand and kissed it. Lily started as she felt his tongue surreptitiously lick her. His eyes rose to meet hers and she saw the flirtatious glint in his gaze.

Smiling, she replied, "Indeed, I enjoyed your performance. Never before have I heard anything like it, so full of emotion and such passion. You are extremely talented, *Monsieur de Leone*."

"Please, call me Vincent. And I thank you for your kind words. I love to hear that I bring pleasure to one's senses, whichever senses they may be." He smiled wickedly at her. The man was such an outrageous flirt and she wasn't resisting.

"Shall I play for you? A song for your remarkable beauty?" he asked her. Before she could respond he shook his head and said more to himself than to her. "No, none could quite compare."

Lily smiled, feeling as beautiful as he thought her to be. Rousing himself, he joined her in that smile. A smile that spoke a thousand words.

"*Mademoiselle* Fontaine, I don't believe you are from around here. Will you be in London long?" he asked nonchalantly but his eyes told her he was eager to hear her answer.

"I come from New Orleans. I'm an American. I will be in London as long as it is *entertaining*. Have you any thoughts on how I should go about entertaining myself?" Lily smiled demurely, as if she meant *only* what she said and nothing more, feeling slightly shocked at her own audacity.

Looking happier for her having said that, he replied, "I have been in London for a year now and I know my way around. I could *introduce* you to the many *pleasures* of the city. If you would like, *ma chatte*."

Lily's heart beat faster. She had no idea why she was flirting with the man. She was ready to surrender everything for Vincent de Leone. A man of extraordinary beauty, he had the face of an angel. Her own dark angel.

"I think I would like that, *Monsieur de Leone*."

Vincent nodded his head graciously. "Tomorrow night, there will be a Garden party at the Countess of Haversham's, a friend of mine; she likes to make her friends green with envy over her prize rosebushes. She's a wonderful woman, very sweet natured and gracious. The next night, there is going to be a masked ball held by another friend of mine, the Earl of Whitestone. Masked balls can be exciting if you know who to look for.

"Tomorrow we can lunch together and I'll take you around to some shops and we can get you a little something for the masked ball. Do we have a date then?"

Lily nodded. "Indeed, we do, *Monsieur de Leone*. I have a townhouse on Curzon," she told him, giving him specific instructions of her address.

Vincent grasped her fingers and kissed them lingeringly. "I'll see you then, *ma chatte*." He gave her an elegant bow and she smiled and turned to go. His grip remained firm on her fingers, staying her. Lily raised a brow and he laughed softly.

"Forgive me, *ma fleur belle*, for I cannot help myself."

With that he drew her into his arms and tilted her chin up. His lips came down over hers, softly, languidly. He ran his tongue over her lower lip and she gasped at the electric sensations coursing through her. She didn't move away, instead she leaned into him. Reluctantly, he released her. He ran his hand down her cheek to her neck, trailing over her shoulder and

down her arm.

Lily shivered at the delicious tremors wracking her frame. Without another word, she turned and left, her head spinning. When she was safe in her carriage, she let out a pent up breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. She should have resisted.

Lily had fantasies filled with him and illicit pleasures that night. And with the coming of the dawn as she lay in her bed, she belatedly realized that she had agreed to meet him that afternoon! Her wits had not been about her, she'd just have to inform her butler to tell him that she was ill and would see him that night at the Garden party. It was a good thing the *ton* was so curious about her and swamping her with their invitations to their extravagant balls and soirees; else she would have been in trouble there too. She'd have to ask Maxwell to find those invitations she needed in the immense stack on the table in the hall later that night and have her acceptances sent quickly out before he came to pick her up.

She quickly threw on a robe and rushed downstairs to find Maxwell. Lily had told Maxwell that she had a condition that made her unable to venture out into the sunlight and she would tell the same to Vincent. She had had all the windows in her house bricked up to allow complete protection from the sun. Although Lily was safe in her house, she still wanted to rush back upstairs into bed, feeling very tired and needing sleep. She was physically weaker by day and she should be getting some rest.

"Do you need anything, my lady?" Maxwell asked her, a trace of concern in his usually stern voice. She was glad she had found him. Or, rather, he had found her.

"Oh, Maxwell, I need a favor. There will be a *Monsieur* de Leone arriving this afternoon. Can you inform him that I am not well and will see him later tonight when he picks me up for the Haversham Garden party?" she asked him.

"Yes, of course, my lady. You should be abed, my lady," he lightly scolded her.

"And one more thing, Maxwell, I need my acceptances sent out for the Earl of Whitestone's masked ball and the Countess of Haversham's Garden party," she told him and he nodded his ascent, shooing her with his hands off to bed. She smiled kindly

at him and he smiled back at her.

Lily returned to her room upstairs and settled herself back into bed to wait for nightfall. In the darkness of the room, Lily allowed her mind to wander. The night had been a surprise. Just a night out at the theatre was all she had planned. Then she had laid her eyes on him. Her heart lurched as she remembered his face. She had felt good with him. It was a strange, and altogether very pleasing, experience.

* * * *

Vincent arrived on Curzon Street at exactly eleven o'clock. It was a beautiful house, pink rosebushes gracing the small yard. The Countess would be jealous of the perfect buds. He smiled and knocked on the door. He heard footsteps in the foyer and consciously straightened his cravat.

A morose looking butler opened the door and looked quizzically at him.

"Is *Mademoiselle* Fontaine in?" he asked the man, he felt that he was being sized up by the butler.

"I'm afraid the lady is not well. She left me instructions to inform you that she will not be able to join you this afternoon. My lady has said that she will see you tonight at nine o'clock for the party."

Vincent nodded, confused. Had he been brushed off? Did she regret her agreement to allow him to show her around London? He fervently hoped that was not the case.

"I see," he replied to the butler. "Please tell *Mademoiselle* Fontaine that I shall call on her again this night. Au revoir, good man." Vincent turned and walked back to his carriage, hearing the door close behind him.

Vincent looked back at the house and noticed something that he had failed to notice at first. It appeared that all the windows of the house had been filled in. Very curious. He turned back and climbed into the carriage. He knocked on the roof and heard the driver ask, "Where to, *Monsieur* de Leone?"

"Pall Mall," was his curt reply. He had some shopping to do.

* * * *

Lily remained in her library reading for the rest of the afternoon after waking. Vincent had called that morning and he

would be back at nine to take her to the Garden party. Hopefully, he did not think that she had changed her mind about them. Although, she probably *should* have changed her mind.

Stretching, Lily glanced at the clock on the mantle. It was already eight o'clock. Rising, she decided it was time to start getting ready. She tugged the bell pull and a minute later the sour-faced Maxwell came into the library after a curt knock and an equally curt command to enter.

"Maxwell, will you send Margaret up to me?"

Maxwell nodded his assent. "There is a large parcel for you in the foyer. It was delivered just this afternoon." He bowed out of the room. Lily rose from her seat behind her desk and went curiously into the foyer. She found the package and noticed there was a card attached. She picked it up and opened it.

It simply said, "*Thought this would suit you well, ma chatte.*" Smiling she refolded the note and set it back in the envelope attached to the package. Lily picked up the parcel and took it up to her bedroom. She laid it on the bed and untied the ribbon. She lifted the lid and pulled back the tissue paper. She let out a gasp. It was a black silk dress. Lily held it up to get a better look at it. It had a low-cut square neckline and holding it in the light, she could see that it had a blue sheen. The sleeves were short and ruched. In the box she could see that the dress came with elbow length gloves, a headpiece for cat ears and a black facemask with slanted eyeholes and tiny sapphires emanating eyebrows. It even had long black whiskers.

Lily was stunned. She had never received such a gift as this, especially from someone she had just met. From the looks of it, he had guessed her size correctly. The man was an enigma! He didn't even know her and yet he flirted outrageously with her and lavished this amazing gift on her. It had to have been expensive. Why would he do such a thing?

Lily was just setting the dress back into its box when a knock came at her door. It was Margaret.

"Come in, Margaret." Margaret walked into the room and her brown eyes lit with admiration of the dress. Her blond hair was tied up into a bun and rebellious tendrils escaped and wisped around her round face.

"Oh my, miss, that's a lovely dress, that!" she exclaimed.

Lily nodded to her. "Indeed it is. I shall be wearing the pink silk evening gown."

Margaret retrieved the dress from the wardrobe and helped Lily into the gown. Margaret fixed her hair up in a simple and elegant twist with tendrils of hair framing her face. Lily watched the woman's progress in the mirror of her vanity, watching the elegant transformation of her reflection.

Margaret nodded with approval. "You look positively lovely, miss."

"Thank you, Margaret. And I look lovely because of the magic you worked on my hair." Margaret accepted the compliment with a shy smile and bowed out of the room. Lily went downstairs to wait for Vincent to arrive, her heart racing with expectation. She wondered if he would try to kiss her again. Blushing, she realized that she was acting like a green girl fresh out of the schoolroom instead of a one hundred and thirty-four year old woman. If he knew her age...

* * * *

At nine o'clock, Vincent once more knocked at the door of Lily Fontaine's stately townhouse on Curzon. He was half afraid she would not be joining him that night, either.

The dour butler greeted him and showed him inside. He was preparing to hand his hat and gloves to the man when he heard Lily's voice.

She was beautiful. Her curves were wonderfully encased in a soft pink silk evening dress. It flowed over her legs as she neared him and he swallowed in appreciation at the picture she presented. He caught her smile as if she knew his thoughts.

"Good evening, *Monsieur de Leone*. Shall we go?"

Vincent took her hand and tucked it into the crook of his arm. Lily felt the hard muscle under her fingers and inwardly sighed. She felt her heart do a somersault when he looked down at her and gave her a slow, sexy smile.

"Indeed we shall," he replied.

"I'll have Cinderella back by midnight," he added to the butler, who, thrilled at seeing his mistress happy, had an almost imperceptible smile on his face.

When they reached Haversham Hall, they found there was a considerable crowd for a small Garden party. The countess'

invitations were highly sought after as she was cousin to a duke and threw some of the best balls in the *ton*. The food and drink was always plentiful and of the best quality, not to mention her house was full of rooms and shadowy alcoves and terraces for lovers to meet.

The garden was decorated simply and elegantly with paper lanterns swaying softly in the night breeze. Small tables were set up on the ground near the rear entrance of the large house. A small band was playing nearby and there was a crowd of dancing and laughing couples.

People roamed the grounds, the women showing off their dresses and men showing off their women. Their voices mingled in a merry drone. So and so was caught unchaperoned in Hanover Square with Lord Maguire and the Earl of Karlton House had gambled away all his money and had reduced his household to squalor.

The Countess of Haversham, Sabrina Phillips, walked among her guests, chatting gaily. She was a sweet older woman, in her mid-sixties. Her face still shone with youthful exuberance, her rounded cheeks becomingly pink. She came to a stop when she saw Vincent and Lily.

"I'm so glad you could come, *Monsieur de Leone*. Lady Fontaine, I must say I did not expect you to come. But I am glad that you are here. Please, enjoy yourselves," she told them both with a kind smile.

They both gave their thanks to the countess and started walking along the garden paths. Rosebushes of all breeds and colors adorned the lovely garden. The countess even had some lilies, which made Lily smile. Vincent took her hand and placed it on his arm.

"I forgot to tell you how lovely you look tonight, *ma fleur*."

Lily smiled at him and replied, "Why, thank you. And might I say you look handsome tonight, as well?"

Vincent waggled his brows at her.

"Oui, you may say that; yesterday, today and tomorrow. I believe the generous Countess of Haversham has a grand maze in her garden. Care to give it a try?"

Lily wondered if she *should* go anywhere secluded with this man but she answered, "And if I cannot find my way out?"

FROM THE SHADOWS

"Then I shall make you wings with which to fly," he answered in turn.

Lily laughed. For him she could fly up to the sun, just like fool Icarus. She looked up into the starry night sky and sadly realized she could never have this man. Vincent was mortal. Would he fear her if he found out? Would his beautiful, trusting eyes darken with hatred of her? Lily didn't think she could bear it.

Vincent walked her into the maze.

"May I ask why you could not join me this afternoon as we had planned, *ma chatte*?"

Lily nodded and said, "I was so caught up in you last night that I agreed to meet you this afternoon before I even thought about it. I have a rare condition in which I cannot go out into the daylight. The sunlight can be fatal to me. I am sorry if I left you with the impression that I do not want to see you. I do. It's just that I can't go outside during the day."

Vincent nodded in understanding, relief flowed through him. He wondered what it was about her that stirred him up so.

"That explains the windows. By the way, how do you like the present I left you?"

Lily swallowed her guilt from the lie of her 'condition'.

"I am speechless. I don't know how to thank you for your generosity. It was absolutely gorgeous! It must have been terribly expensive," she pressed.

Vincent just smiled and ignored her hidden inquiry. They were walking further into the maze, passing giggling couples every now and then.

"I am glad that you liked it, *ma chatte*. Anything for such an exquisite woman."

Lily felt a slight twinge of jealousy.

"I take it you do this often. Purchasing expensive gifts for pretty women hoping they will throw themselves at you in return to show their appreciation."

Vincent looked taken aback.

"That is not my intention, Lily. And I do not do this often, or at all. Not until you. So, I ask *you*, what have you done to *me* that I cannot get you out of my head?"

Lily blushed, actually *blushed*, in pleasure and in shame.

She didn't even know this man, why should she care if he had a thousand other women? Lily looked up into his eyes; they were startling in their intensity. They had stopped in what appeared to be the center of the maze. They could still hear the music from the party, but it was faint. Other than the sound of them breathing, it was absolutely quiet.

"I don't know why I said those things, Vincent. But I can't get you out of my mind, either. Not even in sleep."

He visibly relaxed at her words. Vincent once again took her hand in his but just held it to his chest. Lily searched his face for some clue of what he was thinking; she didn't like to invade others' minds too often if she could help it.

Lily stared, mesmerized, as his features shifted in indecision. Then, apparently, he came to a conclusion. He leaned forward and kissed her softly on the lips. Vincent pulled back and looked into her face. Her eyes were shut still, expecting another kiss. He watched as her tongue traced her lips, tasting him. His breath caught, she was so hypnotic.

Slowly, Lily opened her eyes to find herself sinking into his. It was if the world stood still. There was no one else on earth but them in this moment. She could hear his heart thundering in his chest and feel the electricity that seemed to emanate from them. She had waited all her life for this. No one had this kind of connection with her. Vincent belonged to her as she belonged to him.

Vincent put his hands on either side of her face and kissed her again. Harder this time, with an urgency that spoke of his need for her. Lily surrendered herself to the feeling he gave her and wrapped her arms around his waist, holding on as if she were drowning. Vincent felt her arms around him and growled deep in his throat when her hands slid lower and grabbed his backside.

Lily pulled him closer so that there was nothing but a few layers of clothing to separate them. She could feel the hardness of him pressing into her stomach and she wanted him right there and then. She wanted him on his back, hands tied with his own cravat. She wanted to run her lips, tongue and fingernails all over his long body.

Lily started pulling at his clothes, wanting them off of him.

Vincent shrugged out of his jacket and vest without breaking their kiss. Lily's hands worked to get his cravat off and Vincent worked at the buttons on the back of her dress.

With a moan of satisfaction, Vincent worked the last button free and moved his hands up to her chest. He hooked his thumbs in the dress' bodice and started sliding the dress down to her waist. Underneath, Lily wore a very thin chemise and Vincent could see the dark circles of her nipples through the material.

"Just in there. Go," came an unwelcome whisper. The voice sent a shiver down Lily's spine. Lily was sure the voice was familiar but she couldn't place it, as there were other things on her mind.

"Thanks," was the reply to the whispered instruction. And a tall, elegant blond man came in with a giggling consort. All of the sudden, the center of the maze was very crowded. The man turned red in embarrassment and murmured an apology while his woman merely started giggling louder. They left in a rush.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what I was thinking to start...*mauling* you in a maze during a garden party," Vincent told her.

Lily replied, "It wasn't all you. But I think we should get back to the party before the gossips get their tongues wagging."

Vincent nodded and in silence they righted themselves as best they could.

They walked back through the maze without speaking, the air between them still crackling with sexual tension. Lily felt as if she were on fire.

The countess swooped down on them as they approached the chatting crowd.

"I see you walked in my maze. I hope you enjoyed it. I, myself, have not been able to go too far into it. I get terrified of going in and never finding my way back out!" She laughed gaily at her silliness.

Sabrina sobered and continued, "The band is preparing to do a waltz. So grab a space while there is room left. I say, I didn't expect such a crowd for a small Garden party." With that, she left them and moved on to another small group of people.

Vincent bowed to Lily and asked, "Well, *ma fleur belle*, can I have this dance?"

Lily curtsied in response and accepted his arm. The band struck up a waltz and the other guests started pairing up. Lily's hand was small clasped in Vincent's and the small of her back burned where his hand was placed gently against her. Vincent pressed her body close to his. *Too* close for polite society. To the English *ton* it was improper but they figured that it was just because he was French and she was an uncouth American.

They danced together, closely, for the rest of the party. Another elite rule broken: it was *unseemly* to dance more than twice with the same partner. But neither cared. They were too absorbed in each other. For all they cared, the *ton* could go hang.

Lily and Vincent said their goodbyes to the gracious countess, complimenting her on her skills as a hostess. Sabrina smiled at them knowingly. She, for one, did not think them scandalous for their actions. The Countess of Haversham thought it beautifully romantic.

The carriage ride back to Lily's house on Curzon was tense. Vincent tried lightening the mood by talking about the masked ball the next night.

"May I pick you up at nine, then? The ball lasts until a few hours after midnight when everyone removes their masks."

Lily cleared her throat, "Yes, I will be ready and waiting by nine o'clock tomorrow then." An awkward silence ensued.

Vincent broke it with an apology.

"I am sorry if I was too forward too soon. I should not have acted that way. I could not resist. You are so beautiful to me."

Lily shook her head. "I wanted it, Vincent. There is no need to apologize, for I am just as guilty of mauling you. There is just something in the back of my mind, but I don't know what it is that is bothering me. I feel like there was something I should have noticed," she explained, seeming to speak more to herself than to Vincent. She shook her head again and smiled at him.

"It's probably nothing," she added.

The carriage stopped in front of her house.

"Thank you, Vincent, for the lovely evening. I shall see you tomorrow night."

Vincent stepped out of the carriage and turned to help her down. Once her feet touched the ground, he smiled softly and kissed her gently at the corner of her mouth. Lily closed her

eyes, feeling the shock of his kiss coursing through her.

"Sweet dreams, *ma fleur belle*," he said and bowed over the hand he still held. Lily watched him as he stepped back into the carriage.

"Goodnight," she said in return. He winked at her and the coachman snapped the reins. She stood watching the carriage for a minute, and then walked up to her lovely townhouse. Maxwell was waiting for her in the foyer; he must have heard them arrive. He took her shawl and gloves.

"Take your rest, Maxwell."

Maxwell nodded and bowed to her. Lily grabbed a book from the library and went upstairs to her room, where she undressed and took down her hair. She climbed into bed naked, delighting in the feel of the soft sheets against her bare skin. Lily's mind was torn between thoughts of Vincent and the words that she was reading. Vincent stayed on her mind that night until she slept, and dreamed of him.

* * * *

The next night was cool and calm. The stars shone in the sky around a full moon, peeking through thin, dark clouds. Vincent gazed out the window of his bedroom and thought about Lily, remembering how she had reacted to him in the maze. The memory brought with it the familiar arousal she evoked in him. So primal and strong was it that for a moment he was left breathless.

Vincent was already in his costume for the masked ball. He had chosen to portray the Phantom from his favorite story by Gaston Leroux, '*Le Fantôme De L'Opéra*'. Tonight he was Erik, the Opera Ghost and Lily would be his Christine. The story had awed him, the way that the Phantom had loved Christine. It was a kind of tragic and terrible romance.

Vincent placed his white mask in place and went downstairs. The carriage was already pulled around to the front of his townhouse on St. James. His driver nodded at him and Vincent climbed inside. In short time, the carriage pulled up in front of Lily's.

Vincent made his way up to the front door and smiled when the old butler greeted him in his usual austere fashion.

"Is the lady ready yet, my good man?" he asked jovially.

"In a few minutes, I suppose. Would you care to wait in the drawing room, sir? I could bring you some tea if you would like."

Vincent nodded but declined the offer of tea and followed the man to the drawing room where he was to wait. He wandered around the room, admiring Lily's fine taste in décor. It was most unlike many other fine drawing rooms, with its darker, more masculine colors and dark wood furnishings. She had a lot of Greek sculptures as well around the room.

Vincent's jaw slightly dropped when his eyes found a large statue of a nude nymph in a corner of the room. He could just imagine her sitting smugly in this room watching her guests squirm around the nude figures. The thought made him smile. He moved closer to study the statue when his thoughts were interrupted.

"A beautiful statue, is it not? I'm glad you like it."

Vincent smiled and turned to reply but stopped short when he saw her. The black silk dress fit her like second skin, the deep blue sheen of the material winking at him in the dim light. When she moved, the shifting colors literally caressed her every curve, like shadows were twining themselves intimately over her body. Her hair was dressed up in extravagant curls with a headpiece of cat ears and her golden eyes shone from behind the mask she wore.

"Not so beautiful as you look in that dress," he finally replied. Then sobering, added, "She is not something I expected to find in a lady's drawing room. The ladies of the *ton* would be scandalized."

"Yes, well, I found her to be aesthetically pleasing."

As I find you, she added silently.

She raked his body with her gaze, lingering on his long legs that were deliciously encased in tight dark breeches. Her eyes trailed up to the prominent bulge that had suddenly materialized under her scrutiny. Unconsciously, she licked her lips.

Tearing her gaze from temptation, she took in the rest of his attire. He had on a billowy white shirt that laced at the neck; he had left it loose. Vincent wore over that a black satin cloak with scarlet lining. He wore his long, dark hair pulled back and he had a dashing black hat with a scarlet feather.

FROM THE SHADOWS

Lily loved the way he looked. Like some sort of wraith that would steal her away in the dead of night and make love to her until the sun came up when he would melt away, back to his heavenly realm of starlight and night sky. He was incredibly sensual and so beautiful to look upon.

"Are you the Phantom tonight, Vincent?" she asked him seeing the ghostly white mask covering his beautiful face, then moved closer to him.

He nodded slightly, watching her approach.

"Will you make me sing for you by the end of this night then, Phantom?"

Lily stood but an inch from him now. She stood gazing up at him, lips slightly parted. Vincent took the invitation and lightly grazed her lips with his own. Lily shivered from the unexpected gentleness of it. She sighed as he pulled away. He took her hand and placed it in the crook of his arm.

"Shall we go, *ma chatte* belle?" he asked her.

Lily shook her head to clear it, and then nodded her assent. She felt slightly confused, at him *and* at herself. She had basically thrown herself at him and he had merely brushed her lips with a soft caress from his.

Vincent led her into the foyer where Maxwell waited with her light cloak and the gloves Vincent had purchased for her along with the dress. She put the items on and took his arm again and let him lead her to his waiting carriage. He helped her inside and climbed in after her. Instead of sitting on the seat across from her, he sat next to her and ordered the driver to go on.

Lily smiled, relieved that she hadn't created any awkwardness by lasciviously suggesting he make her sing for him. Without a word, Vincent took off his hat and laid it on the seat across from them. Then, he lightly gripped her chin between his thumb and forefinger and turned her face toward him and kissed her to steal away her breath. The kiss started slowly, tongues languidly caressing. Then, Lily took the tie from his hair and dug her fingers into it, the silken strands tickling her, and she pulled him closer. The kiss deepened and became more urgent, like he needed her to breathe. It made her feel dizzy and powerful to be kissed like that.

Emboldened by her response, Vincent reached down and

put his hand around her ankle and raked his hand slowly up until he reached the top of her stockings. He hesitated and Lily grabbed his hand and thrust it up the rest of the way. He growled low in his throat and Lily lay back on the seat. He laid his body lightly on top of her and his fingers reached her. Lily almost screamed at the contact, it sent shockwaves through her body. He slowly slid a finger inside her and rubbed her clitoris with his thumb all the while kissing her still.

Lily writhed against his hand as he moved his finger inside her. Suddenly his lips were gone and he was sliding off her to his knees on the floor of the rocking carriage. Lily sat up, missing his kiss and he took advantage of her position and reached his other hand up her dress to grasp her hips and pull her to the edge of the cushioned seat.

Vincent then lifted her dress and spread her legs wide. He lowered his head and bit her gently on the soft, pale flesh of her inner thigh. Lily wondered at what he was doing, and then he licked her slowly from where his finger had just been to her clitoris. Lily had never felt anything like it. She had never imagined this! She had only been this intimate with a man *once* and never had she experienced this.

Lily gasped as he thrust his tongue inside of her and *twisted it around inside her!* Lily's body trembled violently from his onslaught of erotic kisses, feeling light-headed and slightly overwhelmed. Vincent's tongue swirled languidly over her swollen flesh, going slowly until she tangled her fingers in his hair. He became just as frantic as she to get her to come. With his quickened pace, Lily could feel herself spiral out of control and then she came apart. Vallon quickly replaced his tongue with his fingers again and kissed her to quiet the scream that erupted from her.

Lily felt she was floating and the excitement was starting all over again as he kept his lips on hers, and his finger inside her. She tasted herself on his mouth and it gave her a little thrill inside. Lily reached for the laces of his breeches but stilled when the carriage came to a sudden stop. Vincent groaned in frustration.

Vincent helped Lily straighten out her gown. He then reached for his hat and placed it back on his head, his hair loose

and slightly tangled under it. Masks in place and clothes aright, they gracefully exited the carriage. Lily turned her head to look at the driver and blushed when he grinned and winked at her from atop his perch.

The pair made their way inside in silence. Lily gasped as they entered the ballroom ten minutes later. It was quite a sight to see. So many gaily dressed people about, dancing and chatting happily. The room itself was awe-inspiring. Lily took in all she could see, the passion for art and beauty inside her roaring to life at such a spectacular display. The walls were deep red and draped with silk of the brightest golden hue. Crystal chandeliers hung gracefully from an elegant painted ceiling. The scene was of cherubs and beautiful Botticelli-esque women in an exotic garden, their voluptuous painted bodies just barely concealed by draping silk. The floor was black marble with gold veining. This was the finest ballroom Lily had ever stepped foot into.

Vincent smiled at her look of wonder.

"Kensington is a very extravagant man with expensive tastes. He hired painters for the ceiling after a visit to Rome. He wanted a depiction as grand as the one in the Sistine. He strives for excellence in almost everything. Ah, and speak of the very devil! Kensington, how are you this night?"

The Earl of Whitestone walked up to them, smiling happily seeing his friend.

"I thought that was you under that mask. You can disguise your face, dear Vincent, but your accent gives you away. And who might this lovely lady with you be, hm? Or must I wait until the evening unveiling?" he asked playfully, his eyes filled with a flirtatious glint.

Kensington Chesterfield, the Earl of Whitestone, was a handsome man. Only a startling twenty-four years of age, he was tall with wavy blond hair that was cut short and a becoming curl rested over his forehead as if inviting a lady to tuck it back. His eyes were so pale a blue that they resembled ice, yet they were inviting eyes. His lips were full and smiling, showing neat, white teeth, the front teeth slightly crooked. He was very charming.

The earl was dressed as a highwayman, the tricorne hat pulled rakishly to one side. His mask was a small and simple black one that just covered the smallest portion of his face.

"I am Lily Fontaine. There seems to be no secret as to who you are, so I may as well confess who I am."

"Well, I didn't want to hide my face completely behind the mask. The ladies wouldn't be able to find me for a dance. Maybe you'll let me have a dance later? I am a fabulous dancer if I may say so."

Lily nodded her head and he smiled.

"Well, I must be about to see to my other guests. Glad you came, Vincent, Lily."

"So, *ma chatte*, care to dance a waltz with me?" Vincent asked her.

"Of course, dear Phantom."

* * * *

Three hours and a midnight unmasking later, Lily was feeling exuberant. She had shared a dance with many exciting people. She was presently taking a short break, sipping a glass of champagne and watching as Vincent danced with a lovely young blond woman. The woman's cheeks were becomingly pink as she flirted and smiled up at him, laughing at something Vincent told her.

Yet Lily felt no jealousy toward the girl. Vincent showed no sign of being attracted to the girl; his smiles were merely polite and without suggestion.

"Have you been enjoying yourself, Miss Fontaine?"

Lily turned toward Kensington with a smile.

"Indeed, I have. It was quite a turn out tonight. I've been dancing all night and it appears that I have hardly begun," she replied easily, responding to the earl's friendly manner.

"I believe that the band is about to start a minuet and you promised me a dance."

Lily took Kensington's proffered arm and allowed him to lead her out into the crowd. Lily was delighted to see that the earl had not been lying when he had told her he was an excellent dancer.

"I must compliment you on your fine taste. This ballroom is exquisite," Lily told him, her eyes again seeking out the beauty of the room.

"Ah, I see you are a fellow enthusiast of the arts! How interesting, indeed. There's something to be said for surrounding

yourself with such beauty. I look upon these rooms everyday and I am content. Many have spoken negatively about spending so much on a single work of art to grace your home, but they just don't see it the way that I do.

"People just like you and I have made these works lovingly with their own hands. These works are the testament to a person's ability to *create* beauty in a world that oft lacks luster," Kensington told her in passionate tones and she nodded mutely, mouth agape.

"Yes, I always felt the same way. I could not have explained it better myself," she told him with admiration and approval in her voice. He smiled appreciatively at her, glad to have someone that understood.

"Have you and Vincent known each other long?" she asked him, curious about how they had met.

"For two years now we have been friends. I met him when I went to Paris with a couple friends of mine. We heard him play at a small theatre and his amazing talent awed me. It's not *just* his music you are hearing when he plays. It's like you are listening to his soul."

At that Kensington shook his head and laughed softly. Dimples appeared in his cheeks and his pale blue eyes sparkled. Lily admired this man's beauty but her mind kept returning to Vincent's face.

"Forgive me, but his music really reaches out to you. It is hard to forget. I remember meeting him after the performance by chance. I had left the theatre and went looking for a place where I could get a drink with my friends and play a couple hands at the tables. I finally found a place and he was already there inside.

"Vincent and a few of his friends asked us to join them at their table. I told him that I had heard him play and that I wanted him to come to England to play for me. I was planning an extravagant ball for the end of the season. Some very influential people would be there; dukes and Parliament members included.

"Vincent accepted as I had mentioned that a few people that would be there were patrons to the arts. After that, we became great friends and he became a great success after meeting a wealthy benefactor and enthusiastic lover of the arts, that being myself. I had decided that I wanted to be the one to sponsor him,

to have my name backing such a talented musician."

The dance came to an end and he led her back out of the throng of people.

"I also first saw him at a concert of his, actually just two days ago," she told him, then blushed and added hastily, "Normally, I wouldn't arrive at a party with someone I have just met, but this was my first time in England and he kindly offered to entertain me. I mean, that is, to escort me around London, to all the good entertainments going on around the city."

Kensington nodded, a grin spreading across his face, and said, "Vincent is an easy man to admire and trust. I hope you'll be staying for awhile. It's not often one meets a woman here in London that can talk of more than the latest fashions and gossip. Tell me, are all American women like you?"

Before she could reply, Vincent joined them, the blushing blond on his arm.

"Ah, Miss Ashton, you're looking well this night. Mary Ashton, might I introduce Miss Lily Fontaine? She's come here for a visit from America." Kensington greeted the young girl, who then set her batting eyelashes on him after exchanging greetings with Lily. Recognizing an invitation, he offered her his arm for a dance.

"If you will both excuse us?" he asked, grinning at them.

They both nodded and watched the pair walk out into the crowd, disappearing from sight as the crowd swallowed them in.

Vincent faced Lily and raised a hand to tuck an escaped tendril of hair behind her ear. It was an intimate gesture and Lily felt her breath catch.

"Having a good time, *ma fleur*?" he asked her quietly.

Nodding, she took his hand as he offered it and let him lead her away from the dancers and into the foyer. She gazed again at the lovely dual staircase, each set of stairs curving upwards to the landing above. Beyond the stairs she could make out a pair of French doors leading into a cloistered courtyard. Vincent led her up the grand staircase to an empty bedroom. The room was dimly lit by the light of the moon shining through the windows but she could see the room in perfect detail.

The room, like the rooms below, was opulent and graceful, reflecting the personal style of its owner. The room had an

eastern theme, dragons and Asian flowers decorating the walls. Rich burgundy covered all the furniture made of dark mahogany wood. Paper lanterns hung from the ceiling, giving you a feeling of being in another place. It was the perfect setting for a tryst.

Lily could sense Vincent's intense gaze on her, he seemed to be waiting for her to give him a sign. She drew out the moment, walking around the room, letting her fingers trail over the furniture. She finally came to a stop before him and looked up into his face. His eyes were hot and his face seemed to be set in stone.

Lily could hear his heart pounding, his blood rushing through his veins. Slowly, she brought one gloved hand to her lips and pulled it off with her teeth, dropping it on the floor. She repeated the action with her other glove. She watched the expressions that crossed his face in fascination.

Vincent closed the distance between them, bending until his lips met hers. He kissed her violently, all the passion inside him bursting free. Lily could feel his emotions ravaging her senses; they were turbulent and raw. His thoughts were all of her and how much he wanted her, the things he wanted to do to her.

She couldn't help but hear his thoughts anymore; it was as if they were a battering torrent to her. She could hardly restrain them as they pummeled her. Lily felt as if there was a thread connecting them and she couldn't ignore it. She felt his kiss deepen and he placed his large hands low on her hips.

Vincent moved his hands up and around, briefly cupping her in them before coming to the buttons at the back of her dress. He quickly began unbuttoning them, teasing her with deep, hot kisses. Vincent broke the kiss when the last button was unfastened. He grabbed the material and began pulling it down.

Lily freed her hands from the dress and removed his cloak and ripped his loose shirt off quickly up over his head. His body took her breath away. Vincent was absolute perfection. His abdomen was ridged in muscle, his shoulders broad with a wide chest tapering down to lean hips. Moonlight streaming in from the windows glazed his velvety skin with a radiant blue gleam.

Lily's heart hammered in her chest. He looked so beautiful, standing bare to the waist, bathed in the light of the moon. The only light she had known for so many years, until him. His hair

shone in the pale beams, the deep blue highlights coming to life. She wanted him more than she had ever wanted anything in her life.

Lily pushed her dress the rest of the way down, stepping out of the pool it made on the floor, and was startled, yet violently aroused, when Vincent grabbed her thin, knee-length chemise and ripped it completely in two down the front.

Now, Lily was naked except for her black silk stockings and high-heeled shoes. Vincent lifted her from off the floor and she wrapped her legs around him. He walked with her to the couch and laid her down on it, laying his body on top of hers.

Vincent reached down between their bodies and opened the front of his breeches. Lily screamed in pleasure when he drove hard into her. She thrust her hips wildly against him, glorying in the feel of his full length pounding into her again and again. Their lovemaking was hard and furious, almost brutal in their urgency.

Lily felt herself spiraling into a frenzy as her pleasure was coming to a crest, finally going over the edge when Vincent bit her neck. Hearing her scream of release, Vincent wrapped his arms around her and pulled her up, moving himself into a sitting position. Lily moved herself up and down, grinding herself against him as his fingers dug into the soft flesh of her hips.

Grasping his face between her hands, Lily kissed him to keep herself from screaming too loudly as she felt another shattering of her senses. Feeling her muscles spasm around him, Vincent joined her, growling low in his throat as he felt his hot seed pour from him.

Breathless and sated, they remained in their position, her heart pounding against his. Neither wanted to break the intimacy of that moment in the aftermath of their passion. Lily let her head rest on Vincent's shoulder, glorying in the sleepy, satisfied state of her body. His pulse throbbed against her lips and the temptation she felt disturbed her. It was time to join the party downstairs before she did something rash.

Minutes later, they reluctantly dressed, Lily putting on her shredded chemise to the best of her ability, and straightened their garments before going back below to join the rest of the guests.

For the remainder of the ball, Vincent and Lily stayed in

each other's company, drawing the speculative gazes of the *ton*. Again they found themselves ignoring the company of the other guests. And again they cared not for the opinions of the elegant aristocrats gossiping amongst them.

The earl, as well, had been inexplicably absent for a time. Along with Miss Ashton. He emerged later from his library with a happy Miss Ashton in tow. Lily and Vincent joined the pair at the refreshment table for some champagne.

"I daresay the two of you have elicited some gossip among my guests. My ears were blazing as I heard the speculation whipping around the room. Seems they think a romance is in their midst," Kensington remarked playfully.

Vincent grinned and replied, "I have merely refused to part with such pleasurable company. I am afraid I have been too attentive to just one lady and rocked society's strict mores."

"I think that is terrifically romantic. I would love such attention myself," Mary hinted and Kensington looked distinctly uncomfortable.

The guests began to leave within the hour. All deemed the ball a success. Lily and Vincent both received invitations from many people to their soirees and parties, hoping to get them to accept and make an appearance so that the *ton* could further speculate a romance between the mysterious American and the French musician.

* * * *

Lily lay half asleep in her large four-poster bed. Vincent lay deeply asleep beside her. Lily smiled as his arms tightened around her and he kissed her shoulder in his sleep. They had made love again in the carriage on the ride home and as he walked her to her door, she had asked him to stay.

Just two days ago Lily had met Vincent. Things had moved outrageously fast, yet Lily felt no regret. She was completely comfortable with her decisions. After so many years, she had even come to accept the past and what had happened so long ago that night that she had met Angelo Milonne.

With the thought of Angelo, she came fully awake. *That* was what had been bothering her this whole time! That night at the garden party when she had been in the maze with Vincent, *he* had been there. The voice leading a young couple into the center

of the maze, it had been Angelo's voice. She felt almost certain of it.

All those years traveling around the world, she had felt the presence of other vampires. Maybe it had been Angelo all of those times. Had he been watching her or was it mere coincidence?

No, it couldn't have been a coincidence. He had *purposefully* led those people into the maze to interrupt them. He was following her; he was being possessive of her. Like he owned her! How *dare* he interfere in her life *again*! What was he going to do? Lily wondered if he was only going to watch and not do anything rash. She would have to be careful.

* * * *

Late May, 2000

Lily sat slumped behind her large oak desk, feeling as if all the energy had been siphoned from her. How had she never suspected that Angelo had something to do with the disappearance of Vincent de Leone? She knew Angelo to be a selfish and cruel man but she hadn't suspected him to be capable of doing something as heinous as murdering a man over a jealous obsession.

And *he* had called *her* petty! Well, she couldn't even begin to comprehend a name vile enough to describe him. The only man she had ever loved was murdered, who knows how brutally, over one man's insane love of her.

Inside, something broke loose in Lily. How could she have been so blind? She should have known that it was Angelo. How could she not have known?

Denial. She must have refused to believe that he would still be with her. It had seemed so improbable. And she had paid the price.

Lily's heart clenched in regret and guilt over Vincent's death. What were his last words? His last thoughts? Did he feel pain? Or was it quick?

So many questions and absolutely no answers to be found. A sob broke from her and tears slid down her cheeks as her body shook with the force of her sobs. Her beloved Vincent. He had always been so good to her. He had done nothing to deserve such

FROM THE SHADOWS

a cruel fate just for loving her.

Lily slept after hours of unrelenting grief and many shed tears. But in her dreams, he smiled for her once again.

Chapter Four

Vallon sat at the bar of one of his favorite hangouts, the Voodoo Garden in the backyard of the famous House of Blues. He was alone tonight, sitting up at the bar contemplating his drink. Lily filled his thoughts at the moment. Her eyes were the same color of his scotch, smoothly golden. Vallon tipped the glass and downed the remainder.

"Another, Vallon?" asked Mitchell, the bartender.

Vallon nodded and slid his glass toward Mitchell, who poured him another two fingers. Vallon accepted his second glass and glanced to his left when he heard someone take the seat next to him. Vallon nodded in greeting to the new arrival, who, smiling broadly, returned the nod.

The man looked amazing. He was dressed beautifully in a gothic dark purple velvet suit with a black mesh shirt underneath. He had waist length black hair that shone blue in the light and eyes so dark they looked black, yet they sparkled with good humor and mischief. From his left ear dangled a silver ankh, winking in the light.

His face was perfection. The man had a widow's peak, giving him even more Gothic allure. His eyebrows had a high, graceful arch and his dark eyes were framed by thick, long black lashes. He had high cheekbones and a long, straight nose. His lips were full and perfectly formed. His chin had a slight cleft and his jaw was perfectly angular. He could have been an angel, so perfect was he.

"I'm Luca. Luca Silva. I knew I recognized you from somewhere! You're Vallon from the band that plays at 'Motel Hell'. 'Symphonic Dream.' I'm a fan. Your lyrics are amazing, and your skills on the violin, impressive. I especially loved your rendition of Weber's 'Music of the Night'."

"Thank you, and it's good to meet you, Luca. Not many

people know that song is not my own. Not many 'Phantom' fans frequent 'Motel Hell' I suppose. I don't remember ever seeing you there, do you come often?" Vallon asked.

"Yes, I do. It is an atmosphere I fit into quite well. I've been staying here for the past six months; I came in from New York. Things are different here. The people, for one, are nicer here. Everyone in New York is busy and rushing for coffees and dry cleaning. The only thing most of the women can talk about is shopping and their work. For a while, all I heard was Versace, Blahnik and so on. Whoever the hell they are," Luca told him.

Luca paused to light a cigarette, a tendril of blue smoke curling from his full lips.

"I find New Orleans suits me quite nicely," he stated, with an enigmatic grin.

Luca shifted his lean body on his stool to watch the approach of an exotic looking woman. She stopped at Luca's side and smiled widely at the two of them.

"Care if I join you?" she asked in a smoky voice.

"This is an old friend of mine, Aurelia Larue. Aurelia, this is Vallon Paige."

"Yes, I know. I'm pleased to meet you, Vallon," she purred as she took the stool next to Luca, leaving him sitting in the middle. She was lovely, with skin the soft golden color of honey and hair that was dark brown with red shining in its depths. Her eyes were chocolate brown and seductive, glinting under elegant arched eyebrows and framed with long black eyelashes. Her lips were painted a dark red and they were perfectly shaped, the upper lip having two sharp peaks and the lower full and curving invitingly.

Her long body was fully curved, like an hourglass. Her body was ample in all the right places and she showcased it in a tantalizing red PVC dress cut four inches above her knees and without sleeves. Aurelia and Luca were a sight to see, they were so beautiful and graceful. Flawless. Just like Lily. They were the most amazing looking couple Vallon had ever seen.

"Oh, we're not a couple," said Aurelia.

Vallon eyed her strangely, wondering if she had known that he was thinking that they were together. Had he said it out loud?

"We get people asking us if we are a couple all the time so

I'm clearing that information now. So, I'm single. Are you seeing anyone special, handsome?" Aurelia asked him flirtatiously. Vallon smiled at her audacity.

"Can I get you both something to drink perhaps?" Vallon asked politely.

"Two tumblers of scotch," Luca suggested.

"Martini for me, please. Luca, must you always be so presumptuous?" Aurelia added glaring playfully at Luca.

Vallon waved Mitchell over and ordered their drinks.

"Can I see some ID from you two?" Mitchell requested and Aurelia and Luca looked at each other, seeming to share a private joke, and then offered up their identification for the bartender to see.

"How about a toast?" Aurelia suggested. "To new friends."

"I'll drink to that," Vallon agreed. The three clinked their glasses together and drank. They talked comfortably with each other for the next hour. It almost felt as if they had been friends for years. They asked questions about Vallon's music and his tattoo parlor. They agreed that they would see each other again, Vallon having enjoyed their company.

Vallon said goodnight to the pair and left the House of Blues. Aurelia and Luca were silent for a minute after he left.

"Do you think he knows of the danger he is in?" asked Aurelia.

Luca was silent for a moment before answering, "I don't think so. But we'll be around. Keep a sharp eye. Angelo is unpredictable."

* * * *

Vallon enjoyed the walk back from Decatur Street to Chartres Street. It was a beautiful night; stars were filling the sky with an ambient light. He entered the rear courtyard and was surprised to see Lily perched on the edge of the water fountain.

Lily looked up as she heard him approach.

"I just wanted some company, if you don't mind," she said softly. She looked worn down, like something was weighing heavily on her mind.

"Not at all. Come on up," Vallon replied.

Lily followed him into his apartment, letting him lead her to the couch. She took a seat next to him, noticing the violin was

now sitting in front of her on the coffee table among scattered sheets of music. It brought back painful memories and her face must have shown her distress.

"Are you all right, Lily? Is there anything I can do?" Vallon asked gently, clearly upset to see her in her current state.

Lily shook her head and explained, "No, there is nothing anyone can do. I'm just disturbed by something that happened long ago. Someone I loved just...disappeared and I just found out that they were likely murdered. I am sorry I came here like this but I had no one else to turn to."

"I am glad you came and I am terribly sorry about this," he said. Then, wanting to cheer her up, asked, "Shall I play for you? A song for your remarkable beauty?"

Lily felt a chill crawl up her spine. Those were the exact words Vincent had used the night she had met him! Her heart slammed against her chest as she waited for him to continue.

He shook his head and said lightly, "No, none could..."

"Quite compare," Lily finished for him.

What is going on? she thought to herself. Vallon looked at her strangely.

"How did you know what I was going to say?" he asked her in wonder.

Lily looked into his eyes, searching for an answer to the question screaming inside her head. Could it be true? Could it be possible? He had reminded her of Vincent on many occasions but she had never once thought it could really be him. His looks, his love of music, his body language...even the way she could feel that invisible link between them. She had ignored it all, discrediting it as impossible.

"I just knew," she replied in a meek voice. She watched as Vallon got up from the couch.

"Can I get you something to drink?" he asked her, taking note of how pale she looked.

Lily nodded, needing a drink at the moment, "Whiskey if you have it."

Vallon left her to get her whiskey and she listened to him moving around in the kitchen, humming under his breath.

Lily recognized the song as Andrew Lloyd Weber's 'Music of the Night' from his musical play 'The Phantom of the Opera'.

She closed her eyes tightly, hugging her arms around herself. She could see him clearly in her mind's eye; Vincent dressed as the Phantom ninety-two years ago at Kensington's masked ball. *Will you make me sing for you this night, Phantom?* she remembered asking him.

Angelo, she thought. Fear of losing Vallon again washed over her, deepening her despair. He would do it again. That's what he had meant by '*old friend*' that night she had found him in her house. Angelo *knew* who Vallon had been all along. He would hold this over her head in an attempt to get what he wanted...her, all to himself.

Lily tried to regain her composure as she heard his approach. His presence wrapped around her like a comforting blanket. He exuded calm and strength. Lily felt herself wanting to throw herself into his arms and beg him to never leave her again.

"Here, drink this. Maybe it will calm your nerves."

Lily accepted the glass he held out to her and downed it. Vallon whistled softly and said teasingly, "Maybe I should have brought the bottle."

Lily laughed, feeling her mood lighten fractionally. Angelo had been right, she did love him. How could she not? Fate had given him back to her and this time she would hold onto him with her life.

"Thanks for the drink and a laugh. I needed it, but I feel better now. And now I think I would like to hear a song, if you don't mind," she asked him.

Vallon smiled and picked up the instrument, settling it under his chin. He began to play one of his own pieces and Lily was enraptured. It was a slow song, the notes drawn out and somewhat uplifting. It was beautiful music that seemed to speak of hope.

When he finished the song, he gently replaced the violin to its spot on the coffee table.

"That was beautiful. How long have you been playing the violin?" she asked, eager to know more about him.

"Since I was six years old. My mother had recordings of my father's music that I loved listening to and I knew that I wanted to be a musician. My father, his name was Marcus, was a jazz

musician. He used to play here at the clubs with his friends. His picture is even on the wall in some of them.

"But I really loved to hear recordings of him playing the violin. He didn't play it often, preferring his bass, but the sound of the violin ensnared me. My mother, Bethany, signed me up for lessons and I loved them. I use his violin. This is the one," he explained, gesturing to the violin sitting on his coffee table.

Lily remembered Marcus Paige and Bethany from their younger days; it had been 1972. She had gone to see some jazz bands play and Marcus' black hair and something in his face had reminded her of her dear Vincent and she had been compelled to introduce herself to him and his lovely girlfriend. At the time, Marcus and Bethany had not even been married. If she saw Bethany again, would Bethany remember her? It had been twenty-eight years, hopefully long enough. Bethany would be around fifty years old now.

How much longer could she hide the truth from Vallon? If she continued to see him as she planned to do, he would eventually know something was very different about her. She would never age, never get ill, if she were injured she would heal too quickly. Vincent had never known what she really was. They hadn't been together long enough. This time would be different; she would make sure of it.

How could she find out how the truth would affect him? But then, how could she simply tell him? *Hey, guess what, I'm a vampire. I'm two hundred and twenty-two years old. Think you can handle the age difference?* She could just see what a confession like that would elicit from him. He'd think she was crazy, right?

Lily felt the sudden urge to just take him, to give him the blood.

She knew she couldn't. It would have to be *his* choice.

When he found out.

Eventually.

Now *this* problem would be on her mind, nagging at her. Vallon didn't seem the type to be afraid of the truth but would he believe it?

"Is there something else bothering you? You seem distracted," Vallon interrupted her thoughts. She gave herself a

mental shake and gave him a wan smile.

"No, I'm fine. I was just thinking of what you told me," she lied.

Lily laid her hand on his thigh and caressed him suggestively, moving her hand up to the crotch of his pants. Lily braced herself for the oncoming storm that their lovemaking always was.

Soon, they were both naked on the floor, entwined in each other, breathless and drifting.

* * * *

The next night, Vallon was working at the tattoo parlor with a blue-haired Marlena and Loki. At the moment, the place was empty and the trio were just talking and joking around. Marlena and Loki had been married for two years; they had met right here in this shop. They had just told Vallon this very evening that they were expecting their first child. They were an impressive couple. True love...they had it and Vallon was happy for them.

Their easy camaraderie was interrupted by the arrival of Azure Beaumont and a handsome man they had never seen before. He was dressed simply in black pants and a snug black t-shirt. His shoulder-length dark auburn hair left down in romantic waves.

"Hello, everyone! I'd like you to meet a very good friend of mine. His name is Angelo Milonne," Azure greeted everyone with a bright smile, looking, as usual, cute and bubbly in a bubblegum pink dress.

Both Loki and Marlena said hello and chatted with him after they were introduced, but Vallon said nothing. He just sat and stared at the man, feeling an unexpected hatred toward him. Realizing the glare he was pinning Angelo with, he turned away to keep anyone from seeing his unusual reaction to a man he didn't know well enough to hate as much as he did.

With relief, he saw a familiar and welcome face. Aurelia came breezing through the door, glancing to the small group conversing. Vallon stepped forward to greet her.

"Nice to see you again, Aurelia. What brings you this way?" he asked her and strangely, she too looked upon Angelo with wariness and dislike.

Hearing his greeting, she turned her gaze on him and gave

him a warm smile.

"I was just in the area and I decided to stop in for a visit. I lost Luca a way back and I figured I'd just go on without him," she explained, waving her hand as if waving the thought of Luca away, and then she continued with, "Also, I had been meaning to come in here to ask someone about tattoos. I want to get one, you see, but I heal very quickly and I'm afraid the ink might not take to me."

Vallon listened to her as she spoke. Her attention was on him but she seemed also to be watching Angelo, who was staring at her quite strangely, as if he had caught scent of something offensive.

A little perturbed by how strange things were going tonight, he shook off his uneasiness and answered, "I've never heard of someone getting a tattoo that didn't take. I don't see why you couldn't get one. I think it would be fine. And if you heal quickly, that's a blessing."

"Indeed, it *is* a blessing. I don't think we've been introduced," said Angelo from behind Vallon, speaking to Aurelia.

Vallon ignored the surge of his hatred for Angelo and the crawling sensation at his nape upon hearing Angelo's silky voice behind him and introduced Aurelia to the gathering in the tattoo parlor. Vallon noticed that Angelo and Aurelia were eyeing each other like wolves fighting over fresh meat. Seeming resigned, Angelo bowed his head toward Aurelia and said, "We'll most likely see each other again, I presume. Vallon, it was *lovely* to make your acquaintance. Your friend Azure is a most charming lady, very eager to please."

With those last words, he looked with warning to Aurelia and turned smartly on his heel to leave, Azure taking the arm he offered and waving goodbye to everyone.

"What was he about?" Vallon asked Aurelia.

She shook her head and replied, "I'm not sure...but he gave me an odd feeling. Unpleasant, he is."

They talked for a while to lighten the pall Angelo's presence had cast over them until Luca came into the parlor. He had his hair pulled back and he was dressed in dark blue leather pants and a gothic swallow-tail jacket with no shirt on underneath.

"There you are, pet! I was beginning to wonder if you had run into the big bad wolf," he told Aurelia with a wink, turning to grin at Vallon.

Aurelia rolled her eyes at him, "Indeed, the big bad wolf. So nice of you to finally grace us with your exalted, holy presence." In answer, Luca pressed his hands together in a holy gesture and bowed smugly at her.

They stayed for a while, then left together arm in arm. When they were well enough away from the tattoo parlor, Luca spoke.

"How were things?"

"He was poisonously polite, not wanting to give himself away for the demon he is. He was not happy to see me there. Another vampire on his turf was not something he expected," she answered.

"I will wait before I let my presence be known. I'd like to know what Angelo is plotting. I can guarantee it could get violent like last time. Angelo will kill him if he feels that Vallon is a threat to what he wants...Lily. He was always so self-concerned. He doesn't realize he is hurting her. Angelo will lash out at anyone. Her life may be at stake, as well. I just don't know. He might begin to think if he can't have her...no one will," Luca surmised.

"Why are you so concerned about the lives of these two? I never asked because I felt it wasn't my business. But I'm in on this now, so it *is* my business why these two are so important to you," Aurelia asked, eyeing him.

"A part of me still cares for Angelo, regrettably, and still has hope for him to find love and stop this madness, even after he lashed out at me for what I had turned him into. I didn't tell him that he should never see his mother again. I should have but I just couldn't do it. Besides, I knew he would never listen, so why waste my breath? She was dying and he openly offered her the blood. I could feel her fear as I stood outside waiting for Angelo to return to me. He killed her by accident. The only person he had loved, he had killed. And he blamed it on me. I accept that as there were things I never told him. But he knew his strength yet had forgotten it in his anger and remorse at his mother's rejection.

FROM THE SHADOWS

"He did the same to Lily as I had done to him, I understand. I've always watched him. The side of him I glimpsed that night was bad, very bad. Something snapped in him that night. He had always been *different*. Mean-spirited, maybe, but never violent, until that moment when he broke his mother's neck. That is when what little good he had in him faded away and the angry man is all that is left. I understand Angelo as many others cannot, Aurelia.

"I put him here on this earth for an *eternity*. I was not in time to save the life of Vincent de Leone, but I will give Vallon Paige what he was meant to have. His life. Angelo has always been one to hate, but I am no longer the same as him. They, Vallon and Lily, deserve the chance to be together.

"I can't let him keep destroying the lives of others just because he can. I fear that I created a monster and I intend to fix it. Besides, Lily is your grandson's and granddaughter's aunt. What do you think of that?" he asked.

Aurelia glanced at him and replied, "Jaidyn and Skye? I had no idea. How so?"

"Richard de Villiers married Lily's sister, Elizabeth Fontaine. Lily *disappeared* that night at the de Villiers' ball in which your great-grandson announced his engagement to Elizabeth. That was the night Angelo took her. I was there watching over Angelo but he could not sense my presence, as I had masked it. Another thing I never told him, thankfully," he explained.

"I never knew Elizabeth had a sister. How are we going to help them, Lucius? Can we be around every second?" she asked skeptically.

"Oh, ye of little faith...we are certainly going to try."

* * * *

Angelo watched as Azure flitted around her house, wanting everything to be perfect.

She really is such a simpleton. Soon she'll be so pathetically in love with me that she would do anything for me.

"I'm going to go change into something a little more comfortable. I'll be right back," giggled Azure as she danced down the hall into her bedroom.

Angelo rolled his eyes. She was so eager to be loved, so

weak minded and sad. At least she was good in bed.

Azure came out of the bedroom in a bright blue corset, a black thong and her big black boots. She swayed over to where he stood in the middle of her *living room*.

He gave her a predatory look and backed her slowly up against the wall. He moved to her side and grabbed the leg closest to him, holding it up while he slid his other hand into her sexy underwear, finding her most sensitive spot and lightly rubbed the little bud, making her pant.

She screamed as she came and he ripped her underwear off. He unbuttoned his pants and she stuck her hand inside to pull him out. He hooked her leg around his hips and positioned himself fully in front of her. With one powerful thrust, he filled her. He pounded into her furiously and as she began to reach another peak, he bit into her neck and drank from her. The bite intensified her orgasm and she let loose a piercing scream.

Angelo pulled back when Azure began showing signs of becoming drowsy. He brought his finger to his lips and bit down, drawing blood. He stuck his bleeding finger into her mouth and she sucked greedily at it. Angelo had done this three times with her. He drank just enough blood to make her feel sleepy and then he gave her his blood. Just a little bit.

This would not make her a vampire. He would have to drain her of most of her blood and give her his own, in a larger amount, for the change to take place. Her body must be close to death before turning into something stronger and amazing.

To him, she was not worthy of such a gift.

This giving of blood to her would make her his slave in a sense. Azure would become so obsessed with him and what he could give her. And she would do *anything* for him.

* * * *

Mikhail watched from the shadows across the street of the dwelling place of his little puppet, Azure. Angelo exited the house quietly, thinking himself unnoticed. He was playing right into the trap. Azure could get him close to his enemy and for that one reason was Azure important to Angelo.

She was the path to his nemesis' demise.

Mikhail slid from the shadows, no more than a shadow himself, in fact. He crept in through the woman's open bedroom

window as he had every night since the night she had first let him in.

She lay sprawled on her bed wearing nothing but a corset and a pair of boots. He heard her moan and knew she was coming to. He had given her his blood again. Mikhail could smell it in her. It was alright though. It was part of the plan. She would be the one to give Angelo his enemy on a silver platter. And then Mikhail would be there to kill them both and leave Angelo to blame.

The Guardians would soon be retreating into their secrets and the vampires would be available for use by the demon race. With that kind of unity...there would be no stopping Davriel from claiming the Isle. No place left for the Guardians to hide. And the demons would reign again.

And Mikhail would finally be recognized as the fighter he was. As the Prince that he was by birth.

"Mikhail? Is that you, my love?" her voice weakly whispered. She coughed to clear her throat and sat up in bed, quickly covering herself. He watched her cheeks pinken. She was afraid he would be angry that she was sleeping with the vampire.

"Yes, it is I, dear Azure. Be at ease. He is of no concern to me. You are to do with him as you please, love. Let him think that you are utterly his and his alone," he crooned to her, running his long fingers through her beautiful blond hair.

He sat next to her on the bed and wrapped his arms around her like a lover would. She rested her head on his shoulder, feeling calm with him, as he had intended.

"I must beg a favor of you. Would you do something for me? Something very important to me? Of course you will. I need you to keep Angelo with you as you play with your band. He will *want* to come along so that he can watch that Vallon.

"Stop protecting Vallon, Azure my love. Eventually he will be alone. And he will leave his parlor or one of the clubs...alone. Angelo, of course, will be with you. You will let him go after Vallon Paige *alone*. Do not accompany him. Do not try to stop him. Just let him think that you have no idea what is going on. Is that clear, my lovely one?" he asked, keeping his voice low and silky. She couldn't resist. Demons have the gift of *compelling*.

And no human could resist the powerful sway of their demands.

The fool Guardians had that power too. But they were too stupid to use it the way it was meant to be used.

"I understand, Mikhail. I will let him do as he pleases with Vallon. Don't worry. I will not interfere," she told him, looking up into his eyes with a sweet and accommodating expression. Ah...how he loved that look.

"There's a good girl."

* * * *

Lily stood in her shower, letting the warm water flow over her body. The events of the last two days played out in her mind. She had just discovered that the disappearance of Vincent had been no accident. He had been murdered by the very man who claimed to love her enough not to hurt her one minute and then threatens her in the next.

Now, she finds out that Vincent is back in her life. Lily hadn't really believed in reincarnation until now. She felt sure that Vincent and Vallon were one and the same. Now she would have to try and keep him in her life. Angelo may very well try to kill him again. He had already said as much himself.

Could she do this on her own? She wasn't sure if her strength could compare to Angelo's. She hadn't known him enough to see first hand if she was capable of holding her own against him.

Would he try to kill Vallon in the same way Vincent had died? It seemed sick and cruel enough for Angelo to do. But what *had* he done to Vincent? One way or another, she would find out. Vincent never received a proper burial because he had never been found.

Lily turned off the water and stepped out of the shower, reaching for a towel to dry with.

I will find out what happened and, if possible, find his body and give him a proper burial.

He had loved her and wanted to marry her. He had done nothing to deserve his wrongful fate. Would Vallon hold any memories of his former life? Every question Lily asked herself fired off more and more. Would Angelo tell her what he had done to Vincent and where he had put his body? It was hard to tell what Angelo would or would not do. Lily felt she was

grasping at straws.

Everywhere she turned she ran into another wall and soon they would start closing in on her. She could ask Angelo and he may tell her, seeing it as a way to keep her away from Vallon if she did not want him to suffer the same fate as before.

But where could she find him? He had to be close. He had been keeping an eye on her for so long now. He had never been far. She had always associated his presence with others, thinking that it surely could not be him. But now, she would not dismiss it so easily. Lily would be on guard from now on.

Now Angelo would be keeping watch of Vallon as well, she was sure. So, where Vallon could be found...so could Angelo. Another 'Symphonic Dream' concert was on tonight at 'The Old Opera House'. Lily would be there and she was *certain* Angelo would be there as well.

Hours later, after sunset, Lily answered a knock at her door. Lily opened the door and smiled. Vallon was looking gorgeous in pinstripe pants and a loose, white poet's shirt. His hair was tied back; it was the first time she had seen it pulled back.

"Good evening, Vallon. You look..." she paused to look him slowly up and down, "positively ravishing. You may escort me to my chariot."

Vallon bowed politely, and quite elegantly, to her, lending his arm as he eyed her in her black velvet peasant shirt and small red leather skirt. He had called her earlier in the day to inform her of the concert and she had accepted his invitation to come, giving him her home address. So here he was, at the beautiful home of Lily Fontaine, to pick her up in a yellow cab.

"Sorry it's not a pretty chariot. I have no car, because I see no point in buying one. I'd spend my whole life driving around looking for a parking space," he bashfully explained, looking a little embarrassed.

"I have no car, either. I never learned to drive," Lily said, laughing at the incredulous look on his face. They reached the cab together and he opened the door for her.

A few minutes later, the cabbie stopped on the corner where Toulouse met Bourbon. Vallon paid the man his fare and got out, going around to open the door for Lily.

They laughed as a couple walked past and the girl hit her

man on the chest, exclaiming, "Did you see that? Why don't you ever open my doors?" The man looked at Vallon sarcastically, seeming to say, 'Thanks a lot.'

Lily laced her fingers in Vallon's and he leaned in for a quick kiss. Then they made haste over to 'The Old Opera House'. People were milling about outside; all were ready for a good time. A lot of the people looked like the fans that usually came to see him at 'Motel Hell'.

Inside, everyone was already drinking and laughing, waiting for the band to play. Some, when they saw him, waved or called out to him and Vallon would answer back with a smile. He led Lily to the bar where they ordered some drinks. Lily decided to remain at the rear of the crowd during the show so as to escape being trampled by a dancing crowd. Lily kissed him and watched him walk away admiring the view.

Minutes later, the band was onstage starting the show. Lily watched the crowd move forward as one, trying to get closer to the stage, vying for a better view. Lily tensed as she became aware of, not one, but two vampires. Then she saw Angelo across the room, toward the front of the stage. The blond bass player, Azure, was smiling at him flirtatiously while she played. He *seemed* unaware of Lily, but she knew better.

She had just begun to wonder who the other presence belonged to when she felt it draw near. Lily turned to see a beautiful, golden-skinned woman staring at her. The mysterious vampire approached her. She stood beside Lily and Lily heard the woman's voice in her head.

"Lily, my name is Aurelia Larue. There are some things you should know. Vallon may be in danger and a friend of mine is determined to stop Angelo from repeating history. I assume you know of what I speak?"

"Yes, I do know. Who is this friend of yours and how do I know you are really trying to help?" she asked suspiciously. She, too, spoke mentally to the stranger, knowing that Angelo, with his preternatural hearing, would hear everything that they said.

"I understand your concern. My friend's name is now Luca Silva. He was once known as Lucius Eduardo Salvarez. He made Angelo a vampire. He has regretted it for many years. And I am the grandmother of Jaidyn and Skyler Pierce. Your sister

FROM THE SHADOWS

Elizabeth married my great grandson, Richard de Villiers. I have no wish to harm you."

"Why is Luca not here?" Lily asked.

"Luca may be able to hide his presence but if Angelo saw him, he would know him immediately. He doesn't want his presence known yet. Angelo may decide to act quickly if he thought for one minute we were here to stop him. Angelo was not always the way he is now. He lives with the pain of his mother's hatred and her death by his hands. You, it seems, are the only other woman he has ever loved. And he will not want to lose you, especially to another man. We think he will kill Vallon because you love him, as Angelo wants to be loved," she explained.

"I have come to care for Vallon myself. I do not want to see any harm come to him or you, for that matter. You, like myself, have been watching over my, our, family for years. I fear Angelo will find out about Jaidyn and Skye and try to use them to get to you as they are your only remaining family. So far, I think he has no idea of their presence. I'd like to keep it that way," Aurelia continued.

"Would you, or Luca, have any knowledge of what happened to Vincent? I need to know so that I can find him," Lily asked her hopefully.

Aurelia shook her head and said, "I do not. However, Luca has been watching Angelo as Angelo has been watching you. He may know more than I. Before you become angry with him, he could do nothing about Vincent. He looked for three days by nightfall, but his presence was so weak that Luca could not find him. I am deeply sorry for all you have been through. I, too, have lost those that I loved. I will have Luca meet you wherever you want and the two of you can talk while I keep an eye on Vallon for you."

"Thank you very much for your help. I live in the Garden District on Coliseum," Lily gave her address to Aurelia and then continued, "I need to speak with Luca. I need to know."

Aurelia nodded, her eyes understanding, and said aloud, "He will be there."

Lily watched her as she walked back into the throng. Glancing toward the stage, Lily watched Vallon as he set aside his guitar and picked up his violin. Lily felt infinitely better

knowing that soon she might get some answers.

"Fancy meeting you here, love. I say, *what* brings you here? Surely not your mortal man? I believe I mentioned that he could never love you for what you are," Angelo said from behind her.

"Angelo, what is it you want? Can you not accept that I do not want you around me? You took everything from me!" Lily told him angrily, her spine stiffening warily as she felt him lean in close behind her.

"I want you, Lily, *ma fleur*."

"Well, you can't have me. That must really burn you. What did you do to Vincent? Tell me *now*," she demanded. He trailed his hand around her neck as he stepped around her to take the spot next to her that Aurelia had vacated.

"You know, he really did love you. You were the music of his soul. *Touching*. His blood was like fine, aged wine. As I tasted him, you know, all he could think of was you? What would happen to you, out in the world alone, with no one to care for you? He had no concern for his own life, only yours. Noble to the end. You should be *so* proud."

"Fuck you, Angelo! Damn your soul to hell! You are truly evil. What did you do with him? Where is his body, Angelo?" she practically shouted, drawing a few stares.

"Such a fuss you create. Tsk-tsk. Why on earth would you want to know the whereabouts of a ninety-year-old skeleton? Don't have enough of them in your closet?" he asked maliciously. His eyes flashed defiantly and his mouth was twisted in a cruel half smile, half sneer.

"I want to bury him. Vincent deserved a decent burial, not that you need be concerned," she snapped angrily.

"Oh, I'm not. Whatever made you think I was? And *I* buried him, my dear. *Alive*," he explained with a ghastly grin. His blue eyes shone with a cold malevolent light.

"Where did you bury him and what do you mean by 'alive'?" she asked, afraid of the answer she would receive. A chill crawled up her spine like the scream that was creeping up her throat. She wanted to rip his head from his shoulders and she was shocked at the ugliness she found in herself.

"I drank from him just enough to make him too weak to fight me. I didn't want to have to break his neck if he struggled. I

gave him just enough of my blood to help him survive for a good few weeks longer than he would have without my blood, and then...I buried him. He probably stayed alive for a month after that, in his crude wooden coffin. Probably still worrying about you."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out an old piece of paper.

"Tell me, were you going to tell him the truth about yourself before you married him?" he asked and handed her the paper. It was a marriage license, the one Vincent had left her to get that day he disappeared. They would have gotten married as soon as they could find a priest to marry them with this very piece of paper. His name was already signed on it. Only hers, Kensington's, Sabrina's and the priest's signatures were missing.

Seeing his handwriting, Lily felt her eyes brim with tears.

"Where is he, Angelo?" she asked again, her voice soft and her shoulders slumped in defeat. A tear slid down her cheek. She was surprised when she felt Angelo softly brush it away, his fingers lingering on her cheek before he pulled abruptly away.

When he spoke, his voice was quiet and subdued, "I buried him in the exact place I realized how much I hated him. The place where I first knew you loved him, as I have always wanted you to love me, is where he still lies to this day. Think on it." With those parting words he left her.

Lily searched her memory frantically. When *had* she realized that she loved him? Obviously in England, in London. And now, with the knowledge that there were others looking out for Vallon, she could go to England. She needed to find him, for closure and for peace of mind.

An hour later, the concert was over. Vallon came through the crowd to greet her. Seeing her wan smile, he suggested he take her home. She readily accepted as she was eager to get home and speak with Luca. She was glad that Vallon did not ask her what was wrong with her, as she couldn't tell him the truth and she hated lying to him.

Vallon got out to open her door when the taxi pulled up to her house in the Garden District. Lily gave Vallon a long, kiss goodnight and he left her with a soft goodbye.

Lily went inside and sat in her foyer for two hours, waiting

for Luca to show up. She leapt to her feet at a soft knock and was stunned at the beautiful man standing on her doorstep. He had gorgeous, silky black hair that was braided down his back and his eyes were the darkest she had seen.

Luca Silva was dressed exquisitely in a Louis the XVI brocade and velvet coat and black snakeskin pants. A silver Celtic cross dangled from his left earlobe.

"Lily, it is good to finally meet you in the flesh. I understand you seek answers. I may not have information enough and for that I sincerely apologize," he said, stepping over the threshold as she gestured for him to come in.

Silently, Lily led him into the front parlor where he gracefully seated himself on a green velvet Queen Anne couch.

"Thank you for coming to speak with me. I know that you have been trailing Angelo for quite some time now. I need to know where he buried Vincent," Lily explained to him while his dark eyes searched hers.

"I regret that I do not know exactly where he was buried. Actually, I had not known he was buried. You have just answered a question of mine. Allow me to explain myself. I have been following Angelo almost since I made him, since 1641. He was never far from you, you know. He always knew where you were, just as I can always find him. It is through our blood that they are born and so their presence is like a thrum in our veins. And before you ask, unfortunately, it's not like their exact location. But more like where in the world they are, like I felt Angelo in New Orleans. The rest is trying to pinpoint their presence and locate any 'trails' of them. Sorry.

"Why Angelo left you thinking that he had left, I'll never understand. I know that he never lets anyone get close to him but I would have thought you would be different to him. Anyway, I loved him and at first, I was just looking after him. For almost three hundred years I watched over him.

"I was aware that something had happened inside his head that night he accidentally killed his own mother. I wasn't aware how severe the transformation of his mind would be. I am sorry I did not stop Angelo from turning you. I sensed that you truly wished for what he was offering, even though you didn't exactly understand what it was he was offering you. I stayed away from

the pair of you but I could sense your acceptance and so I let it be and left you to him. I'm sorry, Lily.

"What Angelo did to you, he did for revenge of what I had done to him. I hadn't planned to make him one of us, a vampire, when I had seen him outside that farmhouse. But when I tasted his blood...he had led a very hard life. I loved the sad little boy he had been. And I loved the lonesome man who craved to be loved. I wanted to give Angelo that love, but he scorned me.

"Angelo loves you and craves your love in return. He hopes that by killing the man you do love, the man who in return loves you, he will at last be free to receive your love. It has never occurred to Angelo that it would merely make you hate him even more. I had been watching over the two of you the night Vincent 'disappeared' but by the time I realized he had left to obtain a marriage license earlier that evening, I was already too late. I had been listening to you telling a Kensington Chesterfield about it, I hadn't even noticed that he was not even there. I had been focusing too hard on you. I got caught up in the joy that you felt.

"I am sorry that I failed you. I left immediately, knowing that you would be safe with this Kensington fellow. I followed Angelo's trail from his place of hiding but it was a weak one. I came finally to a garden where I felt the faint presence of your Vincent. It was difficult to focus on, like it was far away. But that was improbable as his trail stopped there in the garden. I had followed Angelo's trail further and it grew stronger so that I knew he had been by that way recently, but alone. I found someone...but it wasn't Vincent. I went back to the garden...the trail was much weaker.

"Now this garden was an elaborate one with beautiful roses all over the place. The garden belonged to someone; it was in a residential district. Not in town, but a few miles out of London, on the outskirts. One good hint I know I can give you is that this place had a maze," he told her.

Lily exploded up out of her chair and threw her arms around Luca, who was very surprised. After a moment, Luca smiled and set her away from him. He brought his hand to her cheek and caressed her face.

"You are most welcome. I take it you know the place?" he asked, still smiling.

"Yes, I do. And I can never thank you enough," Lily gushed happily.

"I suggest you be on your way then. The owners of the night club 'Motel Hell' can help you out, I think. Shadow and River Redcloud. They can refer you to a family that owns a few planes, special ones equipped for every vampire's needs. You will travel safely from the sun with them. Aurelia and I will keep watch over Vallon while you are away. I will not let him be taken from you this time, I swear this to you. You will, of course, have a good explanation for the current owner of the house as to why you wish to dig up their backyard?" he asked.

"Vincent de Leone is an ancestor of mine and in recently found family documents, I have reason to believe he had been buried there. And if they ask why, I guess I'll tell them the truth, that he was murdered and buried on the grounds without the owner's permission."

"Very well, I shall take my leave. Good luck and *bon voyage*," he nodded to her and showed himself out. Finally, Lily would find Vincent and bury him next to his mother and father at their home, still home to the de Leone family, in Paris. She would be meeting Vincent's cousins. The house had gone to Vincent's uncle when his father, Ramon de Leone, had died.

Ramon had died three weeks after his only son's disappearance, his weak heart finally failing after the trip to London and the failure of locating his son's body.

Lily had quickly loved Ramon as he had her. She remembered him telling her stories of Vincent as a boy and how much he would have loved having her for a daughter. But the grief had taken its toll and Lily had held his hand as he died and she even arranged to have his body taken to Paris where he would be buried next to his beloved wife.

And now his son would join them.

At long last.

Lily would talk to the Redclouds tomorrow night and then she would stop by to see Vallon, she would tell him goodbye before she left. And when she got back...maybe she would find the courage to at last tell him the truth and trust him with that truth.

Finally everything was coming up roses; Lily just hoped she

FROM THE SHADOWS

could escape the thorns.

* * * *

Lily was led upstairs at 'Motel Hell' by the handsome Shadow Redcloud. He took her upstairs so they would not be overheard or disturbed. The upstairs was decorated with the same gothic flair found in the club below.

Shadow took a seat on one of the couches and gestured for her to do the same.

"I understand you have been directed here for special travel services. We, vampires that is, have a few human contacts. They know what we are and they help us with our special needs. They are paid well.

"You would be seeking the Thibideaux family. They started out with a few fan boats and amphibious planes down in Lafitte and they still work down there as well if needed. When they grew, they bought land up in Metairie where they own a private airstrip. They have better planes now, even a few jets which are what you will be traveling in considering the distance.

"All their planes that can be used for our transport have special opaque windows that do not allow sunlight inside the plane except in the cockpit. And there is a room between the cockpit and the passenger's area so that they can go into the back without hurting us with the light," he told her and she was surprised to know that there were people out there that helped vampires like this family did.

"It sounds wonderful. I am glad you could help. How can I contact them?" she asked and thanked him again when he gave her a few numbers and addresses.

* * * *

"Hello, I'm Lily Fontaine. I called earlier," Lily called to the women in the Thibideaux's office.

"Hello there, sugar. Come on inside! We'll get you on your way soon," answered a very lovely older woman with graying black hair and a wide, friendly smile.

Lily had called the owners of the airstrip to ask for their services. They were located down in Lafitte but all business passed through the Thibideaux elders, Harcourt and his wife Philomena. The couple was in their eighties at the least and still going strong or so he had informed her upon her asking if he

would be her pilot.

He had laughed and told her, "No that would be one of my boys or girls. I'm eighty-two years old and still fit but the eyesight isn't what it used to be, honey. But my children and their children will take good care of you. They are excellent aviators, if I may say so."

Harcourt had informed her he would call up to the Metairie office and get her set up. She had thanked him profusely for his help and so here she was in Metairie. She was nervous and excited simultaneously.

"By the way, Miss Fontaine, my name is Yasmeen and these fine ladies with me are my sisters-in-law. The redhead is Cecilia and the little blond is Mackenzie. We call her Mack around here," the dark haired woman who had greeted her told her.

"Pleased to meet you all," Lily replied with a smile.

"Ah! And here comes your pilots now. The young man is Domenico and the lady is his sister Afton," Mack told her and Lily glanced outside at the pair coming toward the office. The man named Domenico was very tall and built like Vallon, broad shouldered, lean of hip, long legs. His hair was cut in an interesting, artful mess, shorter in the back and long, straight locks falling sexily around his face.

Afton was a few inches smaller but had a killer, pin-up model hourglass figure. Her long red hair was twisted up into a loose bun and tendrils escaped around her nape and face, lending her an air of innocence and elegant beauty.

Upon entering the office, their eyes immediately sought her out. They extended their hands warmly to her in greeting.

"Miss Fontaine? I'm your pilot Domenico Thibideaux and this here is my sister and co-pilot, Afton. The jet is ready and as soon as you are ready, we'll get you up in the air," he said, giving her the same smile his aunt had given her. It was a very open and genuinely pleasant. Lily was surprised that they treated her as if she were one of their own knowing what she was. It was strange but one could get used to it.

An hour later, Lily was seated comfortably in one of the family's jets and up in the air just as Domenico had promised her. She ran her hands over the buttery soft leather of the seats. It

FROM THE SHADOWS

was first class. Shadow had been telling the truth when he told her they were paid well. It showed in their planes.

Lily relaxed in her seat and let herself simply be for a moment. In that minute, there was nothing to worry about, nothing to fear. She was on her way to England where she could lay painful memories to rest. It was a moment of pure tranquility. One she had never experienced before and one she would never forget.

Afton's voice came over the intercom a few hours later to warn her that they would be stopping in New York to refuel but reassured her that she would be perfectly safe and would arrive in London the next day.

After Lily had finished up in London, she would take Vincent to be buried in France with his family. Lily knew she would always love Vincent. She would never forget him. But she would find her closure and tell Vincent goodbye so that she could love Vallon for being Vallon.

Then, she would meet Afton and Domenico in Paris and they would take her back to Louisiana. Home again.

Chapter Five

London, England, November 2, 1912

Lily sat nude in bed with the sheets draped around her body. She was listening to Vincent play a song he had composed for her. He was standing nude in the bedroom of his newly purchased townhouse with his violin tucked under his chin. The song brought tears to her eyes. It was a piece he called 'La Fleur Belle'. And he had written it for her.

It had been six months since she had met him. Vincent had made good on his promise to show her the entertainments of London. They had shown up at many parties together and the *ton* was delighted with the gossip they created. They flouted all of society's rules, only caring about each other. They laughed together the way lovers do, caring not a whit about what others had to say about their 'shocking behavior'.

Kensington complained profusely about how many questions were fired at him about the pair. But he always spoke his complaints with a smile.

It was rumored that even the Royal Court had heard about them and all were speculating about an impending marriage. They had not yet spoken of marriage, just content to be in love and in each other's company.

When Vincent finished the song, he set his instrument aside and sat at her side on the bed. He lifted a hand to brush away her tears and asked, "Didn't you like it, *ma fleur belle*?"

"I *loved* it, Vincent. It was absolutely beautiful. No one has ever..." she trailed off, stifling another sob.

"Written you a song? They are fools, where I am not. I love you, Lily. I believe that I have from the start, when I first set eyes on you. I want you to be my wife, Lily. I can acquire a certain license so that we could be married right away. Will you

marry me, Lily?"

Lily threw herself at him, kissing him wildly. Vincent lay back on the bed and Lily climbed over him and rode him until they both lay spent and breathless.

"So...is that a 'yes'?" he asked her, laughing.

"Of course it is! In the best way I could express it," she answered.

Later, she watched him as he slept. She could see the vein in his neck throbbing. Lily leaned closer and set her lips to his pulse, opening them to bite into his neck. Realizing what she was about to do, she threw herself back violently.

His choice, it would be his choice.

Of course she would have to tell him soon. She couldn't marry him without first telling him what she was.

She would *have* to tell him.

She looked around the room. It was plain but it was done in good taste. Dark, masculine colors decorated the whole room. His music sheets lay all over the place, marking the room as his.

Silently, she dressed in the dark, careful not to awaken him. Lily would be leaving to go back to the safety of her own townhouse with its filled-in windows until night fell. Then she would return to him here.

* * * *

Vincent spent the next day with Kensington; they were currently seated at Kensington's favorite club, White's. There were men drinking already and the gaming tables were full. It was a rainy day, so all the men found it a good day for male companionship, drinking and some gambling.

"I asked Lily to marry me last night. I'm going to get a special license today. Can you be at my place to greet her? I don't want her to be there alone," he asked his friend.

"Not a problem, Vincent. But do hurry though. I don't want the lady to resent me for greeting her instead of you. Besides, tonight you are getting married I suppose? As soon as possible? I assume you are going to want me as a witness?"

"Yes, I would like for you to be there. We will rush to find a priest and spend a nice honeymoon locked up in her house. I'll see you in a few months," Vincent replied jokingly.

"I will be at your house to meet her at eight o'clock. Well, if

you are going to go get that paper, I suggest you be on your way. If it will take only so long to get the license, why will you be running so late?" Kensington asked curiously.

"After obtaining the license, I am going to ride out to that little church on the outskirts of town, near Haversham Hall, to beseech the priest for his services. Lady Haversham has agreed to act as my other witness and to supply some of her beautiful roses to decorate the church. Then I will be coming to get my bride," Vincent explained, rising from his seat.

With a nod, he left his friend. The sun was beginning to shine, drying the dampness of the day. It would be setting soon and Lily would be leaving her townhouse to meet him at his place.

* * * *

"Kensington, what are you doing here?" Lily asked, as she noticed that it was he and not Vincent there to meet her.

"Vincent asked me to be here to meet you as he had a few things to take care of. He didn't want you to be here alone," he replied with a smile and hugged her.

"Did he tell you we are going to get married, Kensington? I believe we will do it tonight. That must be what he is doing, getting a marriage license," Lily said, her voice full of the happiness she felt.

She stiffened when she suddenly felt a strong presence and then it was gone.

"I am going to act as a witness along with the Countess of Haversham. I must say I am glad that you came into his life, Lily. Vincent seems truly happy with you," Kensington told her and she forgot all about the presence she had felt.

"I am glad that you will be there with us, Kensington."

They talked and waited for hours, with no sign of Vincent. Lily began to feel dread, something was wrong. Something has happened.

"Kensington, I fear something has happened to Vincent. Where did he go?" she asked apprehensively, trying not to panic, failing miserably. The fact that she could see the same fear in Kensington's eyes scared her even more.

"Get your cloak and gloves; we are going to go find him. Vincent told me he was going out to that little church near

Haversham Hall."

Approximately thirty minutes later, they arrived at the church. They stepped out of the carriage and went inside, worry quickening their steps to a half run. Sabrina greeted them with a broad smile, her old blue eyes misting in her excitement.

"Oh, you are finally here. I am so happy for the two of you! Where is Vincent? He left to get you over an hour ago," she said in a rush, not catching immediately the fear in the both of them.

Lily's heart clenched in fear. The little church was decorated with the most beautiful roses of all colors and sizes. He had done all of this for her and now he was missing. Vincent knew his way around London; he was not simply lost. There must have been an accident of some kind.

"I will send out a search party. This is not at all like Vincent," Kensington offered.

"I'll help you, Kensington. Sabrina, could I possibly coax you to remain here for awhile in case Vincent shows up?" Lily asked her.

"Of course I will. Be careful out there you two," she warned.

* * * *

Five days later, Ramon de Leone came to London after receiving the letter Kensington had written him, painfully telling him of his son's disappearance. Ramon looked tired and very ill. The journey had taken a toll on his health. He sat at the fireside in Lily's study. They were all there, Kensington, Sabrina and Lily. They had searched almost non-stop for all these five days with no luck. His carriage had been found on the side of the road miles away from London. The driver had been found dead inside it, his throat slit.

While Lily could not search during the daylight hours, a fact that infuriated her, the others kept looking for him. The search party had stated they would only search for two more days, at the end of those two days they would announce him dead. Lily knew he wasn't dead, she could still feel him. He was calling out to her. Try as she might she could not locate his whereabouts.

Two days later, Vincent de Leone's death was announced publicly and the search was called off. Kensington was a mess these days, looking disheveled and unshaven. Sabrina's cheery

demeanor had vanished, a dark sullenness in its place. Ramon was getting weaker day by day, the disappearance of his beloved son wearing on his old heart.

Lily loved Ramon; he was such a kind hearted man. He would sit with her and tell her stories of a younger Vincent. Stories of the Vincent who had desperately wanted a horse of his own for his sixth birthday. He had gotten that horse, a dappled gray, and had delightedly ridden it all afternoon, finally slumping asleep in the saddle.

"I would have dearly loved having you for a daughter, Lily. Kensington has told me how happy you made my son and I thank you for making the last of his days the very best days of his life. I wish I could have told him how much I loved him and how proud he made me one last time. I want you to have his violin and his music. Vincent would have wanted you to keep them," he told her in a very tired voice.

"Thank you, Ramon. I would appreciate that very much. I will find him, Ramon, and I will bring him home to France," Lily promised him, adding silently to herself, *alive or dead*.

He grasped her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

* * * *

Three weeks later, Ramon was dead and Lily wished that she could have died with him. A boat would carry his body across the English Channel tomorrow and he would be transported back to Paris. He would be buried next to his wife, Beatrice de Leone.

As would Vincent...someday.

* * * *

June 2000, New Orleans

Vallon felt strangely alone after Lily had left for England three days ago. She had come by his house to tell him that she was looking for an ancestor's grave so that she could then transport their body to Paris and bury them in their family cemetery. She hadn't told him much about this ancestor, not even if the person was man or woman. And why did she need to relocate this ancestor? If she referred to him or her as ancestor, she had never known them personally and he couldn't understand why it was so important that he or she be buried among their

family.

Lily had said that if things went as they should, she would be back within a week at the least.

It felt odd without her around now. He couldn't explain what he felt. When she had entered his life, things had turned upside down. He hadn't realized it until she had left.

Lately, he had been running into Luca and Aurelia everywhere he went. He didn't mind. He was glad for the distraction.

Every concert 'Symphonic Dream' played, Azure brought Angelo. Vallon had no explanation as to why he hated this man but hate him he did. There was something about him that made Vallon feel smothered. He didn't like the sensation at all. The way Angelo looked at him told him that the feeling of hatred was mutual.

Vallon's nightmares were getting worse. He woke feeling wild-eyed and terrified. Now there was a face to go with the threat. It was Angelo's face. It sneered at him before the lid of the coffin blinded him to the outside world. The dream felt so real.

Something strange that Vallon had noticed was that he never saw Luca or Aurelia during the day. Only at night did he ever see them, like Lily. Was it probable that three people he knew were stricken with the same disease? Polymorphic light eruption, or photosensitivity, was what she had called it. She had explained her condition that night she had come to tell him that she would be leaving for London.

Come to think of it, he hadn't even seen Angelo out in the daylight. He was often with Azure these days but never during the day. Azure told him that he has a job in Metairie during the day. Vallon didn't buy it. Angelo dressed so richly; he didn't seem the type who had to work for his money.

What's going on?

It couldn't be a coincidence, could it?

* * * *

London, England

Lily felt confident and light on her feet for the first time in a long time. She was back in London and she would be taking

Vincent's body back home to France.

"Is this the place or not, lady?" the cabbie asked her as she sat staring at the grand house that had once belonged to a dear friend, Sabrina Phillips, the Countess of Haversham. She had had no children and another family had bought the house.

"Yes, it is, thank you," she replied handing him his fare.

She walked up the drive slowly, afraid of what she would find. Lily was going to hire some help but she had decided against it. She would have to secretly dig him up herself, which she could do quickly. She had hidden some tools in the maze just last night. She felt sure that no amount of pleading would sway the current owners to dig on their property, so she would have to do it without their consent.

Nowadays there was a gate beyond the maze in the rear yard. She would carry the coffin out that gate and put it into the back of a black van that would be waiting for her.

Lily had run into a car thief, Freddy, while he was stealing that very van. So she had asked Freddy for his services in exchange for her closed lips. He had agreed, smelling an intriguing opportunity.

"You've come to the right man, lady. Freddy here will take care of you, miss. And the word's mum. I'll not tell a soul," he had told her. His voice had been liberally laced with excitement and a little fear of what she might need him for but he needed to save his own ass and by helping her she wouldn't turn him in.

"That's right, Freddy, because if you do..." she trailed off menacingly, feeling horrible for bullying him so but she needed his silence and nothing really gave you complete devotion but fear.

Lily had told him that he needed to be at the rear gate of this address by midnight. If she did not show immediately he was to wait. She told him to ask no questions and to never breathe a word of what he would see. For this she would pay him well.

Quicker than the human eye could see, Lily was in the center of the maze. Pushing away the memories the spot invoked, she grabbed up her shovel and shoved into the soft earth. She dug furiously, unknown tears streaming from her eyes, until she struck something solid. Her heart jumped up into her throat and she threw the shovel away from her and began clearing away the

loose earth with her hands, revealing an old wooden coffin. It was still in remarkably good condition. Lily lifted it high above her head and set it on the ground above, climbing up after it.

Finally, Vincent was found. Lily lifted the coffin again and went quickly to the rear gate. Freddy was there waiting for her as arranged. The look on his face was priceless as he saw this small, dirt-splattered woman hefting a large coffin as if it weighed nothing. She set the coffin gingerly into the back of the van as he gaped at her.

"What *are* you, lady? That could not have been a lightweight casket," he breathed in awe at her.

"I'm Superwoman. Now drive me to the docks and please hurry. You will be paid well for your services and your *silence*," she told him in return.

Minutes later they reached the docks. She secretly stowed away on a ship for France, carrying the coffin above her head. Freddy watched her progress; he was happily clutching the thick envelope of money she had given him. He was rich now and he had an exciting secret. A real life vampire had needed his help. But he would tell no one, as she had asked.

Lily hid herself deep inside the ship, they should reach port tomorrow but she would have to wait until the sun went down before she went topside. There was no rush as the ship would not be returning to England until the next afternoon.

The rocking motion of the ship made the coffin slide and it bumped into a crate. The crash woke Lily from her light doze and she was horrified to see that the rusted nails did not keep the lid from coming off. She stood and warily walked over to the now open sarcophagus.

Vincent's bones lay inside, darkened with age. Tatters of his clothing remained on the skeleton. Lily shut her eyes to stop the tears that pricked her eyes. This was all that was left of the man who had wanted to marry her and make her happy. She bent to retrieve the lid and sobs finally broke loose from her as she saw the underside of the lid had dried blood stuck to it in places. His fingernails were still in the wood; they had ripped from his fingers as he had clawed at the wood, trying to get out.

Lily heard Angelo's words echoing in her head, *I drank from him just enough to make him too weak to fight me. I didn't*

want to have to break his neck if he struggled. I gave him just enough of my blood to help him survive for a few good weeks longer than he would have without my blood, and then...I buried him. He probably stayed alive for a month after that, in his crude wooden coffin. Probably still worrying about you.

A month he had been alive in this horrid coffin. He had survived his father. Would Angelo try to do this to Vallon? She didn't doubt it at all.

* * * *

New Orleans

Vallon talked enthusiastically with Adam and Cameron backstage at 'Motel Hell'. Another successful show had been played that night.

"Can you believe all the fans we have here in New Orleans? They are fantastic! I don't think they miss a single performance," shouted Adam happily.

"It's a great feeling, isn't it?" Vallon laughed, joining Adam in his exuberance.

"Come on, Cameron! Do you always have to be so *deadly* serious?" asked Adam with a mock morose expression on his face.

"Shut the hell up, Adam," he answered with a short laugh, giving his friend a light shove and sending him stumbling backwards into a chair.

Azure came backstage with Angelo close behind her, killing Vallon's mood. Angelo fixed Vallon with a cold stare. He returned it full force making Angelo smile grimly. No one seemed to notice the silent feud between the two of them.

"Well, I guess I'm off. I have to check in with Loki and see how he's holding up tonight. I'll see you," Vallon called to his friends and left by the rear door. Seeing it was such a nice night, Vallon decided to walk home. His thoughts were focused on the concert. The house had been packed tonight. With all these new bookings they were getting at all these new clubs, they were accumulating new fans.

He could still see their sweat slicked faces clearly in his mind's eye. Their expressions were of ecstasy, the music thrumming in their veins. So many bodies swaying and stomping

to his music. *His* music made them dance. *His* music made them smile those unselfconscious smiles of pure enjoyment.

Suddenly, Vallon stopped in his tracks as a chill danced up his spine. He turned on his heel and came face to face with Angelo.

"Well, hello, Vallon. Didn't your mother ever warn you about walking in dark alleyways? Or surely...Lily...maybe?" he asked with a grimace. Then Vallon was gripped tightly in Angelo's hands. He struggled but couldn't free himself from Angelo.

"What is it you want from me, Angelo?" he asked through clenched teeth.

Angelo grinned and replied, "Your death." Then he sunk his teeth viciously into Vallon's neck. Vallon was shocked and couldn't move. He felt himself grow tired and he couldn't think straight. But that wasn't the worst part of it. No...the worst was the way it felt so damn good.

Vallon was released suddenly and was dimly aware of two people violently fighting each other. His senses began to clear and he realized that it was *Luca* that was fighting with Angelo. It was unbelievable! They were moving so fast that Vallon could hardly focus on them. Unearthly growls raised the hair on his neck and he knew that what he was witnessing was not human.

Both men were displaying large fangs and ripping at each other with hands that were curved into claws and clenched into fists. Angelo took a swipe in the face and the angry red slashes healed almost immediately. Their bodies moved with fluid grace and twisted and turned in seemingly impossible bodily stunts. Then, Vallon was being carried away at an incredible speed and he was suddenly at his apartment. Aurelia had brought him there. What was happening?

Vallon stumbled to the door and went inside. He left the door open for Aurelia but she stood outside his door, not entering.

"You can come in, Aurelia," he said, his voice ragged and breathless. She came through the door then and led him to his couch and made him sit down. She found her way into his kitchen and came back with a dampened towel. She bit her thumb and pressed the bleeding thumb to his wound. Vallon was

surprised as the pain faded away. He sat in stunned silence as she cleaned the blood from him with the towel.

* * * *

Back in the alley, the blows had ceased to fall. Both men stood facing each other, breathing heavily.

"What are you doing here, Lucius?" Angelo asked.

"I am here for the same reason you are. Vallon. Only I intend to keep him alive. What has happened to you, Angelo? Why have you become this way?" Luca asked in return.

"You ruined my life by turning me into this. The only woman who loved me, actually *loved me*, is dead. I killed her, Lucius. I am a monster and it was you that made me this way. And then, I did to my precious Lily what you had done to me! There is no way I can take that back. She hates me as I have hated you!" Angelo yelled at him, his eyes begging, *Why didn't you just let me die?*

"And she will always hate you, Angelo. Do you know why that is? Because you killed Vincent and now you are trying to do it again. Can you think of no one but yourself? Have you ever thought for one moment what Lily might be feeling? If you had, she could have loved you. But you fucked it up," Luca tried to talk some sense into Angelo.

Angelo searched his eyes, seeing that he was speaking the truth. And seeing it there pained him. But he was what he was.

"All I wanted was for her to love *me* like I loved her. But she has always loved *him*."

After saying those words, Angelo ran off into the night, new ideas and regret filling his head.

Luca was at Vallon's apartment soon after his words with Angelo. Aurelia informed Vallon that Luca was at the door and he told her to allow him inside.

"What is happening here?" Vallon asked of Luca and Aurelia. They were pleasantly surprised to hear the relative calm in his voice.

"This was not how you were supposed to find out about us. Before you ask me what I mean, let me tell you that you do know but you are just a little reluctant to believe it. Most people are because it means their lives will never be the same again with this knowledge. And they are right. We, Aurelia, Angelo, even

Lily, and myself, are vampires. Angelo seeks to harm you because he loves Lily and Lily loves you. Aurelia and I are trying to keep you alive. Lily only left for London because she was sure we could keep you safe.

"We didn't do a very good job, I'm afraid. Angelo had acted too suddenly...but you *are* still alive. This is where things may get weird," Luca warned, laughing at the comical expression of sarcastic disbelief on Vallon's face.

"Yes, there is more to tell. I am responsible for making Angelo a vampire. That was in the year 1641 and Angelo made Lily on the night of December thirty-first in the year 1799. Now, in 1912, Lily met a man named Vincent de Leone. He was a French concert violinist and he was, ultimately, you. That is who Lily had gone to find in London, not an ancestor but the body of her first love.

"Is this getting through? I hope you are following me. I have had to tell this story again and again. Anyway, Angelo murdered Vincent, you, by burying him alive. Lily will know the details and you can have her fill you in on the rest. Although, Aurelia, I don't think she is going to be very happy with us. She wanted to tell you herself, Vallon...in time. But as things go in life, circumstances leave us with no choice but to tell you the truth.

"You look tired, you should get some sleep, and we will be here until the sun comes up."

"I am not tired. I'd like for you to explain to me wha..." Vallon slumped over on the couch, asleep.

"Sorry, but I had to. He's a stubborn one," Luca joked to Aurelia, after coaxing Vallon to sleep with his mind.

* * * *

Mikhail was pissed. He hadn't expected any interference. These vampires weretrying to stop Angelo from killing the human, Vallon. Why? He couldn't wrap his mind around it. He was just a weak, pitiful human being! Why did they want him alive?

"Damn it! Oh, I'll get you yet, Angelo."

A hapless drunk stumbled into the alleyway where Mikhail was currently venting his rage. He was utterly oblivious to the danger he had just drunkenly walked into.

Mikhail walked sedately up to the man who leered up at him in some surprise with a jaundiced eye. His nose was red with broken blood vessels from too much drink. His breath reeked of stale whiskey and vomit. Mikhail sneered down at the man, hating him for the scourge he was.

"Oh... 'scuse me, young man, I didn't 'ink anybuddy was up in here," the man let out a loud belch and Mikhail's nose curled in distaste.

Just for the hell of it, he grabbed the man up and twisted his screaming head from his quaking shoulders. It made a sweet, wet cracking sound.

Music to the ears.

Without ceremony, he let the still twitching body drop to his feet, noting with immense disgust that the man had soiled himself in his last moment.

How undignified.

He threw the head with contempt at the brick façade of one of the buildings forming the alley. The head made a nice splattering sound, making a mess on the wall like a psychiatrist's inkblot.

"Hmmm, doc, I think I see a bunny in that one. Whatever does it mean?" he laughed at his own grotesque joke. Now he felt mildly better. Time to go see his little Azure.

She was already home, sitting quietly in her kitchen. All she did these days was wait. She waits for Angelo. She waits for Mikhail. Poor, simple creature.

"My love, Angelo has failed me. But I'm sure we'll get him eventually. We have to! Tell me, dearest one, how can I get Vallon away from his protectors?" he asked her gently, his hands slowly manipulating her body, cupping her breasts.

"His mother, maybe? She lives alone and he loves her very much, my love," she answered, her breath coming in sharp pants.

"Genius, Azure, is what you are. It's quite perfect really. You are far more useful than I first thought. You've got your head on straight, lovely one," he crooned to her, his fingers slipping under the waistband of her pants.

She preened under his compliments, cooing endearments to him and moving her hips to the rhythm he set for her with his questing fingers.

FROM THE SHADOWS

"And where does his mother reside, Azure, my pet?" he asked her.

"The Garden District."

* * * *

London, England

Freddy sat at the small table with his two closest friends, Ham and Reggie. They were busy drinking the night away, puffing on expensive cigars laced liberally with marijuana. Thankfully, the bar was so full of smells that nobody seemed to take note of the heady smell of Mary Jane.

"Here's to becoming a rich fucker!" crowed his best mate, Reggie, who was seated across him with Ham. He was called Ham not because he was particularly heavy but for the fact that his family owned a pig farm. If anyone got on his bad side he let them know that if you starve them just long enough, pigs could eat an entire human body, leaving no trace.

"Why don't you tell us how you came into the money already, man? We're your pals, Fredd-o. Come oooooonnnnnnnnnnn," Ham slurred drunkenly.

"Oh...aahhlriiighhhht, I'll tell you. But you cannot tell a soul. She made me promise not to tell anyone but I can trust you guys, right?" he replied, and he was talking loud enough for the whole bar to hear what he was saying. But if you asked him he would swear that he was speaking in hushed tones.

"I was jacking this van, right? And here comes this gorgeous woman. Killer body and big tits, mate. Wish you could have seen her. Anyway...she offered me a deal. Yeah, I was shocked that this pretty little miss would blackmail me. Promised me she would not breathe a word against me if I helped her out. I was to meet her at the rear gate of some fancy bugger's estate, right? With the stolen van too!

"Offered me money, she did! How could I possibly refuse her? So there I was, waiting at this gate for...say, an hour. And out she comes, covered in dirt head to toe and carrying a six and a half foot long casket over her head as if it were as light as a cloud! And she moved...so fast. Too fast. Not normal at all. I swear she was a real-life vampire!"

"You bullshittin' us, Fred?" asked Reggie skeptically,

thinking his friend had had far too many drinks tonight. But hey, Freddy was buying so he wouldn't complain.

"Naw, man, I fucking swear on my cock! She was hefting that fucking casket over her head and I was completely sober that night. No drugs, no drinks, fucking swear it, chap! And I drove her to the docks and she handed me this thick envelope filled with fifty pound notes! And that's the last I saw of her when she boarded that ship for France. I watched that sweet ass all the way," he laughed with them.

"So, tell us more of this mysterious muscle woman," Ham prompted.

"She came up to my shoulders and she had black-as-pitch hair and these amazing golden eyes. Beautiful face, boys. I have never seen a finer woman in my life," he answered and he laughed secretively when his friends started asking if he had gotten any from her.

Freddy dropped his beer when he noticed a man suddenly...*materialize*?...next to him. He like...came out of the shadows in the bar. Maybe he was too drunk and that's why the man had seemed to appear out of thin air? Maybe next he would see some dancing pink elephants?

"What was her name, Freddy?" the man asked.

Freddy looked to his friends and was relieved to see that they saw him too. So he *was* just too far gone in drink. Phew.

"Some kind of flowery name, I think. I was too busy checking the cans to care to remember her name at the moment, mate. Maybe Rose...or Daisy? I dunno, man," Freddy told him apologetically, his mind trying to wonder about the man's interest in her but he was too drunk and the fog of his alcohol hazed mind quickly trampled any suspiciousness in him.

"Lily?" the strange man asked. He looked like a nice enough fellow. He had shoulder length blond hair and friendly pale blue eyes. His smile was benign and his front teeth slightly crooked. Freddy liked the man already.

"That's it, mate! Lily!" Freddy told him and the man was gone.

* * * *

Paris, France

Lily sat comfortably in the library of the de Leone house. A kindly elderly couple were the current owners of the house. They were Vincent's cousins, Robert and his wife Clarisse de Leone. It was a grand estate, antique furniture since the reign of Louis XIV graced the entire house. Vincent had lived in this very house and had used these furnishings.

Vincent's body lay in the parlor, he was now resting in a brand new coffin and he would be laid to rest in the family cemetery tomorrow evening. Vincent would finally have a tombstone to mark his resting place.

"How did you know to find Vincent?" Clarisse asked her, her kind eyes searching Lily's curiously.

"Recently found family documents have mentioned that an ancestor of mine, who I am named for, was to marry Vincent. She had received word of his whereabouts before she died and left details in a document. It was her wish that someone find him and bring him to be buried here," Lily explained, feeling terrible for the need to lie to these kind people.

"Well, I thank you for locating him, my dear. We have never known if we would ever get to bury him in the family cemetery," said Robert.

"Does your family still own his violin and music sheets?" asked Clarisse and Lily was afraid they'd ask to have them back.

"Yes, I have them in my keeping back home in New Orleans. I have always treasured them. My great-grandmother truly loved Vincent," she replied.

"I want you to have this, Lily," said Robert, reaching into his pocket. Lily held out her hand and in it he placed a small, framed, oval portrait. It was a portrait of Vincent, as handsome as he had ever been, smiling up at her from the black and white picture.

"Thank you so much for this. I will always treasure it," she told him as tears stung her eyes. Robert patted her hand gently and gave her a warm smile.

"No, thank *you* for bringing him home," he told her.

* * * *

The funeral service had been beautiful. Only Lily, Robert and Clarisse attended. They were the last of the de Leone lineage and they had graciously agreed for the funeral to be held at night

for Lily's sake. Lily wiped a tear that trailed down her cheek. She felt happy, Vincent was finally where he belonged and Vallon was waiting for her back in New Orleans.

Vallon.

It was time to tell him, she wouldn't wait like the last time. He had to know the truth. Lily walked toward the coffin and laid a lily on the lid. Vincent would have appreciated it; after all she was his most beautiful flower. She stayed for a moment and then walked back to the headstone. Her fingers traced his name lovingly.

Vincent Sebastian de Leone
Beloved Son
b. October 25, 1886
d. November 1912

Lily left the de Leone's, thanking them for their help. She took a cab back to her hotel and waited for the sun to rise. She would hole herself up in the closet until night fell and it was safe for her to travel. Soon, she would be back in New Orleans and she could have her second chance of happiness.

Would Vallon want to be with her *forever*?

Lily would let him choose what he wanted. If he declines, then Lily would take what she could get and love him as long as she could. And on that painful day of his death, she would die with him. Lily had lost him once, she couldn't do it again.

* * * *

New Orleans

The Thibideaux's had brought her back to the States safely and she had thanked them all again for their help. They continued to amaze her with their hospitality and good nature. They had even invited her to dine with them. And so she had.

Lily was back and she felt at ease. She could move on now. Here she was back home in New Orleans and she was ready to face Vallon. She walked at a slow pace all the way to his apartment, enjoying the sights, sounds and smells of New Orleans.

Serenity. That was what she felt. By facing the pain of her

past, she had set the path for her future. No one would get in her way now.

Lily walked into the courtyard behind 'Under the Gun Tattoo'. Granted, she was nervous tonight as she was planning to confess the secret of what she was. And what if Vallon reacted the way Angelo's mother, Marie, had acted? She could only hope that he was capable of accepting the reality without fear and revulsion.

Lily knocked on Vallon's door, trying to reign in her fears. She smiled when Vallon opened the door and stepped aside to allow her in. His face was taut and he looked confused and tired.

"You found him? In London?" he asked her.

Lily nodded, "Yes, I found him...How did you know I was looking for a man, Vallon?" she asked him, worry creeping up on her.

"Things have happened while you were away, Lily. Things that I have never seen the likes of before have happened. Angelo attacked me two nights ago after a concert. Luca and Aurelia saved my life. They told me a story that most would find very hard to believe," he spoke, leading her to the kitchen where they sat at the island.

"What *things* exactly did they speak of, Vallon?" she asked, knowing what things but needing to hear it from him and gauge his reaction.

"They told me of how Luca made Angelo who then made you. You are all vampires, they told me. And I, apparently, was who you were looking for in London. They also told me of something that really blew me away more than anything else they had told me," Vallon answered.

Lily licked her lips nervously, asking, "And what would that be?"

"Do you love me, Lily? Luca said that Angelo wants me dead because he loves you but you love me. So, do you love me?" he asked her, rising from his seat and standing before her.

Lily leaned her head back and looked up into his face. There was no discernable expression on his lovely face. But his eyes were intent on hers, awaiting her answer.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Because I was *him*?" he asked her, and she saw a flicker in

his eyes. He was afraid she loved him for who he used to be.

"Because you are you, Vallon Paige and though I'll always love Vincent de Leone, I have learned to say goodbye. I love Vallon," she told him.

Vallon gently took her by the arms and lifted her to stand facing him. He was wearing only loose jeans that hung low on his hips. His hair had two long braids at each temple and the rest fell loose at his back. He resembled a pagan god. He was glorious.

Lily, herself, was dressed sexily in a short black miniskirt and a red corset. She wore nothing on her legs and wore a pair of black satin stilettos with ribbon laces twining up her legs to the knee.

"How can you be sure we were the same person, Lily?" he asked, lowering his face and kissing her neck.

"Believe me when I tell you that I am sure," she answered.

Vallon backed her against the island and lifted her onto it. Lily lifted her hips as he reached his hands up her skirt and slid her black silk panties down her legs. Lily unbuttoned Vallon's jeans and gripped him in her hand, leading him to her. She placed her hands behind her on the cool surface of the island. She gasped and leaned her head back as he slid into her.

Vallon gripped her hips and bit her exposed throat. As he thrust into her, Vallon slid his hands down to her ankles and lifted them up onto his shoulders. Lily's breath caught in her throat as he went deeper inside of her.

"Do you love me, Vallon?" Lily asked him breathlessly, needing to know if he loved her as she loved him. As he had loved her once before.

"I do love you, Lily," he whispered hoarsely to her and she smiled. She licked her lips and growled when Vallon started rolling his hips against her. Lily in turn began rolling her hips with his and screamed as their synchronized movements made her come instantly.

Vallon withdrew from her and lifted her up, sliding her down his body. He kissed her lips briefly and turned her to face away from him. Lily gripped the edge of either side of the island and leaned her body forward. She lifted one graceful leg and set her foot on the barstool closest to her.

FROM THE SHADOWS

Vallon set one hand on her hip and brought the other around to gently rub her most sensitive place while he thrust into her again. Vallon's body tensed as she clamped her muscles around him. Lily rotated her hips against him making Vallon groan through clenched teeth.

They made love like it had been years since they had last tasted each other, Vallon finally joining Lily in her release. They sat together, regaining their senses, on the kitchen floor.

"Do you believe what Luca told you?" Lily asked after a few minutes of silence.

"After what I saw in that alley, not to mention Angelo's teeth in my neck, yes. I believe because I saw the proof," he answered, his tone had softened and his hand was holding her small one in his.

"I came here tonight to tell you the truth about myself, Vallon. I am two hundred and twenty-two years old and I believe, I know, that you were Vincent de Leone. Angelo took you away from me once before. He gave you some of his blood and buried you alive. Vincent survived for about a month in that coffin I found him in. There were fingernails stuck in the wood..." she broke off before she could begin to cry.

Vallon was shocked to learn of the way Vincent, he, had died. He had always feared being buried alive and was claustrophobic.

"Are they going to kill Angelo?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. I think we are all a little confused where Angelo is concerned, but I don't think he will stop until someone does kill him. I believe it is what he wants," Lily replied.

* * * *

"Angelo knows about Jaidyn and Skye, Aurelia. Apparently he's been researching Lily's family line. But he most likely knows nothing about your connection to them. I saw him outside Jaidyn's house last night. As of now, I think he is merely curious about them. We will have to keep an eye on them as well. I will keep watching Angelo as it seems he has a new itinerary," Luca told Aurelia. She sat helplessly on the bed in his hotel room. He felt awful to be the bearer of bad news but she had to know.

"Please help me watch over them both, Luca. Don't let him hurt them. They are all I have left," Aurelia pleaded, trusting

Luca completely. She was frightened for them. Who knew what Angelo would do?

"I will help you, of course, Aurelia, *mi amiga*. Jaidyn is most beautiful. No harm will come to her or her son. I swear I will keep both of them alive," he vowed.

Aurelia eyed him suspiciously and asked him, "Can you protect her from yourself, dear Luca?"

Luca grinned lasciviously at her and waggled his brows.

"She deserves *real* love, Luca. I will not suffer Jaidyn to be treated poorly by anyone, not even you," she warned.

"Would I be capable of hurting a woman, Aurelia? You know me better than that, *mi amiga*. Besides...she will never even know that I exist," Luca replied, serious now. Jaidyn *did* deserve great love. She was graceful and so very beautiful. She took the breath away from him and he had seen many beautiful women in his six hundred and seventy-six years.

Chapter Six

The phone was ringing when Vallon got back to his apartment. Loki and Marlena had control of the parlor for the rest of the day as Vallon had decided to call it quits early. It was good to be the boss.

"Hello?" Vallon asked when he picked up the phone.

"Vallon, hon, it's me," it was Vallon's mother. She sounded a little confused and worried.

"What's the matter? Is something wrong?" Vallon asked her, a chill crawling up his spine. Her voice was unsteady and it sounded as if she were trying to hide the fact that she was scared.

"I'm sorry to upset you, dear, but lately I've been feeling strange. I've been having nightmares of something happening to you. And when I go out at night these days, I feel that someone is watching me. I can hear someone walking behind me but when I turn to see what it is, there is no one there at all. I'm always completely alone and I'm scared, Vallon," Bethany explained.

"Maybe you shouldn't be alone, Mom. You know I've got room here for you if you would like to be with someone," Vallon replied, trying to keep his fear for her out of his voice.

"I need to tell you something, Mom. Things have been going on with me lately. I think you should come and stay with me for awhile," he added.

"What's wrong? Are you in trouble?" she asked.

"Just come over, Mom. I don't want you to be alone," he said goodbye after she had promised she would be there soon and hung up the phone.

Vallon knew who was watching his mother. It *had* to be Angelo. Was he going to strike out at Vallon's mother to get at him? She would have to stay here for awhile. There was no telling what Angelo would do next.

An hour later, Bethany was at Vallon's door with two large

overnight bags at her feet. Vallon picked up her bags and set them inside. Her green eyes were troubled and her soft brown hair in disarray. She looked him over worriedly, chewing on her bottom lip.

"So, Vallon, what has been going on here? What *things* have been happening to you?" she asked him nervously, reaching her hand out and grasping his arm to see if he really was alright.

Vallon wondered how much he should tell her. What would she think of all he had to warn her about? He couldn't leave out any tiny detail, she could be in real danger and she had to know what was going on.

"Come inside and sit down," Vallon told her, then asked, "Can I get you a drink before I explain things?"

Bethany, knowing it had to be something big he needed to tell her, nodded, "A beer, please, Vallon."

She sat on the sofa and gratefully accepted the cold beer he handed to her, pressing it to her over-warm forehead before opening it and taking a long drink.

"I thought I was just being silly but the tone of your voice while I spoke to you on the phone told me there was something else going on here. What is it?" she asked.

"Do you believe in vampires, Mom?" Vallon asked, feeling extremely stupid.

Bethany looked at him and laughed.

"You had me worried, Vallon. I thought something was really going on with you. Oh, I was so scared," she wiped tears of mirth from her eyes and Vallon sighed deeply, hating to tell her the truth.

"I know it sounds like I am joking. A couple of days ago, I would have been laughing too. But I'm serious now. There is a man after me, his name is Angelo Milonne and he *is* a vampire," he told her slowly, watching her face.

"A vampire, dear? I believe in spirits, good and evil, but a *vampire*?" she asked him incredulously and he could see in her face that she was desperately hoping that this was one giant prank and not the end of her son's sanity.

"Actually, there are four vampires that I have met and one of them means the world to me. Her name is Lily and she is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. And then there is Luca

FROM THE SHADOWS

and Aurelia, my friends," he replied, hating the look on his mother's face that held a hint of fear that her only child *might* be crazy.

"I know you don't believe me but I had to let you know that Angelo might have been the one following you. You might be in danger and I still think you should stay here for awhile whether you believe me or not. If you had seen what I have, you would not doubt it for an instant," Vallon told her, wishing she would listen to him and hear the truth he was trying to tell her.

"I'll stay if it makes you feel better," she told him.

"Yes, it would make me feel better. I'll put your bags in my room and you can sleep there and I'll sleep on the couch. I still don't have a bed in the spare room," he told her.

Another hour later, Vallon received a phone call from Marlena. 'Under the Gun' had suddenly gotten very busy and they needed him downstairs.

"Loki and Marlena need me down below. If you need anything, call me or come down, okay?" Vallon asked her.

"Alright, but I will be fine," she replied. Bethany settled down on the couch with a book and before she knew it the sun went down and she had to turn on the lights. She was on her way to the kitchen when there was a knock at the door.

Bethany looked out of the door's peephole and saw a handsome blond man she was not familiar with standing outside. She opened the door to greet him as he might be a friend of Vallon's.

"Hello, can I help you?" she asked him.

He smiled kindly at her and replied, "May I come in to speak with Vallon? I'm a friend of his and I assume you are his mother?" he asked politely.

Nodding, she answered, "Yes, I am his mother. My name is Bethany. Vallon's not here at the moment. He's below working but he'll be back later if you could come back," she suggested.

"Oh, I see. Would you mind if I came inside to wait for him?" he asked, staring into her eyes.

Bethany was just stepping back to let him in when all Vallon had told her came rushing back into her head. The man was different somehow. Very elegant and charming, sure, but something else was there that she couldn't put her finger on.

"Who did you say you were?" she asked the stranger.

"I didn't say; forgive me my rudeness. My name is Luca," he said with a smile.

Bethany smiled back at him. So this was the infamous Luca, so-called vampire. Bethany pushed aside her worry for Vallon and stepped aside and said, "Come on in. I'm sure Vallon won't mind if you wait here for him to get back."

He stepped into the apartment and looked around as if he had never been there before.

"Can I get you a drink, Luca? Soda? Beer?" she asked.

"A beer would be lovely," he replied. He followed her into the kitchen and watched her as she retrieved a bottle from the refrigerator.

"Here you go, Luca," she handed him the beer. He popped the cap with an opener she handed him.

"Thank you," he said and took a long drink. Bethany set the bottle opener back on the counter and turned to go back into the living room. Suddenly, she was grabbed roughly from behind.

"What are you doing, Luca?" she asked fearfully.

"The name is Angelo, my pretty. And you are mine," he answered with a malicious smile. She watched in horror as the irises of his eyes glowed red and the whites of them turned black. He opened his mouth so that she could plainly see the fangs lengthening threateningly, as if he wanted her to know he intended to devour her.

Bethany tried to scream for help but Angelo grabbed her roughly by the throat and all that came out was a choked moan. Angelo caressed her face with his free hand and kissed her forehead gently. She could do nothing but watch him in growing terror. His skin changed shade, turning a smooth, smoky gray, like a shadow. His hair seemed to come alive and whipped around him as if by a breeze. She felt surrounded by him; she wasn't sure if he was getting larger or if it was just lack of oxygen to her brain.

In fact, his powers had surged making him seem to grow larger but it was just the expansion of his aura whipping around him.

"Why?" Bethany croaked.

"Your son took the only thing I had left that I love, I'm just

returning the gesture. Be sure to let them know that," he replied cryptically.

Angelo licked her neck and bit into the soft flesh, piercing her jugular. Her warm blood pulsed into his mouth and he groaned aloud as the familiar pleasure filled him. Like a slideshow, her memories and knowledge flooded into him. Incredible love for her husband and her son, sorrow and pain for her dead husband and fear of him washed through him.

A black mist pulsed and undulated around the pair locked together. His large black wings gripped her in an intimate embrace. Bethany had been at first paralyzed by her fear but now as he sucked her life blood, she felt nothing but the ecstasy. His aura seemed to wrap around her and pull her even closer to him, to pull at her hair and grip her wrists.

He wouldn't hurt me. He understands me. He loves me, she thought and a soft smile curled her lips.

He lay her down on the floor; death was closing in on her now. She had mere minutes left. He was done. In an instant, she was left alone. She was weak and drained. Bethany knew she was dying and she felt deep sadness for not taking her beloved Vallon seriously. She had invited evil into his house and now she was dying. But she was unnaturally calm. Her Marcus would be waiting to welcome her into the gates of Heaven.

"Bethany? Bethany! Can you hear me?"

A woman's voice was calling to her. Bethany turned and looked into the eyes of an angel.

"Bethany, my name is Lily and I am here to help you," the angel said with a note of urgency in her voice.

"Lily?" Bethany whispered weakly.

"Yes, I can save your life if you choose it," Lily told her, holding her hand.

"I know you. But it was so long ago, you were known as...Sabrina...then," Bethany whispered to her in awe. This was the woman Vallon was in love with!

"Yes, I took the name of an old friend. I remember you well and your husband Marcus. You are dying now, Bethany. I can save your life if you wish it," Lily spoke in a hurried tone.

"No, I cannot live forever, dear. My Marcus will be waiting for me. I can almost see him standing before me already and he

is waiting to take me. Please look after my son. Angelo is after him for taking the only thing he has left to love. Keep him safe. Tell him that I love him...and...how proud..."

Lily felt the life leave her, the light in her kind eyes now gone. Tears fell from her and splashed onto Bethany's cold hand that she still held in hers. She had come as quickly as she could. She had felt that something was wrong and had thought it was Vallon. She sat holding the dead woman's hand for quite some time, finally coming to when she heard Vallon's front door open and close.

Vallon stood shocked, staring at the corpse of his mother. And sitting beside her was Lily. Vallon's legs gave and he sank to his knees on the floor.

"I am so sorry, Vallon. I was too late to save her. She said...it was Angelo," Lily whispered into the eerie silence.

Vallon nodded weakly and said softly, "I told her to stay here so she would be safe from him."

"She would not have been safe from him anywhere, Vallon," Lily replied.

Vallon reached into his pocket for his cell phone and dialed 911.

"My mother has been murdered. She let someone into my apartment and they killed her," he stayed on the phone with the dispatcher until the sirens could be heard outside.

"You had better go, Lily. Your presence here could get you into trouble," he said quietly, not meeting her eyes.

Lily hated to leave him like this but he had a point. If she stayed she could only raise more questions. She kissed him lightly on the cheek and whispered, "She wanted me to tell you how much she loved you and how proud she was of you."

Then, Lily was gone and Vallon was alone. Tears slipped silently from his eyes. Vallon shuddered and remained sitting slumped on the floor.

* * * *

Vallon was escorted home that morning by a very concerned Adam Zanders. He had been questioned again by the Detectives McKenna and Phelps. He was very tired and he felt as if he were dead inside.

"You should get some sleep, Vallon. I would stay here, but I

FROM THE SHADOWS

couldn't get out of work. If you need anything call me, okay? Azure and Cameron ask that you call on them as well if you should want some company," Adam said to him, feeling as if he were talking to a zombie.

Vallon nodded slowly at him and climbed out of the taxi Adam had hailed for them at the station. He waved to Adam and headed back into the alleyway and upstairs to his apartment. He collapsed on his bed and sank immediately into a fitful sleep. His dreams were filled with menacing dark shapes and screams of horror. Vallon tried running after the shadows that taunted him but they always slipped through his fingers like water.

For hours he tossed restlessly on the big bed, finally awakening to a welcome numbness.

* * * *

Lily was still awake and she could sense the sun was up outside. Every thought she had was focused on Vallon. She should be with him right now. Her heart was breaking. The man she loved needed her and there was no way to go to him. Her weakness infuriated her. Yet again the sunlight kept her from the one place she needed to be. She had failed Vincent and now she was failing Vallon.

There was no telling what he could do and she was worried greatly for him. Would he go looking for Angelo when the sun goes down?

Vallon will probably think he needs to get revenge for his mother's death. He'll end up getting himself killed if he tried such a thing. There is no way Vallon could take on Angelo. She would have to reach Vallon before he set his mind to it.

Where was Angelo hiding? She had never known where he was and it made her feel exceptionally vulnerable that he always seemed to know where she was. If only she knew where he rested during the day, Vallon might have a chance. But as it is, if Vallon wants to find Angelo, Vallon *will* die.

Lily sank down into her desk chair and closed her eyes. She felt helpless at the moment. It was an alien feeling to a vampire. Lily decided she would have to try to reason with Vallon. It wouldn't be easy to make a man blinded by grief and rage to see reason. She might be better off trying to find Angelo herself.

* * * *

Angelo was awake, as well. He was hiding from the daylight in the cool darkness of an attic in a grand house on Magnolia Street in the Garden District. The windows of his house were not filled in. That would make him somewhat easy to find. And Angelo wouldn't allow that to happen.

He didn't want Lily to hurt anymore. Angelo knew how badly he had abused her and was reluctant to do it again. But the *mortal* would hurt her again. Vallon will eventually die and Angelo knew Lily wouldn't do as he had done and change him without his understanding and consent. And Angelo couldn't really see a mortal giving up all they had for immortality. He had lost so much when he had become what he now was.

He hadn't seen or felt the warmth of the sun in three hundred years. He had lost that freedom so long ago. The mortals fear and despise him. Angelo had even lost his beloved mother, as well.

Why would anyone choose this? he thought.

Lily would be destroyed if her mortal stayed with her for so many years and then died again. The sooner he was taken away, the better. Having so many years with him before he passed would be more painful than losing him sooner. He would be doing her a kindness by taking him away from her now, though she would fail to see it as such.

And in truth, he wasn't fooling himself either. Noble intentions be damned. He wanted her for himself. No use lying to the one who knew him best. That, of course, being himself.

His mind was made up anyway; the mortal had to go now. It was time to take things into his own hands. Angelo retrieved his cell phone and dialed Azure's home number. She would be waiting for his instructions. She could deny him nothing.

"Yes?" came Azure's voice on the line.

"I need you to help me, love. It is time to finish what has been started," he told her in a firm tone, one that brooked no argument.

There was silence for a minute, then, "Please...no...he is a friend," she whimpered.

"Call him, Azure. Tell him you are in trouble and that you need him. Tell him that I have hurt you and that you know where he can find me. That will get him," he said with a sad smile.

FROM THE SHADOWS

"Angelo, please don't make me hurt anyone," she pleaded, crying now. He could hear her gasping sobs on the other end.

"Now, now, my love, do not cry. You love me, don't you?" he asked her.

"You know I do, Angelo," she replied honestly. Oh how she loved him. It was so very painful, this love.

"Then do this one thing for me and I shall give you eternal life with me by your side. You will be my queen of the night," he promised.

Silence.

"Call him, Azure, my heart. When he shows up, hit him hard over the head with something heavy and tie him up. I will be by as soon as I can and I will take it from there. That is all you need to do," he insisted.

"Yes, I will do as you tell me. I will call Vallon," she replied and hung up the phone.

Angelo flipped his phone shut and set it aside. He crossed the attic floor to his bed and climbed in. He would get some sleep before the sun set and then he would take care of Vallon.

* * * *

Azure hung up the phone, her hands steady now. She wouldn't really be hurting Vallon *too* badly. She was just knocking him out for awhile. She would repay him with eternal life after Angelo had made her into a vampire. Azure picked up a foot tall statue of Bacchus that was sitting next to the phone. His smile was quite drunk but happy. She studied the weight of it in her hands and nodded, smiling back at the drunken god. It was heavy enough for the job and it shouldn't do any permanent damage to him.

Taking a steadying breath, she picked up the phone again and dialed Vallon's number. It rang seven times before he finally picked up the phone.

"Hello?" asked Vallon's sullen voice.

She mustered up her best frightened voice and even loosed a convincing sob.

"Vallon, its Azure. I'm in trouble, Vallon. Angelo has been strange lately. He hurt me the other day. I'm scared to be alone. He's coming back tonight. I'm afraid he's going to do something very bad to me. I didn't know who else to call. I'm so sorry," she

gushed in a panicked voice.

Something inside Vallon woke up.

"Are you at home, Azure?" he asked her.

"Yes, I'm at home."

"I'll be right over. Just wait there for me," Vallon told her and dropped the phone without even hanging up. He ran into his bedroom and put on a pair of loose jeans and a t-shirt. He crammed his feet into a pair of boots and grabbed his wallet off the kitchen counter.

"What the hell should I take with me? How do you kill a vampire?" he asked himself out loud. He stared out the kitchen window as if expecting the answer to be staring back in at him. Unsure, he grabbed a large knife and stuck it in his boot.

Vallon rushed out without locking his door and luckily was able to find a taxi.

"Burgundy Street, please, and hurry," Vallon told the cab driver, giving him a specific address.

Shortly, the cab rolled to a stop in front of Azure's place. He paid the driver and ran up to her front door and knocked hard.

Azure opened the door for him and let him inside.

"Thank you so much for coming. I didn't know what to do," she told him, calm now.

"When will he be here, Azure? Will he come out as soon as the sun sets?" he asked her.

"Yes, he will be here then. Go into the kitchen, I have something of his in there I need you to look at and tell me what you think," she told him. Vallon nodded and turned his back on her to do as she had asked of him. Azure brought the statue up over her head. Her face contorted into a wicked grimace and she brought Bacchus down on his head with a small scream of effort.

Vallon stumbled from the blow. He turned to look at her in shock and saw her staring at him in disbelief. He watched her bring up her weapon again and he was too sluggish to stop the blow from connecting with the side of his head. This time he fell to his knees and the world around him went black.

Azure watched in horrified fascination as blood began to trickle down the side of Vallon's face as he lay face down on her floor. She threw the statue aside and rushed into the kitchen, humming a lullaby maniacally under her breath, and picked up

FROM THE SHADOWS

the rope Angelo had left her the night before.

"Hush little baby, don't you cry. Momma's gonna buy you a sarcophagi. And if that sarcophagi don't fit, Momma's gonna cut you into tiny bits."

Azure came back into the *living room* and struggled to pull Vallon's prone form into a leaning position against the wall. After much effort, she managed to prop him up and tied his arms tightly to his sides. She got a towel from her bathroom and ran it under some cold water. She took the towel to Vallon and washed some of the blood from his face.

Now she just had to wait for darkness.

* * * *

Hours later, Angelo was awake and feeling triumphant. By now Azure had Vallon tied up in her home. With a bounce in his step, Angelo left his beautiful Georgian era home and headed for Azure's house in the Quarter.

* * * *

Back at Azure's house, Vallon became slowly aware of numbness in his arms and came awake as he suddenly remembered all that had happened.

Azure had attacked him! What was going on?

He heard her moving around in her bedroom and tried to stand up. He looked down at his chest and found that he was tied up.

What was she planning on doing to him?

Vallon started flexing his arms, trying to get some feeling back into his limbs before she came out of her room and found him awake. Tingles spread through his arms and burning pain soon followed. If he could reach the knife in his boot he might be able to free himself from the rope binding him.

Azure came out of the bedroom and Vallon feigned unconsciousness.

She knelt beside him, running her fingers through his hair and whispered to him apologetically, "Not awake yet are you? I hope I didn't hit you too hard. I never meant to hurt you, Vallon. Angelo promised me eternity and I had to do it."

She rose and went back into her room and minutes later he heard her turn on the water in the shower. His arms were starting to get some feeling in them. He curled his leg back until he could

almost reach his foot. He tried to move his arms away from his body, hoping to loosen the rope. It was tight and he couldn't budge it.

Grimacing in pain, he stretched his leg even further back. Finally, he gripped his ankle in his hand. He could feel the comforting form of the knife under his hand. Inching his hand slowly up until he reached the top of his boot, he hooked his fingers into the top and felt the handle. Grinning, Vallon tried to grip the knife between his thumb and forefinger.

Vallon finally got a grip on it and started slowly pulling it up out of his boot trying not to cut himself. Two uncomfortable minutes later, Vallon had the knife gripped firmly in his hand. He angled the blade up and hooked it into the rope. He began sawing at the rope furiously before Azure could come back. With satisfaction, he felt the rope slackening as he cut through it. Finally it was loose enough that he could move his arms and soon it was sagging around him. He stood as quickly as he could and jerked the rest of the rope off of him.

He put the knife back in his boot and ran to the front door. He slipped outside and walked quickly away. Suddenly, he was flung back and the wind rushed out of his lungs as he landed hard on his back.

"Going somewhere?" asked a coldly familiar voice.

Still fighting for breath, Vallon looked up at Angelo, hatred darkening his eyes. Angelo knelt beside him and touched his shoulder lightly.

"Your friends will not know where to find you. They have no idea where you are. I was as quick as I could be to get to you before one of your *charming* friends had the chance to locate me and start tailing me," he explained with a somber expression.

"I would have had you easily that night in the alley. And I would have succeeded if it weren't for those meddling vampires and their morals," Angelo laughed and said, "I always wanted to say that. Oh...*sorry*...I forgot. Today is the day you die and you are probably not in the mood for merrymaking. Do pardon my manners."

Angelo stood and grabbed Vallon's arm and pulled him to his feet easily. Vallon glared at him, still struggling for his breath. Angelo ignored the look he was receiving and picked

Vallon up and put him over his shoulder as if he weighed nothing.

Angelo carried Vallon back into Azure's house and found her sitting on the floor, hair wet from her shower and dressed in a simple black tank top and skirt, rocking herself back and forth, apparently distraught at having let Vallon escape. She looked up and sighed in relief as she saw them.

"There you are, Vallon. Angelo would have been angry had you gotten away," she said happily as if it had all been some innocent game.

"Hand me the rope, Azure, love. I need to tie him back up," he told her in a friendly voice. And smiling broadly with her lovesick eyes, she did as he bade her.

Vallon groaned in frustration as he was being tied again. He couldn't move in Angelo's grasp, he was far too strong.

"Come, sweet, you have done me a great favor and now you shall get your reward," he said to Azure. She walked over to him and exposed her neck to him.

"He won't give you immortality, Azure. Listen to me, he is lying to you. Get out of here," Vallon pleaded.

The pair ignored him and Vallon watched as Angelo sank his fangs into her neck. Vallon watched for what seemed like hours but was most likely only a minute. Finally, Angelo lay her down on the floor. Angelo sighed and turned abruptly to face Vallon who was once again bound on the floor.

"Now, I bet you are wondering what it is that I plan to do with you," Angelo mused.

"You are going to kill me, I already know. It won't make Lily any warmer to you if you kill me, Angelo," Vallon told him, although he knew better than to entertain hopes that Angelo would let him go.

"Yes, I know that, Vallon. But it would be much easier on her if you die now instead of fifty years down the road when she is accustomed to your presence in her life. Besides...I hate you," he answered.

"What makes you think I wouldn't want her to make me a vampire, Angelo?" Vallon asked him. Angelo's eyes widened and his lips curled in a sneer.

"*What?!* You would give up the blessed normalcy of your

life for *this* cursed existence?" Angelo asked him incredulously, his hands gestured to his body as if he were an abomination to look upon.

"My mother is gone now. You made sure of that. For her I would have refused eternal life, but now all I have left is Lily and an eternity with her is something I would gladly accept," Vallon replied, morbidly amused at Angelo's evident self-loathing.

Instead of appeasing Angelo that Lily wouldn't have to fear his death, it only enraged him.

"Why should you be the one to spend your life with her? Why not me, damn it? I have always loved her," he shouted at Vallon.

"Then die for her, Angelo. You have done nothing to show her you loved her. All you know is violence and you have made her endure that long enough," Vallon yelled back.

"*Shut up!* I will not let you sit there and hurl insults at me," with those final words he smashed his fist into Vallon's jaw and knocked him unconscious.

"If she wants me to die for her, then die for her I will. But not before you," Angelo spat maliciously. He hefted Vallon onto his shoulder once more and was gone from the house. He was back in his attic soon after. He looked grimly at the crude coffin that was once again to be Vallon's final resting place. The coffin would then be sealed into the wall.

With an aggrieved sigh Angelo dropped Vallon on the floor.

* * * *

Azure slowly came to with a soft moan. She gingerly rubbed her temples where a pounding headache had formed. She could feel the massive migraine coming on already. Shakily, she managed to pull herself off the floor into a standing position.

Am I a vampire? Where is everybody? What the hell happened?

She looked around her living room, grimaced at the horrid floral sofa set her mother had given her two years ago that she had never had the money to replace. The room spun around her and gradually came to a stop.

Is this my body making the change?

Azure heard a familiar tapping at her door. It was Mikhail!

She rushed to the door and flung it wide. He would be glad to know Angelo had gotten what he wanted.

"Mikhail, it has been done! Angelo must have taken Vallon to his place. That is where he must be, why he left me here," she told him in a rush, waiting to hear those gloriously sweet words of praise, of love and devotion.

They didn't come.

"Angelo made me a vampire at last. Now we can be together forever. Vallon didn't believe he would make me one but he had to have. He bit me and my body felt very strange when I woke just minutes ago," she continued.

"Vallon watched this? Good. He will most likely blame Angelo for your untimely demise. And so, too, will the Guardians," he told her, his silky voice giving her chills of fear now, instead of chills of longing.

"My d-demise? Mikhail?" she asked uncertainly, backing herself up against a wall. He walked toward her, coming one step forward for her every one step back.

"Don't be afraid, Azure. This will only hurt for a little while and then...nothing. I promise," he whispered against her lips as he came face-to-face with her. Her reached a hand up and twisted his fingers in her hair. His tongue flickered out and over her trembling lips. Helpless in her attraction to him, Azure kissed back, her treacherous body surging against him.

Mikhail trailed his kiss over her jaw down to her neck. Azure whimpered and then screamed when his teeth broke her skin. His body changed and his powers surged. Azure became even more terrified when she saw the change. The eyes, the clawed fingers, the horns that broke through the skin on his forehead just below his hairline. But it was those devilish leathery wings that scared her the most.

Mikhail reached up under her skirt and ripped her underwear from her. His fingers parted her flesh and she shivered in pleasure. Her hands sought him out and freed him. She couldn't help herself. Though he terrified her...she had never been more turned on in her entire life than she was right now.

Mikhail impaled her with one long thrust. His mouth never strayed from her neck while he fucked her against her living room wall. Azure came almost instantly and again even though

she felt herself slipping. She sighed appreciatively when Mikhail released inside of her and her last thoughts were that there was no better way to go.

* * * *

Lily came awake, still seated at her desk. She sensed that the sun was down and flung herself out of her chair with a feeling of dread in her heart. She had to get to Vallon.

When she reached Vallon's, she knocked hurriedly and then tried the door when she got no answer. She was surprised to find the door unlocked. She went inside hoping that Vallon was in there still.

"Vallon, are you here?" she called.

No one answered. She ran into the bedroom but he was not there. She searched the whole apartment but Vallon was not there.

Lily rushed back into the living room and heard something she had failed to notice when she first came in. She could hear a dial tone. She looked around and found the phone lying on the floor. Vallon must have received a phone call and he had rushed out. It must have been urgent because he hadn't hung up or locked the door.

Lily picked up the phone and hung it up. She dialed *69 and wrote the number down quickly. Vallon had to have something in here that he would keep phone numbers in. But first she would call the number. She dialed it and let it ring for a minute but no one answered. She tried Vallon's cell phone but heard it ringing in the bedroom. He hadn't taken it with him.

Panicking now, Lily started rummaging through drawers and cabinets looking for an address book. Lily finally found it in a drawer in the kitchen. She scanned the pages as fast as she could and found the number. The number was Azure Beaumont's home telephone number. And there was an address underneath! She left the apartment and rushed to the place, moving through crowds of humans like a ghost.

This door was unlocked as well. Lily went inside without knocking and found the body of Azure Beaumont on the living room floor, her head propped up against a wall, eyes glassy and staring.

Lily searched the rest of the house but there was no one else

there. Where had he gone from here? Had he been alone?

No, he had not been alone. She could sense his presence lingering here along with a vampire's presence. *Angelo*. Where could Angelo have taken Vallon? She doubted that even Azure would have known where to find Angelo so there was no point in trying to search the house for some clue.

Lily walked past Azure's corpse and felt a chill sweep over her. There was something else. *Someone* else that had been here. She shook the feeling off and left the house quickly. She tried to follow the trail Angelo and Vallon had left in their wake. It was wearing thin and she would lose them. Lily felt another presence approaching but it was neither Angelo nor Vallon.

"They have left here?" Luca asked her.

Lily nodded, saying nothing. She felt lost and weak. He would be lost to her again unless Luca could help her.

"I came as soon as I could. I followed you here," he said.

"Do you have any idea where they are, Luca?" she asked him.

"No, I'm afraid not," he lied. He had failed to teach Angelo the ways of vampires, so he would make it up to Lily by teaching her what he had never taught Angelo. He continued with, "But you can find him this time, Lily. I'm aware of your strange connection and this time you know who is responsible. You have all the answers and your mind will not be clouded by your confusion."

Lily struggled to calm herself and open her mind. It was difficult as she was on the verge of panicking. But then, to her amazement, she felt him. She took off at a run, trailing him desperately. Luca was on her heels.

* * * *

Angelo slapped Vallon awake and untied him. Angelo wouldn't need ropes to bind him; he was just a weak mortal.

"Last time we did this, I gave you a bit of my blood to keep you alive in the coffin I put you to rest in. Unfortunately for you, I have no such intention this time around. With three angry vampires on my tail, I'm afraid I just can't risk it," Angelo stated, as if he weren't talking about Vallon's imminent death but merely something as ordinary and mundane as what he had for dinner.

Angelo gripped him by the shoulders and kissed his neck.

"It's such a shame I hate you because you really are such a fine specimen," Angelo said with a mild laugh.

Vallon clenched his teeth as Angelo bit into his neck. The pain ebbed away and pleasure took over. He felt his mind drifting and his thoughts were languid.

"Now, Vallon... Vincent... whatever... take this as a hint and stay dead," Angelo laughed and carried Vallon's limp form over to the wooden coffin Angelo had made especially for him.

Angelo felt grim satisfaction as he felt his nemesis slowly dying in his arms. Angelo let go and Vallon fell into the coffin with a loud *thud*. Soon enough he would be dead. The wall Vallon would be holed up in was already partially erected. Angelo lifted the coffin, now pleasantly occupied, and dumped it rudely behind the wall.

"I would have buried you like last time, just for the fond memories, but I can't bury you here in New Orleans or you would make yet another unwelcome reappearance."

Working quickly, Angelo had the rest of the wall in place within a few minutes.

"*Bonne nuit*, Vallon."

Whistling a happy tune, Angelo left the attic feeling lighter than air. He exited the house and began a leisurely stroll down the banquette.

Angelo's heart leapt in surprise when Luca and Lily were suddenly before him, anger burning in their eyes. Lily flung herself at him, crushing his nose beneath her fist. Angelo stumbled backwards from the unexpected assault.

"Where is he, you bastard?" Lily screamed at him.

Three teenage mortals ran over to the bunch excited by the prospect of a fight. Luca raised his hand to stop them and told them in a calm voice, "Leave this place and forget that you have even seen us."

The trio's gazes drew blank and they turned and ran off into the night. They would not remember how they had gotten to their homes that night.

"Why is it that this mortal man has you in thrall? He cannot give you what I can. He is weak and he will die," Angelo spat at her. He lunged at her and grabbed her by the throat and threw her. Lily's back connected with a thick tree trunk and she slid

down it, dazed.

Luca threw himself at Angelo and ripped open his throat. Angelo choked on his own blood and dropped to his knees.

Luca lunged for Angelo again but Angelo was gone from them in an instant. Luca moved to follow but stopped when he heard pained moaning coming from the base of the big tree Lily had hit.

"He is very close, Luca. I think we came upon Angelo right after he had left Vallon. I can feel him. He is dying. Hurry," she told him and leapt to her feet. Five houses down his presence was stronger.

"In here," Lily yelled back at Luca.

They ripped the front door from its hinges and raced into the house. It was a hellhole. The house's beautiful façade was just that, a façade. Inside there was broken furniture littering the once beautiful home. There must have been an inch of dust covering everything in sight...except the stairs.

Both rushed up the stairs finding the upper level to be in the same condition as the first. Luca spotted something on the ceiling. It was a small hatch. He grabbed the handle and pulled it down and the ladder dropped a quarter of the way. Lily yanked it all the way down and ascended into the attic.

Up in the attic it was spotless. Antique furniture was polished to a high gleam. Rich fabrics adorned the bed and expensive Persian carpets graced the floor. This was without a doubt the realm of Angelo Milonne. One of the walls was bare of decoration of any sort and it looked out of place.

Lily *knew* what lay beyond that wall. She could hear his ragged breathing and his slowing heartbeat. Luca and Lily beat the wall halfway down, it crumbled easily beneath their hammering fists.

Lily jumped back behind the wall while Luca kept pulling the bricks down from the outside. She jerked open the coffin and there he lay with a deathly pallor drawing his last breath. His glassy eyes were staring up at her without seeing.

She picked him up in her arms and his head hung back. He was already so close to death. *Too* close. She tore open her wrist, bringing the blood to his lips, praying she wasn't too late. Lily sobbed in relief as his mouth opened and he bit into the torn

flesh of her bleeding wrist. She sucked in her breath on a hiss and eagerly reveled in the pain.

Soon it was done and Vallon would be with her again.

Lily held Vallon to her chest, her blood on his lips. She felt his muscles jerking as her blood changed him. He opened his mouth on a silent scream and she could see his fangs lengthening.

Vallon was hardly aware of his surroundings. For the moment, the only thing on his mind was the pain in his body and his heart beating wildly in his chest. Then, he began to calm and his heart slowed gradually. His eyesight came suddenly into sharp focus. Every minute detail in the darkened attic became clear.

Vallon became aware of a soft body next to his and a heartbeat close to his head. He looked up and found himself staring into Lily's golden eyes. Those eyes of hers were filled with so many shades of gold now. He hadn't noticed before.

"What happened?" he asked her. He could feel something like relief ebbing around him. Was it his own? Or was he feeling someone else's feelings?

"Angelo almost killed you. I am so sorry, Vallon. I wanted it to be your choice but I could not let you die. Not again," she replied in a sorrowful voice.

"Then...I'm a vampire?" Vallon asked, his hands patting down his body as if expecting to feel a difference.

Lily nodded, gazing into his eyes hoping to see that he would not resent her for what she had chosen to do.

"Angelo is gone and I don't think he will return here anytime soon. But you both must know that he will be *very* pissed off that Vallon is not dead," Luca spoke from above them.

Vallon rose to his feet, amazed at how different he felt. He was so much stronger, physically as well as mentally. Sensing Lily's inner turmoil he turned toward her and smiled encouragingly, holding out his hand to help her to her feet.

"Would I be too forward if I told you how much you need to know?" Luca asked.

"About what?" Vallon asked in return.

"You need to know the powers that we possess. Even Angelo, as old as he is, is in the dark about some things. And I've

always had the sneaking suspicion that I am also unaware of certain things," Luca answered.

"Humans use only so much of their brains, and I think that it is quite obvious with our mental powers that we control the entire brain. We can read minds, compel others to our will, we can move things with our minds, we have incredible speed and strength, we can sense presences and auras and all of our senses are highly developed. We can hide our presence and auras from others and *that* Angelo does not know. I never told him that little gem," Luca said with a smile.

"I had always thought that vampires were the 'undead', without a heartbeat or a pulse," Vallon told them.

"We are not dead. We are immortal. Our bodies have evolved, in a sense, into something...superhuman but we are not dead. We are all saved from death when we are turned, we never actually died. We are very much alive and I have no idea how we are this way or how it began," Luca explained.

"How can I learn to do all these things you just described?" asked Vallon, curiosity burned inside him, he had so many questions.

"It's just a matter of will and thought," Lily told him and continued with, "Look at me and read my mind. Just let your mind open."

Vallon did as she told him and her thoughts were suddenly there in his mind. She was afraid of Vallon's feelings toward her now that she had changed him. But she was greatly relieved that he was alive.

"I have no bad feelings toward you, Lily. I wanted a life with someone I loved and I will have it. Have no regrets, Lily. I don't," Vallon told her.

"It is surprisingly easy if you know what you are capable of. Now, I suggest we leave this place even if Angelo never returns here. I have to catch up with Aurelia, she is watching over Jaidyn and Skye. She is afraid Angelo will shift his attention to them now that Vallon is out of his reach," Luca said to the both of them.

"One more thing, Vallon, you can still die if you are exposed to the sunlight. You can die as well if your heart is destroyed, your head is removed or you are burned to ashes. We

can survive a fire and sunlight if we get out of it quickly enough," Luca said and was gone, leaving the pair of them alone.

"You will be feeling the hunger very soon, Vallon. I will take you out and we will find someone to feed you. I suggest you stay with me as you need a place of darkness to sleep," Lily told him. She felt much happier now. She should not have any regrets because he had none. And now...he would *always* be with her.

"Someone to feed me?" Vallon asked uncertainly. He could picture himself in his mind chewing on some mysterious stranger's neck. His stomach lurched hungrily.

Unbelievable, he thought. Getting hungry while envisioning munching on a human? *Just un-fucking-believable*.

"Yes, someone to feed you, Vallon. There is no need to take an innocent human life. You can drink from them without killing them, Vallon. And then, you erase the memory of it from their minds. I believe most of us prefer to feed from the 'dregs of humanity', the evil humans who harm others. I feel no guilt feeding from them until they are drained," Lily told him and Vallon's eyes widened. She merely smiled in response.

They walked out and away from the house together, down Ursulines Avenue, never looking back. Vallon looked all around him in growing awe. He had never seen his city so clearly before. It was paradise to the senses! The sights: the neon signs of Bourbon Street, bustling crowds, that famous New Orleans architecture. The sounds: jazz and blues streaming from the clubs, laughter, the sizzling of hot meals which brings us to the smells. The aroma of Cajun cooking rising in a pleasurable combination with numerous breeds of flowers and booze.

"I can drink from them without killing?" Vallon asked her later, after he had fully enjoyed their walk through the streets of the *Vieux Carre*.

"Drink just enough to sustain you. It will not hurt them; they actually enjoy the pleasure it brings, as will you. It is important that you remember to pull away; you will know when you have taken enough. Then, you *must* remove the experience from their minds. Tell them that they are dreaming or that they must forget what has just happened to them," Lily told him as they walked.

"I can still eat normal food, right?" he asked and she

laughed at his tone. He really was worried he would never taste the cuisine of New Orleans again.

"Of course you can. But we don't need it to survive anymore. Anything we eat or drink is absorbed directly into our bloodstream," she explained.

Vallon's head swam with all the information and all that had happened. Not long ago, he had been dying, and now...he was a vampire. He would have to sleep during the daylight hours and drink blood. Would he still be able to run his tattoo parlor? How much of his life would have to change?

Vallon thought sadly about Azure. She was dead now, too, because Angelo had wanted him dead. Angelo must have hypnotized her somehow.

"How did Angelo get Azure to attack me? She was my friend. She would not have done that to me," Vallon said to Lily after a long silence.

"Ever heard of Renfield? I'm sure you have, Vallon. Angelo must have given her his blood. We have the power to warp someone completely to our will. Their minds sometimes stay intact but they have no choice but to do as we say. I suspect he drank from her and fed her with a little of his blood often enough to make her his 'slave' if you will," Lily explained in a disgusted tone.

"Angelo killed her. I guess he didn't need her anymore so he just...killed her," Vallon told her but Lily shook her head.

"I don't know, Vallon. He *could* have done it but...there had been someone else there. I felt their presence. It was much stronger than yours and Angelo's. Which must mean he or she...or *it*, was there after you had left. She may have been dead when they got there but...what were they doing there in the first place? Whoever it was, they were not human," Lily told him.

Vallon's mind felt weighed down with questions. If vampires existed, what else could be found? What had been at Azure's house...and why?

"Every legend has a basis of fact," Lily told him, having heard what he was thinking.

"So you know what else is out there?" Vallon asked.

"I'm afraid not. I've never seen anything but other vampires. But before I became one, I thought vampires were only a myth.

But we are real! So...who knows what else is out there," Lily explained.

"I don't have to sleep in a coffin, do I?" Vallon asked her, an expression of dread on his face. Lily laughed and grabbed his hand in hers.

"No, you won't have to sleep in a coffin."

Vallon's questions ceased as he sensed two people were close by. Lily felt it too and stopped where she stood. There was a sound of struggle and a girl crying down an alley.

Vallon moved swiftly and silently into the dark alleyway. A man was pressing a young woman against the wall. Vallon stood silently behind him and the girl's eyes widened further in fear. Vallon grabbed the man by the neck and pulled him off of the girl, who then ran crying from them.

"What the fuck is your problem, man?" the man asked angrily.

Vallon leaned into him and ripped his neck open clumsily, spilling the warm blood all over him and the panicked, struggling man. The blood poured into his mouth and Vallon was overwhelmed with images of all the unfortunate women this man had preyed upon.

Vallon was satisfied as he felt the man die in his arms, never to hurt another woman again. Lily stood back and watched as Vallon flung the body to the ground.

"You will learn, Vallon. You must bite into the skin and not tear at it. And now, we hide the evidence. We could dump him or use our blood to seal the wound. That wound is too severe to close on its own. Like our blood, our saliva will heal the wounds but not wounds like that.

"Once you are used to living this way, you will learn that it is great to have connections. I have someone at the dump that will let me hide bodies there, after I close the wound of course. He gets paid well for his services," Lily told him.

Vallon's eyes widened in shock once more at the information she gave him. It all seemed so shady.

"We are not evil, Vallon. We are not monsters. We do what we have to for survival, just like anyone else. Evil is when you kill mercilessly and without any reason but pleasure. Angelo is an evil man, Vallon," Lily told him, seeing the look on his face.

She then bit into her wrist again and held it close to the man's neck. His wound closed as her blood fell onto it and Lily's wounds started closing before their eyes.

A few hours later, after stopping by Vallon's apartment for some clothing, his phone and a few other necessities, they were both seated in Lily's library. Lily had shown him the old trunk of Vincent's things. There were articles of old clothing, music sheets, a few love letters and the violin case. Lily had been unsure of opening the case but then, Vallon *was* Vincent.

For the first time in over eighty years, the case was opened and placed into the hands of its owner. Vallon played the music written on the old music sheets and Lily was able to hear the music without feeling the old, familiar pain.

Vallon carefully laid the violin back into the case. There were tears of joy in Lily's eyes. He had played for her the song that he had composed for her so long ago. It made him smile to look at her lovely face smiling at him in a way that told him just how precious he was to her.

"How, without help from other vampires, did you learn what to do? How to survive and about your powers?" Vallon asked her after a minute of silence.

"That's easy. I had to, there was no other choice. It was learn or die. I was fearful for my life having heard the folk tales of vampires. I was afraid of crosses and garlic. And then...both were used on me and I realized they were useless. Some poor old woman seemed to realize that I wasn't human and so she tried to ward me off with her crucifix and a bundle of garlic.

"Rest easy, Vallon, I didn't kill the old woman. I made her sleep and made her forget she had ever seen me," she explained when she noticed him grimace at the mention of the defenseless old lady, then she continued, "But the most difficult realization was the ability to disguise my presence. In my travels I had never encountered another like me. At times I thought that I sensed them but now I wonder if it had been Angelo all along. Anyway, I thought to myself how strange it was that I had been to so many places and never once met another vampire.

"So, I came to the logical conclusion that somehow they were hiding themselves from me. After that, it was just a matter of will and I was able to do it," Lily told him.

"Why do we hide from one another?" Vallon asked in response, feeling insatiable curiosity about the supernatural being he had become.

"For a number of reasons that I can find. We are wary of one another; we don't want others to know where we sleep during the day. Another, we are curious of each other and want to observe without being noticed. To protect ourselves from 'sensitives' is another excellent reason to mask our presence," Lily answered, counting them off on her fingers.

"Sensitives? You mean psychics?" Vallon asked. She left her desk chair and came to sit beside him on the sofa. He stretched his long legs out and laid his head in her lap, she spoke while toying with his hair.

"Yes. How can we be sure of how a psychic would react to us? Would they try to kill us if they knew? Probably. It's the same fear of the unknown we have to contend with. They may be frightened by us and try to find us and kill us in our sleep," Lily said, shaking her head sadly.

Vallon wondered what Lily had been like as a human, what her life had been like in an older New Orleans. So he asked her, "Will you tell me of a childhood memory? Tell me something that happened when New Orleans was still fairly new."

"When I was a little girl, my father used to read to my sister and I of distant lands and tell us stories of his own travels and adventures. He would even often play these games with us. Elizabeth was always the damsel in distress. I was the knight, the pirate, the adventurer. Father, of course, played a great villain. We would sail the vast seas and fight sea monsters and other ruffians. It was then that I was happiest, those days when he was still there to inspire my imagination. I got my wanderlust from my father," she told him, smiling fondly at the memories.

"What happened to your father?" Vallon asked her curiously, taking note of the sadness in her voice.

"It was March of 1788 and I was ten years old. My older sister Elizabeth was twelve. My mother was sitting doing her embroidery and Father was reading us stories from the Bible. We became aware of frantic shouts in the streets, screams of '*Fire*' rent the night. It was the fire that destroyed the old city of Nouvelle Orleans. Most of the buildings of that time were

constructed of wood, so everything was victim to the blaze.

"My father rushed us girls and my mother outside the house. The fire was spreading quickly, wreaking havoc all over the town. People were running wildly in the streets looking for loved ones and running for water. But it was too late; there could be no help for it. My father rushed back into the house, he wanted to save some of our valuables and the family heirlooms.

"By then, the fire had already reached our house but he wouldn't stop going in for more. The roof collapsed and my father was trapped inside. I tried to run to him but Mother held me securely back while my sister cried into Mother's skirts. We screamed and cried for someone to please save him but no one did. The house burnt to the ground and my father was dead," Lily finished the sad story. Vallon was silent as the horror of the story sank in. What she had lived through...

"I'm sorry," Vallon said softly.

"It was a very long time ago, Vallon. The pain is not as sharp anymore," Lily told him and he could hear her thinking of how she had almost forgotten the sound of his voice.

They remained silent for a while, Lily still running her fingers through his hair.

"Couldn't Angelo still find us here? We aren't really safe from him here," Vallon said.

"It's true, Angelo knows where I live, has even come into my house. But you are not mortal anymore and his vulnerable hours are the same as yours. He can't disguise his presence from you; you will know when he comes. You are no longer at a disadvantage," Lily explained to him.

"Is it true that vampires have to be invited into a house?" Vallon asked her. Had she invited Angelo into her home?

"Yes, it is. I do not know why though. But it is not the same between vampires. I went into Angelo's house without being invited as he came into mine and I suspect I was able to enter Azure's house because she was dead. It no longer belongs to anyone," Lily told him.

"You stayed here knowing he could come in at any time?" Vallon asked.

"This is my home. I will not be scared from it. Angelo held no threat to me until I found out who you were. If he had come

here to kill me, I might have let him. Death did not scare me then. I had nothing to live for. That's changed now. Besides, I'll know when he comes," she explained softly. Vallon sat up on the sofa. His face looked strained, his jaw tight, eyes lowered.

"Because I was Vincent you had a reason to live?" he asked, his voice was very soft and deceptively calm. He raised his eyes to meet hers. Lily's eyes widened as she took in the anger in his face. He was *angry* with her!

"Yes, you were him, Vallon. And I loved him. Understand that you are my soul mate, Vallon. We are meant to be one. No matter who you are...you are mine and I will always love you. I love you because you were Vincent and because I found you again after I had lost you. But I know that you are different this time around. I am no fool. And even though you are not the same...I love you still...perhaps even more than I loved him. I was given a second chance, Vallon. I cannot forget who you once were but that doesn't mean that *he* is the only reason I need you," she told him. She was blown away that he was actually jealous...of *himself*! He looked at her suspiciously but he could see that she was not deceiving him and he shook his head and even managed a soft laugh. At his own expense. Lily rose gracefully from her seat and stood before him. He looked up at her, took her hand when she offered it and stood to his feet.

"You know, Vallon...all of our senses are so many times stronger than a mortal's. Wait until you experience sex. Come upstairs with me," she purred and led him through the house and upstairs.

The house was beautiful. Antiques were scattered throughout the entire house. Dark wood was found in the stairs, in wainscoting, furniture. Granite and stone was liberal in the house as well. Here and there were some modern pieces and somehow it didn't throw off the elegance of the rooms.

Art decorated every room. Caravaggio to Van Gogh. Renaissance to modern. Paintings and sculpture. Ming dynasty vases and abstract metal masterpieces. It was an eccentric blend of works. Like a museum for the history of art.

The bedroom was a place for romance. Rich reds draped from the bedposts and hung from the windows, which were completely filled in and made little niches in the wall where she

had placed white candles of all sizes. There was a fireplace in one corner of the room with large wing back chairs around it. The walls were a dark golden color and from the ceiling hung a chandelier of brass.

Lily led Vallon to the bed and pushed him down onto it. Vallon ripped his shirt off over his head and flung it on the floor. Lily leaned over him and trailed her tongue down his chest to the waistband of his jeans. She quickly unbuttoned them and drew the zipper down oh-so-slowly. She pulled them off while Vallon kicked off his boots. He lay naked on the bed and she was still fully dressed.

Vallon sat up and reached for her but she stepped back and slowly shook her head. She set her hands on his knees and slid them all the way up. Lily jerked his legs slightly apart and knelt between them. She gently bit his inner thigh and Vallon was surprised at how every touch was like fire. She sent chills all over his body. He could feel her warm breath on his skin and her gaze was like a caress. Vallon's muscles contracted as she sucked him into her mouth. The room was a mass of bright color and it seemed as if a swirling aura surrounded them.

Lily teased him with her lips, tongue and even her teeth. She looked up into his eyes and they had turned so dark they appeared black. Lily released him and smiled, loving what she could do to him. But it wasn't over yet. She gripped the bedpost and slowly swung herself back and forth; undulating to a tune only they could hear.

Lily gripped her black silk shirt and ripped it from her body. She trailed the tattered silk over him and he shuddered. She let the material fall and it pooled in his lap. She laughed as his hungry eyes devoured her. Lily gripped the bedpost in both hands and stepped up onto the footboard. She hooked one leg and then the other around the post and twirled around it. Stepping away from the bed she unhurriedly unfastened her jeans and slid them down. Lily stepped from the denim and stood only in her underwear of jade silk.

She slid one strap of her bra down and sashayed closer to him, still prone on the bed. Lily slid her hand under the remaining strap and slid it down as well. Her movements were languid and her caresses sensual, touching herself as she knew

he wanted to touch her. Lily then unhooked her bra and let it drop. She came to stand at the edge of the bed and Vallon leaned forward to kiss her stomach. Lily felt a thrill when Vallon grabbed her silk panties and took them off. He lifted one of her legs onto the bed and slipped his tongue into her sensitive flesh. Lily let her head fall back as he laved her, enjoying the sensual glide of his tongue.

Vallon leaned back on his elbows and waited for her to join him on the bed but she remained where she was, one leg on the bed and completely open to his lustful gaze. He watched as a wicked smile spread across her face and he almost groaned aloud. He watched with bated breath as she casually lifted one arm and let her fingers trail lightly over her nipple. He moaned as she bit her bottom lip and growled in her throat.

Lily cupped her breast in her hand and brought the other hand to her other breast. She massaged them and lightly scraped her nails over her nipples. She let one hand trail down her stomach and her fingers parted her wet flesh and traced teasing circles around and over the clitoris. She moaned raggedly and pinched one nipple.

Vallon pulled her down onto the bed with him. Lily straddled his hips and Vallon pushed into her. She rode him slowly at first, teasingly, but then quickened her pace when she felt herself drawing nearer to her release. Vallon felt this and got his revenge. He gripped her hips tightly in his hands and slowed the pace *way* down. He watched with a triumphant grin as she struggled to make him move faster.

Lily was almost sobbing with need for release when Vallon let his hips surge upward and rolled against her. Vallon rolled her under him as she screamed his name and rolled his hips against her until she was convulsing again. Only then did he follow her and let himself find his own release.

They slept facing each other, wrapped around each other. And Vallon dreamed of another life. He was feeling very happy in this dream. He was going to marry the woman he loved, Lily Fontaine.

* * * *

On the outskirts of London, November, 1912

"I am so happy for the both of you," said Sabrina, Countess of Haversham.

"Thank you, Sabrina, especially for donating some of your beautiful roses for the occasion. Lily will be very pleased," Vincent replied with a grin.

He left the little church and walked to his carriage. He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and smiled down at it. Fool that he was he had already signed his name on the marriage license he had acquired. He knew now that they were supposed to wait to do that after they were married. Luckily, the priest had only smiled fondly and said he would overlook the error.

He was about to place the item back into his pocket when his head was struck from behind and he went down. He was slapped awake, he knew not how long later. Vincent found himself in familiar surroundings. It was Sabrina's maze. *What the hell?*

"So it is you that she loves. Why on *earth* would she love someone like you? Look at yourself. You are weak and fragile, whereas she is not. She was *actually* going to marry you? Do you have any idea what you have almost done?" asked a strange man that was standing over him. He was holding the marriage license, looking at it as if it were a particularly slimy insect.

"Who are you? What are you talking about?" Vincent demanded.

"Don't take a tone with me, mortal. You have no idea what I could do to you. My name is Angelo and I am speaking of Lily marrying you. She is immortal, a vampire. She never told you, did she? Of *course* not because you would have hated her for it, you would have feared her had she told you the truth. I love her, damn you, and you took her from me! I could give her everything she so desired!" Angelo raged at him, pacing in the eye of the maze like a caged lion and every bit as ferocious.

Vincent thought the man was obviously deranged. He was spouting utter nonsense!

"Think I'm mad, do you? Well, perhaps I am a bit mad. But then aren't we all? Ooh, now you wonder how on *earth* I could have known what you were thinking. I told you Lily was a vampire. Well, I made her. I did! We are the same, Lily and I. You will not get in the way, mortal. That night I fucked her. Yes,

that's right. I fucked your beloved," Angelo paused and laughed delightedly, "...against a tree! And then, I made her what she is. She belongs to me and me alone," Angelo relished the pain in Vincent's eyes as he spat his harsh words.

"Go to hell," Vincent muttered, loathing coursing in his veins, his eyes shining brightly with unshed tears of pain. He even felt the bite of jealousy. This man had taken the virginity of his Lily.

"Look around you, this is hell, *mon ami*! Savor it while you can," Angelo laughingly told him, gesturing to a wooden coffin that was lying next to a large hole in the ground.

"Yes, that is where you will lay forever more. This was where I *knew* that she had fallen head over heels in love with you as I had fallen for her so long ago. This will be the place of your grave. Scenic, isn't it? Not much of a view but it's...nice," Angelo said with a grin, his arms crossed over his chest and his eyes alight with mirth.

Angelo was then suddenly crouching in front of him.

"As much as I'd love to stay and chat, I really must go. But maybe a kiss goodbye?" Angelo laughed in his face. Vincent choked as Angelo's hand shot out and gripped his neck. All humor was gone from his face now. His face was contorted with hatred.

Angelo rose to his feet pulling Vincent up with him. Angelo brought Vincent up against him and bit his neck; he pulled back when he felt Vincent grow lethargic.

Angelo cut open his thumb on a sharp fang and put the bleeding thumb into Vincent's mouth. Satisfied that his blood would be enough to prolong Vincent's life just long enough to make him really suffer, Angelo dropped Vincent into the coffin. He put the lid into place and drove in the nails. He could feel that Vincent was stirring inside, becoming more alert. He placed his boot on top of the coffin.

"My goodness, is that a spot?" Angelo asked the still night air looking at a scuff on his boot. He took out a handkerchief and rubbed the spot away. Satisfied, he shoved the coffin with his now spotless booted foot into the grave. Quickly he filled the hole with dirt hearing muffled yelling coming from the coffin.

"Sweet dreams," Angelo whispered.

FROM THE SHADOWS

The hole filled, Angelo replanted the rosebushes he had uprooted from the spot to cover the grave, whistling an uplifting tune. Satisfied that the center of the maze looked as it had before, Angelo left Vincent to die tucking the hated piece of paper into his pocket.

Vincent lost track of time. It had been three weeks but to Vincent it seemed that years had gone by. The hunger pains he felt were beginning to disturb his mind as were the images of Angelo mocking him while he and Lily made love on top of his grave.

He always thought on Lily. She was alone in the world. He could not die and leave her. Vincent's throat was parched and unbearably sore from shouting and screaming when he had felt his fingernails rip from his flesh from clawing at the wood in desperation.

One week later, Vincent was dead.

* * * *

New Orleans, June, 2000

Vallon sat upright in Lily's bed, his breathing erratic. He looked around the room and recognized his surroundings. Lily turned toward him in her sleep. Vallon could sense that the sun was out. Strange how quickly his life had changed. Nothing was the same now. He shook his head to clear his disturbed thoughts, knowing that the dream had actually happened, and lay back down beside Lily.

* * * *

The next night, Vallon went back to his apartment with Lily. He had to talk with Marlana and Loki. He would not be able to work during the daylight hours anymore. Lily sat on his couch waiting for his friends to arrive. She looked like a queen draped in a seductive dark purple velvet dress sitting upon her black leather throne.

Vallon answered the door minutes later when he heard the voices of his friends approaching.

"Vallon, how are you tonight?" asked Marlana, looking very lovely with her newly dyed purple hair.

"I'm sorry to hear about your mom, Vallon," said Loki, who came in after Marlana.

"Thanks, Loki. I'm doing alright as long as I remember that she is with my dad again. But I've got some more bad news. Azure died. Remember that Katie Bermann that died a little while back? She died in the same way," Vallon told them.

Vallon noticed Lily squirm when he mentioned Katie and he wondered why.

"Oh my God, that's terrible! Poor Azure," Marlena remarked sadly.

"I won't be able to work during the daytime anymore. Could you guys handle that? If you need more help we can start hiring," Vallon asked.

"I think we should hire some help. Maybe two or three people. We could use another piercer and two more people for tattoos," Loki suggested.

"Agreed. Put up a sign for help needed. Make sure they have experience and look at some of their work. I trust you to be a good judge, but if you need help let me know," Vallon replied.

"I have a friend that could come in as a piercer. He did my eyebrow for me. He's never worked in a parlor before, but I taught him all I know," Marlena offered hopefully. Vallon looked to Loki silently asking if the guy was alright and Loki nodded.

"Alright then, ask him if he's interested to join us. And hire me one or two new tattoo artists. These guys *will* need the experience," Vallon agreed.

"By the way, this is my lovely girlfriend, Lily. Lily, these are my good friends Loki and his wife, Marlena," Vallon added belatedly.

They all exchanged greetings and talked for a while about Azure, remembering the good times. Vallon went to get the door when they heard a knock. It was Adam and Cameron.

"Vallon, Azure is dead, did you know?" asked Adam, who had immediately marched through the front door and whirled on Vallon with the tragic news. Cameron came in calmly and nodded his regards to Vallon and the guests.

"Yes, I know. And you are here to ask what will happen to the band. I honestly don't know what we will do now," Vallon told him.

"We were getting real hot, man! And now Azure is gone!

FROM THE SHADOWS

Our dreams are falling apart," Adam stated morosely.

"Are you forgetting that Azure is dead, Adam? Dead, as in no coming back. All you can think about is the band," Cameron said to him, his tone disapproving.

"I know...but we were getting so much attention from the bars and clubs around here. Not to mention the fans! Actual fans screaming our names!" Adam exclaimed, his face alight, trying to convey the importance of the monumental decision that had to be made.

"Maybe you two should start looking for a bass player and vocalist," Vallon suggested with a slight shrug of his shoulders. Lily could see that he was feigning nonchalance and she knew that the end of his band would hurt him.

"No way are we going to replace you, Vallon. We were gaining all those fans and gigs because of you! There will be no band without you in it! It's all over," Adam moaned piteously, he dropped his face into his hands and let his shoulders sag.

"Why would you quit the band, Vallon? Music is what you love! Musicians like you are rare. Are you sure this is what you want to do?" Lily asked him. Adam looked as if he could kiss her.

"I don't know. Too much has happened in so short a time. I don't know what I'm going to do. Give me some time, guys," he told Adam and Cameron.

"I'll start looking for a girl who can play bass and sing like an angel for the backing vocals first thing tomorrow morning!" Adam shouted excitedly.

"Let us know soon, Vallon. Adam is right. We would not be 'Symphonic Dream' without you," Cameron told him and grabbed him in a friendly hug, which was a very uncharacteristic thing for him to do.

Loki and Marlena left not long after, agreeing that they would start looking for help the next afternoon.

"I could use a drink. What say you, Lily?" Vallon asked Lily.

"Alright, I'll admit I'm feeling parched. What kind of drink are you suggesting?" Lily asked him in turn.

"Both," he answered.

* * * *

Angelo was in a rage. Surely they had found Vallon already. Which, in conclusion, meant that he was by now most likely an immortal. Lily would not have let him die if Vallon were truly willing to become a vampire. But if they had been too late...

Angelo's face lit with hope. There is a chance that he died *before* they found him! But how to know for sure? Even if he had died, they would not have left him in that old attic.

"Wait! How is it that I never knew Lucius was here? He must have been trailing me for quite some time. I can feel a human presence...why not them?" Angelo wondered aloud. He had felt the presence of his "children" when he had made them...and then, never felt them again. Why?

He was restlessly pacing across the cold stone floor of a dark mausoleum. He had broken in here after he had escaped from Lucius and Lily. It was an old family mausoleum, the Hearst's; all the graves were forty or more years old. This would be a safe place for him to stay for the time being. And a tomb was all he deserved after what he had done to Lily. His hate for himself boiled up again.

Angelo suddenly stopped pacing; a smile crept across his face.

"That bastard! He never told me that I could disguise my presence! So many things you never told me, Lucius. How secretive you are," Angelo murmured slyly.

* * * *

Luca sat idly in his hotel room at the 'Inn on Bourbon' waiting for Aurelia. She had called him telling him that she desperately needed his help. Curious, he had been sitting here for hours awaiting her appearance. The door to his room opened and in walked Aurelia, beautiful as ever in a dark green dress made of billowy silk.

"I've been dying to know what you need my help with, love. Do tell," Luca said enthusiastically and laughed when Aurelia rolled her eyes heavenward.

"As you know, all the children are on their summer break. Skye will be going to Florida with his little friend, Jake. I am going to follow him and I need you to keep watch over Jaidyn for me. Please do this for me, Luca," she softly pleaded.

Luca sat up straighter in his chair, smiling widely.

FROM THE SHADOWS

"Of course, *mi amiga*, I will do this for you with great pleasure," Luca reassured her.

"It worries me that she will be left with you but I am going to give my trust to you," Aurelia told him with a smile and added, "But break her heart and I will break you."

* * * *

For a week, all was calm. There had been no sight of Angelo. Aurelia had already said her goodbyes and left for Florida. Just days ago Bethany's funeral had been held. It had been held late in the evening so Vallon and Lily could attend.

Burying his mother had been the hardest thing Vallon had ever had to do. It would always be one of the most painful times of his life. He remained thankful that Lily had been there for him. He had been so lost. If not for her...he would not have been able to handle her death. Lily had been a godsend for him.

Vallon had visited with his mother's lawyer in the evenings as he was the one person Bethany had left everything to: her money, her beautiful house in the Garden District on St. Andrews, her red 2000 Mitsubishi Eclipse and all her other belongings. Vallon and Lily were currently overlooking the work being done in Vallon's apartment. He was having his windows filled in as Lily had suggested.

Vallon noticed two familiar faces down in the courtyard heading his way. He came down the stairs to greet them.

"This is bad business, Mr. Paige. Three people are dead and the only connection we can find is you," spoke Det. McKenna with some regret.

"You think *I* had something to do with this?! You believe that I killed my best friend and my own *mother*?" Vallon asked them angrily.

"Calm yourself, sir, or we will have to take you in right now. We aren't sure what to believe but everyone that died has a tie with you, Mr. Paige. We're going to have to ask you if we can search your apartment and your parlor. If you refuse, we will come back with a warrant," stated Phelps, his beady eyes shining with anticipation.

"Go ahead and search if you must. I had nothing to do with those murders," Vallon gestured for them to search the premises. Phelps nodded and started his search.

"I'm very sorry about this, Vallon, but you must understand that as a detective and the fact that we are dealing with a homicide, we must cover all areas. I, personally, do not believe it was you but I am required to do this," McKenna explained sadly and joined Phelps.

An hour later they were finished. They had questioned Lily for a while after they had found out that she was the friend Vallon had spoken of that had been at the parlor the night Katie Bermann was killed.

"We found nothing, of course, but I thank you for your cooperation. May I ask what is going on upstairs though?" Phelps asked curiously.

"I am having my windows filled in. My eyes are very sensitive and the bright sunlight hurts them," Vallon lied. Phelps snorted as if light sensitivity were a sign of weakness.

"Once again I will ask that you call us if you have anything to tell us," McKenna told them.

"Azure did have a new boyfriend, Detective," Lily said.

"Did she? What can you tell us about this man?" Phelps asked her, a pad of paper and a pen ready in his hands.

"He was very unfriendly at times. He was with her a lot. I think his name might have been something like Angelo or Andrea. It sounded foreign," Lily told them.

"Hmmm...well, there was DNA found on the body. It was apparent the victim had had intercourse before her death. Maybe the boyfriend..." Phelps murmured to McKenna and Vallon and Lily heard every word.

"Do you know where he can be found?" McKenna asked.

"He claimed he had a job up in Metairie. That's all I know," Lily replied and she gave them a physical description when they asked for one.

The detectives thanked her for the information and left. Vallon looked at her quizzically, wondering what she was up to.

"That's strange. Did Angelo and Azure have sex before he killed her?" Lily asked Vallon curiously.

"No, there was no time. When I came to, she was getting ready to take a shower. If they found DNA..." he trailed off, shock stilling his train of thought.

"If they found DNA, Angelo couldn't have been the one to

kill her. There was that other presence I felt," Lily continued for him.

"He could have gone back later, Lily. He could have gone back to finish her off," Vallon said and Lily shrugged. It was obvious she wasn't convinced even though Vallon was.

"Why did you tell them about Angelo? Do you think they could actually arrest him?" he asked her.

"I had to get the heat off of you, Vallon. Looking for him should keep them busy even though they won't find him. Besides, it was mostly the truth," Lily explained.

"Well, he did kill them all, the bastard," Vallon spat angrily. Lily squirmed uncomfortably again and Vallon noticed it.

"What's the matter?" he asked her, trying to read her body language.

"I killed Katie Bermann, not Angelo. I followed her out of your shop that night and caught up with her in the alley. Angelo made his first appearance that night and I was so distracted that I forgot to dispose...", she looked at him uncertainly, biting her lip nervously and continued, "...of her properly. And before you condemn me for such, she murdered her *own mother*."

"I could never condemn you, Lily," he told her.

Vallon pulled her into his arms and kissed her lightly. Lily smiled with relief. The week had been easy, she thought. But things were far from over as long as there was still Angelo to contend with.

But for now, there was peace. Angelo had failed his attempt to kill Vallon and Lily was unsure if he would really be a threat to her niece. But, she thought, it would be better to be safe than sorry.

"She'll be alright, Lily. Luca and Aurelia will make sure of it and if it makes you feel better, we'll be around too," Vallon told her. She smiled up at him and nodded.

"Oh, yes, we will be."

* * * *

Later, upon returning to Lily's house, Lily found a single Calla Lily with a note attached on her doorstep. While Vallon helped the cabbie with a few boxes of his things, Lily took the flower inside and opened the vellum note.

In elegant script were the words: 'Be free, *ma fleur*.'

Part Two

"Falling down
To that dark abyss
Spun 'round
By your poison kiss
And there shall I rest
Sliding under
Mind possessed
In twilight's slumber"
-Jae Knight

"Your pain cuts through me
Like a knife
Like a scream
That shatters the glass
Of your eyes
That used to shine like stars

Your hate crushes me
Like a thousand blows
Of pummeling fists
Battering down these walls
That I keep inside

Drown yourself in the pool
Of deep red

FROM THE SHADOWS

Reflecting your scarred face
While rivers of tears
Blur your sight
Until you no longer see me

I stand before you
Bereft of pride
Your love is all that saves me"
-Jae Knight

Chapter Seven

October 9, 1991, New Orleans

Jaidyn felt exhausted. Exuberant, but exhausted. She smiled wearily down at the beautiful face of her son, Skyler Gregory Pierce. He was just one day old today. *Eighteen hours of the pain of labor was entirely worth it*, she thought. He had her nose and thick dark hair. Her heart swelled with pride.

"There's my little angel," said Alexander Gregory Pierce. Her father looked proudly at the pair of them in the hospital bed, love shimmering in his light green eyes. He was a tall and handsome man with black hair graying at the temples, the corner of his eyes and mouth creased with lines of laughter. Her father had raised her as her mother, Renee, had died in childbirth. Renee's body couldn't handle the pains of labor and she had died soon after weakly peering at her daughter's face.

"Hi, Dad. Skye is sleeping. Isn't he beautiful?" Jaidyn spoke softly. She kissed the baby's brow and laughed when he raised his little eyebrow and pursed his mouth at her in his sleep.

"Beautiful just like you, Jaidyn," he told her with a grin.

Jaidyn was only fifteen years old and she was a mother, a very proud mother. Nine months ago she had lost her virginity to her ex-boyfriend, Phillip Montclair. He had said all the right things and confessed undying love for her. She had fallen head over heels for him. Phil was the most popular boy in school and he had asked *her* out. Jaidyn had swooned over his silky black hair and light blue eyes. Of course, Phil had been angry when she told him she was pregnant.

She now realized what a fool she had been. No longer would she be so naïve. She had all the love she needed right here in this room.

Jaidyn had cried for days when he had broken up with her.

He had demanded she get an abortion and she had flat out refused. Damn him for even thinking she would do such a thing. His mother had come by to see her when she had heard of the pregnancy. Jaid had thought that the woman wanted to be a part of her grandchild's life. She remembered with mixed mortification and humor what had transpired.

Mrs. Montclair had sat perched on the edge of their couch as if it were dirty. Her nose was wrinkled in distaste as she took in the size of the house.

"I want you to know that neither I nor my husband will pay a single cent for this child that you claim belongs to my son. Never come near my son again, young lady. I will not have him cavorting with such a *wild* girl like you," she had sneered rudely.

About that time her father came in from the kitchen where he had been preparing dinner. The scowl on his face told Jaid that he had heard every word.

"Well, I was going to ask you to join us for supper, Mrs. Montclair. But if you want to sit your high standard, snobbish ass on *my* couch in *my* house and insult *my* baby girl, we have ourselves a little problem. My daughter is a fine girl. It's *your* son that you need to worry about, *Grandma Montclair*. If you don't..." he paused and whistled, "...you'll be having lots of unaccounted for grandbabies.

"You forget, *ma'am*, that I am a cop. I know guys that can check up on your boy. Seems to me he's had a few problems with vandalism. Not to mention, the forensics lab could do the blood work needed to *prove* that your boy is the father. Now, I don't know about you rich folk...but us lower class bumpkins don't take kindly to strangers coming into our homes and insulting our families. I suggest you get out of my house right now and don't let our door hit your uptight ass on the way out."

"Well...I never...in all my life," she stammered, rising to her feet and clutching her purse tightly to her chest.

"Yeah? Well, you never will with that attitude. I suggest you see a doctor and have that stick removed from your ass," her father had countered. And Mrs. Montclair had stormed out of their house and never came back.

Never again would she fall for the words of a beautiful man if he only wanted her for sex. She had her son to think of now.

"Let me see the little darling," said a voice from the doorway. It was her mother's younger sister, her wonderful Aunt Fiona Monroe. She was wearing her auburn hair long and free today with little bells and ribbons twined in small braids. Her wrists were, as usual, bedecked with lots of silver bangles and she wore a slim fitting scarlet silk dress with a pair of black Doc Martens.

Fiona was unmarried and loving it. Some people thought she was a crazy woman being thirty-two and happy without a husband or children. Her aunt owned an occult shop in the French Quarter and lived alone with three cats and an extremely spoiled black lab.

"Hello, Fiona, you are looking well," said Alexander with a fond smile for his eccentric sister-in-law.

"I am, aren't I?" she asked, playfully swatting at his arm. Jaidyn reluctantly handed Skye to her aunt.

"Oh my, what a doll he is! You are quite a handsome little fellow, my dear Skye. Congratulations, Jaid. He is truly amazing," Fiona gushed.

An hour later she was alone in the room. A nurse had come to take little Skye so she could get some much needed rest. Jaidyn closed her eyes and sank into blissful dreams.

* * * *

Phil had come to see his son only once. It had been Jaid's eighteenth birthday. Alexander was still at work and Jaid had been in the kitchen making herself a birthday cake.

Skye sat in his highchair watching Jaid stir the cake mix. He was clapping his hands and singing, "Happy to Mommy. Happy to Mommy."

Jaid smiled at her son's jumbled version of the birthday song. The doorbell rang and Jaid set the bowl aside to answer the door. She gasped in surprise when she saw Phil on her doorstep.

"What do you want, Phil?" she asked him, hoping he would leave soon.

"Well, you see, Jaid," he stammered while shuffling his feet, "I'm getting married sometime this year. I know that my fiancée won't approve of my coming here but...I need to see him. Please, Jaid, this is my only chance. Just once and I'll never bother you again."

FROM THE SHADOWS

Jaid felt like slamming the door in his face and she likely should have but Skye *was* his son and she couldn't refuse him.

"You can come in for a few minutes. Then, you should leave before your fiancée finds out that you are seeing your *own* child," Jaid answered and he nodded his thanks to her.

Jaidyn led him to the kitchen where Skye still sat perched in his highchair eating Cheerio's. He looked up from his cereal when he heard Jaid return. He looked curiously at the stranger beside her.

"His name is Skyler Gregory and he is three years old now," Jaid told Phil and he nodded mutely, just staring at his son who was staring back.

"Mommy make cake. Happy to Mommy," Skye chirped happily and offered a fistful of Cheerio's to Phil. And Phil accepted, placing the cereal carefully in his shirt pocket as if he had been given a great gift.

Phil didn't stay too long, maybe an hour and a half. He had talked and played with Skye while Jaid had made her cake. Skye had even grabbed Phil's hand and led him into his bedroom to show him all of his toys. He even put his son down in his crib for Skye's afternoon nap, giving him a light kiss on his brow.

"He's really amazing," Phil had remarked as they left the bedroom. His eyes were troubled and Jaid actually felt pity for him.

"Listen...if you can ever come back out to see him...I will welcome you, Phil. I can't say I forgive you, but he *is* your son," Jaid told him.

"Thank you, Jaid. But I don't think he deserves a father like me. I denied him for so long. And then...I'd see fathers with their children and how happy they looked. I've done wrong and I can never take it back. But I'll never forget him," he told her.

Jaid nodded and accepted his hug when he offered it. And then...he left.

* * * *

Early June, 2000

Jaidyn felt desperately alone now that Skye was in Florida with his best friend, Jake McAllister. The McAllister's were good people and would watch over him as if he were their own.

The house was abnormally quiet without him. Jaidyn looked morosely in the bathroom mirror at her reflection. Her hair was a sight, sticking out this way and that.

She stuck her tongue out at her reflection and quickly got into the shower. These days Jaidyn was a bartender at 'The Old Absinthe House' in the evenings and worked in her Aunt Fiona's shop, 'Miss Monroe's Occult Shop', by day. She got weekends off to be with her son. She lived in a small two bedroom house on Bourbon Street, Creole Cottage style, left to her by her father. Alexander Pierce had been a cop for many years and in 1997 he was killed in the line of duty. He had been shot down during a robbery.

She was single still and had not been with another man since Phil. Jaid had been content as a mother. But lately she had been having dreams, sexy, erotic dreams. It was strange for her to have these vivid dreams. She would wake up writhing in bed, moaning and sweaty.

Jaidyn felt her heart start beating harder just thinking about it. There was a man in her dreams. The most gorgeous man she had ever laid eyes on. He had long black-as-sin hair and eyes that were so dark a brown they were almost black. The man had a wicked smile and a body that killed. She couldn't remember his face though, try as she might. Just the eyes and the smile were all she remembered.

Jaidyn blow-dried her hair and got dressed, putting on a bright yellow tank top over a hot pink one. She put on a pair of loose fitting green khaki Capri pants and a pair of pink high heeled sandals with a butterfly on the ankle straps. She decked her wrists in silver bangle bracelets and put matching hoop earrings in her ears. She went over to her full length mirror in the bedroom and twisted her hair up loosely.

Jaidyn used to be a very thin girl but then that dreaded bitch puberty had struck. She was now a size eighteen and had an unfortunate pair of double d-cup breasts. To her, it was too much for her five foot three inch frame. But the men in town didn't mind at all.

Her skin was smooth and silky, lightly freckled in places. Her eyes were almond-shaped and a lovely pale shade of green and her hair was a deep, dark red. Jaidyn was graced with

beautiful high cheekbones (a lovely trait passed on to her by the Cherokee blood from her mother's side), a pointed chin, full bow-shaped lips and deep dimples when she smiled.

Skye looked much like she did except for his black hair. He even had her nose which was very aristocratic, as her father always told her. She groaned dejectedly at the thought of Skye. What would she do when he was old enough to move out and start a life of his own? Maybe swearing off men hadn't been such a bright idea, but then she had been badly hurt.

Jaidyn grabbed her purse and locked up the house. She grabbed her car keys off the kitchen counter and left for work. She drove her father's old car, an older model red Chevy Camaro. Minutes later she was parked behind 'Miss Monroe's' on Chartres. Her aunt was already there, her green Jeep parked in its customary space.

"Good morning, love," her aunt greeted her as she came into the back room where her aunt was preparing some of her herbs and perfumes. She sold all sorts of odds and ends at her shop. There were the herbs and perfumes, of course, and there were books galore on medicines, spells, along with everyday literature as well. She sold silks, velvets and brocades, oils, candles, jewelry. And then there were the spell ingredients and so much more. Her Aunt Fiona had something to offer to everyone.

Fiona was dressed in an ankle length green velvet dress with belled sleeves; she had made it herself. In her hair she had twined ribbons and, yes, bells. She had rings of all sizes on all of her fingers and a large amulet around her neck. Jaidyn greatly admired her aunt's sense of style and even dressed herself in the style her aunt sometimes called 'the Goddess Stevie Nicks style'.

Jaid and her aunt were much alike. Though her Aunt Fiona always dressed 'à la Stevie', she always told Jaid that as much as she admired it, she was too old for Jaidyn's 'twenties glam meets punk' look, as Fiona called it.

"Hullo," Jaidyn greeted her glumly. Fiona smiled at her niece, shaking her head.

"It's not as if he's gone forever, dear. I miss him a lot myself. You will have to get used to being without him at times. He's at that age where he wants to be with his friends and dragging you behind him clinging onto his ankles will only

embarrass the child," Fiona told her laughingly.

The image made Jaidyn smile for she knew that it was true. She could just picture herself being dragged in Skye's wake, refusing to let go.

"I know you are right, but it is hard for me. You and Skye are all I've got," she told her honestly.

"That's because you won't go out and make yourself some friends. And before you start in on the 'I don't have time for that' spiel, let me tell you that now *is* that time, sweetheart. You are twenty-four years old and you haven't had sex in *nine years*. And you haven't had good sex *ever*! You are missing out, Jaid. Maybe you need to find yourself a man. Skye doesn't have a good man to look upon as a role model. A young boy needs that. True, he had your father for a while and there was no finer man to look up to," Fiona reasoned with her. Jaid came over to her Aunt's work table and leaned her hip against its edge, her arms crossed over her chest.

"William McAllister is a good man and Skye does look up to him. They play sports together and have barbeques and pool parties. Skye loves Jake's family and so do I. Having a man for myself...I just don't know, Aunt Fiona. How can I find one that I can trust? To me they seem like they want just one thing," Jaidyn said exasperatedly, giving her Aunt Fiona a helping hand with the perfume display.

"You lost your virginity to a sixteen year old *boy*. He was just a horny little boy, hon. You can't base your whole outlook on *men* because of one nasty little boy, can you? What you need is a tall, drop dead sexy man that can charm the pants right off of you," Fiona said with a wicked smile.

Jaidyn laughed at her aunt's suggestion even though she worried that she would never be able to find someone that she even *wanted* to have sex with. Then, she remembered the dream. Oh yeah, he was someone she could imagine being *very* interested in.

"I went to that tattoo parlor here up the street last month or so, you know, to see about getting my nose pierced, which I think I just might," Fiona rambled, feigning a nonchalant tone.

"Anyway, what's your point?" Jaidyn prompted.

"The owner, Vallon was his name; he is a very delicious

dish. I could see you with someone like him, Jaid. Someone tall, with long hair and a tight ass," Fiona said, her eyes looking unfocused. Probably envisioning said ass.

"I believe I've seen him before, once when he was opening shop quite a while back and then a few times at 'The Old Absinthe House'. He *is* very attractive," Jaidyn said, bringing Fiona out of her reverie.

"I think I'll go see him tonight. Have that sweetheart Marlena pierce my nose; she is such a nice girl. She comes in here a lot. You remember her I'm sure," Fiona talked animatedly while they finished setting up. Jaidyn flipped the sign on the door to read 'Open'.

The day moved at its usual relaxed pace. A few new customers came in as well as their regulars. For lunch, the pair ordered some po' boys and sat eating in Jackson Square watching people move about their business. The Saint Louis Cathedral loomed grand and beautiful and they admired the view while they ate.

"So, Jaid, if you don't have any plans for a man in your life...what exactly *is* your life plan? Besides clinging to Skye for all you're worth?" Fiona asked around a bite of her sandwich. Fiona looked at her out the corner of her eye and smiled mischievously.

"Oh, I have a plan, Aunt Fiona. You see, I am going to be the crazy old lady with one hundred cats that lives in a dilapidated old house. The children will dare each other to ring my doorbell and then run away screaming. Hey...hang on...sounds like you're off to a good start, Aunt Fiona," Jaid teased her.

"I'm not old, silly," Fiona countered and they both laughed.

At the end of the day they closed shop and cleaned up for an hour before parting ways with a fond goodbye. Jaidyn would be heading to her second job and Fiona was going to do some shopping before stopping in at 'Under the Gun'.

* * * *

Fiona parked in front of her lovely pink townhouse on Barracks Street and carried her bags into the kitchen. The animals came running as they heard the front door open and the jingling of her bells.

"There are my little babies!" she cooed, shaking some treat bags that she had bought for them. The cats circled her ankles purring and the dog sat grinning up at her, his tail thumping happily on the floor. The dog was called Oberon; he was a very lovey-dovey black Labrador. She had one male cat and two females; all were fixed to prevent her from keeping the litters of kittens they would have.

The male was named Vladislav and was a big black and white cat. The females were Guinevere, a long haired orange tabby, and the other was an odd-eyed, tailed Manx named Morgan le Fay. She was pure white and had one green eye and one blue eye.

Fiona fed them some of their treats and then put away all the groceries. Her apartment was her haven. There were laces and candles everywhere. She had an altar set up in the loft above for her magick. The furniture was old but she had had them reupholstered in her favorite colors of purple and green.

Leaving her beloved pets once more, Fiona drove back to Chartres Street. She entered Vallon's parlor and was greeted by Loki and Marlena along with two new faces.

"How are you all tonight? I'm here to get my nose pierced at long last. But who are these new faces? I don't believe I have made their acquaintance," Fiona greeted them all warmly.

"We just hired a new tattoo artist and another piercer. What with Vallon's band having become so popular, our parlor is getting more and more recognition and we needed help. This is Ziggy Blue and this here is the lovely and talented Sadie West," Loki answered Fiona, gesturing to the new workers.

Fiona looked long on Ziggy. He was a fine man, that one. He was at the very *least* six foot eight, built like a god, with black hair streaked with green that was lightly wavy and fell just past his shoulders. His left eyebrow was pierced twice and the right corner of his bottom lip was also pierced. His eyes were what really snared her; they were a smoky gray and had thick black lashes. He looked dead sexy in a long black trench coat and smooth black leather pants.

Sadie was a lovely girl with black and electric blue hair cut in a sexy angled bob with v-shaped bangs. She had brilliant blue eyes, like the sea. She was wearing a black knee-high forties

style skirt with a ruffle at the hem and a slit in the back. Her legs were encased in fishnets that had the seam down the back and she had on the cutest pair of forties style swinger shoes. She wore a red button down blouse with lapels and with three-quarter length sleeves with cuffs. A black Jolly Roger was embroidered above her right breast. She had a pair of horn rimmed glasses on as well.

They greeted her and talked with her about her shop. Fiona was just about to ask where the owner was when he came in with a beautiful companion.

Damn, she thought, looks like he's taken.

She found out that the woman's name was Lily and she immediately liked her. Lily had a kindness about her that Fiona instantly picked up on.

Fiona was led into one of the rooms by Marlena and she began to feel nervous. But soon it was over. She had felt some pressure, a slight sting and then it was done. Fiona looked in the mirror and smiled at the adorable little ring gracing her nostril. She listened patiently to the rules of proper care.

"Thank you so much, Marlena. I'm glad I had it done, it didn't hurt at all! I'm going to go show Jaid," she gushed excitedly. She paid Marlena at the front desk and was preparing to leave when *he* came in. The breath rushed out of her lungs in an audible *whoosh*.

"Wowza," she breathed and Marlena smiled having heard her.

"That's Vallon's friend. His name is Luca Silva and he kind of gets that reaction from a lot of the girls that have come in over the past few days. He comes in once in a while to see Vallon and then is off to wherever it is that angel goes," Marlena sighed.

"Uh-huh, I may have to convince you who the real angel is, love," Loki told her jokingly, playfully swatting her backside and Fiona smiled.

"You know it's always been you, Loki," Marlena returned, slapping his chest.

Luca walked over to Fiona and smiled at her in greeting, taking her breath away all over again. There was something strange about him but at the moment she was too dazed by him to figure out what it was.

"Luca Silva," he said, "and you are?"

"Um, *Miss* Fiona Monroe, and I'm pleased to meet you," she told him, emphasizing the 'Miss'.

"As if there were any doubt that you were a 'Miss'," he told her flirtatiously, taking her hand in his and kissing it lightly.

"My, I have never been kissed on the hand before. You must be quite the charmer," Fiona said, shaking her head at his extravagant ways.

"Well, I'm afraid I must be going. I'm off to see my niece and show her my new adornment. Nice to meet you all," Fiona called to the company and left the parlor. She reached 'The Old Absinthe House' shortly and breezed up to the bar.

"Hello, Aunt Fiona, can I get you something?" Jaidyn asked.

"Notice anything new about me?" she prompted.

"Yes, I do. It looks good on you by the way. So, how about that drink?" Jaidyn asked her again.

"Oh, I suppose a nice mint julep will do me nicely," she answered, admiring the old brass faucets from the marble fountains that were once used to drip cold water over sugar cubes into glasses of absinthe. There were calling cards hung up all over the place where many visitors had left their mark. From cypress beams hung chandeliers and sports memorabilia. Even the rich and famous were drawn to the historic bar and some of their portraits graced the walls, giving testament to the fame of the place.

"One mint julep. Enjoy it while I go wait on the others," Jaid told her, handing her the cold glass.

Fiona took a sip and licked her lips appreciatively, watching her niece while she worked. She was a good bartender, always friendly and with a smile on her face. She joked with the other customers and remembered the names of her regulars, asking on their families.

"That gorgeous tattoo artist, Vallon, is taken," Fiona told her remorsefully, when Jaidyn returned to her.

"Oh, is he? I'm sorry to hear that. Who are you going to drool over now?" Jaidyn laughed at her.

"Probably the new piercer they just hired. His name is Ziggy Blue and he is just lovely!" Fiona exclaimed, joining in

the light banter. Then, she added, "Or maybe that Luca Silva who is a friend of Vallon's. He took my breath away I tell you, he was that beautiful!"

"Got a fair ass, has he?" Jaidyn joked, knowing her aunt had a great appreciation for a man with a nice rear view.

Her aunt looked surprised, and then laughed until tears formed in her eyes.

"You know what's crazy, dear? I was so busy staring at his face that I never even took a glance at it. He's got such a perfect face, Jaid, you wouldn't believe it! And his hair, oh, it was so long it reached the middle of his back! He was wearing it down and I wanted to run my fingers through it," Fiona told her.

"Wow, he sounds pretty amazing. What else did you notice about this Don Juan?" Jaidyn asked her aunt.

"Well, his hair was pitch black as were his eyes. Or at least they looked black to me, so dark they were. He was wearing black pinstriped pants with suspenders that he left hanging down and he had on a very modern, Gothic pair of black-and-white Oxfords. His shirt was one of those crazy novelty tees that have the body of a woman in lingerie made to look like it's your body. I remember thinking how crazy it was for a man to be wearing that shirt," Fiona said with a smile.

Jaidyn, remembering the man in her dreams, felt a little strange hearing this man had the same hair and eyes as her dream man. Her aunt, noticing this, asked her what was wrong and she reluctantly explained a far less graphic version of her dreams.

"Oh my, I had no idea you had that in you, Jaid. How strange. It seems that I have met the man of your dreams," Fiona said and laughed with a soft snort into her mint julep.

* * * *

Jaidyn drove home slowly. She was tired and feeling blue knowing her son wouldn't be with her tonight. She parked in front of her house and dragged herself through the front door, kicking her sandals off and moaning as she wiggled and stretched her sore toes. It was hard being a single mother and juggling two jobs while trying to keep a neat house and fixing meals but she had a good life and she didn't complain.

Skye helped her out around the house with small household chores and keeping his room neat and tidy to Mom's satisfaction.

He was a good kid and she would juggle ten jobs to keep him clothed and fed with a roof over his head. If it weren't for Mrs. McAllister offering to watch Skye for her while she was at work until Fiona could come and get him after she closed her shop...Jaid *would* need more work.

Jaidyn thought of the man her aunt had met tonight. It was just a coincidence but she still couldn't shake the strange feeling it gave her. Jaidyn made herself a salami and cheese sandwich and sat at the kitchen table chewing thoughtfully, her eyes roving her familiar space. The appliances in her kitchen were white and the fridge was covered with photographs and artwork done by her son. The counter tops were tiled and the cabinets were made of cypress. The flooring throughout her house was hard wood, which she loved.

It was a small house but it was beautiful and well cared for. Her father had been a 'weekend warrior', loving to fix up the house he loved with his own hands. There was not a single room in the house he had not renovated, except the attic and the attic stairwell. The bathroom was now a lovely haven for a bubble bath with its serene blue walls and cypress cabinets topped with natural stone colored tiles.

Her bedroom was painted a soft butter yellow and she had an antique bedroom set passed down from her father's grandmother. Her bed clothes were green velvet and there was sheer silk hanging from the canopy of the bed.

Skye's room was a mossy green color and he had her old oak wood bedroom set from when she was a kid. He had posters up on the walls and shelves that were filled with model cars and airplanes and toys.

Her living room was a rich red color and she had a beautiful antique armoire that she kept all the electronics and game consoles in. Above the armoire, she had put up three strategic hooks and had draped a black feather boa from them to frame the piece. She had two large bookshelves filled with books, framed photographs, little statues and trinkets. There was an over stuffed chaise lounge and an elegant Victorian styled couch upholstered in red brocade and decorated with leopard print pillows.

In the corner of the living room there was a knee height statue of Buddha and around his neck she had hung some Mardi

FROM THE SHADOWS

Gras beads. Her lamps were legs with fishnet stockings, the shades of the lamps leopard print with trims of spiked leather or black feathers. Covering most of the living room floor was a zebra print rug.

Most of her expensive antique pieces had been passed on from family or bought by her father in poor condition and he had fixed them up.

Jaid finished her meal and sat in her kitchen looking at her lovely surroundings, seeing the difference her father, and she herself, had made in this home that was once plain white walls and without personality. Now, it was a place she was proud to say was hers. Here and there, she and Skye had added to Alexander's pure elegance style, their own eclectic tastes.

Jaid washed her dish in the sink and set it in the drying rack. She washed up in the bathroom and flopped down in her large, and empty, bed. That night in her sleep, there was a name for the man in her dreams.

Luca.

Chapter Eight

Jaidyn was again bored out of her ever-loving mind. It was a Saturday and she had the whole weekend off of work and no one to share it with. Skye had been gone for a whole week now and she was hoping for a phone call today as he had promised her he would call. She jumped up from the kitchen chair when the phone had finally rang. Stumbling into the living room, she ripped the phone up off its cradle and answered breathlessly, "Hello?"

"Hi, Mom, guess where I went yesterday?" Skye said excitedly into the phone. Jaid knew where he had gone. The McAllister's had wanted to surprise the boys with their three-day Disney World excursion.

"Where did you go?" asked Jaidyn.

"We went to Disneyworld! And me and Jake rode on all these cool rides! And Mrs. McAllister said that we were really, really brave because she said that she was too scared to go on those rides that we rode. It was so cool, Mom. I wish you could've come. I know you would've ridden those rides with us," he gushed.

"I wish I could be there, too. I really miss you, Skye," Jaid said, feeling tears forming in her eyes.

"I miss you, too, Mom. And you know what? We're going back today and tomorrow. Snow White hugged me twice. I think she's in love with me," Skye told her laughingly.

"Wow, my son, the princess charmer. I hope you have fun today, sweetheart. Call me again when you can, okay?" Jaidyn asked him.

"I will have fun *and* call you again. I love you, Mom," he said.

"I love you too, Skye," she responded, trying like hell to hide what she was feeling from him. He picked up on these

things far too easily and she didn't want to spoil his vacation with her problems.

"You sound sad. Maybe you should make some friends, Mom. You never know who you might run into," Skye suggested.

"Maybe you're right, Skye. Have fun and call me soon," she told him again. They said their goodbyes and hung up. Her shoulders slumped and she sank down onto the couch. She grabbed a soft, leopard print pillow and shoved her face into and moaned. Her nine year old son had just told her she should make some friends. Like *he* was the parent!

"Oh, Jaid, this is just *too* sad. Even for you," Jaid mumbled to herself, calmly replacing the pillow to its corner of the couch. She punched Aunt Fiona's number into the phone.

"What do you need, Jaid?" Fiona asked her.

"My son just told me I should go out and make some friends," Jaidyn told her, not sure whether to laugh or cry.

"Pearls of wisdom, my dear, that's what that is. You *should* go out and have some fun. Who knows who you might run into, maybe the *man of your dreams*, Jaid. And his name is Luca Silva if you forgot," answered Fiona.

Did everyone think she was going to run into someone special or something?

"I don't know, Aunt Fiona. It's been too long since I even cared about having friends or a man for that matter," Jaidyn told her.

"Oh, Jaid, it's not like being unsociable for so many years has turned you into a cretin. I'm sure you still know your manners. It's usually only men who act like Neanderthals. All I hear is you trying to make excuses not to go out and get a social life of your own. I think it is high time you find someone you can have fun with. And take your cell phone with you, dearest. I might have to call you to see how you are faring," Fiona told her.

"Alright, I think I will go out," Jaidyn said with finality.

"Glad to hear it, hon. Buy some condoms and get laid!" Fiona suggested.

"Oh my God, Aunt Fiona, it will be my first time out! I *won't* be getting laid, I assure you. At least I don't think I will," Jaid said, thoughts swirling in her head.

"If he's hot and is a clean and decent guy, I say go for it. You could use a good screw and with tits like yours...it shouldn't be a problem at all," Fiona said with a giggle.

Jaidyn hung up the phone after telling Fiona goodbye and realized with a shock that she was going to go out. She hadn't even gone out for her twenty-first birthday.

* * * *

Luca walked sedately down Bourbon Street, listening to the loud chatter and laughter all around him. This city was amazing. There was always something to do around here. Boredom surely must not visit those who live in or visit this great city of New Orleans. He was attached to it even more now than he had been two hundred years ago the first time he had come here. He looked up the street briefly and saw that Jaidyn was still some way ahead of him. She seemed to be looking for a place that wasn't as crowded as the rest. He finally saw her give up and walk into the bar where she worked, 'The Old Absinthe House'.

Someone whistled as he walked by and he turned around and bowed with a wide grin on his face. The girl stood and stared open mouthed at him. She was a cute little blond wearing a pink PVC micro dress. He winked at her and walked into the bar, scanning the room for Jaidyn. He found her at the bar talking with a co-worker. She had her hair down and it curled to her shoulder blades. She had on a lightweight patchwork skirt that reminded him of wandering gypsies and a green v-necked tank top. She had a silver cuff on her upper arm and a series of silver bangles on her wrists.

She was so beautiful.

"Back here again on a Saturday? It's your day off. You just can't stay away can you?" asked a co-worker of hers named Bill. He was a very kind and actually quite good looking man. Jaidyn would have considered asking him out on a date a long time ago if he had not been married. He was a man that she could trust and one she got along with. And those were rare.

"Actually, Bill, I'm out tonight to enjoy myself. Don't look at me like that, I know that I have never had such an inclination before but as everyone has been telling me, it's time I start. I came here because it's familiar. I'll save a new bar for some other night," she told him with a smile and a nonchalant wave of her

hand.

Jaidyn ordered a Sazerac and idly sat at the bar, letting her mind and eyes wander. She had no idea that she was being carefully watched. Luca's eyes devoured her from where he sat hidden from her view. He wanted to join her, but he wasn't sure how to handle her. She was different from all the others. Somehow.

Ah, what the hell. He couldn't just sit here and stare at her like some love-struck schoolboy in short pants.

Rising from his seat, he sauntered over to the bar and took a seat beside her. Currently her attention was focused on the door as a group of young revelers came loudly through the doorway.

Jaid heard someone sit beside her and her skin prickled, reacting as if to a physical caress. She turned to see who it was that had joined her and the breath slammed out of her lungs as she took in the beauty of the man who was sitting at her side. His long black hair was arranged in many braids of all sizes and it fell to his lower back.

He was attired in a sheer mesh long sleeved shirt that clung to every delicious inch of his chest. Her eyes trailed down his body to take in his tight black leather pants and biker boots. Her eyes reluctantly dragged themselves back up to his face. His face really was so beautiful that it was almost painful to her. Her heart contracted sharply. His features were so striking! A straight, long nose, full shapely lips, angled jaw, cleft chin.

Ooh, baby, this one would make a girl *burn*.

The gorgeous man was smiling at her in such a strange 'I-wanna-eat-you' kind of way and it made her feel all liquid-y inside. Jaidyn met his gaze and the breath rushed back into her lungs. His eyes were black!

"Hello," he said and she *felt* his voice ripple over her skin. Jaidyn watched in fascination as blue smoke curled around his beautiful face and light tendrils escaped his lips when he spoke. His long fingers gently held a cigarette and she was transfixed by his graceful hands.

"Um...hi," she replied meekly, cursing herself inwardly for being such a timid little mouse all of the sudden.

Real smooth, Jaid.

"I'm Jaidyn Pierce," she told him, extending her hand in

greeting.

He took it gently into his and turned her hand palm up and placed a kiss in the center of her palm sending shockwaves up her arm. And apparently up into her brain because it instantly turned to mush. She had never even heard of something like this happening. She was at a loss on how to react.

"Luca Silva," he returned and added, "Very nice to meet you, Jaidyn." Her name on his lips was tantalizing. She briefly imagined his lips repeating her name as he moved over her in bed. Then the name struck home. Her Aunt Fiona had told her about this man and had said he was the man of her dreams.

And of my fantasies, she added silently in her head.

"Nice to meet you too, Luca," she replied, blushing at her thoughts.

Luca inwardly grinned at the dirty things she was thinking. His thumb gently rubbed small circles over her palm. He was still holding her hand in his.

Jaid gently pulled her hand away from his. His warm skin had felt too good and those devastating circles he had been tracing...

"I work here, but this is the first time I've come here to just relax and bask in the atmosphere," Jaidyn told him and he arched a brow at her.

"Well then, allow me to buy you a drink," he told her and Jaid waved Bill over.

"I'll take another of these, Bill," she told him and Luca ordered a whiskey.

"To good times," Luca said and held his glass up. Jaid smiled and clinked her glass to his and said, "Laissez les bons temps rouler!"

Jaidyn noticed with some pleasure that the women in the bar were practically drooling over this man and he had noticed none of them. His eyes were on her only. It made her feel strangely powerful. And sexy.

"So, Luca, what is it you do for a living?" Jaidyn asked him curiously.

"I'm a bodyguard...of a sort. My...employer is vacationing in Florida and she needs me to watch over her family while she is away," he told her. It was an *almost* truth.

They ordered another round and talked of their work. Jaid told him the history of the bar and some of the people she had met working there. They fell into easy conversation and Jaid felt herself getting more relaxed around him.

"My aunt has met you and she told me about you. She met you at 'Under the Gun' and I thought you were maybe an employee there," she told him.

"Ah, yes, *Miss* Fiona, a very charming woman," Luca mused.

"That's her alright. How did you know?" she asked, surely he couldn't pick one woman out of the many he must have met.

"She is the only woman I have met in that particular place," he said, thinking fast. It would not do for her to get scared of him if she thought he knew a lot about her because he watched her. He suddenly felt like a voyeur, a common no-good pervert. But then, he was *protecting* her, not just spying on her.

"Oh, she *is* quite memorable. She's a wonderful lady and a big flirt. She had only nice things to say about you," Jaidyn told him with a giggle.

He smiled, that giggle endeared her to him even more. There was no one else like her. He imagined that this was the first time that she had actually been tipsy. She wasn't drunk but she was definitely in the 'feel good' stage.

"Oh? And what sort of things did she have to say?" he asked her playfully.

"She said she was so absorbed by your beautiful face that she forgot to check out your ass. And from her...that's strange. She makes it a point to see if a man has a fair enough backside," Jaidyn told him.

He was surprised at what she said at first and then he had to laugh. So he had a beautiful face, did he?

Unbeknownst to Luca, they were being watched. Angelo sat bitterly in the corner, hidden by the crowd, eyeing the pair of them chatting happily as if they had not a single care in the world. Then he smiled grimly.

I've got you now, Lucius. You have no idea that I figured your damn trick out, he thought. He sat listening to their conversation. He was hearing nothing interesting from them. Except that he was playing bodyguard for Aurelia. And that

Aurelia was in Florida at the time. So, they thought he was a threat to Lily's family?

Angelo stared at Lily's niece. He couldn't believe he had never thought to look up Lily's family history long before. She was really something to look at, but then she *was* blood to his beautiful Lily. He almost choked on his rage when he thought of her. Vallon. The name was like venom in his mind and he would see red every time that horrible word floated up in his thoughts. He looked at Luca. *He* was the reason his mother had died. *He* had turned him into the monster Angelo was this day. Angelo should have realized long ago that it was *Lucius'* blood he wanted.

An hour later at midnight, Jaidyn and Luca were walking amiably down Bourbon. Jaid was feeling very good, not drunk though, as she kept assuring herself. She was perfectly capable of walking, talking and decision making.

It is okay that I am walking to my house with this man I just met like I've known him for years. He has been nothing but good since I first clapped eyes on him. If he were a bad man, I would know and Aunt Fiona would have known.

Fiona was sensitive, meaning there were certain things she knew without knowing how she knew. Jaidyn had moments of sensitivity as well, although nothing like her Aunt Fiona. She knew when Skye was hurt or sad. Even her son had surprised her at times and made her wonder what *he* knew. Everyone had experienced something like it; they just refuse to open their eyes.

So Luca was certainly not a bad person or she would know. And she wanted him. In her bed, on the floor, it didn't matter. No, not really.

So why not invite him in for something to drink or some coffee? That was the universal invitation for sex, right?

Jaidyn gestured to her house and asked him, "This is it. This is my place. Would you like to come in for a while?"

Luca mulled it over quickly in his mind, should he or shouldn't he? Aurelia was a close friend and he'd never want to upset her. Not to mention, he could never give Jaid anything more than a dalliance and he certainly didn't want to hurt Jaidyn. And so the question remained, weighing heavily on him.

He should, he finally decided. He nodded to Jaidyn and she

smiled at him, gesturing for him to come inside. Luca felt his grin widen as he walked into the house. He loved her sense of style. He laughed at the jolly Buddha statue draped in Mardi Gras beads.

"Very interesting place you have here, Jaidyn," Luca told her.

She smiled and said, "Thank you, Luca. My son and I had to make this place match our personalities after my father died and left it to me. And I think we did a good job." She watched his face to gauge his reaction when she mentioned her son. If she *were* to find a man, he would *have* to accept and love her son. Luca showed no reaction that would tell her that he disliked the idea of her having a son. She nodded in approval.

"What is your son's name, Jaidyn?" he asked her, feigning ignorance of the fact that he had already known that she had a son.

She gestured to a photograph of him grinning up at her. She had taken the picture at his birthday party at the McAllister's house. They had welcomed her to hold the party there so the kids could swim in the pool.

"This is my son, Skye. He is nine years old now. I took this picture of him on his birthday," she told him, motherly love and pride shining in her eyes.

She had never looked more beautiful.

"He looks a lot like you. So where is he now?" he asked her. He could listen to her voice for hours. Watch her lips move around the words. Watch her tongue sneak out to moisten her lips.

"Vacationing with his best friend in Florida," she responded, noticing belatedly that he had said his employer was vacationing there as well. She turned back to him and asked him if he wanted a cup of coffee.

"How do you like it, Luca?" she asked from the kitchen.

He smiled evilly and replied, "Oh, I like it *hot* and *steamy*. Smooth and sweet as it flows over my tongue."

He heard her drop a mug and curse under her breath.

"Um...cream?" she asked timidly.

"Absolutely," he answered, loving the strained note in her voice.

She came back into the living room with two steaming mugs. Jaid handed him one, biting back a moan when his fingers touched hers as he accepted the drink, and sat on the couch. Jaidyn indicated that he could sit down and he chose to sit on the chaise. Her eyes roamed his body and for the first time she felt genuine lust.

Jaidyn wanted to see what his body looked like naked and sweaty. She wanted to watch as his muscles bunched and undulated under her. She swallowed loudly and pressed a hand to her forehead as if checking for fever, feeling suddenly shy around him.

Sensing her abrupt change of mood, Luca wondered if he should leave. It might make things awkward and uncomfortable for her if he stayed. Jaidyn wanted him to stay though, he sensed as much.

Jaidyn looked uncertainly at him. Maybe she could just have one wonderful night with him. Just have some fun before Skye came back and then she could continue her uncomplicated life...single and unloved.

But was he interested in her? He hadn't really shown any signs that he was attracted to her. What if he only wanted to be her *friend*? She cringed at the thought. Surely someone as hot as this man would want some tall, scrawny woman with mile long legs and blond hair. They all wanted one of those and she was certainly *not* one of those women.

Then again, the way he had kissed her palm...she doubted that was the way he greeted every woman he met. Aunt Fiona would surely have mentioned it had he done the same to her. Her palm tingled as she remembered the feel of those lips on her skin.

What to do?

She looked over at him and watched, utterly captivated, as he took a drink of his coffee. She licked her lips as she watched the muscles in his neck working as he swallowed. He finished taking a drink and licked his lips.

Feeling the building desire rising in her, he glanced over to find her stripping him naked with her eyes. Grinning, he caught her gaze and crooked a finger at her. Jaidyn stood and walked over to him as he motioned her to. Luca stood up and faced her.

He set his mug beside hers on the coffee table.

"What are you going to do?" she asked him nervously.

"Nothing," he replied and then said, "I want you to do whatever you want to do. I am your willing captive."

Jaidyn shivered as she imagined all the possibilities. She raised her gaze to meet his and realized that he *was* attracted to her. She looked down and smiled as she saw the proof of his attraction to her straining against the leather of his pants.

Once her gaze met his again, Luca lowered his head and kissed her lightly on the neck.

So much for being submissive.

Jaid leaned her head away to give him better access and closed her eyes. Jaid had never felt anything like this before. His lips found hers and he traced her lips with his tongue. She gasped and he took advantage of her parted lips and deepened his kiss. Jaidyn felt a throbbing between her legs and she wanted him naked. As much as she hated to, she broke the kiss and lifted his mesh shirt up and pulled it over his head.

Jaidyn took off her own shirt as he removed his boots. He stared at her large breasts, just barely held in her bra. He grinned as the phrase 'my cup runneth over' rang in his head. He stood still as her hands found his zipper. Her fingers flew as she unbuttoned his pants and unzipped them. She tucked her hands inside, gripping his hips and slid the leather down leisurely, savoring the unveiling.

Her eyes widened as she took in the size of him. She wondered if it could possibly fit inside her. She had only had sex years ago with a sixteen year old boy. And Phil had been pretty big for his age but not like this.

She had heard other girls talking about Phil and the things he would do to a girl on the first date and she had been so hurt that they had seemed to know from experience. Jaid had already been pregnant then and aware of what Phil really was, a complete ass. She remembered crying through lunch period in the bathroom, which made her cry harder because she had been really hungry.

Jaidyn was afraid it would be painful but she knew she wanted him. And Luca was naked and right in front of her. Hers to do with as she pleased. She looked longingly at his body.

Jaidyn set her hands on his chest and ran her hands down his abdomen. Holding her breath, she gripped him in her hands and stroked him, letting her fingers trail teasingly from the tip to wrap around. Jaidyn watched as what she did wreaked havoc on his senses. His eyes fluttered and his breathing quickened.

Luca felt as if he was being torn apart and he loved the effect she had on him. He reached out to her and pushed her skirt down her hips and let it fall the rest of the way down her legs. She stepped out of her skirt, kicked off her sandals and walked into his arms. Luca wrapped his arms around her and kissed her again. He reached behind her and unhooked her bra. She allowed him to slide the bra off her and was surprisingly unembarrassed as he stared at her standing only in a pair of underwear. Thank the Gods she had taken Fiona's advice and had worn a sexy pair...just in case.

Luca sucked in his breath as he looked at her breasts. They were quite large and round. They looked very soft and her nipples were large and dark, puckering under his steady gaze. He reached out and touched her and she let out a small scream at the force that rocked her as she felt his fingers on her bare flesh. She began panting and sighed his name as he bent his head to lick her nipples and suck them into his mouth.

She hooked her thumbs into her panties and began pulling them down. Jaidyn was glad that two years ago she had started getting a Brazilian wax; she guessed that a part of her had always known. Luca sat on the chaise and admired the view she presented him with. Jaidyn was all sensuous, lush curves. He wanted to taste her on his tongue. He gripped her hands and pulled her closer to him. Luca lifted one of her legs and placed it over his shoulder. She looked down at him questioningly and he smiled seductively at her.

She moaned loudly when his tongue slithered between her legs, licking her in the most intimate place. He sucked at her and bit her gently. Her pushed a finger into her and continued to tease her with his mouth. Jaidyn felt as if she was on fire and suddenly it seemed as if a shower of colors exploded behind her closed eyelids and she cried out from the force of her orgasm.

Luca lowered her leg and bit it lightly. He leaned back on the chaise and pulled her down until she was straddling him like

she had wanted to earlier. Luca placed his hands on either side of her face and brought her lips to his. Jaidyn's arousal began anew as he kissed her and explored her body with his hands.

Jaidyn suddenly remembered her Aunt Fiona telling her to get some condoms. She realized with frustration that she had not. Luca sensed her disappointment and reached down for his pants. He always kept condoms on him because he knew most women wanted the men to wear one. Of course with him they needn't worry because he couldn't carry disease or get them pregnant. But they didn't know that.

Jaidyn sighed in apparent relief as she saw that he had one with him. He smiled at that and she couldn't resist smiling back at him. She watched as he unwrapped it and she moaned longingly as he rolled it down his length. She suddenly wished he had waited because she had a wild fantasy about watching him masturbate. Jaidyn quickly set the thought aside as he entered her and gripped her hips.

At a loss on what to do, Jaidyn followed the instruction Luca was giving her with his hands. She soon got the hang of it and his hands moved up to her breasts. Jaidyn rolled her hips against him, making noises she had never thought to hear coming from her own lips. Luca watched her face as she came apart in his arms, loving the way she growled his name when she came. Her pale green eyes grew a brighter shade of green and her skin was becomingly flushed.

Watching her take her pleasure thrilled Luca immensely and he purred as he came. Jaidyn was fascinated watching his jaw tighten and his eyes darken further, much to her surprise. Jaid leaned against his chest and listened to his heart pounding and then slowing, as was her own. She was very glad this had happened. It was amazing and she could not feel any remorse for the decision she had made.

Jaidyn reluctantly climbed off his lap and told him where the bathroom was so he could clean up. She watched with a satisfied grin on her face as he walked away from her. His ass was perfectly sculpted and she ogled him appreciatively. She picked up her clothes and took them into the laundry room. Jaid walked back to the living room and then into her bedroom. She slipped on her pink silk robe and went back into the living room.

Luca came out of the bathroom and came up behind her. He wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her softly on the neck. The action surprised Jaid in its tenderness. She hadn't expected him to be affectionate. She leaned back against him.

"Thank you for that, Luca. It was wonderful and I will never forget this night," she whispered.

"Sounds like goodbye to me," he mused, speaking as softly as she had. He hoped that he was wrong about that. Now he realized one time with her would not be enough.

"I thought that maybe this was just a one night stand or maybe even a short fling. I do not expect anything more nor do I *want* more," she told him, turning in his arms to look up into his face. She was surprised at the hint of sadness he tried to hide.

He smiled at her and asked, "Does that mean I can see you again, Jaid?"

"Yes, I suppose that's what I'm saying. But understand that for nine years of raising my son, I was fine without a man. And when he comes back in three weeks, I'm going to go back to living without any other man in my life but him. I hope I'm not offending you but I want you to know that there is no pressure on you for a relationship," she explained, not really believing her own words.

Luca knew that it was for the best. She was mortal and he was not. There was no way she would want to become like him because of her son. So, there was no hope for them to have a future anyway. That didn't stop him from feeling inexplicably saddened by her decision.

"I understand you, Jaid. You aren't offending me at all," he reassured her. He kissed her lightly on the mouth and she startled him by licking his lips.

"Keep that up and I'll have you on that rug and I hear rug burns are unpleasant," Luca told her with a glint in his eye.

She laughed at him, "You mean like in a few hours or tomorrow?"

"For some men...yeah, but for me..." he trailed off and grabbed her hand and led it to his hardening cock. She gasped and then smiled.

Later that night, settling down for a few hours of sleep, Jaidyn realized bitterly that he had been right about rug burn.

FROM THE SHADOWS

* * * *

Luca left Jaid's house a few hours before dawn. He went quickly back to his hotel room feeling better than he had felt in many years. She had given him her phone numbers so that he could call her. She wanted to see him again and so...she would. Luca remembered how she had felt as she had ridden him.

Three weeks, she had said. Well, he would take advantage of his short time with her and then he would have to return to admiring her from afar and let her live her normal life peacefully, without him in it. He was disrupted from his thoughts when he heard 'Tubular Bells' from the movie 'The Exorcist'. He flipped open his phone.

"Yes, Aurelia, *mi amiga*?" he answered. He had expected her to call him soon.

"How are things going? Any signs of Angelo?" she asked him in a rush.

"Everything is fine so far and I have not sensed Angelo yet. Have you?" he asked in return.

"No, not at all," she replied. Luca, like Aurelia, wondered why Angelo was lying in wait. And what he planned.

"How is my granddaughter, Luca?" Aurelia asked him suspiciously, as if she doubted he was doing a very good job at guarding her.

"Jaid is fine, Aurelia. I am keeping my eye on her," he replied.

"Just your eye? You called her Jaid, Luca, darling. That is a familiar name for her. You have met her, haven't you?" she asked.

"Yes, I have met her and I like her very much, Aurelia. This is me you are talking to and I am not going to hurt her," he told her, annoyed that he had to tell her that at all. After two hundred years of friendship, you'd think they could trust one another.

"Do you love her, Luca?" Aurelia asked.

"I hardly know her, Aurelia. I have some feeling for her, but I've only just met her face to face for the first time tonight," he answered.

Aurelia thought that maybe he was not telling the whole truth or he just didn't realize it yet. But with a woman's intuition, she knew better.

* * * *

Jaidyn patted the old dog, Oberon, lightly on the head. He licked affectionately at her hand. The fat old cats were draped lazily over the chairs and couch. Fiona came into her living room carrying two cups of hot, fresh coffee.

"Here you go, Jaid," Fiona said, handing her a steaming mug. They both smelled the aroma coming from their cups and sighed appreciatively.

"So...how was last night's excursion?" Fiona asked her curiously, hoping that she hadn't chickened out and stayed home instead.

"It was great actually. I had a wonderful time, Aunt Fiona. And...um...I really did meet Luca Silva at the bar like you said I might. Weird, huh? I'm glad I took Skye's and your advice," Jaidyn told her with a small, satisfied and barely concealed 'I've-got-a-delicious-secret' smile.

"You had sex and it was mind blowing? Oh, that is wonderful news, Jaid. Silly girl, you can't hide from me! I can read you like a book, child. I know you far too well," Fiona told her. She laid her hand comfortingly on Jaid's.

"It's nothing to be embarrassed about, Jaid. You're twenty-four years old for fuck's sake! It's high time you were with a man that could curl your toes," Fiona told her with a sly wink.

"So...how was this beautiful Luca Silva?" Fiona continued, her curiosity piqued.

"I'm not one to kiss-and-tell, Aunt Fiona, but, *Oh My God!* I never imagined...it was incredible! He had the most gorgeous body, Aunt Fiona. Luca is six foot three inches of solid, scrumptious muscle. He is lean but so well toned that I could wash my linen on his abdomen. And his hands...it's such a shame that I can't have a relationship with someone like that! Luca wasn't even turned off by the fact that I'm a mother. That means the world to me. Not to mention the sex! A lifetime of sex like that..." she trailed off, a glazed expression on her face.

"Why *can't* you have a relationship? Do you think you can't because of Skye? Single parents have relationships, too. You are just afraid of hurting Skye and being hurt yourself. Skye doesn't know his real father, a.k.a. the sperm donor, so he won't begrudge a new man in your life to take on the role. He might

even be thrilled at the prospect of a father of his own.

"Children with only one parent get confused about why their friends have a daddy or mommy and they don't. *You* know that, Jaid. I remember your father telling me how you came home from school one day and asked him why all the other kids had mommies. We cried together over that, Jaid.

"Skye might not even be jealous that a new man would make him have to share your attentions. As I've told you before, he is at that age where he doesn't want to cling to mommy's skirts anymore," Fiona told her, trying to talk some sense into her niece. She couldn't pass up a chance to be happy.

"I know you are probably right, Aunt Fiona, but...I just don't know. I'm so confused. I have no experience with having a relationship. All I know is how to be a good mother to my son. Would Luca even *want* something more? And what about the idea about being a father figure? It might make him run screaming for the hills!" Jaid told her worriedly, her confusion upsetting her.

"That would be something to see, wouldn't it?" Fiona asked her, laughing at the image Jaid's words had given her and then, seeing Jaid's horrified expression, she hastily added, "I'm sure you are just overreacting, Jaid. Just continue to see him and get to know him. Time will tell, dear. You never know, Jaid, he may be the one you've always been waiting for." Fiona hugged her and cupped her cheek lovingly.

"Aunt Fiona? You always worry about my happiness. What about yours?" Jaid asked, trying not to sound rude.

Fiona sat back in her chair and was quiet for a minute as she took a long drink of her coffee. She sighed sadly and replied, "My life does not hold the promise of the love of a man, darling. My twin soul is no where on the face of this earth. I would have felt him, would have felt the hope. But...I never do feel it.

"I want you to be happy though. To see you cry when that Phil broke your heart...my own heart shriveled. I feel there is hope for you, Jaid, *if* you would just try."

"Oh...I'm sorry, Aunt Fiona," Jaid said softly.

Fiona patted her shoulder and gave her a stunning smile.

"Life is good, Jaid. It really is. All you can do is try to live it to its fullest. Give Luca time, dear, and we shall see. Until then,

just keep having that amazing sex, okay?" Fiona said, rewarded with a laugh from the much calmer Jaid.

Jaidyn left her aunt's house with her mind racing as she thought over all the possibilities. Either Aunt Fiona was right and she *could* have an amazing relationship with Luca or...*she* was right and was better off alone. How would Skye react to Luca and vice-versa?

There was only one way to find out...they would have to meet. That is if things with Luca went from a fling to a 'thing'.

A few hours later, she received a phone call from Luca. She had expected it would be Skye calling but was instead pleasantly surprised to find Luca on the line.

"Hello, *mi amante*. How are you tonight?" Luca asked her. Jaidyn bit her lip as his voice raised gooseflesh all over her arms.

"I'm fine, thanks. And you, where y'at?" she asked him in return.

"*Excelente! Gracias, mi amante*," he said.

"I'm sorry, what?" Jaidyn asked him, laughing. Now she knew his accent. Luca was Spanish...ooh.

"Excellent! Thank you, my lover," he translated for her. Then he asked her, "Do you have plans for tonight, *mi amante*?"

"No, I do not have any plans. Any suggestions?" she asked him in return.

"A friend of mine, Vallon Paige, has a band called 'Symphonic Dream'. One of their band members has recently passed away and they have found another to fill in. They are reuniting and playing tonight at a club they frequent called 'Motel Hell'. Interested?" Luca asked her.

"Sounds like fun! I've never been to a concert before!" she exclaimed, excited about going to a concert for the first time ever.

"Are there many things that you have not tried? Well, we had better get started! Life is short after all, *mi corazón*," Luca told her.

Luca arranged to pick her up at nine o'clock later in the evening. The show would be at eleven o'clock. Jaid smiled satisfactorily. It looked like they were going to get in some alone time before the concert.

Jaidyn put on a billowy black halter dress and a pair of

high-heeled black sandals. She let her hair fall in waves around her face and shoulders and put a large hot pink flower barrette in her hair on one side of her head. She adorned her wrists with her customary silver bangles that had belonged to her mother.

By then, there was still an hour left until Luca would come to get her. Jaidyn decided to do some quick shopping.

Jaid pulled up at 'Destiny's' on Iberville. It was a clothing boutique that she was partial to and she wanted some really sexy underwear now that she had a reason to show it off. She especially wanted some of those panties that had snaps on the side so that they could be taken off quickly.

After twenty minutes of browsing, Jaidyn had some of those snap undies, some sexy underwear sets and even two corsets and a garter belt with fishnet stockings. Jaid left the store with a smile on her face and she rushed back home to put on a pair of the snap underwear.

Luca showed up a little early and that elevated her mood even more. Jaid had never felt like this before. She was full of excitement, a little nervousness and expectation. It was such a heady feeling and she had been missing out on this for so long.

"You are so breathtaking, Jaid," Luca told her, his eyes caressing her. She could see the hunger in his eyes and she could feel it rising in herself, as well.

"As are you, Luca," she replied, stepping closer to him and closing the front door behind him with a nudge from her toe, she then wrapped her leg around his. He looked good enough to eat! Dressed in skin tight blood red leather pants and biker boots with a loose black shirt that laced up the sides and exposed a lot of tantalizing flesh with his hair loose and long, falling in gorgeous silky waves that she wanted to wrap herself in.

"Are you trying to seduce me, Miss Pierce?" Luca asked her, his voice a low, seductive purr.

"Yes," she answered simply and was swept away by his kiss. Her blood pounded in her ears. Surely he could hear how loudly her heart was beating!

Luca untied the top of her halter dress and let it fall, where it hung limply and exposed her to his hungry gaze. His fingers moved slowly and softly over her sensitive flesh, making her feel weak-kneed.

Luca grabbed her by the waist and turned her to face away from him; he lightly kissed the back of her neck. Taking his time, pressing himself against her, he bent at the waist, bending her over the arm of the couch. Luca then straightened, and with his groin still pressed against her, he put his hands under her dress on her thighs and slid them slowly up, lifting the dress. Jaid heard a soft laugh as he saw her new panties. He gripped them forcefully and ripped them away. They came off easily and painlessly with a light *snap*.

Jaid felt a dampness rush between her legs and she shuddered. She liked it when he was rough. He bit her and she screamed out in pleasure. She grinned as she realized that she must be a bit of a masochist. Luca continued to kiss and nibble at her flesh while he undid his pants and slipped on a condom.

Jaidyn wished that the condom wasn't necessary. She would love to feel his flesh inside of her. She wanted nothing to separate them. Jaid quickly lost that train of thought as he slid himself into her. Luca arched his hips into her and was rewarded with the sound of his name on her lips. They made love slowly at first, savoring each other.

Jaidyn's whimpers turned into moans and she came apart. Luca then slid out of her and lifted her up effortlessly and turned her back around to face him. He perched her on the edge of the couch's arm and slid back into her. This time the taking was fast and hard, much to Jaid's pleasure. She wrapped her legs around his waist and leaned back.

Luca bent down and sucked a nipple into his mouth. Jaid let her head fall back as she enjoyed his teasing. He continued to thrust hard into her and shouted his release as Jaidyn's muscles squeezed him as she convulsed with her own orgasm. Jaid kissed his brow and smiled lazily at him.

Luca pulled out of her and Jaid took him by the hand and led him into the bathroom. With cool water she washed him. Her hands slipped and slid over his flesh making him hard for her again. Delighted at his arousal, Jaid sat on the edge of her tub and pulled him to stand before her.

Jaid held him in her hands again and proceeded to stroke his cock. She sucked the swollen tip into her mouth and listened with proud satisfaction as Luca made sexy growling noises in his

throat. She sucked more and more of his length into her mouth, bringing him closer and closer to the edge of his control. Jaidyn started moving her hand faster and applied more pressure to her grip.

Luca felt that he was about to come and he pulled back. Jaid allowed him to and watched in greedy fascination as he finished up himself. She leaned back for him and he released himself on her breasts. He watched through hooded eyes as it rolled down the valley between her large breasts. Jaid, her eyes intent on his, caught some with her finger and rubbed it over her nipple. She sadistically enjoyed the pained expression on his face as he watched her nipple harden. Jaid then, smiling wickedly, brought that finger to her lips and sucked it into her mouth.

Luca felt as if he had been hit in the gut with a sledgehammer. Did she have any idea what she was doing to him? Of course she did, the man-eater! He saw the lusty grin on her lovely face. Why did she do this to him? Was she a sadist? A man could only take so much! Thankfully, his loose shirt was long enough to hide an erection. He was sure he'd have one all night.

All those years, never once had he found a woman that could bring him to his knees. Not until now. She would have him eating out of her little hands.

After a few minutes, they were both back to a presentable appearance and ready to go. Jaid locked the house up behind her. She turned to walk over to his car only to see that he didn't have a car. There was a shiny, sleek cobalt blue and black motorcycle in her driveway. Her first time on a motorcycle, too!

"Is this your first time, Jaid? I promise I'll be gentle," Luca purred at her, patting the seat of the beautiful bike. She nodded and practically skipped over to him. He gave her a gorgeously air-brushed helmet. It was black with cobalt and periwinkle blue flames. He gave her a sheepish grin as he tied his hair up.

"If I don't, it will be hell to comb through," he told her with a laugh. She smiled back and saw that he put on a matching helmet.

He must be rich, she thought.

"What kind of bike is this?" she asked him as she climbed on behind him. She ran her hand over it admiringly.

"I'm so glad you asked! I love to show her off. This beauty here is a Ducati Monster. Beautiful machine, isn't it?" he grinned back at her, taking her breath away. The bike was indeed beautiful but it couldn't compare to him.

They showed up at 'Motel Hell' at ten-thirty, pulling into a crowded side parking lot. They pulled up beside the building where a couple other motorcycles were parked, including a shimmering red Kawasaki Ninja ZX-6R that belonged to Ziggy, a fuchsia and white 1966 Harley Davidson Electra-Glide belonging to River Redcloud and a beautiful black and silver 1947 Indian Chief that belonged to the club owner, Shadow Redcloud.

Luca led her around the back of the building and they went inside via the rear entrance, reserved for employees and bands. 'Symphonic Dream' and some of their friends were already backstage waiting. Vallon introduced everyone to the new band member.

She was beautiful. Jaidyn guessed she must be *at least* five foot eleven. She had dark green eyes and vibrant red hair that had big loose curls that fell to the middle of her back. Her skin was pale and had a light dusting of freckles.

The woman was dressed splendidly in a tiny, layered black skirt with uneven, witch-like edges and a floral patterned black velvet corset. She was wearing black and white striped stockings and ruby red platform high heels. On her arms were ruby red velvet arm warmers.

Luca recognized her instantly. But it had been years and years. Around three hundred years since he had seen Korinna MacDougal last.

"Lucius, is that you? By the gods but I haven't seen you in *ages!* Although, I knew I would find you around here somewhere," Korinna exclaimed. She ran over to him and hugged him fiercely.

The reunion caught the attention of everyone present. Jaidyn felt slightly confused and she fervently hoped they weren't romantically involved. Had she become involved with a philanderer? Luca hugged Korinna back, laughing at her enthusiasm.

"Korinna, I can't believe it! I had no idea that *you* were the

'Symphonic Dream' replacement," he gushed, plainly ecstatic to see her.

"Yeah, I met Adam, Cameron and Vallon at 'Under the Gun' when I went in there to see Ziggy. I heard that they wanted a girl that could sing and play the bass so I auditioned for them. And here I am!" she exclaimed.

Luca turned toward Jaid and said, "Jaid, this is an old friend of mine, Korinna MacDougal. We go *way* back. She saved my life a long time ago. Twice. Korinna, this is my lovely friend, Jaidyn Pierce."

Korinna smiled at Jaid and took her hand into hers, saying, "Very nice to meet you, Jaidyn Pierce."

There was so much sincerity and warmth in Korinna's face and in her voice that Jaidyn found that she liked Korinna, the tiny flame of jealousy flickering out like it had never been there to start. They exchanged greetings and everyone there was very wonderful and welcoming to Jaid, making her feel like she actually belonged. She felt really good inside at this moment and she would always remember it. It would be nice to call these people her friends. There were a few people she met that night: Vallon, Lily, Adam, Cameron, Loki, Ziggy, Sadie and Korinna. Marlena she already knew. Marlena came into 'Miss Monroe's' often.

"Fancy meeting you here, Jaid," Marlena told her as she joined the girls on the couch while the guys stood around and talked.

"I know but I'm glad I came. How've you been?" she asked her.

"Positively glowing! Loki and I are expecting," Marlena told her, her face really was glowing. The mother's pride was already surfacing.

"Congratulations! I am so happy for you. How far along are you?" Jaid asked her.

"I'm a good three months along now. Due in mid-December," Marlena explained, gently placing her palm over her stomach. The girls talked amiably about babies until Shadow Redcloud came in to tell the band that they were up next. All female eyes watched Shadow walk back out of the room. He was a tall, built-like-a-God and incredibly sexy Native American and

he had fallen in love with the Gothic culture, which is one of the reasons he had opened the club. The other was for the space upstairs where all of his kind and other 'supernatural' beings could congregate for councils or to keep out of the daylight if needed.

Luca thought he would see if he could call together a meeting to inform the others about Angelo. He needed to be brought down; he was hurting too many people out of vengeance and not survival. That was something many of their kind would not stand for.

The band made their way with their instruments on stage, with the exception of Adam, whose drums were already assembled, and the rest of the group went out into the crowd of people come to see the show. They all took a stool up at the bar and ordered drinks to sit and listen to the band. Korinna was an awesome replacement. Her voice was lovely and she could play the bass as well as Azure had.

"Greetings, mortals. We are 'Symphonic Dream'. We'd like to thank you all for turning up to honor our late bassist, Azure Beaumont. May she rest in peace," Vallon spoke to the crowd.

On the stage there were candles lit in memory of their lost friend and some of the audience held up their own candles or lighters in respect. Vallon had lit a candle for his mother, as well. It was sad but Jaidyn was having a good time. The band began their set and the crowd sang along.

Luca stood behind Jaid's stool and wrapped his arms around her. They stayed like that throughout the show. He periodically kissed her or toyed with her hair.

"Are you enjoying yourself, *mi corazón*?" Luca asked her, leaning in close and trying to speak loud enough for her to hear him over the music. 'Symphonic Dream' finished their set and another band took the stage.

"Yes, thank you so much for bringing me. I can't believe all the fun I've been missing out on. My son will be thrilled to hear that I went out and enjoyed myself," she replied.

"That's a great kid you have," Luca told her, making her glow inside. He kissed her softly on the neck and went to speak with Vallon and Lily. Jaid saw Korinna coming over to talk to her.

"How long have you two known each other, Jaidyn?" Korinna asked her.

Jaidyn blushed at the question. Wow, she had only met him yesterday and already she felt close to him somehow.

"Oh, I see, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to embarrass you. It's all Luca's fault! He said you were friends. I didn't realize...nevermind. I'm making things worse. Let's start over, shall we? Hi, I'm Korinna MacDougal. Pleased to meet you," she said with an apologetic smile.

That made Jaid laugh out loud in surprise and she felt better instantly. Korinna laughed with her. Jaidyn noticed Ziggy standing a little behind Korinna, staring at her like a wolf eyeing a lamb. Ziggy glanced up and met Jaid's eyes and he grinned at her and winked. She smiled back and Korinna turned to see what she was smiling about and found Ziggy in conversation with Loki and Marlana, looking completely innocent.

"That man is so infuriating," Korinna said more to herself than to Jaid and she stared at him in a most lustful way. Jaid smiled inwardly at her new found secret. There was something going on between those two. They acted as if they weren't aware of each other but their eyes said otherwise.

Jaid liked Korinna even more now. If there *had* been something between her and Luca...there was only Ziggy for her now.

Jaid couldn't believe her thoughts. Her heart was screaming that Luca was *hers*!

* * * *

Jaidyn and Luca left the club together at one-thirty. The night was warm with a soft breeze. Jaidyn smiled feeling that breeze on her warm cheeks. It felt good to be with him and somehow...right. Luca led her down a narrow alley off the rear side of the building and into a small, hidden courtyard with only a single wooden bench to furnish it. Jaid was surprised to find one here. It was quiet and they were all alone.

He pulled her into his arms and lowered his lips to hers, holding them close but not making contact.

"Did you have a good time?" he whispered against her lips, crowding her senses with the closeness of his body and the scant distance of his lips.

She tried to answer with a semblance of dignity, "*Mmm-hmm.*" She felt as if her knees would buckle under her.

"You know...every time I looked at you tonight," Luca purred, lowering his hands to cup her rear and pressing her against him, "I felt myself harden with my need of you, to feel your softness and get lost inside you. I've been in pain for you all night."

Jaidyn's breath was coming in harsh gasps now as he turned her on with his words and the subtle torture of touching her but holding back all the things her body was screaming for, demanding.

"Tell me what you want, Jaid," he breathed and then traced her lips with the tip of his tongue, making her sigh.

"I want..." she whispered lightly and he backed her up a couple of steps. She knew he was backing her up against a wall and she grew more excited. The anticipation she felt was tearing her apart now. She could hardly stand it.

"Yes?" Luca purred in question when she paused. He backed her all the way up against the cool brick wall and lifted her dress. His hands gripped the sides of her snap panties and lingered there.

She undid his leather pants and pushed them down just past his hips and said, "I want you to take me hard against this wall. Now."

"With pleasure, *mi corazón*," he answered and ripped her panties from her, tucking them hurriedly in his back pocket. Luca lifted her and she wrapped her arms and legs around him as he penetrated her. Jaidyn gasped as she felt his flesh fill her. It was better than she could ever have imagined.

Every nerve was tingling and coming to vibrant life at his touch. The feel of his bare flesh sent shockwaves of pleasure through her.

Luca seared her lips with a kiss that set her blood on fire and made her heart thud loudly against her ribcage. Jaid felt as if she could fly; he made her feel so amazing, like a goddess.

"*Tú estás muy hermosa, mi corazón*," he whispered hoarsely against her swollen lips. Then he gently took her lower lip between his teeth. Luca kissed her jaw and trailed a hot kiss to her throat where he could hear her pulse thundering erratically.

Feeling that she was about to come, Luca bit her neck but was careful not to break the skin, even though his body was aching for a taste of her blood. He leashed the beast inside him, refusing to give in to the bloodlust.

Jaid's orgasm hit her hard and she swore she could see stars. Luca stifled her screams with a kiss that she returned with as much passion as he gave to it.

Jaidyn threaded her hands in his hair and tilted his head to the side. She ran her tongue and teeth down the corded muscle that ran down his neck. Jaid kissed him lightly there and then bit him back. She inwardly shouted in triumph as he gasped at the love bite she gave him. She felt his muscles stiffen and knew that she had pushed him over the edge.

Luca lowered her to the ground and while they were straightening themselves, she asked him, "What was it you said to me in Spanish? 'Too estes mooney hermos me corona?'"

Luca laughed at her, clearly enjoying her jumbled version of what he had said. She couldn't help but laugh, too, seeing the look on his face.

"Close, but I actually said, '*Tú estás muy hermosa, mi corazón.*' And that means, 'You are very beautiful, my...heart'," he told her, looking awkward that she had caught him using such a personal pet name.

"Really? And was there an awkward pause in the Spanish version, too?" she asked, smiling gently at him. He smiled back and kissed her shoulder.

Belatedly, Jaid realized that she had just had sex without a condom. The thought continued to worry her, intruding on her previous happier thoughts, as they walked back to his bike. What if she got pregnant? She didn't want to be impregnated and left on her own again. She knew nothing about Luca except that he was an amazing lover.

Luca swung his leg over the bike and she climbed on after him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"What would you do if I got pregnant?" she asked him before he started the bike. She was afraid that a question like that might scare him off. It didn't.

"You won't get pregnant, Jaid. I'm not able to have children. I'm sterile, I shoot blanks. However you want to say it, but there

is no way that I can get you pregnant. And that is not something I would lie about," Luca told her.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Luca. Did you ever want a family?" she asked, inexplicably *craving* the answer he would give her.

"Yes, I did want to have children," he answered her, an incredibly sad note, just barely hidden in his voice.

Jaid smiled as he started up the Ducati and pulled away from the club. Jaid was glad that she would now be able to feel his bare flesh inside her again...and again. Moreover, he had wanted a family once. Would he want to be a part of hers, small though it was? Would he want to be a father to a boy that was not by blood his?

Jaidyn was surprised that she was beginning to hope so. She'd only known him since yesterday but the idea of only having him for a few weeks depressed her. She hadn't had this much fun without her son since...well, never.

You are being stupid again, Jaid. You cannot set yourself up to be hurt again. Not by Luca, oh please, not by him.

Luca stayed with her for most of the night again. They made love three times before he left around four o'clock in the morning. Jaidyn fell asleep knowing that she would have a difficult time getting up for work in the morning but he was *so* worth it.

Chapter Nine

"Sleep well, Jaid?" Fiona asked Jaid with a gleam in her eye as she watched Jaid stifle yet another yawn. It was Friday and all week Jaid had been sluggish.

Girl needs to get some sleep, Fiona thought. She'd been working at the shop all day, serving drinks to her new friends every evening all week and going home with her sex god every night. But the girl was beginning to smile more.

Jaidyn grinned up at Fiona. Sure she was tired but Jaid was having fun with a man for the first time. Every morning she dragged herself out of bed grinning, knowing every ache and yawn was a small price to pay for what she got every night.

She had seen Luca every night after work this week. Monday night he had taken her out dancing. Tuesday he made her dinner at her place. Wednesday they spent the night in the bedroom with various erotic food stuffs. And last night they had climbed up onto her roof and gazed at the stars.

Luca came to see her at work during her night job and then she would see him after work...at home, in bed...or on the couch...or table. Hell, even her roof.

Jaid was currently bringing in shipments from the back room and stocking up the store while Fiona handled the customers. And while she worked, she thought of Luca. It was strange that she never saw him during the day. He knew she worked here during the day. Luca would be the type to come get her for lunch or something. But then, he was a bodyguard. He had a lot of work to do during the day.

"Hey, what's going on, ladies?" Ziggy asked, coming through the door like a whirlwind. Ladies throughout the store, and Andrew 'Dru' Reagan who was Fiona's best friend since grade school, turned and watched him furtively. One customer was reading a book upside down, her eyes peeking over the top.

"Well, am I surprised to see you again," Fiona told him smiling sweetly at him, and then asking, "How can we help you today?"

Ziggy looked around as if to make sure he wasn't being followed. Then, he leaned in really close to Fiona and whispered, "Do you have any jewelry or something that I would buy if, say, I wanted to please a beautiful woman?"

Jaid snickered at his secretive actions and he turned on her with an arch stare, one corner of his mouth quirked, giving him a sexy dimple, when he failed his attempt not to smile.

"We do have some very lovely necklaces here, Ziggy. What kind of girl are we buying for?" Jaid asked, feigning ignorance.

He studied her expression and then slumped his shoulders in defeat.

"You women are just so intuitive, aren't you? Yes, for Korinna," he told her, giving her a charming lopsided grin.

A half an hour later, Ziggy left with an expensive cuff bracelet instead of a necklace. Korinna would love it, Jaid was sure. Any woman would. The bracelet was a large silver cuff decorated with a Celtic motif and had a large chunk of polished amber in the middle with a bee stuck inside.

"Korinna, huh? What's she got that I ain't got?" Fiona asked Jaid.

"Her mind, maybe?" Jaid returned, grinning wickedly at Fiona. Fiona glanced at her niece out the corner of her eye and tried to keep a frown.

"I suppose that could be it, Jaid. Someday I'll find someone who will accept me as I am or at least share my insanity. Maybe in another life," Fiona laughed.

Dru waltzed up to the counter and asked, "Who *was* that, Fifi?"

"That was my latest fantasy, Drucilla, also known as Ziggy Blue," Fiona answered and shook her head sadly. "He's got a girl."

Dru patted her shoulder consolingly. Dru was a beautiful man, like a model and with the body to match. He dressed to the nines in designer clothing and always had *the perfect* shoes and accessories. Currently his shoulder length wavy blond hair was tied back and his forget-me-not blue eyes disguised behind a pair

of Dior shades.

"Shame, a man like that wasting his affections on a woman. No offense to you fine ladies though," Dru mused with an incorrigible grin.

"Our Jaid has a man, Dru," Fiona whispered.

Dru spun away from Fiona his mouth hanging open in shock, to look speculatively at Jaid. He gasped and brought his hand to rest over his heart.

"My soul...to live to see the day...an honor I tell you. Jaid, good for you! How long have you been seeing Mr. Wonderful?" he breathed.

"A week now. And yes he is fabulous and yes, he is gorgeous," Jaid told him.

"My, my. Fifi...I do believe our baby is growing up," Dru spoke, holding back his pretend sob with his fist held to his lips. She laughed at his theatrics. Jaid had always loved Dru. She had thought for the longest time he was her uncle. He called her his niece. Skye loved him, too.

Jaid joined the pair at the front desk and Dru set his arm around her shoulders. Jaid wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him.

Later, with the shop empty, Jaid and Fiona were cleaning up so they could leave, Jaid received a call on her cell phone.

"Hi, Mom, it's me. I meant to call sooner but we've been running all over the place! I got to go to the beach!" Skye exclaimed.

"Wow, Skye, the beach? Did you find any seashells to bring home for me?" Jaid asked him, loving to hear his voice again.

"Sure did, Mom, three seashells. One's all spirally and weird. You'll like it, I promise! What have you been doing while I'm away?" he asked her. Jaid's face grew warm.

"Well, let's see. I took your advice and went out and made some friends. I went to a concert and you'll love this one, Skye. I got to ride on a motorcycle!" Jaid told him.

"Whoa, cool, Mom! Hey, Jake! My mom rode on a *motorcycle*!" Skye yelled and Jaid smiled as she heard his friend exclaim excitedly in the background.

"What kind of bike was it?" Skye asked her.

"I believe it was called a Ducati, Skye. And it was black and

bright blue and it was very fast. It was quite an adventure," she told him.

"What are your friends' names? Will I get to meet them? Do they have kids, too?" Skye fired off questions.

"There's Korinna, Ziggy, Sadie, Marlana, Loki, Lily, Vallon, Adam, Cameron and Luca. And they don't have kids and I'm sure you will be able to meet them," Jaid answered.

"Wow, your friends sure have some weird names. How's Aunt Fiona, Mom? And Oberon? And the cats?" he asked.

Jaid walked over to stand next to Fiona and leaned the phone sideways so that she could hear, too. Fiona was just locking the front door.

"We're all fine, doll. Thanks for caring. Been having a lot of fun?" Fiona asked him.

"Hi, Aunt Fiona! I'm having a whole bunch of fun! I got some seashells for you, too! If you put them to your ear, you can hear the ocean. At least that's what Mrs. McAllister said. I think mine was broken or something," Skye told them and they laughed. After a few minutes they said their goodbyes and hung up. Jaid sniffled loudly, catching Fiona's attention.

"He'll be back soon, Jaid. Don't cry. You know it tears me up when you cry. Then I'll cry. It'll really put a damper on the evening," Fiona told her, hugging her close.

"I know he's coming back soon but I still want him here now. Are you coming with me tonight, Aunt Fiona?" Jaidyn asked her, drying her eyes.

The two women left 'Miss Monroe's' and drove over to the 'Old Absinthe House'. Bill greeted them as they came in. Jaid went immediately behind the bar.

Fiona took a seat along the bar and ordered a mint julep, her favorite, when Jaidyn asked what she wanted.

"I should have known," Jaid murmured, her aunt always ordered a mint julep.

Less than an hour later, Jaid's friends were laughing and talking with Fiona while Luca conversed with Korinna. Fiona watched them for a minute and it finally hit her exactly what she had thought strange about Luca the night she had met him. He had no aura! She could read nothing from him, like he was purposefully hiding himself from her.

Suddenly, he turned and looked at her as if he knew what she was thinking. Luca's eyes were surprised and a little fearful and then in what seemed like an instant, they were completely devoid of what he was feeling.

Amazing, Fiona thought. *What are you, Luca?*

I would never harm her, Fiona, Luca's voice whispered across her mind, startling her even more. Sensing her fear for Jaid, Luca got up from his seat and walked cautiously over to her.

"What are you?" she whispered, looking up at him from where she still sat, stunned. The exchange had caught the worried attention of every vampire there: Korinna, Lily, and Vallon. Luca calmly took a seat beside her and looked into her eyes, trying to make her realize that he was not going to do anything to hurt either one of them.

"I would never harm her," he repeated and then, "I was supposed to watch over her and protect her but I had to *know* her."

"Protect her from whom, Luca? What are you talking about?" she asked, fearing the answer. How could her Jaid be in danger? She never caused anyone any harm. Who could be a threat to Jaid?

"It's a long story and this is not the time or the place, Fiona. I don't even know if I can trust you with my secret but I want you to believe that Jaid has nothing to fear from me...ever," Luca told her, beseeching her with his eyes to keep quiet on what he knew that she knew already. She was even now aware that Luca was not the only one. She cautiously glanced at Lily, Vallon and Korinna.

"Don't know if *you* can trust *me*? Are you insane? I'm the human here, Luca. Come to my place with me where we can talk alone. I need answers. She and Skye are all that I have left and I'll not let anything happen to them," Fiona told him. Fiona made her excuses to everyone and left the bar.

"Jaid, I'll see you a little later, okay? I've got something important to do, but I'll be back," he told Jaid. Jaid nodded and he kissed her lingeringly on the lips, leaning over the bar to reach her. Before he left, he heard Vallon say in his mind that they would stay with her until Luca returned. He nodded his

thanks.

Luca saw that Fiona was waiting in her Jeep and he hopped on his bike and followed her to her townhouse on Barracks Street. Fiona sat outside and watched him approach, wondering what she had gotten Jaid into.

"I think it will be alright out here," Fiona told him, gesturing for him to follow her through the small alleyway and into the tiny and plain rear courtyard. Obviously she was afraid to invite him into her home. Fair enough.

"Who and what are you exactly, Luca? Why don't you have an aura? Who and what are you 'protecting' my niece from?" Fiona asked him in a rush.

"I am Lucius Eduardo Salvarez and you know what I am, Fiona. I have no aura because I hide it so people like you and others like me can't 'read' me. I don't want the others to know where I am at all times so I hide myself from them. It's as simple as that.

"I *am* protecting Jaid from a man who may strike out at her in revenge against a woman who could never love him," Luca explained.

"What woman and *why*? Why?" she asked, wringing her hands nervously.

"Lily Fontaine never loved a man named Angelo Milonne. She has always loved Vallon and so Angelo tried to take his life. He failed and we fear he may look for another way to get back at Lily. That would be Jaidyn and Skye, her only living relatives," Luca explained to her slowly.

"Lily related to Skye and Jaid? Skye! Oh my dear Gods, he's in Florida! What if something happens to him?" she panicked.

"Another relative is with him. Her name is Aurelia Larue. Aurelia's great grandson, Richard de Villiers, married Lily's sister, Elizabeth Fontaine. They had children who had children and so on and so forth coming down to Jaid and Skye. From us, there is nothing to fear, Fiona. I promise you," Luca told her.

"This is unbelievable, Luca! How outrageous did that story sound to you? Lucky for you, I believe that there are things in this world of which we humans remain unaware," Fiona said, rubbing her arms as she felt chilled by all he told her. A real live

horde of vampires right here in New Orleans. Fiona snorted. Of course. Where *else* would they be?

"Angelo is six foot one, pale skin, very blue eyes and auburn hair that is shoulder length," Luca showed her Angelo with his mind and added, "Always be on the lookout for this man. If you see him, get into a crowd of people. He murdered Vallon's mother and friend, Azure. He is ruthless and relentless, Fiona."

"Oh, God and Goddess, help us all. How can I be sure that I can trust you, Luca?" Fiona asked him with concern, wanting to trust him but afraid to.

He sighed gustily and told her, "Understand this takes a lot of trust on my part. Not to mention any vampire near will know I'm here."

Suddenly his aura surrounded him, swirling and pulsing with power she couldn't begin to imagine.

"Just how old are you?" she asked in awe.

He watched her as she went to take a seat on a wooden bench tucked into the corner of the courtyard. He leaned himself against the building.

"Six hundred and seventy-six," he told her.

"*Shit!* Sorry, that was rude of me. How many of the others I know are vampires?" she asked him, feeling that she could relax and trust him. He was a good soul and he cared about Jaid and surprisingly, he cared for the absent Skye.

"Korinna, Lily and Vallon are vampires, Fiona. Although I'm sure you knew that. All can be trusted. They stayed around you even though they knew you might sense their absence of auras. That calls for a lot of trust. We basically put our lives into your hands. We couldn't know if you would kill us or not," he explained, crossing his ankles and lighting a cigarette.

"You shouldn't smoke. Those things will kill you," Fiona warned him.

Luca gave her a droll stare as he took another long drag. Fiona laughed at herself and shook her head.

"Sometimes I think I'm crazy and other times...I know," Fiona told him wistfully, which elicited a husky laugh from him.

"You'll have to tell her, Luca. How can I keep something this huge from her? We are very close and we share a lot with

each other," Fiona told him seriously.

"May I ask you not to tell her of this? I just want to be near her for awhile. Soon, her son will be home and she can go back to her life and I will go back to watching her from afar. We could never be together, Fiona. I know that is what you are thinking. I will never age and I could not watch her die," he told her. Luca felt suddenly weighed down with regrets. If he were human, he would fight to stay with her.

"Maybe she would want to be what you are, Luca," Fiona suggested, refusing to give up hope that her niece would find someone to love.

"You know that's untrue just as I know it. She would never choose that because she has her son to think of," Luca told her. It would be useless for her to entertain such thoughts of the two of them living happily in love. There would be no happily ever after for him...not as long as he couldn't have Jaidyn.

"You love her, don't you? Alright...I will not say anything to her yet, but I hope that you'll change your mind and tell her yourself. Jaid is a smart girl, and mark my words, she *would* find out eventually. Even though she isn't as sensitive to these things as I can be, she does know some things. She will feel it for herself, you'll see," Fiona told him and Luca wondered if she was right. If she found out by herself, how would she react to the knowledge?

Would she give him a chance to explain himself or would she cut out his heart? Why did everything have to be so complicated? And if he just simply told her, would she think he was crazy or a Strigoi Vii: a human, 'living vampire'?

Then again, if he didn't tell her the truth, how would she know to watch out for a man that may try to hurt her? Maybe Fiona *was* right.

"Damn right, I'm right, Luca! Jaid grew up with me for an aunt. As a child she would talk to spirits and tell me that her mommy, my sister Renee, was watching over us and that she said that she loved us. I used to take her on fairy hunts and tell her stories of elves, dragons and unicorns. Her mind is wide open, dear," Fiona told him, with tears in her eyes over her thoughts of her sister.

"I don't know, Fiona, we'll see. I don't want to complicate

her life," Luca told her and she stood up and walked over to him. He watched her warily, wondering what she was up to. Luca was stunned when she merely pulled him into her arms and hugged him.

"What was that for?" he asked her.

She smiled benignly at him and answered, "Thank you for looking after her, Luca. She and Skye are my world."

* * * *

Jaidyn worked until midnight like she did every night and said goodnight to Bill.

"Be careful going home, Jaid. Have a nice night and I'll see you Monday, alright?" Bill called after her. She waved to him and walked out the door.

"Would you like a ride? Or maybe you could come visit me over at my place?" Jaidyn asked Vallon and Lily who were still with her.

"Sure, we'll go over to your place. I'd like that very much," Lily answered her and Jaid nodded happily and waved at them to follow her to her car.

Lily sat on Vallon's lap in the front passenger seat as neither one had wanted to climb into the cramped backseat of Jaidyn's Camaro. Jaidyn was glad for their company, she really liked them and she wasn't sure if Luca was getting back tonight. The house would be very lonely.

They reached Jaidyn's place and followed her up to the house.

"Would you like a drink? I've got coffee, water, soda, beer, and I've got some great vintage wine if you'd like a glass," Jaidyn asked them as she unlocked her front door and stepped into the house. They both accepted a glass of wine and she realized they were still standing outside waiting.

"You can come in, you know," Jaid called to them and she got them some wine from the fridge. How strange that they had just stood outside waiting for her to invite them in. Then Jaid got a crazy thought in her head.

They're like vampires. They can't come into your house unless you invite them in.

"Here you go," she said, handing them their drinks. They were looking at her strangely and then the looks faded. She

looked down at herself to make sure everything was still in order.

Why were they looking at me like that? Did I say that they were vampires out loud?

"Is this your son, Jaidyn?" Lily asked her, pointing to one of the pictures of him that were scattered all over the house on walls and shelves.

"Yeah, that's Skye. He's nine years old now and in this picture he was only six," Jaidyn told her and Lily looked around for a more recent photograph.

"What a cute boy! He's really growing up to be a lady killer," Lily told her honestly, smiling at the picture of him at his birthday party.

"Thank you and I'm raising him so that he'll know how to treat a girl," Jaid told her proudly and Lily looked fondly at her niece, wanting to grip her in a tight hug. She missed Elizabeth fiercely and Jaid and Skye were her flesh and blood. How she longed to tell her so.

A knock sounded at the front door and Jaid opened the door to see Luca standing there with a big grin on his face.

"Hello, all, nice to see you here," he said and then murmured, "I guess." He smiled predatorily at Jaid and asked her, "Should we make them *am-scray*? They should have previous engagements," he joked, making Lily choke on her sip of beer. Vallon just shook his head at Luca and smiled back.

"For shame, beast. Can I get you a drink?" Jaidyn asked him. He gave her a queer look and asked her in return, "Do you always bring your work home with you?"

"What can I say? I'm a work-aholic," Jaidyn said and he asked her politely for a glass of wine. He had brought her two nice bottles of vintage the other night. While she was in the kitchen, Luca thanked Vallon and Lily for staying with her.

"Anytime, Luca, she's my niece after all. Not to pry...but you seem to be very *close* to her now..." Lily said and trailed off.

"Not you, too! You sound like Aurelia. I won't hurt her, Lily, I promise. I will be out of her life soon and she can forget me," Luca told her. The thought caused him no small pain. *Would* she forget him?

FROM THE SHADOWS

Would she find someone else after him? Oh, he couldn't bear the idea but he had no right to her. He was not human. It would never work.

"Nonsense, she will never forget you. That I *know*! If you had planned to leave her all along, why did you ever let her know you in the first place? You'll only make the parting harder for the both of you," Lily said. They kept their voices quiet so that Jaid could not hear them.

"I don't know, Lily. I really can't explain it. It was like I was walking toward her before I even knew what I was doing. I couldn't make myself see reason," he told her and she nodded in understanding.

Luca knew she understood perfectly what he meant; she had done the same with Vallon. But Vallon had no children and his decision was simpler than Jaid's would have to be. *If* he asked her.

And Luca knew he couldn't bring himself to.

"Are you going to tell her what is going on? She might be better off knowing who Angelo is so that he can't trick her the way I know he had to have tricked my mom," Vallon told him, obvious concern etched on his face. And Luca realized he had a good point there. Luca shrugged, showing them his confusion.

"I know I should but I'm reluctant. If I do tell her...nothing will ever be the same for her. She'll be nervous and terrified because the threat extends to her son. But then again, if I tell her, she can be on guard. I just don't know," Luca told them, his head pounding.

Adding up the pros and cons of the situation would be no help to him. He should never have interfered in Jaid's life.

"I don't think there is a decision to be made here *at all*, Luca. You know that she is in greater danger if she doesn't know," Vallon told him, settling the matter.

"Would you like for us to be here? For moral support...or something?" Lily asked him, feeling awkward. She hadn't had to make this kind of choice. The truth had bitten Vallon on the neck and after that...there had been no need to convince him.

This would be different.

Luca let out a strange half-laugh, half-groan and said, "Seems kind of strange, doesn't it? Like some 'Twilight Zone'

intervention. 'You're human and we're not...we are *very* concerned.'"

Jaidyn came back into the living room and brought Luca his glass of wine, making her excuses on having taken so long in the kitchen. She had figured they might be hungry and had popped a frozen lasagna into the oven.

Luca downed his glass of wine in one swallow. Jaid raised an eyebrow at him.

"Okaaaaaaay, what changed in the atmosphere since I left the room?" Jaid asked, looking around at three nervous faces. She watched in horror as Luca took a deep breath as if he were about to drop a bomb on her.

Ohgodohgodohgodohgod, her mind screamed, wondering what in the world he could possibly have to tell her.

"Jaid...I need to tell you something. Maybe you should sit?" Luca began and continued when she merely shook her head, a pained look of worry and anticipation marring her brow.

"You're life may be in danger. There is a man named Angelo Milonne who has just recently killed two people just to get at Vallon. This is because Angelo loves Lily, in a maniacal way, but she loves Vallon. Angelo tried to kill Vallon not too long ago but failed and will most likely try to exact his revenge on others who are important to her. I have been watching over you for some time now..." he was cut off by an unladylike snort from Jaid. Questioningly, he looked at her and raised his eyebrows.

"You *can't* be serious! Are you trying to tell me that you *spied* on me? I don't understand what *any* of this has to do with me!" Jaid spoke, trying to keep her voice at a sedate level, failing. She was struggling to understand what he was saying to her.

"I wasn't spying on you. I was trying to protect you from a man that it is my fault he is still on the earth in the first place!" he told her, staring into her eyes, willing her to see the truth inside them. Jaid sat abruptly on the chaise and Luca knelt at her feet. Lily and Vallon remained silent on the couch.

Luca let his guard down, letting his presence be felt and the others followed suit. Jaid looked up at him suddenly.

"What just happened? Something is different!" Jaid asked

Luca, feeling the power that emanated from all of them.

"Strange, most humans don't feel the change," Lily murmured to Vallon. Jaid heard and turned to her, whipping her head around so fast that she was surprised it hadn't popped in protest.

"Did you just say '*humans* don't feel the change'?! What is that supposed to mean? Oh my God! Are you telling me that all three of you are not human? What? You're from another planet? Did the world just go George Lucas on me? Is your other car the 'Millennium Falcon'? Or, wait, maybe you're all vampires! Is that what you're trying to tell me?" Jaidyn asked them, wondering if they shared a psychosis or something. Mass delusion, perhaps.

That or they took RPG to a whole new level.

"We are not crazy, Jaid. Your aunt told me your mind was wide open! Let me explain to you what is going on here, okay? I have a friend named Aurelia Larue and she is an ancestor of yours. And so is Lily. Have you ever looked at your family tree, if you have one? You would find Lily's name for sure but not Aurelia's. Aurelia was seduced by a married man, his name was Thomas Warren de Villiers, and as a result she gave birth to his son, one Robert Augustus de Villiers. Now, Thomas' wife Margaret was barren and he desperately wanted an heir.

"Their answer to this dilemma was to take the child from Aurelia and raise him to be the heir of the de Villiers' fortune. Aurelia *would* have agreed to this. She was only what *they* called 'a mulatto slave girl' and she wouldn't be able to afford to bring him up the way they could. Margaret, however, wanted Aurelia banished from their estate. And so she was.

"They beat her badly. Aurelia had refused to go peacefully as there was no way she could leave her son. In the end, she was cast out as a free woman and forbidden to ever come near their house again. And in no way must she ever try to see her son. These were the conditions for her freedom. Thomas thought she would be appeased and leave them with the child. Two years later, after biding her time, she came back at night and stole the sleeping child from his crib.

"It took them days to find her and the child, but they finally found her hiding out with the child in a cabin in the bayou and when they found her...they hung her on the spot and left her

hanging there to die a slow, torturous death. At the last moment, she was saved by a Cherokee by the name of Shadow. Aurelia told me he had cut her down and held her in his arms as she gasped for air, dying slowly still.

"He said to her, 'I know what it is to have a child taken from you. I want you to take your revenge as I was never able.' And so he turned her, giving her the blood and teaching her the powers she now possessed. Aurelia went back to the house a week later and with her hands, crushed every bone in Thomas' neck. Margaret woke to see his murder but she made not a sound. She was too terrified to even move.

"Aurelia turned to her and told her calmly, 'Raise him as if he were your own. Give him everything that I cannot or I will come back for you. This I swear to you, so help me God.' Aurelia has stayed in New Orleans watching over her descendants and protecting them. She followed Skye to Florida and is watching him there. She asked me to watch over you in her stead," Luca finished his story and waited for Jaid to speak. Vallon and Lily sat in stunned silence on the couch, amazed by the terrible story they had just heard.

"So how am I related to Lily?" Jaid asked meekly, at a loss of what else to say at the moment.

"Aurelia's great-grandson, Richard, married Lily's sister, Elizabeth Fontaine. You are descended from their union," Luca explained patiently.

"So Lily is a vampire?" she asked, looking at Lily as if she had never seen her before. Lily nodded at her and said, "So is Vallon, Korinna, Luca, and the man we are warning you about, Angelo."

Jaid looked to Luca, and then Vallon and then her head snapped back to Luca.

"Luca, you are a vampire, too? How am I supposed to believe all of this? How old are you guys?" Jaid asked, trying to believe their words but failing a little. But then, she *had* felt something in the room change.

"Two hundred and twenty-two years old," Lily answered for herself. Jaid looked at Luca and he answered, "Six hundred and seventy-six." Jaid's eyes widened considerably and then turned to look expectantly at Vallon.

FROM THE SHADOWS

"Oh, I'm only twenty-six," he said, smiling at her. Jaid nodded, looking as if she were going to laugh.

She did.

"Twenty-six? They're telling me they are hundreds of years old and you're only twenty-six?" Jaidyn asked. She fought hard against rising hysteria.

"I'm new," he replied.

* * * *

Jaidyn lay in bed alone that night. Her mind was swimming with all they had told her. They had kept her up until three o'clock talking about the danger she could be in.

Needless to say, no one ate the lasagna she had accidentally let burn to a blackened crisp.

First thing in the morning, Jaid was going to crawl up into the attic and find those old family documents her father had loved to look through. There *was* a family tree in those papers if she remembered correctly.

Chapter Ten

"I don't believe it! He told you the truth after all!" Fiona exclaimed to her niece the next morning. Jaid had called her at seven in the morning to come over. Jaid had said that she really needed someone to talk to. Jaid had told her everything that had happened the night before, relieved to be sharing her feelings with someone.

"What are you talking about, Aunt Fiona?" Jaid asked cautiously. Not her, too.

"That's where Luca was when he left the bar last night, with me. I realized in the bar what I had thought had been so unusual about him and he confronted me. We went back to my place and he told me the truth and Jaid, he isn't lying to you. Trust me on this. He did show you Angelo, didn't he?" Fiona asked and Jaid nodded glumly as the undeniable truth slammed into her. Fiona would not lie to her...so it was true.

"Come on, Jaid. Let's get up into that dusty attic and find that family tree! I know that you know I wouldn't lie to you but this would give you closure seeing it on paper. I could have sworn that you were more open-minded, Jaid. You made me look like a liar," Fiona told her, nudging her up off the couch.

Jaid nodded and felt foolish. Fiona was right. Jaid had been raised believing in fairies and dragons! And yet she had balked when told there were real vampires. And she had slept with one! Jaidyn shook her head, trying to clear it of the fog that seemed to have crept in last night.

Jaid followed Fiona into the laundry room. In the laundry room there was a door that led up to the attic by way of a narrow staircase.

"All that renovating and he didn't think of at least painting up here?" Fiona asked, hating the drab off-white color of the walls of the stairwell and the attic itself.

"At least it's organized," Fiona added. The room may be in desperate need of cleaning, but Jaid's father had been precise and orderly. And so was the attic.

Everything had a label or was in a marked box. They found the chest they were looking for. It was a red cracked leather trunk with silver hardware and had belonged to Jaid's father's grandmother, Louisa May Flint. Her name was emblazoned on the lid. On the front of the chest, her father had taped a card to the metal strap running down the middle. On the card he had written, 'Family Documents.'

Jaid opened the box, excited about finding the names she had heard last night. What if she did find them? There would be no going back. No more denial. She would have to admit to herself that there were things in this world she didn't understand, and likely never would.

For two hours the pair got caught up in mounds of papers of family history and some old photographs that had gotten mixed in. Jaid smiled wistfully when she found photos of her father as a small boy.

"Here it is, Jaid!" Fiona called out, waving the paper over her head like a lunatic.

"Thank God the paper is still in good condition, Aunt Fiona. Did anyone ever tell you that old papers had to be handled with *care*?" Jaid asked her, gently plucking the paper from Fiona's fingers.

Fiona smiled fondly at her and said, "You sound just like your father, Jaid. He never let me near any of these old things."

"I can see why," Jaid mumbled, scanning her family tree with avid interest. Her father had added their names. He had written their names in the same beautiful calligraphy that decorated the rest of the old parchment.

"Here it is! It shows here that a Thomas Warren de Villiers married one Margaret Amelia and they had a son by the name of Robert Augustus de Villiers! That was *Aurelia's* son, not Margaret's! And *he* married a woman by the name of Caroline and had a son they called Arthur Thomas. He married a woman named Jane and they had a son named Richard!

"Oh my God! It's all here! Richard married Elizabeth Fontaine! And here is Lily's name! Lillian Marie Simone

Fontaine!" Jaid spoke rapidly, her heart pounding with excitement.

"Jaid, check this out," Fiona said, handing her an old newspaper clipping. It was an engagement announcement. It included a plea for the return of Lillian Marie Simone Fontaine to her family. Jaid shook her head, a grin spreading across her face.

"I can't believe it! There is a vampire in my family tree," Jaid said, staring at Lily's name in the tree. She looked up to see Margaret's name and scowled. She would have to fix *that* later.

"Okay, I believe it all now and I am even somewhat calm. I just need to know one thing: Is my son really in danger?" Jaid asked. She looked up into Fiona's face.

"That I do not know, dear. After all, they said you *could* be in danger, not that you *were*. They are just trying to warn us in case this Angelo fella thinks he's going to get even with Lily through you and Skye," Fiona answered.

That was true enough but any remote possibility was too much as far as Jaidyn was concerned. Should she call the McAllister's and ask them to bring her son back? That might only succeed in panicking them and the children. He would be home in two weeks but was that soon enough?

"Maybe you *should* call them and ask them to bring him home," Fiona told her, reading her thoughts. Jaid nodded mutely.

"It would ruin their whole vacation. Skye would be so upset. Hey, I could have Luca call Aurelia and have her bring him back. I would call the McAllister's and inform them that she is coming. You know, that's a great idea! I think I will," Jaidyn decided.

Later that night, Jaid called Luca up on his cell phone to ask him to have Aurelia bring her son home to her. He agreed and was relieved when she told him she had found the family tree and saw that what he had told her was true.

There had been no fear in her voice.

"Luca, is something wrong?" Aurelia asked, answering her phone after the first ring.

"No, Aurelia, don't worry. Jaid wants you to bring Skye home to her. She's calling the family he's been staying with after I call her back to tell them that you will be coming for him. She's

going to tell them that you are her father's long lost niece," Luca told her.

"What? How does she know about me? You told her. Why?" Aurelia bombarded him with questions.

"Her aunt is a sensitive. She figured me out and so I decided to tell Jaid. It is better that she know so that she can be on the lookout for Angelo," Luca explained.

He heard Aurelia let out a long sigh.

"Alright, I'll do it. She will, of course, speak to Skye of this, I presume?" Aurelia asked.

"Yes, she will. Be happy, Aurelia, *mi amiga*. There will be no more hiding for you. You have your family now," Luca told her and he could almost *hear* her smile.

* * * *

St. Augustine, Florida

Aurelia waited outside the door of the McAllister's hotel room and took a deep breath. It had been two days since she had received Luca's phone call. So as not to raise questions on how and why she had already been in the area, she was told to wait for at least two days before going to them. Luca's idea, she was sure.

She raised her hand and knocked gently on the door, trying to will her nervousness away. Her heart was pounding in her throat. She was excited to see Skye and get to speak with him and yet...she hadn't had contact with her blood in so long.

A pretty woman with soft blond hair and big brown eyes opened the door and looked questioningly at her.

"Hello, I am Aurelia Larue. Jaid sent me here to pick up Skye. I've just come from Tampa," she told the woman, who then gave her a kind smile.

"Come on in, Miss Larue. I'm Kathy and this is my husband, Kyle and our son, Jake. I'm not sure you've met Skye? To have been lost to your family for so long...well, I can hardly imagine. It's so nice of Jaidyn to have you bring her son home so she can organize a family reunion in your honor," she talked, gesturing to her family as she introduced them. Her husband was a kind featured man with wavy short brown hair and dark blue eyes and his son resembled Kathy in coloring.

Aurelia's eyes came to rest on Skye's face and she felt a surging of happiness bubbling up inside of her. He gazed at her curiously, his head cocked to the side as if stumped by her appearance. His light green eyes studied her intently.

"I'm afraid not. I'm sure Jaid told you that I am the daughter of Alexander's half-sister whom he had never known about. I've never had the opportunity to meet Skye yet. I've known Jaid for a long time but never had the courage to tell her who I was, until just recently," she lied, never taking her eyes from the boy that was staring interestedly back at her.

"Hello," he told her with a smile, coming to stand before her, a patched up green backpack slung over one shoulder. He was such a beautiful child. He resembled his mother in many ways, except for the black hair. He was infinitely precious to her.

"Hello, are you ready to go home and see your mother?" Aurelia asked him, ruffling his hair playfully. He nodded and they said their goodbyes.

They walked quietly through the hotel together, as if neither was sure what to make of the other. They continued in silence outside. Skye looked up into the dark night sky and pointed silently for her to look up. The stars were bright tonight and there was a ring around the moon.

"Troubles ahead," he told her simply, nodding to the moon.

"And maybe some storms, too," Aurelia added and he laughed at her more logical approach to reading the night sky.

They came to a stop before Aurelia's black Ford Mustang GT. Skye eyed it appreciatively and climbed in on the passenger side.

"You aren't my Grandpa's niece, Aurelia. I could tell that Mom wasn't being honest with me. She has a different sound to her voice when she lies, like the time I asked her about my father. She told me that he had had a bad accident and was in Heaven but that he loved me very much. It was a lie, Aurelia," Skye told her as she pulled out of the hotel's parking lot. She was struck by how wise this boy was. How could he know such things as the tone of his mother's voice when she lied?

"How do you know that, kiddo?" Aurelia asked him curiously.

"Aunt Fiona calls it 'the sight'. She says Mom's got it too but

she's been too busy worrying about me all the time to see what the mind is trying to tell her. We get it from great-Grandma Monroe, who Aunt Fiona says was a Cajun seeress. She would read tarot cards and palms. She could talk to spirits too. My great-Grandpa was a Cherokee shaman. So we were born to this," Skye told her.

"Does your mom know about what you can 'see', Skye?" she asked.

"Yes and no. She knows that I know things but she doesn't know how much I know, you know?" Skye asked her and laughed at what he had said.

"I guess you know that I know that you know, right?" Aurelia replied and laughed with him. God, but it felt good to be with her family.

"So will we have to sleep during the day?" he asked her and she was again amazed at the kid's mind power. All this time she had watched him and she hadn't picked up on the psychic energy this kid was emitting? She must be getting too old.

"I don't want anyone to feel that energy. I just want to be normal," Skye told her.

* * * *

Aurelia pulled the car off the road at a lonely gas station in Alabama late the next night. Skye was curled up asleep in the backseat. Early that morning she had found a hotel where they could stay until sunset. Skye had had a lot of trouble going to sleep at such odd hours so he had watched TV for most of the morning. Hence, he was now crashed out in her car.

She hummed under her breath as she exited the car and stepped up to the dusty self-serve pumps. This place was truly eerie. Like something you'd see in a bad b-movie.

She put twenty in the tank and hung the pump back onto its hook. Reaching into the car for her purse, she changed her mind about leaving the car unlocked and so she opened the door to roll up the windows and lock the doors. She left the keys inside so the air conditioning would keep Skye cool; she had a spare key in her purse.

She ran up to the small building and pushed open the grimy door.

"Hello? I need to pay for some gas," she called out. There

was no one at the service desk and she could see no one in the back room. She looked down the three sad aisles and found no one. Cautiously, Aurelia crept into the back room to look around. There was a small black and white TV blaring the news. She peered over the edge of the couch and saw him. His throat had been torn out, blood pooled on the floor.

"Shit!" she breathed and ran back outside, bursting through the door and skidding to a halt. A group of five men were leaning up against her car. They all wore non-descriptive black clothing and matching sneers.

"Well, well, lookie here, boys. We got a lovely little Changeling here. Isn't she delightful? Now normally I don't go for the Changelings...but this one's got appeal," spoke the apparent leader of the group. He was very tall with smooth, pale skin and deep garnet hair that fell to his waist. His eyes were sinister and black.

Aurelia watched them warily. These were no humans. What could they want with her and a small, defenseless boy?

"Yeah, the boss didn't tell us she was so good looking. And he neglected to mention the boy was an Oracle. Or maybe Davriel is just getting too old," said another one, this one fluttered a butterfly knife menacingly. It was made of a strange black metal.

Aurelia noticed that all were carrying these strange blades. Some were swords, some were knives, and one even had a set of hand claws made of the same metal.

"Admiring our tools, Changeling? How about a taste?" asked the leader and he rushed at her. The others followed.

Aurelia caught the leader with an uppercut and he hit the ground. One reached out with a knife and she grabbed his wrist and flipped him over her, knocking the knife from his hands. She screamed as one of them with a sword laid open her shoulder.

She hissed in pain as the wound sizzled and throbbed. The blade was so cold that it burned like mad. Blood poured from the gash unrelentingly.

What the fuck? she thought as the flow didn't stop, the wound didn't heal.

He laughed and lunged for her again while the others circled her menacingly, laughing and jeering at her.

She picked the fallen knife up and shoved it into her attacker's eye. He dropped his blade and screamed as he held his hands over his eye. Aurelia took hold of the sword and swung it over her head in an arc.

"You boys just messed with the wrong bitch!" she shouted and ran for the blinded one. She cut his torso in half and she grinned when his top half slid off and fell to the ground.

"Who's next?" she asked, laughing maniacally. The man with the claws who was their leader, rushed at her simultaneously with another knife wielder. The leader slashed at her, shredding her shirt but fortunately missing her flesh. She swung her elbow out and connected it with his jaw. He stumbled backwards and she cut the fingers of the knife wielder off. He dropped the knife with a howl.

Aurelia stopped the unpleasant sound as she separated his head from his shoulders. She barely had time to register the fact that he had turned to ashes. Another knife maniac came up from behind her. Aurelia brought her foot up and back, slamming his testicles back up from where they had first dropped. She heard him hit his knees and so she spun and took his head. Again, he became nothing but ashes.

The leader and the other swordsman eyed her warily and then disappeared.

Aurelia blinked her eyes rapidly. Surely she had not just seen two men just disappear, it wasn't possible. Wasn't it?

The man whose torso she had cut was still alive! She could hear him breathing!

Looking up she saw Skye, eyes wide, face pressed against the window. Oh dear God, he had seen everything.

"It's alright now, Skye. They're gone. But just stay in the car until I'm done, alright?" she asked him in her best soothing voice. He weakly nodded.

She gasped as the pain in her arm never lessened. What in the world was going on? She remembered that they had changed, *physically* changed, when she had killed them. And then, they had turned into dust, right before her eyes!

Aurelia walked warily over to the man that was still alive. He was watching her, waiting for her to finish him. She crouched down on her haunches and just gazed at him, utterly bewildered.

His skin was grayish-blue in color and he had large black wings! She glanced down into his eyes, glassy and empty from the pain, from weakness. The irises were blood red and the whites...were black. Even the blood was black.

She stood over him and plunged the blade into his chest, swinging the blade in an arc. Reaching in, she callously ripped out his heart and tossed it on the ground. And then, his body was no more.

"Un-*fucking*-believable! What the fuck *were* those things?!" she asked aloud.

Aurelia carried the weapons back to her car and set them in the trunk. She had to show them to someone. Running back into the gas station, Aurelia grabbed some water and some chips, a first aid kit and a sewing kit. She left a fifty dollar bill on the counter and ran back to the car.

She left the man inside exactly where he was, he might have family that would want to bury him.

After unloading her newly acquired items into the car, Aurelia climbed back into the driver's seat. She gave Skye a kiss on the forehead.

"You alright, Skye?" she asked.

"Yeah, they just knocked on the window and woke me up. Then I heard them talking to you. They were going to kill us," he told her.

"I know, Skye, I know. Let's get the hell outta here. I'll find us someplace to stay for the day, alright? Chips, sweetie?" she asked, handing him a bag with some water.

Later at the cheap motel she found, Aurelia stitched her arm up in the bathroom while Skye watched cartoons lying on the single bed. This was the first time since she had been human that she had needed to be patched up.

What kind of blades were those?

* * * *

Tenebrae, the Shadow Realm

"You failed, did you? Are you telling me that *one* Changeling took on the five of you? Only two of you survived! That is pathetic! Never underestimate your prey! It is what will get you killed, you colossal fools!" Davriel raged. He had sent

five demons out to take care of one vampire Changeling and one *human* child!

Evonn watched smugly from her seat on the dais next to Davriel. She wasn't his queen but she was his head mistress. She watched as Davriel fumed at the quaking demons.

"We were not informed about the Oracle, sir. We were not the only ones making mistakes," the leader of the small band said.

Davriel swept out of his seat and rushed down to stand nose to nose with the impudent whelp that had dared to mock him. The demon didn't bat an eye.

"Awfully brave of you, Torr. An Oracle, you say? Think you for a moment that had I known he was an Oracle I would have ordered you to kill him? *Do* you?" Davriel asked him, his voice silky and deadly.

"No, sir, you would not have ordered us to kill him. I spoke out of line," Torr answered.

"I respect you, Torr. I really do. You are one of the strongest demons of our army. But if you *ever* take such a tone with me again," Davriel paused and put his hand through the other demon's chest and ripped out his still beating heart, "...you will end up like him."

Davriel tossed the heart on the floor of his council chambers and the shifting shadows began tearing at the flesh, making hungry sucking sounds, moments before the body disintegrated into nothing more than ash.

"Do you understand me?" Davriel asked.

Torr nodded and lowered his gaze to the floor, watching as the shadows of countless other fallen demons swirled menacingly, and waiting for the next fresh kill. He could not erase the image of them as they had devoured his comrade's heart.

* * * *

New Orleans, Louisiana

Jaid was getting a beer for one of her customers at work that Thursday when Skye came running through the door. She had been waiting impatiently to see him even as Luca had been staying with her every night until an hour or so before sun up.

Now he hid nothing from her since she knew the truth and she realized just how strange her life had become.

For instance, Jaid had been in the kitchen late one night and had to clamber up onto a kitchen chair to reach the cabinets above her refrigerator where she kept her more expensive champagne flutes, wine glasses and fancy dinnerware. The chair had slipped and Jaid had lost her balance and suddenly found herself in Luca's arms.

"How did you...? But you were just...Backyard...I *saw* you out the window...*as* I fell! Wow. I was just trying to get some nice glasses for the wine..." Jaidyn stammered as Luca gently set her back on her feet and kissed her sweetly.

Jaidyn was disrupted from the memory as she saw Skye.

"Skye! Oh, I missed you *so* much! Are you alright? Did you have fun?" Jaid asked as she ran over to him and gripped him in a tight hug.

"Mom...I can't breathe," he whispered and she laughed and released him. He made a big show of gulping in air and grinned at her. Skye glanced over to Luca and waved as if he knew him. Jaid frowned, wondering.

"You must be Luca. Are you my mom's *boyfriend*?" he asked, walking over to take a seat next to him. Luca looked startled and he looked at Jaid with a raised eyebrow as if asking her if he *was* her boyfriend.

"Yes, he is," Fiona piped up and Jaid shook her head exasperatedly. But she blushed and looked at Luca with a shy smile.

"Hey, Aunt Fiona! I got your seashells here in my bag! But I wrapped them in bubble wrap so they wouldn't break. You can have the bubble wrap too, as you like to pop it," Skye told her as he rummaged through his backpack.

Jaid turned to the woman who was standing a few feet away, watching them together. She was beautiful with warm honey-colored skin and lovely brown eyes. Her hair was dark auburn and twisted up with chopsticks. She wore a flowing purple silk dress with belled sleeves that Fiona would adore.

"Aurelia? Thank you for bringing him home to us," Jaidyn told her and Aurelia looked longingly at her as if she wanted to hug her.

"Jaid...it's good to see you face-to-face at last," Aurelia said to her, coming closer to stand before her granddaughter. Jaid stepped into the woman's arms, feeling an immediate connection to her. A few moments later, Aurelia reluctantly let her go and smiled affectionately at her.

"Good to see you again, Luca. Thank you for watching over her for me," Aurelia told Luca, who had been looking over the seashells Skye had brought. Aurelia, Fiona and Jaid all plainly saw the budding admiration in Skye's eyes as Luca told Skye what kinds of seashells he had brought back.

It seemed he really had needed a male figure in his life.

"Anytime, Aurelia, anytime. How was Florida?" he asked her, meeting her eyes. She caught the real question. They all took a seat at the bar with the exception of Jaid who went to stand behind it.

"I cannot say here. We should meet someplace private afterwards. All of you. I have some things to discuss with you all," Aurelia answered and Jaid's heart leaped up into her throat.

"My house. I get off at midnight. Aunt Fiona can take Skye over later and they'll wait for us to get there," Jaid suggested and all nodded their agreement. Jaid began talking to Skye about his trip to lighten the mood.

Skye talked while he began a game of Texas Hold 'Em with Luca.

"I learned how to play Texas Hold 'Em. I won almost all the time! Mr. McAllister said that I was a card shark and that I had known how to play all along and was just trying to trick him. So you probably wouldn't want to play me for money," he said to everyone and added with a solemn expression on his face, "because it'll be a highway robbery."

Jaid smiled and felt as if her heart were expanding as she watched Luca laughing with Skye and looking at him as if they had always been friends. Luca felt Jaid's eyes on him and he turned to her with a smile.

Skye watched the expressions on their faces with interest. There was something there, he could tell. It was so obvious! But did they know it? Of course not! Being grown up didn't seem like much fun to Skye. They couldn't even distinguish their own feelings!

Later, all were finally gathered expectantly at Jaid's house. Skye sat between Luca and Jaid on the couch while Aurelia sat on the chaise and Fiona was sitting Indian-style on the floor.

Aurelia had a blanket with something bundled in it balanced on her knees. They all eyed it curiously, except Skye who knew what she was concealing.

"On the second night I had Skye with me, I pulled off at some lonely little gas station in Alabama. The worker was dead. I was attacked by five...things. They looked like men, at first. Fortunately, I fought them off. Three died and the other two vanished in thin air. Yes, I'm absolutely serious! When I looked at the body of the survivor of one of those...creatures...his skin had become a grayish-blue color and the blood was black! His eyes...black with red irises! And...the wings!" Aurelia began, imploring them to believe her far-fetched story. Skye nodded mutely to give confirmation to her story. Jaid had him hugged close to her side as she listened in horror that her baby had been attacked by...*things*!

"It's true, I saw everything! But I was locked in the car, Mom. Nothing happened to me but Aurelia was hurt very badly," Skye told them.

"You were hurt? Surely you healed?" Luca asked her.

She shook her head and lowered the shoulder of her dress to expose the bandaged wound to them. There was blood on the bandage. The cut was still bleeding.

"It's a lot better than it was. But I'm healing at a *human* rate!" she answered him and she unwrapped the bundle on her lap to show them the strange gleaming black metal weapons. The color of the blade almost seemed to writhe.

"What the...?" Luca cut himself off before he used profanity in front of Skye. He picked up one of the knives and examined it in the light. It was...*cold*.

"I don't know what these beings were, but they pack some serious weapons if I can be damaged like this. Another thing strange...they referred to Skye as an Oracle and to me as a 'Changeling'. What do you suppose *that* means?" she asked.

Luca remained silent. He had no answers to give. He had never come across anything like this. He had never heard of a vampire healing at a human rate before.

FROM THE SHADOWS

"I think I need to take these to Shadow. Maybe he will know something. He meets all sorts of strange people," Aurelia said to Luca.

Skye curiously reached out and tentatively touched the hilt of the sword. He hissed and drew his hand back.

"Those did not come from anywhere on Earth. They are...bad," he whispered and the group looked at the weapons with a whole new respect.

"What do you mean, Skye?" Luca asked him.

"I can feel it. It...pulses...out of the sword...a very bad feeling," Skye answered. He was unable to aptly describe what he had felt. He just knew it was bad.

"You said they referred to Skye as an Oracle? They must mean psychic!" Fiona put in and Aurelia nodded, agreeing.

"It makes sense, doesn't it?" Aurelia mused.

Luca put the knife he was holding gingerly back in Aurelia's lap and she recovered them with the blanket. She set the bundle on the floor.

The women went into the kitchen to prepare some tea and some sandwiches. Skye remained sitting next to Luca on the couch. Luca was interrupted from his thoughts on those strange beings and their weapons when Skye told him in a low tone, "There is a way you can be like her again."

"What do you mean by that?" Luca asked him.

"I know what you and Aurelia are. And there was this one time, like maybe a year ago, that I saw this woman. She was one of the most beautiful women in the world, like Mom. I knew there was something different about her. She turned to me as I thought that and raised her finger to her lips, like she was telling me not to say anything.

"I heard her voice in my head telling me that she was called a 'Guardian' and that she helps save people from bad things. And you have something bad inside you, only you keep it quiet now," Skye said to him.

Luca looked at Skye strangely. How could he know all these things?

"He knows many things, Luca. I am so proud of him. He has always been strangely wise for a child," Fiona said, startling Luca, who had been too enveloped in the possibilities Skye had

mentioned. He didn't know what the kid meant but he couldn't shake the feeling that he had just been given some very important information.

"Does Jaid know about this?" Luca asked, gazing curiously at Skye. Fiona came and sat on the chaise and told him, "Well...she does and she doesn't. Jaid knows that our family has the gift but she is unaware of the power that Skye possesses. He is the one who has been the strongest of us all."

"So you know that Aurelia and I are...?" Luca began and Skye nodded at him before he finished the question.

"And you're telling me I can be human again? Right?" Luca asked feeling excited that there was a slight chance that he and Jaid could be together. Again, Skye nodded.

"How?" Luca asked and Skye said, "The Guardians can help you."

Jaid and Aurelia came into the *living room* with tea and a plate of sandwiches. Jaid stopped short as she heard what Skye was speaking of. Jaid looked over to Fiona questioningly.

"You knew we had a gift in this family, Jaid. You were always too busy raising Skye to consider the world around you and open your mind to it. Neither I nor Skye has ever had that problem," Fiona told her with a shrug.

"Aurelia, you have got to speak with Shadow and ask him to arrange a meeting for all of us to get together. He might have some answers and I need to know what it is that I have not been told. I can't believe Korinna kept anything from me," Luca said, hurt suffusing his voice that his friend would keep truths from him. Aurelia nodded and quickly said her goodbyes, grabbing up her weapons and informing them she was going to call Shadow tonight. Curiosity ate at her as well for she didn't know what Skye had meant either.

"Well, I'm going to go home and feed my babies. And if Shadow will allow humans...I want to come to this meeting. You'll have to come too, Jaid. I'm sure the bar will give you the night off. I just know that some fascinating things are going to come to light," Fiona said, a spark of hope and excitement alight in her eyes.

Luca stayed on the couch to guard Skye and Jaid while they slept. He could barely sleep. He wanted to wake Skye and get

some answers but he just couldn't bring himself to do that to the kid. He was such a charming boy. Luca was shocked to realize that he had begun to feel they would be a family.

Where had that notion come from? Of course, Jaid acknowledged him as her boyfriend so...it was a start. And if what Skye had hinted at was true, there *was* hope for them to be a family.

To be human again...what would that be like? What would the cost be? Would he regret it at all? Surely he would lose his vampire powers and in a way, that saddened him. He had been like this for the last six centuries. He'd be like a newborn child when he turned back!

His gaze fell on Jaid's closed bedroom door. He could hear her breathing, her heart beating. God, he loved her.

He *loved* her?

It had to be infatuation, right? A couple weeks and he *loved* her?

Yes, I do love her. There is no denying just how much she means to me.

Luca turned his back to her door, harrumphing as he punched the leopard print pillow bunched uncomfortably under his head. Love, he had never even believed that he would ever know of it.

Maybe it was time to believe, to trust that it was real.

* * * *

Shadow opened the door for the group of people standing at the back door of his club. Silently, he led them upstairs to where his sister, River, and a few others waited, seated on chairs and couches arranged in a loose circle. The main room was as strange as the area below, decorated with many different Gothic styles.

Aurelia, Luca, Jaid and Fiona looked around at all the unfamiliar faces. Among them they recognized few. Korinna, Ziggy, Lily and Vallon were already there. The atmosphere was confusing, like someone or *something* unknown to them was among them. What were these strange feelings? What were these people?

Shadow commenced their meeting by introducing everyone present. Besides his sister, there were five others. And none were

sure exactly what they were besides River, Shadow and Korinna. These people were the three men: Constantine and Malachi Davignon and Phoenix Balfour; and the two women: Rowena Galloway and Milan Sauvage.

"Please, be seated, everyone," Shadow began, the room grew silent responding to Shadow's commanding presence and the air around them seemed to writhe with the powerful sway of secrets untold.

"I will start at the beginning. The God and Goddess, who go by many names on Earth, are omnipresent. They are everything and everywhere. Their spiritual planes have been called 'Heaven' in its many variations. The Goddess and God are equal, they are one and they reside in every living thing.

"When the world was still new, there were two beings of the Gods on Earth: the humans and the animals. They lived in relative peace and unbeknownst to the humans, there were malicious, bodiless spirits residing in a world they could not see. A place dark and devoid of life or happiness, a place many refer to as 'Hell' and these spirits were called demons.

"Demons gained their power over human beings through temptation, promising them what they could not refuse. And in so doing, were able to lure them to their hellish realm, thereby growing stronger by feeding on the emotions of the human spirit which gave them the greater power to *physically* drink from them their life. The blood of a human gave these spirits frightening new power. The genetic makeup of human DNA formed a sort of base, so to speak, for the demon's new body. But their own...shadow phantom... qualities were infused with human genetics, giving them a far different, yet familiar and recognizable, appearance.

"No longer were these cursed phantoms bodiless and no longer were they condemned to their shadowed spirit domain.

"They now can live among us as one of us. They can appear human and can act human. Normally they possess pale skin with dark wings and have fangs with which to drink blood but their guise or 'glamour' hides these telling traits from us so that we will trust them as one of us. And a demon of rank will possess horns. These beings, in the usual sense, are immortal, being able to live forever and never age. But they *can* die by sunlight, by

being completely destroyed by fire, decapitation and if their heart is destroyed.

"There are spells that can be used as protection against the demons. There are also certain symbols used for protection, these being mainly symbols of the Gods. However, the magic has been lost to humans throughout time. With the coming of Christianity, the old ways have been forgotten. The Goddess has been mostly forgotten and magic deemed as evil. The Guardians protect humans, tracking demons, searching them out and slaying them, as was the purpose of their origination. Demons still remain a very dangerous threat.

"The Guardians possess the magic and the weapon technology to fight these demons. Their weapons are so powerful, killing the enemy and sending them back into their shadow world, where they are to remain trapped forever. The Fae can call upon the light of the God, a light demons were never meant to see, a light fatal to them like sunlight.

"Other than the weapons of the Guardians, there are more natural weapons to slay a demon. The Gods are everywhere in nature and as such, if a demon heart is pierced by, as an example, a dagger encrusted with earth, a demon will die. This will not work against half-demons and vampires though, as they were once human and have the Gods within them.

"The wooden stake theory originated because of this. The Gods can be found in trees and so, naturally, in a wooden stake.

"Demons can have children and you can imagine how they have spread since they became corporeal. These demon children, like their parents, need only blood to survive. Mostly, demons see humans only as a source of food. Most demons take a life for the pleasure it brings them to consume a human life. It brings a power surge to them, making their power more potent for an extended period of time.

"As well as the demon children, there have been instances when a 'Halfling' child was born. A child born of the night of an unholy union, it's these children that were the first vampires. Half-demon, half-human, these children also possessed many unusual, supernatural powers. Not to mention their unusual appearance.

"These children are few and far between for a number of

reasons. A human mother often dies from the blood loss a demon child would take from her during birth and the 'evil' appearance of the child gives much fright, so many of these children have been killed by midwives and doctors, making the decision in place of the dead mother, and declared as a stillborn. And so it is rare that these children born of human mothers survive. In the case of the human mother surviving the birth, the decision is in her hands. It takes a strong person with a very kind heart to keep these children.

"As for those born of a demon mother, they hardly have better chances of survival. Very rarely the child will be kept and allowed to live. Other times, the demon mother leaves the child to die by sunlight, rejecting the mixed blood of the child, the 'impure' blood. Some are rescued by humans but when the humans find the wings...they, too, usually reject the child.

"The first Halfling child ever born caused much panic and fear. Surely no good can explain the birth of a child with dark, leathery wings! These children needed blood, life's essence, to survive. And the powers they possessed: extraordinary strength and speed, the ability to heal themselves and even others, telepathy, telekinesis, the power to compel humans to do their will, they never fall ill and they have very highly developed senses.

"The Halfling's body is incredibly limber and strong. They can jump long distances and even climb sheer walls, as can we," Shadow added the last, answering the question he hadn't needed to hear. Then he continued, "These children also had amazing learning skills. Their minds and wills are so strong that there is almost nothing that they cannot do. Not to mention they could fly. Although, they also have a fierce inner struggle between good and evil, the human half warring incessantly with the demon half.

"A half-demon vampire is immortal because that immortality is passed on to them from their demon parent, as are their unusual characteristics. They have every outward appearance of a human except that they have wings, fangs and a flawless pale skin. The wings are almost bat-like, dark in color with a leathery texture. These vampires are also extraordinarily beautiful. Demons are beautiful creatures after all.

"As a child of a human, they can in fact eat human foods and drink liquids other than blood. These are absorbed almost immediately into the bloodstream as is the blood that they drink. Vampires do not create human wastes for this reason.

"As I've said, the half-demons look much like humans do, except for the addition of wings and fangs, as do their demon parent. However, the appearance of these beings can grotesquely alter if angered or if they feel they are in danger and provoked. They can also change at will. The eyes turn black as pitch and the irises red as blood and their faces take a cruel turn. The skin turns a dark shadowy color from the sudden increase in their blood flow due to the adrenaline and the fangs grow longer and larger and they develop large black claws on their fingers.

"Half-demons are able to hide their true form from humans. The human blood in them makes it more difficult for half-demons to magically disguise their bodies for a prolonged time. The guise is harder to maintain and can drain them of energy quickly which results in the guise being dropped unexpectedly and that could happen in front of witnesses, endangering them. And so they generally prefer to remain as they are naturally.

"These half-demon vampires are not widely known for that one major reason: it is next to impossible for them to blend into society. They have the abnormality of their wings and for this reason would have a hard time mixing with humans and go unnoticed. Of course, with a long coat, they can somewhat nullify that problem. They will still attract stares, of course, for their beauty and pale skin, although with a hunchbacked appearance due to the bulk of their wings hidden beneath their coats. They can move about unnoticed by using their powers to make the humans 'not see' them. In a crowd, humans will walk around the vampire, giving them a wide berth, but they will be oblivious to the vampire, as if they weren't even there," Shadow spoke, everyone focused intently on his story.

"How terribly sad," Fiona murmured and Shadow nodded solemnly at her.

"Half-demon vampires *do* allow themselves to be seen at times. They can always pass themselves off as a hunchback and be believed without much suspicion. They do this because to be completely ignored in a crowd is much lonelier than to be

separate from them. To be surrounded by people and go unnoticed is worse by far. Besides, vampires *do* feel emotion and can even become enslaved by their emotions feeling them as strongly as they do.

"The God and Goddess saw this evil that had been born into their world and were angered. These children were allowed to live being innocent in their infancy but they could not reproduce. The Goddess cursed them to be unable to have children so that they could not spread throughout the world. The God cursed them to never see the blessed light of day. The Gods had the power to curse the half-demons because they are present in these beings as half-demons are part human. Unfortunately, the true demons cannot be cursed into sterility by the Gods like their Halfling children but having come from the shadows, they could not venture out into the sun.

"And then, *another* vampire was made despite the curse of the Goddess. This vampire had not been born as a vampire. When a human being is drained of human blood, nearing death, and made to drink the blood of a vampire, they in turn become one. The half-demon blood invades a body and changes it into something not human. These 'turned' individuals receive the powers and weaknesses of the half-demon vampire.

"The 'turning' is not the same for every human. For some the change is quick while in others, it is long and sometimes very painful. All experience the pain of the change but for some it is more intense. Some cannot stomach the blood given to them at first and vomit it up before their body has a chance to absorb it. The senses usually wane alarmingly before becoming the amazingly clear senses of the vampire. The organs, muscles and nerves seem to fail as well before turning.

"Their now vampiric heart begins to beat again, pumping vampiric blood through their veins. Their brain is used in its entirety as well, thus allowing these psychic abilities. The only physical characteristics that they pass on are the fangs. Most 'made' vampires have the pale skin only because they can no longer venture into the sun. Also, like the demons and the Halflings, a Changeling's fangs will increase in size as will our fingernails become claw-like, longer and as hard and sharp as glass, under duress. We inherit a small fragment of their defense

mechanisms.

"The Gods let these beings exist as well. The first once-human vampire had been judged by the God and Goddess to still retain enough human in them to give resistance to the demonic sway of the half-demon blood. They were allowed to live.

"When a vampire turns a human being, they also pass on their inner struggle of good and evil. With time, as that vampire creates another, and then that one makes another, and so on down the line, the struggle is lessened until the vampire much further along is left virtually the same as they had been as a human.

"That is how vampires originated. And as for the Guardians...with the arrival of demons on Earth, so were the Guardians born. The God and Goddess each created a being made to protect humanity from the evil growing around them. The God, ruler of the Sun, made beings that are called the Fae. Unnaturally beautiful, graceful, artistic and powerful, they are the warriors of the God. The Fae are able to bear children and though they are not immortal, they can live for thousands of years.

"The Fae are a widely popular legend. They go by many names: fairy, elf, sprite and once as the Tuatha de Danaan. They hide themselves because humans want their power and because of such are rarely ever seen. All kinds of myths have been built up around them, some fearful and some reverent.

"As well as the powers of the demons and vampires, the Fae can also move through time, 'teleport', summon fire and even mask the existence of an enormous mass of land. The Guardians are the true inhabitants of Atlantis. Humans had been welcomed there until they became too greedy and under the illusion of the Isle's destruction, hid the island from hungry human eyes forever. The Bloodlines were appointed to keep the magic strong. The Fae had once made Ireland, their beloved Eire, their home until man forced them from the land.

"The traits of these Fae, besides their beauty, are the pointed ears of legend and pale skin that seems to shimmer when they are in their true form. Their hair is silky and shines vibrantly. Their eyes are never a simple color; there is always an array of hues. While among human they take a shape like their own but

resembling a normal human being.

"The Goddess, ruler of the Moon, created a being somewhere between animal and human. These were the Familiars, or Shape-shifters, that could take the form of an animal and they are worthy fighters of evil due to their physical prowess, speed and strength. The Goddess chose some of her favorite animals: dragons, wolves, lions, leopards, tigers, cheetahs, jaguars and panthers. A few are even gifted with the power to take *any* form. The Familiars are also able to bear children and live for about a thousand years.

"Familiars possess every extraordinary trait of their animal. Familiars have very sharp senses and are able to wield powerful magic of the likes of the Fae. Familiars have become sacred to many religions; they are especially famous in Celtic, Egyptian and Native American lore. Although, like it is widely believed, the moon does not rule their shifting.

"If a Fae or a Familiar were to fall in love with a human, that human can live his/her life out with them. This is done through a ceremony called 'hand-fasting'. It is a ritual marriage that uses a blood bond to unite two people in love and life.

"Although these Guardians do not have to drink blood to survive, they possess the fangs of the vampire but *their* fangs are only seen when needed. They 'grow' their fangs at will mostly. Guardians use them to drain the blood of demons and other creatures that have succumbed to their evil to make them weak and put them in a death-like sleep. The aura of a vampire can ultimately decide their fate. Guardians have this quality to make judgment.

"Guardians also have the power to change a 'made' vampire back into a human. This is done by draining the vampire's blood, which like I've said before, weakens them to a death-like coma if drained completely, putting them into a deep sleep until they get more human blood which is needed to keep the heart pumping. After the demonic blood is free of the vampire's body, a Guardian gives them their blood and the blood of a *willing* human, a human that loves them. These bloods mix and once again make the vampire human.

"The Guardian was given this power to change a vampire back by the Gods so that the souls they created, and are a part of,

can once again be human and return to the Gods upon their death. A Halfling's deceased soul will go wherever there is the most sway, to the Gods if their human side was stronger or to the demon world if the demon side was stronger. Since both sides were inherent in them on birth, the soul goes where it rightly belongs. Unfortunately, for Changelings, it is not the same. The soul becomes confused and lost, drifting without purpose, without meaning. They need someone to show them the way back home. Psychics would be a great recruit for our side," Shadow hinted, looking to Fiona who beamed and looked as if she were about to burst with the excitement of being needed by the Gods.

"Vampires, as well, both Halfling vampires and Changeling vampires, can be known as Guardians. Those vampires that can resist the evil of their demon half may join with the Guardians to help mankind. The God and Goddess soon realized that these vampires could prove very useful allies and I'm sure demons may have realized the same.

"At first, the demons were in terror of the Guardians. Their fear lessened as they learned that by drinking the blood of a Guardian, they drank in some of their power, as well. That's not to say that they could suddenly walk in the light. But their powers surged from Guardian blood far more than human blood could give them. The power taken also lasts inside them longer. They can steal time-shifting from the Fae and Shape-shifting from the Familiar. Those powers last only as long as the surge but that is still very extensive. And, unfortunately, even a Guardian *can* succumb to evil.

"Humans, too, fall to their sway. A human has to be deemed 'worthy' or present the demons with an opportunity, something that this particular human could do for them that others could not. Otherwise, only the wickedest mortals on Earth would they choose to serve them. Even Halflings and Changelings have the power to enslave a human in this way. We call it the power of 'compelling.'

"The demons and Guardians refer to these enslaved beings as zombies, living only to serve their 'master'. These zombies must be hunted as well. They are as ruthless as their masters. Although, they *usually* possess all of their mind and former

personality, zombies have no will of their own. Their will becomes that of their master.

"In the rare case that an innocent is taken as a zombie, the poor human can be released from their curse. The zombie is taken to the Isle and Purification begins. The Gods do not neglect their children. The innocent victims' free will can be restored to its former state as it is just 'buried' beneath the powerful sway of their master's manipulation. The victim's mind is then usually wiped of the experience as they are often forced to perform terrible deeds at the command of a demon or vampire.

"And so the battle of good and evil began," Shadow ended his tale and looked around to all the faces staring at him in bewilderment.

"After Aurelia came to me last night, I called Korinna. We decided it was time to let all of you in on the truth and ask for your help in our fight. Those weapons you had, Aurelia, are called Shadowblades, forged in the cold, black fires of Hell. They are the weapons of the demons and very deadly to Guardians and even us. Aurelia knows this, the wounds we receive don't heal as they should," Shadow explained and all eyes fell on the coffee table where Aurelia's blanket still held the weapons.

"Fortunately, we know much about the demons. The first Halfling ever born has long ago sided himself with the Gods. The Guardians learned all they could from him," Shadow added. A few eyes widened at the unexpected news.

"As Shadow has said, vampires can be Guardians, too. As long as we are willing to fight the evil, we can become Guardians. It is our duty, and sometimes our pleasure, to kill these demons in order to keep the human race on Earth," Korinna spoke up into the silence. Shadow nodded, confirming her words and letting everyone know that they were, indeed, Guardians.

"We are needed to help. The demons will probably want us as well. Guardians at one time grew too cautious, afraid to trust, and they passed down their stories less and less. Very few vampires knew the truth because we are generally expected to side with the evil since it resides inside of us. There are half-Fae and half-Familiar children out there who have no idea what they are and they don't understand their power.

"And with the end of the Gianni Bloodline back in 1984...the Gods need us all the more. The Isle, human life, the Guardians...all are at stake. We need you to help us," Korinna continued. Then she gestured to the five people no one knew.

"And these people are Guardians, too, but not vampires. Constantine, who goes by the name Costa, and Malachi are Familiar. They take the form of a wolf," she gestured to the sexy twins sitting to her left. They both had dark brown hair with highlights of deep gold and red. Their eyes were dark gray and intense, as if daring anyone to insult them.

Turning to her right, she gestured to another Familiar, a female.

"This is Milan Sauvage and she takes the form of a tiger," Korinna said, and Milan smiled beautifully at everyone present. She had dark brown eyes and beautiful, golden blond hair that curled over her shoulders.

Further to her right were two extraordinarily beautiful people. Their soft, pale skin seemed to take on the light in the room and it shimmered, giving them an ethereal glow.

"This is Phoenix Balfour and Rowena Galloway and they are Fae," Korinna told them. Phoenix was gorgeous with long, deep red hair and one green eye and one blue eye, both jewel bright and with many different hues in the blue and green. Rowena had violet eyes and silvery blond hair. Her smile was impish and at the same time sweet. Both Fae had pointed ears. Shadow pointed out that they were in their true form.

"Understand that there are far more Guardians throughout the world," Shadow told them.

"Why were we never told?" Lily asked, taking the words from all of their mouths and they eagerly awaited the answer.

"One reason all starts with dear Luca, I'm afraid," Korinna told them, with an apologetic smile plastered on her face as she gazed at Luca.

"How, pray tell?" Luca asked her, a strange glint in his eye.

"After I turned you, I was distressed to see that you were not holding up well against the demon blood inside you, even though it was understandable in your situation. You grew up hard-hearted in the first place and this, along with the devastation you had faced before I turned you, not to mention

what happened after I turned you, only made you worse. Your heart was once cruel and I am sorry to say that to you, Luca, my friend. It was cruel even when you made Angelo, another bad one. But you, when you were confronted with the wickedness of Angelo's soul, you woke up. That's when you came to me and I still told you nothing because of Angelo.

"You were going to follow him and try to keep him from killing an innocent again. I was afraid he would be able to read the truth from you or that you would tell him in hopes of reforming him. You might let him get close and I was afraid that Angelo would side with the demons, and I didn't want to risk seeing you hurt. You turned out to be one of the most caring people I have ever met.

"I had not told any of you because you were close to Luca. But now it is time, you should know and you have a right to know. I am sorry. And I was the one to tell Shadow so long ago when you first followed Angelo to New Orleans. He was advised not to inform Aurelia after you became close to her. Sorry to you as well, Aurelia," Korinna told them.

"Wow, I can't believe that I have never known of any of this," Luca murmured, shaking his head slowly, then asked, "You said 'one reason', so what is the other?"

Rowena spoke up to answer him, "The demon inside vampires is the reason we Guardians were reluctant to let the truth out. Who knew? You could have sided with the demons and gave them all the information you would learn from us. But it is a necessary risk and any who join us must make an Oath to the Gods, swearing their allegiance. And any who betray that Oath...forfeit their life. Assassins will be sent for them."

Ziggy whistled at the harshness of it but all realized that the Gods would take no chances. They had life to protect.

"I will be going now. I hope you will decide to help us," Rowena said sweetly, waving goodbye and then she...disappeared.

"I wish I could do that!" Fiona exclaimed, making Korinna laugh.

"We should go, too. Demons don't wait for us to get out of meetings, y'know?" Costa said to the room with a sarcastic smirk.

FROM THE SHADOWS

"Are you guys going to disappear, too?" Fiona couldn't resist asking, her eyes happier now than they had been in a long while.

"No, we're going to use the mystifying magic of opening a door," Malachi said, smiling flirtatiously at the adorable inquisitive older woman.

She blushed prettily and asked him, "Do you by any chance mean a 'portal' door or...?"

"No portals tonight, Fiona but maybe I can show you some other time. I can, you know, 'pop in' over at your place sometime and who knows where else I'll 'pop in'?" Malachi asked her playfully.

"Ooh, I like that one," Fiona whispered to Jaid. He bowed over their hands and kissed their knuckles lingeringly until Luca growled at him.

"Well, you have bark...but do you have bite? Feel free to come and play with the big dogs anytime, Luca. We may show you a thing or two," Malachi told him, his smile never wavering. Costa stood in the background and glowered.

Milan left after the twins and the vampires were left alone with Phoenix.

"How can *we* kill the demons and their zombies?" Vallon asked.

"Well, you know how a demon can die. As for their zombies, any way you would kill a human. They may not feel pain and will last longer than a normal human, but they are not given a demon's immortality," River answered, speaking in a quiet, melodic voice.

"I have some questions, please. What is an Oracle? Also, protection spells and symbols were mentioned earlier. What kind?" Jaid asked and Fiona nodded, wanting to know them herself.

"An Oracle is a human being with extraordinary psychic powers. They are very rare and highly sought after for their power. Demons want them for their power to tell the future and to see truths they can't discover on their own, like about the Guardians or maybe even the Gods. Which is why your son is so valuable, Jaid. When he is older, expect a Guardian to come for him and give him the Oath," Shadow answered her first question.

Jaid couldn't believe her ears.

Highly sought after? My son? He's alone at home right now!

"Spells of any kind that has the purpose of protecting the caster or for guarding against evil will work. I'm sure you know of many, Fiona. Pagans are much attuned to the Gods and nature. The Fae, of course, can call upon the light of the God. It won't kill Halflings or Changelings," Korinna explained.

"As for symbols, the Elements as well as the Gods will serve their purpose. Some call on the power of Earth, Air, Fire, Water and Akasha. Akasha is the spiritual power that permeates throughout the universe, the energy of the universe. You have only to open yourself to the Gods and their power. Unfortunately, humans these days do not believe in magic or the Goddess and call those who do heretics. So even though the power to protect oneself is there, they are unaware and unaccepting," Shadow added, and then seeing the doubtful look on Ziggy's face, added, "Of course, many of us just like to kill them the old fashioned way, face-to-face, with weapons...tangible weapons."

Ziggy's face lit up.

"So Paganism is the true way!" Fiona exclaimed happily.

"Not exactly, Fiona. Every deity in most every religion can be identified with the God and Goddess. They manifest themselves in many ways and cannot be pinned down to one religion," River corrected.

"Are we supposed to start carrying weapons now to hunt these things?" Ziggy asked with a hopeful gleam in his eye.

"You can do that if you want to help in our cause. Although, humans have a distinct disadvantage when facing a demon, the lack of immortality! The Guardians have very strong weapons made with the resources of the Isle and the light of God. But no one except Guardians have them, such a powerful weapon in the wrong hands....well, I'm sure you can understand. Shadow here makes spectacular weapons! Swords, daggers, crossbows! You name it! He makes sharp, deadly arrows of all kinds of woods and raw metal ore. But make sure the hit is a fatal one or else they'll be in Aurelia's position, wounded but still very much alive," Korinna said holding up an intricately carved arrow. It

had symbols etched all over it.

"Of course, any weapon will do. A gun for example: pack a bullet with earth and shoot through the heart and they are dead. Gone as if they had simply disintegrated into dust," Shadow added.

"And if you need permits to carry a handgun, I can get them. We know some people at the police department," River spoke up. Ziggy glanced her way, his eyes alight with a new found respect.

"River is also a computer freak a hacker. You need any information, she's your girl. You need a new or temporary identity, she's your girl. River and Shadow have skills that are very valuable assets to us. I know you all know how to change your identities...but she makes it official. The whole 'I-live-off-my-investments' and 'I-inherited-from-my-ancestors' and willing humans to believe what we tell them are all good methods and have been used by us all for a very long time. Now we can show proof that we are somebody else. Birth certificates, driver's license, social security...the whole shebang! And she's not the only one...our hackers are showing up everywhere now that technology is so advanced and proof is needed for everything," Korinna told them all.

"Remember, we are not looking for creatures that look like demons. Most of the time they appear just as humans do, as we do. Some even live like humans. They own houses, go to school, and even have jobs sometimes. You'll sometimes find them at restaurants dining, at the movies or shopping; they have cell phones and drive cars. But they can never hide their auras from the Guardians. The Gods gave the Guardians the power to see beyond the 'mask' that the demons wear.

"We cannot read a demon's aura because they hide it, like they cannot read ours if we hide it. Their powers are like ours as we came from them. And for that reason we will still always be able to recognize them because we feel them within ourselves. It is a feeling one has to get used to in order to recognize it for what it is. Almost like *déjà vu* but it's a faint notion.

"Half-demons possess a demonic aura as well as human. We need to be able to tell the difference of good and evil because these half-demons are not necessarily evil. Korinna was

made by a vampire named Siobhan and Siobhan was made by a half-demon vampire and he was not evil.

"We possess a human aura but one that is transformed, more powerful than that of a normal human being. And the Guardians have an aura that we, nor the demons, will ever be able to read unless they show us," Shadow told them.

He looked around at all of them and was certain they would all be trustworthy with the knowledge they were receiving. Shadow understood that this was a story that was hard to adjust to in one night.

"I hope you all know how to fight. If not...learn. You will need to be able to hold your own against them and be able to successfully and expertly wield your weapons," River added.

The room was silent, everyone taking the time to absorb everything they had heard that night. There were so many things that they had not known, had not even had the tiniest inkling of. It was lucky they hadn't been killed by demons.

Luca didn't like the idea of dying as a vampire and his soul becoming lost.

"What about the demons' weapons?" Fiona asked, curious as to their fate.

It was Phoenix who answered her, "The Shadowblades will be taken to Atlantis where they will be destroyed. They must not fall into the wrong hands."

"So...how much to buy *your* weapons, Shadow?" Ziggy asked, breaking everyone's thoughtful silence and lightening the mood.

"A little more than you can buy quality weapons elsewhere is how much it will cost because these weapons are beautiful works of art and they are very reliable," Korinna told him and looked to everyone letting them know they were included in the offer as well as Ziggy.

"Even though *we're* humans, you'll still sell to us, right?" Ziggy asked River and Shadow, hope gleaming in his eyes.

"You are on our side, of course you may buy. You've provided for us many times, Ziggy. They aren't cheap though. I do, after all, have to make money for my club," Shadow responded.

"I thought that was what your club customers were for. And

I assure you, I can afford the price," Ziggy told him and Shadow, River and Korinna nodded while the others looked at Ziggy questioningly.

"His family owns a motorcycle shop called 'Dvhorzhetsky Custom Choppers and Repair' or 'DCCR' and he's worked there for a few years. He was hired a few weeks ago at 'Under the Gun Tattoo'. Oh, and on the side of the motorcycle business, Ziggy, his father Dimitri and his sister Zarya do a little something called *grand theft auto* while his mother Reveka stays home with little brother Marek to wait for them, keep a lookout, play secretary and deal with buyers and so on and on. They are a devious and delightful bunch of people with a mission. He's been a good source of vehicles and motor parts to Shadow and River and other vampires," Korinna explained and Ziggy nodded and pointed to his chest and grinned. He winked at the ladies.

"Of course, we're regular Robin Hood's. We only steal from the stinkin' rich. So if I were you guys...I'd keep an eye on my vehicle," Ziggy told them.

"If you even *breathe* on my Indian I will break your thieving neck. And you are either incredibly brave or incredibly stupid to say such things in a room full of vampires," Shadow threatened him but he was actually laughing and the transformation that came over his usually solemn face was remarkable.

Ziggy held his hands up in mock surrender and gave his best look of innocence. It failed miserably.

"Phoenix, if you will," Korinna spoke up suddenly and Phoenix rose from his seat.

"If you are willing to side with us, I will ask you to make your Oath to the Gods. It will not be forced upon you. I am merely offering you all the honor. They will hear you and accept you," he paused and when all nodded, he told them, "Repeat my words back to me: I seek union with the God and Goddess. I pledge my soul to you, the Gods, and promise to uphold your sacred laws to protect mankind and never betray my own. I give my word freely, understanding that my life is in your hands and the day I choose to betray my sacred vow is the day my soul will depart and be cast into Oblivion. I offer you my blood as a symbol for my life and willingly entrust it to you. As I will it, so

mote it be."

After they spoke their vows, the new Guardians were shocked when the skin on their wrist split painlessly and Phoenix caught the blood in a large silver chalice half filled with wine.

"Each of you will drink from this chalice and the rest will be poured into the soil before the Temple in Atlantis. This will complete the binding ritual and you are all now one of us. Hold true to your vows," Phoenix told them, handing the chalice first to Fiona who then passed it on until they had all taken a drink.

Phoenix collected the chalice and the Shadowblades and with a respectful nod to all in company, vanished.

But before he left, he handed a silver amulet on a leather cord to Jaid, "As long as he wears this, we shall not be far. The Gods look after their own but remember, the world is no small place."

* * * *

Soon after, everyone walked away from 'Motel Hell' with some kind of weapon or weapons, plural in Ziggy's case especially. New knowledge and awareness filled their heads and they were on the lookout as if excited for the chance to have a go at these demons.

Jaid, Luca and Fiona drove back to Jaid's house in Fiona's Jeep in silence. Skye and Oberon greeted them at the door. Jaid was glad to see he was alright. She hadn't wanted to make Skye feel like a baby if she had hired a sitter so instead she had Fiona bring Oberon to stay with him. He was, after all, nine *and a half* years old, as he had reminded her adamantly when she had worried about leaving him alone.

She slipped the necklace around his neck as she hugged him. He looked questioningly at her and then nodded. Jaid kissed his forehead lovingly.

They all placed their weapons on the coffee table. Luca had insisted Jaid and Fiona get something and he had paid for them. Luca had some hand carved stakes with symbols etched all over them; it came with a holster belt to carry them. For Jaid he had bought a gold and steel infused stiletto. Fiona had opted for a crossbow with carved wooden arrows. Skye eyeballed them appreciatively.

They spoke openly in front of Skye being sure he had

known something about it anyway. He *had* been the one to tell Luca to meet with the Guardians. Jaid smiled as she saw Skye sitting beside Luca, hanging onto his every word. Again, the thought of a vampire becoming human again crept into her mind.

Sure, it had only been two weeks as of tomorrow that they had known each other but...

Jaid was painfully aware that she was in this over her head now. He might not be remotely interested in being human again. He'd surely lose most, if not all, of his powers, wouldn't he? And he would be mortal and would age and fall ill.

Nevertheless, she was head over heels in love with the man. And she knew nothing about his human life. Maybe when Skye went to bed she would coax him into opening up for her.

Fiona left after a while and she had to drag her sleepy dog out the door. Skye gave a big yawn and went to take a shower and go to bed. Jaid sat enveloped in Luca's arms on the chaise, their legs entwined.

"I bought a house finally. I love it here in New Orleans too much. I moved all my stuff in already. Besides, it's nice to be able to park my bike where I'm staying. The hotel wouldn't allow bikes and I had to leave her at Shadow's club," Luca told her.

"You're moved in *already*? After one day?" she asked, turning to look at him with an incredulous look.

"Yes, after years and years of chasing after Angelo, I was never able to have many belongings. My bike and my clothes and jewelry are all I've had for a long time. Just two suitcases of clothes and a pair of boots and my dressy Oxfords," he told her and it made her feel sad that he had never had much.

Jaid looked around at her own things. How simple it all seemed to her, to have a lamp and a couch. But to not have them, to not have a place to call home, how lonely his existence must be. Though he had never said as much.

"Where is your house?" she asked him and she could see the words 'your house' pleased him thoroughly.

"On Toulouse and it's a nice two-story brick Creole townhouse with a large, dark attic where I can sleep during the day. It's got a lot of promise," he answered, pride in his voice.

"It's your first?" Jaid asked him, suspecting that it was.

"Actually, yes, it is my first house. Even as a mortal I

remained at the church or with my mother and sister. My little sister was the apple of my eye," he told her, surprising her with the personal information she hadn't even needed to pry from him.

He was a member of the church? She thought, hardly able to believe it. He was just too sinful and yummy to be a clergyman!

"What was her name, Luca?" Jaid asked with genuine interest and much curiosity.

"Her name was Lucianna Manuela Salvarez, my little Lucia. She was only twelve years old when she died in the year 1348. I was twenty-four at the time. I had a younger brother that died shortly after his birth, my mother never stopped mourning him and so I raised little Lucia, '*mi ángel*' as I used to call her and it always made her smile. She had my features or, rather, my mother's features," he told her. Jaid ached at the profound grief she heard in his voice.

"How did she die?" Jaid asked him, hating to bring up such painful memories but something in her told her he needed to speak of it.

Chapter Eleven

Madrid, Spain, August 26, 1324

"You have to push, Rosita! I can almost see the head!" Father Francisco Manuel Salvarez shouted to his mistress over the calm instruction of the tired and frustrated midwife. Rosalind, "Rosita", was a creature of comfort and a stranger to pain. This was her first child and she wanted it out of her body. "Right now, *por favor!* Get this child out of me! I'm dying, Francisco!"

In Spain some priests were known to keep a concubine, a *barragana*, and they usually explained her away as a niece or a cousin come to help him as his *ama*, a housekeeper. That was the relationship between Father Francisco and Rosita. She lived in his little white-washed house and was there for him when he came home from the church. He was a well-respected priest of the *Iglesia de San Nicolás de los Servitas*.

It was not usual for a man to be present in the birthing room but Father Francisco had insisted. It was his first child and he wanted to be there during that miraculous moment when a new life was brought forth. He would christen the child tomorrow.

Suddenly a cry filled the air and a healthy baby boy with a head full of black hair was handed to his mother. Rosita peered down into the little face and wept.

"Francisco, he truly is a miracle. So beautiful! Christen him Eduardo, after my father," she told him. She ran her finger over the baby's tiny mouth and laughed when he pursed those lips as if for a kiss.

"I will christen him Lucius Eduardo, dear Rosita, *mi amada*. I will name him Lucius because he is my light. Let me hold him," Francisco replied, taking the child from her.

"Ah, my strong son, you will make me so proud someday.

You will be a strong force in the Church and one day, you'll be a bishop or a cardinal," Francisco whispered and Lucius began to cry again.

"Father Francisco, the child needs nourishment. You must let the lady feed him so that she may rest," the midwife told him. He nodded and handed the precious boy back to his mother.

As planned, Lucius was christened the very next day and grew to be a beautiful, playful boy. He learned of the Bible and how to speak Latin and even English from his doting father. His mother taught him many things, how to read and write as she had been taught by Francisco. She read to him often from books of poetry, regaled him with tales of far off places, brave knights and fierce dragons. Rosita would take him outside at night and speak to him of the stars. She told him that his destiny was written in the stars and try as he might, he never once could see the words up there. Every night Rosita would sing to him before he went to sleep and help him say his nightly prayers.

When he was six years old, Rosalind gave birth to another child, another boy. She called the child Estéban. The boy was born early and died a few hours after birth. That was the day Lucius' mother stopped being warm and happy and turned cold. It was as if she could no longer see her son even though he stood before her, craving her attention.

"Your mother is very sad, Lucius, my boy. She has suffered a terrible loss and is wracked by the pain in her soul. It will not last, *m'ijo*. Have no fear of that," Francisco told his young son who had come to him with a tear streaked face.

"I'm still...here though, *Papá*. Why can't she...look at me anymore?" Lucius asked, his voice broken by hiccups.

Six years later, another child was born. This child was healthy and it was a baby girl that Father Francisco christened Lucianna Manuela Salvarez. Lucius was twelve years old and had grown to be a solemn, quiet young man. His childhood had taken a drastic turn on the death of his brother. His mother had never been the same. She couldn't bring herself to look at her daughter and so an *ama de cría*, a wet nurse, was brought in to care for the infant.

Although Father Francisco loved his children, he loved his Church more and was rarely home. And now Rosita was too lost

in her own grief to ever acknowledge her children. So Lucius raised his baby sister and soon she became more important to him than his own life.

Years passed and the siblings were very close. It was 1342 and Lucia was six and Lucius was eighteen. Already, Lucius was attracting women and had been since he was fourteen years old. He had lost his virginity then to a very lovely, shy girl that had been his age and completely in love with him. Over the next four years, he had lain with other girls and was recently the lover of an older widowed woman. Her name was Lovinia and she was a good ten years older than he was.

Lucius was in town with Lucia, watching her play with the other children. The air was full of the sound of children laughing and shouting to one another. Their play was interrupted when an older kid around Lucius' age took the ball the children had been kicking around when it landed at his feet.

"Can I have our ball back, *por favor*?" Lucia asked the boy. His father was a wealthy land owner and so his son, Pascual Segorra, was very rude and sometimes quite cruel to those below his station.

"The little *barragana* wants her ball back? I can't believe I touched this foul thing after your whore's hands have touched it! Maybe the little whore wants to get it back by giving me a *special* kiss?" he sneered at her, making her cry. Pascual looked speculatively at the beautiful young girl before him; Lucius saw the lecherous gleam in his eye.

At his sister's tears, Lucius saw red. He leapt from his seat on the ground and stormed over to where Pascual stood, eyeing his sister evilly. Pascual looked up arrogantly at Lucius and opened his mouth to speak. The words never came out. His lips split under Lucius' angry fist and his head snapped back viciously from the attack.

"Don't you *ever* speak to or even glance at my sister again," Lucius warned and slammed his fist into Pascual's stomach. Pascual dropped to his knees on the ground, gasping for air.

A servant of Pascual's rushed over and pulled the boys apart and shook them angrily.

"You are lucky you can hide behind your father's holy robes, boy, or else you might get lashed for assaulting the young

master," the man said and quickly led Pascual away from the crowd. The children laughed and jeered at Pascual's back, jumping excitedly around Lucius, their new hero.

"Oh kind and brave knight in shining armor, however can I repay such chivalry?" Lucia asked, feigning a regal stance and holding her hand high for him to bow over. He leaned over and wiped the tears from her face and kissed her forehead affectionately.

"My lady, my beautiful princess, I ask only to be your most loyal servant. My heart's only desire is to protect you from all harm," he replied.

"A true hero, stout of heart, you have truly shown me much strength. Surely there is no braver knight in all the land of my glorious kingdom," she gushed, grasping his large hand in hers as he led her back home.

They had played like this often and he always regaled her with tales of knights that slew dragons and beautiful queens that rode on unicorns. Lucia loved his stories and always told him he was the very best storyteller to have ever lived.

Lucius had always wanted to be a knight, to serve his king and country but his father refused. Lucius was meant for the Church and only the Church. His father wanted him to join him at the Church and so he would soon. Lucius was infuriated. He needed to stay with Lucia. She needed him. Rosalind would not care for her as he would.

Lucius left his sister to go speak with his mother. As usual she was sitting in her bedroom at the window sewing.

"I'm leaving within the week as Father has planned. I need you to care for Lucia. She needs a mother. Why won't you look at me, Rosalind?" he shouted the last at her. He watched with bated breath as she set aside her needlework and slowly lifted her gaze to his. He cursed when he saw her eyes fill with tears.

"It's been twelve years since Estéban's death, Rosalind! Wake up! You have two other children who are alive and need you to care for them. Especially Lucia! Don't do to her what you have done to me. I beg you," he spoke to her from the heart, hoping to make her realize how she had been throwing her life away.

"How *dare* you speak of him with so little respect? My only

son is dead!" she cried, making him want to strangle her.

"I am not dead! I am still here! I have always been here but you never saw me! Estéban was *not* your only son!" he screamed at her. He watched in pain, unshed tears burning his eyes and throat, as she wiped away her tears and picked up her needlework and went back to sewing, humming a lullaby under her breath. He turned from her in disgust and returned to his sister, who stood curious and wide-eyed in the hall.

"Why are you so sad, *mi hermano*?" Lucia asked him softly. He took her hand and led her into the kitchen area to make her lunch like he always did. He fetched some bread and cheese from the pantry and set to slicing some for Lucia.

"I'm only sad that I must leave you soon, little one. I'll visit as often as duty allows, I promise you. Will you be alright here without me? Father is going to hire a nice lady to come live with you," he spoke calmly to her, to keep her from crying.

"I'll miss you, Lucius, but I'll be okay, I promise," she reassured him, patting him consolingly on the hand. He smiled affectionately down into her angelic face with her large, soulful brown eyes. There was so much innocence and love in her.

Later that night, after he had put Lucia to bed, Lucius went to pay a visit to Lovinia. She had no idea that he would soon be spending most of his time at the church and would not be able to come see her every night. He tapped lightly on her door and heard soft footfalls rushing to the door to greet him. The door opened a tiny crack and he smiled at the inquisitive light brown eye peeking at him.

Seeing that it was Lucius, Lovinia swung the door open wide and Lucius' body hardened instantly as he saw her standing in the doorway in nothing but a sheer gown that hid nothing from his gaze. The light from the room shone from behind her, sensuously highlighting her generous curves.

Lovinia pulled Lucius through the door and closed it behind him.

"*Buenas noches, mi amado*. Can I get you something? Are you *hungry*?" she asked him as she walked a slow circle around him, trailing her hands over his body. Her voice was a husky purr in his ears.

Lovinia came to a stop standing in front of him, her soft,

rounded body pressed against his hard, lean body. She reached out and started to undress him. Lucius stood completely still and let her remove his clothes.

When she had him naked, she knelt down before him and took him into her mouth. Lucius ran his fingers through her hair and she moaned appreciatively deep in her throat, the vibration the moan caused in her mouth shook him to his core.

Lucius reluctantly pulled her away and divested her of her thin gown. His gaze raked slowly over her body. Her breasts were small but beckoned for his attention, the nipples tight and hard. Her stomach was gently rounded and her hips wide and curvaceous. The dark curls at the apex of her thighs glistened wetly from her want of him.

Lucius lifted her up over his shoulder and carried her into her bedchamber. Lovinia was laughing delightedly the whole way. He tossed her gently on the bed and crawled over her, making her breathing become harsh and erratic with desire. He made love to her hard and fast, the way she liked it.

Later, they lay spent on the bed and Lovinia was curled up to him at his side, her fingers tracing idle patterns over his chest. He ran his fingers through her hair, knowing he was going to miss seeing her every night, but not as much as he would miss his sister. She was more like a daughter to him than a sister.

"I won't be able to come to you every night anymore, Lovinia. My father is ready for me to join him at the Church now and I'm sure he'll keep me busy with study and prayer," he told her, his voice soft and full of regrets.

"I will miss you so, Lucius. I cannot see you as a priest, try as I might. You will come to see me when you can, won't you?" she asked, looking up into his face.

"You know I will, Lovinia," he said to her, kissing her brow.

"Oh, you know how I love you, don't you? Seeing you is more important to me than anything else in the world, Lucius," Lovinia said to him, her beautiful brown eyes sad and filling with tears.

"I know, Lovinia, but it's not like I'll be far away. I'll still be here in Madrid. This won't be goodbye," he told her, seeing the hurt in her eyes she got every time she told him that she loved

him and he never told her he loved her back. But she never pushed him to love her and it was why he was still with her.

He stayed the night with her that night, knowing she needed him there. But as soon as the sun came up, he was gone. Lucius always made sure to be home when his sister awoke in the morning.

Lucius rummaged in the kitchen, preparing a breakfast of eggs and bread for Lucia and Rosalind. His father had never hired anyone to help around the house, hoping his beloved Rosita would come out of her depression, but she never had. And so here he was, cooking breakfast for his family over the fire as he had for years.

"*Buenos días, mi hermano,*" Lucia called to him as she skipped into the kitchen. As always he told her, "*Lucia, mi ángel.* You keep getting more beautiful as you sleep."

She giggled and twirled, letting her hair float around her. Lucius knew that someday his father would seek to marry her off. He hated to even think of it. She was still so young and a man might mistreat her. How he wished she really were *his* daughter.

A week later, Lucius joined his father at the church. Father Francisco had bought his son his own horse for the occasion, happy to have his son by his side. Every once in a while Lucius' boredom would be alleviated when he would receive visits from a woman by the name of Korinna MacDougal. He had found her one night bleeding on the Church's doorstep. Lucius had brought her inside and cared for her. She had been an amazingly fast healer.

Abnormally fast.

When he had asked her what happened, she had seemed reluctant to respond and he assumed there was a man in her life that had hurt her and he had never asked again, but instead waited, hoping she would confide. She never did.

Korinna became his best friend. They would talk together and walk together through the streets of Madrid late at night. His father never knew of their friendship. He would surely have disapproved.

She would tell him stories about where she came from, a place called Inverness in the Highlands of Scotland.

Korinna made Scotland sound like a place of immeasurable beauty. He couldn't help but wonder, why if she loved her country so much did she keep herself from it for so long?

Throughout Lucius' Church years, the Black Death had come and the town was in an uproar from fear. Any household that was afflicted by the plague would be boarded up, the sick family trapped inside.

Just two months ago, Lucius had gone to see both Lucia and Lovinia, spending the day with Lucia, who had grown to be such a beauty, and the night with Lovinia. Lovinia was going to have his child; she had the rounded belly already and she thought that she was five months into the pregnancy. Lucius was very happy that he would be a father. He had told no one yet.

Currently, Lucius waited for his father to return. Francisco had gone into town to check on the family and came back looking nervous under Lucius' scrutiny.

"What is going on, Father?" Lucius demanded to know. His father merely crossed himself and went to kneel in the chapel to pray. Lucius felt dread welling up inside him. His father avoided his gaze and would not answer his questions.

"I will go see for myself," Lucius said and turned to leave at once.

"Do not go, my son! I beg you, do not go there!" his father exclaimed, real fear making his voice tremble and clouding his dark eyes.

The fear in Lucius increased at his father's pleading. Something was seriously wrong. He ran out of the church and quickly saddled up his horse. It seemed like forever had passed him by before he reached the little house where his sister lived with his mother and their housekeeper. He screamed in rage as he saw that the house had been sealed, a sure sign that the plague had struck there.

His father had been hot on his heels the whole way, shouting to him, pleading with him not to go to the house. He grabbed Lucius' arm before he could break his way into the house.

"Please, my son, listen to me. Do not go inside that house!" Francisco begged him, tears falling from his eyes. Lucius shrugged his father off of him.

FROM THE SHADOWS

"How could you let them die like this? They are your family!" Lucius screamed at him, the pain he felt consumed him and the look of fear on his father's face did nothing to calm him. He was beyond reason.

"I could do nothing, *m'ijo*. It is God's will," he pleaded.

"Damn God's will, Father! And damn you!" Lucius shouted and ripped the boards away from the door. His father stood helpless wringing his hands, tears streaking down his face.

"If you go in there, you will die, my son. Please, stay with me," Francisco spoke softly to him, hoping to make his son see reason. But it was too late. Francisco watched with a sinking heart as his son entered the sick house. He dropped to his knees on the ground and buried his face in his hands.

Inside the house, Lucius rushed to his sister's bedchamber. He stood breathless in her open doorway, taking in the scene with horror and a profound grief that left him physically numb. She weakly coughed and he cried out as he saw the blood come up, pouring down the front of her nightgown. She hugged a bloodstained doll to her chest as she sobbed; frightened of all the blood she vomited. Her neck was swollen grotesquely and blackish in color. It made Lucius feel sick.

He was losing his baby sister and he was powerless to save her. No amount of prayer could help him now.

He stumbled over to her bed and grabbed her up in his arms. She clung to him weakly and he could feel that she was burning with fever.

"Mother won't wake up, Lucius. I'm all alone and I'm scared," she cried, her tears soaking his neck. He was covered in her blood and sweat but he did not care. She needed him now more than ever before and he would not leave her.

"Shh, *mi ángel*, I'm here now. I won't ever leave you, I promise you," he told her.

"I knew you would come," she whispered.

Lucius clutched her to him with a manic desperation. He could not lose her. Please God, have mercy. Lucia lasted until the next afternoon and she died in his arms, sobbing in pain and too weak to move. Lucius had prayed for her, performing the last rites. It had seemed to comfort her, she had even smiled. And now...she was gone and he was dead inside, so what did it

matter if he died, too?

Lucius coughed and knew immediately that he would join her soon. He laid her still body down in her bed with her favorite doll and raised the covers up over her head. He sat beside her bed and wept for his loss. He prayed that his own child would be alright. He could not chance going to see Lovinia; he might take the sickness to her and kill her and the child for sure.

On the third day, Lucius lay in his own bed with his own blood and sweat soaking him. He was cold and weak. His body was swollen and discolored on the neck, armpits and groin. It hurt him to breathe, he could not move. Soon it would be over though. He lay alone, thinking of better days, before the Church. His eyesight seemed to be failing, the room was growing darker and he felt himself slipping away.

"Wha...?" he choked out, seeing a bright halo of red before his eyes. Was it an angel?

"Lucius, I've finally found you," it was Korinna's voice calling to him. She lifted his weak body into her arms, she knew he was dying, she had felt it before she had even entered the house. Korinna cried for him. He had been a good friend to her. How could she let him die? She couldn't even though she knew he probably wanted to die.

She clumsily tore her wrist open in her haste and brought the gushing wrist close to his lips and let it flow into his mouth. Korinna felt immensely relieved when his lips closed around the wound, sucking the blood into his mouth. She watched in morbid fascination as his body tightened in the throes of the change, his muscles bunching and straining. Watched the four teeth on top as they lengthened and sharpened into fangs like her own, and the swollen, blackened patches on his body healed.

"What happened? Am I dead?" he asked her, his hands roving over his body as if trying to detect any signs of death. He stood shakily, looking around in bewilderment as the dawning realization hit him. He was still alive.

"No, you are not dead, Lucius. I changed you. I saved your life," she told him, worried at what her confession, her decision, would make him do.

"Changed me how? Why did you save me? I *wanted* to die, Korinna," he said, his voice raising, anger filling his eyes.

"I am a vampire, Lucius. I gave you my blood and now you are a vampire, as well," she told him, wincing as she saw his expression darken to something akin to hatred.

"Why have you done this to me?" he yelled, stepping closer to her. She stared mutely at him; he cut such a frightening figure. He wore nothing, having stripped down in the heat of his fever. His body was lean but corded with muscle and well toned. His body glistened, covered in blood and sweat, and he looked terrifying to her in that moment.

"You are verra dear to me, Lucius. You are my friend and I didna want to lose you. I'm so sorry, it was selfish of me," Korinna apologized, wishing she had thought twice about changing him. But she had never imagined Lucius as being violent, as being capable of causing someone harm.

Lucius found some clothes and dressed angrily, saying nothing more to her. Without a backward glance, he left the house and ran to Lovinia's house. It, too, was boarded up. He felt his heart die even more and he screamed at the unfairness of it. People in the streets ran from him, fearing him.

He ripped the boarded up door from its hinges, causing havoc in the streets. People ran away screaming about the devil.

Lovina lay dead in the hall, her once lovely body ravaged by the disease. Lucius exploded in a fit of rage and practically tore the house to the ground. His child would never take its first breath.

"I am verra sorry, Lucius," Korinna said meekly from the doorway. She flinched as he turned to her with anger and hate darkening his eyes.

"I'm sure you'll ne'er want to lay eyes on me again...but you must know many things. You canna go into the daylight anymore. It will kill you. Fire, beheading, your heart being destroyed will also kill you. You have many powers inside you now. You can read minds and move things without touching them. You can track a person by their presence. You can hear, see, and feel better than e'er before. You will ne'er get sick, ne'er age, you will heal verra quickly and can heal the wounds of others with your blood. You can make others do as you bid with your mind. You can tell the goodness or wickedness of a person so that you only feed on the evil of humanity. You will now be

exceptionally strong, as you've already proven, and also exceedingly limber and quick. Also, you will have the power to hide your presence from others," she told him quickly before he began raging at her.

Lucius left her standing in that house and didn't see her again for two hundred and ninety-three years. He buried his loved ones and said prayers over their graves. He would not leave them to be collected by some high paid servant to be dumped in a mass grave.

Father Francisco never stepped foot out of his church again. The memory of his beloved son haunted him to his death.

Lucius never went to see his father. He didn't want to see the look in Father Francisco's eyes when he understood what Lucius had become. Father Francisco was a man of the Church. Upon learning the truth of his son's existence he would surely be filled with fear and start yelling of the devil's work.

And Lucius feared he would be right.

* * * *

It was the year 1641 in France, near Orleans. Lucius was three hundred and seventeen years old. The years had made him cruel. He cared nothing for anyone, and most of all, he cared nothing for himself. Lucius had been roaming aimlessly all over the world, looking for some place to make him feel human again. France was not the place and he would be leaving soon.

Not far from the forgotten cabin in the woods where he spent his days, there was a farmhouse where an old farmer and his wife lived. He had never bothered them. But he watched as they led their peaceful, happy and blessedly normal lives.

Lucius watched one fateful night as the farmers' handsome guest left the safety of the house and Lucius grabbed him. He carried him away to a clearing in the woods not far from his cabin and drank from him.

Images and emotions from his victim assailed him. Inside the man there was still a young boy who loved his mother very much and desperately wanted her to return that love. This man *needed* someone to love him back. His name was Angelo and he was on his way back to Paris to see his mother. He was worried about her.

Feeling an affinity with the young man, Lucius gave him

the blood and turned him. He knocked Angelo back when he had reached for more; he wasn't sure why he did it. It was just something he did, lashing out at people. Angelo stirred in him the feelings he thought long dead. He, too, had been a sad little boy craving his mother's attention. Lucius would go with him to Paris and along the way he taught Angelo many things about being a vampire.

"Lucius, I am doing it! I can hear everything you are thinking! It's so simple!" Angelo exclaimed, his excitement that of a child's.

Lucius sat in an overstuffed chair at a tidy, comfortable country inn. Angelo was trying out his powers, amazed at his new abilities. He watched with heavy-lidded eyes as Angelo came to kneel in front of him. Lucius wondered at his intent but then he read it clearly in Angelo's blue eyes. Lucius sat up and leaned down, taking Angelo's lips in a fierce kiss. Angelo placed his hands on either side of Lucius' face and pulled him up into a standing position with him.

Lucius broke the kiss as Angelo quickly undressed, baring a body the classical sculptors would have longed to emulate in their work. Angelo then turned his focus to teasingly removing each layer of clothing from Lucius. Lucius felt Angelo's hands glide over his body, making him harden.

"You are beautiful," Angelo murmured with a seductive smile curling his full, sensual lips. Angelo kissed Lucius' neck and reached his hand down to lingeringly stroke him. Lucius gripped Angelo's face and brought it close to his for another kiss. In answer, Angelo sped his hand, stroking him harder and faster.

Angelo trailed his kisses down Lucius' tense body while he continued to massage him. Lucius leaned back and let Angelo make love to him with his hands and mouth. Lucius moaned when Angelo took his full length deep into his mouth. He tangled his fingers in Angelo's soft hair that glowed like fire in the candlelight. His hips began to jerk involuntarily as Angelo sucked at him. Angelo moaned satisfactorily when Lucius spilled his seed into his mouth.

Lucius let Angelo lead him to the big bed and Angelo lay down before him. Lucius climbed over him and took his mouth in a bruising kiss. Angelo's eyes fluttered shut as Lucius gripped

his erection in his strong hands and bit into his neck. Angelo in turn sank his teeth into Lucius' shoulder and they were connected intimately as Lucius pleased Angelo, rubbing his hand up and down Angelo's hard flesh.

They saw in each other a kinship and understanding of the pain that life can bring. Lucius and Angelo felt love for each other and spent their nights riding onward to Paris and loving during the day. Lucius knew that it would be better to tell Angelo to forget his mother but he just couldn't bring himself to say the words.

Later, in Paris, hearing the petrified screams of fear Angelo's mother emitted, Lucius regretted his stubborn silence. Suddenly inside there was complete silence. Angelo stormed out of the tiny, rat infested hovel, flinging a murderous glare in Lucius' direction.

"I killed her, Lucius. Her neck was like glass, so fragile, and I splintered that once graceful neck. You are looking at a monster, Lucius, and you are the one that made me this way! She was terrified of me! Her eyes..." he broke off on a sob. Lucius stepped toward him but Angelo flung his arm out, keeping him back.

"Do not touch me, Lucius. Do not even look at my face. I am a killer of innocence and you made me into what I am! Why didn't you tell me she would react that way? You seem to know about everything else! Don't you *ever* come near me again! I never want to lay eyes on your evil face ever again!" Angelo screamed and leapt onto his horse and sped off into the dark streets of Paris.

Lucius felt ashamed and again as if his heart had died. Why had he even tried? Angelo had changed greatly in the past few minutes. Why? It was as if his mind had finally cracked under the strain. His aura had been so dark and filled with malice. Angelo had never been particularly good natured but now...

"What have I done?" Lucius whispered to himself.

Angelo could have killed Lucius in that moment and Lucius would have let him. But he hadn't.

Lucius entered the small room where Marie lived. His nose curled at the smell of rotting food and human sweat and vomit. A rat skittered across the floor squeaking madly at him for

intruding.

He scooped up the frail, broken body of Marie Milonne and carried her outside. He gingerly placed her upon his horse and took the reins. He led the horse out of the city and came upon a small church. There were a few graves in sight just beyond the tiny little building. Perhaps they would let her be buried here.

He left Paris the very next night after spending the day holed up in the cellar of the church. The priest had been very warm and friendly, inviting him to rest awhile. Lucius moved fast through the country and took board on a ship over the British Sea. Soon he stood on English soil. He would buy a room for the day and then...to Scotland. He had some making up to do.

How had he become so dispassionate and cruel?

* * * *

Inverness, Scotland

Lucius was cold and wet. It was a rainy night and the wind was cold and biting. Even though the weather was terrible at the moment, Scotland was *one* of the most beautiful places Lucius had ever laid eyes on.

Days passed as Lucius traveled slowly on horseback through the Scottish countryside, noticing with pleasure that the hills were brilliant green and dappled with heather. The weather had been calm and mild at first but the days were growing chill yet still he kept his steady pace, stopping only to rest the daylight hours away.

The people of Scotland were mostly friendly, although a little suspicious of him. He talked at length with them, learning their history and their culture. After a few drinks to warm the blood and some hearty conversation, most Scots gave up their wariness and gifted him with a kindness he feared he didn't deserve.

Upon reaching Inverness, Lucius was struck by how untamed the land became. And then, the glittering of the lochs would seem so serene. He needed this before he reached Korinna, this time to think, to go back and truly see how he had been leading his life up to this point. When had he stopped being a knight in shining armor and become the monster Angelo had claimed him to be?

He spent one final day at a cozy inn. He ordered some food and ate quietly in his room as he gazed out the window without seeing.

You're here somewhere, Korinna. I can feel it. I need you now more than ever.

Korinna didn't disappoint. Lucius awoke to discover her sitting on the edge of his bed, gazing curiously at him. Her eyes held no hint of her feelings toward him, no telling of whether or not he was welcome.

He didn't expect welcome.

"What are you doing here, Lucius?" she asked him, standing suddenly and turning to open the window and gaze out. He watched her absorb the view, knew she was trying to calm herself. He got out of the bed and dressed.

"I've come to seek your forgiveness, Korinna. Understand that I had lost much that night and couldn't handle it. I want your help, Korinna. I can't seem to run from the side of me that wants to hurt people, to make them as miserable as I am," he told her, his eyes speaking volumes of the sorrow he felt.

Korinna turned slowly from the window, gifted him with a smile and flung herself into his arms. He laughed at her actions and spun her around.

"That makes me verra happy to hear, Lucius. But I owe you an apology, as well. I should ne'er have interfered in your life. But I cared for you and I didna want to see you die, not like that. I had nae right to thrust you into this life," she told him and he shook his head dismissively.

"I've already forgiven you a long time ago. How can I fault you for something so noble?" he answered and she finally stepped out of his embrace.

"Tis good to see you at last. Come, you will stay with me at my wee castle and we will further discuss everything," she said, making shooin' motions with her hands, hurrying him on.

She talked and gestured animatedly around them as they rode on to Korinna's home. She pointed out the boundaries of her lands and waved to the few people still out at this time in the evening. She had told him her home was a wee castle and that was exactly how he would describe it. The size was more fitting of a smaller manor house like you'd find in England but it was

made of stone and had small turrets and a larger tower.

The castle was surrounded by a stone wall with a portcullis. She whistled to the guards and the portcullis was raised for them. Inside the walls there was a small village. People milled about, finishing the days work. There was a small market, a blacksmith, a tanner, lone vending merchants and further along there were small farms.

Korinna introduced him to her tenants along the way. They greeted him with kind smiles and wished him welcome. And Korinna had lorded over this place for so many years. He would have to remember to ask her how she had done it.

They housed their horses in the stables, leaving them to be tended by the young stable boy. He crooned to them and fed them oats out of his hand.

Korinna walked him around her small castle, showing him his room. Later, they dined in the Great Hall with her servants and a few tenants.

"I refuse to dine alone, ye ken, and sae these verra fine folk sit with me night after night and regale me with stories and song. Few prefer to stay at hearth and home to be with their wives and wee ones," Korinna told him, her Scots brogue thickening while with her people.

"I've never had whishkey before, Korinnaaaa. S'nice, really. Is it warm in here to you?" Lucius asked and Korinna laughed at him, refilling his tankard.

"Eat, drink and be merry, Lucius. Dinna let the wee dram go to yer head. But if ye do, nae worries, everything will be alrigh' tomorrow," Korinna told him, raising her voice to be heard over the bawdy song a few of her people had suddenly erupted into.

"Mind, we aren't like this all the time. But tis a time for celebrating, my friend. Tis their way of welcoming you to MacDhughail Keep," she added.

They went to sleep that morning never mentioning all that needed to be said. They would save those questions and answers for the night ahead. Lucius kissed her lightly on the cheek before he retired to his room.

"I always kept the hope alive for ye, Lucius."

* * * *

Lucius and Korinna were seated alone in the Great Hall.

Both sat in silence, giving the other time to collect all they needed to say. Lucius was the first to speak.

"I came to you because I made another like us, took him without warning and loved him too much to try and advise him as he needed. He's stubborn and willful, he would not have listened anyway, but at least I should have tried. To see the betrayal he felt...shining in his eyes, it hurt a lot, Korinna. I was seeing exactly what I had become in him. Now, I fear he's lost, to me and to himself.

"For too long I have lived with the anger, the boredom. Nothing made me happy anymore. Something inside me came out of a trance when I saw myself reflected in his eyes. And I don't understand..." he trailed off, looking to her with an expression of such devastation. He was so lost, so bewildered.

"You don't understand how you lost who you were before? Lucius, every vampire has within them a struggle. One that is ultimately between good and evil. You, my friend, have been succumbing to the side that was ne'er a part of you before, the sway of the 'evil' that resides inside of us all.

"I'd like to tell you that there is some magical power I could use on you to make you see the good. I'd also like to tell you that tis a difficult and challenging ordeal. Truth is, you've ne'er needed me to help you find the way," Korinna told him with a small shrug and a sheepish grin.

"What do you mean?" he asked her, hoping he had a chance to become the good person he had once been.

"Weel, for someone like you, it shouldna be hard. You had a sister that you loved more than your own life and she would be deeply saddened to know the direction you took," Korinna told him.

"Yes...and...?" he encouraged her.

"Just listen to what your heart is trying to tell that hard head of yours, to what is still good. That is the way," Korinna told him.

He sat quiet for a full minute, her words resounding in his head. He *had* forgotten the happiness he had and hung only on the sorrow. But in grief, it was often hard to see the light again after such painful losses.

"I guess I chose not to think on her over the years. It was

too painful for me to confront," Lucius finally said, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Exactly. You chose to ignore that little 'voice' inside you, the good memories and the love, and that's what can again make you the caring man that you once were to your sister and to me," Korinna told him. She shrugged again as if apologizing that there wasn't something mystical and magical that he had needed from her. He laughed and gave her a rare smile, one that reached his eyes.

"And what if someone has never known good memories or love?" Lucius asked her, wondering if there could be much hope for Angelo.

"I believe so. One could change if they found someone to give them reason," she told him with a sad smile, as if she knew that he was thinking of someone in particular.

So he hadn't been enough for Angelo? Well, apparently Angelo hadn't been enough for him either. But there was hope for him. Just remember Lucia and the love she had for him. She would never have liked for him to be the unfeeling man he had been for so long. He was supposed to be her knight in shining armor.

"I can feel the happiness her memory brings to you. I am glad you have finally found yourself again. I did miss you, Lucius. You were so good to me that night you found me outside that church of yours," Korinna said to him.

"You wouldn't tell me what happened," he pressed and was aggravated to see her look away. He knew she was going to change the subject.

"I'm glad to have you here, Lucius. This is my home and you are welcome here always. Tell me, what do you think of MacDhughail Keep?" she brought her gaze back to his. He could read nothing in her eyes.

"Wildly beautiful comes to mind. The land is rugged and yet it brings peace at the same time. How did you come to own such a place?" he asked, allowing her the change of subject.

"Ah, a mere woman holding lands befuddles the mind, does it? Tis alright, dinna apologize, Lucius. Many have given me that same reaction. I'll say with pride that tis because I am a strong and capable woman that these lands still belong to me. I was

once hand-fasted to an older man, a chieftain called Pádrúig. A hand-fast tis mostly a trial marriage, a year and a day. He died during our first year. Pádrúig told me on his deathbed that he wanted me to run his lands. Said there was no finer person for the job," Korinna explained with a beaming smile.

"Pádrúig and I, I was known as Kennocha then, were two of many who had stuck to the old ways. I suppose one would have called me a Druid. Pádrúig and I were well respected in our time. We ruled our people fairly, justly. And when he was gone, none resented my inheritance. Pádrúig had no sons, no brothers and no close kin at all really. I was all he had and he loved me verra much. I've come and gone for years at a time, going by a different name, claiming to be my own descendant. And so I've kept my place here," she continued and Lucius couldn't help but admire his friend for she really was all she said. She was strong and she was definitely capable.

"It must be wonderful to have your own place in the world. Having someplace to call your home. Who made you a vampire, Korinna?" Lucius asked curiously. He knew so little of her.

Korinna leaned back in her chair and steepled her hands over her stomach. He watched her eyes as she remembered her own changing.

"A woman named Siobhan Ó Conghaile made me. We were verra close to the same age, she and I. Siobhan had just been changed herself, perhaps for a year, maybe less. Unfortunately, she had left the one who turned her, ne'er learning of most the things a vampire needs to know. Siobhan had known Oren for awhile before she was turned, knew what he was even. She was aware of his vulnerabilities to light and some of his powers, but she ne'er knew she could avoid killing to feed.

"Siobhan had starved herself for so long, refusing to feed from people. She grew so weak. I chanced upon her and she took me then and there, unable to resist. Guilt was what made her attempt to change me as she had been changed. She told me all she knew, it wasna verra much. Most things I learned on my own. I felt an immediate bond with her, like a sister she is to me. But she moved quickly on, running from her pain and I havena seen her since," Korinna concluded sadly.

A maid came to bring them drinks and they paused in their

FROM THE SHADOWS

discussion. She was pretty with soft brown curls and doe-like brown eyes. A spatter of freckles lay over her fine boned nose and cheeks. She had a dimple when she smiled.

"Thank you, Moira. Lucius, I dinna believe you've met Moira. I trust your father is well," Korinna said to the girl. She gave a small curtsy to them and answered in a soft voice, "Aye, miss, he be quite well now. I've fed him broth and made sure he had himself a wee dram of whiskey to warm him before bed every night. It chased the chill from his bones."

"I'm verra glad to hear that, Moira. Be sure to give him my regards," Korinna told her, noticing with a satisfied smile Moira was eating Lucius up with her eyes. It would do the man good to get a good tup. It uplifts the spirit.

* * * *

Moira proved to be a great salve for the healing soul. She was so sweet and full of life, joy and spirit. She lovingly soothed him for hours that night and into the early morning where they stayed bundled in Lucius' bed. Moira came to him every night for the full three weeks of his stay. It would soon be time for him to leave though.

"May your journey be safe and Godspeed," she had whispered to him before she left him late that last afternoon.

He dressed lazily that evening and packed his few belongings. He met Korinna in the Great Hall for dinner one last time.

"You're welcome to stay as long as you like," Korinna told him delicately, trying hard to cover her reluctance of his leaving.

"I understand, but I need to do something very important. I need to look after Angelo and see he does not hurt another," he answered and saw her nod.

He picked half-heartedly at the stew on his trencher. He had done what he came to do and now he felt lost yet again. There was no place for him here. Or anywhere. But Angelo should be watched. Lucius had given him eternal life and he couldn't bear with the guilt of Angelo hurting more people.

"You believe he is your responsibility. I willna tell you otherwise. You must go about your business as you see fit. But I wish you luck and hope you find peace," Korinna spoke softly, a tremble in her voice. It was then he understood. Korinna was

surrounded by people but very alone.

"Dinna fash yourself, Lucius. I will be fine as I always have been. But anytime you wish to see me..." she started and trailed off without finishing the thought.

And so the last sight he had of her was her waving to him from atop her tower. She probably watched him until he was out of sight. His heart heavy, Lucius continued on.

Chapter Twelve

June, 2000, New Orleans

"I followed him here. I watched as he ruined Lily's life twice. The first, when he turned her, and then left her to fend for herself in a way of revenge for what I had done to him by not warning him about his mother's possible reaction to him. Although, strangely, he *had* warned her that her family may fear her if she returned to them.

"The second time he hurt her by killing Vincent, who was Vallon in a past life. I was too late to save him. I should have been on guard but I got caught up in her happiness that night when Vincent went to procure the marriage papers.

"Angelo is bent on hurting those who hurt him, whether they were innocent of their harm or not. Which is why you must be careful, just in case. You are Lily's grand-niece and I'm not sure whether or not he would use you to get back at her and Vallon. Or me," Luca told Jaid, kissing her softly on the lips.

"I'm so sorry, Luca. I had no idea you had to live through such tragedy," she responded, her mind swamped with his words. This man had been through the plague, the death of his beloved sister and only child, who had never had the chance to enter the world. It made her want to weep for him.

"Thank you, Jaid. I still miss Lucia very much," he told her and she could still see the pain it caused him haunting his eyes. How she *needed* to soothe him.

"Would you ever want to become human again, Luca?" Jaid asked him, trying to keep her tone of voice nonchalant.

He looked down at her and pried into her mind, feeling guilty as he did so but he needed to know why she had asked that question.

His heart leaped. She loved him and wanted him to be

human again so that they could be a family. Luca smiled and was happy with what he had seen in her.

"Yes, I think I would, Jaid. Why do you ask?" he asked her, feigning ignorance.

"Oh, I was just wondering, Luca. It was apparent to me that you hadn't known there was a way to become human again and I was just wondering your take on it," she lied, chancing a peek at him and then looking quickly back at her hands. She was a terrible liar.

"I love you, Jaid," Luca said and watched with some humor as she looked up into his face with such wide, startled eyes.

"What? Did you just say what I think you just said?" she asked, a wide grin spreading over her beautiful face.

She really was the world to him.

"I love you, Jaidyn. I love everything about you," he repeated.

He laughed as she started to sing softly under her breath, "The way I wear my hat? The way I sip my tea? The memory of all that?"

He kissed her, cutting off her playful song. She pulled herself up to straddle him and kiss him passionately back. His hands roved up the back of her skirt and gripped her snap panties.

Luca smiled as he felt that she was wearing that easy-off underwear.

He ripped them off of her and undid his pants, pushing them down to his hips. Jaid moaned happily in her throat as he entered her. She slid up and down on him, rolling her hips into his. They made love furiously, Luca stifling all the little love sounds she made with his kisses. They came together and Jaid bit Luca's neck to keep from crying out.

She languidly lifted herself off of him and they fixed their clothing and sat snuggled on the chaise again, coming down from their high.

"I love you, Luca and I would willingly give you all of my blood if you needed it," she whispered against his neck.

"There's just one tiny problem," he answered.

She jerked herself into a fully erect sitting position, looking fearfully into his eyes and said, "What? Problem? What

problem?"

"I need the blood of a Guardian first," he told her.

"Oh...well...surely one of them would help you. I mean, they told us at the meeting that the Guardians were given that power to release vampires from the evil. So...they would help you. I know they would," she said with conviction ringing in her voice. She was determined and nothing was going to stop her now.

"But where to find them? I doubt they hang around on street corners or in bars," he told her doubtfully.

"But Shadow and Korinna would know, I'm sure," she told him consolingly, absolutely refusing to believe that he wouldn't be changed back by the Guardians.

"I'll ask one of them. I'm sure Shadow is still at the club. Will you be alright here by yourself, Jaid?" he asked her uncertainly.

They stood up from the chaise and Jaid looked at him with a smirk at his question.

"Sure will, just go, hurry," she rushed him, practically pushing him out the door. He heard the door slam shut behind him.

"Insufferable woman," he muttered and knocked on the door.

Jaid opened the door wide and gave him a comical surprised expression.

"That was fast! I knew that you guys have preternatural speed but...wow!" she said and he cut her off with a kiss. She sighed blissfully and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Haven't even left yet, *mi amada*!" he told her, letting her go.

"No? Then why are you still here? Go find a Guardian!" she told him and pushed him back outside.

"I love you," she said and closed the door in his face. He shook his head and stared dumbly at the door. What a strange woman. He raised his hand to knock again when the door opened a crack and she held out his motorcycle keys.

"Thanks," he got out before the door shut again. He threw his leg over his motorcycle that was parked sideways, facing the street in front of Jaid's Camaro and sped off toward 'Motel Hell'.

Angelo watched him go and he smiled widely. He walked up to the door and knocked softly. Inside he heard Jaid scoff in disbelief.

"Why haven't you left yet? Just come in, you fool of a man," she yelled softly from inside the house, her voice fading as she moved through the rooms. He opened the door and stepped inside. Jaid came back into the living room with a glass of water. She looked up and saw it was Angelo standing in her living room and not Luca. She screamed and dropped her glass; it shattered into fragments at her feet.

"Mom, what's going on? What's all the yelling...oh no. You let him in," he said in a soft, worried voice.

"Skye, go to your room, okay? This is between me and him. Go back to your room, honey. Please, Skye, just go," she said, never taking her eyes off of Angelo. She eyed him like a wary mother bear.

Skye did as he was told but as soon as he made it to his room, he crawled out his bedroom window, dropped down into the alley and ran to find Luca.

"So...the boy took off...but that's fine by me. I'd prefer for us to be alone anyway," he told her with a short laugh.

"Are you going to kill me?" she asked, fear making her voice quiver uncertainly.

"Is that what they've been filling your pretty head with? 'Watch out for the big, bad man, Angelo. He's off his rocker!' No, Jaidyn Pierce, I will not hurt you at all.

"You see, I want to make a trade with Luca, your life for his. Although, I really won't hurt you but he won't know that, now, will he? It's as simple, or as complicated, as that, *chérie*. And he *will* forfeit his life for you," he told her in a silken voice and then added, "Now...sleep."

He caught her before she hit the floor. As he stepped out of her house, he let his presence be felt. After all, he *wanted* to be found.

* * * *

Luca pulled his bike into the parking area of 'Motel Hell' not long after he had left Jaid. Luckily, Shadow's motorcycle was still there, which meant he was still there. He went in through the back and loped up the staircase that led to the upper level. He

knocked on the door and was greeted by River.

"I need to ask you both something," Luca told her and she gestured for him to come inside and have a seat.

"What can we help you with?" Shadow asked as he came into the main room from one of the back rooms where he kept some of his weapons. He was holding a knife in one hand and an elaborate carved wooden stake in the other hand. He came in and took a seat beside River across from him and continued to carve his stake.

"I need to know where I can find a Guardian. I want them to change me back," he told them and they both looked at him in surprise.

"Really? Well, I'm sure one of the Davignon's or maybe Milan can help you. Who knows where Phoenix and Rowena are at the moment?" Shadow replied.

"Where can I find one of them?" he asked in a rush.

"Well, one of the twins, Malachi, lives here in New Orleans and the other, Costa, lives out in Lafayette, not too far from here. But Milan is the closest as she has been staying here. She went out on patrol. But you got lucky. A while ago she called me saying she would need a replacement. Seems the demons were rough on her tonight, and her bow was snapped in two. She should be showing up any minute now," River told him.

"What made you decide to go back?" Shadow asked him curiously.

"Jaid made me decide to go back. I really love her and I want to be with her. She can't be one of us because I know she wouldn't be able to do that to her son," Luca explained and he was surprised to see envy in Shadow's gaze but it was gone so fast he wasn't even sure he had seen the look. The three of them talked for awhile, waiting for Milan to return.

The door to the upper level of 'Motel Hell' opened and in walked Milan with...Skye?

"This kid here says he has some very urgent news," Milan told them, worry creasing her brow as she felt the panic Skye was in just like everyone could. Luca felt his heart turn to ice and his stomach plummet.

"Angelo," was all Skye said and the room was alive with a flurry of activity. Weapons were passed out quickly and Shadow

and Luca were downstairs and on their bikes in an instant. Skye stayed behind with River who was to call everyone in the vicinity she could for help.

Luca and Shadow roared off on their bikes into the night. Milan simply disintegrated and, while disembodied, searched the city for Angelo and Jaid. Her senses finally picked them up and she found what she was looking for in St. Louis Cemetery number one, in an old mausoleum.

Using her mind to connect to the others, she sent a message to Luca, Shadow and River, "St. Louis Cemetery number one, guys. They are in a mausoleum belonging to a family by the name of 'Hearst'. Jaid is unharmed."

Luca expelled a pent up breath, relief flooding him.

She would *not* be harmed.

* * * *

Evonn crept through the halls of Davriel's palace, making not a sound. Davriel was currently deep in discussion with a few of his elite warriors. He would not know what she was up to.

She breezed through the arched doorway of Mikhail's chambers. He was pacing, no doubt enraged that his father had excluded him from his important meeting.

"Fear not, Mikhail, he has something far more important for you in mind than the retrieval of some silly child. But as he is busy, I've come in his stead," she purred as she trailed a hand over Mikhail's heaving chest and she playfully slapped his cheek.

"What is it, Evonn? Stop toying with me and tell me what it is I am supposed to do," he demanded angrily, jerking himself out of her reach.

Giving a pout she asked him, "Don't you like me anymore, Mikhail? Calm down, petulant boy, and I will tell you what your father wishes of you. At this moment your little vampire puppet, Angelo, is about to be proved innocent. It will wreak havoc on all your ingenious designs. We can't have that now, can we?" she asked, sitting down on his large bed. She leaned back on her elbows, giving him a view of her scantily clad body.

"What does he wish of me, Evonn?" he asked her again, trying to keep his temper in check, for she liked him when he was angry. She loved to get him riled up.

"It's simple, really, Mikhail. Kill all of them. It is too late to

keep his innocence in question. We cannot repair this one, love. You will find them in a cemetery, a St. Louis number one, Hearst mausoleum. Everyone present must die, Mikhail, or else the rest will learn our plan.

"And if you fail...maybe Davriel's eldest son will be more fit as his right hand than you are..." she told him in a sing-song voice. Evonn watched delightedly when his eyes flashed to red and black and his skin darkened to the color of the shadows that thrived in their world.

"That's right, Mikhail. Your father has another son. A Halfling son called Oren. He is a strong one and oh-so-beautiful. He looks of your father," Evonn teased him, watching with hooded eyes as he came closer to her. She almost moaned in anticipation as she watched his anger turn him to his true form. His fingers produced the wicked claws and his blond hair swirled as if caught in an angry wind.

Evonn lifted her dress and spread her legs for him. Only when she made him angry did he ever succumb to his lust for her. And she so loved to provoke his ire.

* * * *

Milan again took her corporeal form in the mausoleum, startling Angelo.

"What are you?" he asked her, looking at her with disbelief. He rushed over to the sleeping Jaid and picked her up in his arms and held a knife to her throat. She was tied up and gagged so that she would not be able to speak when she woke up. Angelo didn't want her telling anyone that he had no intention of hurting her. It would spoil everything.

"Give it up, Angelo. You don't need to hurt anyone anymore. Lily is not for you, Angelo. I know you love her and it's because she reminds you of your mother. Her coloring, her grace, the soft, melodic sound of her voice. There *is* someone out there to love you, Angelo. Just not Lily," Milan spoke calmly to him.

Angelo searched inside himself frantically. How could he not have seen it? Lily *did* remind him of Marie. How could he have been so blind?

"Alright, I'll admit that what you speak is true. But I still want Luca dead. He was the starting point of all my misfortune,"

he spoke to her through his teeth.

"No, he was not, Angelo. Why do you lie to yourself? Your mother was the start of all your misfortune," she told him forcefully. *See things as they are*, she urged him with her mind, giving him a mental nudge.

"You lie! Never speak of Marie that way!" he yelled at her, waking Jaid. She looked wildly around and was relieved to see Milan with them.

"Wake up to reality, Angelo. If she were as perfect a mother as you pretend she was, she would have never allowed you to be used in that whore house! As a matter of fact, if she had loved you as you pretend she did, she would have left that horrible place. She let you be used there because it lined her pockets! They made a slave of you and beat you and then forced you to service the men!" Milan yelled back.

Angelo shook with fury, but tears slid down his face. A roar of motorcycles filled the air and Shadow and Luca were soon seen running toward the group. They were followed by Lily, Vallon, Korinna, Ziggy, Costa, Malachi and Aurelia. Milan stood inside the mausoleum with Angelo and Jaid and she motioned for the rest to remain where they were outside.

"Luca, I have an ultimatum for you! Her life...for yours! Agree? I'll never bother Lily again and Jaid will be left unharmed, I swear it!" Angelo yelled suddenly, looking only at Luca and awaiting his answer.

Luca knew he would do it for Jaid. He looked at her with all the love he had for her shining in his eyes and saw her shaking her head at him madly. He could hear muffled screams coming from her. He nodded to Angelo and walked into the mausoleum to an uproar of protests.

"He will trick you!"

"Don't listen to him!"

"He's bluffing!"

"What? Are you fucking nuts?" yelled Costa.

Milan silenced them with an upraised hand. All hoped she knew what she was doing.

Luca stepped over to Angelo, Angelo grabbed him, and flung Jaid to Milan who rushed her outside. Angelo caressed Luca's face with his hands, and softly asked him, "Why couldn't

you love me enough to tell me how much she would hate me? You knew, you knew..." and then Angelo bit into his neck roughly. Soon, Luca felt himself becoming drowsy, weak, he was being put into a kind of coma from the blood loss.

"No, Luca! He was never going to hurt me! He told me so..." Jaid's sweet voice faded and Luca's body fell to the floor in an unnatural sleep. Jaid cried as Aurelia hugged her close. Milan reentered the mausoleum.

"Angelo...will killing him really solve your problems?" Milan asked gently. He held the knife in his hands, ready to cut out Luca's heart, but he paused at the sound of her calmly spoken words.

Outside everyone held their breath. What was going to happen? They dared not rush in at him and make him do something rash. He was like nitroglycerine, one nudge and he would explode.

"What do *you* know of my problems?" he yelled at her.

"I can see right through you now, Angelo. You never really meant to hurt anyone, not even Vincent. No one ever taught you the difference between what was right and what was wrong. One of the prostitutes at '*Le Maison Rouge*' was killed for refusing a man his pleasure, right? That's all you had to go by: violence and rage. But something inside you is still good, Angelo. I can see it even if you don't!" Milan told him, crying for everything she saw inside of him. He had known so much pain.

"I am better off dead and you know it," he said in a soft, defeated voice. His eyes spoke of years of self loathing and tragedy. Milan was weakened by it. No one should ever have to live such a tragic life.

"No, Angelo, I don't think that at all. You need a second chance. Start over someplace new," she told him, again raising her hand for silence for there were a few present who didn't agree with her at all. Angelo's eyes grew angered.

"Trying to get me to fall for your pretty words and your pity so I'll spare him and high tail it out of Louisiana in shame?" he accused her.

"That's not what I said and you know it. Stop twisting my words into something deceitful. Jaid said you never meant to hurt her and I, for one, believe her completely. She wouldn't lie

about that," Milan spoke in her same soothing tone.

Jaid stepped into the mausoleum and slowly approached Angelo. His gaze swiveled to meet hers.

"Angelo, why didn't you kill me for your revenge? If you think that Luca is responsible for the death of a loved one, why didn't you decide to take away one of his loved ones?" Jaid asked him. His eyes again filled with tears.

"I could never...bring harm to a lady, except Marie. It was an accident. I had forgotten...how strong the blood had made me. But I have killed men. I am evil and there will be no second chances or starting over for me. I am, and have always been, beyond redemption," he spat out angrily.

Milan could feel the outrage Angelo's words had provoked in Vallon and Lily especially. They still believed him responsible for the deaths of Bethany and Azure.

"I want all of you to know that Angelo is not guilty for the deaths of Bethany Paige or Azure Beaumont," she began but Angelo interrupted her.

"It is my fault that Bethany died! It was my hatred for her son that led to her death, I know it!"

"You are wrong, Angelo," Milan countered.

"One day, someone will come along that will make you find the good inside yourself and make you happy to be alive, Angelo," Jaid told him.

"How can you say that?" Angelo asked her. He looked so full of pain and regret that she wanted to hold him. And he looked at her strangely as he felt that from her.

"I just know," she answered simply.

"She speaks the truth, Angelo. I see it myself," Milan told him, again giving him a mental nudge. There was so much he was hiding from.

"What *are* you?" he asked her again.

"I am a Guardian, Angelo. My people were made by the Goddess to save mankind from evil," she answered. It was not enough but for now it would have to be.

Costa and Malachi teleported behind Angelo and grabbed hold of his arms. Milan nodded to them; she had told them to do this with her mind.

"What are you doing to me?" Angelo asked. He didn't fight

their hold on him.

"I am going to make you sleep for a while, Angelo. You've got a hell of a fight ahead of you. When you wake, she will be waiting for you," Milan told him, stepping closer to him.

"Who will?" he asked, confused and untrusting.

"Your soul mate," she answered and opened her mouth wide. He watched as she grew sharp fangs and then they were sunk deep into his flesh. Milan drank every last drop from him until he, too, lay in that eerie death-like sleep.

A bout of sarcastic clapping met their ears. The group turned as one to the newcomer. He gazed at them all loathingly while the Guardians and Shadow and Korinna readied their weapons.

"Touching scene, really. So sorry to interrupt your little inspirational play of love and forgiveness. You really make me sick," Mikhail sneered at them, insolently raking them with his bored gaze.

"What's going on?" Jaid whispered, curious of the stranger.

"He's a demon, Jaid. It's best that you see now how they look just as normal as everyone else," Malachi answered her in hushed tones. Ziggy, upon hearing the man was a demon, equipped his own weapons. He released the blades strapped onto each forearm and they snapped straight out with a hiss.

Mikhail appraised the situation with a quick glance. He would be fighting all of them...alone. Would his father have put him into this situation? Demons were very strong and fierce fighters, but the Guardians possessed weapons most fatal to them. He was at a distinct disadvantage.

Damn, but he had let Evonn get to him. She always knew just what to say to anger him. And he had an older brother, a Halfling, for competition! He had walked right into her trap. She was too crafty and his father too blinded by his own power to see her for what she really was.

But if there was a chance he *could* kill them all, he could return victorious and tell his father of Evonn's machinations. And then *he* would be sitting in on every important meeting, be a part of all his father's affairs. And he would have the pleasure of watching Evonn die for her treason.

"Not just a demon, Guardian, but son of Davriel. I am a

Prince of Tenebrae and Elite Warrior of my father's army. And all of you here must die. You see, I used Angelo as a pawn in my plan and you fools fell for it...for a while," he began, allowing all to see the horns that declared him as a demon of rank, and he let his eyes rest on Shadow, Korinna and Aurelia.

"We can offer so much more to you than the Guardians can. Help us and you shall have power, riches, anything you could ever want. The Guardians never trusted you enough, thought you were evil creatures and should be hunted down and killed like you were animals. And yet you blindly accept them...*sheep* you all are...led to the slaughter," he tried tempting them.

They never swayed. They remained steadfast.

"You wanted to make Angelo seem such a monster we would never trust a Changeling again. You murdered those women, didn't you?" Costa asked him, seeing it all clearly now. Angelo had never been their enemy.

"Yes...true...that was the plan. Until Blondie here fucked it up with her 'I can see it in you' bullshit. Cut the crap, Guardian! We're all adults here!" he addressed Milan. She said nothing but narrowed her eyes.

Without another word, Mikhail unsheathed his hidden Shadowblade and struck out at the nearest being which happened to be Costa. He took a nasty cut to the face. The blade laid open his cheek from cheekbone to chin. Blood poured down his neck, the wound showed no sign of healing.

Jaid was thrust into the mausoleum. Aurelia used her own body as a shield as she leaned over Jaid on the floor of the crypt. And then, all hell broke loose.

Costa charged Mikhail with a vengeful fury, laying open Mikhail's face with his short sword. He laughed evilly and Malachi threw three small daggers, which laid themselves deep in Mikhail's chest. Mikhail's wounds would not heal either. All blades were made from Atlantean steel and silver, decorated with powerful symbols.

Still Mikhail fought, his blade slashing at his enemies who circled around him like wolves closing in for the kill. Korinna took a deep cut in the thigh. Ziggy's blades slid through Mikhail's sides, trapping him, and Shadow took a knife from his belt and plunged it into the demon's chest.

And the fight was done, in less than two minutes. Mikhail's heart was cut from his body and it instantly disintegrated into nothing but ash that blew away in the calm breeze sweeping through the cemetery.

Aurelia let Jaid up and they watched as Korinna tied a scrap of cloth from Ziggy's shirt around her injured thigh and Costa held his own over shirt to his cut cheek. They would need stitches to close the wound and stop the bleeding.

"Why was he alone?" Milan mused, speaking her thoughts aloud. The question was, of course, rhetorical. No one understood why a single demon would try and take on all of them.

"If he spoke true, we just killed the only son of Davriel. Now, I know demons don't really love, but he will be pissed and he will want us dead for this," Malachi spoke and Milan nodded grudgingly.

"What should we do about Angelo?" Costa asked, nodding his head toward the vampire's comatose form.

"We will leave him here to sleep until he is awakened. Until then...he will remain here under Guardian protection until his day comes," Milan told them all.

"And what of Luca?" Jaid asked fearfully.

Milan smiled at her and answered, "He wanted to be human, so I will grant that wish for him.

"Better you than me," Costa grumbled.

Milan knelt down at Luca's side and cut open her wrist with her small knife and brought the bleeding wrist to his lips.

"Drink and be human again, Luca," Milan coaxed him and Luca's mouth latched onto her wrist. After a minute, Milan pulled away and held up Angelo's unused knife to Jaid.

"The blood of a human that loves him...ready?" she asked.

Jaidyn nodded and sucked in air as Milan made a gash on her upper forearm. Luca bit into her skin and Jaid hissed in pain but then she felt the pleasure. She watched as Luca's body tensed and his fangs receded. Everyone waited with bated breath.

"Shit, I can't see worth a damn! What happened?" Luca asked.

"You can see, Luca. You are just used to your vampire sight. I'm sorry to say that none of your physical vampire powers

will remain with you. But your psychic powers will stay. Once those doors of the mind are opened, they stay open," Milan told him, laughing prettily as he tried to focus on her face by squinting.

"You mean I'm human? What the hell happened?" he asked confused and he listened patiently as Jaid and Milan filled him in.

"I didn't kill Angelo; I just put him into a deep sleep for a while. You always knew that deep inside there was a chance for him, didn't you?" Milan asked him. She healed Jaid's cut with her own blood as she spoke.

"I guess I at least hoped there was. Well, what are we all sitting around in a cemetery for?" he asked as he climbed to his feet. He put his arm around Jaid and said, "We better go get Skye and take him home."

Jaid nodded and smiled up at him lovingly. Home. He had said they should take Skye home.

"Thank you, all of you, for helping us. I can never repay what you have done for me," Jaid told them all. Milan and the twins lifted Angelo into an empty vault.

* * * *

"Mom! You're alright! I knew you would be, but I was still worried," Skye flew into her arms as they walked through the door at 'Motel Hell'. The rest of the group came into the main room and River went for first aid supplies.

"Those cuts will scar and the healing will be slow," Aurelia told Korinna and Costa.

"Of course, chalk one up for life against Costa," he answered her in an insolent way and she grinned at him.

Korinna began stitching her own thigh, pulling her loose skirt up. Everyone eyed Costa, none wanted to stitch him. No one wanted to 'poke the bear'. He rolled his eyes, plainly having guessed why they hesitated.

"I promise to be good if one of you fine ladies would sit on my lap while you stitch me," Costa bartered, remarkably plain-faced.

"It's times like these when I *know* you're my brother," Malachi laughed.

"Poor Fiona. She would have loved to do the honor," Jaid

FROM THE SHADOWS

said.

"I'll help you. But I'll not be sitting on your lap, Costa," Aurelia told him, eyeing him warily and he frowned.

"No one wants to play with me."

* * * *

Jaid and Luca went home that night with *their* son and waited for the sunrise from atop the roof. It would be the first time he had seen the sun in over six hundred years. Jaid watched the awe that spread over his face as he watched it come up over the horizon.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Jaid asked him.

"Not as beautiful as you are, *mi amada*, my beloved," he answered. They kissed each other sweetly until Skye made a characteristic nine *and a half* year old snort of disgust.

"Yuck! No smooching when I'm here! Wait until I go to bed to make my baby sister!" he told them, his nose wrinkled at them.

"Your baby sister?" Jaid asked him, wondering if he knew something. He smiled at the both of them and whispered secretively, "Little Lucia."

He hopped up from his perch on the roof, scurried down the ladder they had propped against the rear wall of the house and ran inside to go to bed, leaving them staring after him with their mouths gaping.

"Little Lucia...*mi ángel*...she's coming back to me," Luca whispered. Jaid smiled at him happily and stood up, reaching her hand down to him.

"What are you thinking?" he asked her with a matching smile, accepting her proffered hand and rising slowly to his feet.

"Oh, I think I want a baby girl now, Luca. That is, if you're going to marry me," she said to him and he cradled her gently in his arms.

"Of course, I'm going to marry you, Jaid, *mi corazón*. But first I am going to make wild, passionate love to you...again and again. And if we're going to have more children...we're going to need a bigger place," he replied and after they were down on terra firma, he lifted her into his arms and carried her into the house.

"Are you asking me to move in with you?" she asked in her

best coy voice.

"A house would not be a home without you in it, love."

* * * *

Lily and Vallon lay together in bed, feeling lighter than air. It was finally over now. Angelo would never bother them again. They had nothing to worry about except each other. Lily and Vallon couldn't wait to start their new lives together.

Lily had found Vincent again. Her beloved Vallon, who was as much the adventurer she had always been at heart. Their first stop would be England, to make new and sweeter memories to lighten the darkness of the past.

Lily toyed with the ring on her finger and said, "So...Mr. Paige, are you sure you want to spend the rest of your life with little ole me?"

"Yes, I absolutely do, Mrs. Paige. And I'll spend every night of the rest of my life showing you just how much I love you."

Vallon turned to her and took possession of her lips in a steamy, toe-curling kiss.

Epilogue

May 26, 2001

The hospital room was crammed with adoring visitors. Fiona had been sure to call *everyone* when Jaid had gone into labor the previous morning. It was now the night of the next day and Lily, Vallon, Korinna, Ziggy, Skye, Fiona and Fiona's friend Dru were all gathered around the tiny infant girl that lay asleep in her proud father's arms. They had named her Lucia Renee Silva.

Jaid and Luca had gotten married four months ago on February seventh when Jaid had been five months pregnant. The ceremony had been small but beautiful. They had taken a long honeymoon in Spain. Jaid and Luca had never been happier, and Skye was thrilled with his father. And as for Luca, those stories of knights, dragons and damsels in distress had never left him. His first book will hit the shelves in mere weeks.

Jaid and Skye had moved into Luca's much bigger house on Toulouse and since Skye had returned, they were having lots of fun renovating and redecorating. Jaid's house remained in her name as she wanted Skye to have it as soon as he was old enough to live on his own.

Lily and Vallon were also happily married and the band was still together and gaining more and more recognition in New Orleans. They had appointed Lily as their manager and she was quite happy to have work to do. Vallon and Lily lived in their beautiful house on Coliseum in the Garden District whenever they weren't out traveling the world.

Vallon had made Loki a partner of 'Under the Gun Tattoo'. The upstairs was to be used for Guardians, Fae, Familiar and vampires alike, as a safe house, just like the upper level of 'Motel Hell'. Vallon had also decided to rent out his mother's house to

Loki and Marlena for a very fair price. They were thrilled to be able to raise their five month old daughter, Obsidian Blaze Hartwick there.

Aurelia had found happiness with her family at long last and has her name in the 'Pierce Family Tree'. She was named Lucia's godmother, as well.

Korinna and Ziggy are still very much in love and the subject of marriage has surfaced despite their attempts to resist their love for one another. Ziggy, predictably, is having more fun than ever now out hunting demons with Korinna at his side.

And as for Angelo...he remains 'sleeping' in the 'Hearst' mausoleum until the day he will be awakened and he can be tamed by his soul mate.

About the Author

Jae Knight is a paranormal romance author. *From the Shadows* is her first novel. Please visit her website at www.myspace.com/jaeknight for more information on her work.